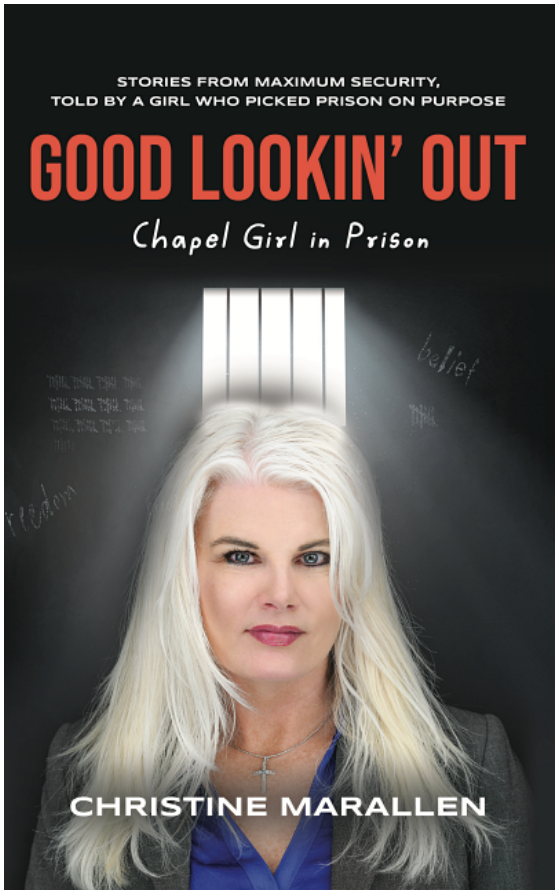

Good Lookin' Out captures the reality of what's possible with incarceration, restoration, and redemption, told through the individuals Chaplain Christine Marallen encounters as a prison chaplain and criminal justice college instructor.

Good Lookin' Out: Chapel Girl in Prison

By Christine Marallen

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STORIES FROM MAXIMUM SECURITY,
TOLD BY A GIRL WHO PICKED PRISON ON PURPOSE

GOOD LOOKIN' OUT

Chapel Girl in Prison

CHRISTINE MARALLEN

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Affiliation

It's the third time I've asked Damian for the name of his gang—which is four times too many.

He tells me, glancing over his shoulder as if we aren't the only two people in the chapel office. He points to the tattoo that runs the span of his neck to confirm his membership.

I nod and look around subtly for the pen I brought with me. Damian has one in his clenched fist, sees me trying to be discreet, and hands it to me with one raised eyebrow. There is a notepad hitched under my arm, a constant companion in prison since I cannot begin to remember every request made of me as I move through groups. Damian won't refuse my unspoken request any more than I'll dishonor his candor by doing anything with the notes I scribble. Still, after nineteen years locked inside a prison, he is loath to encourage my recording of any events that might transpire.

"Any idea why I want to talk to you?" I ask while attempting to draw the gang tattoo on my pad. There are hundreds of established STGs—security threat groups—in the prison system and I definitely don't have the matrix down cold.

Damian shrugs and tilts his thick head. His large black state-issue glasses betray his tough guy image for a few seconds and but for the fact of the words tattooed and peeking out from the buzzed hair on the side of his skull, I might just be sitting across from any nerdy student who could saunter into my college classroom during office hours to discuss a bad grade.

Except that's not Damian. Not even close.

"I have a question for you," I say. "No expectations. Just a question."

Damian squares in his busted-up metal chair.

"Since I know that you and your gang extort people for protection," (pause) "…and you sit in my group each week and profess a desire to be a better version of yourself—to follow your faith more closely,"

(bigger pause) "…wouldn't it make sense that some of the men you consider part of your Christian community should be protected by you for free?"

Super big pause. Wind-sucked-out-of-the-room kind of pause.

Then, Damian's wide shoulders start to move in rhythm with his nod. His thoughts collected, he is smiling, but I've been around him long enough to know it's not because we are in agreement.

"First, Amiga," he says, pushing the black glasses further back on his face, "what I do is not extortion. And second, you want me to tell my vatos to stop business because of God?"

I smile with him. And shrug. And not speak. Four short seconds later, he can't resist the silence.

"It's just business, you know?" His Hispanic accent is heavy with the seriousness he hopes to impart to me. "If we don't offer it, somebody else would. Then, we lose business and nothing's changed. How's that good?" He says "nothing's" like "no things."

I nod. Appreciate his willingness to banter about prison economics.

"Zoom out, Damian," I say, spreading my arms wide and high like when people dance to the YMCA song at weddings. "Get out of your current business model and into God's business model."

Damian laughs, his tough-guy-gang-stare-skull-cracking demeanor replaced by that of any Latino boy kickin' it with his buddies watching a World Cup match on a Sunday afternoon in my local Mexican dive. Somewhere close to surface is a young man who wants to be included, lead even. He is thirty-seven years old and has been incarcerated for nineteen years of a possible fifty years for attempted murder and kidnapping. His entire adult life so far has been spent navigating the incarcerated barrio and the rules and languages therein. In prison, he is respected for being a man of his word and someone who handles his business—a reputation many seek but cannot attain or uphold. I can't possibly decipher all the tattoos on his head and neck, but he tells me a different time that they all point to 'honor' and 'respect'….gangsta style, of course.

I first met Damian in 2009 in a different prison. At the request of the non-Hispanic contingent, we had asked a Spanish-speaking priest to celebrate the Mass of the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in prison with us. We created flyers that welcomed the men to Mass and let them know that we understood that they had a strong devotion to Mary because, in

part, of her appearance in the sixteenth century near Mexico City and the annual feast day in December that commemorates that. Damian came to that Mass and then became a regular in our weekly Catholic Instruction class. He speaks fluent English but frequently engages me in Spanish to test my ability to comprehend and banter. It tends to be the great equalizer among us; I rarely comprehend him correctly or quickly and he finds that a fair trade for the fact that I get to leave through the front gate each night.

