The Intercessors

Exordium

Journey I

by

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This book is dedicated to my
Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
Who so graciously chose me, out of all the authors in the world,
to write it.
May it bring glory to His name, hearts to His Kingdom, and
empower the good and loving Intercessors of the world,
the prayer warriors of
the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This book is also dedicated to my three children.
Aven, MaCaedyn, and Samuel Braeden
for all the years of constant support, encouragement, and
enthusiasm they bring to me
daily for this ministry.
Thank you, Samuel, for all the apples you brought to me each night
while I was working, and to MaCaedyn and Aven for always wanting
to read what mommy wrote.

I love you all more than words can say.

Dear Friend,

I want to thank you for picking up this book and, upon seeing the size of it, pressed on to begin reading!

Years ago, when I saw so many books on the market that were pointing people in a direction that was far from the Lord, I prayed and asked God to give me a book series that would provide readers with a good mystery, adventure, some romance, and all the while, weave lessons of scripture from the Bible, and teach the power of prayer within the storyline. I asked the Lord for a series that would directly point people in the direction of Jesus Christ.

God answered my prayer.

The story you are about to read is considered fiction, but it is full of facts. You will learn lessons of history along the way, which I hope you will enjoy. But what I want to impress upon you is that the lessons about the power of God, His only Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, along with the lessons about prayer and the scriptures of God's Holy Word, the Bible, are the most important ***truths*** *you could ever learn.*

My prayer is that this story will take you on a fantastic journey, transform your heart, and inspire you to become a
Real-life Intercessor: a Warrior of God. I hope to impact you in such a way that when you are faced with a battle, the weapon you reach for is the Sword of the Spirit, the Bible, and the action you take is prayer. Then stand aside and watch our King Jesus bring you victory!

There will be a total of seven books in this series. You are about to begin your first-- and I pray that it won't be your last!

May God richly bless you while you read and help you to realize that while the characters in this story are not all real, ***you*** *most certainly are. Jesus loves you more than words can describe, and He died to give* ***you*** *life. My hope is that you will put your trust in Him, give Him your heart, and confess Him as your Lord and Savior. For living your life for Jesus Christ is the BEST life you can live!*

Now, as you turn this page, you are taking your first step on this journey… so let it begin!

All For the Glory of God!
Angelique La Fon-Cox

"With **God** ALL things are possible."
Matthew 19:26

1

It was two fifteen in the morning when Mark heard his little girl crying. Her nightmares were becoming more and more frequent.

His wife stirred, "I'll get her honey," he said, scrambling up from the mattress on the dirt floor.

"Shh, Kawala," he whispered, "You're okay, Daddy's got you." Reaching in through the mosquito netting, he scooped her up off her little bed mat on the floor and cuddled her into his arms. Her crying was inconsolable.

Mark took her into the sitting room of the hut and sat down with her by the front window. The moon was shining down brightly that night, providing him enough light to see her tear-streaked face. With her eyes still clenched, she cried, and she clung to her father tightly in fear.

"Brielle, shh, Brielle," he soothed, "you're okay, it was just a bad dream. Let's calm down now, Kawala. Shh…"

Brielle tried to stop crying, but she still had a good grip on her father.

"Try to take a few deep breaths, baby. Everything is okay. Just relax," Mark said, kissing her on the top of her head.

Brielle tried to calm down, her sobs lessening with each breath she took. Mark gently rocked her back and forth as if in a rocking chair. Her little hands began to relax, and she lay her head back in the fold of her father's arm. In this position, the moon shone down brilliantly across her honey blonde hair, golden tan skin, and sparkled in her lovely green eyes. Although Brielle favored her daddy in her looks, she had the same jade-green eyes as her mama. Mark gently took his hand and brushed away the tears on her face, kissing her head again.

"There now, Kawala. That's better," he soothed.

"Daddy? Why do all the little girls in the village get called that?" she asked curiously, temporarily distracted from her nightmare.

"Kawala? Because it means baby girl in Ugandan; you are *my* baby girl and always will be," he said, giving her a gentle hug. "Do you want to tell me about your dream?"

Brielle thought for a moment. "I always want to tell you, Daddy. Sometimes I don't know what it is. It just scares me really bad," she said, her lower lip beginning to quiver.

"That's okay. That's okay; you don't have to talk about it. Just keep taking those deep breaths and try to relax," he said, smoothing her hair with his hand. "Daddy is here. You know you always have Jesus when you are frightened or when you need help. You know what I like to do when I need help?"

"You say a Bible verse," Brielle looked up at him sweetly, her little voice still

shaky.

Mark smiled, “Yes, I like to say something from the Bible. When I do, I can find what I need: strength, happiness, or peace for when I am frightened.”

“Do you get scared, daddy?” Brielle asked.

“I do. I get scared, just like you do. But I talk to Jesus about those things, and He helps me,” her father answered. “Like right now. Let’s see… what would be a good verse to say after a bad dream?” Mark paused while trying to think of a verse.

“’*Peace I leave with you; peace I give to you. I don’t give it to you as the world gives. Don’t let your hearts be troubled and don’t be afraid*,’ John 14:27,” Brielle said, her voice completely calm and steady.

Mark stared at his daughter, mesmerized by her words. Even though he had heard her recite scriptures like that before, she never failed to surprise him. It was so impressive to hear a child of her age speak the Word of God so well and with a verse that perfectly fit the situation.

“Yes…” he searched for his words, “that is the perfect verse,” he smiled. “You are amazing! God has blessed you with a very, *very* special gift. Always believe in Him, Brielle, no matter what anyone else tells you. God is *real* and so is His only Son Jesus, and I cannot begin to explain just how much They love you.” Mark lovingly traced her little face with his finger, taking in every detail of her delicate beauty.

“Do you know what other gift God gave you?”

“What?” Brielle asked.

“The gift of song!” Mark smiled widely, “And oh, how I love to hear you sing,” he said, tickling her softly; she giggled and rolled her eyes at him.

“I sing for you all the time!” she said, giggling harder as her father tickled her more.

“I hope to hear you sing for the rest of my life!” Mark said. “How about if we sing your special song?”

Brielle’s eyes lit up, and she nodded vigorously, as this was her favorite song. A special lullaby that her father had sung to her since she was a tiny baby; it never failed to soothe her. They began to sing together.

I love you much more than all of the stars,
I love you much further than the sun, moon, or Mars,

I love you much deeper than the big, deep blue sea,
My love is unending, my love is for free,

Wherever you go, if you’re near or far,
My love will be with you right there where you are,

I’ll always be with you, we never will part
For you’ll find my love there, inside your heart,

I love you forever and all I can do,
Is spend each day showing how much I love you.

When they finished singing, Brielle looked at her father thoughtfully.

"Daddy, when did you learn that song?"

"I didn't learn it; I made it up for you when you were a tiny little baby. You were so small that I could hold you with just one arm—almost with *one hand!*" he said, eyes wide with amazement.

Brielle smiled and giggled again, the sound of her laughter enriching his spirit.

"And now look at you, this great big six-year-old girl that I have to hold with *two* arms-- *and* a leg!" he said with a silly voice, crossing his legs one over the other and bouncing it underneath her.

Brielle giggled, "You made up that song just for me?"

"Yep. You ask Mama," he began, "When you came along… that was the greatest day of our lives," he smiled.

Brielle looked back over her shoulder to the sleeping room and could barely see the image of her mother through the mosquito net that covered her bed. Mark's eyes followed Brielle's and looked in at his wife sleeping on the old, thin mattress lying on the dirt floor. She was due to have their second child any day now. His heart ached for her as she looked so uncomfortable. He knew she was, but she never complained. She would always say, "If these village ladies can have babies and live, work, and sleep like they have done here for years, so can I."

"When mama has our new baby, will that day be better than when I was born?" Brielle asked softly.

Mark looked back down at his daughter. "Oh, honey, are you worried that things will change for you when the new baby comes?"

"A little bit. I see how the other mothers are in the village when they have a new baby. They carry them everywhere and are always taking care of them. When will Mama have time for me?"

Mark brought her close and held her tight, kissing her on the head again. "Don't ever worry. Mama and I love you so much, and no one could ever take your place. Our new baby will be special too, but in a different way. Nothing will ever change how we feel about you. Don't worry, Mama will spend just as much time with you as she ever did, and so will I. You are going to love our new baby. Just think, you will have a new playmate soon!" he said with a broad smile as he hugged her close, "There will be someone else you can make mud cakes for."

Brielle giggled again, delighted at the thought. "Thank you, Daddy," she said, reaching her little hand around his neck and kissing him on the

cheek. “I love you *so* much!”

“I love *you* so much and I always will. Never doubt that Kawala. I will love you forever and ever and ever.”

As Brielle brought her hand down from hugging him, she felt the chain around his neck and traced it with her fingers down to the collar of his shirt. Giving a little tug, she slowly pulled the rest of it out of his shirt until she found what she was searching for… his cross. Ever since she could remember, her father had worn this cross. Even though it looked very old, it was very beautiful, and she loved to hold it in her fingers and examine all its details. She turned it so that the moonlight would strike it just right and let the dark gold stone in its center sparkle.

“Is this the cross Oba gave you?”

“Yes, he gave it to me years ago, before you were born.”

“Even before you came to Uganda?”

“Yep, even before I married your mama. It’s very special, and someday, I will give it to you.”

Even though he had told her this a dozen times before, she smiled because she always liked to hear him say it.

Mark held up the cross and looked at it affectionately in the moonlight, “Always remember this, Kawala; the love of Jesus Christ is your key to life,” he said, his mind drifting for a moment in thought. Then he looked at Brielle, her eyes studying him.

“Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes.”

“Let me say a prayer for you so that you only have good dreams, okay?”

“But you prayed for me to only have good dreams before I went to sleep, and it didn’t work,” Brielle protested.

“Then, we must ask the Lord for it again, and we have to have faith that you will have only the good dreams this time, okay?”

Brielle nodded, and he prayed over her sleep. When he was finished, he asked, “Do you want to come and sleep with me and Mama?”

Brielle nodded again and, with one more kiss upon her head, he took her into the sleeping room of the two-room hut. Just as he had laid her down and was getting ready to go back to sleep, there came a thundering knock on their hut door. The sound of it startled them all. Mark jumped up to go to the door. Brielle rose to follow him, but her mother pulled her back.

“Stay here, sweetheart. Daddy will see what it is,” Genevieve said, cradling her daughter in her arms.

The two watched as Mark went to open the door. Standing in the moonlight, they could see their good and trusted friend Magomu; he was panting hard as if he had been running fast.

Mark stepped outside the door and looked at Magomu intensely.

"Jabari knows it was us who helped the children," he said, gasping for breath, "I found out tonight that he knows," he paused again. "Someone must have seen us outside of the village in Tororo. Whoever saw us told him what we did. He has sent the order for them to come. His men are coming here to kill you and your family tonight. We must all leave right now," he said, still trying to catch his breath. "My friend, Akiki, has a jeep that we can use. It's not very fast, but it will get us to the airport. He lives in the next village up the base of the mountain. We must go *now*."

Mark hadn't even blinked while Magomu was talking; he just stared, listening intently to his friend's message of death. He brought his hands up to his head and pressed them into his eyes. Their old and battered truck, the only vehicle in this village, had broken down, and though they had ordered parts to fix it over a week ago, they still had not come. Mark ran his hands down his face, covering his mouth and raising his eyes to the sky, searching for an answer. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Okay, I need your help with Genna. I don't know how she will be able to do this; the baby is due any day."

Mark quickly went back into the hut. Genevieve and Brielle were wide awake and sitting up on the bed. Although they had not heard Magomu's message, they knew there was trouble.

As the two men raced around the room to quickly gather some important belongings--water, food, money, and passports-- Mark spoke to his family.

"Genevieve," he said calmly, "We must go. We must go right now. Get your shoes and Brielle's. We must leave immediately,"

Genevieve knew not to waste time bothering her husband with questions. There had not been too many times in their life together when he called her by her full name. She knew to trust him and do exactly what he said. Brielle, however, was not as easily convinced of their sudden departure.

"Why do we have to leave, Daddy? Are we coming back? What's happened?" she asked nervously.

Her mother rolled herself off the mattress and put her shoes on, not bothering to change from her night clothes, and grabbed Brielle's shoes and rag doll.

"Come on, Kawala. It's going to be okay," Genevieve smiled reassuringly, "Daddy will take good care of us. Let's not waste any time with questions, just do what he says, okay?"

The frightened little girl nodded her head and put her shoes on. Once Mark had everything they needed, they headed out the door as quietly as possible. Although they loved the people of their village dearly, they did not want any of them to know what they were doing. If Jabari's men came to the village and found anyone else outside, they would think they had helped them to

escape and kill them instantly. Since their hut was located at the farthest end of the village, their quiet disappearance would be best for everyone's safety. Mark thought to himself that even though it would be nice to have it, their broken truck still parked in its place was a good way to throw Jabari's men off track.

Quietly, they started out the door of the little hut they had lived in these past seven years. They came to the village from Connecticut as newlywed missionaries to minister to the people who lived there and other villages nearby. At first, it was a very hard transition to learn how to live in such a primitive place, but now, it was their way of life too. It broke their hearts to leave a place so full of wonderful memories and treasured friends - friends who would worry when it was discovered they had gone. Brielle was having the hardest time leaving, as this was where she was born; this was the only home she had ever known.

Immediately, they began to walk in the bush to stay away from the main road. Genevieve was trying her best to keep up, but even with Mark's help, she could not move at a quick pace.

"I'm so sorry, Mark," she said, "I am trying, but this baby is so much bigger than Brielle was."

Mark, holding tightly to his wife's waist to try and give her support, kissed her cheek and smiled, "You're doing great, Genna, just keep breathing." he looked at Magomu, "Where are the children now?"

"I'll explain when we reach Kampala. Don't worry, they are safe," Magomu said.

Mark looked deeply into his friend's eyes for a moment, withholding his thoughts and not speaking them out loud so as not to scare his family. He knew that Jabari would quickly make sure the children were all killed as soon as he found them. To him, they were deserters from his military.

Several days ago, Mark and Magomu had rescued a group of children who had escaped the officers of the S.G.R., Soldiers of God Regime. It was run by a brutal man who claimed to do all his work in the name of the Lord, going from village to village, kidnapping children, and forcing them to be in his militia. If a child happened to escape near their village, Mark and Magomu would assist them, trying to either place them back with family or find them a new home. Up until now, they had been successful in their secret mission, but somewhere along the line, Jabari found out and was going to put an end to their work.

"Daddy, I'm scared," Brielle said.

"It's going to be okay, Kawala. God will protect us," Mark assured her, "His angels are here with us right now."

"Yes, but what about the snakes?" Brielle said, remembering the rules she was taught about going into the bush at night when the wildlife could not be seen.

Mark quickly realized she was right, took her ragdoll, placed it into his pocket, and scooped her up onto his back. "Father God, please protect us from

any snakes or creatures that would bring us harm tonight," he whispered.

Genevieve was moving as fast as she could. From time to time, days before, she had begun experiencing short contractions, and walking at this pace was bringing them on again. She kept trying to breathe deeply, but the intensity of this moment made it difficult. Afraid that she was going to have her water break and go into labor at any moment, she added to her husband's prayer, "And please don't let this baby come until we are safe."

Pressing on as quietly and as quickly through the rugged terrain as possible, Mark and Magomu both now wrapped their arms around Genevieve's back for support; each was holding one of her hands to help steady and guide her along. Reaching the base of the small mountain, they came out of the bush and began their climb, which elevated into thicker trees. Walking in this area without the help of the moonlight was very difficult, but it was far too risky to carry a flashlight.

"Do you need to stop for a break?" Mark asked his wife. "We could carry you."

"And you could trip in the darkness and drop me. No, let's keep going, if I stop, I may not get started again," she said with a smile.

"You're amazing," Mark said, kissing her again, "I'm so sorry this is happening. I know I brought this on our family."

Genevieve did not stop but looked up at her husband, "I can't believe you would say that. It wasn't just Magomu working by your side--this was our work together. Yours and mine," she paused, trying to steady her breathing. "We did what God led us to do. What is happening now is not by your hand, but the hand of the enemy."

Finally, they came out of the trees and were back amidst the bush when Magomu pointed to a hilltop where they could see a small group of huts silhouetted against the starlit sky. "There. There is Akiki's village. I will go ahead and make arrangements for the jeep."

"Do you need money?" Mark asked.

"No, he would not have it if it weren't for me-- I fixed it for him!" he said as he ran ahead to the village.

"Where are we going to go, Daddy?" Brielle inquired softly.

"We are going to have to leave this place for a while, Kawala," he said, looking down at Genevieve. "I think it would be good to go and visit Grandpa Oba, don't you?" he asked, knowing the reaction this would bring from his daughter.

"Really? We can go to his house in America?" she asked happily.

"Yes, don't you think that would be fun, Mama?" Mark asked, looking down at his wife.

"I can't think of anywhere else I would rather go. Except, maybe we could stop by a hospital first," she smiled.

Their temporary moment of joy vanished in an instant when they heard the sound of truck engines in the distance. Mark stopped and looked behind them. From where they had climbed up through the trees, they could now look down and see the valley just below.

It was Jabari's men.

They had already discovered the family had fled from the village, and they were searching the surrounding areas. The convoy could not travel the way the family had walked because the roads did not come up that part of the mountain. They would have to go a longer way around, but it wouldn't be long before they would catch up to them.

Grabbing a tighter hold on Brielle's legs with one arm, Mark wrapped his other arm around Genevieve, pulling her to a faster pace. As they traveled, he began to pray.

As they climbed, they saw Magomu and Akiki coming toward them in the moonlight.

"This is Akiki," Magomu said, "He has come to help."

"God bless you," Mark said with deepest gratitude, "They are coming now, they are just down in the valley. It will only be minutes before they reach this village. We must hurry," he said as he looked at Genevieve, "We have to carry you, my love." She nodded and wrapped her arms around the necks of Akiki and her husband. While holding her back, they lifted her legs and draped them over their locked forearms to move her as quickly and comfortably up the hill as possible.

Magomu reached for Brielle, "Come on, little one, I will take you so Daddy can help Mama," he said. Brielle loved Magomu and was swiftly swung upon his back. God was with them all as they scrambled up the hill, their only source of light coming from the beams of the full moon and the stars above. The jeep was at the end of the village road, ready and waiting to go. Akiki's brothers had made sure that it had all the gas they could find for their journey to Kampala. But as they reached the vehicle, they heard the convoy of Jabari's men approaching in the distance. Mark looked down the hill to see that they had already come around the trees and were just minutes away. He remembered what Magomu had said about the jeep not being very fast. There would be no way they could outrun Jabari's men. He closed his eyes and listened for the voice of God, "Show me the way, Father God," he whispered, "They will not have my family." Suddenly, he opened his eyes and spun around. There, a few huts down the village road, was another vehicle, an old and very rusty car.

"Akiki! Magomu!" he yelled, "Come quickly! Genna, you and the baby get into Akiki's truck!"

Magomu and Akiki ran to Mark as Genevieve and Brielle watched. Mark spoke to the men. Akiki went to the old car while Mark and Magomu ran to the jeep. Magomu jumped in and started the engine before climbing in the back

with Brielle, making sure she was buckled in.

Genevieve knew something was not right by the look on her husband's face. He didn't take his eyes away from hers as he ran toward them. The expression on his face seemed to be requesting forgiveness as he stared at her. When he reached the jeep, he took her face in his hands.

"We will never make it, and I won't let them have you all," he whispered, kissing her hard on the lips. Then he quickly took his cross from around his neck neck and placed it in her hands, "Give this to her when she is ready."

Genevieve began to panic, "No! NO! You can't leave us! You can't! Mark, we need you! I love you! Please!" she begged, scrambling to try and get out of the jeep.

"Genevieve, you have to take care of our children. I am doing as God showed me. I will lead them away from you. It's the only way to keep you all safe. There isn't much time," he said, kissing her again.

Upon hearing of her father's decision, Brielle began to scramble out of her seat, but Magomu held onto her.

"Daddy! Daddy! NO!" she cried, reaching for him, "Don't leave us!"

Mark's face was full of tears as he reached his hand back to hold hers. "I love you, my precious Kawala, forever. Remember what I told you to do when you need help. Call on Jesus," his voice quivered as he spoke the words. Then he turned back to Genevieve and placed his hand on her stomach, looking down at it, "I love you. I love you all, and I will come to you. I *will* come to you," he said hurriedly.

Akiki ran up and jumped in the driver's seat, reaching over Genevieve, he placed something in Mark's hand. Mark quickly glanced one more time at his precious family.

"Keep your lights off!" he yelled, "Go! Go NOW!"

Akiki took off in the jeep up the village road toward the next hill to try and escape Jabari's convoy. Brielle and Genevieve were both crying, and Brielle was frantically reaching her little arms out for her daddy, his heart-full moon. He drove with no lights so as not to draw immediate attention and hopefully give himself a bit of a head start. He was trying to look over his right shoulder to see the location of his family and look over his left shoulder to see the location of the convoy.

Akiki was now approaching the top of the hill. Magomu was still trying to calm Brielle, his heart breaking to see the beautiful family torn apart by the evil of Jabari. He tried to pray but could only mutter, "Dear God, please spare him. I beg of You, spare him, please, God."

Genevieve had not stopped looking back for her husband, but could not find him anywhere. Mark was racing through the bush as fast as possible. The terrain was rough and rocky, and the car was very old. Again, he looked back over his right shoulder to try and locate his family, but he could not. Then

he looked back over his left shoulder to locate the convoy. When he did, a cold chill swept through his body. They had spotted him by his trail of dust. They were now headed in his direction. The only thing that he could possibly do was keep going as far as he could to divert their attention away from his family.

As Akiki began climbing up the next hill, Genevieve thought she saw something moving on the horizon.

"Stop! Please!" she cried, but Akiki kept driving.

Once she had identified Mark's car, she couldn't take her eyes from it. "Please, I beg you! Stop!" she cried.

"We cannot stop," Magomu said, "Mark made me promise to get you and Brielle out of here and not to stop."

Genevieve kept watching the movement of the car until something else caught her eye: the headlights of the convoy. They were quickly moving in on Mark. Without thinking about the look on her face, she watched in horror as the cataclysmic scene began to play out. Upon seeing her mother's face, Brielle turned quickly to see what she was watching.

The convoy easily caught up with the old car, some trucks passed him wide so they could circle in and cut him off, others closed in tight behind him, creating a ring of vehicles around him. Some of the vehicles giving chase were regular trucks, and others were large 6x6 military trucks. One of these larger trucks happened to pull in behind Mark so that his car was blocked from view of Genevieve. Akiki saw the look on Genevieve's face and slowed his jeep so he could turn around and see what was happening. Then he stopped altogether.

The ring of trucks had Mark trapped. The headlights of the vehicles were on, and men with guns could be seen jumping out of them and running toward the area of Mark's car. There seemed to be a lot of commotion for a moment among the men. Genevieve could not comprehend all that was happening. Just a moment ago, she was resting peacefully in the arms of her true love. Now, he was surrounded by terrorists with no way out. She could hear the voice of Magomu whispering his prayer over and over again, but was too paralyzed in fear to join him. Something shook her for a moment, and she realized that her little girl was watching this scene too. Quickly, she reached back to grab Brielle and turn her around from it. Just as she did, the sound of gunshots rang through the air; the echo of it slicing through Brielle and Genevieve's hearts like a knife.

Genevieve locked eyes with her panic-stricken daughter the moment the shots rang out.

They stared at each other in shock. At first, neither of them was able to move… or cry… or breathe. Everything moved in slow motion. Nothing seemed real or made any sense.

Magomu turned to Akiki, "Drive! Go! Go!" he shouted.

Genevieve tried to hold on to Brielle, but she could not. The little girl turned around to look at the place where she had last seen her father. Smoke from the

guns was slowly circling overhead and could be seen floating in the beams of the vehicle headlights. Brielle reached her hands toward her father, tears streaming down her little face as she screamed over and over,
“DADDY

2

Brielle sat up in her bed, panicked and drenched in sweat. It had been ten years since that fateful night, but the dark memories of it continued to haunt her. Whenever the nightmare came, it attacked with full force, taking her instantly back to Uganda, right into that horrific moment of her life. She took long, slow breaths, trying to calm herself, clutching her bedspread to her chest. The pain of losing her father never left her; it was always there. She learned how to live with it from day to day.

Slowly, she looked around to see that she was in her room. She recognized the sheer white drape that covered her bed. When her family first moved into her grandfather's home in Fairfield, Connecticut, she could not sleep without the familiar mosquito netting that had always surrounded her in their little Ugandan hut. The netting was comforting to her at night. This morning, sunlight was shining through her windows, and the mosquito netting made everything in her room appear soft and dreamy.

Looking at her clock, she found that her alarm was set to sound in ten minutes. She reached over and shut it off. She got out of bed, wrapped herself in her bedspread, and opened the French doors that led to her own private balcony. She sat on one of the rocking chairs she kept there. She took another slow, deep breath, inhaling the chilly fresh air of the crisp September morning. She loved to sit here and look out at the forest of trees that surrounded their house.

Brielle's grandfather, Obadiah O'Sullivan, had designed and built this home over forty years ago. When he wasn't working in the mission fields building bridges in America and overseas, he lived here. He was more than willing to have Brielle, her mother, and her little brother Asher come live with him. Obadiah's wife, Elise, Brielle's grandmother, had passed away some years before. Obadiah gave this room to Brielle because of the view. He knew how much she loved the tall trees in Uganda and thought having a room with a balcony of her own where she could sit and enjoy the beauty of the forest would bring her peace.

Trying to clear her mind of her nightmare, she began to rock back and forth slowly in her chair. Today was not a day to be struggling with sadness. It was her first day of high school. Until this day, her mother, Genevieve, had homeschooled both her children. When Brielle was a little girl in Uganda, her mother and father had both participated in teaching her. When they moved to Fairfield, Genevieve didn't even consider enrolling her in a public school. She continued with homeschool education because she truly enjoyed the time she was able to spend with her children each day.

Genevieve was not only a patient mother, but she was also an excellent teacher. Although she was educated to be a music teacher, she found she was

good at teaching any subject. She loved watching the progress her children made each day, but there was another reason why she kept her children close to home; she was terrified of either one of them being away from her protection. The constant fear that Jabari would somehow hunt them down was always in her mind. After ten years, she felt more confident that they were safe.

This summer, she talked with Brielle and asked her if she would like to attend the local high school. Genevieve had such fond memories of her days with her friends in school, and she didn't want to teach Brielle to live in fear, so she asked if attending the local high school was something she might like to experience.

At first, Brielle wasn't enthusiastic about the idea. She had made many friends at their church and in the community and didn't feel she was lacking socially. She loved the freedom homeschooling brought. She took some time to pray and think about it over the summer and came to the conclusion that she would at least give it a try. Her mother agreed. If she didn't like it, she could just finish her education at home with Asher.

Now, the first day of school had arrived, and Brielle wasn't sure how she felt. Was she nervous or excited? Maybe a little bit of both? As she gently rocked in her chair, wrapped up in her bedspread, she closed her eyes and spent some time in prayer before her day began. She asked God for His strength, protection, and guidance. When she finished praying, she felt much better. Then, there came a soft knock at the door.

"Come in," Brielle said.

The door opened slightly, and Genevieve looked in, smiling broadly,

"Happy first day of school!"

Brielle laughed, rolling her eyes, "Thanks, Mama. You make it sound like I'm just now starting kindergarten."

Genevieve was a beautiful woman with long chestnut brown hair, jade green eyes, and a brilliant smile that could light up a room. She was petite like Brielle, though shapelier in her figure, and she had creamy, ivory colored skin that gave a striking contrast to her dark hair. Happily, she entered the room and stood in the doorway of the balcony, pulling a camera out from behind her back.

"Say Fairfield High!" she said, snapping Brielle's picture quickly before the girl could protest.

"Mama! I'm not even dressed yet!" Brielle howled.

"I know, I know, but I never did have a first day of school with you until now. Just humor me, okay?" Genevieve laughed lightheartedly, causing Brielle to break out into a giggle.

"I guess that's true," Brielle said, looking out at the trees.

Genevieve looked at her daughter curiously, "Are you okay, Kawala?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Brielle answered.

"Are you nervous about today?" her mother asked.

"I actually feel like I am more excited about it," Brielle began, "I just…"

Genevieve came closer, squatting down beside her to look into her eyes. "What's wrong, baby?" she whispered.

"I had another dream about daddy… about that night," she paused, unable to speak as a lump had formed in her throat.

Genevieve knelt beside Brielle's chair and wrapped her arms around her daughter. "Oh, Kawala. I'm so sorry. Why didn't you come and get me?" she asked gently, stroking her daughter's hair.

"I don't know. I just decided to come out here, and it helped me calm down," Brielle answered. "I prayed and honestly do feel excited about going to school today. I just…" she paused again.

"What?" Genevieve asked.

"I just wonder if I am ever going to not feel this… terrible pain. Will it ever get any better?"

Genevieve stood up and pulled the other rocking chair close to her daughter and sat down. She sighed and said, "I honestly don't know."

Brielle looked at her mother, a little surprised.

"I know that may be very hard to hear, trust me; it's very hard to say. The truth is sweetheart, that I just don't know," she said. "I do know that God is able to heal you of that pain, that nothing is too difficult for Him, and I believe that He can," she stopped for a moment in thought and looked out at the trees. "I pray for that every single day, and yet, here we are."

"Are we doing something wrong to keep God from healing us?" Brielle asked.

"I don't think so. I think that sometimes God heals people instantly, making them completely whole in a miraculous way, and sometimes He heals people gradually," she took Brielle's hands in hers and lightly kissed them. "We just loved daddy so very, very much, and losing him is going to take us a *very* long time to heal. I also think that the pain is kind of a reminder of just how special he was to us. We still miss him because we loved him, and that is something that we never want to forget. That's just how I try to deal with it," she looked thoughtfully into her daughter's eyes, "But I promise you this, I will always be here for you when you need me, and you know you always have Jesus with you too," she smiled.

Brielle reached out and grabbed her mother around the neck, pulling her close for a long hug.

"I love you so much, Mama," she whispered.

"I wish there were words to tell you how much I love you," Genevieve answered, kissing her on the cheek. "Are you ready to do this today?"

Brielle smiled and nodded.

"Okay then, get dressed, Oba is downstairs ready to take you to school!" she replied.

Genevieve walked out, closing the door behind her. Brielle got up and began to get dressed for the day, getting more excited about her new adventure. She quickly chose to wear a simple pair of jeans and an elbow-sleeved pink and brown V-necked striped shirt. Looking for her jean jacket and failing to find it, she grabbed a cream-colored sweater for the brisk morning. She brushed her honey-colored, wavy hair, threw it back into a headband, put on a little makeup, and a quick spray of perfume so she would be a pleasant-smelling student to sit next to. Then she grabbed her purse and backpack and started down the stairs.

Brielle dropped her bags by the front door and headed toward the kitchen. The usual sounds of Asher's morning television shows were resonating through the house, and the aroma of her grandfather's coffee filled the room. When she came in, she saw her little brother, Asher, watching his morning shows and eating a bowl of cereal. Obadiah, her grandfather, was standing by the kitchen counter, coffee in one hand and the morning paper in the other.

Obadiah was a large man, 6'4" in height, with broad shoulders and strong arms. He was an engineer and inventor, but took pride in working on the construction of his projects. He was in his early sixties and was in excellent physical shape. His once chestnut brown hair, like his daughter's, was now heavily tarnished with thick streaks of gray and white, and he was the source of the family's gene for alluring jade green eyes. He had a very rugged, but handsome face, and just like Genevieve, his smile was captivating and charming. He was an Irishman, born and raised in the green lands of Ireland, and traces of his Irish accent were still evident in his speech. He had come to America as a young man to study for his degree in engineering and fell in love with the country, along with his wife, Elise, who was born and raised in Fairfield.

When he looked up and saw his granddaughter standing before him, he put down his paper and smiled warmly at her. "Good morning, sweetheart! Ready for your first day of school?" he joked.

Again, Brielle smiled and rolled her eyes, "I would like to remind you all that the school didn't even know what to do with me. Since I have been so highly educated all these years, they didn't even know what else I could learn," she goaded with her hands on her hips.

"That's very true," Genevieve beamed proudly.

"I wish I could spend *my* whole day taking art and music classes," Asher said with a mouth half full of cereal, not taking his eyes from the television.

Brielle leaned around to speak to him, "Ha, Ha, very funny. What's the matter? Jealous?" she smiled.

Asher looked over at her, “Hey, I’m just saying, it must be nice to go to school and just take dance, pottery, and violin,” he said with wide eyes. Her brother Asher was always making her laugh.

“You forgot about American history,” she added, “—and Latin.”

“Who takes Latin? It’s a dead language for crying out loud,” Asher mumbled, his eyes still fixed on the television.

“Obviously, not totally dead if they offer it at Fairfield High, anyway, now you will have something to look forward to yourself,” she said, “Since I already met most of my requirements for school, I have Mama to thank for it-- and she’s your teacher too.”

Genevieve beamed with pride.

“We better get going so you can get yourself settled on campus,” Obadiah said, “but not without a good breakfast.” Then he moved away from the counter to reveal Brielle’s favorite breakfast, chocolate milk and powdered doughnuts. Her face lit up when she saw them.

“I don’t know how healthy it is or how well your brain will function with this stuff,” Obadiah teased, “but I know they’re your favorite,” he chuckled, reaching down to kiss her on the top of her head.

“Thank you, Oba!” Brielle said, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek. She grabbed her breakfast surprise off the counter and went to kiss her mother and brother good-bye, “Wish me luck!” she said.

Genevieve grabbed Brielle and kissed her on the head. “I wish you *blessings*, not luck. Luck is for leprechauns,” she laughed. Then she pulled her daughter into her arms and held her tight while saying her usual departing prayer; something she always did whenever she had to be away from one of her children. This morning, however, she added extra prayers for the special day ahead.

“One more photo,” she said, grabbing her camera, “Please, for my scrapbook, okay?”

Brielle posed with her backpack and chocolate milk for her mother and then headed for Obadiah’s truck. As they started down the road, Brielle waved to her mother and brother. Asher and Genevieve stood on the porch and waved back.

Genevieve blew her daughter a kiss, “Father God, protect my Kawala. Give her a great day and bring her home safely to me. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen,” she whispered.

“She’ll be okay, Mama,” Asher said, reaching his arms around his mother’s waist. “But I’m going to miss her.”

Genevieve looked down at her son and hugged him. “I wonder how many mothers in the world get to hear their children say something like that about their siblings?” she laughed. “I’ll miss her too,” she said softly as she watched the truck drive down the road and disappear from view.

“Come on, let’s get started with *your* school work for the day,” she said to

Asher, dragging him into the house reluctantly, as he still had his arms wrapped around her waist.

