

Once again, Cynthia Ruchti has me falling in love with her characters and not wanting the story to end. From the teenager to the tiny house village people, I wanted to follow them on Instagram and read every post. Don't start reading if you need to get up in the morning because this will be an all-nighter. –Becky Turner, president KBT Consulting

Cynthia Ruchti's "hemmed-in-Hope" stories always capture my attention. In *Miles from Where We Started*, her characters grabbed me from the first sentences, and my travels with them felt much like my own personal journey. Throw in the mix of a sassy adolescent foster boy and a joyful collection of roadside characters, and you've got a book that will travel in your heart a long time. Cynthia's books remind me that when love is rooted in commitment and faith, the rest is just details. Of all of Ruchti's beautifully written novels, this is her best. –Janet Holm McHenry, award-winning author of 23 books including the bestselling *PrayerWalk* and *The Complete Guide to the Prayers of Jesus*

Road trip! Come along on a creative, thoughtful, and fun road trip with Connor and Mallory as they try to figure out what marriage should look like. A wonderful book! –Gayle Roper, author of *A Fatal Arrangement*, *Plain Truth*

Every Cynthia Ruchti story is an unforgettable darkness-to-light journey. In *Miles from Where We Started*, the journey is literal, inviting readers to tag along on a road trip, savoring backroads beauty across the country while experiencing every bump, detour, and breakdown in a rocky first year of marriage. Like Ruchti's vibrant characters, you will not be the same at the end of this emotion-filled journey to hope. –Becky Melby, author of Guideposts' *Family Secrets*.

Traveling love's and life's highways and byways together can be a challenge at any age or stage. Award-winning author Cynthia Ruchti brilliantly draws the reader into the main characters' road trip in a way that your own life's journey is enriched and inspired. –Pam and Bill Farrel, Directors of Love-Wise, authors of 45 books, including the bestselling *Men Are Like Waffles*, *Women Are Like Spaghetti*

"Just add humans and the adventure begins," goes the slogan for RoadRave's new tiny trailer. And what an adventure *Miles from Where*

*We Started* is—following millennial newlyweds Mallory and Connor and a troubled eleven-year-old Judah cross-country. No one wants to be there. The couple is planning to divorce, the boy is wary of yet another in a long line of rejections, and the tiny trailer is just that—way too tiny to contain all this drama! But the people they meet, the places they visit, and the God who accompanies them ... all work together through both trauma and transformation. Best line? This is not how our story ends. Yet another confirmation why Cynthia Ruchti remains my favorite author for contemporary fiction. Her portrayal of millennials and tweeners is phenomenal and I especially loved the down-to-earth middle America folks who offered such wise road signs for these pilgrims. Honey, it's time to take this trip! —Lucinda Secrest McDowell, author of *Ordinary Graces*

Cynthia Ruchti, with her signature blend of warmth and wisdom, never disappoints! *Miles from Where We Started* will have you laughing out loud one moment and reaching for a tissue the next. A journey of hope and healing as unforgettable as the characters you root for and grow to love along the way. Highly recommended! —Kathryn Springer, author of *The Dandelion Field*

Sometimes a risky adventure can change your life in the best way. Road trips are never perfect, so they are perfect opportunities to experience the love that meets our real needs. Cynthia Ruchti offers us all a trustworthy story of redemption. Life gets broken; redemption happens in the ways we least expect. There is great hope! *Miles from Where We Started* could be our story. Doug and I could be Mallory and Connor—if they were thirty years older! —Janet Newberry, educator and educational consultant-on-the-road

*Miles from Where We Started* is a beautifully redemptive tale that reminds us nothing broken is beyond healing. Ruchti is a master at making readers feel deeply and examine their own lives and relationships in the process. A highly recommended read! —Lindsay Harrel, author of *The Heart Between Us*

miles from where we started

Cynthia Ruchti



*Miles from Where We Started*

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“Traveling. It leaves you speechless,  
then turns you into a storyteller.”  
—Ibn Battuta



To the young souls in older bodies  
And the old souls in young bodies,  
To those who can still see home  
In their rearview mirror  
And those who fight to see through  
The fog in front of them,  
Those who race to stay ahead  
Of the regrets chasing them,  
These pages,  
These very pages  
Are applause for your journey.