In 2010, Damian and a fellow gang member provided me a rare info session where they answered many of the questions I had about gangs in prison—specifically the Ohio gang situation. Both of the men had been down a number of years and had seen the inside of a handful of other prisons. I had peppered them with enough innocuous questions over multiple weeks (that were met with the standard, "You know I can't tell you that" and my, "What? And then you'd have to kill me?" reply) that they finally agreed to treat me to a "Prison Gang Life for Dummies" session. In the chapel one evening, Damian and friend shared tattoo markings and hand signals; the meaning behind certain glances and shrugs; the proverbial handshakes and defensible shake downs. It was then that I learned that Damian's particular gang, among others, offered protection for pay. Given the prison culture and its hand-crafted flowchart of power, that's a booming business. Now that I'm using that information to extract a favor of sorts, he may be rethinking his willingness to share.

"*God's business model*?" he asks, leaning in as if I'm about to share something distinct to me and only for him. "God don't want to be part of my business, Amiga."

"How do you know?" I counter.

"I know," he says.

Like most of society, there exists a hierarchical structure in prison that is determined by many factors: time down, length of bit, brute strength, and ethnicity/neighborhood/connections among them. Most significantly, however, the hierarchy is delineated by crime category. Long before I set foot in a detention site, the residents in most prisons across America had determined the intrinsic value of their fellow detainees and what that meant for their stay in order to eke out a brand-new society under which to operate. When people enter prison, they don't abandon their desires for control and identity; in fact, those needs

expand because the world of incarceration inversely works hard, for safety or retributive measures, to strip the population of its individuality and power. Like *Lord of the Flies* with barbed wire, prison invites the opportunity to commune and create a setting whereby people can collectively and respectively make themselves and the world a better place…and it rarely turns out that way. The reasons that land men in prison perpetuate and are fostered by a misguided need to expound on that which separates, not unites us as humans. Men gather, decide who among them are the strong—which, by default means there are those who are the weak—and soon enough there is a sow's head on a stake and Piggy and the conch shell get smashed by the giant.

"Damian, how can you be so sure that God doesn't want you to be part of what makes this place better?" I ask.

His eyebrows crunch together and he blinks a couple times. His shoulders square. Then they fall.

"Nah," he says. "God knows I been working on me, but he ain't trying to be part of what I do here. Lots of guys here are weak. That ain't God's business."

The "weak"–by more than Damian's definition—typically fall into a couple categories: those who are unpracticed in or too small for victory in the area of hand-to-hand combat; and those incarcerated for crimes again children. If you happen to be both, you are instantly in need of a guardian of sorts because once you are issued your state digits, there awaits instant persecution and sustained oppression—both by your fellow man and the staff hired to keep order. It is irrelevant that the prison handbook for new arrivals says, essentially, "Keep your hands to yourself." What everyone knows and, sadly accepts, is that you will be punished early and often and differently than everyone else that society deemed unfit to hang out without supervision.

If you have hurt a child, in prison you will move immediately from Main Street to Front Street, courtesy of whoever has appointed themselves the Uber driver of all things moral and ethical behind bars. You will be mocked upon arrival and stolen from, crashed on, and blamed for anything that ails the universe. You will be the constant bad guy and low man. You will be asked to defend your poor choices by everyone else (who have given themselves amnesty of their own poor choices) and there is simply no response that mitigates what the asker already feels you have coming to you and plans to deliver without your

consent. Those who hurt children and find themselves behind bars will be sought out and harmed. Period. The right and wrong of that is a fight I pick often with my men who strive to understand God's justice vs. man's justice. (Notice I said "fight" and not "discussion." That's because, despite my greatest attempts to carve a discussion out of the matter, two decades in it is still a fight. Always. Every. Time.)

For the purposes of Team Damian, harmers of children are big business. Certain groups consider themselves protectors, economists of human commodity who simply address the supply and demand of safety and security in a world with its own contrived CEOs and stockholders. It goes like this:

Jarod gets sentenced to ten years for convincing his eight-year-old niece to touch him in places no child should touch. He arrives in prison and, within minutes, is profiled by other incarcerated people who either "know his type" or know people who already know Jarod. Sometimes a corrections officer (who missed the point of his job and has his own tool chest of personal issues) will reveal the details of Jarod's case to other incarcerated men. Or incarcerated people will ask their friends/family on the outside to check the public information available on Jarod to confirm their hunch.

However it is known that Jarod acted inappropriately with a child, it is out there and he is put on blast. Someone calls Jarod a "chomo" (child molester) and Jarod will either shirk and hide (bad idea) or he will jaw back (bad idea). His cellie balks at the idea of having this "chomo" in his personal space and makes a bunch of noise to separate himself, which draws even more attention to Jarod. When Jarod's cellie is denied his request for a new address, he figures that spending time in segregation bodes better for his personal bit than being seen as a quiet supporter of Jarod's "type." So he crashes on Jarod, harming him physically and destroying Jarod's meager pile of goods. Jarod cycles through cellies until someone (usually someone else who has similar charges) quietly accepts the arrangement. In the meantime, Jarod gets wise to the fact that he needs protection because now everyone within a ten-block radius has become privy to the muck and ruckus surrounding him and that someone—whether for moral high ground or to gain entry into a gang—waits around every un-camera-ed corner to go one round.

Enter Damian.

"Protection" means exactly that. Once you have established your contract, word spreads quickly and the edict is read: Hands off Jarod or get a visit from those he paid to keep him safe. Depending on your means, protection comes with a sliding scale of requirements and price structure. If you work in the prison and have no other means of income, your monthly state pay will likely go straight to your protectors in the form of commissary items purchased on Store Day from the prison convenient mart. If you have means outside the prison, such as family or friends who are willing to place money on your account, the price likely jacks up to meet that supply. Aunt Sally delivers $50 a month to your books via the prison lobby kiosk machine for what she believes is extra Oreos and a new television, but she is really feeding the Protection Machine so Jarod can keep all his teeth this month and not have to look over his shoulder except for the brazen or uninformed who are willing to take a chance despite the contract that keeps Jarod safe.

While not the method of Damian's faction, some protectors will accept sexual favor as payment and either visit the protected whenever they feel like bringing sexy back or to pay off their own debt by sending Jarod to perform that dance with a rival gang member. Whatever the arrangement, the protected is essentially owned by the protector. It's a lesser evil than getting the snot beat out of you or having your stuff stolen every five minutes, but no Disneyland either.