As Obadiah drove into town, Brielle was enjoying her milk and doughnuts. He looked over at his granddaughter, “You do realize you are covered with powdered sugar, don’t you?”

Brielle looked down and giggled, her mouth too full of doughnuts to speak.

“You know, one really impressive fact about children who have been homeschooled is that ninety-five percent of them never turn from their faith,” Obadiah began. Brielle knew exactly where he was going with this. she nodded in agreement while starting in on another doughnut.

“You have always had a good head on your shoulders and have been such a wonderful, good girl. You have served the Lord since you were little and have shown that you can be trusted to make good choices,” he continued. Brielle just smiled and let him talk.

“I just want to encourage you not to be persuaded by others to change from who you are in any way,” he said.

Brielle looked over at him for a moment with confident eyes, “Oba, I’m not about to be led astray by any of my new friends. You know me better than that,” she answered with a hint of arrogance.

“Sweetheart, I know you very well. I love you and trust you completely. All I’m trying to say is that we are all human and we all make mistakes; there is no perfect person in this world. There is only perfection in Christ,” he said. “Things happen. It’s part of life. I just don’t want you to forget who you are.”

“I’m not going to. Don’t worry so much,” she laughed casually.

“I don’t just mean who you are as a member of our family. I mean who you are in the Lord,” he said seriously, taking a tone that Brielle knew not to pass off lightly. “I know you love Jesus. That is evident in your daily life. I know that you pray and read His Word and try to follow His commandments. At the same time, there is more to come that God has planned for your life. You have been created for a great purpose. He has His hand on you and has placed many talents and abilities in you. It is important that you stay true to who you are in Christ,” he said.

“Talents? Me? Ha, you’ve got to be kidding. What kind of talents are you talking about, Oba? You’ve heard me play the violin, and I have no idea if I am artistic yet… I guess I’ll soon find out,” she muttered.

“Brielle, talents are not limited to abilities that lie within the arts. You have many great abilities. You are a strong leader; people are drawn to you. You are kind and compassionate to people when others turn away, and you have an amazing gift of memorization,” he said, “The Lord has blessed you with these qualities for a reason.”

Brielle thought about what her grandfather was saying. She knew he

was right about her ability to memorize things, written text, pictures, song lyrics; anything that she concentrated on was promptly filed away in her mind, and easily remembered when she needed the information. She did know that she had a tremendous amount of compassion for others; it was something she had always felt inside her heart since she was a little girl. She just really loved people. But she didn't see herself as a leader. Not in the least.

"We're all supposed to be kind to one another. I really wouldn't consider that a talent as much as just trying to follow God's commands. But I don't see how some of those things are *talents* that God can use. I remember things well, so what?" she said softly, looking out the window. "What good does that do for anyone else but me?"

Obadiah was quiet for a moment in thought. Then he reached over and patted her arm, "God has a plan for you, sweetheart. I don't know what it is yet, but you'll see someday… you'll see."

Just as Obadiah finished speaking, Brielle's heart gave a quick leap. They had reached the school. She had been so distracted by the conversation during the drive that she hadn't had time to feel anxious. Now, it hit her all at once. Her heart began beating faster and faster as Obadiah pulled into the parking lot. That morning at home, she decided she was excited and not nervous. In this moment, she wasn't so sure. She was looking at all the kids that were already there and began to tell herself that she was being ridiculous. She had been at all kinds of community events and dozens of church youth functions before; it wasn't like she hadn't ever been around teenagers her own age. Plus, she already had two very close friends at the school: Keoni and Gideon.

Keoni and Gideon Toussaint were twins, and they all went to the same church. Brielle met them the first time she attended Sunday School at the Maple Grove Church when she was only six years old. Because they were African Americans, she immediately went to sit by them. Brielle did not care about differences in skin color or race; in fact, she related to them more than the other children because she had been born and raised in a small village in Uganda.

Keoni and Gideon also had something in common with Brielle that created a bond between them. Their father, Antoine Toussaint, was a police officer in the town of Fairfield and had been killed in the line of duty a few years back. The twins were just entering their teens when he died.

Brielle knew exactly what they were experiencing and was able to support them as she completely understood their loss. Keoni and Gideon were her best friends, and they were bonded together through loss, friendship, and the love of Jesus Christ.

Since the twins had always gone to public school, Brielle believed having the two of them with her was going to make the transition much easier. Her eyes immediately began combing through the campus buildings in search of the library. Keoni was going to be waiting for her there that morning.

Finally, she saw Keoni and pointed out to Obadiah where to drop her off. Now that she had one of her friends in sight, the nerves were fading and the excitement was coming on again.

Obadiah stopped the truck at the curb and turned toward his granddaughter, “I’ll be here at two o’clock. Have a great day, sweetheart. I love you… And remember what I said.”

Brielle nodded, “I will, Oba, I love you too!” she said happily as she bounced out of the truck. Turning to give her grandfather one more wave, she then went over to her friend, who was waiting underneath a beautiful oak tree. When she reached her, she immediately grabbed Keoni for a hug.

“Oh, I’m glad to see you!” she said, “I was starting to freak out!”

Keoni laughed and hugged her friend, “You’ve got nothing to worry about. You’re gonna do fine!”

Keoni was a lovely girl with flawless skin and light brown eyes. She had a sweet, delicate smile, and she possessed a gentle inner grace that was apparent in everything she did. She was slender and tall, taller than Brielle by several inches.

The two girls were different in many ways, yet their friendship worked beautifully. Keoni was graceful, poised, and more reserved, whereas Brielle was more daring, vibrant, and much bolder with her words. Sometimes Keoni seemed distant to others, but once they got to know her, she was easy to talk to, whereas Brielle didn’t know a stranger. The two friends balanced each other
out well.

Both girls had a great love for the violin, even though Keoni didn’t play. Instead, Keoni was quite a gifted artist and loved to paint, draw, sculpt, and sew. Her specialty was fashion; she wanted to be a designer. She was always doodling on some sort of new creation in her sketchbook, which was with her wherever she went. It was well known that Keoni was quite the “fashion queen”, for her style sense was evident. That morning, she had pulled back her long, black, shiny hair into a ponytail. She was a very stylish and meticulous dresser, always appearing to have walked right off a model’s runway, and she loved to spend time designing and making her own clothes, almost as much as she loved shopping. After she greeted her friend, she gently stepped back from Brielle to look her up and down.

With a slight grin, she slowly shook her head. “Honey, what have you put on for your first day of high school? And what on earth do you have all over you--no wait, let me guess? Powdered doughnuts, right?”

Brielle looked down at herself and laughed. She was covered with powdered sugar—again. Her friend knew her so well. Keoni broke open her bag, “Brush yourself off and let’s fix you up a bit,” she said.

Brielle had learned to never argue with Keoni when it came to clothes; she

knew that Keoni had great taste and a gift for how to dress, and to be honest, most of the time, Brielle liked having her friend's help. Keoni had a natural expertise for style and good fashion sense, and she was always ready to share her talent by helping those she thought to be "fashion deprived."

"I expected this from you today," Keoni said, "Here, let's put this on to spice things up."

Keoni produced a silky cream-colored scarf from her bag and tied it around Brielle's neck to loosely hang down. The sun had come out and was gradually warming things up, so she took Brielle's sweater and tied it around her waist. Then she grabbed her hairbrush, removed Brielle's headband, brushed her hair out, combed it over to the side, and placed a jeweled clip in it. For the final touch, she had Brielle clean off all her doughnut crumbs from around her mouth, added a little color to her cheeks, and freshened up her lip gloss.

Brielle was a naturally beautiful girl. She was petite, only a little over five feet tall. She was very slender and had glossy honey colored, wavy hair. Her skin was radiant, especially for a sixteen-year-old, and her green eyes and bright smile would capture anyone's attention, just like her mother's. When Keoni used her talents to fix her up, she was lovely.

"There," she said, standing back to view her work, "Much better. Do I need to come over each night and lay out your clothes for you?" she teased.

Brielle laughed, "You are more than welcome to do that. It will save us time each morning!"

"Okay, let's go, we only have a few minutes. Do you remember where all your classes are?" Keoni asked and then quickly corrected herself, "Look who I am talking to, of course you remember where your classes are."

Brielle pulled her class schedule out of her backpack, even though she had it memorized, she wanted to take one more look. A few weeks ago, she and her mother had come and walked the campus to learn where all her classes were located. She felt confident that she had a good handle on things, but still wished that Keoni was going with her.

"I'll see you in American History, and then we'll have lunch after that," Keoni said.

"Okay," Brielle replied, "What about Giddy?"

"He'll meet us. I can't remember what class he had before lunch, but he said he would meet us in the lunchroom. You're gonna do fine," Keoni said, grabbing her friend around the neck for a quick hug.

"Thanks," Brielle said, and then she headed down the hall to her first class.

Brielle hoped her first two hours would be a piece of cake: art and dance. Being a homeschool student, her mother kept a strong focus on all her main requirements: math, reading, history, English, science, and social studies--among other subjects. But outside of music, Brielle didn't get too many chances to study other areas of art. Now, she was going to take every opportunity. The

other students in her classes were fairly quiet. She tried talking with a few of them, but they seemed to be shy. She quickly learned that she wasn't the only one who had the first day jitters.

In her first class, she decided to do a pottery project and quickly discovered that working with clay is not as simple as it looks. It was very fun-- but not very easy.

In dance, she quickly learned how inflexible she was and, to her surprise, had a hard time keeping her balance, but these things didn't discourage her as she always loved a challenge. She felt satisfied that she wasn't coming to high school just to create memories; she was going to learn something new and enjoy it.

Finally, it was time for American History. She was excited to see Keoni and to begin her class, as history was one of her favorite subjects. When she walked through the door, she glanced around the room to find Keoni. When she saw her, she smiled and motioned for Brielle to come sit in the seat next to her.

"How's it going?" Keoni asked eagerly.

"Good!" Brielle said happily, "I haven't made any new friends yet, but the classes are all fun and the teachers are very nice. It's really interesting to be in a classroom, the only one I have been in before this was Oba's Cross Café class at church," she laughed.

Just then, the door opened, and a girl walked in who caught Brielle's attention. The girl had jet-black hair and very pale skin. She was tall and extremely thin; she didn't look healthy at all. She wore mostly black clothing and had very thick lines of black eyeliner. Her eyes were tired, and she had little purple half circles underneath them, apparently from not enough sleep. Her hair looked like it hadn't been brushed in days and was loosely gathered in a ponytail around her neck. She kept her head down and did not look up as she walked in, but her facial expression reflected that of a person with a heavy heart. Brielle
did not take her eyes off the girl; she didn't mean to stare, but there was something about her that stirred compassion in Brielle's heart.

"Who's that?" Brielle whispered.

"I'm not totally sure, but it kind of looks like… Lacy Weaver." Keoni answered, looking and sounding shocked, "At least, I think it is."

Brielle watched the girl walk to the opposite side of the classroom and sit in the very last seat, where many empty chairs surrounded her. She placed her books on her desk, crossed her arms on top of them, and rested her head.

"She seems… full of pain," Brielle said.

"Yeah, she must be," Keoni answered.

"Why do you say that?"

"I knew her last year and she didn't look anything like that," Keoni

whispered, “Not only did she look different, she acted different. She acted happy.”

“Hmm, I wonder what happened.”

Keoni raised her eyebrows and nodded, “Yeah, that’s quite a transformation.”

The bell rang, and the teacher began the class. He introduced himself as Mr. Bennet. He was a middle-aged man who had tremendous energy for teaching history. Brielle knew she would enjoy this class. They were going to begin the year with an in-depth study of the Revolutionary War. Brielle had already studied the Revolutionary War for years with her mother. Because she knew so much of what the teacher was covering already, her mind kept wandering to the girl who sat alone in the back of the room. She would look at her from time to time, thinking that if Lacy saw her, she would give her a friendly smile. But Lacy never looked back.

When the bell rang to dismiss the class, Lacy was one of the first ones out the door, racing past the other students to leave. Keoni and Brielle noticed this immediately.

“Wow, she’s in a hurry,” Brielle said.

“Yeah,” Keoni answered, “maybe she’s really hungry.”

The students gathered their things and headed for the door, but Brielle couldn’t stop thinking about the girl.

“I think tomorrow I will invite her to sit with us,” Brielle said.

Keoni looked at her, puzzled, “Why? You can see that she doesn’t want to be around other people.”

“Yeah, but maybe she just needs to feel included. She looks so sad, like she is in mourning or something,” Brielle said.

Keoni looked at her seriously, “Honey, there is a whole group of kids who look like that, act like that, and dress like that. Most of the time, they just want to be left alone and only hang out with each other. I know this is all new to you, but you’ll learn,” she paused, pulling her phone out of her bag to read a text message. “Come on, Giddy just texted that he is almost there. By the way, don’t call him Giddy in front of anyone at school, he’s not fond of it,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“You’re kidding? We’ve called him that since he was six years old,” Brielle said.

“He doesn’t care if we call him that, he just doesn’t want *anyone else* to,” Keoni smiled slyly.

“Ah, I see, ‘*Giddy’* really isn’t the name of a smooth lady’s man, huh?” Brielle laughed.

“Exactly,” Keoni said. When she and Brielle entered the lunch line, Brielle was thrilled to see so many kinds of foods from which to choose.

“Wow!” Brielle exclaimed, “In so many of the movies I’ve seen, in high

schools, there is just one line where they slop *things* on a tray that hardly resembles food. This is *excellent!* I could do some damage here."

Keoni laughed, "I don't know how you do it. You eat like a teenage boy instead of a girl, and yet you're one of the tiniest little things around. I'd be careful, someday that might catch up to you."

"I'll worry about that when it happens, but as long as I have this wonderful metabolism, I'm going to enjoy it!" Brielle said as she added a giant slice of pepperoni pizza to her tray to join the bag of chips, side of mashed potatoes and gravy, bowl of fruit, and bottle of chocolate milk.

"I take that back," Keoni laughed, "You don't eat like a teenage boy, you eat more like a garbage disposal."

Even the checkout lunch lady seemed shocked to see such an array of food being purchased by such a petite, slender girl.

"Is this all together?" the lunch lady asked curiously.

Brielle looked up from digging in her wallet and was caught off guard at the question. "Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. Were you talking to me? Yes, this is all mine," she answered happily.

"This is all for *you*?" the lady asked again. Brielle, concentrating on counting her money, didn't hear her.

"Yes," Keoni answered for her friend, "Amazing, isn't it?" She smiled at the lady.

"It's actually kind of refreshing to see a girl her age eat for a change," the lady muttered to herself.

Brielle handed the lady her money, and while she waited for her change, she looked at Keoni's tray, which held a small salad and a bottle of green tea.

The checkout lady rang up Keoni's items, then looked over at Brielle, "This is what I'm used to selling to all the girls around here," she said, shaking her head.

Once Brielle and Keoni had their food trays, they stood at the edge of the lunchroom and scanned the room looking for Gideon. "Just look for pretty groups of girls, he's bound to be sitting with one of them," Keoni chided. But after a minute of looking, they didn't see him.

"I thought he texted you that he was almost here?" Brielle asked as they moved to a table with open seats.

"He did. He must have met up with some friends on the way," Keoni said, puzzled.

The girls sat down, and Brielle blessed her food before starting in on her mashed potatoes. When she opened her eyes, she noticed that Lacy had come into the lunchroom. She looked strange, different than she did before, still very sad, but now oddly disconnected. She didn't have food, only a drink. Brielle nodded to Keoni to turn around. They watched as Lacy walked up to the L-shaped condiments counter and grabbed several napkins and a straw. Then she sulked out the door of the lunchroom. Brielle could still see her through the

window as Lacy went outside to a tree and sat down. She pulled a small notebook from her bag and began writing vigorously in it.

"What is your fascination with that girl?" Keoni asked, taking a bite of her salad.

"I don't know. I can't put my finger on it. There's just something not right going on there. Tell me about what she was like last year," Brielle replied.

Keoni stopped in thought, "She was blonde-- really blonde, like lighter than your hair and so beautiful. She wore regular clothes, not all black and dramatic, and she was friendly. She was always with these two girls, Meryl and Samantha. They weren't popular, just kept to themselves. We were all in the same biology class last year, and sometimes we did labs together. They were all very nice. Lacy was pretty funny; she was always making us laugh," she finished. Then she turned around to look across the lunchroom. "There they are over there," she pointed with her pinky as she took a drink of her tea, "Meryl is sitting at the end of the table and Samantha is across from her."

Brielle looked over to see two girls; both of them appeared to be very happy.

"Wow, what a difference a year makes, huh?" Brielle said, "I'm going to try and talk to Lacy tomorrow. Maybe we can get her to sit with us in class."

Keoni hesitated, "Yeah, you mentioned that earlier, I don't know. You've been pretty sheltered all these years by being homeschooled. There are a lot of people in school who dress and act like that. It might just be her thing now, who knows?"

Brielle looked out the window at the girl scribbling in her notebook. She didn't know why, but something was pulling on her heart for Lacy, a girl she had never known before today. Brielle had already finished her mashed potatoes and gravy and was now diving into her pizza when she saw Keoni's face drop into a look of serious disapproval. Keoni was looking behind Brielle and wasn't very happy about what she was seeing. Brielle turned around to see Gideon with a tray of food balanced carefully on one arm, and the other arm was wrapped around the waist of a tall and beautiful red-haired girl. She was dressed scantily in a short jean miniskirt with a thick black belt and a tight pink shirt. The shirt revealed a lot of her slender, yet voluptuous figure. Brielle smiled brightly when she saw Gideon and jumped up to give him a hug.

"Hey Buddy!" she said. Gideon let go of the redhead and warmly hugged Brielle back.

"How's your first day goin' so far, Bri?" Gideon asked.

"Good! At least, so far, so good," she grinned. Then she looked over at the red-haired girl whose smiling face now changed into a serious look of disapproval--just like Keoni's.

Brielle smiled warmly at the girl, "Hello," she said, extending her hand out to her, "I'm Brielle St. Claire."

The girl stepped back to place her hand on Gideon's shoulder. She looked down mockingly at Brielle's extended hand but didn't shake it. "Hello," she said coldly.

Gideon immediately spoke to introduce the girls, "Brielle, this is Taryn. Taryn, this is Brielle, we've known each other since we were six years old," he said lightly.

Brielle laughed, "Yeah, I'm like his other twin sister."

"Only white," Gideon joked.

This made Brielle laugh, as Gideon was always the entertainer. Taryn, however, was not amused. She turned to Gideon and whispered, "You can join me at my table if you like." Then, with a smug smile at Keoni, she turned and walked away.

Gideon knew he was in trouble from the look on his sister's face. Keoni's expression of disapproval had not budged.

"What are you doing with that girl?" Keoni hissed at him.

Gideon set his tray of food down and raised his hands in front of him, "She's been coming to football practices to watch and just came up to me and started talking. What was I supposed to do?" he said with an innocent expression, as he pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. Then he looked over at Brielle's tray, trying to change the subject, noticing that all she had was a bag of chips and a bowl of fruit, "What's the matter, Bri? Not hungry today?" he joked.

"Hush," Brielle smiled, patting her hand in the air.

"She's already eaten almost everything," Keoni scoffed, "Because we have been here waiting for you for quite a while."

"Okay, fill me in," Brielle said, "What's the deal with this Taryn?" she asked curiously.

Gideon started to speak, and Keoni beat him to it. "Taryn is the school… Jezebel, to use a Biblical term, you will understand. She is *not* the kind of girl to bring home to Mama, and I do not understand what my brother is doing with her," she said sternly, glaring at Gideon while she answered Brielle.

"It's like I said, she's been coming to watch football practice, and then she was in my last class today. She sat next to me in class because we've been talking a lot after practice. Now what am I supposed to do, be rude?" Gideon said, again with that same innocent expression.

"Yeah, come on, Keoni," Brielle said, "We both know that Giddy can't pass up a pretty face. He lacks the strength," she giggled, taking a bite of fruit.

"And the willpower," Gideon agreed with a sly smile.

"I'm serious, Gideon Toussaint, that girl is trouble-- the kind that you don't need," Keoni said.

"I'm just making friends," Gideon said, stuffing almost half of his cheeseburger into his mouth for a bite.

"And isn't it convenient how she never was interested in being your friend until you became the starting tailback for the football team this year?"

"You did?" Brielle gasped, "That's awesome!" she said, raising her fist to touch his, then noticing the stern look on Keoni's face, quickly opened her bag of chips.

Keoni hesitated for a moment, but lowered her voice and said, "Daddy taught you better than this."

Gideon did not look up. He just lowered his head in thought and slowly put down his cheeseburger. He grabbed his napkin, cleaned off his face, and took a deep breath. "I think I'm done," he said, turning to Brielle, "I'll see you tomorrow. I hope you have a good day."

"Okay, bye, Giddy," Brielle said gently. Then he got up and walked out the door. Brielle looked across the room to see Taryn's eyes following him.

Keoni sat back and put her head in her hands, "I shouldn't have said that," she whispered, "but something has got to get through to him. If he's not careful, he could get himself into a bad situation with that girl."

Brielle leaned forward to her friend, "He knows you love him," she said, "and that you are trying to look out for him." Then she looked across the room at Taryn, who was now staring directly at her. She smiled and happily waved at her, but Taryn quickly turned away.

"I seem to really ruffle her feathers," Brielle said, puzzled by the girl's behavior. "Why is that?"

"Because you're beautiful and new here; you have mystery, and people will all be wondering who you are and where you came from. Whereas she has been around *a lot,* and everyone knows *everything* there is to know about her," Keoni said, stabbing a piece of lettuce with her fork.

"Seriously?" Brielle questioned as she picked up the rest of Gideon's cheeseburger and took a bite.

"Seriously, and the only reason that she has latched on to my brother is because she's already been through most of the starting lineup—offense, defense, and probably special teams," she scoffed.

At this comment, Brielle began to giggle. She wasn't used to seeing Keoni so worked up, and for some reason, it struck her funny. She tried to muffle her laughter but couldn't. Keoni sat there for a moment and shook her head, then she smiled and began laughing too.

After lunch, Brielle only had two more classes: Latin and orchestra. She headed down the corridor toward the classroom, as she was most eager to improve her knowledge of this language. She shared a common interest with her grandfather when it came to the Latin language.

Obadiah was a gifted engineer and inventor. He used his talents to travel the world and help primitive and underdeveloped areas strengthen their villages and communities by designing and building bridges, roads, churches, schools,

and orphanages. In the past, if he was contacted about a project, no matter where it was, or if they could pay him or not, he tried to go. While he temporarily lived and worked in these countries, he also acted as a missionary. He would minister the message of Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen to him and teach them scriptures from God's Word.

The people he worked with came to love and respect Obadiah very much. Often, they would give him gifts of gratitude. Sometimes these gifts were things which they had made, or were relics or objects of their culture. Sometimes, he had been given rare and unusual artifacts, ancient pieces of antiquities that people wanted to bless him with.

One man in Chile gave Obadiah the gift of an extraordinary Bible. It was written in the Latin language and was something magnificent to behold. The pages were made of sheepskin parchment, and the cover was made of the softest goatskin leather. The leather encased a hardcover binding, and on the front and back edges of the cover were brass hinges that could be latched together to hold the Bible closed. Obadiah was told that it dated to the seventeenth century. Brielle had always been fascinated with the Bible and would climb onto her grandfather's lap and listen to him try and read the scriptures in the antiquated language. Brielle and Obadiah were thrilled to learn that Fairfield High offered a class in Latin studies.

When she reached the class, she was not surprised to find that it was sparsely attended. Obviously, the students who were interested in studying a dead language were also of a dying breed. Brielle looked around the room. Most of the students didn't even look up when she entered. She sat down next to a guy who looked to be even younger than a freshman in his size and stature. When he saw her enter, he smiled at her, so she decided to sit next to him.

"Hello," she said, "I'm Brielle."

"Hi," he said shyly, his eyes darting up to meet hers, "I'm Rateesh."

Brielle's eyes widened, "Wow, what a great name. What's your last name?

"Kedar," he said.

"Rateesh Kedar. Very cool. Where are you from?"

"I was born here, but my parents are from Chennai, India," he said.

"Cool," Brielle replied, "My grandfather lived in India for a short period of time. He built a bridge there," she smiled.

"Really? Where?" he asked.

"Zanskar for one place, and then another was Baspar, but he traveled all over to other places where he didn't build bridges."

"That's really cool," he said with a smile.

Rateesh had very thick black hair that was short and wavy. He looked like he might have weighed 100 pounds—if that. His arms were thin, and she

could tell from how he sat in his seat that when he stood up, he wasn't very tall. He had on a nice pair of khaki pants and a green polo-style shirt. Brielle wanted to know how old he was, but didn't want to be rude or make him feel self-conscious. Maybe in time, she would figure out a way to find out.

Brielle's thoughts were interrupted when their teacher came into the room. He was a short, plump, elderly Italian man with very little hair, who introduced himself as Mr. Mancuso. After his introduction, he turned to the blackboard behind him and wrote one word: *Exordium*.

"This is the first Latin word you will learn in this class: Exordium. It means *the beginning*," then he turned to the class, "and that is where you are, the beginning of a great journey in learning this beautiful and fascinating language."

Mr. Mancuso had a sweet, friendly smile that warmed Brielle's heart. He spoke very softly, and although he had a slight Italian accent, he had impeccable diction. She knew that this class would be another one she would enjoy.

After Latin, she said goodbye to Rateesh and headed for her last class of the day: orchestra. This class, she was sad to admit, made her a little nervous. When she first came to America, she heard some of Obadiah's classical CDs. Up to that point, she had only been exposed to the sounds and instruments of Africa. She loved hearing melodies from the new, rich-sounding instruments. She fell in love with the sweet and lustrous tones of the violin. She enjoyed the violin so much that she wanted to learn how to play one. She had asked her mother last year if she could take lessons. Her mother happily agreed and found her a good teacher in town, who gave private lessons named Mrs. Farrel. After the first couple of weeks, Mrs. Farrel suggested to Genevieve that Brielle try another instrument. It was her opinion that Brielle and the violin did not make a good match, and she could *not* be taught. But Brielle was determined and always loved a challenge, so when she saw that the high school offered beginning orchestra, she immediately signed up.

Upon entering the class, she found her teacher, Mrs. Wyatt, sitting on a tall stool in front of the risers. Mrs. Wyatt was a younger lady, tall with dark blonde hair and beautiful blue eyes. She smiled when Brielle entered and warmly welcomed her. Brielle had only rented the violin she had previously used, so her mother thought it would be easier if she rented another one from the school. Mrs. Wyatt had her violin ready for her and then directed her to her seat.

One by one, the students arrived, and Mrs. Wyatt placed them according to their instrument and section. Brielle sat down and opened her violin case. Just looking at it made Brielle feel happy; it was a lovely cherry color, and the lights overhead shone brightly off its smooth lacquered wood. She took it out and began to rosin her bow as she had learned last year. She had not been paying attention to the other students coming into the class, so she was completely shocked when she looked up from her violin and saw Lacy. She was not sitting with the other students on the orchestra platform but was seated at the black

grand piano in the front of the room. Brielle was pleasantly surprised to see that Lacy no longer had an expression of sadness. Now she seemed content, peaceful, and concentrated.

Mrs. Wyatt called the class to attention and, after a few words of welcome and instruction, they were off, clamoring their instruments together, desperately trying to create music. But even though the noises of the newly formed group were somewhat devastating to hear, there was one instrument that brought a confident and magnificent melody to the madness: the piano. Lacy was a gifted classical pianist, and she played her instrument effortlessly and with great passion. Brielle was thrilled to see this unexpected but wonderful transition.

When the class was over, she packed up her violin and gathered her things as quickly as possible, trying to get down to the piano to talk to Lacy. She looked up to see that Lacy had already gathered up her music and was getting up to leave. As soon as she stood up, the peaceful, contented expression on her face melted away to reveal the former look of sorrow she carried.

Brielle jumped up and called out to her, "Lacy!" she said, struggling to get her bags and violin case together.

Lacy turned to Brielle with a look of confusion, "How did you know my name?" she asked softly.

"Oh… well… we are in the same American History class, and I heard it today," Brielle stammered, not realizing that she and Lacy had not been formally introduced.

"Ok," Lacy said and started to turn back toward the door.

"You play beautifully," Brielle said quickly, hoping to stop her.

Lacy quickly glanced back, taken off guard, and said, "Thanks," but kept walking to the door.

"I was wondering if you would like to sit by me in class tomorrow." Brielle blurted out, quickly realizing that her question was a bit awkward to the girl who didn't know her, "I mean, I'm new here, so it would be nice to make more friends," she said, feeling more and more like a complete idiot.

Lacy reached the door but stopped to look at Brielle with a puzzled look on her face. "No thanks. I don't need more friends," she muttered, and before Brielle could say another word, she was gone.

3

Brielle sighed and stood there momentarily thinking about how she wished she had been more prepared for what to say. Now, Lacy would just think she was some needy, weird girl. She tried to shake it off and just be glad that she had made it through her first day of high school. Overall, she felt good about the experience but was very tired. As she walked toward the parking lot, she thought about all the new things that she wasn't used to: so much noise, being in such large crowds of teens, and having someone else besides her mother and grandfather teach her. Plus, she missed the company of her little brother, Asher. Attending high school would take some getting used to, but then she thought about all the things she enjoyed; the new subjects she could take, the fabulous lunchroom with the great variety of foods, and the new friends she was making—even if Lacy didn't want to be one of them.

As promised, Obadiah was sitting outside in the parking lot in his truck. He was reading one of his history books and drinking a cup of coffee. He greeted Brielle cheerfully, "How was it?" he asked.

"Good!" she said, hopping into the truck's cab.

"Good, huh?" he asked happily.

"Yeah! I really liked it. I think I'll stay," she smiled.

On the way home, she told Obadiah about her day. She talked about her classes, her teachers, and some of her new friends. Then she began to tell him about Lacy. Obadiah listened intently.

"I can't explain it, Oba," she said, "I've never seen this girl in my life, but there is something about her that is pulling on my heart."

"You know what that is, don't you?" he looked over at her with raised eyebrows.

Brielle looked at him for a moment, thinking, "You mean what is pulling on my heart?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "That is the Holy Spirit. There is something that this girl needs help with, and the Lord is pulling on your heart through the power of the Holy Spirit."

"So then, the Holy Spirit was the one bringing her to my attention?" she asked.

"Certainly," he said, "Did you see anyone else paying attention to her?"

Brielle thought for a moment, "No, not really. But I wasn't with her all day. I only saw her a few times."

"And what happened when you saw her?" he asked.

"I could hardly stop thinking about how sad she looked, and I felt like… I don't know, like I wanted to reach out to her somehow," she answered.

"That is the Holy Spirit speaking to you," Obadiah said softly. "The Holy

Spirit is that still small voice speaking in your ear; it is the voice of God trying to get your attention."

"You mean, like when I am trying to make a decision and an answer suddenly pops into my head?" she asked.

"Yes, that's one example. The Lord speaks to people in different ways. The Holy Spirit is always there to guide and direct us, but we need to be in tune with God and walk closely with Him in order to understand Him clearly. The closer our relationship, the more answers we hear from Him. We must be open and seek His will. Then once we hear it, we have to receive it and be obedient to follow His direction. "I have even heard some people, who don't believe in God, say that in times of trouble, they suddenly felt like a loving presence was guiding them. God is always with us, whether we believe in Him or not," he said with his charming smile. "I personally don't know what people do who *don't* believe in Him. I find I need Him more every day."

Brielle was taking in every word her grandfather spoke. She had heard the teachings of the Holy Spirit before, but hadn't thought about the pulling on her heart being that of the Lord. The entire school day, it was something she couldn't quite figure out, but now, it made sense. God was speaking to her about Lacy.

"Being obedient is the hardest part-- I think so anyway," she said, "Like when you hear that small voice in your head telling you to do something, and you *don't* do it… and then things don't turn out so great. I have had many moments like that where I wished I had gone with my first instinct."

"Ah, yes, that reminds me of your grandmother," Obadiah said warmly as he thought of her. "She used to say that the first feeling that came into your heart was the Lord speaking to you, giving you direction. Anything that came after that was of the enemy trying to stop you from doing God's will."

Brielle listened to her grandfather intently. She loved to hear stories about her grandmother. Her name was Elise. She died in the missionary fields before Brielle was born. Obadiah always seemed to be in awe when remembering her, and he always spoke so tenderly while telling the stories of her life. Anyone could see the great love for his wife that still lived in his heart. Brielle wished she could have known her.

"These kinds of things don't happen by chance, Brielle. I don't believe in coincidence. I've seen enough evidence of the Lord through the years to show me that He has His hand in everything that happens. There is a reason that you met this girl and that you feel led to reach out to her. You need to pray about it, see how God directs you to handle it, and He will. Just try and be patient and seek His direction throughout your day," he said.

They sat quietly for a moment, and then he said, "I'm proud of you, sweetheart."

"Yeah? Why?" she asked.

"Because you do try to keep a close relationship with the Lord and He is able to use you," he said.

Brielle thought about this quietly. Then Obadiah changed the subject, "Hey! I almost forgot; we received an invitation from my friend Mr. Mullins to go out on his boat for some fishing Saturday morning at Black Rock Lake. Asher was thrilled to go, so what do you say? Are you in?" he asked.

"Yeah, sounds good to me! Wow, Mr. Mullins's boat, huh? We'll be fishing in style," she laughed.

Obadiah made the turn onto the road to their house. As they approached, Brielle felt that familiar warmth of coming home. This was the home where her mother grew up when her family was not traveling among the mission fields. When Brielle arrived here, she was still severely grieving the loss of her father. This home had helped with her healing process. Brielle was accustomed to living in a little mud hut with a thatched roof, with two rooms, one for eating and one for sleeping. Though at first the large house was a bit of a shock for Brielle, Obadiah's home became a place where she felt safe and protected. It became a place of happiness and peace.

Brielle never looked at the house without marveling at her grandfather's talents in engineering, design, and construction. He had built this home as a wedding gift for his young bride, and it truly was a masterpiece. The house held a wonderful balance of strong masculinity and delicate elegance, perfectly blended. The home was two stories with English cottage-pitched roof tops that were covered with dark slate tile. A large porch stretched across the front of the home. The house itself was built with large natural gray stones, accented with dark mahogany wood. There was an incredible tower that sprang from the front left side of the home, which looked exactly like a medieval castle turret. Obadiah had made this tower into a viewing room with windows all around the top floor so that the lush landscapes, which surrounded the home, could be viewed and enjoyed. There were two fireplaces that had large ivy-covered stone chimneys, and every window was framed with a set of wooden shutters.

Along the right side of the house, there was a little creek. The creek came down the hill behind the house, cutting through Obadiah's property in the back yard, and the front yard before flowing underneath the road. Being a lover of bridge building, he seized the opportunity to use the creek as an excuse to create a bridge right within his own home. This bridge was a hallway, enclosed with a magnificent transparent floor structure along the bottom and tinted windows constructing the sides and top so one could vividly see the beauty of the nature one was walking over and through. The bridge crossed directly over the creek and led to Obadiah's study and office, where he worked on his projects, giving a magnificent view of the forest on the way.