Dedicated to the One.



## chapter one

**Y**OU CAN'T BAIL ON ME, Nathan."

Mallory Duncan looked up from her laptop. The unfinished spreadsheet wouldn't walk out on her. It would wait. She watched as the vein on her husband's forehead—normally hidden by one or two of the random dark curls that first drew her curiosity—pulsed its displeasure with what he heard on the phone.

"This can't happen." Connor gripped his cell phone with one hand and drove the other into the countertop. Ever the gentleman, he didn't pound. He ground his fist, as if smashing roasted garlic into a smooth paste.

*What can't happen?* Mallory kept her fingers on the keyboard but listened for clues. She would have crossed the room to where he stood and wrapped her arms around him from behind. She would have laid her head on his broad back and planted her hands over his chest as a sign of solidarity for whatever Connor's best friend and "boss"—as Connor teasingly termed him—was or was not doing.

*miles from where we started*

She would have embraced her husband ... if it hadn't been for last week's conversation. If it hadn't been for the words that changed their trajectory. Couples on the verge of separation don't declare their solidarity.

*This can't happen.* The words belonged plastered on the exit door of their marriage. She'd said it to him, to the mirror, to the voice inside her head that insisted love was enough to overcome any first-year obstacles. Now, Connor used the same words with Nathan.

"No! No. This can't happen. You have to get an excused absence or something. Nathan, come on!"

Connor glanced at her, then turned his back and walked deeper into the kitchen. A 700-square-foot apartment doesn't allow for a lot of privacy. Who would have thought two people who were still officially newlyweds for four more weeks—until their one-year anniversary—would need private space? Need an apartment with separate bedrooms. Need to separate.

The familiar hollowness swelled, compressing her lungs and heart. She sat up straighter. It didn't improve her breathing. She sipped her tea. Tepid. Big help.

The spreadsheet on her laptop screen stared at her with its neat lines and tidy edges. Columns. Rows. Sensible. Logical. The antithesis of their home life. Nothing fit between the lines. Nothing made sense anymore. If they separated, the columns would fall into line again, wouldn't they? Mallory and Connor simply needed time apart to sort it out. Six months at the most.

They were grown-ups. Among the most grown up of their millennial friends. They could do this amicably. Refocus. Deal with a few of their personal issues. Six months. Reset. Wipe the hard drive clean and start over. From the way Connor had been talking, six months was more like the kind of hoop a couple jumps through so they could legitimately say they'd tried everything.

Her phone pinged. Her verse-of-the-day app. It would ping again in a half hour if she didn't open it. She tapped the app, then tapped it shut. Months ago, that on/off habit made

her feel guilty. She waited for guilt's nudge. It never came.

Mallory set the phone on the coffee table and headed toward the kitchen with her mug of lukewarm tea. How sensible of them to decide Mallory should retain the apartment, since she worked from home most of the week when she wasn't needed on-site as director of the Hope Street Youth Center. If Nathan agreed to let Connor temporarily set up housekeeping in the empty studio apartment above the Troyer & Duncan marketing firm, that would save his commute. The men had counted on rental income to help offset their company start-up costs. Could Troyer & Duncan hold out for six months without it if Connor camped in the studio?

The first month didn't count, since the upstairs level of the building still boasted unpainted drywall. The remodeling couldn't get done any sooner, since Connor and Nathan's dream client—RoadRave—needed all that video footage of the three-week cross-country trip for their ad campaign.

The first few weeks of their separation wouldn't be the distance across town but miles. And miles.

Three weeks of pre-separation practice. Sounded horrible. But she could make far more progress on her literacy campaign for the youth center if she could work nights too, without the constant communication collapses. Lately, it was as if the entire apartment were floored with eggshells. Every attempt at a cohesive thought derailed. When he was on the road with Nathan ...

She slid around Connor's still-tensed body and pointed to the microwave in the corner. He nodded and gave her room. Maybe they wouldn't have to tell anyone they were separated until Connor and Nathan returned from the trip. So far, no one knew. Not even the people closest to them. They were that good at acting, at preserving appearances.