Damian knows that I know that he is a high official in the protection game. And while the prison administration tends to overlook this practice as a silent nod to keeping some form of jaded peace, if the complaints pile up from the 'protected' that the economics are out of whack or cross the line to dangerous-er than your usual prison ambience, something is done about it. For Damian, that line gets blurred enough that he has passport stamps from nearly every prison in Ohio above medium security. From the time I first met him until this meeting today, he has added "extortion" to his prison jacket and spent three years cooling his heels in twenty-three-hour lockdown to contemplate it. Having paid those dues, he is now back at a Level Three security institution and sitting across from the Catholic chaplain, who, Damian is starting to believe, has been smoking crazy pills.

"My vatos won't know what's wrong with me if I tell them to stop charging," he tells me, along with a protracted explanation code and process that suggests that if he doesn't collect his ducks, somebody else

will anyway so why would he pass on the score if it ain't gonna change nothing anyway?

"Besides," he says, in a plea to demonstrate his reasonableness, "God knows that I am trying to do things better in my life. He knows my heart."

Clever, I say, and we both laugh. He has co-opted the defense that I mount every time someone in our group wants to tell me what they "know" to be true about another person's motivation or intention. Only God knows our hearts, I always remind them. We are not God.

I continue to scribble on the page. Damian can't see what I'm writing and pretends to not care. But he does care, because he eventually sighs.

"OK, Christine, OK."

I look up and he's nodding.

"OK, what?" I really don't know what he's concluded. I have just written down the words "ducks" and "vatos" so I can figure out what they mean another time.

"I will think about it," he says and then he sighs again. "Whatta you want me to do?"

I smile at him and shrug.

"Nothing outrageous, Damian," I say. "Use your influence for good. Live out your faith instead of being the loudest guy in the room who doesn't. You can start small but start somewhere. Write down some ideas."

The hallway outside the office fills with conversation. The Catholic Instruction group has just disbanded, and I can see a circle of men forming around Deacon Jack Schaefer, the volunteer who has managed the weekly group for years. Once class is over, lots of guys have just one more thing to say about one more thing, so they jockey for position around volunteers before they leave and before the group members have to return to the crowded spaces of the housing units. Deacon Jack's Fan Club is crowded; they count among his best qualities his loyalty to them since he returns week after week to Warren Correctional—even when the staff stays home for government holidays—and his paycheck is exactly zero. They also respect the balance he strikes with them: a willingness to cut them a break and hold them accountable in the same space. And that he brings them snacks. When Jack's wife, Linda, joined the volunteer team and accompanied him to the classes with her no-

nonsense-retired-teacher-ness, Jack lost top billing, but the group gained a real-life example of love, marriage, and how "submission" in Scripture in no way means anything other than separate duties, equal responsibility.

Damian looks toward the crew outside the office and then back at me; we both know if he waits much longer, he will lose his requisite candy bar from Jack's coffer. God may be everywhere in prison, but Snickers bars are hard to come by. I smile at him and we both nod. We are in agreement. Damian's word is good, and I know that when I see him next, he will slip me a piece of paper as if it is contraband with positive ideas on how to shift this business model onto a new platform.

Except I don't see him again.

Damian is extracted from general population at WCI a week after our discussion, his beefy absence heavy in the weekly Catholic Instruction circle and swirling with rumors of broken contracts and busted skulls. Guys shrug when we ask what happened and what the prognosis is; they know, but it would invite sanction to offer the specifics about it. Despite the code of silence, it's muy facil to piece some things together: Damian, despite his desire to be a better version of himself, has a gang protocol to follow. And to date, God is considered among the troops, not part of the leadership. Somebody got out of line and somebody else had to take care of that madness. I'm not sure if I will see Damian again to get the full Monty or whether we'll have to let the urban legend bloom and grow at WCI in his absence.

Three full months later, I receive a kite—a request for something, made on a prison form and forwarded to the proper recipient—from the segregation unit: Damian wants to talk to me.

"I'm here to see Rodriguez," I tell the seg CO. The corrections officer is distracted by and annoyed with all the activity in the high-security area and does his best not to take that out on me. I have not met this officer before and he stares quickly at my badge and my face, then back at my badge. Many times, even the officers who have seen this particular blonde walking around the compound are hard pressed to hide their irritation with the fact that this particular blonde walks around the compound. I assign that, combined with the chaos that accompanies a high-security area, to the reason for his brusque treatment.

"Rodriguez, huh?" he says over his shoulder. And then a harrumph. "You a doctor?"

"No," I say to the back of his head. He's moved toward the thick door that separates the grungy and cramped lobby area from the segregation cells. I can't see all the way inside to the ranges, but what little I can see is dark and muted. Dampish grey. There is a cacophony of shouting from that direction, both from the corrections officers exiting the area and from the incarcerated men who wish they could do the same. My CO has moved through the door, uninterested in learning further who I am, and I have no idea if my cache rises or plummets since I'm not in the medical field. Either way, he is satisfied enough by my response to disappear into the dank, black hole of segregation without further questions. I'm left to kick dirt around the lobby floor and stay out of the way of handcuffed men and the officers who are leading them from one place to another.

"You can wait in there," an officer says and points to another thick door open across the lobby with a plate across the top frame that reads, "Interview Room." I step inside the dingy space where lawyers and psychologists and chaplains before me have crowded with their incarcerated clients to sort through infinite requests and clogged rationale. There are three chairs in the room—all decades into their existence and dirty—and a computer desk that holds a machine that, based on its girth, is from the nineties and from which someone before me forgot to log off. There's a filing cabinet with peeling paint, heavy locks that cannot have been touched in years, and there is a camera somewhere in the room, certainly. I'm not one to get caught up in aesthetics, especially in a prison, but I can't imagine what conversation takes place in this room that doesn't start from glass-half-empty and crawl like elderly snails to glass-just-a-shade-above-half-empty. I move the most obvious dirt from the space in front of me on the desk and start reading through the Glorious Mysteries from the rosary booklet I've brought.