The home had five bedrooms upstairs, one for each of the family members and a guest room. There was a large kitchen and dining area, a living room

where Genevieve's piano and other instruments were kept, and a family room that had the look and feel of an elegant mountain lodge. Behind the home was a grand patio and yard with a basketball court for Asher. A small distance behind the yard were the stables, a quaint cottage guest home for the stable groom, and to the left side of the stables was a large corral surrounded by trees.

The home gave all who first came upon it quite a striking impression. Still, there was also a lovely gentleness that surrounded it, the flowers. Brielle's grandmother had spent many years planting and cultivating a lush garden filled with all kinds of flowers, which splashed color around the home and brought the sweet smell of a feminine touch. There was also a romantic arbor just to the right of the home. To reach it, you had to pass through the garden and cross the creek, over which Obadiah had built a sturdy miniature bridge. On the porch stood an old-fashioned swing and a few rustic-looking rocking chairs for easy living. Rose bushes grew up all around the railing, scenting the porch with their delicate and lovely aromas.

When they reached the house, Asher and Genevieve were waiting for her on the front porch swing. They waved happily, excited to have her back home.

"So?" Genevieve asked as she walked out to meet her daughter, "How did it go?"

"It was good!" Brielle answered, climbing out of the truck. "I really enjoyed it," she said giving her mother a hug.

"Really? You liked it?" Genevieve asked.

"Are you surprised or disappointed?" Obadiah laughed.

Genevieve looked at her father while hugging Brielle again, "I'm not sure. I had no idea how much I would miss her!" She kissed Brielle on the head. "We're glad you're home, Kawala," she whispered in Brielle's ear, "Especially Asher. He watched the clock like a hawk, waiting for you to come home."

This warmed Brielle's heart. Asher loved his sister very much, but also relished the joy of constantly teasing her. He was a very happy and lively ten-year-old boy with chestnut brown hair like his mother's, but with the same brilliant blue eyes of his father. Genevieve and Brielle were so thankful that
God had blessed him to look so much like his father. It helped keep their memories of Mark close and alive on a daily basis. Brielle could never quite explain it, but when Asher was born, his birth brought her great peace and strength; she loved him very much.

"I heard that," Asher said from the top porch step.

"Oh, come on, you know you did," Genevieve laughed.

"Yeah, well… maybe a little," he smiled.

"Come on in and tell me all about your day," Genevieve said. "I knew you

would be hungry, so I made you a snack.

Brielle smiled at her mother, who, of course, was right; she was hungry. She sat down with Asher and her mother to tell them about all she experienced that day, starting from Keoni's parking lot makeover to the humiliating talk with Lacy at the end. She discussed with her mother what Obadiah told her on the way home about the Holy Spirit leading her to Lacy.

"I agree with Oba," her mother said. "Pray about it and the Lord will guide you." Then she grabbed her and hugged her again, "I'm so proud of you, Kawala! And I missed you so much!" she smiled.

After Brielle had spent some time with her mother and Asher, she ran upstairs to change her clothes and then headed out to the stables behind the house. On her way, she passed by Asher shooting hoops outside.

"I'm going for a ride, want to come?" she asked.

"Mama and I already went out today," he said. "It's amazing how fast I can get done with school now that you're not here. I have mama's attention all to myself," he smiled, taking another shot.

Brielle laughed and headed toward the stables, anxious to see her friend. Outside of Brielle's family, there was someone else who held a tight grip on her heart, her horse Piper. Every day after their school time at home, Brielle and Asher would groom their horses and take them out for a ride in the woods or along the beach. Piper was a gift from Obadiah. He gave Piper to Brielle as a filly when she first arrived in Fairfield; Obadiah understood how horses were enchanting creatures to children. He taught her how to groom, saddle, ride, and care for her horse, which she learned very well. Piper was the best therapy for a grieving little girl because the horse brought her tremendous joy.

When she entered the stables, Piper heard her coming and immediately began to nod her head and whinny in excitement. Brielle walked through the stable, greeting all the horses in their stalls with kind words and a gentle rub on the nose as she passed. There was Obadiah's sleek and strong black stallion, Sisco, Genevieve's lovely Palomino-Arabian, Moon Dancer, Asher's brown and white pinto colt, Apache, Magomu's gentle buckskin Appaloosa mare, Kissa, and then… There was Jellyfish.

Obadiah was a tall, strong man weighing 200 pounds, and he needed a horse to match. Jellyfish was a most impressive, enormous sorrel-colored horse that stood over 17 hands. Oba had purchased the horse for himself, as Jellyfish reminded him of Secretariat, the greatest race horse that ever lived, and appeared to be perfect for lively afternoon rides. But he quickly found the horse was too high-strung and strong-tempered.

Almost from the moment they saw each other, Jellyfish and Moon Dancer formed a strong attachment, and Obadiah couldn't find it in his heart to separate them. Jellyfish was also very protective of Piper and Apache. Genevieve said that Sisco held the role of grandfather, and Jellyfish was the father figure. He was a

good horse to other horses, but to humans… he was a firecracker.

Finally, at the end of the stable was Brielle's mare Piper. When she reached Piper's stall, she spent some time petting and talking to her, telling her all about her day, and giving her a few lumps of sugar with half an apple. Piper was a strikingly beautiful thoroughbred. She was iron gray and without spots. The horse had a solid, sleek, gray body with a jet-black mane, tail, muzzle, and stockings up her legs. Brielle opened the stall door, and Piper slowly followed her out to the corral. Brielle always liked to saddle and groom Piper outside among the trees and fresh air.

"Happy day to you, Brielle!" she heard a familiar voice say from behind her. She turned to see the cheerful face of her dear friend Magomu.

"Can I help bring Piper's tack and grooming tools out for you?" he asked happily.

"Oh, Magomu, you know I don't expect you to do that," she said, "I can get it, you do enough already."

"That is my job, is it not? It is no trouble at all. I won't be but a moment," he said, turning to head back into the stables.

The night that Magomu helped Genevieve and Brielle escape, he knew that he could not return to his village in Uganda. His parents and extended family had been slaughtered by Jabari's regime, and his brother Ojore was a captive of the S.G.R. and was forced to serve in Jabari's Troops. There was no one and nothing left for Magomu in Uganda.

After all that Magomu had done to protect and help save Genevieve and Brielle, Obadiah gladly welcomed him to live there with them and gave him the job of groom for the horses. Magomu was also talented in construction, mechanics, and art. He loved to go with Obadiah on his engineering jobs; he wanted to learn all he could about construction, engineering, and design. He had homeschooled with Genevieve when he first came to live in Fairfield. Even though he had minimal schooling in Uganda, he was an excellent student and had flown through his studies so rapidly that he went from elementary school level through high school in only five years. After obtaining his high school diploma, he was attending an online college. Although he had dreams of being an engineer himself, at present, he was very content living with Brielle and her family and working as the groom for their horses. Since he was a fast learner, Obadiah had taught him well how to care for the horses, and it was a job he truly loved to do.

Magomu returned promptly with Piper's tack and grooming brushes. He placed the blanket and saddle on the top rail of the corral and the bridle on the fence post. Then he took out the hoof pick and walked over to Piper.

"I have not cleaned her hooves for a few days, let me do that for her before your ride," he said.

"Thank you, that would be great," Brielle said, grabbing the brush to groom

Piper.

"How was your first day of school today?" Magomu asked, looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, no--not you too," Brielle smiled, shaking her head.

Magomu laughed, "Yes, I was so proud. Our little girl all grown up and finally going to high school!" he joked.

Brielle rolled her eyes and laughed, "Well, if today is my first day of school, then I will be a prodigy student who graduates after only two years, huh?"

Magomu laughed again, "Tell me, how was it?" he asked.

As she worked on grooming Piper and he worked on Piper's hooves, she told him of her day.

"Are you looking forward to going back again?" he asked.

"Yeah, I am. I liked it. Don't tell Mama this, but it's so much easier than what she taught us at home! I understand that the reason why I am so ahead of my class is because of all I learned from her, but boy, is this going to be easy," she giggled.

"Maybe it isn't that it is so easy, but that you are just very intelligent," Magomu said.

"Why thank you, kind Sir," she said, nodding her head as if to bow, "But I don't think it's that, I just think that Mama is one tough cookie of a teacher."

"Yes, yes, I can agree with that," Magomu laughed lightly, "but thank God for her."

Once Piper was ready to go, Brielle climbed up onto the saddle and slowly headed down the dirt path that led from the house and into the woods.

"Have a safe ride, Brielle," Magomu said. "Do you have your phone, just in case?"

"Yeah," Brielle turned to him and waved her phone in the air, "thanks for your help!"

There was a long trail through the trees that extended for miles without traffic, as Obadiah owned most of the land in this area. After walking for a few minutes, Brielle gave Piper a soft kick, and the horse began to trot, warming up her muscles. She knew her horse well and could tell when Piper was ready to stretch her legs. Being a thoroughbred, it was in Piper's blood to run, and they both equally loved it when she did. Brielle gently gave her the cue, and Piper began galloping, gaining speed as she ran down the forest trail. No matter how many times Brielle had done this, it was always a thrilling and invigorating feeling to ride on the back of a racing horse. Brielle released her joy as she cheered Piper on, the gray horse gaining speed with every stride. The trees flew by, and the dust on the dirt road behind them resembled the stream in the sky left behind a soaring jet.

After traveling about a mile or so on the dirt road, Brielle slowed Piper to make a left-hand turn onto another path. Today, Brielle was going down to the

beach. She wanted to spend some time in prayer for Lacy, and she loved going to the beach whenever she could. There, out in the open air, where she could see as much of the sky as possible, she always had a better understanding of just how big God is, and when she had a problem, she wanted the help of that big God.

The trees were thinning, and as she rode down the path, she could feel the salty wind blowing across her face. Finally, she reached the beach. The sun was still warm, and its light glistened on the rolling waters of the sea. She let Piper run in the waves for a while, as this was something they loved to do. Then she walked the horse over to a grassy area where Piper could graze, dismounted, and sat down on a large rock by the shore. This beach was so beautiful and serene, she loved to come here to relax, think, and pray. She breathed in the fresh air and listened to the waves as they came rolling in, giving almost a sizzling sound as the foamy waters dragged back across the sea-soaked sand.

"Thank You, Father God, for this great day," she said. "I enjoyed my new school and ask You to please help me learn all I possibly can there. I thank You for Giddy and Keoni, and I ask You to please help them with their current situation with Taryn. Thank You for letting me meet Rateesh and for my great teachers. I had a good day, Lord…" She paused in thought, "I just would like to have Your help with that girl, Lacy," she said. "God, I don't know her--but You do and for some reason You have placed it in my heart to reach out to her."

"If You do want to use me to help her, please let me know. Give me some sort of confirmation so I will understand that this is truly Your will. And if You do want me to reach out to her, please help me to know how You want me to do that, because… I blew it today. I sounded ridiculous. Help me to become her friend, she seems so sad. I know that You have a reason for bringing us together, Lord, and I ask You to help me do what You want done," she took in another slow, deep breath, "Help me to hear Your voice at all times and be obedient to it. Thank You, Father God, in Jesus' Name. Amen."

After she prayed, she felt good, but didn't have a clue as to what to do about Lacy. She remembered one of her old Sunday School Bible verses, *'But if we hope for what is still unseen by us, we wait for it with patience and composure.' Romans 8:25.* She thought about this verse for a moment, and then she thought about what Obadiah had said about her talent of memorization. She didn't know why she was able to retain information the way she did; it was just something she had done for as long as she could remember. Still, she didn't see how it would help anyone else but herself.

After spending a few more relaxing moments on the beach, she climbed back on Piper and headed for home.

That night, as she was getting ready for bed, she walked down the hall to her mother's room. Genevieve was still getting ready for bed, and Brielle

loved to go in, stretch across her mother's bed, and talk to her while she did.

"You know, there was something else that I wanted to talk to you about school today," she began

Genevieve sat down in her chair and started to put lotion on. "What's that, Kawala?"

"I didn't want to talk to you about this in front of Asher," Brielle started, "because he's too young."

"Oh, okay," Genevieve smiled broadly, "are we going to talk about boys after your first day of high school?"

Brielle rolled her eyes. "No, Mama, it's not that, but it does involve Giddy."

"What's wrong?" Genevieve asked.

"He totally ticked Keoni off today by coming into the lunchroom with his arm around a girl named Taryn," she said, "According to Keoni, this girl is like the school… well, she called her a Jezebel."

"Goodness," Genevieve said, "Why does Keoni think that about Taryn?"

"I don't know, but she went on about it and was pretty mad at Giddy. She even told him that their daddy didn't teach him to act like that."

Genevieve stopped what she was doing and stared at Brielle seriously, "How did Gideon respond to her?"

"It hurt him. He left his lunch on the table and walked out. I felt bad for him. But at the same time, I know that Keoni would never have said something like that, knowing it would hurt him if she wasn't worried about that girl."

"What is the girl's name again?" Genevieve asked, rubbing lotion on her arms.

"Taryn," she answered.

Genevieve stopped again in thought, "Does she have red hair?"

"Yeah? Do you know her?" Brielle asked.

"If she is who I'm thinking of, I went to high school with her mother. She lives on the Gold Coast. I think you may want to try and be patient with this girl," she said, "if she is Taryn Cavanaugh, she has a pretty rough time at home."

"Are you serious?" Brielle said sarcastically, "She lives on the Gold Coast, and you think she has a rough time?"

Genevieve gave her daughter a direct look, "Money doesn't buy happiness, Brielle, you of all people should know that."

Brielle lowered her eyes in thought. Obadiah was not as wealthy as the people who lived on the Gold Coast, but he was comfortable in his living. Yet, even with all the luxuries that surrounded her, none of them took away the pain of losing her father. She would happily give everything she had now to be back in that little mud hut in Uganda with him again.

"You're right, Mama. I'm sorry. But why do you say that then?" she asked.

"Her parents are always gone. They are either working or traveling for business or just out enjoying themselves… but, from what I understand, Taryn

gets left behind most of the time," Genevieve said.

"How do you know?" Brielle asked.

"I still run into her mother from time to time, and she has told me. I always make it a point to ask her about Taryn, as she is their only child. Her mother always says that they leave her here, so she won't miss school. They hired a live-in Nanny," Genevieve said, capping her lotion bottle and getting up from her chair to kiss Brielle on the head. "Now, I ask, do you think she has a rough time of it?"

Brielle sighed, thinking about how much she loved her family and how miserable she would be if she had to be separated from them all the time. "Yeah, that's pretty bad," she agreed. "But why do they do that to her?" she asked innocently.

Genevieve shook her head slowly and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I have no idea. I know I couldn't do it. I was sad being away from you all day today! Yet, I know some parents are different than others. Not everyone realizes how much of a gift it is to have a child."

"Doesn't sound like they love her very much," Brielle scoffed.

"That's not up to us to judge. I'm sure they love her, they are just being careless and don't realize how precious these few years with their daughter are," she looked at Brielle and lovingly pulled a strand of hair back from her face.

"Plus, from what I remember of her mother, that's what her parents did to her, too. So, the circle continues."

Brielle thought about her mother's words, "I love you so much, Mama." she said, leaning up to hug her mother.

"I love you too, Kawala," Genevieve said, hugging her daughter. "Just try to be a little more patient with Taryn, she is obviously looking for attention and love. She's just going about it the wrong way."

"That makes sense," Brielle said, falling back onto the bed, "I just hope I can convince Keoni of the same thing."

"Me too," Genevieve said, "Just be careful not to repeat anything that you've heard about Taryn. You're not used to how high school kids work yet. Rumors can be brutal. You don't know if Taryn is a *Jezebel* or not. I need to teach you all about who Jezebel actually was and all that she did to ancient Israel. Jezebel was a very, very evil woman; maybe Taryn is more lost and in need of love than evil. Do you understand?" she asked, reaching her hand out to her daughter. "Come here and give me a kiss good-night, it's getting late and you need to get to bed."

Brielle kissed her mother and then went off to bed, excited for another day of school in the morning.

The next day at school, as Brielle walked to her third hour for American

History, she thought of sitting in the back of the room where Lacy sat the day before. Perhaps this might be easier than trying to get Lacy to join her. But when she came into the class, Lacy was already in a seat on the far side of the room, and all the seats around her were taken.

"At least she isn't sitting at the back all by herself," she thought.

Keoni smiled, and Brielle could tell from the look on her face that she had something important to say to her. As Brielle approached her friend, Keoni looked her up and down.

The look on Keoni's face quickly changed to one of surprise. "Hey, not bad," she said, motioning her hand for Brielle to turn around, "I like this little ensemble you have on today. Well done, honey, you're learning."

Brielle had chosen to wear a black pair of capris, a white cotton shirt that came past her hips, and a little red waist jacket.

"You even accessorized!" Keoni praised.

Brielle laughed, "Yeah, but this little ensemble took me thirty minutes to figure out! If you don't want me to show up every day in a t-shirt and jeans, then it would be a lot easier if you would come over and get my closet in shape!"

Keoni smiled, "Just – say – when."

Brielle plopped down in her seat and motioned over toward Lacy, "I'm glad to see that she isn't hiding in the back of the room today."

"She was, but Mr. Bennet asked her to move up; he must have noticed her yesterday too," Keoni said.

"Really? That's good, makes me feel better that I'm not alone."

"I wanted to talk to you about something," Keoni started, but just as she spoke, the bell rang and Mr. Bennet started the class.

"I'll tell you at lunch," she said.

After class, the girls began walking to the lunchroom. Brielle wanted to talk to Keoni about Taryn and was hoping that Gideon wasn't going to join them so she could.

"Is Giddy going to meet us for lunch today?" she asked.

Keoni rolled her eyes, "Not if he brings his little red-headed friend," she said dryly.

"You know, I had an interesting talk with my mom last night about that," Brielle said.

"About what? Gideon and Jezebel?" Keoni said, a bit louder than she thought. Some of the other kids in the line turned around to look at her. Quickly, she put her head down and started digging in her bag.

"I'll talk to you about it inside," Brielle whispered, "I think what I learned might help you a little."

As the two girls went through the lunch line, Brielle began choosing a new conglomeration of foods than she had selected the day before, but Keoni stayed with her regular salad and tea.

The checkout lady grinned when she saw Brielle coming, “Ah, my favorite customer!”

Brielle laughed, “What can I say? I like food and I’m a hungry girl.”

“It’s alright by me,” the checkout lady laughed, “I get tired of seeing our food go to waste.”

Brielle and Keoni found seats and blessed their food. When Brielle looked up, she saw Lacy, who hadn’t come into the lunchroom but was sitting outside again under the same tree, writing in her notebook. Lacy stopped her work for a moment and leaned her head back against the tree, closing her eyes. Brielle could hardly stop watching the girl. Then she remembered what Keoni had said in class.

“What was it that you started to tell me in class today?” Brielle asked as she selected her first food item to devour.

“Oh, yeah!” Keoni said, “I’m sorry, I got sidetracked with the whole Taryn thing,” she said, putting down her fork and leaning forward to lower her voice. “I had a really weird dream last night about Lacy.”

“What happened?” Brielle asked.

“Some of it was unclear, I was trying to find someone--or run from someone, I can’t determine which, but I was panicking. I was running through dark streets until I came to a large building. It was old and abandoned; it was in New York City,” she said.

“How do you know?” Brielle asked.

“Because the Chrysler Building was in the distance.”

Brielle nodded, “Ah, got it.”

“The building was all brick,” Keoni continued, “It was dirty, in need of repair, and several stories high. When I walked up to it, a bunch of pigeons flew out suddenly and scared me to death. It had big brass doors that I could tell were once beautiful, but everything about the building was run down, and all the doors and windows were boarded up.” She paused, focusing her eyes on the table as if visualizing the dream again.

Brielle was captivated but didn’t interrupt her.

“I was really scared to go inside, but I had to, and once I was inside, I kept hearing different voices crying out for help. It was a chilling sound. I began to run through the building, searching to find the voices. I wasn’t sure who I was looking for, but when I would come to a room where I could hear someone crying for help, but the door was locked.

“Room after room, I ran from door to door, and they were all locked. I ran through hallways and strange rooms; it was like I was in a maze of some sort. Then I started crying because I could hear the people calling for help, but I couldn’t see them, and I didn’t know how to find them.” She paused again and took a deep breath.

Brielle’s eyes were wide with anticipation. “Is there more?” she asked

eagerly.

Keoni glanced outside the window at Lacy, and an expression of sadness came over her face. Then she looked back at Brielle, who was anxiously waiting to hear more.

"Finally, I came to a door at the end of the hall, and when I tried the knob, it opened. The room wasn't a room at all, but it was like I was looking out onto a dark lake where a terrible storm was taking place. I could hear a voice calling for help and then disappear. For a moment, I saw the person's face… and it was Lacy. She was drowning in this dark water, and the waves kept getting bigger and would hit her again and again," she sat remembering, "It was horrible."

Brielle's heart was racing. "Then what happened?"

"Then I woke up," Keoni said softly, "It seriously scared me. But I had to tell you that you were right." She looked out at Lacy again under the tree, who seemed to have fallen asleep. "She really needs help."

Brielle turned to look at the girl, too. She knew that this dream was God's way of answering her prayer yesterday on the beach. It was a confirmation in her spirit that she needed to take action in reaching out to Lacy before it was too late.

"I will help you," Keoni said, "I don't know what to do, but I want to help you. In my dream, I felt so powerless that I couldn't do anything to help her, but I wanted to reach out and try."

"That dream was given to you by God," Brielle said.

"Why do you think that?" Keoni asked.

"Because yesterday I rode down to the beach, and I prayed about Lacy. I asked God to let me know if it was His will to reach out to her. I asked Him to give me confirmation that she needed help," she said, staring deeply into her friend's eyes and slowly beginning to smile. "I guess God decided to give you that dream to get our attention," she looked back out the window at Lacy, who had awakened from her sleep and was now scribbling in her notebook again. "That girl is drowning."

Brielle glanced up at the clock and saw that there were only fifteen minutes of lunch left. She quickly downed what she had left of her food, gathered up her stuff, and cleaned up her table.

Then she looked at Keoni, "No time like the present," she smiled, "Come on. Let's go talk to her now."

Keoni didn't hesitate for a moment and quickly gathered up her stuff to follow Brielle.

"What are you going to say?" Keoni asked.

Brielle shook her head blankly and sighed, "I have no idea--and that could be dangerous," she joked, thinking of her experience with Lacy yesterday. "I sounded like the school idiot when I tried to talk to her yesterday in orchestra."

"She's in your orchestra class?" Keoni asked, "What happened?"

Brielle, not wanting to go over all the awkward details of it, changed the subject, "You knew her last year, can't you think of something to say?"

"No! I'm too nervous!" Keoni whispered.

"For crying out loud," Brielle said, "Come on. Let's just break the ice."

The two girls walked to the tree where Lacy was sitting; she still had her eyes fixed on her notebook.

"Hey Lacy!" Brielle said, waving to the girl with a friendly smile. Lacy looked up but did not smile or wave back.

"Great," Keoni muttered.

Brielle tried to relax, thinking maybe she should have prepared herself a bit more for this.

"Help us, Lord," she thought to herself, "I have no idea what to say."

The girls began walking to where Lacy was sitting when suddenly Brielle said, "Keoni was telling me that you guys were in a biology class together last year."

Lacy looked up, her face a bit softer now as she looked at Keoni. "Yeah, we were. Hey Keoni," she said quietly and then looked back down at her notebook. Brielle was happy for Lacy's response; at least it was something.

"Since you guys were friends last year and since we have some classes together, I was wondering if we could have lunch with you sometime," Brielle asked.

Lacy closed her notebook and sighed heavily. "You're new here, right?"

Brielle, taken aback by her response, looked over quickly at Keoni, "Yeah, well… I'm new to the school anyway," she said.

"Okay, let me explain things for you," she said, packing up her bag. "I come out here because I want to be alone. If I *wanted* to eat with everyone else, I would, but I *don't* want to," she said, standing up and dusting off her black clothes. "I just want to come out here with my own thoughts and be *alone*. I don't need any more friends, I don't *want* any more friends," she said, tossing her bag over her shoulder, "Got it?" And with that, she took off, leaving the two girls behind her, completely bewildered.

Keoni sighed as she looked at Brille, "Well, I'd say you broke the ice," then turned back to watch Lacy as she stormed off down the corridor, "And I'd say that you are the Titanic, because that was a disaster."

Brielle also stood watching Lacy. "I'm not giving up. God wants us to reach out to that girl, and we have to keep trying."

That afternoon in orchestra, Lacy came in right before the bell rang and then hurried out as soon as class was over. Brielle didn't try to talk to her; she wanted to spend more time in prayer about it. She didn't have a clue what to say or do, but all she could think about was Keoni's dream of Lacy drowning and crying out for help. She knew that her angry words today couldn't be about Brielle and Keoni. There had to be a deeper reason for her actions.

Every day, Brielle would pray, asking God for direction, and every day, even the slightest smile from her would send Lacy's eyes rolling. She and Keoni had spent some time together at church with their youth leader, Pastor Nathan, on Wednesday night in prayer for Lacy. Brielle knew that God had spoken to her and Keoni, and both girls were determined to do His will… they just had to find out what His will was.

Finally, it was the weekend. By Friday night, Brielle was too exhausted to do much of anything. It would take a while to become adjusted to her new schedule, but she felt satisfied that she had survived her first week of high school. She missed her family very much and their days together, but was proud of herself for trying something new. Besides, if she hadn't come to the school, she would never have met Lacy, and she believed God had a reason for that.

Brielle decided to keep her mind on tomorrow. She was excited to go fishing tomorrow with her brother and Oba on Mr. Mullins' beautiful boat. She couldn't wait. If they were successful in their trip, this time tomorrow night, they would be enjoying a lovely dinner of fresh fish. Her mother didn't like to catch them, but she certainly did like to cook them.

Later that evening, after she was ready for bed, her mother came to her room. "I forgot to ask you this week if you were able to talk to Keoni about Taryn?"

Brielle thought for a moment about how she was going to talk to Keoni about Taryn and her parents, and even started to in the lunch line, but after she heard the dream about Lacy, she completely forgot to.

"Oh, no! I didn't. I started to, and we got interrupted, then I just completely forgot," she said.

"That's okay, I was just curious. Is Gideon still with her?" Genevieve asked.

"I think so. We hardly ever see him, and I'm too afraid to ask Keoni about it," she said.

"If you get the chance to talk to her, I thought it might help her feelings toward Taryn a little bit. Now, you had better get some sleep," she said, coming in to kiss her daughter good night. "Gotta get up early for those fish tomorrow. Catch a good one for us. I love you, Kawala," she said, walking out the door.

"I love you too, Mama," Brielle replied.

4

When the buzzing sound of her alarm started, Brielle slapped it a couple of times to snooze before she got up at 4:30 a.m. to go fishing. She was eight years old the first time Obadiah took her fishing, and they had such a great time together that she enjoyed going ever since. When Asher got older, he would join them and turned out to be the best fisherman in the group. He was a natural, usually catching the most and the biggest fish of the day. Obadiah always joked that if Asher were to stick his head in the lake and call for the fish, perhaps they would just swim up and jump right into the boat.

When Brielle came down the stairs, she expected to see her brother gathering up his gear to load in the truck, but only Obadiah was there.

"Where's Ash?" she asked, puzzled, knowing her brother would never turn down a fishing trip, especially on Mr. Mullins' boat.

"He woke up in the night with a fever," Obadiah frowned and said, "and a sore throat."

"Oh, no! I'll go check on him," Brielle said, walking to the stairs.

"I wouldn't," Obadiah stopped her, "he was up a lot last night; he and your mother are finally sleeping. She got his temperature down, but they just need some good rest. Jesus is healing him, he'll be well soon," he said reassuringly.

"Okay," she said, "I'll pray for him before we go."

While Obadiah finished loading the car, Brielle got her stuff together and said a prayer for her little brother. Then she went outside into the brisk dark morning and climbed into the truck to leave.

"I feel bad leaving Ash behind," Brielle said.

"I know, I do too… but don't think for a moment that if you were sick, he wouldn't still jump in the truck to go—after he prayed for you first, of course," Obadiah chuckled. "Before we head over to the lake, I need to stop and get some gas."

"And let me guess, some hot coffee—black of course, a newspaper, and a bag of cherry cough drops," Brielle said.

"You know me so well," Obadiah replied, glancing over at her, "and you'll have chocolate milk and powdered sugar doughnuts."

"Mmm! You know *me* so well." Brielle agreed, patting her grandpa's arm.

"I should, I've been buying you the same thing for the past ten years," he answered.

"Yeah, well, I like what I like! Just talking about doughnuts is making my mouth water," she laughed, "I'm starving!"

After driving for a while, Obadiah turned into a gas station and a mini-mart just outside of Bridgeport and pulled up to a gas pump.

"I thought it would be better to get gas now," he said, "instead of on the way back when our truck will be *loaded* with fish."

"That's very optimistic of you," Brielle said, hopping out of the truck and shutting the door. "I'll meet you inside."

When Brielle entered, she glanced around the store looking for the doughnut shelf. Because it was almost 5 o'clock in the morning, the store had few customers. There were mostly fishermen there who were getting an early start to their day. On the left side of the store were the self-serve soft drinks, tea, and coffee stands, along with baskets of fresh fruit, bagels, and bread. There was a grill with some not-so-fresh-looking hot dogs spinning on it. Across from the hot dog grill, there were some old barrels lined up with a sign over them that read "Live Bait Bar". Brielle lifted her eyebrows at the terrible mixture of aromas: coffee, hot dogs, and bloodworms.

Digging through one of the barrels was a young boy who looked to be about Asher's age. He was happily selecting the worms he would be using on that morning's fishing trip. Just inside the door to the left sat a small picnic table with benches where two old men dressed in coats and hats sat drinking coffee, exchanging fishing stories, and playing checkers. A few steps inside the front door was the check-out counter. There was a very short and stocky old man talking to the clerk, who was a fragile-looking young man. He glanced up momentarily to smile at Brielle and greet her before returning to his conversation with the old man. On the right side of the store was the mini-mart. Brielle looked for the doughnut boxes. Spying them at the end of an aisle, she made a beeline for her coveted powdered treat. As she approached the shelf, she noticed there was only one box of powdered doughnuts left.

"Thank You, Jesus," she thought to herself with a giggle.

Brielle reached out her hand to take the box, but before she could, a young man who had grabbed something from inside the cooler across the aisle from the doughnut shelf closed the door and reached his hand over to grab the same box of powdered doughnuts. Brielle was coming from behind him, and he did not see her until their hands touched. Startled, he turned around to look at her.

"Oh, excuse me," he said softly.

Brielle's eyes were still fixed on the box. The feeling of sadness as she watched the last of the doughnuts slip away was still lingering. She didn't say anything but looked up to see the face of her competitor. The young man was tall, not quite as tall as Obadiah, but almost. When their eyes met, they locked for a moment, and Brielle felt something jolt inside her. His eyes were dark brown, darker than she had ever seen before; so dark that she could not see the outline of his pupils. They were beautiful eyes, hypnotic, and matched his dark brown hair and eyebrows, which perfectly framed his eyes. He was strikingly handsome, and she was temporarily mesmerized.

"I'm sorry," the young man said shyly, "Here, you can have them. I didn't see you coming."

Brielle didn't know why, but she knew she would remember these words

forever, as she did not see him coming either.

"No, that's okay. You had them first," she smiled, "I'll just grab a cinnamon roll."

"No worries, it's alright. As long as I have this, I'll be good," he said, holding up a bottle of chocolate milk.

"You like chocolate milk and powdered doughnuts?" she said curiously.

"Who doesn't?" he laughed softly. He had the most beautiful smile. "Here, please, take them."

"Are you sure? Because that's the last box," she said.

"Absolutely," he said gently, "I would feel bad all day about taking them from you." he lowered his eyes, as if embarrassed by his own comment.

Brielle didn't need another convincing argument. It was, after all, the last box of powdered doughnuts she would get a chance to have that morning.

"That's very kind of you," she said, taking the box from his hand, "thank you." She smiled at him and then slowly turned, trying to think of something else to say so she didn't have to leave.

"You go to Fairfield High," he said.

"Yeah," she turned back quickly, her face puzzled. "How did you know that?"

"Because I saw you there this week," he answered.

"Really? You go there? Where did you see me?" she asked.

"In American History. We're in the same class," he replied, his voice smooth and relaxing.

"You're kidding, seriously?" She paused, desperately trying to place his face in her mind amidst the dozens of students she had seen that week. "You're in Mr. Bennet's class? Where do you sit?" she asked.

The young man looked down shyly for a moment and laughed, "Directly behind you."

Brielle felt the heat of embarrassment rush through her body and up to her face. "Oh my gosh!" she said with wide eyes, "Oh, I'm so sorry! I can't believe I didn't notice!" Then, feeling a little embarrassed for her choice of words quickly added, "I have just been a bit overwhelmed with the whole classroom thing," she said, flustered.

How could she have come into history class each day this week and *not* noticed him sitting behind her? This incredibly tall, gorgeous guy with the captivating dark brown eyes?

"What do you mean? Have you never been in a classroom before?" he asked curiously.

"Not for school, this is my first year. Until now I've been homeschooled by my mom," she answered, relieved to change the subject.

"That's cool. What made you start attending a public school now?" he asked.

“My mom, kind of… I mean, she thought that it would be good for me to branch out, meet more people, and make more traditional memories, I guess. You know, football games, school dances, and stuff like that,” she replied.

“How do you like it?” he asked.

“It’s okay. There’s a lot to get used to. There’s so much noise and distraction, everything’s so fast-paced and crowded. It’s much different than studying at home,” she smiled. “But it’s fine, I’ll get used to it.”

“I’m glad to hear it. My name’s Jace by the way,” he said with a smile, extending his hand to her.

Jace.

It was a name she had never heard before and one she loved the sound of. His name fit him well.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, “I’m--”

“Brielle,” he answered.

She was taken aback for a moment that he knew her name, but then remembered that he had sat behind her each day this week. She nodded and shook his hand. When she touched him, she felt that jolt of energy pass through her body again.

“Yes…” Brielle,” she said meekly, “I’m so sorry that I didn’t see you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jace said, “You probably didn’t recognize me. I usually wear glasses in class for reading. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself to you sooner.”

“Thank you,” Brielle said, relieved at his kindness.

“So, what are you doing at a mini mart at five o’clock in the morning?” he asked.

“My grandpa is taking me fishing,” she looked behind her to see that Obadiah had finished pumping the gas and was now at the other end of the store pouring his coffee. He had a bag of cough drops and a newspaper in hand. She turned to the cooler to grab herself a bottle of chocolate milk.