Connor had said, *You can't bail on me* and something about an *excused absence*. And he wasn't talking about himself or their marriage. What?

"This is the end of it, then," Connor said into the phone. "I don't understand how the courts have the right to do this

to us. Or why your civic duty principles seem more important than our keeping the business going. You know we can't survive without the RoadRave account. Nathan, it was our game-changing break."

*They lost the account?*

Connor leaned his backside against the kitchen island. "Yeah, yeah. Patriotism. American values. I get it. I do. You're not telling me something I don't know." He picked a black grape from the bowl of fruit in the center of the island but rolled it around in his fingers rather than eating it. "Man, this could not have come at a worse time."

Mallory felt an inexplicable urge to scroll back and read the verse of the day she'd ignored every half hour since breakfast ten hours ago. But she stayed rooted to her spot in front of the microwave.

Connor slid his phone—hockey puck style—across the counter and pressed his fingertips into his skull, face scrunched.

"What happened?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. Did he hesitate because he no longer thought she had a right to know?

"Jury duty. Nathan has to report for jury duty Monday morning." He uncrossed his arms and let them flap against his sides. "We were supposed to receive the RoadRave delivery day after tomorrow and head out Sunday morning. It's all set. Everything. Except we're missing half of the two-man team. One small but vital detail." He growled and popped the fidgeted grape into his mouth.

Her chest registered the blow as if it had happened to her, not him. Isn't that how it was supposed to be in a marriage? And here she stood with no advice that would help in any—

Wait. "Connor, Nathan doesn't have to serve on a jury if he's a small business owner, does he? If his business depends on him?"

Mallory's hair stylist had once begged off the responsibility, without argument, for that reason.

Connor swallowed harder than necessary for an already

pulverized grape. “Says he can’t, with a clear conscience. And because it would send the wrong message to RoadRave.” He laced his fingers behind his neck, brow still creased. “You know what sticklers they’ve been about family-friendly, all-American, patriotic, get-this-country-back-to-its-small-town-roots agenda. If Nathan shirks his ‘civic duty,’ we’re likely to lose the account anyway.”

“Do they have to know?” Had she really suggested that?

Connor glared at her, then softened his look. “It’s the principle of the thing. In Nathan’s mind, anyway. He’s crippled by a triple threat. His own convictions. RoadRave’s expectations. And his gut feeling that it’s what *God* wants him to do.” Connor sighed and turned his head, the cords in his neck taut and pulsing. “We don’t call him ‘faithtimistic’ for nothing.”

Mallory cringed. “Can you reschedule the trip?”

“No.” He ripped another grape from its stem. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound harsh. The prestaging is already set. PR schedules don’t bend that easily. You don’t know this business, Mallory.”

“I’m not an imbecile, Connor.”

“Why do you have to take everything so personally?” He grabbed his phone and left her choking on secondhand anger.

And there it was. The completely dysfunctional communication method that had brought them to an impasse in their relationship. Bridge out. No access. Within a few short sentences, she could trace the path that had led them to the only conclusion they agreed on: This would never work. Marriage can’t be built on a rapid-fire volley of reasons to apologize.



With the microwaved tea now too hot to drink, Mallory left it on the counter and scrubbed at water spots on the kitchen faucet. They, too, were stubborn. She loaded the rest of the supper dishes into the apartment-sized dishwasher. Neither of them felt like cooking much these days. They’d shared chef duties, Connor the more adventurous cook. But more often

than not, the dishwasher held little more than silverware and the microwave splatter cover.

Connor paced. No solutions emerged from the effort. None he voiced anyway.

“I need to get some sleep,” he said at length. “Are you okay taking *that*”—he indicated her laptop—“to the bedroom so I can ... ?” He nodded toward the couch.

What young couple stands at the altar—music in the air, candles flickering, hearts pounding—and imagines such cold distance so soon? They weren’t heartless people. They hadn’t chosen each other for the wrong reasons. The online dating service had deemed them compatible. Their initial dates had kept them talking for hours. Had they been idealistic to a fault?