"Hey, Christine."

It's Damian. Sort of.

His head is completely shaved, and he is without his state-issued blue shirt. His hands are shackled to a chain that leads to his feet and they are pinched tight against the white t-shirt that is one size too small for his belly. He shuffles into the room and plops into a chair across from me. His thick, black-rimmed glasses slide down his nose a smidge when he lands and, try as he may, he can't connect his handcuffed

fingers to them without bending completely over his lap—something his belly prevents. It's something straight out of a slapstick, except it's not really funny to either of us. I am wholly unaccustomed to seeing Damian so unsettled and I can't decide if that will change with our typical dialogue.

The CO shuts us inside and I stay positioned facing the grimy panel in the door that was designed to be a window. I'm not concerned about my safety, but about eliminating any possibility that someone on staff with a chip on his shoulder or indigestion from lunch will suggest that anything took place in the room that was less than professional.

"Hey," I say to the top of his bald head. He has yet to make eye contact.

The room is freezing. It is mid-October and outside it is a remarkably warm day. But inside this room, it is as if someone has pointed a blast chiller straight from the ceiling. Damian shivers like you do when you think the ghost of your crabby grandmother has passed through you. It is obvious that he doesn't want me to see him like this, handicapped of his power and the assertive nature I know so well to be Damian.

"I blew it, Christine," he says, still staring at the floor, shoulders hunched. He shivers again. "Man! It's cold as fuck in here!"

I nod my agreement, but we both know that no one is going to care much about his comfort nor allow either of us to do anything about it short of sending him back to his cell.

"Good to see you," I say, and I mean it a bunch. "The group misses your insight. How'd we get from the chapel to here?"

He shakes his head and unloads a litany of pieces to a story that those around him might have scripted. There is a fight that includes a mangled skull and the honor of a brother. There is a broken agreement and a trail of heroin, weed, tobacco. There is a corrections officer who no longer works for the State of Ohio who found the risk of moving drugs into a prison worth whatever validation or compensation she was getting. Damian wanders through the story like he's on a summer walk and peers up with one eye and one raised eyebrow every couple minutes to make sure I'm still engaged. Then he ends where he began.

"I blew it, Christine," he says. "They riding me out to Luc next month."

Damian has already seen his fair share of Lucasville, the max-security facility in Southeast Ohio that is just a bad day away from Ohio's only Supermax in Youngstown. When you can't make friends at Warren, you go to Lucasville; when you can't make friends at Luc, pack your duffel bag for Ohio State Penitentiary. Damian spent three years at Lucasville in between my first encounter with him at Lebanon Correctional and his return to Warren. He knows the ropes there; mastered them, even. So I know he isn't spooked by the unknown or even the bad lunch menu.

"They thought we was having sex, you know," he says. "That officer who was helping us. That's how we got caught. Somebody snitched that we was kickin' it too long in the back of the block and that sometimes it took me twenty minutes to clean the staff bathroom. They thought we was having sex."

My look begs the next question.

"They fired her for having a relationship because they ain't actually caught her with drugs on her but we wasn't doing anything," he says and then shrugs. "Just a couple kisses here and there."

A short laugh escapes me and Damian looks up, startled. He smiles at me, but he doesn't connect my reaction to his story at all and says so.

"Damian, I will agree with you that there might not have been an official relationship between you and the CO," I say. "But let's be really clear on something: When any officer agrees to take a job here, inherent in the understanding and explicit in the rulebook is that he or she will not be kissing anybody. No kisses. With anyone. Not part of the job."

He smiles and nods, his shoulders rising and falling in rhythm. If he could wrangle his hand from the shackles in his lap, he'd slap his forehead. Now that we've zoomed out—as we frequently do in our conversations—he realizes how obvious that is, even after his nearly two decades in this artificial environment. Still, he reminds me, he's been in prison a long-ass time; if a female wants to kiss him, he will not quote the Prison Handbook.

He fills in some of the gaps: Heroin was coming in hand over fist; multiple gangs in on the action in order to spread the blame and profit; errant gang member decides to pinch the supply rather than sell it; heads roll; somebody ends up with a broken jaw and a boatload of stitches across the back of his head. Damian stops, looks at me, closes his eyes,

shakes his head. He isn't so much mad about the situation as he is tired from his participation.

"Christine, I been down nineteen years. I can't keep doing this. You know they gonna add about six years to my sentence for this. I blew my parole. I was about to start your college class. I was startin' to think about going home." Pause. Slump. Sigh. "I blew it."

"You're tired, Damian," I say and he doesn't react, both of us aware of what I *didn't* say. The mere mention of the *thought* to leave the gang life after years of shouting orders from a top bunk is no joke. Blood in, blood out. Despite the sensationalism that goes on about prison life courtesy of modern media, that maxim remains true in lots of places. Fear of the reprisal that Damian would face should he ask for a sideline is part of his current angst-equation.

"It's what I *do*," he says and meets my eyes squarely for the first time today. "You know? On the street when I was a kid and here, it's what I do. How'm I gonna tell my vatos I ain't down with that no more? How'm I gonna leave all that?"

Then it hits me: Damian might not be as concerned about "blowing it" as he is relieved that he won't have to get to the street and try to figure out who he is out there. But that runs contrary to all the conversations we have about new life and living out our faith lives. I say as much. He meets my suggestion with a slight nod.

"In here, I'm somebody," he says. "Here, people respect me." He cocks his head toward the door. "Out there, I ain't nobody. Even if I go to my old streets, I been gone so long people will say, "Who are you? You ain't nobody here.""

I'm quiet, but not because I don't have anything to say. It's because I have *too* much to say and it is all jumbled inside my brain trying to get to the fore.

This is the third conversation in as many days that I have had with high-ranking gang members who allude to getting out of the life because they are 1) tired and 2) a thousand percent unclear as to their identity short of that life, and 3) tripping over themselves when they compare the life they lead with the life they profess they want in their faith. Eighteen hours earlier than my segregation conversation with Damian,

I avail myself at Lebanon Correctional to anyone who wants a listener during our regular Wednesday Catholic Instruction group, while the rest of my amazing volunteer team facilitates small groups. Not a surprise, once the trust is established between us and the men, the floodgates open and men who have been tamping down the whole of their crumpled and messy lives into tiny compartments way, way down somewhere inside them ask if they can talk for just a minute. Or two hours.