“I could ask you the same question,” she said, moving past him to open the cooler door.

“I work on a boat on the weekends,” Jace answered.

“A fishing boat?” she asked.

“Yeah, the Bonnie Jane,” he said happily, “I work for my father, just trying to earn some extra money. Plus, I love being out on the water.”

Brielle shut the cooler door and noticed his eyes focused on the bottle of chocolate milk in her hand.

“So, powdered doughnuts and chocolate milk for you, too, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah, they’re my favorite,” she looked up with worried eyes, “now I’m the one feeling bad for taking the box. Maybe we should ask if they have more in the back?” she suggested as she started to move down the aisle toward the clerk. “If not, we could always share these,” she laughed.

“Please, don’t worry about it, if you feel that bad, you can always owe me a box later,” he said with a smile.

Brielle was taken in by his dark brown eyes and broad smile when she heard yelling. Two men had stormed into the store. They were each brandishing handguns, black revolvers, and they both wore white masks. There was a short man whose mask had a peculiar and sinister smile on it. The other man was taller, and his mask was strange and sad. Both men were wearing old blue jeans, a pair of black gloves, and matching long-sleeved red flannel shirts which were buttoned up to their necks. Their heads seemed to be covered with something black that looked like it was attached to their masks. There was no part of them left uncovered.

Brielle was terrified.

“EVERYBODY FREEZE!” the short robber yelled. “GET YOUR HANDS UP! AND NOBODY MOVE! WE’RE HERE TO DO A LITTLE BUSINESS!” he laughed a chilling, deranged laugh. Obadiah was still standing at the coffee counter. He set the cup down slowly on the counter, hiding it under his newspaper, and lifted his hands in the air. Then his eyes focused across the store, directly to where Brielle was standing.

While she had been talking to Jace about checking on more doughnuts, she had turned to start walking up the main aisle but hadn’t fully stepped out into it yet. With one quick move, Jace grabbed her arm and pulled her down behind the end of the aisle, out of view, to hide her from the danger.

“Stay down,” he whispered.

The tall robber by the door saw Jace moving, but didn’t see him hide Brielle.

“WE SAID NOBODY MOVE!” he shouted, “COME HERE WHERE WE CAN SEE YOU AND KEEP YOUR HANDS UP!” he yelled, seeming very nervous, much more so than his partner, who acted as if he were on a game show.

The tall robber made the two men who were sitting at the table stand up and walk closer to Obadiah. The little boy who had been digging through the worm barrels had run over to the stocky old man, who was his grandfather, and hid behind him by the check-out counter. Only Jace and Brielle had been on the mini-mart side of the store, but the robbers didn’t see her.

Jace slowly walked down the end of the aisle, closer to the checkout counter, with his hands raised in the air. The short robber waved him closer with his gun.

“COME ON DOWN, HANDSOME!” he laughed crazily, “Oh my goodness ain’t he sweet?” he said in a high-pitched voice. Then, from where he was standing, he glanced over the store to make sure they had control of everyone in it.

“I WANT ALL THE MONEY IN THE DRAWERS IN THIS BAG NOW!” the short man shouted, “Papa needs a brand-new bag!” he said, and then he danced a crazy little dance and tried to sing like James Brown.

Laughing his crazed laugh, he threw what looked to be a pillowcase to his

partner. The tall robber with the sad mask took the bag and started toward the counter.

"MOVE IT! LET'S GO!" the tall robber yelled at the frail clerk, who was terrified. He tried to quickly open the register drawers. He opened the first one, and the tall robber began to grab the money.

"Hey, handsome!" the short robber yelled to Jace, "grab me those bottles of whiskey behind you, make sure it's Jack Daniels. I like the good stuff!" he laughed again, waving his gun toward the liquor shelf behind Jace. Then he turned to his partner. "While you're back there, grab all the ciggies you can get, we're gonna have ourselves a party!" he shouted, then he broke into his disturbed high-pitched laughter.

Jace was calm. He slowly picked up as many bottles of Jack Daniels as he could. Then he turned toward the short robber and waited for his instructions.

"Sit 'em down there on the counter, gorgeous," the short robber said mockingly, "And you can leave your wallet there too."

Jace kept his movements easy and controlled. He walked to the counter and placed the bottles of whiskey down. Then he kept one hand raised in the air while he took out his wallet from his back pocket with the other and laid it gently down on the counter.

Brielle was down on the floor and had been watching what she could through the bags of potato chips at the end of the aisle. She tried not to move much as she knew there might be security mirrors behind her on that side of the store. If the robbers saw the movement in the reflection, it would give her away.

The tall robber had cleaned out the first register, all the cigarette boxes on the shelves behind the counter, and had grabbed the bottles of whiskey, putting them carefully into the bag.

"OPEN THE NEXT ONE!" the tall robber shouted, "MOVE IT!"

The short robber kept checking on everyone in the store, waving his gun around to make sure no one was moving. He was enjoying the control of fear he had over these people. The clerk went to the second register, but his hands were trembling so violently he couldn't get it to open.

"I SAID MOVE IT!" the tall robber screamed. The clerk was frantically punching buttons, trying to open the register. He was in such a state of panic that he looked as if he would fall over. Finally, he got the drawer open, and the tall robber began to clean it out.

"I WANT THE MONEY IN THE SAFE!" the short robber shouted.

The clerk's face flushed, "I can't, I honestly can't open the safe. I'm just an employee," he said.

"WHAT!? OF COURSE, EMPLOYEES CAN OPEN THE SAFE!! SO, OPEN THE SAFE!! NOW BOY!!" the short robber shouted.

"I can't. I really can't. I don't have the keys. See?" the clerk said, pointing a shaky finger to a sign located on the wall behind him that read: "Employees

Cannot Open Store Safe".

The short robber, who had his gun in his left hand, grabbed the little stocky old man who had been standing at the check-out counter by the throat and dragged him back from the counter. His little grandson, who had been so brave until now, cried out for his grandfather and reached out to grab onto his hand.

"GET BACK, KID!" the short robber shouted, and then he wrapped his right arm around the old man's neck and placed the gun to the man's head. The old man was trying hard to stand up as the short robber instructed.

"MAYBE YOU NEED SOME INCENTIVE, BOY! NOW OPEN THE SAFE TO KEEP GRANDPA HERE…. SAFE!" he shouted, laughing his crazy laugh again.

Brielle watched as closely as she could; her heart was racing a million beats per minute. She could still see Obadiah standing where he was when the robbers came in, but she could no longer see Jace. The little boy, seeing his grandfather held captive, overwhelmed Brielle. Oba was standing across from her, and she knew how terrified she would be to see him taken by the robbers. As she watched, something began to take hold of her heart. Even though it had only taken a few minutes for all this to happen, it seemed like an eternity. She had been in such a state of fear that she hadn't remembered to call on God. After taking a deep breath to calm down, she began to whisper her prayers to the Lord.

The short robber, who up until now seemed to enjoy his theft, was getting very angry and impatient. He was still tightly holding onto the old man's neck. The poor old man was desperately trying to hold himself up in this off-balanced and painful position, and he was struggling to breathe. His little grandson was sobbing now, still standing close to the counter. Jace was close by and slowly edged his way over to stand behind him.

Brielle started praying faster, "Protect us, Mighty God, send us your angels. Do not let these evil men have their way. Stop them, Jesus. Please help and protect us. Help us, God, help us now, please."

The short robber took the gun from the old man's head and pointed it at the clerk. Then he spoke in a very low, rough voice, "I'm not going to tell you again to open that safe, boy."

The clerk, with his hands raised in front of him, began to plead. "I can't, I really can't. Please, I would have to call a manager. I have to have two keys to open the safe, and I don't--"

"SHUT UP! Maybe this will help you think of a way to get it open," the short robber said as he fired his gun just past the clerk's head, shooting the clock hanging on the wall, causing the clock to explode.

Jace reached out in front of him and grabbed the little boy, pulling him down out of the line of fire and huddled over him on the floor. The clerk ducked down behind the counter, and the tall robber reached to pull him back up with his shirt collar. Then he quickly stepped out of the way so his partner could fire

his gun again and again, shooting objects and bottles on the shelves behind him.

Brielle was watching the horror unfold before her. The store clerk was terrified beyond measure as bullets came flying by him, the old man desperately trying to breathe while in the clutches of a monstrous criminal, and the little boy watching his grandfather held captive. The child had his hands covering his ears and was sobbing violently as the bullets were fired.

Brielle had been praying hard, her heart crying out for God to send help and deliver them from this evil. Suddenly, she felt something come over her– something she had never felt before. It was strong and powerful, yet peaceful and serene. She didn't know what she was doing, but without thinking, she jumped out into the aisle and planted her feet firmly as if prepared for battle. She lifted her eyes to the masked men before her and stretched out her right hand, her palm pressed toward them. Then, with a mighty voice of authority, she yelled,

"STOP! IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST! I COMMAND YOU TO STOP!"

Both robbers were surprised by Brielle's actions – they had not realized she was in the store-- until this moment. They stopped quickly and turned to look at her. Seeing their horrible, masked faces now fixated on her made her legs begin to tremble, but something held her firm to her position. At that very moment, the little old man who had been in the tight clutches of the short robber collapsed. His weight falling back onto his captor caused both men to tumble backward and fall down. The old man's grandson cried out and reached for his grandfather, but Jace held him back.

The tall robber, seeing his partner fall, quickly came around the other side of the counter to help him. Obadiah seized this opportunity to attack and threw the scalding hot coffee he had hidden underneath his newspaper in the man's face. Even though the robber was masked, the coffee still made it directly into his eyes. He grabbed his face with both his hands. Screaming in pain, he dropped the money bag as well as the cigarettes and alcohol, which came crashing to the floor. He was still holding fast to his gun and hastily extended it out before him, pointing it madly in different directions to keep away anyone who would try to take him down. The short robber, now consumed with rage, yelled in anger and pulled his arm out from under the old man to point his gun at Brielle. Obadiah and Jace knew the robber's intentions - both tried to reach the robber to stop him from pulling the trigger.

Brielle watched everything play out before her as if it were all in slow motion.

As the robber lifted his right hand to point his weapon toward her, he shouted, "Jesus ain't here, girly--just me."

Brielle then lifted her left hand to join her right, stretching out both her palms to face him and shouted with all her might,

"NO WEAPON FORMED AGAINST ME SHALL PROSPER ISAIAH 54:17!!"

In her slow-motion perspective, there was a slight pause of silence. Then the shot rang out.

Brielle did not move but held fast to her battle stance. She knew that God was with her, and He was protecting her from this evil. She did not falter but watched as the smoke from the gun began to rise, and the short robber suddenly fell back to the floor. His gun had backfired. Instead of the trigger activating the hammer to send the shot forward, the hammer was blown off the gun at impact, causing it to fly straight back into the short robber's chest. The very bullet that the robber intended for Brielle had been stopped by the Power of God and used for the robber's defeat.

Everyone was frozen in place for that moment in time as they watched the scene unfold before them.

"Jesus is everywhere," Brielle whispered as she watched the robber fall to the floor.

The tall robber, still rubbing his eyes on his sleeve, was dumbfounded. He was still pointing his gun wildly in front of him to ward off attackers. He stopped, rubbed his eyes with his shirt one more time, and stared down the aisle at Brielle. The stare lasted only a few seconds, but for Brielle, it seemed much longer. He stood there, trying to comprehend what had just taken place. Then he nervously began to back up toward the exit, crashing into displays and shelves along the way.

"T.J., help me, man! I'm shot!" the short robber yelled. The tall robber looked down at his partner and saw that he was shot in the chest by his own gun and was bleeding severely. Then the tall robber looked down the aisle again to stare at Brielle. He kept his gun extended in front of him as he backed his way to the door.

The short man began to panic, "T.J., what are you doing? Help me, man!"

T.J. turned his head to look down at his partner, then, realizing he had reached the door, bolted outside and ran into the woods.

"T.J.!" the short robber screamed, "T.J.!"

Again, Obadiah didn't hesitate, but used the injured robber's distraction to run over and grab his gun from his hand-even though it was destroyed and useless. Brielle was still standing in the exact same position, her hands still extended out in front of her. She didn't move. The short robber was lying on the floor, breathing hard and clutching his hands to his bleeding chest. The old man was slowly gaining consciousness and was trying to sit up. His little grandson ran over to him, wrapped his arms around him, and buried his tear-streaked face into his grandfather's neck. The two fishermen, the clerk, Jace, and Obadiah all turned their eyes on Brielle, stunned to silence.

They were unable to take their eyes from her; speechless at the miracle they had just witnessed.

Brielle began to tremble as the reality of what had happened began to wash

over her. Her whole body felt drained of energy, and she began to breathe as if she were exhausted. She pulled her arms back toward her slowly, looking at her hands carefully. She turned her hands over to look at her palms, examining every detail of them as if she were searching for something.

Brielle became too weak to stand; her quivering legs gave way beneath her, and she sank to the floor. The only sound she heard now was that of the short robber who was moaning in pain. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to see each of the men in the store still frozen, each of them staring in awe and bewilderment. She looked at her grandfather. Obadiah had a peculiar look on his face; it was a mixture of relief, of pride… and of certainty.

This moment was Brielle's awakening to the powerful gift and anointing that God had placed on her life. Obadiah knew it… and so did she.

5

Brielle sat for a moment, trying to catch her breath; she could now hear the sound of sirens in the distance. She didn't know how much time had passed, but obviously enough for someone in the store to call the police. She sat on the floor, her arms holding herself up to keep from collapsing altogether, and her head was down. Her breathing was becoming more relaxed as she stared at the white tile floor. She replayed everything in her mind to try and discover what had happened.

As she sat pondering the events which she knew were controlled by the Holy Spirit, she saw a black pair of boots step in front of her - she knew they did not belong to her grandfather. She was so deep in thought that she didn't hear anyone approaching. Slowly, she raised her head to see Jace standing before her, his face still held a complex look of shock and confusion. He knelt beside her and gently put his hand on her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly.

Brielle nodded, "Yeah," she whispered, "I just feel weak."

"Can I help you up?" he asked.

She nodded again. He gently wrapped his arms around her waist, pulled her arm around his neck, and lifted her slowly to her feet.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" he asked.

"No, no, I'm fine. I need to get out of here and get some air," she answered.

When Obadiah knew that Brielle was alright, he knelt beside the short robber on the floor. He felt led to stay with him and try to help his bleeding wound until the paramedics arrived.

"Can you get me some towels or something?" Obadiah asked the store clerk, who was still trembling from his experience.

The clerk nodded and went into the back room. Obadiah then reached down and removed the man's mask.

"I honestly don't care what you look like," Obadiah said, "but it might be easier to breathe with this off your face."

The robber didn't resist him. The store clerk returned with a small stack of cloths and gave them to Obadiah. Then he nervously backed away from the robber, still afraid of the man who only minutes earlier had been crazily shooting at him.

Obadiah saw the clerk's nervousness. "Thank you for your help," he said gently, then looking deep into the man's eyes said, "It's okay now, you're going to be alright."

The man nodded slowly at Obadiah and then leaned back against the counter, sliding down to sit on the floor. He placed his head in his hands, trying to calm himself.

The robber looked up at Obadiah, who was applying the towels gently to his

wounded chest.

"I can't breathe, I can't breathe!" the robber began to panic.

"You have to stay calm; it could be that you have a punctured lung. Don't talk. Try to breathe very slowly," Obadiah said.

Jace and Brielle walked up the aisle toward them. When the robber saw her coming closer, he became hysterical, trying to scoot himself away from her on the floor, "Get her away! Get her away! Don't let her hurt me!"

Obadiah placed his hands on the robber's shoulders to hold him still. "Calm down!" he said firmly, "Stop moving, you must try to stay calm."

Brielle looked at Obadiah in confusion. This man, who only moments ago was arrogantly controlling and threatening everyone around him with a handgun, was now sprawled on the floor acting like a scared child.

"Young man," Obadiah said to Jace, "I would greatly appreciate it if you would take my granddaughter to my truck until I am finished here."

"Yes, Sir," Jace answered.

Obadiah finally calmed the robber down. "It's not that little girl that you should be afraid of, it's the Almighty God, she serves you should fear."

Within a few minutes, the police and paramedics arrived. Jace, though shaken after the robbery, had enough sense to call 911 on his cell phone to send for help. The paramedics took the robber to the hospital, accompanied by two police officers, while other officers stayed to take statements from everyone in the store. After they had spoken with the men inside the store, two of the officers came out to Jace and Brielle, who were sitting on the tailgate of Obadiah's truck. One of the officers knew Brielle well. His name was Hadley Jenkins. He had been partners for years with Keoni and Gideon's father, Antoine, and had kept a close relationship with them after their father was killed.

He greeted Brielle with a strong hug, "Hey Brielle, how you doin'? You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Brielle smiled at the officer, "I'm okay-- still shaking, but okay."

Jace watched the two of them interact with a look of surprise.

"Good," Hadley said to her, then turning to Jace, he asked, "Obadiah said this wallet belonged to you, is that right?"

Jace nodded and took the wallet, which was soaked in the Jack Daniels that spilled out from the broken bottles when the bag was dropped to the ground.

"Yes, Sir, thank you," he said politely.

"I'm Officer Jenkins, and this is Officer Stockton. He is going to talk to you and ask you some questions. I am going to talk to Brielle, alright?" Hadley asked kindly.

Jace and Brielle nodded, and Officer Stockton took Jace back to the store and began making his report on the incident.

Hadley looked down at Brielle, "Some of the men in the store told me what they saw. Can you tell me what happened?"

Brielle began retrieving the moments from her memory, telling Hadley every detail she possibly could about the robbery. He took her statements down, then looked at her with a puzzled expression when she finished.

"But… how exactly did you stop the robber from shooting the clerk?" he asked with confusion.

"I didn't. God did." Brielle said.

Hadley smiled, "So you just stood there, raised your hands, and said to stop in the Name of Jesus… and they just stopped?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Then, when the robber turned his gun on you, you shouted a Bible verse at him and the gun misfired, striking the robber in the chest?" he asked.

Brielle slightly raised her eyebrows, "Yes."

Hadley slightly smirked, "Okay," he said, scribbling something on his notepad, "that's the same story we got from the men in there, too."

Brielle was puzzled by his response, "You don't think we are lying, do you?" she asked.

"The only thing I know is that's one remarkable story," he said as he finished making his notes.

"That's because He is a remarkable God. Do you believe in the power of God?" she asked softly.

"What I believe isn't important here, what's important is that I get the facts down, and since everyone is telling me the same story, it must be true," he said, closing his notepad. "I'm just glad that you, Obadiah, and everyone else are alright. Thank you for your help, Sweetheart. We may need to be in touch with you again for more information. I'll contact your grandfather if we do," he said, patting her shoulder, "You take care, alright?"

Brielle nodded, "Thank you, Hadley, I will."

Hadley then walked back into the store.

Brielle sat on the tailgate of the truck, thinking about her conversation with Hadley. When Jace was finished with Officer Stockton, he came back out to sit with her.

"Well, that was… interesting," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"When I told him what happened, it was like he didn't believe me," Jace said. "Like I was lying to him or something."

"That's exactly what Hadley did to me," Brielle said. "I guess it's too much for people to believe, you know? That God can still do things like this. For some people, it's too much to believe in God at all."

"How do you know Officer Jenkins?" he asked.

"Hadley? Oh, my best friends Keoni and Gideon, their father was a police officer, his name was Antoine Toussaint. Hadley was his partner. They worked together for a long time, but a few years ago they were out on an investigation

and Antoine got shot," she put her head down, remembering the night they got the call. "He didn't make it," she said softly. "So, Hadley has been there for my friends ever since. He knows he can never replace their father, but he just wants to be there for them whenever he can. He's a good man. We've known him for a long time. I just don't think he believes in God."

Obadiah came out to the truck and brought Jace and Brielle each a cup of hot chocolate and himself a cup of coffee. He set them down on the tailgate and then reached down to grab Brielle and hold her close.

"I love you, Sweetheart. I'm so thankful you are safe," he whispered, kissing the top of her head.

"I'm okay, Oba," she smiled, "God protected me. He protected us all."

Obadiah pulled her back to look in her eyes, "I am so proud of you, how brave you were and how you allowed God to use you in there."

Then he turned to Jace, "Young man, I want to thank you for what you did to protect my granddaughter. You were very brave as well," he said, extending his hand to Jace.

"You're welcome, Sir," Jace said.

"My name is Obadiah O'Sullivan, and I will be eternally grateful," Obadiah replied.

"I'm Jace," he said, "Jace Roberts. I appreciate that, but it seems as if hiding Brielle wasn't the plan after all," he said, looking at Brielle, who was sitting on the tailgate, sipping her hot chocolate.

"That's very true," Obadiah said, "God had something much bigger in mind."

"I've never seen God do anything like that before," Jace said. "It was incredible—to say the least."

"Awesome and totally scary," Brielle said with wide eyes. "I've never seen God do anything like that either."

Obadiah sipped his coffee slowly, "I have," he said.

Brielle and Jace immediately fixed their eyes on him.

"You have?" Brielle gasped.

"Yes," he said mysteriously, "but what is important is to know that it was the power of God that saved us here today. Because you were obedient to the commands of the Holy Spirit, God was able to accomplish something, as you said, incredible-- to say the least. We must give Him all the thanks and praise for it," then he asked Jace, "Son, do you know about Jesus?"

Jace looked at him and then dropped his gaze to the ground. "I did, not so long ago. My grandmother always took me to church, but when she passed away, I stopped going. I guess I just didn't want to go by myself," he answered.

"Do your parents go to church?" Obadiah asked gently.

"No. They have always been open to the idea of God, just never made Him a priority. My grandma did, though. We went to church every Sunday together. I

really miss that," he replied softly as if in thought.

"If you want someone to go to church with you, why don't you come to ours?" Brielle asked.

"I would love to," Jace smiled, "Where do you go to church?"

"We go to The Maple Grove Church," Brielle answered, "Oba here has been my Cross Café leader for the past two years. Keoni and Gideon are in the class too, and they both go to Fairfield High, so you will have several friends there," she said.

"The Cross Café? What's that?" Jace asked.

"That's what we call our Sunday school class. We get together over coffee and doughnuts and talk about Jesus. It starts at 9:30 a.m. and the church service starts at 10:30," she said.

"Powdered sugar doughnuts?" Jace asked with a curious smile.

Brielle laughed, "Absolutely! And sometimes Oba brings chocolate milk."

"He likes that too?" Obadiah asked with a chuckle, "If having chocolate milk is what it takes to get you to come, I'll bring it every week." he smiled his charming smile.

"I'd love to come," Jace said, "I'll be there tomorrow. Thank you," then he looked at his phone to check the time, "I'm so sorry, but I have to go. I would love to stay longer and talk, but I'm so late for work."

"Can't take the day off to recover from all this?" Obadiah asked.

"I'm sure I could, but I think being out on the sea will relax me more than anything else," Jace answered.

"You're a fisherman?" Obadiah asked.

"Just part-time--very part-time. I only work on Saturdays," he answered, putting on his toboggan hat. "I'm saving up to buy a new truck. I wouldn't mind having one of these someday," he said, patting Obadiah's beautiful silver truck. "I really do love to be out on a boat, so it's a good way for me to work while I'm in school."

Obadiah stuck his hand out to Jace again, "You be careful, Jace, and hopefully we will see you tomorrow," he said, shaking Jace's hand again.

"Thank you, Sir, you will. It was good to meet you," Jace replied, then he turned to Brielle, "It was good to finally meet you too, and I won't forget it for as long as I live. Thank you for… for…. uh—" he paused, unsure of his words.

"Being obedient to God," Obadiah helped him.

"Yes, thank you for being obedient, if you hadn't, who knows where we all would be right now," he said, extending his hand out to gently shake hers.

Just the simple touch of his hand brought a powerful rush of energy that increased her heartbeat and brought butterflies to her stomach. She didn't know what to say; she was very humbled by the whole experience and didn't need any thanks. All the thanks are due to God.

"I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow," she said.

After Jace left, Obadiah put his hand on Brielle's shoulder and looked at her closely.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked.

Brielle nodded.

"Okay, come on, let's go home," he said.

The two were exhausted from their experience, and fishing was the last thing they felt like doing. They climbed into the truck and started home. Obadiah made a call to his friend Ken Mullins to let him know what happened and why they would not be joining him on his boat. When he finished his call, he looked over at Brielle, who was deep in thought over their experience.

"Jace seems to be a very nice young man," he said casually.

"Yes, he seems very nice," Brielle said.

"Did you meet him in school?" Obadiah asked.

"No. I just met him this morning in the store-- though he told me today that he sits directly behind me in American History," she said.

"Really? And you didn't notice him, a good-looking kid like that?" Obadiah chuckled.

"Yeah, I guess I've been too preoccupied with Lacy to notice anyone else," she laughed.

"How are you feeling now? Any stronger?" he asked.

"Yes, a little bit. Why did I get so weak?" she asked.

Obadiah raised his eyebrows and took in a deep breath, "The Bible says our bodies were made in the *image* of God, but we are not exactly like Him. We are not used to housing such magnificent holiness. You were just used in a most impressive way by the hand of God. Your little human body is not used to having that much power inside of it on a regular basis. It's used to things like powdered doughnuts and chocolate milk," he laughed.

Brielle smiled at her grandfather.

"The power of God is not something our minds can truly comprehend to its fullest. We only understand what our brains can comprehend--which isn't much," he said. "You are feeling weak right now because of the massive amounts of holy energy that just came through your little body. It's a powerful thing, the Holy Spirit. There is *nothing* else like the power of God, not in this world, the entire universe, or beyond."

Brielle thought for a moment. "I have felt the Holy Spirit in me, leading me or blessing me before, but nothing----*nothing* like that! I didn't even know what I was doing, it was like I… like I wasn't in control, not at all," she said.

"You weren't," Obadiah said. "The power of God was manifested through you in the form of the Holy Spirit. You were the vessel that God used. Everyone could feel it through the whole store—whether they knew what it was or not, they *felt* it. It wouldn't surprise me if Jace wasn't the only man who comes to church tomorrow," he chuckled, "and wouldn't *that* be a blessing, something

good coming out of something not good. That's the way God works."

"But while it was all happening, I felt *awesome!* I wasn't scared at all at that moment, and I had this incredible feeling of peace and confidence inside. Have you ever felt that before, Oba?" she asked.

"Oh yes, I have felt the power of the Holy Spirit, the joy, the peace, the energy. I have never had the Lord use me in the way that He just used you, but I have felt the power of the Holy Spirit upon me, and it is, in a word, *awesome,*" he answered. "Things are about to change for you, Brielle," he said softly. "I think perhaps the time may have come for you to step into what God has created you to do in this world. Ancient Jewish wisdom teaches us that every soul stood before God before we were born on this earth, and He gave us a specific mission. Maybe the time has come for you to start fulfilling that mission?"

Brielle sat quietly for the rest of the ride home, thinking about her grandfather's words, all that had happened, and what it was exactly that God was going to do with her. Now that she had this experience with the Lord, she wanted to know Him more. She wanted to feel His presence like that with her always and to know all she could of His Word and power.

As they pulled into the driveway of the house, the sun was shining brightly, warming the chilly morning air. Obadiah told Brielle to go on in and rest, and he would unload the truck. Brielle went in, took off her coat, and headed for the refrigerator. Now that she was home and had used the drive to calm down from the whole experience, she realized she had not eaten anything all morning. She grabbed a bowl of cereal and just sat down when she heard Obadiah coming into the house.

"Hey, that looks pretty good," he said, "I think I'll join you."

He sat down at the table to join his granddaughter when they both heard the voice of Genevieve.

"What happened? No fish today?" she asked with a puzzled look on her face.

Brielle stood up, walked over to her mother, and hugged her tightly. She sighed in relief at feeling her mother's arms around her; she felt safe here.

Genevieve hugged her back but looked at Obadiah with a confused expression, "What happened, Kawala? Is everything okay?"

Brielle stepped back and smiled at her mother, "Yes, we're okay -thanks to God."

Genevieve's face now went from confused to concerned, "Why, what happened?" she asked quickly. Obadiah sat back in his chair and waited for Brielle to speak.

Brielle then began to tell her mother everything that had happened. As she spoke, Genevieve slowly walked to the kitchen table and sat down opposite her father, staring at Brielle the whole time. When Brielle finished, Genevieve stood

back up and reached to grab her daughter again, holding her close.

"Thank God you're alright," she said, kissing Brielle on the head, then she reached her hand across the table to grab her father's. "Both of you," she smiled, tears welling up in her eyes. "That's… amazing… incredible…" she gasped, looking at Brielle, "What an amazing gift my girl, to be able to have God use you in such a powerful way."

"I think it's important," Obadiah said, "that we take the time, now that we have calmed down, to give thanks to the Lord together."

They all sat down at the kitchen table and held hands while Obadiah said a word of thanks to God for His protection and His power to deliver them from the robbers. When they finished, Genevieve remembered something.

"Oh, you know what? Keoni called here not so long ago looking for you," she said.

Brielle, who had put away her cereal bowl and was heading back to the refrigerator, turned to look at her mother with a puzzled look. "She called this morning? Good grief, it's only a little after 7 o'clock now, what time did she call?" she asked.

"It might have been close to half an hour ago, I'm not sure. She didn't wake me, I was up checking on Ash, but it was strange since she has never called that early. She sounded a little anxious. She said she tried your cell but couldn't reach you. You better give her a call back," Genevieve said.

Brielle shut the refrigerator and started up the stairs, then she leaned back into the kitchen. "How is Ash?" she asked her mother.

"He's okay, he still has a little fever, but if I can keep him down today, I think he'll be better tomorrow. He's still sleeping, though, so don't wake him," she said.

"Okay. I'm kind of glad he was sick today and wasn't in the store for all of that," Brielle said and then crept up the wooden staircase softly.

Obadiah had sat quietly in his chair after his prayer, closely watching Genevieve's reaction to what had happened with Brielle.

"Are you okay?" he asked her gently.

Genevieve placed her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands.

"I don't know," she whispered, shaking her head, "I don't know. This is so much to take in."

Obadiah reached his strong hands gently around hers and pulled them down from her face to look in his daughter's tear-filled eyes. He didn't speak but reached up to dry her tears, giving her his warm smile that always comforted her.

"Half of me feels so humbled and honored that God would use my little girl in such a powerful and amazing way… and the other side of me is terrified of what might happen to her next," she said.

Obadiah nodded quietly. “We both knew this was coming,” he said softly, “All the same personality traits and memory abilities are there; most importantly, her strong love for the Lord. You knew it was a possibility, we’ve talked about it before,” he said.

“I know, I know. But is it so wrong for me to hope that my children could be used for the Lord in a more *regular* way… like me? Leading music and directing a choir isn’t too life-threatening,” she said, getting up to grab a tissue.

“You cannot change who she is, or the purpose God created for her. I know it’s hard, but you must trust in Him and learn to accept it,” he said.

“Dad, please, not right now, alright? I know all of this. I’ve had to do quite a share of accepting things I cannot change in my lifetime. I’m not a stranger to it. But it doesn’t mean that I like it either. It’s so hard to keep accepting things about *my* family,” she said, leaning on the counter and taking a slow, deep breath. “It’s just that she’s so young… so very young for all of this to start happening to her.”

Obadiah got up and walked over to his daughter, “She’s really not that young for God’s plans to begin. It’s just that she’s your baby and you will always see her that way,” he said, taking her in his arms, “I know, because I feel the same way about you,” he smiled, hugging her close.

Genevieve rested in the safety of her father’s loving arms for a moment.

“You’re right,” she said, sniffing, “I just need God to strengthen me to accept it. I can’t bear the thought of losing her too. I don’t think I could survive it if anything happened to her or Asher.”

“I understand and I know it’s hard. But God’s Word tells us that He won’t leave us or forsake us. He is always there to help us, right by our side. We *have* to trust Him in this. God has selected Brielle to carry on the legacy of her family. He knows what He is doing, and we have to keep our faith strong in His promises. After what I witnessed today, I don’t think that you will be worrying as much as you will be praising. The power of God is strong in her. His favor is clearly upon her, and I believe that He is going to use her to do some incredible damage to the enemy,” he said gently.

Genevieve sighed and hugged her father again, “Thank you, daddy,” she whispered, “I’ll need your prayers of strength to help me with this,” she said, wiping her eyes and sitting back down at the table.

“Now… tell me everything that happened again,” she said.

Brielle had gone into her room and quietly shut the door. She kicked off her shoes and changed clothes. When she looked in the mirror to brush her hair, she was glad that she had decided to wear a little make-up that morning. She had never done that before when she went fishing, but thanked God she had. If she hadn’t, she would have looked like a pale zombie with puffy frog eyes the first time she met Jace. She laughed at herself in the mirror. With everything that happened to her that morning, her mind was thinking about meeting Jace.

She grabbed her phone, stretched out across her bed, and dialed Keoni's number. Keoni picked it up before the first ring finished.

"Brielle!?" she asked in a panic.

"Yeah, what's wrong?" Brielle asked.

"Oh-my-heavens girl, I have been totally freaked out! I am so glad to hear your voice," she said.

"Why? What happened? Are you okay?" Brielle asked.

"No, the question is, are *you* okay?" Keoni asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, I'm fine. How did you find out?" Brielle asked, confused by her frenzied friend.

"Find out about what? What *happened*?" Keoni said.

"What? Now I'm confused," Brielle began, "Mama told me you called the house this morning about half an hour ago to talk to me. She said you sounded completely anxious—and you do, so I am wondering how you found out?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Keoni began, "Found out what? I didn't *know* that anything happened, not for sure anyway. I just had a horrible dream this morning about you. It wasn't very clear. I couldn't see where you were exactly, only that you were in danger. Then God woke me up to pray for you, and I haven't stopped praying since!" she said.

Brielle sat up on her bed, shocked by Keoni's story. "What time was this dream?" she asked softly.

"I don't remember the exact time. I know that when I woke up, it was around five o'clock or so. I just jumped out of bed and started to pray for you. I tried your cell, but you didn't answer it," she replied.

"No, I never take my cell when I go fishing, not after I lost that one phone in the lake," Brielle said.

"Then I waited until six thirty before I called the house. I didn't know who I would wake up in the house, but I had to see if you were okay," Keoni finished.

"So, you had a dream about me around five o'clock and got up to pray?" Brielle said, amazed, "Wow… that was even before anything happened yet," she mumbled to herself.

"Before *what* happened?" Keoni pressed.

"That was even before I met Jace," Brielle whispered to herself absent-mindedly, going over the events in her head.

"Who is Jace?!" Keoni demanded.

"Wait, just let me make sure I have this right. You had a dream that I was in danger, and then God spoke to you to pray for me… and you didn't even know why?" Brielle said, still rambling.

"Yes, *YES!* Now, *please,* will you tell me what is going on?" Keoni pleaded.

