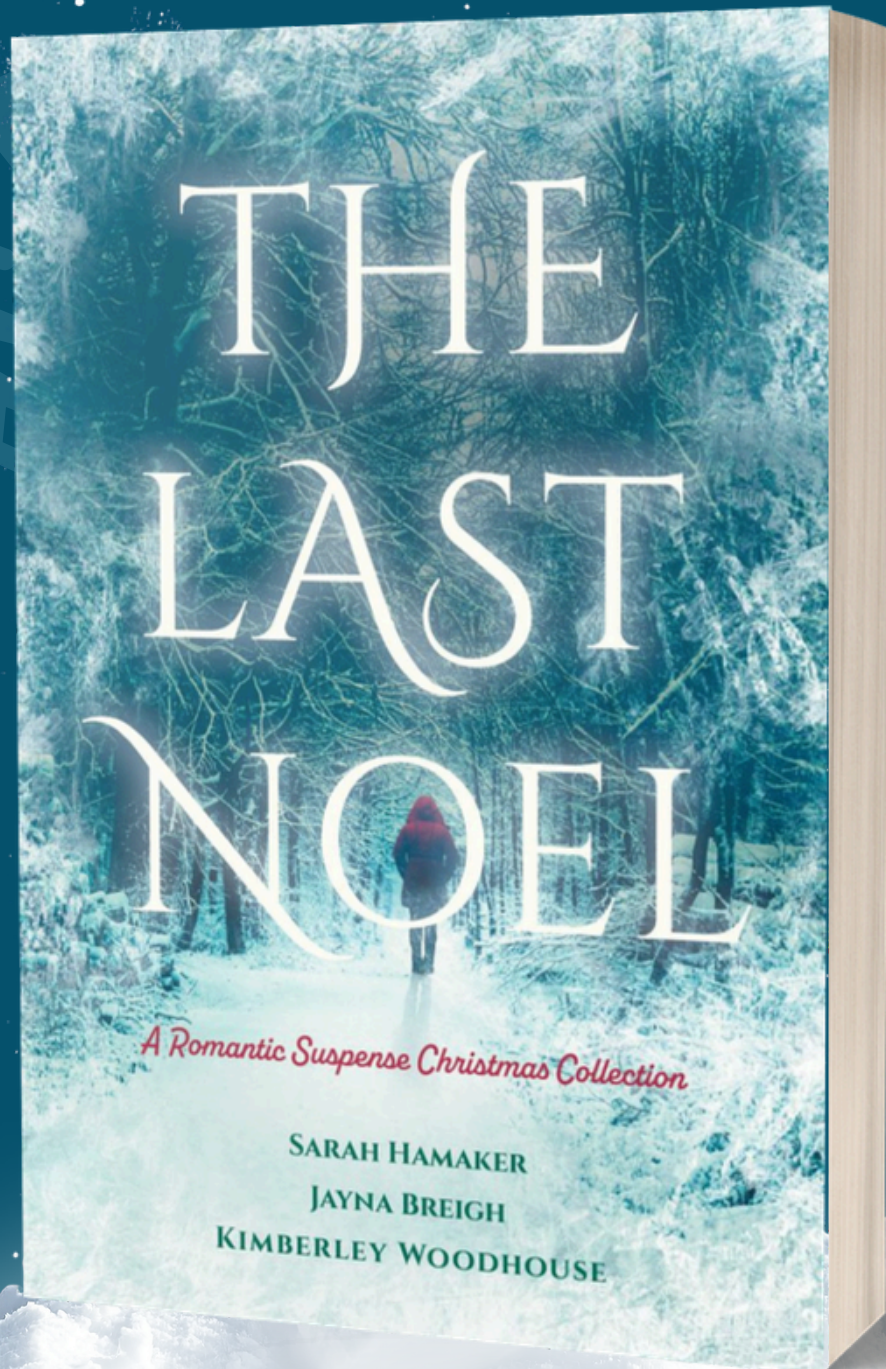


BOOK CLUB GUIDE



Three Novellas. One Deadly Christmas.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Spoiler Warning Ahead! This discussion guide contains spoilers for all three novellas. Save it for after you've turned the last page.

Part One: "Do You See What I See?" by Sarah Hamaker

1. Oakleigh's first instinct when the danger begins is to call Joseph, the person she wronged, not the police. What does that choice tell you about her? What does it say about the kind of trust that survives even after a relationship ends?
2. Joseph is drawn back into Oakleigh's life through her sister's children. In what ways do Desi and the baby change how Joseph sees Oakleigh, and how does caring for them together reshape both characters?
3. Sarah Hamaker sets much of the story in the small towns and rural back roads during a snowstorm. How does the physical landscape shape the tension of the story? Would this novella work the same way if it were set in a city?
4. At one point, Joseph reflects that Oakleigh's return to his life might be "the beginning of a Christmas miracle." What do you think he means by that? And where in the story does that miracle actually happen?