Tonight, John Sanders stops me in the hallway on the way to his small group and hesitates just long enough to let me know he isn't sure whether to open his mouth or keep it clamped and keep walking. I wait him out and he chooses the former. He is perplexed by how the group is affecting him; confused by how it makes him see the rest of his prison bit. I have seen this moment dozens of times before: God shows up and bangs pots and pans inside a guy's skull loud enough that he starts to question which foot goes in front of the other. Guys who had strutted around the institutional hallways for years with a handbook they had written and passed on to hundreds of willing followers suddenly became confused as to what their purpose was and former output meant. By whatever faith group's definition, it is a conversion of sorts. Guys crack open a tiny sliver of themselves and allow a smidgen of vulnerability, culpability, responsibility, and then they get restless because the old ways don't feel quite right anymore.

John Sanders has been one of the understated but understood front men in his gang for years. He is a "convict" with a serious reputation for quiet control. Most of his fifty years have been spent under state supervision and, for reasons I am still unclear about, John applied for and snagged a spot in my Xavier University Criminal Justice class the year prior to joining my Catholic Instruction group. He spent much of the semester listening rather than talking alongside co-eds half his age and incarcerated men who typically fell outside his regulated circle of acquaintances. His contributions to the larger group were sparse, but when he decided it was time to speak, he offered rich perspective on behalf of the men who knew incarceration before the War on Drugs and the high school set's arrival. After the semester ended, he asked if he could join my faith-based group, despite the limited dalliances with God in his lifetime. We ushered him in and, just a few short months later (and the return of his twenty-nine-year-old son to prison, again, for

heroin) he finds himself stammering and stalling in the hallway with me.

"Somethin' don't feel right, Christine," he finally offers. "I told my (gang) guys I needed to retire or take a break or something and they're pissed at me—which I understand. My son's about to get out of the hole and I know he owes a bunch of people." He stops. Looks around. "I don't know what's going on."

He doesn't have enough God-knowledge to sit still for a lecture on conversion. The only plausible forward motion will come from my drawing more from him so he can start to piece it together in whatever quiet moments he can construct in prison. I ask him what exactly feels different.

"I been doing this my whole life, Christine," he says. "I'm tired and it doesn't end. Now my son's here again and I see him lying and stealing and I'm walkin' around telling the supply guys that they ain't gonna get paid. If you give dope to my son, you ain't gonna get paid, so you better think about it."

Then he stops, looks around again. Shakes his head.

"But that's my son. When they come looking for him, I'm gonna have to be there. And I'm tired."

There is no point in reminding him that his son is an adult with his own choices and there is no point in asking him to step aside and let the masses wage war without him. It is intrinsic in his blood and bones and code to stay in the fray. But the jumbled-upedness of it has him nauseous and he wants to know if it has something to do with our classes. With, you know, *God*.

I shrug.

"God's a mystery, right?" I say. "His timing is perfect and if He has decided that at this point in time He wants your attention, He will attempt to get your attention. That could be the indigestion you feel. But I don't have the secret decoder ring to all that. That's why we gather and study and trust each other and talk it out."

He nods and looks at the room that holds the rest of his group.

"OK, well, I'm gonna get inside," John says. "Thanks for talkin'."

He takes his place at the table in Volunteer Bev's group and guys instantly engage him, shake his hand, slap his back. The men in his small group—like the Xavier class—would never have made his dance card back in the day and back in the block because of their race, their

crimes, their lack of stature. But here, tonight, he genuinely feels the equality we profess and live out and that, along with all the other ways God is kneading on him from the inside out, has him mumbling in his sleep but staying in the mix. I take my place at the small wooden table in the hallway outside the classrooms to organize things for the remainder of the evening and, not ten minutes later, the seat across from me is occupied…. with John Sanders.

"Can we keep talkin' for a minute?" he asks.

Or two hours.

The buzz rippling through the staff on the way to the guts of the prison holds an unusual level of gravity today. I'm headed to the chapel for my Catholic 101 class where my disparate group of fifteen men will debate the One, True Church with their many competing theories that we honor for dialogue. It's lunch time, which sometimes brings its own brand of tension as over two thousand men move through the hallways on their way to the dining area and possibly with other intentions that a gathering in the chow hall might allow. Corrections officers assigned to the hallways and three dining halls have their own techniques—normally accompanied by scowls and pointing—for keeping the business of mealtime in check; today, however, feels more serious than a rush on the chicken patty, the house favorite. Today, something clearly went down that has even the typically unruffled a bit out of sorts. I wave to a few incarcerated people along the route, chat a second with staff members I recognize, and arrive in the chapel where some of my attendees already wait. The chapel ceiling feels ten feet lower than usual.

"Dude didn't even have a face left," I hear from the corner of the table that is set up between the pews specifically for our class.

Over the years, I've heard suicides and homicides discussed in prison with the nonchalance of determining lunch selections and vacation spots. Drug shakedowns rife with dirty needles and suboxone-filled body cavities are often dismissed as the daily cost of working in prison. Whether desensitized or unaffected from jump, staff in a high-security prison frequently share details between themselves about life and death issues (whether they were a participant, attendee, or third-

hand recipient of said news) like they are talking about their high school team's championship game. It makes sense, given the propensity for mayhem and conduct unbecoming when you put angry humans in close proximity of each other against their will for long stretches and how 'normal' the mayhem becomes after some such stretch. The only people I've met who seem less affected by chaos and tragedy in prison than the staff are the residents.

"I had to scrub my shoes, man. Brand new. Good thing it all came out."