Brielle began to recount the events of the robbery to her friend, starting from when she met Jace. She was getting pretty good at it by now, as this was the third time she had told the story about what happened. When she finished

her story, Keoni was silent.

"Are you there?" Brielle asked.

"Yeah," Keoni said.

"What's wrong?" Brielle asked.

"Wow…" Keoni said softly, deep in thought, "I wish I could have been there to see that."

"Uh, no—no, you don't-- it was pretty intense," Brielle said.

"Yes, but to see a miracle of God like that… it must have been awesome," Keoni replied.

"God is awesome," Brielle answered.

"Then my dream wasn't some weird concoction of foods that I ate, topped off with watching a mystery movie, but it was something *divine*?" Keoni asked.

"What else could it possibly be?" Brielle asked gently, "And by the way-- thank you. Your prayers worked."

"This makes me look at my dream about Lacy in a whole different way," Keoni said.

"What do you mean? You took it seriously," Brielle said.

"Yeah, I did take it seriously, and I felt led to tell you so that we could do whatever God wanted us to in helping her. But I'm beginning to wonder if this isn't a coincidence," she said.

"Oba says he doesn't believe in coincidence," Brielle said, "He says there is no word in ancient Hebrew that means coincidence because there is no coincidence with God."

"I know. I haven't had dreams like these for years," Keoni paused, deep in thought again, "I'm just so glad to know that you are okay. I was so worried."

Brielle laughed, "This is blowing my mind! I can't wait to tell Mama and Oba how God used you to help us! They're gonna freak out and –Oh my gosh! I almost forgot, Jace! He's coming to church tomorrow, so you will be able to meet him. I can't believe we didn't notice this guy all week in class!" she laughed.

"Don't kid yourself, *I* noticed him! I just didn't know his name. He seems so shy. You were just too busy watching Lacy every day to notice anyone else," Keoni laughed.

"Really? You saw him and didn't say anything?" Brielle asked.

"He's gorgeous, but he's not my type. You know what I like," she giggled.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, but a cross between a young Denzel Washington and Chadwick Boseman is highly unlikely to come walking through the doors of Fairfield High anytime soon," Brielle said.

"Hey, where's your faith at girl?" Keoni said, "You, for one, should know that all things are possible with God."

"Yeah, I do, that's for sure," Brielle said, "Okay, I'm gonna go, I'll call you later - I want to tell Oba and Mama about your dream."

"Okay, I love you," Keoni said.

"I love you too, and thank you for being obedient to God," Brielle replied, remembering how Obadiah had just used those same words with Jace about her.

As she hung up the phone, her heart was so full of gratitude for God that she went outside and spent some time just thanking and praising Him for the miracle He had performed that day in her life. God met her in her time of need. He did not fail but came running to her cries for help, delivering her and everyone in that store from the evil that had descended upon them in that moment. She took the time to worship Him for being the amazing God that He is.

Later, she went downstairs and shared with Oba and Genevieve the powerful dream the Lord gave Keoni and how He impressed upon her to pray for Brielle and to keep praying. Once again, they were amazed at the mighty hand of God. Obadiah said that he had a great idea for the Cross Café class in the morning and went across the bridge to his study to prepare for it.

Asher was still in bed, so Brielle sat down with Genevieve on the couch and turned on the television. The news was on, and they were doing a special report on the mini-mart where the robbery had taken place. Genevieve and Brielle sat up as the police gave an alert to the entire county for the robber who had escaped. In the excitement and insanity of what took place, Brielle had completely forgotten that this man was on the loose. Everyone had reported to the police that the short robber called him "T.J." as he bolted from the store. But other than his first name and an estimation of his height and weight, they had no other descriptions to tell. He had been covered from head to toe.

The police had discovered his mask with the attached head cover in the woods about a mile from the store. They were giving an alert to all surrounding citizens; if they saw a man with a red flannel shirt that matched the same height and weight estimates, he was armed and dangerous, and they should call the police immediately.

Genevieve pulled Brielle close to her and kissed her again.

"Thank You, Father God, for keeping my baby safe. Please Lord, always, *always* guard her with Your angels and keep her in Your care," she whispered, "Always."

6

The next day, the Lord brought forth a lovely fall morning. The forest trees surrounding Obadiah's home were rich with colors of red, yellow, and orange. The cool breeze that sang through the trees brought with it an aroma of the chilly months to come. Genevieve and Asher were up early and left for church before Brielle was even out of her pajamas. Genevieve was the minister of music for their church and had to be there early for the musicians' rehearsal before the morning service. She had served the Lord with her talents in music her entire life, ever since she was a little girl. She was thrilled to learn that both her children were blessed with beautiful voices from the Lord, and she longed for the day when Brielle would sing again. She knew her daughter had a God-given talent for song. Ever since that last night with her father, Brielle had completely lost the desire to sing. Anytime she thought about trying to sing, she immediately felt a tight lump in her throat.

After going downstairs and eating a quick breakfast, Brielle headed up to her room to get ready for church. She took her time that morning in her closet deciding what would be best to wear. She liked to dress nicely for church as she was taught that people should always wear their best for the Lord, whatever their best may be. But in the back of her mind, she couldn't kid herself. She knew she was not only dressing out of respect and honor for the Lord today, but she also wanted to look nice because Jace was coming to the service—at least she hoped so. She didn't know him at all. Was he the kind of person who said one thing and did another, or would he show up today? If he did…she wanted to look nice, nicer than she did yesterday morning anyway.

After a few minutes of trying to decide what to wear, she finally selected a dress that Keoni had chosen for her one day while out shopping together. It was a navy-blue dress with a fluted skirt that came just above her knee, with elbow-length sleeves and a simple crew neckline. The sleeves and neckline were trimmed with white ribbon, and around her waist, a satin white ribbon tied in the front into a bow. It was form-fitting to show off her tiny figure, but nothing that was inappropriate; it was very becoming. She had not worn the dress before, and now that she had put it on, she liked it very much. She felt very pretty. If nothing else, she knew it would at least make Keoni happy to see her wearing it.

Obadiah was downstairs, growing more impatient as Brielle never usually took this much time to get ready for things. "Are you about ready to go?" he called upstairs to her as he looked in the entranceway mirror to adjust his tie. Obadiah dressed casually at home in jeans and comfortable button-down shirts. But on Sundays, he liked to dress up for church, usually wearing a suit and an old-fashioned bow tie. His wife always loved him to see him in a bow tie, and even though she had passed away years ago, he still wore them for her.

"Just give me five minutes," Brielle called down to him.

Obadiah looked at his watch and then remembered that Jace was coming to the service this morning. He smiled at himself as he realized what was delaying Brielle. But right after five minutes passed, she came downstairs ready to go. She looked beautiful.

"Hmm," Obadiah observed, "Is that a new dress?" he asked slyly.

Brielle acted nonchalantly, "What? Oh, yes… well, kind of. Keoni picked it out for me a while ago, I just haven't gotten around to wearing it yet," she said as she gathered up her Bible and purse.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

Obadiah smiled his charming smile, "Yes," he chuckled, "Here, catch," he said as he tossed her his truck keys, "Want to get some driving practice today?"

Brielle hesitated; she knew that she had to be the only teenager on the planet who was sixteen years old and didn't care about having a driver's license. There was just something about driving that made her nervous. She would rather have everyone chauffeur her around-- but she knew that wasn't a practical way to think.

"Are you sure? We don't want to be late, right?" she teased as she always drove close to ten miles below the speed limit.

"You're something else; you know it?" Obadiah laughed as they walked out the door.

"Why?" she asked.

"You'll stand up to a masked gunman firing away in a store robbery, but you're afraid to drive a car," he said.

Brielle smiled and rolled her eyes at her grandfather, "Yeah, well that wasn't me who did that, it was God. He was the one in control. But this *is* me in control-- which is why it makes me nervous!" she said as she climbed into the truck.

"Relax, Sweetheart, you're a good, safe driver," Obadiah soothed, "just like my grandfather used to be. Of course, back then the cars only went about 20 miles per hour, which is about how fast you like to go," he said with a chuckle.

"Ha, ha, thanks a lot. I am most parents' driving dream. I don't speed and I'm very, *very* cautious," she said, slowly backing out of the driveway, "Now, please let me concentrate," she muttered jokingly.

Even though Brielle had gone about ten miles under the posted speed limit on their trip to the church, they were still on time with a few minutes to spare. The church parking lot was slowly beginning to fill, and Brielle took a spot almost at the other end of the lot so as not to have any trouble parking Obadiah's large pickup truck between other cars.

"Do you always plan on parking a half a mile away from where you are going?" he teased her.

"Maybe it would be easier for me to learn to park if I were driving

something smaller than this bus!" she replied with a laugh.

As they walked through the back parking lot up to the church, she took a deep, slow breath. She had butterflies in her stomach thinking about Jace and wanted to make sure she was already inside her class before he arrived. She thought she would be more relaxed with Keoni and Gideon there.

"There's Mr. Mullins, I want to talk to him again, he wants to set up another fishing trip. I'll see you in class," he said.

Brielle nodded and kept walking toward the church building, wondering what Jace would think about it. She remembered the first time she saw it; she fell in love with it immediately. There were several lovely old churches in Fairfield County, many with hundreds of years of history, too. Although the Maple Grove Church was not nearly that old, still, there was something very special about it. It was built with red bricks and white wood in the traditional architecture and style of the early American churches typically found in the colonial period.

The Maple Grove Church had lovely long white paned windows with shutters that could be opened and closed from the inside for the convenience of special lighting needs. Some locals rumored that this shutter design came from stories of British soldiers who trapped American colonists inside town churches to burn them to death. But no such record of this took place during the Revolutionary War era. Obadiah said the idea for such construction for the shutters actually came from World War II.

On June 10, 1944, in the small town of Oradour-sur-Glane, France, a group of Nazi SS soldiers took all the town's women and children and locked them in a church. The soldiers burned the church to the ground, and all the souls inside perished. They took the men to another building where they were shot. A total of 642 souls perished in Oradour that day. Since the Maple Grove Church was built just after the war, the plans called for the shutters to be placed on the inside, so there was no way anyone could be trapped in case of a fire.

On the front of the church, there was a tall white bell tower and a majestic steeple with a prominent white cross perched on top. The cross visibly announced the location of the church from miles away. Brielle stood on the front steps for a moment, her attention distracted by the lovely garden that was just outside the doors and along the east side of the building.

The garden was full of lilac trees, rose bushes, lilies, snapdragons, and all kinds of wildflowers. In the center of the garden stood a noble maple tree, the largest of the maples that surrounded the church. It reached its strong, beautiful branches out, towering above the other trees, sprawling over the garden grounds. This tree held a special place in Brielle's heart, for although she had never seen it until she was six years old, her mother would tell her a most enchanting story about it. Under this tree, with its brilliant leaves in the colors of red and orange on a crisp October Sunday afternoon, Brielle's father asked her

mother to marry him. So many times, Brielle had sat and looked at this lovely tree and pictured this event taking place; her father kneeling before her mother, taking out the exquisite ring he presented her with, and asking her to be his bride. She was about ten years old the first time her mother told her that story, and the older she got, the more she appreciated it. Seeing the tree brought back a happy memory of her father. Even though it wasn't her own memory, she liked to remember him that way: happy, well, and embracing life.

Brielle suddenly remembered she wanted to be in the classroom when Jace arrived---if he arrived. She walked in and greeted several people who were gathering inside the church and then headed for the Cross Café. When she came in, Obadiah was preparing his lesson for that morning. There were three other students in the class sitting and talking, two girls named Taylor and Valerie, and another guy named Adam. They smiled when Brielle walked in, and she greeted them before going to the café in the corner of the room.

Every Sunday, Obadiah made sure his Cross Café class was properly supplied with boxes of doughnuts, pastries, coffee, tea, juice, and chocolate milk for his students. He found that a good way to draw teenagers into a Sunday School Class was with good food and good conversations about their daily lives. It was his mission to empower teenagers with the Word of God so they could handle the things they dealt with from day to day with the confidence that their Lord Jesus Christ was always with them.

Brielle grabbed her favorite things, powdered doughnuts and a cup of chocolate milk. She then sat down with her friends. A few minutes later, another guy named Tyler came in, followed by another girl named Rochelle. Brielle's stomach did a flip every time the door opened, her eyes quickly darting to see who was entering the room. Obadiah smiled and greeted everyone as they came in; he seemed very excited about what he had planned to teach that morning. Then Keoni and Gideon arrived. When Keoni saw Brielle in the dress she had chosen for her, she broke out into a broad smile, beaming with pride.

"You finally wore it!" she delighted, "Stand up and let me see," she said, spinning her finger in her familiar way when she wanted Brielle to turn around.

Gideon looked at Brielle and lifted his eyebrows, "Nice, very nice. You look good, Bri."

"Thank you," Brielle replied with a cute curtsy, quickly realizing that everyone in the class was now staring at her. She felt her face flush, "Keoni chose this dress for me," she explained sheepishly to her friends, all the kids smiled and nodded, for they understood Keoni's love for clothes.

"What can I say? I've got a passion for fashion," Keoni said with a laugh, "and you look good, girl, if I do say so myself." Then she turned around to talk to the other friends in the class and catch up on their week. A few minutes later, Obadiah started the class.

"Okay, everyone, it's time to begin. First, I would like to say good morning

to you all," he said cheerfully, "For most of you, this was your first week back to school. I hope you all are enjoying it and are excited about the upcoming school year. I myself am very excited about our lesson for today because I believe it will help you this year at school and after that for all your years to come. I am hoping that you will leave here just as excited and motivated as I am! Now, before we begin, I must pass out several papers to you, so please take one of each and then pass them along," he said.

"Where's your friend?" Keoni whispered to Brielle.

Brielle looked at her and shrugged solemnly, "Maybe he's one of those people who's just a bunch of talk."

"Okay, the truth is revealed! That's the reason for all your glamour today," Gideon chided, "And here I thought maybe my sister was rubbing off on you," he joked.

Brielle patted her hand in the air, "Hush," she said.

Obadiah continued passing out papers until each student had a total of five sheets. The top of the first page read: *Learning Your Spiritual Gifts,* with an outline of topics underneath. The rest of the papers looked to be like something of a test or survey with questions and multiple-choice answers.

Once everyone had their sheets, Obadiah opened with prayer, and then he began to teach.

"This is a lesson that I have taught for years, but I usually taught it to college students and adults. However, I have now changed my position and believe that it is never too early to learn what talents and gifts God has placed within you," Obadiah explained. "Maybe some of you have already discovered a talent or gift that God has given you. But if you haven't, then hopefully today will be a day of enlightenment for your purpose here on earth."

Just then, the door opened, and Obadiah looked up from his lesson. when he did, his face lit up. Brielle looked back to see Jace standing in the doorway. Her heart suddenly began to beat a hundred miles an hour. He was wearing a pair of black pants and a long-sleeved cream-colored V-necked sweater with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Brielle was mesmerized-- along with all the girls in the class.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said shyly.

"That's okay," Obadiah greeted him warmly. "We're happy you made it, welcome!" he said, gathering up some papers to give to him. "Everyone, this is Jace," Obadiah said to the class. The kids in the class all responded to welcome him, especially the girls who seemed slightly dazed by his presence.

"Just take a seat and I'll get you everything you need," Obadiah said.

Jace looked around the room, and when he saw Brielle, his warm, beautiful smile slowly spread across his face. She had saved a seat next to her just in case he *was* the kind of guy who did what he said he would. Jace made his way across the room and sat down next to her. Brielle breathed in his cologne; he smelled

heavenly.

"Hi," he whispered.

"Hi," Brielle said sweetly.

Gideon reached his hand over to greet Jace and introduced himself, "Hey, I'm Gideon."

"Hey," Jace answered while shaking his hand.

Keoni waved, "I'm Keoni," she whispered.

"Hi," Jace said. Then Obadiah came over and handed him the lesson papers.

"Before we begin," Obadiah said, moving to a stool in the front of the room, "I want to tell you that I understand how hard it is to be a teenager. It's been a while, but I was once one too," he chuckled. "I remember the pressures I had and all the different emotions and feelings I experienced. It was a time to begin to find myself, to find out who I really was, and learn more about who I wanted to be. Finding oneself is quite a long process, and you won't discover who you are all at once; it may take years or, for some, decades, but it all begins at this time in your life.

"Now I know that times have changed from when I was a kid, and they have changed drastically. You are dealing with issues and circumstances my generation never thought about—or in some cases never even *knew* about. However, even though this is a time of growth and transition, my hope is that you can all find out who you are in the Lord and know it for certain. Having this information will help make the road of being a teenager much easier," he said, taking the time to look at each individual student intently as he spoke.

"Let me begin by telling you just how much God, your Heavenly Father, loves you," he paused, "This is no easy task to understand, for it is almost impossible for our human minds to be able to comprehend that kind of love. But you need to know that you are most *important*, most *valuable*, and most *precious* to God. When he looks at you, He sees His child, His beloved, His precious treasure. There is *nothing* that God would not do for you. We have already seen the proof of that by His giving of His only Son to be sacrificed for our sins," then he stood up and came closer to the students, "You need to know, Rochelle and you need to know, Adam and you, Valerie," he pointed, "and you, Taylor, Tyler-- all of you need to know that if you were the only person alive on this earth, God would *still* have sent His Son Jesus to die for you. Just for you. Jesus still would have come to earth, and He still would have given His life on Calvary… just - for - *you*. He loves you that much. It's hard sometimes for us to imagine or understand that, but it's true.

"In your schools and circles of friends, there may be some who would challenge that as being truth," then he reached down and picked up his Bible. "But we know that God's Word *is* truth. You can trust and believe everything that you read in this book *is* real. In the Bible, God explains His amazing love for

you. So even though there will be times when you feel lost, awkward, scared, confused, or doubtful, whatever you are going through, *always* know just how precious you are to God and how much He *loves* you… no matter what."

Brielle looked over at Jace, who was captivated by her grandfather's teachings, hanging on to his every word.

Obadiah continued, "God loves you because you are His. You are His child, His creation. The Bible says in Psalm 139:13 '*He created your innermost being. He knew you before you were knit in your mother's womb—*' *before* you were knit in your mother's womb," he emphasized, "That verse right there shows His intent for your life. Whether your mother or your father planned for you to come or not, God did. He had a reason for creating you the way He did and placing you where you are. The Bible also tells us in Luke 12:7 '*That indeed even the very hairs on your head are numbered'*—and God knows exactly how many there are at all times, so if you lose some or grow some, He knows it! He loves you and He *knows* you like no other. It is important to believe that there is a specific reason for your life, a divine purpose, and God holds all the blueprints for it in His hands."

Brielle thought about these words. All her life, for as long as she could remember, she had been taught about God and His great love. Her parents, being missionaries, taught God's love and the Gospel of Jesus to everyone they met. When she and her mother and brother came to Fairfield, she saw how her mother and grandfather had never ceased doing God's work together, no matter how much they had lost or suffered.

Brielle loved the Lord with all her heart, always had, and believed His Word to be true, but she did not feel like she knew what her purpose in life was—until yesterday. After the robbery took place and Brielle saw how God could use her to fight evil, she knew she had a distinct purpose on this earth, and she wasn't going to be afraid of it. Since God loved her so much and designed her with special talents and abilities, she would do everything she could to learn more about those talents and develop them to use for His glory.

"What we are going to do today," Obadiah went on, "is try to help you discover some of your talents or hidden abilities and how God can use them in this world. These talents are called *Spiritual Gifts,* and they are things that you can do to help reach others for God. Our main goal in life is to serve God and do what He commands. One thing I can tell you after a little over sixty years of living when you strive to live in the Will of God, you will always find His blessings. There will be tests and trials that will indeed come, but if you stay on God's path, you will have a good life.

"So! Let's take a look at this questionnaire. On these sheets, you will find a series of questions. Please understand that there are no wrong or right answers to these questions. In order for the test to be accurate, however, you must answer the questions with complete honesty. Then the test will help you to learn

more about yourself, your abilities, and how you can use them for God and the work He has for you. Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to pass out the pencils," he said, turning to grab a box of pencils from the table and pass them out.

"Would you like a doughnut?" Brielle whispered to Jace, remembering how they met.

Jace looked down at her plate, "Seems like every time I see you, there's a doughnut in your hand-- except in History class, of course," he grinned.

"Don't kid yourself, I keep little ones in my backpack and eat them between classes," she giggled, "Here take one, I'm trying to learn to share them," she joked.

Jace laughed softly, "Okay, thanks," he said while taking a doughnut.

Once Obadiah distributed the pencils, he asked the students to answer the questions. Everyone began reading and answering at once. Taking the test took the rest of the time for the class. Once everyone was finished, Obadiah asked them to make sure their names were on the top of their tests and to pass them to the front.

"When you come back next week, I will have your test results, and we will really start to identify how you can use these talents for God and His work. It is my hope that this will help you with your direction in life and will bring you to true happiness," he said cheerfully.

The class flew by, and before long, it was time to dismiss the Cross Café' class for the morning service. Obadiah closed the class with prayer and thanked everyone for coming. The teens all lingered in the room a bit as they did every week and talked with one another while enjoying their refreshments. Everyone introduced themselves to Jace-- especially the girls, who made it quite obvious they were very interested in meeting him.

When they came out of the classroom, Keoni and Gideon excused themselves as they were members of the choir and had to go get ready to sing. Brielle decided to show Jace around the church so he would feel more at home.

"Did you enjoy the Cross Café?" she asked.

"Yeah, it was great! I think I came on the perfect Sunday," he said.

"Really, why?" she asked.

"Remember how I told you that I used to go to church with my grandma?" he said.

Brielle nodded.

"I've missed it. I've been thinking about coming to church for a while now, longing for it really, but I just didn't go," he said, "It was good to come back and on a day that might help me discover some important things."

"You mean, about yourself?" Brielle asked.

"Yeah, so I can see what God wants to do with me," he replied.

"I want to ask you about the church that you went to with your grandma," Brielle began, "What kind of services did they have?"

"What do you mean?" Jace asked.

"Well, this is a Pentecostal church, which means we tend to get *excited* about God," she smiled.

Jace laughed, "Don't worry, my grandma believed the same as you, we went to a non-denominational church, which was very *excited* about God too."

Brielle laughed, "Good! I just didn't want you to be scared when you went in there. Our people like to clap, shout, praise, and jump around. Not that there is anything wrong with churches that don't do this, I think it's just a personal preference on how people like to praise God. My grandfather always said that if people can go to a baseball game and jump and shout for a man to hit a ball, then we should be able to get excited when praising Jesus, the Son God!"

Jace nodded, "That's a good way to put it."

Just then, the music in the sanctuary began, so they headed inside and found seats with a few of the other teens. Then the worship service began. When Genevieve got up to sing, Brielle leaned over proudly and told Jace, "That's my mama!"

Brielle was so proud of her mother and loved to hear her sing. Her mother's passion for the Lord came out strong whenever she opened her mouth to sing for Him. The goose bumps that people felt were evidence of her being under the anointing of God.

Jace was impressed, "She's amazing," Brielle nodded proudly in agreement.

Then Genevieve cued the choir to sing. That morning, they sang a beautiful song that featured Keoni as the soloist. Brielle loved to hear her friend sing as well. Most of the time, whether the song was upbeat or slow in tempo, it didn't matter; Keoni's voice would bring tears to Brielle's eyes. Keoni and Gideon were both blessed with strong singing voices, and they had always used their talents for the Lord.

Jace was also impressed with Keoni, "There sure are a lot of talented people in this church," he whispered. Brielle nodded in agreement.

Then Pastor Diffie took the pulpit to begin the morning's message. Next to her father and grandfather, Pastor Diffie was one of the most amazing men Brielle had ever known. He was almost six feet tall with snow white hair, large dark rimmed glasses, and a smile that could light up the darkest night. He was warm and loving, a true shepherd to his people. Every single time she heard him speak, she came away educated, motivated, and excited to serve the Lord. As Pastor Diffie introduced his sermon for the morning, Brielle began to get excited. The title of his sermon was *"Jesus Is Calling to You".*

She marveled at how God worked. Obadiah had always taught her that there was no word in the Hebrew language for coincidence; therefore, there was no coincidence with God. Here, Jace had sat behind her all week in school, and she didn't even notice him. But on the day they met, God did something so miraculous in saving their lives that Jace decided to come back to church. Now,

he was hearing a message that God had placed on Pastor Diffie's heart, which could have been for many people in the building, but most certainly was for Jace.

Pastor Diffie gave the most beautiful and inspiring message, and at the end, he asked the musicians to play softly.

"If you all would stand with me today," he said gently, "I would like to ask if there is anyone here who has gotten away from having a daily relationship with Jesus. Or maybe you don't know Him at all, but you would like to. As the musicians play, if you would like to come back to Jesus or come meet Him for the first time, I would love to pray with you," he said sweetly.

Genevieve began to softly sing the old hymn "I Surrender All". Her lovely voice filled the sanctuary like a sweet perfume. As she sang, several people began to make their way to the altar where Pastor Diffie and other church volunteers were waiting to pray with them. Brielle had her head lowered with her eyes closed in prayer when she felt the gentle touch of a hand on her arm.

"Excuse me, please," Jace whispered.

Brielle backed up so he could pass. She held her breath for a moment to see which direction he was going: to the door at the back of the church to leave-- or to the altar at the front. He turned down the aisle and began to walk to the front. Without realizing it she felt a broad smile stretching across her face, her heart was overflowing with joy. Then she felt a strong urge in her spirit to follow him. She stood there for a moment contemplating this idea. Should she back off and let him have this time with the Lord on his own? Or should she go down and show him her support in his decision to recommit his life to Jesus? She worried about whether or not it would be too forward, after all, she just met him yesterday. But she remembered something her mother told her that her grandmother said: *'The first thing that comes to your heart is from the Holy Spirit, and anything that comes after that was from the enemy trying to get you to not do God's will.'* So, she listened to her first feeling and went to pray with Jace.

Just as she moved out of the pew and headed down the aisle, she saw her grandfather up ahead of her moving in Jace's direction. Brielle smiled as she walked closer, knowing that what was happening in Jace's heart would change his life on earth-- and more importantly, his eternity.

Jace had knelt at the altar and was praying with Pastor Diffie and Pastor Nathan, the church's Youth Pastor. Obadiah had reached him before Brielle and had knelt beside him, placing his hand on Jace's back. Brielle knelt behind him, reaching up to place her hand on his shoulder. She wanted him to know that he had a lot of support in his decision. After Pastor Diffie and Pastor Nathan had prayed with him, they spoke with him and hugged him before moving on to pray with other people who had come down to the altar. When Jace looked up and saw that Brielle and Obadiah were with him, he smiled.

"I'm really glad you decided to come to church today," Brielle whispered.

"Me too," he said as he wiped tears from his eyes.

Obadiah put his arm around him for a hug, "Me too," he smiled, "and if there is anything I can ever do for you, you just let me know. I'm here for you," Obadiah said, extending his hand to Jace.

"Thank you, Sir," Jace said politely, shaking Obadiah's hand.

Obadiah returned to his seat, and Jace and Brielle began to walk back to theirs. There were still people praying at the altar, but Pastor Diffie dismissed the rest of the congregation.

"So… how do you feel?" she asked.

"I'm not sure I can quite describe it," Jace said. "I remember asking Jesus into my heart a long time ago when I was a little kid, and it felt wonderful then. I've always believed in Jesus, I never stopped believing, I just…" he paused, searching for the right words.

"Drifted away?" Brielle asked, trying to help him.

"Yes, kind of. I didn't have anyone else in my life who went to church, and so after my grandmother passed away, I just stopped going. Jesus went from someone I knew well to being someone I just really missed," he said. "I don't know if that makes any sense."

"Yes, it does," Brielle said reassuringly.

"I'm very excited to have Him back in my life. It feels incredible," he explained. Then he cocked his head to the side and lowered his eyes in thought.

"What is it?" Brielle asked, seeing his inquisitive expression.

"I was just thinking," he said, "about how we met and everything that happened yesterday."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"When I got up yesterday morning, I hit my alarm a few times, which made me a little bit later than usual. But if I had been on time, I would have been out of the store before you even got there, and with the last box of doughnuts in my hand," he smiled.

Brielle laughed.

"But the timing for me to meet you was just right. It was like it was meant for me to be there in that place at that time," he said.

"You mean, you were meant to see God's power so you would--"

"Come back to Him," Jace finished her sentence, "Yes, exactly. I mean, even if I had met you in school, if I hadn't seen what happened yesterday, I might never have come back to church and God."

"I'm sure I would have invited you," Brielle said happily.

"But that doesn't mean I would have come," he answered directly. "I had a couple of friends invite me to church from time to time over the past few years, but I've never gone, even though I missed being there. I guess it took the right person to invite me," he said sweetly, looking at Brielle. "I know it might sound crazy to say this because yesterday's robbery was something I wouldn't wish on

anyone… but I'm glad I was there. I'm glad I came here today and very glad to have my relationship with God again," he hesitated, then he looked deep into her eyes and said gently, "and I'm really glad I found… I mean… I'm really glad I met you," he blushed and lowered his eyes to the floor.

Brielle looked up at him, "I'm glad I met you, too," she said, feeling the butterflies explode in her stomach, "Oba always says God's timing is perfect for everything."

Jace looked at her and nodded in agreement.

While they were talking, other people in the church were walking around to shake hands and greet each other. There was joyful energy in the air, and you could see it on the faces of the people there. Brielle saw Keoni making her way toward them.

"Hey, Jace! Good service, huh?" Keoni asked.

"I'd say it was life-changing," Jace said with a smile.

"I'm so glad!" Keoni delighted, "There's nothing better than Jesus," she said giving Jace a hug.

"I'll agree with that," Jace replied.

"Hey, do you two want to go get something to eat?" Then she rolled her eyes at her own question, "Look who I'm asking, you always want to get something to eat," she said jokingly to Brielle.

"Sure, let me talk to Mama," Brielle laughed.

"Yeah, sure," Jace answered, "sounds good."

"Where do you want to go?" Keoni asked.

"I don't care, you know I'll eat anything," Brielle answered, grabbing her purse.

"That's true, you will," Keoni smiled.

"Hush," Brielle said, patting her hand in the air, "I'm not the one you should be asking, your picky brother is. You guys work it out, I'm going to go talk to Mama," she said as she walked toward the stage.

Keoni turned to look at Jace. "Did you like the Cross Café today?"

"Everything was great. I'm really glad I came," he smiled, "I also loved your song, you have a beautiful voice."

"Aw, thanks," Keoni answered, flattered, "I'm glad you enjoyed it. Do you think you might come back again?"

"Oh yeah, most definitely," he said.

"Where would you like to go to eat?" she asked.

"Uh, I don't know. I'm not too picky though, I'll eat anywhere," he said.

"Good! Here comes Mr. Pickypants now, we'll ask him what his food-mood is today," Keoni teased, as she looked over her shoulder to see Gideon coming up the aisle.

"Hey man," Gideon said, patting Jace on the back, "How did you like the service?"

Jace smiled, “It was great! I enjoyed it!”

“Good! I hope you’ll be back. I could use your company to survive all the female domination around here,” Gideon laughed.

“Ha-ha, female domination? And I was just saying that *you* would be the one to decide where we would eat because *you* are so picky about food,” Keoni said dryly.

“Very nice,” Gideon said, ignoring his sister’s remark, “I was thinking maybe we could go down to the Blue Moon. I would love some wings.”

Keoni’s expression changed. “That sounds good to me, too. I love their salads,” she said.

Jace nodded in agreement, “Sounds good to me.”

Brielle returned and said, “Okay, I’m all set. As long as Keoni drives, I’m good to go.”

“What?” Gideon blurted, “What’s that all about? That hurts!”

“You know that you are not as safe a driver as your sister and mama says I’m too valuable to take a chance with,” Brielle answered with an air of sophistication and importance, “but you know she still loves you,” she said, laughing, patting him on the cheek.

Gideon looked up on the stage to see Genevieve watching them talk. She laughed at Gideon’s expression and blew him a kiss, which of course made him smile.

“Let’s go!” she said.

“Don’t you even want to know where we are going?” Keoni asked.

“Hmm, is there food there?” Brielle asked.

“Yes,” Keoni said.

“Then nope. I don’t care, let’s go!” Brielle said, grabbing Keoni’s arm and heading for the door.

Jace leaned over to Gideon, “I take it that Brielle likes to eat?” he asked quietly.

“You have no idea,” Gideon answered.

When they arrived at the restaurant, they waited at the hostess desk to be seated. The restaurant was busy with people enjoying a Sunday lunch of burgers and wings. When they entered, Jace and Gideon approached the hostess stand, but some old photos hanging in the waiting area had caught Brielle’s attention. The photos were all black and white shots of New York City in the 1800s. She and Keoni were studying the photos when they heard the voice of the hostess.

“Welcome to the Blue Moon. Party of four?” the hostess asked.

“Yes,” Gideon answered.

“I know you,” the hostess said to Jace, “Aren’t you in my history class at school?”

Brielle and Keoni, upon hearing this, came around the corner to see who the hostess was.

It was Lacy.

Brielle was surprised at first to see her there and dressed in a bright, beautiful blue shirt instead of her usual black.

Before Jace could respond to Lacy's question, Brielle happily replied, "Hey Lacy! I didn't know you worked here!"

Lacy also had a look of surprise when she saw Brielle-- but hers was not an expression of joy.

"Only on weekends," Lacy said quickly, grabbing four menus from the stand. Her actions of irritation made it very clear that she was not interested in conversation with Brielle. "Follow me, please," she said with a kinder tone while looking at Jace.

Then she turned quickly to lead them to their table.

Keoni grabbed her friend's arm and whispered in Brielle's ear, "Is God trying to get our attention here or what?"

Brielle didn't answer but nodded subtly.

Gideon heard his sister's comment to Brielle as she passed him to follow Lacy. The four friends followed their hostess to their table, which was in the back corner of the restaurant. Jace, being the perfect gentleman, pulled out both Brielle and Keoni's chairs for them. The girls were shocked to see such manners and thanked him for his thoughtfulness.

Then Keoni whispered to her brother, "I think it will be good for you to be around this guy; you could learn some more manners."

"Hey, I know how to treat the ladies, but I'm not too worried about pulling a chair out for my sister," Gideon chided.

After they sat down and looked over their menus, they gave their order to a beautiful waitress whom Gideon could hardly take his eyes from.

"I just can't take you anywhere," Keoni scolded.

"What?" Gideon asked with that same innocent expression he always gave her.

"We just got out of church. Can't you show a little bit of self-control?" she asked.

"Yes, we did just get out of church, and I am sitting here thinking what a Mighty God I serve that could create someone that fine," Gideon answered, trying to act dignified, which only resulted in laughter from the group.