Part Two: "Do You Hear What I Hear?" by Jayna Breigh

5. Jack proposes a "Christmas truce": a temporary peace, borrowed from the World War I moment when soldiers left their trenches on Christmas Eve. What does the truce mean to each of them? How does the metaphor deepen as the story goes on?
6. Nana is not the protagonist of the novella, but she may be its emotional center. What is it about Nana that makes her presence so powerful? Was there someone like Nana in your life?
7. Elise says early on that people should earn forgiveness, not have it handed over. By the end of the novella, is she right? Or has she changed her mind? What does the story argue about forgiveness?
8. Jayna Breigh sets the story in Asheville at Christmas, a city with sparkling lights, mountain views, and its own particular quiet. What role does the setting play in the emotional arc of Elise and Jack's story?

Part Three: "Do You Know What I Know?" by Kimberley Woodhouse

9. Faith is scarred—physically and emotionally—when we meet her. How does the story treat her healing? Is it forgiveness, time, work, love, faith, or some combination that brings her back to herself?
10. The cooking competition frames the whole novella. What does the kitchen let Kimberley Woodhouse show us about Faith and Gabe that a dinner-table conversation couldn't? What is it about a cook-off that raises the stakes in a way that reveals character?

11. Kimberley writes across two settings—Alaska and Louisiana—that she has personal ties to. How do the two places function differently in the story? What does each represent for Faith?

12. At the end of the novella, Gabe's inscription reads, "to a lifetime of Christmases filled with Gumbo." What kind of promise is that—practical, romantic, spiritual, all three? What does it say about how Faith and Gabe have grown?

Part Four: Across All Three Novellas

13. Each novella features a second-chance romance, but the reasons the couples broke up the first time are different in each. Which second-chance story hit you hardest, and why? What does it take, in each case, for the couple to try again?

14. The collection is titled *The Last Noel*. Each novella carries a title from a familiar Christmas carol: "Do You See What I See?", "Do You Hear What I Hear?", and "Do You Know What I Know?" What did you notice about the way the carols and the stories echo each other?

15. All three stories come to a reckoning on or around Christmas Eve. Why do you think Christmas Eve, rather than Christmas Day itself, or any other night, makes such a natural stage for a story? What is it about that particular night?

16. Each novella carries a moment of faith (a whispered prayer, a hymn, a Scripture verse, a felt sense of grace). Choose the moment that stayed with you most. What made it land?

17. Kimberley Woodhouse, Sarah Hamaker, and Jayna Breigh each bring a very different voice to Christmas suspense. If you had to describe each author's signature to a friend in a single sentence, what would you say? Which voice most made you want to read that author's backlist?

18. Finally: the collection promises "suspense, second chances, and one holy night." Did the suspense earn its place next to the romance? Or did one dominate the other for you? Would you read another collection from these three authors together? Would you read one of them solo?

A Bonus Question If You Have Time...

The three authors chose to end each novella at the beginning of a new life for their couple—a promise, an engagement, a reconciliation. If you could revisit any one of the three couples five Christmases from now, which would you choose? What do you imagine their fifth Christmas together looks like?

Continue the Conversation

If your group loved *The Last Noel*, tell someone. Post a photo. Leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads. Give a copy to the friend who needs a Christmas story with real stakes. The best gift you can give an author is another reader.

Merry Christmas from Sarah, Jayna, Kimberley, and the team at Kregel Publications.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Kimberley Woodhouse: "Do You Know What I Know?"

1. Do You Know What I Know is an Alaska-set romantic suspense that pivots to Louisiana. How did the two-state structure come together, and what do you want readers to feel in the moment the story shifts?

I grew up in Louisiana and lived in Alaska for several years. They're my two favorite states. I loved the chance to showcase some of Louisiana's wonderful cuisine and Alaska's incredible scenery. I hope sharing what I love about these two states encourages readers to visit both of them!

2. Your protagonist, Faith, is a chef reckoning with a very public Food Channel disaster. What drew you to a food-world character, and what does a working kitchen let you do dramatically that another setting wouldn't?

Cooking is one of the things I love to do. Also, my husband and I enjoy watching fast-paced cooking shows, seeing what chefs can create under pressure. I enjoyed the opportunity to share some amazing recipes with readers and showcase the high-energy environment of a kitchen competition. It was a fun challenge to write.

3. The gumbo cook-off is a set piece, but it also carries faith content, character revelation, and suspense all at once. How did you keep the pacing tight while running so many threads through one competition?