Class member Kraig Velcutter is holding court as I join them, the four men on either side of him rapt for details if for no other reason than to sprinkle some moisture on the stale biscuit of prison life. I'm not sure what story I've just walked in on, but it feels connected to the six-ton weight of the air molecules in this place today. I glance at Kraig's shoes but don't receive any clues that way. He is a large man, well over six feet and beefy, Paul-Bunyan-like with scraggly long hair and a beard that he has threatened to sue the state to keep intact. Last year, when staff showed up with scissors and the policy manual, Kraig lost the hygiene skirmish—despite the religious freedom card he pulled from thin air that declared him Amish. It might have held had he not been actively studying in our group to become a Catholic, and had he known a single thing about the Amish when questioned by prison staff.

Prison-1, Kraig-0.

When he arrived in our classroom last year with his shaven face and closely clipped locks, we resisted all funny business mostly because he was so obviously demeaned by the outcome and had shuffled into our classroom as if one dissenting comment would send him straight to the dusty floor with a thud.

Today, with a newly minted statewide hygiene policy on the books, Kraig's long hair and beard frame his face and the tiny round glasses too small for his lumberjack head. With a steely stare, Kraig sends an easy signal to anyone around on any day that he could and definitely would crack a skull if necessary. I assume that's what happened earlier.

"Get in a little fight today, Kraig?" I ask.

"Not me," he says quickly, moving his attention from those around him to me and everyone else filing into the chapel. "Dude got wasted on the yard today. They kicked his face in so bad you couldn't even see it no more."

He says it with an evenness that betrays the content. Some at the table nod.

"He was an idiot to go to the corner," he continues. "Everybody knew it was about to pop off."

When rival gangs meet on the prison yard, the rest of the population pays attention. Rare is the fight that goes down without planning and threads of promotional marketing meant to quell or swell the outcome. When someone is in the crosshairs before he even arrives on the scene, it goes on prison's underground social calendar as a can't-miss event. I learn quickly that today's victim was a guy transferred in from another prison in northern Ohio. He had been sent to prison originally for molesting someone's young daughter, already a problem on many people's Prison Justice Matrix. That daughter's father also happened to be in prison (Lebanon, specifically) and part of one of the toughest gangs in the area—the kind of tough where there are shot callers and roll call and honor to defend, and boundaries that are blurry only to those who bust through them. Before this young lad even got to Lebanon Correctional, a hit was placed on his head. His life was in danger and two thousand people knew it (although not him, apparently) before he even unpacked his travel bag. This morning he decides to find a quiet space on the rec yard in order to assess his new digs and is welcomed to Lebanon by a six-pack of whoop ass that is quickly becoming the stuff of legends.

"COs were throwing up and shit," Kraig continues, returning his attention to those around the table. "They kicked his face in so hard there wasn't nothin' left. Just flesh hanging off."

I have so many questions. I start with the most obvious.

"Kraig," I begin, "you were standing right there when it happened?"

Kraig nods and points to his shoes again, then his shirt and pants to acknowledge whatever blood was on them before he cleaned up for class.

"You were there when it happened and you didn't step in to help the guy?"

I furrow my brow, tilt my head, and wait for an answer. Despite my years in prison and familiarity with the code, I simply cannot transfer the understanding that the code coupled with watching a guy get his face mashed in will trump common courtesy. And yet, here we are.

Kraig snorts and narrows his eyes on me like I've just insulted his Aunt Sally, in Swahili.

"Hey, ain't my problem," he says. "Dude shoulda kept his paws off the kid."

My astonishment is hard to hide. Kraig is a large human, with strength that matches his girth. Were he to start or stop anything physical, few could overturn his intentions. That he did not interfere in the face-mashing on the yard today has nothing to do with ability and everything to do with willingness and a prison code that I am deeply aware of but do not accept without inserting a bunch of my two cents. And given that today's objective on the yard was someone's messy and complete death, I cannot let it go.

"I'm not sure I've been this disappointed in you before," I say to Kraig. "I really would have expected more of you."

His jaw swings open. His eyes narrow further. I've both confused him and sent a spear through his caged-up heart.

"Disappointed in *me*?" he asks. "Why are you mad at *me*?" He doesn't even look around the table for support. Kraig's an every-man-for-himself kind of guy and finds reliance on others to be a punishable weakness. Still, even he is shocked to learn that my disappointment matters a sliver to him. He stares at me, gaped-mouthed, patiently impatient.

"You could have done something to make the situation on the yard better," I say to him, "and you chose to do nothing. Stand in the way. Wave your arms and yell. Tell the guys to stop when their point was made. You did nothing but *watch*. That's as bad as being part of the stomping."

He cannot believe his ears and looks at me sideways, incredulous, like I've lost my actual and complete mind. Like I've forgotten I'm in prison. Like I have just asked him to sing show tunes in the block shower. But worse than that, he cannot believe how much it hurts his heart that I feel let down—a feeling he cannot mask at this moment. He didn't see that coming ten miles away.

Disappointment is rampant in prison because men and women have experienced it in both directions: from people they counted on who left them hanging in life and from people who were supposed to love them but reminded them instead that their mere presence—and certainly their muck-ups—were a perpetual and permanent burden. Incarcerated

people have tangoed with disappointment their entire lives, and part of the appeal and process of spending time with my team is that we scrub at that disappointment with heavy-duty utility rags and emotional chemicals powerful enough to cut through the layers of build-up. Sometimes that scrubbing takes years to get at the shiny polish that we know is underneath. From the top, we replace the customary rhetoric people have endured (read: limiting beliefs accepted as truth) in their lives with comments like, "proud of you," and, "excited about your future," and, "privilege to spend time with you" so that the layers rebuild and the brain rewires. Rare is the moment when we add to the original wiring because we know how hard it is to turn that Titanic around. But some moments simply don't benefit from gloss.

"What is the point of sitting in my classroom month after month talking about how God expects us to treat each other and how we need to rise above life's fray despite the difficulty, and how being a Christian comes with marching orders if we pass on a pretty important opportunity to live that out?"

Kraig's mouth remains open but he shakes his head and pushes the mute button. He has few enemies in prison and has never been the prey, only the predator. He is thoroughly unaccustomed to grappling with this brand-new sense of restlessness and he is not the tiniest bit pleased with the Chapel Girl in front of him. He's silent, but he's thinking. Stewing like your grandma's pot-roast on a winter day.