"I have an announcement to make," Brielle said, "in honor of the life changing decision that our new friend Jace made today, mama has given me the money to pay for everyone's lunch. She told us to take you out and celebrate," she smiled at Jace, taking her water glass, and lifting it up to propose a toast, "Congratulations to Jace and thank You, Jesus for Your forgiveness and everlasting life!" she said joyfully.

Everyone lifted their water glasses and toasted together in celebration. Jace looked thoughtfully at Brielle, "Your mother really did that for me?" he asked, a

little bewildered.

"Yes," Brielle said, "this is a wonderful day for you, and she wanted to show you her support along with the rest of us."

"But… she doesn't even know me," he said, puzzled.

"No, not yet, but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't celebrate today. You're my friend, and she is happy that you came to church today and asked Jesus back into your heart," Brielle said, "You know the Bible tells us that when just one soul comes to ask Jesus into their heart, there is a celebration throughout all of heaven. So, if the angels are celebrating, so should we!"

Jace felt humbled, "Thank you," he said, looking around the table to his new friends, "And thank your mother for me, please."

Brielle nodded. "I will, but I'm sure you will have the chance to talk to her sometime—especially if you come back next Sunday."

Then she took a bite of the appetizer that had been brought to the table, her eyes casually traveling to the hostess stand to look at Lacy.

Gideon caught her gaze and asked, "Hey, what were you saying about God trying to get your attention for that girl?"

Jace looked over his shoulder to see that Brielle was looking at Lacy. "I've noticed that you watch her a lot in history, too," he said.

Brielle was caught off guard by both of their statements and started to blush, "Oh, well… I um," she stammered, unsure of where to begin.

"God has brought her to our attention," Keoni interrupted to help her friend.

"What do you mean?" Gideon asked, "For what?"

"We aren't too sure at this point," Brielle said, "I just feel like she is in need of some help."

Keoni and Brielle began to explain everything to Jace and Gideon, how Keoni had known her last year, and how different she was. They explained the feelings that Brielle had to try and be her friend, and then Keoni told them about her dream.

"Wow," Gideon said, looking over at Lacy, "So what do you think is going on?"

"We're not sure," Keoni said, "but there's been a huge change in her since last year, how she looks, how she acts, dresses, everything."

"We keep praying for answers, we just haven't had any come yet," Brielle said, "All I know is that God has placed her in my heart, and we feel led to keep trying to help her. I know that may sound kind of strange. It's hard to explain."

Jace, who had been quietly listening, spoke up, "I understand that. I understand having that feeling."

"Really?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, I have been feeling that way myself over the past week. There's a kid at school, he's very small for his age, and he's brilliant, maybe a genius. I think he

is an accelerated student; I don't know for sure. But I think he is having trouble with some guys at school. I keep feeling like I need to… I don't know, do something to help him," he said.

"Who is the kid?" Gideon asked.

"His name is Rateesh Kedar," Jace answered, "His family is from India."

"You know Rateesh?" Brielle said in surprise, "I know him too. He's in my Latin class."

"Latin?" Gideon asked with his puzzled tone, "Why on earth are you taking Latin?"

Brielle didn't answer him but gave him an exasperated look, then she turned to Jace, "What's happening to him? Is he being bullied or something?"

"I don't exactly know. He's in my chemistry class and he's my lab partner this year. He's made a few comments about some of the other guys in the class not liking him. He acts nervous when they come around, too. The other day, I saw him change the direction he was walking and go another way because he would have to pass some of these guys in the hall," Jace explained.

"Who are the guys?" Gideon asked.

"I'm not sure about two of them, but the other two are on the football team," Jace said. "I'm still trying to learn names."

"Can you point them out to me at school tomorrow?" Gideon asked, "If I know them, maybe I can find out what's going on."

"Yeah, that would be great," Jace said.

"I'll meet you for lunch," Gideon said, "and you can show me who they are."

"That's nice of you guys," Brielle said, "Rateesh is very sweet, and he looks so small and helpless. I couldn't stand the thought of anyone bullying him."

"Are you new to Fairfield High, too?" Keoni asked.

"Yes," Jace replied.

"Where did you go to school before?" Brielle asked.

"I've been to several," he said, "More than I would like to have. But I like Fairfield High and plan to stay there until I graduate."

"Good," Brielle said, "That's my plan too."

Just then, the waitress brought out their food. Brielle's order was the biggest of the group. They blessed their lunch and began to eat.

"I think you need to be checked for a tapeworm," Gideon laughed.

"Hush," Brielle said, taking another bite.

"It's amazing, you look like a normal person, but actually, you are a garbage disposal in disguise," he said.

"Hey! I told her that the other day at school," Keoni giggled.

Everyone laughed as Brielle never made any qualms over the fact that she liked food and enjoyed eating it.

The friends enjoyed their lunch, and when they were finished, Brielle looked for Lacy to tell her goodbye, whether Lacy would say goodbye or not. But she

was busy with other customers, so Brielle decided she would try to talk to her tomorrow. Now that she knew Lacy worked here, they would have to come back and visit again. Gideon had already mentioned that he would like to come back soon, but Brielle doubted it was for the food--it was because of the waitress who had slyly slipped him her phone number.

7

The next day at school, Brielle couldn't wait to get to history class. Of course, she was curious to see how Lacy was doing, but more than that, she was excited to see Jace. It still made her mind whirl that she had sat for five days in a row in the seat directly in front of him and never noticed he was there. After all that she had experienced with the power of God in the mini-mart, she wanted to be completely obedient to the Lord in helping Lacy, but in addition to helping Lacy, she also needed to take some time to see what else—or *who* else-was in the world around her.

When she walked in the door, she looked immediately toward her seat in search of Jace. There he was, sitting in the second-to-last seat in her row. He was talking to Keoni, who was always there before Brielle could make it across campus from her dance class. When Jace saw her come into the room, he gave her that broad, beautiful smile that made her knees weak. Keoni turned and waved happily to her. Then, upon seeing what Brielle was wearing, turned her delighted face of welcome into a look of disappointment. Brielle was wearing a simple pair of jeans and a cream-colored knit shirt with one of Keoni's greatest dislikes, tennis shoes. Brielle started to laugh when she saw her friend's face - she immediately knew what the change in her expression was about.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Brielle said as if to plead her case, "I was running late this morning, and this was all I had time to throw on."

Keoni shook her head sadly, "What *am* I going to do with you?"

Then Brielle turned to Jace, "Hi," she said.

"Good morning," he said, "it's good to see you."

"Thanks, it's good to see you too," she replied.

"So, you do?" he asked.

"Do I what?" Brielle asked, puzzled.

"See me… sitting here, directly behind you," he teased.

Brielle blushed, "Yes, I know, I'm pathetic."

"I'll agree with that," Keoni joked, still commenting on Brielle's clothing, "You know that black suede vest we got over the summer and your black boots would have pulled this all together."

Brielle looked down at her clothes and marveled at her friend's fashion knowledge, "You know, you're right, it would have been perfect with this. I wish I had thought of that!"

"I wish you did, too," Keoni chided.

"It's quite clear that fashion is *not* one of my Spiritual Gifts," Brielle said, "but then again, God did bless me with you as my best friend for help."

"Yes, and there's a reason for that," Keoni agreed.

"I think you look great," Jace said softly.

Keoni shot a look at him, "Please do *not* encourage her," she said

sarcastically.

Brielle laughed, “Keoni knows that I am fashionably challenged. Yet, she loves me anyway, despite my shortcomings. I am but a mere apprentice who needs the strong and guiding hand of a master,” she said. Then she opened her hands out in front of her and acted as if she was bowing to Keoni, saying, “Teach me, Obi-Wan Keoni; teach me the ways of the chic!”

Keoni giggled at her friend, shaking her head and waving her hand at her to get away. As the two girls were talking, Jace took out his glasses and put them on. Brielle turned to say something to him and was caught off guard at seeing him in glasses for the first time; in fact, he took her breath away. He looked extremely sophisticated and handsome in his glasses, and once again, she was bewildered as to how she had missed noticing him every day last week.

“Oh, wow,” she blurted without thinking.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing, nothing at all, it’s just this is the first time I’ve seen you in your glasses,” she said, feeling her face flush.

“Is it that bad?” he asked with a light laugh.

“No, not at all, it gives you a whole… um, Clark Kent kind of look,” she said.

Jace laughed, “I assure you, I’m no Superman.”

“I like them too, very chic,” Keoni said, “Are you near or far-sighted?”

“Far-sighted,” he answered, “I started having some problems last year. I think it’s a hereditary thing, my dad has it too.”

“Help me,” Brielle said, “I always get that confused, far-sighted means you can’t see things *far from* you or *close to* you?”

“Close to you,” Jace said, “I can see things around me just fine. It’s the small writing that tends to get a little fuzzy. I used to get those terms confused too, that and fiction and non-fiction.”

“Me too!” Brielle said.

Just then, Lacy came into the room. Brielle had her back turned to the door, but Jace’s face changed when he saw Lacy come in. Brielle turned to see what had captured his attention. She was horrified when she saw Lacy. This was the worst that she had looked. Her clothes, as usual, were all black, but today they were quite wrinkled, and her pants were dirty. Her hair had not been brushed and was lying loosely around her shoulders, looking stringy and matted like she had just gotten out of bed. Her skin was always pale, but today she seemed to have a sickly pastiness to it, and the circles under her eyes were darker than they had been before. Brielle stared helplessly at the girl, not knowing what to do. She could tell that whatever it was Lacy was drowning in, she was sinking deeper.

Brielle looked at Jace and Keoni, who were also stunned by Lacy’s appearance. This was such an incredible contrast from yesterday. It was hard to believe that this was the same girl who had seated them at the restaurant.

All through class, Brielle had a hard time concentrating. She knew much of what the teacher was covering about the American Revolution, and so her mind would wander to Lacy. She wanted so much to be Lacy's friend and to help her in whatever way she could. Immediately after class, Lacy, as usual, was one of the first ones out the door. Brielle did not get up but turned in her seat to look at Keoni.

"I feel this has gone from bad to worse," Keoni said.

"It has, you can see it. I don't know how I'm going to do it," Brielle said, "but I've got to get that girl to like me enough to at least be able to talk to her. I've prayed for God to open the door for me to be able to come into her life, but so far, all the doors seem to be shut tight."

"Just be patient," Keoni said, "we both know that God placed her in our hearts for a reason."

At lunch, Jace joined the girls at their table. Keoni waited for Gideon to come in and join them, but he never came. The three of them sat down, blessed their food, and began to eat, Keoni with her usual salad and tea, and Brielle with her usual smorgasbord of items. While they were eating, Keoni decided to call Gideon.

"He's not answering. I'll text him and see what's going on. I don't see Taryn in here either," she said with a disgusted tone.

"Taryn?" Jace asked curiously.

"I wouldn't get her started on that," Brielle whispered.

Keoni didn't answer him or even look up, but kept typing her message. Brielle was watching Keoni send her text, but then her eyes lifted across the room behind Keoni. Lacy had come into the lunchroom.

"Oh no," she whispered.

Keoni and Jace looked up. "What is it?" Jace asked.

Brielle didn't speak but nodded in the direction she wanted them to look. Lacy had come in with her drink and was walking toward the 'L' shaped condiments counter to get a straw. She was moving slowly across the floor, dragging her feet, almost as if she were in slow motion. Her eyes looked glazed and were very red, like she had been crying. The three friends stared across the room at her in silence for a moment.

"She's totally baked," Keoni whispered, "She's high as a kite."

Brielle knew that Keoni was right. Keoni's father, Antoine, was a police officer and had taught them well about drugs, the effects they have on a person, and that they should *never* try them. It was evident from her appearance that Lacy was high on something. Brielle had the strong feeling that there was something else wrong in addition to her being high. She heard that still, small voice of the Holy Spirit tell her to get up and go to Lacy. She processed the thought for a moment, then remembering what God did through her in the mini mart, she didn't argue with it. Without saying a word, she stood up and started

making her way around the lunchroom to Lacy.

"What are you going to do?" Keoni asked softly.

Brielle did not answer. She had no idea what she was going to do. She did not look back at Keoni but kept her eyes fixed on Lacy, who had just reached the counter to get her straw and had turned around to walk away. Brielle was still several steps away from her when she saw Lacy stop for a moment, then her eyes rolled back into her head, and she began to teeter off balance. Brielle took off in a sprint to reach her just as the girl began to fall backward. She extended her arms to catch Lacy as she came down, pulling her away from smashing the back of her head on the edge of the counter.

Brielle had gained momentum and was moving at a fast pace. Once she had Lacy in her arms, she looked up to see that now she was about to crash them both directly into the metal counter's "L" shaped extension that jutted from the wall. This section of the counter was full of ketchup and mustard bottles along with silverware. To avoid falling directly into it, Brielle reacted quickly. While clutching Lacy tightly in her arms, she dropped to the side of her left leg and began to slide across the floor as if she were sliding into home plate—dragging Lacy along with her. Together, they both slid safely underneath the metal counter; there was nothing on the other side.

When they stopped sliding, Brielle tried to sit up and catch her breath. She looked down at Lacy and called her name. Just for a moment, Lacy turned her face up toward Brielle, opened her eyes, and looked at her.

Without thinking, Brielle looked at the dazed girl and whispered the first thing that came to her mind, "Jesus loves you, Lacy." She had wanted to tell Lacy those words from the moment she saw her that first day.

Lacy looked at Brielle with swollen, red eyes for just a moment, and her lips moved softly. It appeared as if she was trying to say something. Then her eyes closed, and her head fell back against Brielle's arms.

Brielle's heart was pounding in her chest. "Lacy! Lacy!" she shouted. She quickly reached her hand up to check for Lacy's pulse. It was there. It was faint, but it was there. Other students and lunchroom staff members had seen the incident and were gathering around them. Quickly, a wall of kids formed, talking and staring in astonishment.

"Brielle, are you alright?"

She looked up to see her American History teacher, Mr. Bennet, coming to kneel beside them.

"Yes, but she's unconscious," Brielle replied.

"What happened?" Mr. Bennet asked.

"I'm... I'm not sure, I saw her starting to fall, so I ran to catch her," she answered.

Mr. Bennet turned to one of the other teachers who had come to help and told her to call the paramedics. He reached his fingers to her neck and checked

her pulse, and then leaned down to hear if she was still breathing. Brielle, still clutching Lacy close in her arms, could barely feel the girl's rib cage expanding lightly.

"I'm going to take her to the nurse's office; the paramedics will be here soon," he said to Brielle, reassuringly.

Then he gently scooped Lacy up into his arms and, with the help of the other teachers there, he headed out the door.

Brielle sat there for a moment and watched Mr. Bennet carry Lacy's motionless body away. She slowly stood and brushed herself off.

"Are you okay, honey?" she heard the familiar voice of the lunch lady, who looked at her with worried eyes and gently put her arm around her.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Brielle whispered.

"That little girl was lucky that you were there," the lunch lady said, "She would still be going to the hospital, but probably to get her head stitched up," she said, giving Brielle an encouraging smile.

Keoni and Jace were trying to make their way through the crowd of students who were still standing around talking. All the students were staring at Brielle.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Keoni asked when she reached her friend.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Brielle said, "but Lacy's unconscious."

Jace didn't say anything but stared at Brielle with the same expression that he had the day of the robbery. The crowd of kids started to dissipate, still discussing what had just happened.

"Let's go sit down, I don't like everyone staring," Brielle said.

"Okay, come on," Keoni said, putting her arm around Brielle's shoulder. They turned and walked around the "L" shaped counter to go back to their table when something caught Brielle's eye. Under the counter that ran along the wall was Lacy's school bag. Lacy must have dropped it when she walked to grab her straw. Keoni and Brielle stopped for a moment and looked at the bag. Brielle looked around the room. The other students were still busy talking, but not paying such close attention to Brielle now.

Brielle looked at Keoni. "That's Lacy's bag, isn't it?" she whispered.

Keoni nodded.

Brielle walked over to the counter and took a few napkins. She used the napkins to mop the sweat from her forehead. Then she quickly bent down, picked up the bag, and threw it over her shoulder casually as if it were her own.

"Come on," she whispered to Keoni.

"What are you going to do with that?" Keoni asked.

"I'm going to figure this girl out," Brielle said, walking quickly over to their table.

Jace was already sitting there waiting for them to return. He wasn't eating,

just sitting there quietly, and watching Brielle.

"You can't take her bag!" Keoni whispered to her friend.

"She dropped it on the floor, and I am just being a good friend and keeping it safe for her," Brielle said, gathering up some of her packaged food items and stuffing them into her backpack.

"You forget, you're *not* her friend. Not yet anyway," Keoni said.

"What's going on?" Jace asked.

"Lacy dropped her bag on the floor before she passed out, and now Brielle's taking it," Keoni said.

Jace looked at Brielle for a moment. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go somewhere where I can check out what she has in here and see if I can help her," Brielle said.

"You can help her by taking the bag to the nurse's office. If anything is in it, *they* can find it," Keoni said.

"I'm not looking for drugs," Brielle said, "I'm looking for answers. If Lacy is hooked on drugs, there's got to be a reason why, right?" She took a quick drink of her chocolate milk and then grabbed both her bag and Lacy's to head for the door. Then she turned around and looked at her friends. "Are you coming?"

Jace and Keoni looked at each other for a moment. They knew that the bag should go to the office with Lacy, and if there was anything that needed to be found, the school staff or her parents could handle it.

Brielle looked at her friends with a frustrated expression, let out a deep breath, and rolled her eyes.

"Fine. I'll take the bag to the office, okay?" she said.

"Do you promise?" Keoni questioned.

"Yes, yes, I promise, I'll be right back," she said over her shoulder. She wanted to get out of there as fast as possible so that her friends wouldn't follow her.

Keoni looked at Jace, "She's up to something," she said.

"How do you know?" Jace asked.

"Brielle is as stubborn as a goat. I won that argument too easily," she said, watching her friend through the window as she headed down the hall. "I'm going to try and see where Gideon is again; he's not answering my texts."

Once Brielle was down the hall and out of sight of the lunchroom, she darted into a girl's restroom and went into a stall. She hung up her backpack and then stared at Lacy's bag. She was torn. She knew it wasn't right to look through Lacy's personal things, but she wanted to help her. She wasn't looking for drugs; she was looking for Lacy's journal.

Brielle kept hearing that small voice telling her to take the bag to the office. But she justified her actions by telling herself that she was only helping Lacy by doing this. She took a deep breath and opened the bag. Lacy had all kinds of makeup, folders, sheet music, and an MP3 player crammed into it. Brielle was

trying hard to take things out swiftly but carefully while balancing all the items in her arms. Finally, she found the journal.

She held the book in her hands for a moment and studied the cover. It was a hard-covered journal with a gothic art-style black and gray design. As she held the book in her hands, her face began to flush, and her hands began to tremble. She told herself that she was still trembling from the incident with Lacy in the lunchroom. She told herself she needed to take this book; she was only borrowing it so she could help Lacy, and what could possibly be wrong with that? It wasn't like she was stealing it permanently; she would give it back, but answers needed to be found. An overwhelming feeling of guilt came over her, and she hesitated momentarily… but Lacy had to be helped.

Quickly, she shoved everything back into Lacy's bag and then opened her backpack to slip the journal inside. She took a deep breath, threw both bags onto her shoulders, and headed out the door for the nurse's office.

When she reached the office, the paramedics were preparing Lacy to leave. Mr. Bennet was standing in the doorway with the nurse when Brielle came in. There was quite a commotion in the school office regarding the handling of the situation. She stood for a moment watching the flurry of people as they all tried to get Lacy off at the hospital and contact her parents to let them know what had happened. Mr. Bennet saw Brielle across the room and made his way over to her, his facial expression was heavy.

"Hey, Brielle," he said softly, "You okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine, how is Lacy?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I don't really know much about her condition right now. I have noticed her in class since school started. She's been worrying me," he said in deep thought. "The school contacted her mother and father, and they are going to meet her at the hospital," he said.

Brielle nodded at Mr. Bennet and remembered her reason for coming, "I found her bag in the lunchroom; she must have dropped it," she said, handing it to Mr. Bennet. Brielle stared at it with guilty eyes, knowing that she was handing it over without some of its prior contents.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll make sure it gets to her mother."

"Okay," Brielle said weakly as she watched the paramedics drive off with Lacy inside the ambulance.

"Can I ask you a question?" Mr. Bennet said.

"Sure," Brielle answered.

"I've noticed that you watch Lacy a lot in class. Why is that?" he asked.

"I don't know," Brielle said, "When I saw her come into class on that first day of school, she looked like she was really sad. I felt like I wanted to help her somehow."

"Yes, she does look sad," Mr. Bennet said softly, his eyes following the ambulance as it pulled out of the parking lot. "Are you good friends with her?"

he asked.

"Uh, no. In fact, she told me she doesn't want to be my friend," she said sadly.

"Really? Wow," Mr. Bennet said, "She told you that she doesn't want you as a friend?" he asked with surprise.

"Pretty much," Brielle confirmed.

"Hmm. Can you tell me what happened today?" he asked.

"When Lacy came into your class, she just looked… I don't know, seriously bad. Then, when I saw her come into the lunchroom, she looked even worse. She looked like…"

"Like she was on something?" he asked her directly.

"Yeah, I mean, at least that's what we thought," Brielle said.

"We?" Mr. Bennet asked.

"Yeah, Keoni, Jace, and I were having lunch together, and we saw her come into the lunchroom. We all thought she looked high. Then something told me to go over where she was. As I came closer to her, I saw her eyes roll back, and then she started to fall, so I ran to catch her," Brielle said.

"Wow," Mr. Bennet said, "and catch her you did. Quick thinking to slide under that counter too, you both could have been seriously injured by crashing into that," he said, "Do you play baseball?"

"A little from time to time," she laughed.

"It's a good thing you were there. If she had fallen backward and hit her head, she would be in much worse shape than she already is," he paused in thought, "But… what was it that made you go to her?"

"I just felt something telling me to go," Brielle whispered.

Mr. Bennet didn't answer at first but lifted his eyebrows in surprise, then, giving her a pat on the shoulder, said, "Lacy has no idea what a good friend she has in you already."

Brielle felt her face flush. A good friend wouldn't have stolen her journal, she thought to herself.

"I'd better go. I haven't eaten anything yet. I'll go by the hospital after school and see how she is doing," she said, turning to leave. Brielle felt the shame of guilt from her theft of the journal.

"Yes, Principal Stevens and I are going to head over there after school as well. Maybe I will see you there," he said.

Brielle nodded, "Okay, see you later, Mr. Bennet."

As Brielle walked out the door, she took a deep breath. Her feelings of guilt, coupled with worry for Lacy, were weighing heavily upon her. She felt like she was underwater. She walked back to the lunchroom, but when she arrived, Jace and Keoni were gone. She looked around but didn't see them anywhere. There were still fifteen minutes of lunch left, so Brielle sat down and unpacked some of her food. As she did, she saw the journal. The lunchroom was almost empty

now, only a few students remained, and they were sitting across the room.

Slowly, she took out the journal and put it on the table. She didn't open it but placed it down in front of her. She sat and stared at it while munching on a bag of chips, wondering what she would find inside. This was an opportunity to look inside the private thoughts of Lacy's brain without Lacy knowing it. She took her hands and placed them on the cover, tracing the edge with her fingers. The desire to open it was overpowering. Inside this book could be the very information she was so desperately seeking; answers to why Lacy was "drowning."

Brielle tried to justify her actions to herself as if she were pleading her case against a judge and jury, a judge and jury made up of her own conscience. Perhaps she could learn the truth. Perhaps she could learn about the pain and the confusion that Lacy was experiencing. She might learn why Lacy was taking so many drugs that she passed out. But more importantly, help could be given to save Lacy from drowning in her problems and being lost forever.

Brielle's heart was pounding in her chest, and her hands had begun to tremble. In her mind, she could hear that still, small voice once again telling her, "Don't do this."

The temptation was so strong. She couldn't remember having to work so hard to resist anything like this before. She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. "God help me," she whispered. She sat there for a moment waiting on God. When she finally opened her eyes, the sight of the book on the table brought with it a flood of disgust that washed over her. She had to look away from it.

What was she doing? How could she possibly justify this? This was *stealing!* She was breaking one of God's commandments, and not only that, but she was also stealing something very personal and confidential to someone she wanted to minister to. How would Lacy ever be able to trust her if she found out about this? It didn't matter if reading this journal would help her find answers to Lacy's situation; it wasn't her place, and it was wrong. The remorse for her actions hit her so strongly that tears began to form in her eyes.

"God, I am so sorry. I don't know why I thought I had the right to do this. Please forgive me, I am so sorry," she whispered.

Brielle knew she had to set it right. Jumping up, she went into action and gathered her things quickly. Mr. Bennet had already gone to the hospital, so she knew she had missed her chance at putting it back into her bag. She would just have to go to the hospital, give it back in person, and apologize.

She took out her phone, called her grandfather, and explained everything that happened at lunch with Lacy and that she wanted to go to the hospital to see her. Obadiah said that he would come and pick her up. Then she headed to the office to wait for him. He would help check her out of her other two classes for the day. She knew that she could not concentrate on anything else besides

learning if Lacy was going to be okay and making right what she had done wrong.

While she waited for Obadiah, she sent a text message to Jace and Keoni to let them know that she was leaving to go see Lacy at the hospital.

Going to see Lacy at the hospital.
Oba's coming to get me.

Keoni responded promptly:

Okay, keep me posted.
Did you take her bag back?

Brielle stared at the text for a moment. She wanted to be honest with her friend, but if she told her that she took the backpack, Keoni wouldn't know about her keeping the journal. She would be proud of Brielle for making the decision. She didn't want Keoni to be proud of her right now, and she wanted to tell her the truth, so she wrote:

Took the bag but kept the journal.
I know I was wrong & didn't read it.
Going now to set it right.

Keoni didn't respond, and Jace had not responded to the first message. Brielle sat down and put her head in her hands. She had been so arrogant, who knows what Jace must think of her now, more importantly, what did Jesus think of her now? She closed her eyes and prayed, asking the Lord to forgive her actions.

After Obadiah arrived and checked her out of school, they headed for the hospital.

"Tell me everything that happened," he said.

Brielle went over every detail of her day with Lacy, from American History to her sliding under the counter while holding her in her arms.

"Do you really think she is taking drugs?" Obadiah asked.

"Yes… Well, taking something that isn't right. She looked like she was completely crocked," Brielle said.

Now that she was talking about what happened, she forgot about the journal and began to focus on Lacy. Suddenly, she was overtaken with emotion. She felt a lump come into her throat, and tears again filled her eyes as she thought about the seriousness of Lacy's condition. When Obadiah saw her, he reached his hand over and placed it on her shoulder.

"God will help Lacy," he said, "There is always hope."

"I know… I believe that. It's just that, along with everything that happened

today… I did something… I," she stammered.

Obadiah waited patiently for her to continue, "Just take a deep breath, sweetheart," he said.

Brielle stopped to clear her mind.

"Okay," she began, "I have been praying for Lacy since I first saw her last week. I know that's not very long, but Keoni and I both have had it laid on our hearts to help her," she paused, taking in another deep breath, feeling the heaviness come back to her chest.

"Lacy wants nothing to do with me, not at all. She pretty much looks at me like I'm a freak," she said. "But I kept praying for God to open doors for me to come into her life. I kept thinking that if she could become my friend, then I could talk to her about Jesus."

Obadiah nodded but remained quiet and let her continue.

"Then today, when all of this happened, Lacy dropped her bag. She left it in the lunchroom, and I found it," she said, hesitating to go on.

Obadiah waited quietly.

"I wanted to help her so badly that I did something I shouldn't have," she said softly.

"And what was that?" Obadiah asked.

"I took her journal," she said, "I know that it was wrong, and I asked God to forgive me. I kept thinking to myself that maybe this was the door that I asked God to open for me. Maybe He had me go over there to catch her so that I would find the bag and then be able to find the journal."

"Why did you think taking her journal would help you?" he asked.

"Because she is always scribbling in it during lunch and sometimes in class, she takes it out and writes constantly. I thought maybe she would have written something in there that could help me understand what she is going through," Brielle said.

Obadiah nodded. "I see. Let me ask you something. In going about this, you ended up breaking one of God's commandments?"

Brielle sighed deeply, "Yes," she whispered.

"Then there is your answer that it wasn't the right way. God is never going to ask you to do something that will go against His own law. He will open a door for you, sweetheart, you just have to be patient and wait for it. But if you do something that goes against God's Word, then you know it is not something that He is telling you to do. God is never going to open a door for you to do something that goes against His Word. Do you understand?" he asked gently.

"Yes," Brielle answered meekly.

"What did your heart tell you?" he asked.

"Not to do it," she said.

"Did you read the journal?" he asked.

"No. Not one word, I promise, I didn't even open it up," she said. "I just

want to give it to her mother and apologize to her."

"That sounds like a good plan," he glanced over, giving her his charming smile.

They pulled into the hospital parking lot and went into the ER to ask for Lacy. Mr. Bennet was in the waiting room with a couple of other teachers and Principal Stevens; their expressions were heavy. Brielle felt that something must be seriously wrong.

An elderly nurse stopped Brielle from going to visit Lacy because Brielle was not family. Mr. Bennet came over and introduced himself to Obadiah, then turned to the nurse and explained how Brielle was the one who had caught Lacy in the lunchroom. Mr. Bennet asked the nurse to check to see if Brielle could see Lacy for a few minutes. The nurse looked at Brielle and nodded at Mr. Bennet, and then the nurse told Brielle to come on through the main doors. Brielle still had the journal tucked down inside her backpack. She swung it up onto her shoulder and looked up at Obadiah, who gave her an encouraging look of support.

"I'll be right here," he said, patting her shoulder.

Brielle took a deep breath and went through the large double doors to meet the nurse waiting for her inside.

"Follow me," the nurse said, "your friend has had quite a day," she said, walking past the regular emergency beds and turning down another hallway. They came to another part of the hospital where there were private rooms surrounded by large glass windows. Brielle looked up at the sign that pointed in the direction they were walking and got a chill. It read, *Intensive Care Unit*.

"Is Lacy going to be okay?" she asked the nurse nervously.

"I'm not a doctor, so I can't really say. She is in critical condition and her situation is serious, so you can't stay very long… but I always like to believe there is hope for all the patients here," she said.

Brielle nodded and smiled gently.

The nurse stopped in front of a room with the curtains pulled across the windows and motioned for Brielle to enter. Brielle could feel her hands begin to tremble again, and her heart began to race inside her chest. She stepped to the doorway but hesitated to go further. There, just inside the door, was a man sitting in a chair with his head in his hands.

Brielle took a step inside the room. She could see Lacy stretched out on the bed. There was a woman standing next to her, gently running her hand through Lacy's hair. She was short and full-figured with pretty, strawberry-blonde hair and glasses. She was crying softly and talking through her tears into Lacy's ear. Brielle tried to speak but couldn't find her voice. Just then, the woman looked up and saw her standing in the doorway.

She tried to force a smile at Brielle, "Hello," she said softly. This made the man in the chair look up at Brielle as well.

"Hello," Brielle responded, her voice shaky, "My name is Brielle St. Claire. I came to see how Lacy is doing," she said.

"Brielle?" the woman asked kindly, "The girl from school?"

"Yes," Brielle answered with a puzzled tone as to how she knew her name.

"Mr. Bennet told us about what happened today and how you caught Lacy before she collapsed," she said through her tears. "Thank you so much," she said, coming around the edge of Lacy's bed to give Brielle a hug.

The man in the chair got up and came over to introduce himself.

"I'm Jim, Lacy's father," he said weakly, "and this is her mother, Laura."

"It's nice to meet you," Brielle said softly. "How is Lacy?" she asked hesitantly.

Laura started to cry again, leaning over onto her husband.

"The doctors said that Lacy is in a coma," she said, choking on the words.

Brielle's heart gave a sudden jump. "A coma?" she asked in disbelief. "Oh, I'm... I'm so sorry," she gasped.

Lacy's parents didn't speak, but Jim nodded in thanks.

Brielle slowly walked over to Lacy's bedside. The girl was completely still. An oxygen tube was in her nose and taped alongside her face. There were several other wires and tubes attached to her, coming from her arms, fingers, and chest. Even though she didn't know the girl well, the sight of her like this was heartbreaking, and Brielle felt the sting of tears well up in her eyes.

"Do the doctors know what happened?" she whispered.

"Not exactly," Jim said. "They believe she overdosed on something, but we don't know what she took…" he trailed off, his voice succumbing to his emotion.

Brielle waited quietly for him to continue.

"They aren't exactly sure what all she took. Apparently, the drugs were mixed with something else. They haven't figured out the combination just yet," he said. "We went all through her bag but couldn't find anything to help us. I have my sister at our house right now going through all of Lacy's things. We're trying to figure this out," Jim said, with heavy emotion breaking his voice.

Brielle stood there for a moment processing this information, and then a sudden urgency came over her.

"I wonder if I can help with that," she said softly. Lacy's parents looked up at her inquisitively.

"I want you both to know that Lacy and I are not exactly friends. I mean, she is in a couple of my classes, but we haven't talked much. I can't quite explain it to you, but God has put Lacy on my heart. I have been praying for her since I met her last week, and I don't know much about her at all," she continued. Lacy's parents listened intently.

"Today, after she collapsed and was taken to the office, I noticed her book bag was still on the floor." Brielle stopped to open her backpack. "I wanted to help Lacy so badly that I did something I should not have done," she said, taking

out the journal. “I took her journal out of her bag. I wanted to look in it and see if there was any information that might be important to help her,” she said, lowering her head. “I’m very, very sorry for doing this. I didn’t open it. I promise you; I didn’t even read one word. I called my grandfather and had him bring me here right away so I could give it back to you. Please forgive me, I’m very sorry,” she said, handing the journal to Lacy’s mother.

Lacy’s parents looked at her and then looked at each other. Then Laura walked over to Brielle and hugged her again, harder this time.

“Of course… of course, please don’t worry. I think I am just more touched that you have such a desire to help Lacy,” she said.

Jim took the journal and held it in his hands.

“Thank you, young lady, for being honest and for bringing this back to us. You may be right, there might be some very valuable information in here that can help us,” he said.

The nurse returned and told Brielle that it was time for her to go. Laura gave Brielle one more hug, goodbye. “If you would like to come back and visit Lacy, you are more than welcome,” she said.

“I would like to do that,” Brielle said. “Thank you again for being so forgiving,” she paused and then asked, “Could I come back tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course,” Laura said.

“If it would be alright with you, I would like to bring my friend Keoni. She would also like to see Lacy and is very concerned about her, too. They were friends last year in biology,” Brielle replied.

“That would be wonderful,” Laura said softly.

Brielle then turned to look at Lacy on the bed. Her mind was whirling with questions of what brought Lacy to this place in her life, lying here in this bed in a coma. She gently touched the girl’s cold, pale skin, placing her hand on Lacy’s. Then she looked up at Lacy’s parents. “I will help you find out what happened to Lacy,” she said. “I will do whatever I can. God placed her on my heart for a reason, and He will help us find the answers.”