After writing over 50 books, I know where my strengths lie. My incredible editor, Karen Ball, helped me to realize two decades ago that I'm really great at conflict, suspense, and lots of threads. In fact, she had to teach me to let the reader breathe, because I often had too much happening in one scene. As a reader myself, I enjoy a good-paced book—and seeing the threads come together in a satisfying pay-off.

4. This is a second-chance romance, but "second chance" carries theological weight in Christian fiction that it doesn't carry in the general market. What did you want to say about grace and starting over that only Faith and Gabe's story could say?

I think one of the most amazing things about Jesus and the Christian faith is that grace is so overwhelming when you know you're truly forgiven. That's a wrestle for us as humans. But the fact that we experience the grace, love, and forgiveness of God is a story worth telling over and over again.

5. You've published more than fifty books. How was this project, co-writing with two other novelists, different from your other writing experiences?

I've had the opportunity to write other novella collections in the past. This one, however, was particularly special. I loved the opportunity to work with my dear friend Jayna. And to get to know Sarah, who is lovely.

6. If a reader has never read a Kimberley Woodhouse book before and picks up *The Last Noel* because of your novella, what do you hope they discover about your work? And what should they read from your backlist next?

The biggest takeaway I always want is for readers to be filled with hope. Hope in the Lord and His great love. As for recommendations: if a reader enjoys historical suspense, *A SONG IN THE DARK*, a World War II novel released last September, is a story that is near and dear to my heart. It's about a blind pianist touring Europe in the shadow of Hitler's Third Reich. If they enjoy contemporary suspense, I would recommend my Alaskan Cyber Hunters series, starting with *26 BELOW*. It focuses on how technology pervades our lives and, in the wrong hands, can create chaos and destruction.

Sarah Hamaker: "Do You See What I See?"

1. Your novella opens with a bus station, a snowstorm, and children in danger. Where did the seed of that opening scene come from, and what made you know it belonged at Christmas rather than any other time of year?

I think having Christmas fast approaching adds another layer of urgency to the story—will they figure out who's behind the danger in time for a safe Christmas? I also needed to move my heroine from Northern Virginia to central western Virginia to get her in proximity to my hero, and a bus offered more dangerous possibilities than a train, plane, or car.

2. You host a fiction podcast, which puts you on the other side of the interview table more often than most novelists. Does hosting other writers change how you approach your own craft? Have any of your podcast guests influenced your writing or this novella specifically?

My background is in journalism, and my first professional job was with a magazine at a national trade association, so I'm used to asking questions! I love talking with my fellow Christian romantic suspense writers about the craft and stories. I sometimes get inspiration from our conversations and always find interesting ways they connect with characters, readers, or the stories themselves. There's no direct link between my podcast and this Christmas novella, but overall, I'm always more energized for my own writing projects after talking with other writers.

3. Your protagonist, Oakleigh Wright, grew up in foster care alongside Gabriella. What did you want readers who don't share that background to understand about Oakleigh's worldview, and what did you have to be careful with in writing it?

My parents took in foster kids when I was a preteen and teenager (and through my college years and beyond, too), plus my husband and I fostered for seven years ourselves, so I had a firsthand glimpse of the backgrounds and hardships and thought patterns a foster child or teenager experienced. I wanted to emphasize both the trauma Oakleigh and Gabriella had to overcome and the hope for a brighter future. Having an insecure upbringing can make it difficult to make connections and also to believe you're worthy of love. While every locality and foster situation can be different, I tried to stay true to my own experiences and write a believable scenario for the story.

4. The reunion with Joseph is tender, but the antagonists in this novella mean serious harm. How do you balance the softness of a second-chance romance with the sharpness of the suspense plot inside novella-length pages?

I generally don't write extremely fast-paced suspense stories because I do want to give my hero and heroine time to breathe, to reflect, to ponder their relationship or situation. So my goal is to balance the danger with those quiet moments that fit with those characters'

circumstances. Having the two kids provided those opportunities, as Oakleigh and Joseph both needed to slow down to take care of Chale and Desi. The children also gave Oakleigh a chance to see a different side of Joseph, one that got her thinking perhaps she had misjudged him all those years ago.

5. Talk about your book's setting. What is it about that particular landscape—the back roads, the small towns, the weather—that made it the right stage for a Christmas thriller?

Twin Oaks is a fictitious town set in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The town itself is nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I wanted a small town that celebrated Christmas in a big way with a festival and parade, etc., and I wanted Joseph's family to be involved in the town, so I made his mother the mayor. That gave Joseph roots and appealed to Oakleigh, who had no roots growing up. That area of Virginia also gets more snow and other dangerous weather conditions, so that was important to the storyline, too.

6. You quote Scripture directly on the page and structure a full faith arc into the story. For a reader coming from general-market romantic suspense who is new to Christian fiction, what should they know about how faith shows up in your novella?