Mission accomplished.

Inside the dank interview room in Warren Correctional's segregation unit, the man who has added so many tattoos to his body during his incarceration that they have slunk up and around his skull, neck and cheek is suddenly looking…. lost. It's a look that, in connection with him, is unfamiliar to both of us. I gather my things to leave as Damian and I decide to part ways for the day, but when he learns that I will not be able to communicate with him once he rides to Lucasville (as per the contract agreement under which I work) he becomes the most animated I've seen him in an hour.

"Can you make another stop here in the hole?" he asks me as the officer approaches the door to take him back to his cell in segregation. "There's stuff I don't understand yet."

I laugh and hand him the rosary I've brought, along with the prayer booklets in both Spanish and English. "There's stuff most of us don't understand yet, Damian," I tell him. "It's a lifelong journey. Stay the course."

I agree to stop by next week and when I exit the interview room, I notice that the corrections officer doesn't yank on the shackles that bind Damian's hands and feet to his waist, but instead just points to the door heading into the housing unit. It's a small gesture, but one that I recognize as a peace treaty of sorts: Damian has been down long enough to have garnered the respect of those who can make his world miserable and they silently agree that they each have a responsibility to the other. Damian takes his knocks quietly for breaking prison rules and quells other seg residents by his example; and the officer allows Damian to traverse the black hole of segregation without any extra dollops of drama. On the way out, I am sure to ask the officers about their day and answer any questions they have about the various roles I have in the prison system. The compound is like a rural high school in that, even if you haven't met everyone, you recognize the faces. The officers have "seen me around" and "always wondered what I do." I laugh and tell them that it isn't always easy to figure out at the end of the day. They tell me they can relate.

The following week the same officers point me to the interview room with limited outward concern about my intent or methods; Damian is already waiting inside. He has a crisp blue shirt that is pressed and fits him well and, while he is still shackled and crammed into a tiny plastic chair, his demeanor resembles that to which I'm accustomed in the freer part of his bit. He nods his hello and his thanks over his shoulder to the officer who delivered me.

"How's your week?" I ask.

He nods again. "It's alright, Christine," he says. "I got my stuff today and I got some sleep last night. I'm alright."

"Stuff? What stuff?" I ask. "How can you get "stuff" delivered to you in seg?"

He gives me the, "you-know-I-can't-tell-you-everything" look. I meet that with my, "OK-OK-tell-me-what-you-can-tell-me" look.

"I been down a long time, Christine," he says. "I need stuff, I can get stuff."

He says he's got new shorts and shower shoes back in his cell and his underground delivery explains the shirt that fits. More animated than last week, he launches into an unbidden explanation of gang life and how someone from across the state in a high-security lockup can control the activity of every member in every Ohio prison, as per instructions transmitted from the big guns all the way out in California. Somehow, those connections ensure that even a guy in a high-security segregation unit will sport new kicks if he flashes the right sign. I am equally intrigued and amazed by the ingenuity. We have a dance, Damian and I, where he generally only supplies the information that I could legitimately find on the internet, but sometimes supplies enough extra nuance that I can fill in some local blanks. My interest lies not in interloping on systems inside which I fail to hold a membership card, but in storing the vignettes away for the day when Damian (and anyone else) wants to know more about the intersection of gang activities and this God he keeps telling people he's down with. Turns out, today might be one of those days.

"I been thinkin' about how come I can't stay in touch with you when I ride out," Damian says, referring to his upcoming transfer to a higher security prison. "That don't seem right."

I shrug and nod at the same time. It's policy, I remind him. And, neither of us needs anything that can be misconstrued as an inappropriate relationship. It keeps both of us out of trouble, I remind him. Or, less trouble, anyway.

"You know that's right," he says.

"So, your job, when you're sitting somewhere else and wondering what it's all about, is to conjure up my voice," I say. "Hear what I've said and what we've talked about a dozen times. Pull something from that and continue the discussion with God, not me."

He snorts and looks down at his navy prison pants. The worn spots near the knees contrast the pressed, fresh look of his shirt. He leans his head to one side as if he's trying to decide what to tell me. Then he goes all in.

"Yeah, see, I don't know how I feel about God and all," he says.

And there it is: the moment every chaplain wonders and waxes about, solely and in unison with other laborers in this vast harvest. The

pivotal connector between the relationship you've built and the baton you hope to pass to God (who has really held it all along). When the intricacies of the relationship can no longer support the veneer of surface-level banter, then truth spills out. Sometimes it's messy and vats of vulnerability spill over the levees of self-control with the ferocity of Hurricane Katrina. Sometimes, like now, it's a welcome admission that makes everyone in the room feel like they've stepped on a scale at a Weight Watchers meeting and come up forty-two pounds lighter than they expected.

"God's tricky, isn't He?" I offer. Damian nods.

"I mean, I know there's a God and all," he says, trying to open his shackled hands in a way that signifies a surrender of sorts. "I believe that, but I can't say I hear God or feel God or have faith like I'm supposed to. How can I talk to someone I can't even see?"

I shrug and tell him he has a good point. Except….

"Damian, when you're writing a letter back in the hole to send to your vato in another prison," I say, "you know, say, the guy who's calling all the shots in Ohio? When you send a letter from here, how do you know he's going to get it? I mean, you're not actually getting in your car and driving it to the other prison, checking in at the front desk, making your way to his cellblock and handing it to him. So how do you know he's going to get it?"

Damian thinks, nods.

"I know because that's how it works," Damian says. "He always gets my letters."

"Yes, but the first day you tried that, you didn't know it would reach him. You had to trust someone else—someone who might not know or care about you or your vato and his superpowers enough to make sure it all went smoothly. Some invisible mail carrier force of nature, right?"

He agrees, but his eyebrows are pinched. Not because he's trying super hard to figure out the connection I'm attempting to construct, but because it is instinctive for his hackles to rise when someone pokes at the balloon of gang loyalty even a tiny pin prick.

"And, how did you know that when your dude on the other end got your letter he wasn't going to crumble it up and use it to steady an uneven desk leg in his cell instead?"