8

On the ride home, Brielle was quiet, lost in thought. Her heart was aching for Lacy and her sweet parents, who obviously loved her so much. How horrible it must be for them to see their child in a coma and to find out that it was from taking an overdose of something. Although it was too soon to know for sure, Brielle thought it had to be drugs; she had no proof, she just felt it in her heart. Her mind began racing through the possibilities of why Lacy started taking the drugs, then traveled to the thoughts of where she got them, and then… she heard her cell phone ring. She had a text message. Digging through her bag, she remembered that she had promised to call Keoni and tell her about Lacy's condition.

Brielle found her phone; the message wasn't from Keoni; it was from Jace. It read:

> Sorry I missed your text
> I was with Rateesh
> How is Lacy?
> Please call tonight after 7

Brielle breathed a sigh of relief. Jace wasn't upset about her taking Lacy's bag-- at least she hoped not.

"Is everything okay?" Obadiah asked.

Brielle looked at her grandfather, almost forgetting he was with her, "Yeah," she said softly, "that was Jace. He asked me to call him tonight. But I'd better call Keoni now. I told her I would after I saw Lacy."

While they drove home, Brielle called Keoni and filled her in on Lacy's condition.

"I'm glad you gave them the journal," Keoni said.

"Yes, me too. I know I was so stupid," Brielle said.

"That's true, but that's not what I meant," Keoni teased, "By giving it back and telling them why you took it in the first place, it brought more attention to the journal. Maybe they didn't even know she kept a journal. You did the right thing in taking it to them."

"Thanks. Let's hope I have more self-control the next time and not do things *my* way," Brielle muttered.

"Do you think it will be okay with her parents if we pray for Lacy while we are there?" Keoni asked.

"I was thinking the same thing. I didn't mention it today because they don't know me, and I don't know what they believe. We can ask them tomorrow, but I'm sure they won't mind. If you could have seen their faces, they would take any

help for Lacy they can get," Brielle said.

Just as she finished her conversation with Keoni, Obadiah pulled into their driveway. Genevieve was in her usual waiting place, sitting on the front porch swing with Asher. When Brielle arrived, she spent time talking about all that had happened that day with her mother and brother. When she finished, they were both very quiet.

"I can't imagine what her parents are going through right now," Genevieve said, looking out in the distance, "the horror of seeing their girl like that. I just can't imagine how they must feel. If you get to know them a little bit better and they let you pray for Lacy, please tell them that I would like to come see Lacy and pray for her and them-- but only if they would be comfortable with that. They will need all the strength they can to get through this. In fact, I think we should pray for all of them right now," she said, calling to Obadiah to come and pray together on the porch for Lacy and her family.

They all took turns asking God to please heal Lacy's condition and to give her parents hope, strength, and peace during this terrible time. After their prayers, Genevieve reached over and grabbed Asher and Brielle tightly to hug them close.

"I love you both," she said, kissing each of them on their heads, "I hope this is a lesson for both of you to never use or even try drugs, no matter what. Nothing good ever comes from it, not ever. They are just a tool of the destructor."

After spending some time with her mother and getting what little homework she had finished, Brielle decided to take Piper out for a ride. Today, Asher went along with her on his horse, Apache. Once they reached the beach, they sat down on the rocks and let the horses graze on the beach grass.

"I was going to ask you, outside of this whole thing with Lacy, how do you like going to school?" Asher asked.

"I like it. But it's very different. Everything is so fast-paced, and there isn't a lot of time for questions if you don't understand something. The teachers have to give their lessons and get the students out the door to the next class; it takes some getting used to," she said.

"Do you think you will stay with it for the next two years?" he asked.

"I don't know, maybe. I want at least to try and go through a whole year, then I will know for sure," she said.

"I was so surprised that Mama was the one who thought you should try school," he said, "after all the years of protecting us. It seemed really weird. I mean, I would think high school would be what parents would want to protect their kids from the most."

Brielle smiled at her brother, "That's because you are a highly intelligent ten-year-old who is too smart for his own good."

Asher laughed softly and put his head down.

"I know that Mama trusts us, and she knew I wouldn't get into anything weird or crazy," Brielle said.

"Yeah, I know," he said quietly.

"What's the matter? Are you okay?" Brielle asked.

"It's just… I don't know. It's not the same now, doing school at home without you here," he said, "I thought it would be, but it's not."

Brielle's heart was warmed by his words, "Are you saying that you miss me?" she asked with a stunned tone, "You? Mr. '*Now That You're Gone, I Get Done Twice as Fast*'?" she giggled.

Asher looked up and laughed at his sister, hesitating to answer her question, "Maybe."

"You're so sweet!" she said, reaching her arm around his shoulder to hug him, "I miss you too! Do you want to talk to Mama about going to a school?"

Asher shook his head immediately to her question, "No way! I love being homeschooled. I just didn't know how much I enjoyed doing school with you--until you were gone."

These tender words from her brother touched Brielle's heart, "Maybe I'll just have to do my senior year back at home with you and mama," she said, hugging him around the shoulder tighter, "But you'll have to deal with me going to college eventually," she laughed.

They spent some time together on the beach and then raced their horses home. Both of their horses were fast and light on their feet. For a while, Brielle wasn't sure if she was letting Asher win or if he actually was. But she decided to pull Piper back a bit anyway, just to let him have the victory over her to cheer him up. It did, much to Piper's dismay. Being a thoroughbred, it wasn't in Piper's spirit to lose.

Later that night, after dinner was done and the dishes were cleaned, Brielle went up to her room. She had been watching the clock all evening so that she could call Jace. It seemed like it took forever to reach seven o'clock, but once the time came, Brielle wasn't sure what to do. She had never called a boy before, not exactly anyway. She had called guys at the church about things, but she never really liked any of them, not the way she liked Jace.

She began to play several questions over and over in her mind. He said to call her after seven, but when exactly should she call? Should she call within the first ten minutes or so, or would that look too anxious? If she waited to call toward the end of the hour, that would come across like she was uninterested. Maybe she should play it safe and call at seven thirty, that would be exactly in between; not too anxious, not too disinterested. Then again, Mama always said that being punctual for things was a great quality to have. While she was debating with herself about the time to call, her cell phone rang. Her heart began to race--until she saw that it was Keoni.

"Hey," she answered.

“Hey,” Keoni said, “I talked to my mom about going to visit Lacy after school tomorrow.”

“Oh, good,” Brielle said, “I already talked to Mama, and she said it was fine. Do you want me to have Oba come and pick me up from the hospital?”

“No, that’s okay, I can bring you home. Gideon has football practice late tomorrow, so I’ll come over until practice is over, and then I can pick him up on my way home,” she said.

“Sounds good,” Brielle said. “I wonder how she’s doing.”

“You mean Lacy?” Keoni asked.

“Yeah, I wonder how long she’ll be in a coma,” Brielle replied.

“I don’t know much about comas. I wonder if maybe she will come out of it once the drugs wear off?” Keoni said.

Brielle thought for a moment, “That’s a good question. I don’t want to sit and bombard her parents with all that stuff. Maybe I’ll check online later.”

Just then, Brielle’s phone beeped that she had another call coming in. It was Jace.

“I’ve gotta go, Jace is calling!” she said, and hung up on Keoni without another word.

She tried to calm her voice down and sound casual when she answered.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hey Brielle, it's Jace,” his soft, rich voice said through her phone, “Is this a good time to call?”

“Oh yes, of course,” she said sweetly, taking a glance at the clock, it was seven fifteen. “I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner; I was just on the phone with Keoni. We are planning to go see Lacy tomorrow after school.”

“How is she?” he asked.

Brielle told him everything she knew about Lacy’s condition. She told him about meeting her parents and learning about her coma from a drug overdose.

“Wow, that explains a lot,” he said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“The way she looks most of the time, like she hasn’t slept in days. Or the fact that she shoots out of class like a bullet as soon as the bell rings. After seeing her come into the lunchroom in the condition she was in, she has probably been racing out of history to take another hit before lunch,” he said.

Brielle hadn’t thought about these things until now. She could truly see how being a homeschooled student had protected her from learning about such things; so much so that she didn’t notice the details of Lacy’s behavior being related to drug use.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” she said. “What kind of drugs do you think she was taking?”

“Who knows,” Jace said, “there’s a lot of stuff out there, but tell me again what her parents said about the unidentifiable elements?”

"They said that there were some things in her system that had to be identified. They thought maybe the drugs had been mixed with something else," she said.

"You mean cut with something else?" he asked.

"Yes, that's the word they used, cut with other things, and they haven't figured it all out yet," she answered.

Jace was quiet for a moment. "That could mean anything from baby powder to baking soda," he said.

Brielle raised her eyebrows in surprise, "How do you know all of this?" she asked curiously.

"I do a lot of outside study," he said shyly.

"Did you ever use drugs?" she asked directly.

"Me? Of course not," he said, "No, I'm just really interested in the medical field."

"Really? You want to be a doctor?" she asked.

"Yeah, I… well, I would like to go to medical school someday, maybe try it at least," he said.

"You don't sound certain about that," she said.

"It's kind of complicated. My father doesn't understand it all," he said.

"What? Are you kidding? Most parents would be thrilled to know their son wants to be a doctor," she laughed. "What does your father want you to be?"

"He would like me to do what he does," he said.

Brielle remembered her conversation at the mini-mart the day of the robbery. Jace told her he worked for his father on his fishing boat, "Oh, so he wants you to become a fisherman?" she asked gently.

"He thinks I should be in charge someday," he said. "Anyway, if you don't mind, could I come with you and Keoni to see Lacy tomorrow?"

Brielle was thrilled to hear him ask, "Yes, of course. I was going to ride with Keoni, and then she was going to bring me home and hang out over here until Gideon is finished with football practice. You're welcome to come over too—if you would like," she said, trying to control her nervousness.

"That sounds great, I'd like that. I want to thank your mom for our lunch on Sunday," he said.

Brielle's heart was pounding in her chest, and a huge smile spread across her face. "When you texted me today, it sounded like there might be something else you wanted to talk about, something other than Lacy?" she asked curiously.

"Yes," he answered, "I wanted to tell you about Rateesh."

"Rateesh? Is he okay?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Jace said, "Something is going on with those guys I told you about in our chemistry class. I think Rateesh is too scared to tell me what it is."

"What do you mean? What do you think is going on?" she asked with concern.

"When I left the lunchroom today, I ran into him. He looked nervous. He kept looking over his shoulder like someone was following him. I asked him what was wrong, but then two of those guys from our chemistry class came around the corner, and he took off. There is something not right going on there, I can feel it. But I don't know if he will tell me or not. I thought maybe you could try and find a way to talk to him and see if he will tell you anything?" he asked.

"Yeah, I mean, I'll try. I haven't had too much success with trying to talk to Lacy, but I will be happy to try to help Rateesh. Do you think those guys are after him for something?" she asked.

"I don't know for sure, but it's obvious he is afraid of them. I just would like to see if we could help him," he said.

"Yeah, count me in. I'll try to talk to him tomorrow in class," she said.

"Thanks, I appreciate your help," he replied.

Brielle started to ask him more about his interest in becoming a doctor when he said, "I'm sorry, I've got to go. I haven't had a chance today to get any of my homework done. I will see you tomorrow in class. Is it okay if I have lunch with you again?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Brielle said happily, "and then if I learn anything from Rateesh in Latin, I will let you know after school when we go to see Lacy."

"Okay, great. Have a good night," he said.

"You too, I'll see you tomorrow," she answered.

Brielle hung up the phone and fell back on her bed, a large smile across her face. She would get to see him tomorrow for lunch and after school, and he was coming to her house-- after visiting Lacy. Suddenly her smile faded as she thought about Lacy in a coma, and she decided to spend some time reading her Bible for verses on healing. Obadiah had taught her that when she was seeking answers or help from God, she should use His Word in her prayers and speak to Him about what He promises can be done-- especially something this serious. She knew the power of God's Word and wanted to use it. Lacy's life depended on a miracle.

The next day at school, Brielle was exhausted. She hadn't slept well the night before. When she did sleep, she kept having nightmares about Lacy. She dreamt that Lacy was falling again, but before Brielle could catch her, she would fall into a stormy sea that took her under, just like what Keoni had dreamt. When she was awake, she would start praying for Lacy and had a hard time falling asleep again. She was not herself today.

Upon entering her American History class, she noticed every person in the room turned to watch her come in. She felt uncomfortable and knew it wasn't because she was new to the school; it was because of what happened yesterday with Lacy. She immediately looked for Jace and Keoni in their usual spots. The sight of Keoni was comforting, and the sight of Jace was exhilarating. She smiled as she walked toward her seat, though everyone's eyes were still on her.

"You look like you had a bad night," Keoni said.

"That's because I did," Brielle said, unpacking her books for class.

"What happened?" Jace asked with concerned eyes. How she loved his eyes.

"I couldn't sleep," she said, "I kept having bad dreams about Lacy. When I was awake, I was praying for her. I went back and forth like that all night."

Just then, Mr. Bennet started the class, sat down upon the front of his desk, and folded his hands in his lap.

"I think that it is important," he began, "to talk about what has happened to one of your classmates."

A heavy silence came over the classroom as he spoke.

"Some of you may know that Lacy Weaver is in the hospital. There are many rumors floating around as to what has happened, so I have spoken with her parents and have their permission to tell you the truth. Lacy is in a coma," he paused, clearing his throat. "And the doctors don't know how long her condition will continue."

Brielle looked back at the empty chair where Lacy sat, and she felt the sting of tears slowly filling her eyes.

"If you know Lacy, I encourage you to reach out to her family - they are going to need all the support they can get during this time of crisis. So today, instead of learning about the history of our country, I would like to discuss any feelings you may have about this situation or anything else that you might have personal questions about," he said, taking a deep breath.

Mr. Bennet spent time talking to students about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, why people turn to them, and why people should stay away from them. Then he asked the students if they had any thoughts or feelings they would like to share. When the class was over, Brielle wished that she were in church instead of a public-school classroom.

"Right now, would be a perfect time for an altar call," she whispered to Keoni with a grin, "I'm ready to do some praying."

After class, many students stayed to keep talking with their teacher. Mr. Bennet was glad he had allowed the students of that class the time to share their feelings about Lacy and her situation. Jace, Brielle, and Keoni were also glad that he had given his class time that day to have the discussion. The three of them gathered their things and headed toward the lunchroom. Much to Keoni's surprise, Gideon was there waiting for them.

"Wow," she said inquisitively, "you're coming to eat with us for a change?"

Gideon laughed, "Why yes, in fact I am—that is if you can behave yourself," he said to his sister.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"It means that Taryn will be joining me for lunch as well, so as long as you play nicely with the other children, I will join you," he said with a smirk.

Keoni was not amused, “Okay, so that’s how it is, huh? You are going to make this about me? I don’t think so,” she said, walking passed him, “Don’t bother *gracing* us with your presence. I’m sure we will survive on our own.”

Jace looked at Brielle and raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Is Taryn Gideon’s girlfriend?” he whispered to her.

“Yes. No. I don’t know. Giddy likes girls, period. You saw him at the restaurant with the waitress on Sunday. He’s a chic magnet. Keoni is accustomed to all of that, but she does not approve of *this* girl. She doesn’t think Taryn is, um... an appropriate girl for her brother. I personally don’t know Taryn, but I do know Keoni, and this may not be a pleasant lunch,” she said.

“So, Keoni doesn’t like Gideon with Taryn because she is worried about his reputation being damaged?” Jace asked.

“Exactly, she thinks Gideon will wind up hurt in more ways than just his heart.”

“I think Keoni’s right,” Jace said.

Brielle looked up at him with curious eyes. “Why do you say that?”

“Just sounds like a possible outcome to me,” he said casually.

Brielle wanted to ask him more about his thoughts, but their conversation was interrupted as they approached the lunch line. The four friends went through the lunch line together. Brielle backed off her usual choice of items and just pulled a few healthier selections onto her tray with Jace standing there. Still, she longed for her usual conglomeration of junk. Keoni lifted her eyes in surprise when she saw Brielle’s tray.

“This guy is good for you already,” Keoni whispered in Brielle’s ear. “I don’t think I have ever seen you with so much healthy food in your hands,” she laughed. Brielle was glad to see that Keoni had lightened her attitude.

When Brielle reached the checkout lunch lady, she began her usual dive into her backpack for her purse. The lunch lady lifted her eyebrows in surprise at the items on Brielle’s tray.

“You feeling okay today, honey?” she asked curiously.

Brielle was distracted. “What? Oh, yes, I’m fine,” she replied happily.

“I was just checking, because this doesn’t look like your regular lunch!” she said as she rang Brielle’s tally up. “By the way, how’s your friend doing? I heard she’s still in the hospital.”

This got Brielle’s attention completely. She stopped digging through her bag to answer the lady, “Yes, she is,” she said sadly, “She’s in a coma.”

“A coma? Oh my, that poor girl. I’ll be sure to pray for her,” the lunch lady said.

Brielle smiled warmly at her, “That’s exactly what she needs, thank you.”

The lunch lady looked at Brielle and said, “That will be $5.75.”

Brielle looked in her backpack, “You know what? I’m so sorry, but I think I left my purse in the locker room!”

Keoni had already checked out and was headed to their usual table. Brielle started to call out to her to see if she could borrow some money, but Jace stopped her.

"I've got it," he said. "Would you please ring these up together?" he suggested to the lunch lady, who immediately lit up when he spoke to her.

"What a sweet young man. I can certainly do that," she said happily, giving Brielle a quick wink.

Brielle looked up at Jace and felt her face flush. "I'm sorry. I remember taking my purse out in the locker room when I changed after dance class. I'm not with it today, and I must have left it in there. I'll pay you back after school," she said.

Jace grinned and shook his head, "Don't worry about it."

Brielle watched him take out his wallet to pay. When he opened his wallet, she noticed a stack of bills. She didn't intend to stare, but she couldn't stop herself. Jace didn't know she was watching him so closely. Quickly, he found a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to the lunch lady, then he looked over at Brielle, who was looking at him with her eyebrows raised in surprise.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I guess you're a pretty successful fisherman?" she said without thinking.

Jace was caught off guard by her bold statement, "Oh, yeah, there can be good money in fishing—when you catch a lot of fish, and I have been richly blessed."

"I'm so glad to hear it," she said happily, "And thank you very much for my lunch, I will pay you back later."

"Please, it's no problem. I'm happy to do it," Jace said.

Brielle felt her face flush again. She quickly turned to pick up her tray and began walking to the table. As she did, she noticed all the students in the lunchroom turned to look at her. They were whispering to one another. Brielle felt self-conscious. When she made it to the table, Keoni and Gideon were looking at her, too.

"Why is everyone staring at me?" she whispered.

"I don't know, maybe it's because of what happened yesterday," Keoni said.

"Whatever the reason, it's freaking me out," Brielle said, choosing a chair that placed her back to the room.

"So when is the red head superstar supposed to arrive?" Keoni asked Gideon curtly.

"I don't know, she just said she would meet me for lunch today," he answered.

"Oh, so you didn't ask her to eat with us?" Keoni asked.

Gideon shook his head.

"Good! Maybe the sight of me will be enough to keep her from coming," she giggled.

Gideon rolled his eyes and took a bite of his burger.

"I hope she does eat with us. I would like to try talking to the girl," Brielle said, causing Keoni to shoot her a look of frustration.

"Why? You like having indigestion?" Keoni asked.

"No, I just thought it would be good for us to get to know her for ourselves and not what everyone else says about her," Brielle said. She then remembered that she had never told Keoni about her conversation with her mother about Taryn. The day Brielle intended to tell Keoni, Keoni started telling Brielle of her dream about Lacy drowning and being in that mysterious building. Brielle became so sidetracked with Keoni's dream that she had not told Keoni of her conversation with her mother.

"Oh yeah!" she said, "I forgot to tell you about my conversation with Mama about Taryn."

Gideon looked at Brielle with a puzzled expression. "Genevieve knows Taryn?" he asked.

"Yes, well, she thinks so. She told me that she believes she went to school with Taryn's mother and that her parents, who are extremely wealthy, are never home and leave her alone all the time. Mama thinks that she is starved for attention but goes about it the wrong way to get it," she said.

Keoni listened to her friend intently and sighed, "I guess that would make sense as to why she is the way she is," she said, holding to her original stance, "but that doesn't mean that my brother needs to get mixed up in her attention-seeking schemes."

"Hey, I would appreciate it if you all would just be *nice,*" Gideon said, "because here she comes."

Taryn approached the table apprehensively with her lunch tray in her hands. She was not smiling, nor did she seem thrilled to be joining the group. Gideon stood up and pulled out a chair for her next to him.

"Hey, there's my girl," he said smoothly, "Taryn, you remember my sister, Keoni, and my friend, Brielle." Taryn looked at Brielle first. Brielle smiled happily at her, but Taryn just looked away. Then she looked at Keoni, who tried her best to force a friendly smile. Gideon continued, "And this is Jace," he said.

When Taryn looked at Jace, her whole demeanor changed. Not only did she smile broadly at Jace, but she suddenly held herself differently, and her motions became more graceful. Instead of just walking while holding a plastic food tray, she seemed to be gliding while carrying a platter of fine cuisine. As she sat down in the offered chair, she flung her hair back, all the while looking at Jace.

"Yes, Jace is in my creative writing class," she said with a smooth tone as she stared at him.

Jace was calm and didn't seem affected by the charming presence that was now being focused upon him.

"That's right," he said casually, "in second hour."

Brielle was not happy about this new information, and she was getting more uncomfortable about how Taryn was directing all her attention to Jace. She had never seen anything like this before. This was flirtation at its finest—and she was not enjoying it. She looked over at Keoni, who was trying to hide her expression behind her bottle of tea. The table was awkwardly silent. Brielle thought back to the comments she had made only minutes prior and said a prayer in her mind asking God to help her show His light in her heart to Taryn at that moment.

"Taryn," Brielle said, trying to break the ice, "I think that my mother knows your mother," she said sincerely.

Taryn gave her a smug look, "And why would she think that?" she asked arrogantly.

"She said that she went to high school with your mother and that she still sees her from time to time in town," Brielle said.

"I wouldn't know," Taryn said with great disinterest.

Brielle dropped the subject.

The silence was awkward. Then Gideon tried to start a conversation.

"Hey, how is Lacy doing?" he asked Brielle. She grinned at him for his attempt, as she knew full well that Keoni had told him everything about Lacy's condition.

"As far as I know, she's still in a coma. We are going to the hospital to visit her after school today," Brielle said.

"Why are you going to do that?" Taryn asked with that same arrogant tone.

Brielle stared at her for a moment, unsure how to answer her.

"What do you mean?" Brielle asked.

"I mean, I know that you and Lacy *aren't* friends," Taryn said smugly.

"No, we aren't friends. Not yet anyway," Brielle said directly, starting to feel her pulse quicken.

"From what I understand, Lacy told you that she didn't *want* to be your friend. So then why would you go to see someone who obviously does not want you in their life?" Taryn asked.

Brielle felt her hands begin to tremble, and she forced herself to take a slow, deep breath. She wondered how Taryn knew that, but wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of asking.

"Lacy told me that she didn't need any more friends," Brielle calmly replied.

"That's why I asked why you were going to the hospital," Taryn said.

Brielle held her hands under the table to steady them and thought of a prayer in her head to God, *"Help me, Lord, not to lose my temper, please help me now,"* she thought to herself. Brielle was usually patient with people and wanted to be a good example of Christ's love to them through her actions. But she also knew that when the wrong person pushed the wrong buttons, her temper could explode - and when it did, it resembled *nothing* of the love of Jesus; a weakness she was desperately working on.

"We are going to see her and to pray for her," Brielle said, "Would you like to come with us?" she asked, raising her eyebrows in true curiosity.

Taryn laughed, "Uh, no thanks. I just wonder how Lacy will feel about *you* coming to see her."

"Unfortunately, right now, she doesn't have the option of knowing anything that is happening to her," Brielle said, trying to keep her voice steady and calm.

"So, if she is in the hospital for a while, are you going to see her again?" Taryn asked dryly.

"Of course, I will," Brielle said.

"Okay then, that's what I mean. When Lacy wakes up and finds out that *you* have been coming to see her, I wonder how she will feel about it," Taryn said.

"Why would you say that?" Keoni chimed in with an irritated tone.

"Because Lacy calls Brielle her 'little stalker,' that's why," she said with a giggle.

Brielle felt her face flush and her pulse quicken.

"What?" Gideon asked, "A *stalker*? Brielle? Come on, who told you that?"

"Lacy, of course," Taryn laughed sinisterly, "She thinks you want her."

Brielle was stunned.

"What do you mean, *want* her?" Keoni asked sharply.

"I mean *want* her want her," Taryn said in a seductive tone. "She thinks the reason you are always staring at her and trying to get to know her is because you're gay, you think she's hot, you want to sleep with her and that's why you won't leave her alone," she said with a devilish expression.

Brielle was shaking and felt she was about to explode.

"No, Taryn, I'm just trying to share the love of Jesus with Lacy," Brielle said, trying to keep her composure.

Taryn looked across the table straight into Brielle's eyes and laughed, "The love of Jesus, huh? I guess you still haven't found the courage to come out, so you want to call what *you* want to give her the love of Jesus?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

Without thinking or saying a word, Brielle reached over, placed her hands on the sides of Jace's head, and pulled his face into hers, pressing her lips to his. She kissed him gently at first, then harder, releasing all the frustration she felt from Taryn into that one crazy moment. Keoni and Gideon's jaws dropped, and their eyes grew wide with shocked surprise. Gideon dropped his burger into his lap. Taryn, at first, was also stunned at Brielle's response to her question but tried to conceal it beneath an icy expression of annoyance.

After Brielle was finished with her demonstration of preference for the opposite sex, she turned, looked at Taryn, shrugged, and calmly said, "I'm not gay, Taryn, not in the least. It truly is the love of Jesus I want to share with Lacy, and that's all."

Then she turned and looked deeply for a moment into Jace's pleasantly

surprised eyes, mouthed to him the words, “I’m sorry,” picked up her backpack and left the table—food and all.

The rest of the group sat in stunned silence for a moment, especially Jace. Keoni felt a broad smile start to spread across her face, and a giggle began to bubble up in her throat. She covered her mouth with her hand and looked at Jace, who was still trying to figure out what had just happened to him.

Then she looked at Gideon, “I think I’ve had enough for today,” she said, picking up her food tray. “I’ll pick you up after practice,” then she turned to Jace and smiled, “And I’ll see you after school.”

Not wanting to leave without speaking to Taryn, Keoni turned to her, “It was really… *interesting* having lunch with you today, Taryn,” she said, trying not to burst into laughter. Then she gathered up her things and went to find Brielle.

She went out the same door as Brielle but couldn’t find her. Then she thought of the one place she knew Brielle would probably be, sitting amidst the maple trees in front of the library. Keoni came around the corner and, from a distance, could see her friend sitting down underneath one of the large trees with her arms crossed upon her knees and her head down upon her arms. She walked over to her friend quietly, and as she approached Brielle, she began to slowly clap her hands.

“Bravo, Bravo!” she cheered, “That was one of the best comebacks I have ever seen! Nicely done, my friend, nicely done!” she laughed.

Brielle lifted her head when she heard her friend’s praise. She placed her chin on her hand and shook her head at herself in disgust.

“No, no, it wasn’t. I’m too brash. I let her push me and completely lost it in there,” she said, “I cannot *believe* I just *did* that!”

Keoni put her bags down on the ground and sat down next to her friend. “Well… I liked it. At least it shut her up, and I doubt she will be questioning your sexuality anytime soon,” she laughed, nudging her friend.

Brielle stifled a small giggle. “No, now she’ll just call me bisexual.”

Keoni laughed.

“But seriously! What kind of example was that? I mean, honestly, you have to admit that was *nothing* that Jesus would do!” Brielle retorted.

Keoni smiled and sighed, “Yes, that’s true, you’re right there.”

“And poor Jace!” Brielle continued, “I don’t know how I will ever face him again! He might think I sexually harassed him,” she said, putting her head back into her hands.

“Uh, yeah, did you say poor Jace? Trust me, baby, Jace is just fine—perhaps a little stunned, but he’s just fine,” Keon replied.

Brielle raised her head and looked at her friend, “Really? You don’t think he will be upset?”

Keoni laughed again, “Are you kidding me? From the look on his face, there was nothing *upset* about him.”

Brielle squinted her eyes in uncertainty, “You think he… liked that?” she asked softly.

“Umm, let me think-- *YES!”* Keoni said with wide eyes.

“So… you think maybe he might… like me?” Brielle asked sheepishly.

“Are you serious? Girl, that boy is *crazy* about you!” Keoni said.

“How do you know?” Brielle asked.

“Because I have eyes, and I’m *not* blind,” Keoni chided. “How is it that you *can’t* see that?”

“Come on, it’s not like I’ve had a lot of boyfriends in my life. I held hands with Eric Rich once and chose Brad Parsley a lot for town square dancing, but you know Mama’s rule, ‘no dating until I am 17’. There haven’t exactly been many experiences in my life to learn from. I’m sorry to say, that was my first kiss--and I blew it on being vengeful!” she said, dropping her head back into her hands.

Keoni smiled and put her arms around her friend, “Come on, cheer up, it’s not that bad. I don’t think you need to worry. But if you feel like you offended Jace or sexually harassed him or something and need to apologize, just talk to him about it,” she paused in thought for a moment, “But I wish you could have seen that girls face when you planted that kiss on him!”

The two girls began to laugh, but then Brielle’s face changed into a serious expression.

“You know what she said about me wanting Lacy, that’s it. That’s got to be it. She thinks I’m gay and trying to come after her—or maybe because Taryn doesn’t like me, she *told* Lacy that I’m gay and that I’m trying to come after her... I don’t know, I shouldn’t let my mind go there… I can’t prove that, and I can’t think anymore... my brain hurts-- and I just kissed Jace!”

“But you have to tell me, I know it was out of, what’d you say, vengeance? But… how was it?” Keoni asked with a broad smile.

Brielle laughed, “Oh my gosh! You’re kidding, right? What do you want me to quote something from The Sandlot? ‘I kissed Jace Roberts, I kissed him long and good. ’”

The two friends burst out laughing.

“Honestly, it all happened so fast I can hardly remember it now! Everything is just a blur,” Brielle said.

“Don’t worry about that one bit, you just take your time and calm down, it will all come back to you,” Keoni teased.

Brielle sighed and lay back on the ground.

“I honestly do not understand what my brother sees in that red-headed vixen. She’s as mean as they come! It’s obvious she’s jealous of you and wants to hurt you. So don’t you let her,” Keoni said.

Brielle looked at her friend, “You know, just a moment ago I was trying to convince you to get to know her better, but now I can see she really *is* awful!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Keoni soothed, “God knows your heart is pure when it comes to Lacy and He will help you with the whole situation. Everything will be okay. But we’ve gotta go, lunch is almost over. What are you going to do for the last hour until I get out of class?”

“I think I’ll come here to the library and do some homework. Oh, but first I have to go back to the locker room. I think I left my purse there today after dance. I’ll just meet you in the parking lot,” Brielle said.

“Okay, we can meet up with Jace there,” Keoni said, gathering up her things.

“Jace! That’s right! He’s going to the hospital with us and then coming over to my house!” Brielle exclaimed in realization, dropping her head back into her hands.

Keoni reached down and pulled Brielle’s hands away, trying to get her to stand up. “Okay, well, you can ask God how to handle that when you ask Him for His forgiveness for your brash but very kind of cool response to Taryn,” she giggled, pulling Brielle to her feet. “Remember what my Grannie Bibbi always says, ‘This too shall pass’. Come on, let’s go.”

Brielle sighed as she stood up, “Yeah, this too shall pass, but right now I have to deal with the fact that *I just kissed Jace!”*

9

Brielle and Keoni headed for their next classes, and as Brielle walked the hallway toward her Latin class, she remembered how Jace had asked her to talk with Rateesh. She quickened her steps so she could get to class early and speak with Rateesh before the bell rang.

When she arrived, she was happy to see Rateesh sitting in his usual seat. He was reading, but when he heard the door open, he looked up to see her coming in. He greeted her happily as she sat down.

"You're here early," he said.

"Yeah, I didn't have much to eat at lunch today," Brielle replied.

She had eaten very little before her kiss attack on Jace, and had eaten nothing afterward either. Now she was beginning to feel the rumbles of an empty stomach.

"Are you ready for the vocab quiz today?" Rateesh asked.

"I think so," she said nervously, "My grandfather and I went over the list during the weekend. But I completely forgot to study last night."

"I think you'll do fine," he said.

"I hope so," she said, taking out her notebook and opening it. Then she seized the opportunity to talk to him about Jace.

"Hey, did you know that you and I have a mutual friend?" she asked casually.

Rateesh looked at her curiously, "Oh yeah? Who's that?"

"Jace Roberts. He's in your chemistry class, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, I know Jace, he's my lab partner," he said, "He's a cool guy."

"Yes, he is," Brielle agreed.

"How do you know him?" he asked.

"He's in my American History class, but he also came to my church last Sunday. I think he may start attending there. So we're friends," she answered.

"Are you… *Good* friends with him?" he asked playfully.

Brielle cocked her head to the side, gave him a little smirk, "I haven't known him for very long, so let's just say I *hope* that we will become good friends."

Rateesh nodded again, satisfied with her answer.

"He was telling me yesterday that he is a little concerned about you," she said carefully, unsure of how he would react.

Rateesh's playful expression slowly turned puzzled. "He's concerned about me?"

"Yeah, he said he thinks that you might be having some kind of trouble with a few of the guys in your chemistry class," she said gently.

Rateesh's physical response to this statement was apparent. He had been sitting back relaxed in his chair reading his book, but once Brielle said this, he tensed, slowly sitting up straight, and closing his book.

"Guys in chemistry?" he said casually, "No… no, I don't have a problem with any of the guys in chemistry," he said, avoiding eye contact with her.

Brielle could immediately see from his reaction that he was hiding something, but she didn't want to push.

"Really? Oh, okay. Well… that's good," she said, "Jace will be happy to know that."

"Why does he think I'm having a problem? I mean, what all did he say to you?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Not much really. He was just telling me that he was worried about them giving you a bad time or something, and he wanted to help you if they were," she said lightly, not wanting to embarrass him.

Rateesh looked down at his desk for a moment in thought. Brielle sat patiently, hoping that he was going to open up and talk to her about something.

"No, everything's fine. There's no problem," he said as he bent down and started digging in his backpack, again trying to avoid eye contact with Brielle.

She sat there for a moment watching him, then reached over and gently placed her hand on his arm, which stilled his movement.

"Rateesh," she said softly, "I know that you and I haven't known each other very long, but I want you to know that I am your friend. You can trust me. I just want to help you, and so does Jace."

Rateesh stopped digging through his bag and looked at her thoughtfully.