Connor was a good man. Solid, which could also translate to stubborn. But Mallory admired the way his brain worked. He’d said the same about hers.

It didn’t take long after their wedding day to realize their passions were fueled differently, his attentions singlemindedly devoted to getting his career off the ground.

His rogue genes weren’t helping any. Or his father’s recent declining health. Mallory’s thoughts stalled. The way Connor pressed his fingers against his temples—it meant nothing, right?

“I have another hour or more of paperwork,” she said. The laptop felt heavier than it had a few minutes earlier. Yes, maybe some of this was her fault. She’d disappeared into the foggy abyss of her responsibilities at the youth center too often. “I’ll try to be quiet.”

Two steps from the bedroom door, she heard Connor say, “I put my pillows back on the bed this morning. I ... didn’t know where to store them out here.”

For six days, they’d tried sharing the bed with an imaginary concrete block wall dividing it in half. She hadn’t asked him to sleep on the couch. But she hadn’t asked him not to either. Mallory answered without turning. “You don’t need permission to walk into our bedroom, Connor.”

He hesitated but then slid past her into the room that had once represented closeness. Intimacy. “I don’t know how to do this,” he said. “What’s the code of conduct for separation? I don’t want to make a mess of this part too.” His voice sounded thin, childlike.

“I never wanted to know the protocol. Still don’t.” The last word lodged in Mallory’s throat like an oversized vitamin with nothing to wash it down. “Maybe we could look it up online.” She mustered a gotta-keep-our-sense-of-humor half smile.

He mirrored her expression but with his signature furrowed brows. She waited outside the door to their—the—room. Less than a minute later, he stood in front of her, arms laden with a makeshift bed. A picture of defeat. “We may have to rethink my moving into the studio above the office. Without the RoadRave account, we won’t have enough cash flow to keep operations going, much less hang on to the building.”

“Maybe Nathan will think of something. You’re both creative geniuses.”

“Feeling less genius-like every day.” His gaze held hers as if the sentence had a double meaning. They likely both knew it did. “Goodnight, Mallory.”

“Even friends kiss each other on the cheek.”

He paused, then leaned in and held his lips against the hollow under her cheekbone an immeasurably short second.

She retreated into the bedroom, dumped the laptop at the foot of the bed, and lay facedown where his pillows had been.



## chapter two

CONNOR WAS ON THE PHONE when Mallory emerged from their bedroom a little after six in the morning. The kitchen was already light-drenched. In a couple of months, it wouldn't be. For more reasons than the autumnal equinox. Even now, she felt a wave of dread for a dark commute to work and a dark commute home on days the center needed her physical presence.

Connor had made coffee and set her favorite mug next to the coffeemaker. Habit, she supposed. Once, a thing like that had seemed romantic.

His hair lay in damp, dark swirls that even from this distance smelled of oranges and cloves. How had she slept through his showering? Not falling asleep until three a.m. might have had something to do with it.

She opened the refrigerator door and stared at its faceless contents so long the open-door alarm beeped its high-pitched, nerve-scraping sound.

Connor ended the phone call and said, "There's one more toaster waffle if you want it." He refilled his coffee mug and lifted the stainless-steel French press toward her.

She nodded and watched as he poured her first cup of the day. A simple gesture. It shouldn't have brought tears. She scrubbed her eyes as if lack of sleep were her chief concern. "Who was on the phone?"

Connor handed her the coffee—handle first—and said, "Nathan, the Magnificent." The disparity between the look his smile attempted and the question his eyebrows raised almost made her laugh, except for the ever-present throbbing pain around her heart.

"Last night, you described Nathan as a big, congealed bowl of trouble. Today, he's magnificent? What changed?" Pulling off nonchalant wasn't going to be easy if they were going to keep the separation amicable. And if Mallory's heartbeat didn't quit sounding as if it were limping rather than pumping.

The atmosphere itself felt fragile. Could they carry on an entire conversation without it imploding as so many had in recent months?

"He has an idea." Connor opened his mouth as if to say more but didn't.