My favorite part of writing Christian fiction is portraying Christian characters with all their flaws and their hope in Christ. Most of my characters are already believers, so there's usually no salvation scene, but one or both of my hero or heroine struggles to hold fast to their faith in the midst of difficult circumstances. I want their struggles to ring true to readers and for my readers to see the truth of how God walks with us through those struggles. God's sovereignty reigns over everything, and I love to show that on the page through my characters, encouraging them to keep trusting in God.

Jayna Breigh: "Do You See What I See?"

1. You're a lawyer by training, and so is your character, Elise Sinclair, who finds herself on the wrong end of a document dump from a pharmaceutical giant. How does your skilled experience as an attorney help you craft suspenseful fiction?

The suspense in fiction is very similar to the suspense in a real legal case. People do not know the outcome from the beginning. Who will win? Who will lose? I don't start the fictional cases in my books with a clear winner or outcome in mind. As characters come to me, I let them throw curveballs, lie, hide, and surprise me. It works exactly that way in a real legal case. There is no way in advance to know what the evidence is going to show you until you've collected it all and evaluated it. As I write and the cases unfold, I look for realistic ways to introduce plot twists, and sometimes I even surprise myself.

2. The novella builds around a "Christmas truce" between former fiancés. Where did that framing come from, and did you always know the truce would be the spine of the story?

When brainstorming the first draft of the book, I had to decide what legal concept would be at the heart of the story. Since it was shorter than a full-length novel, I figured out that a second-chance romance was the best way to avoid "insta-love" and to get to the heart of the conflict quickly. I tried to figure out what sounded both Christmassy and legal at the same time. I started playing with legal words like The Christmas Contract, The Mistletoe Trial. Things like that. Along with that, I knew I wanted there to be a kiss under the

mistletoe. Finally, I remembered the Christmas ceasefire during World War I. The story locked into place when I put the ceasefire and Christmas together. It gave my two characters, with plenty of history between them, time to work out their differences.

3. Nana may be the most memorable character in the collection. She's not the protagonist, but the one who carries the theological weight of the story. How did you build her, and did she come out on the page the way you first imagined her?

In my books, I always try to have one character who is free to speak truth and wisdom without apology to other characters in an accessible and winsome way. Senior citizen characters don't have to be "cool," and with age comes the right to be heard with respect. Nana came into my mind and onto the page fully formed. I knew how she would dress, the jokes she would tell, and the trajectory of the insights I wanted her to convey. I made her carry the spiritual arc because words of wisdom and truth sound natural and unforced when presented by someone with gray hair who has earned the right to speak them.

4. Your novella is described as directly presenting the truth of Christmas and the incarnation. What did you want to say theologically, and how did you weave it in without breaking narrative momentum for a reader who came for the legal thriller?

Simply put, I wanted to say Jesus is God. King of kings, as Handel's Messiah points out. Years ago, when I practiced law, the office building where I worked piped in Christmas music in the atrium during December. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel echoed off the marble. I remember thinking that Christmas is the one time of year when you can sneak theology past people without them objecting. God and sinners reconciled. Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Shepherds quake at the sight. These songs float through malls, doctors' offices, and on secular streaming services. In a Christmas novella, it was easy to weave in the lyrics themselves or allusions to lyrics from Christmas songs by having them play in the background of various settings in the book. It was all hidden in plain sight, leaving the readers to hum along in their minds.

5. Talk about the writing process, joining up with two other novelists to create *The Last Noel*. What did you learn from writing alongside Kimberley Woodhouse and Sarah Hamaker? And what surprised you about the process?

There were happy surprises along the way. While we did not coordinate on writing our novellas at all, it worked out that each of us independently landed on the idea of a second-chance romance. We then worked together to approve the cover design and the overall title option presented by Kregel. Again, we were unanimous in our ranking of choices. They are both such great authors to collaborate with, and it was an honor to have my novella included in a collection beside theirs.

6. Elise's arc turns on forgiveness. She says early on that people should earn it, not have it handed over. What made you want to test that conviction against a Christmas plot, and how did you find the moment she actually changes?

Christmas seemed like the perfect backdrop for the proposition that one's ultimate fate turns on receiving a forgiveness they did not earn. The journey beginning with *Away in a Manger* concludes at Easter, where the greatest payment was made for those who have not earned it. Elise needed someone to walk her through the journey of forgiveness, and Nana was that person. Nana loved Elise, but knew Elise was imperfect, just like everyone else. When Elise admitted her fear that Jack would hurt her again, Nana pointed out that Elise would also hurt Jack. That moment held up a mirror, showing Elise she had the power to help bring healing and reconciliation with Jack.