Now Damian puffs up and meets my eyes. This is fundamental and serious ground I'm treading on. It's an honor issue and he is happy to set me straight.

"Vatos are loyal," he says. "He takes care of me because he knows I will do the same thing for him. He would die for me. That's the way it is." Then he reminds me that all the furniture in the cells in prison are bolted to the floor so my point is sorta moot anyway.

"Mmm hmmm," I say, nodding. "Even though he is *there* and you are here, he would do anything for you? And you would do anything for him? Anything he asked?"

Damian nods furiously. "That's my vato, my brother," he says. If his shackled hand could reach his chest, he would surely pound it for emphasis.

"Even though you can't see him and he's not right in front of you?"

Damian's still nodding. "I know him," he says.

"So, it IS possible to trust someone you can't see and sometimes it DOES make sense to put your own life and safety in the hands of someone else, even if they aren't right in front of you?" I ask. "As long as you know them well enough to know their character and believe that they have your back at all times? Is that what you're telling me?"

Damian nods. Then stops. He reclines back in the chair and he's quiet. A rare moment of quiet from a guy who racks up miles and miles of respect because he's the one with all the answers. He is still looking at me, but he is super still.

"OK," he says, still reclined. "OK, I get where you're going. I don't trust God or nothin' because I don't know Dude that much, right?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, just looks around the room. Thinks.

"See, Christine," he finally says. "This is why I gotta keep talkin' to you. You make me understand things."

"Nope, not me," I say. "God. I'm just the vessel. Which is why I know that if you really *really* mean it when you look for God at Lucasville, another vessel will present itself."

He nods again and we both sit in the know that we likely won't see each other again. Damian has already mucked up any chances of returning to my prisons when he finishes his stint at Lucasville. His next get-out-of-high-security card will take him to a different part of the state. With that realization, it seems, he decides to treat me to more specific details of his original crime that placed him on the state docket

nearly twenty years earlier. He winds quickly through the pieces that I or anyone could grab from a public record, and then drills down to the motivation behind the crazed and concerted mission of a teenager seeking justice for his brother that ended with two victims who had nothing to do with anything and who are no longer alive to seek their own justice. I hope out loud that I'm around when he sees his part in the melee and two deaths through a different lens, one where loyalty and the code of the street don't trump the dignity of another person. He respects me enough not to say—again—that *nothing* trumps loyalty and the code of the street but we both know that's what he's thinking.

The officer in the hallway signals through the blurry glass window that it's time for count. I stand to leave and remind Damian that we will miss him in these here parts. He laughs away all the bad air in the room and attempts to raise his hand to shake mine, but it's shackled at his belly and we both realize that if I grab it, eight people will immediately enter the room with bad breath and a reason to make our day suck eggs. I make a peace sign instead, point it toward my eyes and then his eyes. "I'll be paying attention," I say.

Damian laughs again. In one of the few times since he's been locked up, he's actually kinda not sad so much about the scrutiny.

About the Author

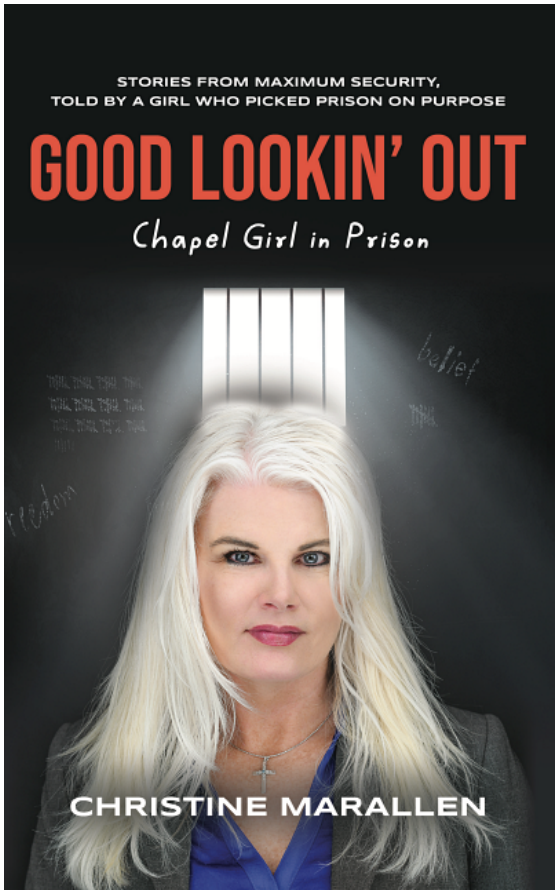
Christine Marallen has spent time with the incarcerated since 2002, trading a successful corporate career for the wooden pews of the prison chapel. Over the last two decades, she has been the ear and the voice for thousands of individuals inside the criminal justice system, writing and facilitating programming for men and women of all faith backgrounds and security levels. Her curricula on trauma, personal development, and post-release life planning have been offered in treatment facilities, jails, and maximum-security prisons.

Christine is the chief strategy officer for Damascus, a nonprofit reentry organization she co-founded in 2015 in Cincinnati. She is the former director of prison ministries for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati

and past president of the American Catholic Correctional Chaplains Association. She holds an M.S. Criminal Justice and M.A. Theology from Xavier University, and is a trauma-informed professional, trained in the NeuroAffective Relational Model (NARM). Christine has been presented numerous awards in areas of both ministry and incarceration. She was featured on the *Transforming Trauma* podcast in 2024, where she describes the intersection of incarceration and trauma—her current work. (Episode 130: A Compassionate Approach to Incarceration and Reentry) Listen to the podcast here:
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/a-compassionate-approach-to-incarceration-and/id1496190024?i=1000651275994

A vocal fan of Notre Dame football, FC Cincinnati soccer, and the Cincinnati Bengals, Christine currently lives in Cincinnati. She is working hard on her golf game, plotting travel on her world map, and applauding her five children as they plant flags throughout the country.

(Author and cover photo by KDalton Photography, Cincinnati)



Good Lookin' Out captures the reality of what's possible with incarceration, restoration, and redemption, told through the individuals Chaplain Christine Marallen encounters as a prison chaplain and criminal justice college instructor.

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