She dropped the waffle into her slot of the toaster. His slot no doubt held remnants of the onion bagels he favored. "A business-saving idea?" Mallory preferred her waffles with a drizzle of raw honey, but a day like today—on the verge of a life change like theirs—required full-on maple syrup. Wherever it was.

She rummaged in the narrow cupboard they called their pantry.

Connor reached around her and pulled out the bottle of syrup. As if he knew. "Nathan is not only an advertising genius, he's ..."

"Misguided? An illogical dreamer? Determined to a fault?"

"I was going to say 'brave.' He's brave." Connor's facial expression made him look like an eight-year-old boy admiring his favorite superhero. He glanced sidelong at Mallory and dropped his gaze.

"He's going to ask for an excused absence from jury duty

after all?” The pop of the toaster punctuated her question. She dug it out with a fork, against human reason and safety wisdom.

“That ... wasn’t his idea.”

Two slow passes with the stream of organic maple syrup. “What did he come up with, then?” She didn’t have to fake genuine interest. She cared—more than he realized. More than he knew he needed.

Connor rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to mid-forearm and rubbed his palm down his face, forehead to dimpled chin. “Doesn’t matter. It would never work.”

It came to her as slowly as the top speed of a glacier but with as much splash as a glacier calving, losing a chunk of itself to the milky aqua sea. *No. Nathan couldn’t have suggested—*

“This idea. It doesn’t involve me, does it?”

“You and me and—”

“There are two too many ‘ands’ in your sentence.” Mallory’s coffee rebelled against where her mind headed.

“You’re crazy passionate about reaching out to at-risk youth, aren’t you?”

That didn’t even deserve an answer.

“Nathan has one,” Conner said. “A troubled youth.”

“I know. His nephew Judah.” Nathan had only been Judah’s guardian a few months, but the boy had caused enough ruckus to be labeled “at risk.” “You can’t be serious. Nathan wants you to take Judah on this adventure?”

“And ... you. He wants *us* to take his nephew with *us*.”

“*Us* is not a word we’re using much these days.”

*Young lady, I don’t like your tone of voice.* She promised she’d never say that to one of her kids. Seemed logical to use it on herself. She might never have a chance to prevent herself from using it on the in-your-dreams children she’d assumed she and Connor would have. Together. The two of them. *That almost made sense.*

Connor took the coffee mug from her shaky hands and swiped at the caffeinated dribble on the hardwood floor at her feet. With his bare foot. “I’m keenly aware how awkward this

*miles from where we started*

sounds and the weightiness of what Nathan and I are asking.” He paused. “Say it. Whatever it is, you might as well say it.”

“What Nathan and I are asking?” They were *asking*, as if their all-consuming business didn’t depend on it. As if she had a choice. As if Connor could tell her in one breath he didn’t love her the way he should—couldn’t afford to, for her sake, of all things—and in the next expect her to drop everything and roadtrip with him.

He was “tripping,” all right. She practiced several responses and discarded them all.

“Mallory, this could literally save the business. And I mean *literally*, literally. RoadRave is all over the idea. They’re stoked at the thought of including an at-risk kid on this inaugural adventure.”

They—all of them—had apparently talked about it already. Including RoadRave. Without her input. Mallory forced herself to blink.

“And,” Connor added, “that has to help your cause with your literacy project.”

*Really? You’re going to use that weapon?*

“I don’t have to remind you, do I, what happens if this trip doesn’t work out and RoadRave no longer is obligated to make their promised contribution to your Literacy Takes Courage thing? Beyond what it would mean to Troyer & Duncan, do you want to be responsible for cheating the youth out of \$100,000 worth of assistance?”

That was low. Intimidating. He used the word *cheating*? She would be cheating her kids? *Come on, Connor. Even for you ...*

She could say *no* in five languages. Forced to learn how in order to communicate with the inner city underserved. Not enough. She drifted toward the couch.

“Literacy takes *courage*. The name of your little project says it all, Mallory. Adventure. Courage. Think about it.”

*Oh, I am. Trust me. My little project.*

“Nathan has nowhere for Judah to go when he’s on jury