She continued, "If anyone is harassing you, threatening you, or just giving you a hard time, you should tell somebody—even if it isn't me, just tell somebody... okay?"

Rateesh looked down nervously in thought and then back up at her with his forced smile, "Thanks," he said, caught off guard at her sincerity, "I appreciate your kindness, and that's good to know, but I'm fine, really. Please tell Jace that there is nothing to worry about, okay?"

Brielle sighed. She could see that he was hiding something, but knew she wasn't going to get any more information from him at this time. "Okay," she said sweetly, "Just remember I'm always here for you if you need me."

"I will," he said, "Thanks."

Just then, the bell rang, and class began.

After class, Rateesh seemed like he was in a hurry to get out the door. Brielle watched him as he left and wondered if he was trying to avoid having to talk to her again. She felt in her heart that Jace's thoughts about the guys in their chemistry class harassing Rateesh were correct. But for some reason, Rateesh was hiding the truth from her.

She headed to orchestra, and realized that she would be in another class where Lacy would be missed. The rehearsal just wasn't the same without Lacy's melodious accompaniment on the piano; the music seemed lifeless and empty without her. This made Brielle anxious to go and see Lacy after school and

hopefully have the opportunity to pray for her.

Once her classes were over, she headed to the library to do her homework – she would stay there until Keoni and Jace were finished for the day. She tried to concentrate on her homework but struggled to keep her mind focused. She was feeling so many different emotions. She had sad, heavy feelings about going to see Lacy and her parents in the hospital. She had angry and frustrated feelings about the cruel things that Taryn said about her and her intentions with Lacy. Then there were the feelings she had about her crazy kiss with Jace. Even though hours had passed since the kiss took place, she could still feel the tingle of his lips pressed against hers. She could still smell the fragrance of his skin and remember the feel of his hair in her hands. Each time she thought about it, she had the feeling of fluttering butterflies in her stomach, which was immediately followed by warm feelings of embarrassment.

She didn't know how she was going to face him. What should she say? What would *he* say? She practiced a few scenarios in her head to try and figure out the best way to handle it. Finally, she decided to do exactly what Keoni said: "pray". She found a secluded place in the library where she could spend some time talking to God.

"Dear God… I am sincerely sorry for my actions today. I know that I really lost it when I heard the things Taryn was saying. Please forgive me and help me to have more self-control," then she paused in thought for a moment, "At the same time, You know my innermost thoughts and You can see that deep down… I really enjoyed that kiss. But I don't want it to hurt my friendship with Jace. Help me know what to say to him and work it all out. Thank You, Lord," she whispered, taking a slow, deep breath.

She looked up at the clock; there were only a few minutes until the bell rang. She quickly gathered up her things and headed to the parking lot to wait for Keoni and Jace. The butterflies began fluttering rapidly in her stomach as she waited to watch the students emerge from their classrooms. From across the campus, she spotted Keoni; she knew her friend by her graceful walk, and even from afar, her appearance was stylish. She waved to her, and Keoni waved back. Brielle squinted in the sun as she watched her friend slowly approach her.

Brielle was standing beneath the branch of a large maple tree, admiring the slowly changing leaves and thinking of how much she loved the approaching fall season. She leaned her shoulder next to the tree when suddenly her thoughts were interrupted.

"I was wondering if I was going to see you again today," a familiar voice said from behind her.

Startled, she turned around quickly to see Jace standing there, his hand leaning on a branch of the tree above her. He was so handsome with his dark brown hair and striking dark brown eyes, his face so young and vibrant. Brielle stood there staring at him, speechless for two reasons; one, she was enjoying

the moment to gaze up at him as he stood there so tall underneath the lovely tree, and the other because she was completely embarrassed by her previous behavior with him at lunch. Feeling the warmth of embarrassment mixed with shame slowly spread from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, she lowered her eyes to the ground.

"Jace, I'm so sorry I did that to you today. I was so angry with Taryn and the stupid things she was asking me, and I just totally lost it. I'm sorry that I did that to you without your permission, and I am very sorry I offended or embarrassed you," she said softly.

Jace laughed lightly, "I know you didn't ask my permission, and in the world we live in today, I understand why you are saying that to me. But please don't worry. I won't pretend like I wasn't surprised, I was, but I wasn't embarrassed… and I definitely wasn't offended," he said with his broad, beautiful smile. "I would say you made your point to Taryn and everyone else at the table very directly."

Brielle looked up at him and smiled back, "Thank you," she said meekly.

"It certainly won't be a moment I will ever forget," he laughed, "But I'm glad it was me sitting next to you and not someone else."

Brielle felt her heart skip a beat. "Really?" she asked shyly.

Jace looked at her intently and responded, almost whispering, "Yes."

Brielle started to ask him to explain his feelings when they were interrupted by the voice of Keoni.

"Hey, are you guys ready to head out?" she asked.

Brielle looked at Jace curiously, still unsure of his feelings, but turned to answer Keoni, "Yeah, do you know where you are going?" she asked Keoni.

"I think it is the same place that Giddy went to for stitches last year," she said, then she looked at Jace, "Do you want to ride with us? I can bring you back to the school when I pick up Giddy from practice," she said.

"What time is his practice over?" Jace asked Keoni.

"They usually finish by 5:30," she answered.

Jace looked down at Brielle for a moment.

"I think I'll drive," he said to Keoni, "if that's okay with you?" he asked, looking at Brielle. "That way I'll be able to drive myself to your house afterward."

Brielle's face lit up brightly, "Of course," she said, excited that he wanted to spend time with her.

"Okay then, let's go," Brielle said. "Do you know which hospital we are going to?" she asked Jace.

"No," he said.

"It's called Devereaux Memorial," Brielle said.

"Okay, yeah, I know where that is," he said, "My bike is just parked on the other side here," he said, nodding toward the other end of the parking lot, "I'll meet you there."

Brielle looked at him curiously, “Your bike?” she asked, “You’re going to ride a bike to the hospital?”

“Well… not really,” he grinned, “that’s just what I call my motorcycle,” he said, trying hard not to laugh.

Keoni wrapped her arm around Brielle’s waist, pulling her close, “Please forgive my friend here, you have to remember she’s been homeschooled all her life and takes things literally,” she giggled, “You ride a motorcycle? But the other day at church, weren’t you in an SUV?”

“Yeah, I just borrowed that from my dad. I’m actually saving up to buy a truck. Until then, I just ride the bike to save money,” he explained.

Keoni stood there staring at him silently. Jace looked at her, puzzled by her expression. “Are you okay?” he asked slowly.

Brielle answered for her, “Yes, she’s fine, just a girl who apparently never met anyone who rides a motorcycle before,” she laughed, dragging Keoni off to her car. “We’ll meet you there!” she said, heading to the parking lot.

“Good grief, girl, it’s just a motorcycle for crying out loud. Pull yourself together,” Brielle teased.

Keoni shook her head, “I know, I know,” she said as she looked across the parking lot to see him put on his helmet and start up his engine, “But there’s just something about a man on a motorcycle.”

Brielle quietly looked at her friend.

“Don’t worry! You know he’s not my type; there’s nothing about him like Denzel or Chadwick!” Keoni laughed, “But that doesn’t mean I can’t be impressed… I wonder if he cooks too-- I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” she giggled. Brielle rolled her eyes at her friend and giggled too.

“Come on, are you going to tell me that you don’t find that even somewhat appealing?” Keoni lured.

“I would much rather know that he likes to ride horses,” Brielle said, “For me, there’s just something about a man on a horse!” she laughed.

“I get that--but look at him go,” Keoni said, watching Jace pull around the parking lot.

Brielle’s eyes followed as she watched him ride. Then she shook herself to concentrate on where they were headed,

“Come on, let’s go. You’re forgetting about who we are going to see,” she said, her expression turning serious.

As soon as Brielle’s mind turned to Lacy, her heart began to feel heavy. Keoni nodded in agreement and began to drive to the hospital. She caught up with Jace and, when they arrived, pulled into the parking space next to him. As she turned the engine off, she stopped for a moment, staring ahead into space, her mind deep in thought.

Brielle looked at her, “What’s wrong?”

Keoni didn’t answer or move but stared straight ahead, as if in a daze.

"Keoni, are you okay?" Brielle asked.

Keoni looked over, her thoughts interrupted by Brielle's question, "Huh? Oh… yeah," she said slowly, opening the car door to get out.

Jace was waiting for them on the passenger side of the car and opened Brielle's door for her.

She looked up at him shyly, "Thank you."

Then he reached his hand out to help her get out of the car, her stomach instantly filled with butterflies as she gently took his hand.

"Can I get your bag for you?" he asked.

Brielle looked down at her big backpack on the floor of the car.

"I'll just grab my purse," she said, absentmindedly, then as she was reaching to get it out of her backpack, she paused, "I forgot. I left it in my gym locker, which was why you bought me lunch today."

"Do you need it?" he asked.

"Not really, but my Bible was in there," she answered.

"You keep a Bible in your purse?"

"Yeah, it's a little one. It kind of looks like a wallet. I wanted to bring it here today," she said, disappointed.

"We can still pray without it," Jace said.

Brielle nodded and stepped away for him to close the car door. Keoni, who was standing at the back of the car, had that same deep-in-thought glazed look on her face.

"Hey," Brielle said, patting Keoni's arm, "are you sure you're okay?" she asked, more concerned this time.

Keoni took a deep breath and looked up at the hospital. "Yeah, I just… I don't know, I feel like something is wrong, like a heavy sadness coming," she whispered.

"Hospitals are not fun places," Jace said quietly, "They are full of sad, sick, and hurting people."

"Unless they are having a baby," Brielle chimed in, trying to lighten things up.

Keoni smiled at her friend but said nothing.

When the three friends entered the hospital, Keoni asked if she could stop and use the restroom in the lobby.

"I wonder how Lacy is doing today," Brielle asked Jace as she slowly walked toward a lovely waterfall in the corner of the lobby. "I'm hoping we will go into her room to find her awake and doing better."

Jace nodded, "Let's hope."

"The Bible says with God, *all* things are possible!" Brielle said happily, hoping for the best.

Jace watched as Brielle walked over to a large portrait of a distinguished man hanging on the wall beside the waterfall. Brielle looked at the painting

closely, studying the face of the man in it. He was an old man with very little hair, and what he did have was pure white, but there was something strangely familiar about him.

"When we leave here, should we go back to the school to get your purse?" Jace asked. Brielle looked over her shoulder at him.

"Hmm? Okay, yeah, that would be great. We'll pass by the school on the way to my house, and I can run into the locker room and get it," she said, turning back to look at the painting. "It says this man is A.C. Devereaux. He's the one the hospital is named for," she said, studying his face again. "I always wondered what it was a person did to be able to have a building, or a street named for them."

Jace shrugged his shoulders at her question and then noticed Keoni emerge from the restroom.

"There's Keoni. Come on, let's go," he said, gently placing his hand on Brielle's back to walk with him. She felt the butterflies return, fluttering in her stomach as he touched her back to guide her along.

When they reached the ICU, they checked in with the nurse, the same one who had been there with Lacy yesterday. She was just coming on for her shift.

She saw Brielle and smiled, "Hello, there! Mr. and Mrs. Weaver have been expecting you. Please follow me."

Lacy's room had been completely transformed since Brielle's visit yesterday. Bright flowers, balloons, and stuffed animals splashed color all around, showing support from family and friends. But even with all the festive colors of gifts and floral arrangements, the room was heavy with sadness. Brielle's hope for Lacy to be awake and doing better was not so, not for today anyway. Lacy was still stretched out on her bed with even more tubes, wires, and machines hooked to her. Brielle looked at Keoni, whose face was solemn and still.

When Brielle saw Laura, Lacy's mother, she greeted her warmly while still standing outside the door, and Lacy's father, Jim, also got up to shake hands with the kids who had come to visit their daughter. Brielle introduced Jace and Keoni to Lacy's parents, who invited them to come inside and see her.

"How is she doing today?" Brielle asked her mother.

Laura's eyes began to fill with tears, "Not very well, I'm afraid," she said softly, "The doctors are having a hard time with her vital signs. Her blood pressure is not where it should be, and her heart rate keeps fluctuating. She also had to be put on a respirator because her oxygen levels were too low," she said, trying to hold back her tears.

Brielle and Keoni walked over to the side of Lacy's bed. Jace moved closer but stayed at the foot of the bed. Brielle reached out her hand and placed it on Lacy's as she had done the day before.

"She's so cold," she whispered to Keoni.

"Some of that is because of the IVs they have running in her," Jace

whispered.

Keoni couldn't take seeing Lacy like this. "Ask her mother if we can pray for her," she urged Brielle.

Brielle nodded and walked over to Laura and Jim. She sat down in a chair next to them.

"I was wondering if you go to church?" Brielle asked gently.

Laura looked up at Brielle and then at her husband, "We used to," she whispered, "We used to go to church regularly… but that was a long time ago. When we first got married, we went every Sunday morning and Wednesday night. Then Lacy came along, and it seemed like we never missed a service; we loved going to church together as a family. But then I had to go back to work, and quite often was scheduled to work on Sundays. After a while, we had some serious financial things hit us, and Jim was working two jobs. Sometimes Sundays were the only days we could take the time to rest. It's amazing how quickly you can get into the habit of *not* going to church," she said, reaching for a tissue.

"Well, my friends and I would like to know if it would be all alright with you if we prayed for Lacy today," Brielle asked her.

Laura was touched by Brielle's question, and she tried to smile through her tears. "I think that would be wonderful," she whispered, "Thank you."

"Would you like to join us?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, of course," Laura said, standing to walk toward Lacy's bed, "I've been praying a lot, asking God to help our Lacy. She needs a miracle." Then she turned to her husband, "Jim, would you like to come and pray with us?"

Jim had been sitting in the chair next to his wife in a daze, not moving or speaking. When she spoke to him, he looked up at her quickly, "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"We are going to say a prayer together for Lacy. Do you want to pray with us?" she asked again.

Jim stood up for a moment, looking at his daughter on the bed. He took a long, deep breath, trying to hold his emotions back. Then he lowered his head and started for the door.

"I'm sorry, please excuse me," he said, leaving the room and walking down the hall.

Brielle didn't speak but looked over at Keoni and Jace.

"I'm sorry," Laura said. "He's having a really hard time praying right now. He doesn't understand why God would allow something like this to happen to his little girl," she said, starting to sob again.

Brielle nodded at Laura and gently held her hand, leading her to stand next to Lacy's bed. Even though Brielle had left her Bible in her locker, the Holy Spirit gave her a verse to speak before they prayed.

"The Bible says in Matthew 18:20, *'Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.'"* she said, "There are four of us

here and we know this scripture is true, so let's all ask God together to heal Lacy."

Then Brielle began to pray. She prayed and asked God to please help Lacy. Not just to heal her physical body from the overdose of drugs, but also to heal her spirit so she wouldn't want to take them again.

When they were finished, Brielle could feel a great sense of peace in the room. She looked at Keoni and could tell from the look on her face that she felt it too.

Then she turned to Laura, "My mother wanted me to ask you if it would be alright if she came by to visit Lacy and spend some time with you?"

Laura looked pleasantly surprised, "Yes, that would be wonderful. I would love to meet your mother," she said, her face also revealing she felt the peace of God that filled the room. "Please tell her that she is most welcome. I have been talking to God a lot, and I told Him that if He would heal my little girl, I would get my family back into church. Maybe if we had stayed in church, we wouldn't be here right now," she said as she looked over at Lacy.

"I'll tell her," Brielle said.

"I would like to ask you a question if it isn't too difficult for you?" Keoni asked Laura softly.

"Of course, you can, sweetheart," she answered, reaching for another tissue.

"I met Lacy last year. She was in my biology class. We were lab partners with two other girls at school. She was so different, she acted different and… looked different," she said, carefully choosing her words, "What changed in her?"

Laura wiped away the trickling tears from her cheeks, "Lacy was always a good girl," she started, "Her father and I never had any trouble with her. At home, she did her chores, in school, she worked hard and got good grades. She is so gifted musically, always did her homework, and seemed to have nice friends. But then over the summer, she got a job at The Blue Moon, and she met a boy, a young man. His name was Sidney."

She paused to blow her nose. "At first, when Lacy started spending time with him, we honestly didn't notice anything different, but then after a few weeks, she started dressing differently and wearing heavier makeup." She stopped again and put her head down. "My husband didn't like what was happening and tried to put his foot down, but I defended Lacy telling him that she really wasn't doing anything so wrong, she was just trying to find herself," she said with a smug laugh at herself and shaking her head in shame, "I should have listened to him."

"Was Lacy trying to look more like this guy looked?" Brielle asked.

"Not really," Laura answered, "He wore dark clothes, but he didn't look too radical. Some of his friends did, though, and Lacy began to dress like them. After

we noticed the change in her appearance, other changes began to follow. She became more difficult at home. She wouldn't do her chores or respect our rules. She was very argumentative and began to lose interest in her other friends. She also didn't want to spend time with her family anymore. She always wanted to be out with Sidney or alone. She didn't smile and she didn't laugh, she just looked…"

"Miserable," Brielle finished for her.

"Yes," Laura said, beginning to sob again. "She did, she just looked miserable. Every time I tried to talk to her, she would close herself off. She seemed so angry; I just didn't know what to do. I had hoped that once school started, things would get better, but a week or so before the first day of school, Sidney broke up with her. He told her he didn't want to see her anymore. Then things went from bad to worse. When she was home, she just stayed in her room. She didn't want to talk to anyone, and I could barely get her to eat. I was just happy that she was getting up out of bed and going to school each day, and we were thrilled when she agreed to play for Mrs. Wyatt's orchestra class."

"Yes, I'm in that class with her. She is an amazing pianist," Brielle said.

Laura grinned, "Lacy has what some would call God given talent. She plays effortlessly, always has--even now she hardly ever practices at home, but still keeps up with everything
Mrs. Wyatt gives her. That boy was a bad influence on our little girl. But I can't blame him; we should have been better parents to her, been more involved with her life. I should have agreed to give her stronger boundaries," she said regretfully.

"Does Sidney go to our school?" Jace asked.

Laura looked up at him in thought, "You know… I'm not quite sure," she said curiously, "I believe he was older than Lacy, and I knew he lived around here. But I don't know where he goes to school, or if he goes to school at all."

"Do you know his last name?" Keoni asked.

"No, no, I don't," she said weakly, "He didn't spend any time at our house. Most of the time, Lacy would meet him somewhere for a date."

"Can you tell me what he looks like?" Brielle asked.

"He was an average-looking boy. Somewhat tall, not as tall as Jace, but taller than me-- then again, who isn't?" she laughed softly, "He had dark blonde hair and blue eyes. He always wore jeans and T-shirts whenever I saw him. He did have a large scar on the inside of his right forearm. I saw it once when he came to the house to pick Lacy up. I asked her about it, and she said he had an accident where he had been severely burned."

Jace, Brielle, and Keoni were quiet in thought, each of them trying to think if they had seen a guy like this at school.

Lacy's father came back to the doorway and stood quietly looking in. Brielle thought perhaps he was waiting for them to leave. Then she looked over at Jace

and Keoni, “We had better be going,” she said, “The nurse told us not to stay too long.”

Laura turned toward Brielle quickly, “Thank you so much for coming to visit today and for praying for Lacy. I am going to believe that those prayers will change things,” she said, standing up to hug the three teens. “Please tell your mother that she is welcome to come at any time as well,” she said to Brielle. Then suddenly she remembered something, “Oh! Wait a minute,” she said, moving across the room to her bag in the corner, “Before you go, I want you to take this,” she said, pulling out Lacy’s journal. Brielle’s eyes grew wide when she saw what it was that Laura wanted her to take.

“We gave it to the police, and they went through it but didn’t think there was anything significant in it. They said it was just full of Lacy’s poems and drawings, nothing that could help them, but I want you to take it,” she said, handing it out to Brielle, who hesitated. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” Laura assured her, “I am asking you to do this. Lacy has written things and drawn pictures in there that don’t make any sense to us or anyone who has seen it. We can’t make heads or tails of it. But you felt led to look in it, so maybe you might be able to figure some of it out.”

Brielle felt the familiar flush of guilt that had covered her so much yesterday return. “But what if Lacy finds out you gave it to me to read?” she asked nervously, glancing over at Lacy.

Laura gently placed the book in Brielle’s hands, “I am desperate to help my daughter. Please take this and see if you can figure out what any of her writings or pictures mean. You told me yesterday that you felt like the answers to the questions surrounding Lacy could be in here. You could be right, so please take it. Please see if you can figure anything out that could help my baby girl.”

Brielle looked down at the book and then up at Laura.

“I will,” she nodded, “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you,” Laura said, reaching out to grab Brielle and hug her. “You are all welcome to come and pray with us anytime. I hope you come back soon,” she said, doing her best to give them a small grin. “Thank you for showing such concern for my Lacy.”

The three friends said goodbye and slowly made their way out of the hospital. Brielle held the journal tightly in her hand.

“See,” Keoni said to Brielle, “God worked it out for you to see what’s inside that book *without* you stealing it.”

Brielle grinned and looked down at the journal, “I’m almost afraid of what’s inside it.”

When they reached the parking lot, Jace asked Brielle, “Are you going to go back to the school to get your purse?”

Brielle looked over at Keoni, “Would that be okay with you?”

“Sure, it’s on the way to your house,” Keoni answered.

"Okay then, I'll meet you there," Jace said as he strapped on his helmet.

Keoni waited until Jace had backed out before she pulled out of her space so she could watch him ride away.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Brielle laughed, "let's go already."

Keoni giggled and began to drive back to the school, but this time she parked in the parking lot by the football field to get Brielle closer to the locker rooms. Brielle hopped out of the car and started to jog toward the locker room door. Keoni turned the engine off but left her CD playing in the stereo. She opened the car door and sat on the hood to watch the football practice. Jace had parked his bike beside the car and came over to watch with her.

"What number is Gideon?" he asked her.

"Thirty-eight, I think," she said, "Apparently that's a big deal, huh? Having the right number?"

"Yeah," Jace laughed, "I can't explain why very well, but it is."

They looked on as Gideon was thrown a quick screen pass out of the backfield. The throw was slightly off target, causing Gideon to have to shift his body to snare the pass with one hand. Although the athletic catch was impressive, he was only able to elude one defender before immediately being tackled by two other guys. After the play, Gideon hopped up and ran back to the huddle.

"He's really good," Jace said, "and fast."

"Yeah, even before we could walk, our daddy had a football in Gideon's hands," she giggled, "Do you play?"

"I've played a little football, but not much. I play baseball, though," he said.

"Oh, yeah? What position?" she asked.

"I'll play anywhere," he said, "but mostly I pitch."

"What's your number?

"Two. I like to keep it simple," he said with a grin.

Brielle walked up at that moment with her purse in hand, "Okay, got it!" she said happily, "Let's go."

They had no sooner stood up to get back into the car to leave when they heard a great commotion coming from the football field. They turned to see what was happening. Someone was hurt. The players were gathered around in a circle, looking down at someone who had fallen. They couldn't see Gideon, so they hurried over to the side of the field for a better look. Then they heard the coaches yelling at one another, and all the players came to see what was going on. When Keoni reached the side of the field and still couldn't see Gideon, she took off for the group in the middle of the field, and Brielle and Jace followed.

When they reached the circle of team members, they saw through the crowd that one of the players was on the ground, motionless. The coaches were there trying to help him. Keoni ran around the circle of players until she found Gideon. She grabbed his shoulder and turned him around, giving him a strong

hug.

"I had to make sure you were okay," she said.

"I'm fine, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Brielle left her purse in the gym locker room, and we came by to get it," she said. Brielle and Jace had now found them as well, and Brielle reached up to hug Gideon.

"I'm so glad you're okay," she whispered, "but what happened?"

"We don't know yet," he said, "that's Dylan Whitfield, our left tackle. We were in the huddle getting ready to run another play, and he just fell over. He's out cold."

"You mean he didn't get hurt or tackled?" Keoni asked, puzzled.

"No, we were just in the huddle. He wasn't running or anything. He just fell over," Gideon answered.

After several minutes had passed, they could hear the sound of sirens approaching in the distance. The fire department arrived with the paramedics and began working on Dylan immediately. They quickly stabilized him on the gurney and loaded him into the ambulance. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, they were gone, the sirens blaring until they could only be heard faintly resonating in the distance.

Coach Barnes gathered the team together for a talk. Brielle, Keoni, and Jace stepped aside, but stayed with the other spectators who had come to watch the practice and see what had happened to the player.

"We're not sure yet what has happened to Dylan, but we know that he is in good hands and hope he will be okay. Given the circumstances, we are going to cut practice short today, so go ahead and hit the showers. Hopefully, we will have more news on his condition soon," he said.

Keoni let out a long sigh. "You know when we were at the hospital today and I told you I felt something very sad?" she asked Brielle softly.

Brielle nodded.

"This is what it was," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" Brielle asked.

"All I could think about was Gideon's football practice. I just kept seeing the players on the field; they were running, and then they just stopped. I saw this over and over again. It was so clear, like I was watching it happen before me. Each time I saw it, I just felt this terrible, heavy sadness," she said.

Brielle looked at her friend intently, who was deep in thought. "What do you feel now?"

Keoni looked at her with a seriously concerned expression, "I'm not sure how to explain it. I just feel like this has happened before… and it is going to happen again."

10

The friends waited for Gideon to change and shower, and then they all decided to go to Brielle's house. On the drive, Brielle took a moment to look through Lacy's journal. She opened it slowly, studying the worn pages that were cluttered with strange scribbling, bizarre drawings, and dark words of poetry. She began to understand why the police gave it back to Lacy's mother. It looked like the diary of an insane person.

When they arrived at Brielle's house, she quickly closed the journal and placed it inside her backpack within a special compartment. She wanted to keep it safe as she had promised Lacy's mother. She looked out the car window to see Asher and Genevieve in their usual waiting places on the porch. Asher ran out to greet them.

"Hey! You didn't tell me the Gidonies were coming!" he said to his sister, who laughed at his remark.

"Why is it you call them that?" Brielle asked.

"Keeps it simple, *Gid*eon and Ke*oni*; the *Gidonies*," Asher explained, as he said hello to Gideon and Keoni, giving Gideon a fist pound. Then he noticed Jace. Jace had parked his motorcycle and was taking off his helmet. "Nice bike!" Asher said, running over to Jace.

"You see?" Keoni elbowed Brielle, "I'm not the only one who thinks bikes are cool," she chided.

Brielle rolled her eyes at her friend, "Yes, yes, I know. They are just so… *dangerous*."

"You have got to be the *oldest* sixteen-year-old I know," Keoni giggled as she wrapped her arm around Brielle's shoulder.

Jace and Asher were still talking about his motorcycle as they came up the walkway. When Jace turned his attention to the house, he was startled at its beauty – he was impressed and stopped to stare at it, taking in the details of its structure. Genevieve was waiting to welcome her daughter and guests on the front porch. She grabbed Brielle, giving her usual warm hugs and kisses.

"Mama!" Asher said, "You see that motorcycle Jace was riding? He built it using scrap parts from the junk yard!"

Genevieve smiled warmly at her son and Jace, "Really? That is impressive! It's good to see you again, Jace, sounds like you are quite the mechanic," she said as she reached out to hug him.

"Thanks," Jace said, surprised by her welcoming embrace, "You have an amazing house."

"Oh, thank you," Genevieve answered happily, "This is a live palette for the creativity of my father," she said, turning to welcome Keoni and Gideon with hugs too.

Jace was puzzled by her statement about the house.

"This is a nice surprise, Giddy!" Genevieve said happily, "I wasn't expecting to see you. Didn't you have football practice today?"

At Genevieve's question, the teens' facial expressions of joy dropped as they remembered what they had just witnessed on the football field.

"Did something happen?" Genevieve asked.

"One of our teammates collapsed on the field today. We still don't know what happened to him. He was taken by the paramedics to the hospital, so Coach cancelled the rest of today's practice," Gideon answered.

Genevieve covered her mouth with her hand, "Oh, no," she whispered, "how terrible. Who was it?"

"Dylan Whitfield, he's our left tackle," Gideon said.

"I'm so sorry to hear this, how awful for that young man… and his family," then she turned to Brielle, "and you all just came from visiting Lacy in the hospital too," she paused, "Why don't you all come in and sit down. I've made some snacks, and you can tell me all about it," she said sweetly opening the door for them to enter.

They all went in, greeting Obadiah, who had just come to the door, drinking a hot cup of coffee. Obadiah shook hands with Jace and Gideon as he greeted them and wrapped one arm around Keoni to give her a welcoming hug. The others went ahead into the kitchen with Genevieve, as they had so many times before through the years. But when Jace came through the doorway into the house, he stopped as he had done outside, to admire the inside.

"What did your mother mean when she said the house is a live palette for her father?" Jace asked.

"My grandfather designed and built this house years ago when he and my grandmother were married," she explained.

Jace was surprised, "He designed and built it?"

Brielle nodded, "Would you like a tour?"

"I'd *love* one," he said.

The floor plan for the home was open and spacious. To the right of the front door was a beautiful, rounded staircase made of dark mahogany wood that wound up to the second floor of the home. To the left of the front door was a large music room, which was sunken from the level of the main walkway by several inches. The music room was elegantly decorated, featuring a black lacquered baby grand piano that stood in the corner and was well-lit by a large bay window at the front. The window had a lovely bench seat, which was comfortably cushioned with beautiful, thick pillows.

There was a grand fireplace at the other end, separating the music room from the living room, which could be enjoyed from both sides. The fireplace was built from the same gray colored stones that covered the front of the house, and in it, a warm fire burned brightly. The ceilings were high and supported by thick wood beams that matched the colors of the wood floors. The wood floors were

made from the same dark mahogany wood as the staircase. There were two large wooden columns along the edge of the hallway by the music room. These solid columns reminded Jace of the trunk of a tree, but were lacquered, shiny, and sleek to the touch.

Brielle led him into the living room on the opposite side of the fireplace. The earth-toned walls that began in the music room spread to this area as well and were accented by the dark mahogany wood beams that lined the ceiling and trimmed the large, paneled windows along the back wall. These windows revealed not only beams of natural sunlight but also the majestic and colorful trees of the forest. Through the windows, Jace could see a huge porch with relaxing patio furniture and a couple of large hummingbird feeders that had several buzzing little birds hovering around them. In between the music room and the living room, there was a hallway that led to the left. But the brightness of the light coming through the windows made it difficult to see where the hallway led.

The living room had another supporting treelike column springing up on the side of the room. The room itself had been warmly decorated with dark brown leather and wood furniture. Now they came to the kitchen, which was also open and connected to the living room. There was a grand dining table that could seat eight people, and just past that was a large wrap-around counter with tall barstools. Large, paneled windows lined the living room, but when Jace entered the kitchen area, he could see the windows were no longer just windows, but large doors that could be opened to the grand porch, which stretched across the back of the house.

The kitchen itself was also impressive, like entering an elegant European cottage complete with dried flowers and lavender hanging from the ceiling beams. Most of the home's décor was in earth tones of rich browns, greens, tan, and deep burgundy, with the warmth of the gray stones mixed throughout. It was a home that blended perfectly with the magnificent nature that surrounded it.

Jace stood quietly in each room, studying his surroundings. There was something about this home that grabbed his heart. He was captivated. "Your grandfather is an architect?" he asked Brielle.

"He's a *retired* engineer and inventor," she said, using her fingers as quotes.

"Somewhat retired," they heard Obadiah's voice from the living room, who was relaxing in his easy chair, enjoying his coffee and newspaper.

Brielle laughed. "He still creates things constantly for the fun of it," she said, "He likes to keep busy."

"You have *no idea*," Genevieve said with a gleam in her eye, "There is a powerful imagination within that mind of his."

Brielle turned to her grandfather, "May I show him your study?" she asked.

"Of course," he said.

"Follow me," she said to Jace, walking him toward two double doors located just off the kitchen.

She opened the doors and stepped back to let Jace enter. His eyes grew wide with amazement. There before them was a long-enclosed corridor with walls and a floor that were constructed of large Plexiglass panels. Jace slowly strolled into the walkway, getting his feet to trust what his eyes were taking in beneath him. "It's a clear bridge," he gasped, watching the flowing creek that came down the hill from behind the house and ran underneath the corridor. He stood in amazement as he took in the beauty of nature surrounding him, "It's like I'm floating in air," he laughed.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Brielle delighted, "When Oba began his engineering work, he mainly built bridges. He traveled all over the world and worked in some extremely primitive places. He felt he was doing the most good for the people that way. He said he always liked going into small villages that didn't have any resources and helped them to improve their means of life. He said sometimes all it took to make a positive difference for a group of people was to build them a bridge which connected them to the things they needed," she said with proud respect for her grandfather, "But this bridge is so special and so much fun—especially during the winter months when it snows, it's so beautiful. Come on; I'll show you his study."

Jace was in no hurry; he crossed the hall bridge slowly, enjoying the beautiful scenery of the trees and creek that he hovered over as he walked. He gradually reached the study, his face clearly showing astonishment at the magnificent design and creativity in the home. As he approached the study, he could hear the faint sound of music, which sounded sort of scratchy and old. Finally, he reached the doorway.

Obadiah's study was a mixture of an inventor's workshop, a library, and an engineer's office. It was full of massive drawing tables, shelves full of books, desktops covered with blueprints and prototypes, tools, and other equipment. There was a very advanced computer system with two large flat-screen monitors that had design plans displayed for some sort of structure that Jace didn't recognize. He looked around the room and quickly found the source of the scratchy, old-sounding music. In the corner of the room, on an antique table, was an old Victrola Phonograph with a hand crank. It was playing a tune from a thick record.

"I can't believe he has an old Victrola," Jace said, walking over to examine it.

"Oba *loves* antiques, as you will learn. The Victrola is something he's had for years. He must have been working in here before we came home," Brielle said.

Jace was mesmerized by the items around him.

"This looks cool," he said, walking over to the monitors to study the design, which was displayed on the screen. "What is it?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she said, puzzled, "He said he is developing a new support

structure for something in New Orleans; something to help strengthen the levees there, I think. It's a new project that he is still working on, so he hasn't mentioned it much."

Jace looked around at the photographs on the wall. There were pictures of Obadiah with the bridges he had built and the people who lived near them. But these people were not just villagers who dwelled where Oba built bridges - from the photographs, Jace could tell these people had become Obadiah's good friends.

There were so many interesting objects to see in this place. The furniture gave the room a feeling of being transported somewhere back in time, but the high-tech tools were a reminder of the present. It was a vast array of modern technology mixed with antiquated gadgets and devices.

In the midst of all the antiques and tools, there was one item that stood out among the rest. It was a photograph of a beautiful woman that caught Jace's eye. She was sitting in front of a magnificent waterfall, and her radiant smile and sparkling eyes conveyed that she was full of joy and exuberance.

"That's my grandmother," Brielle said softly. "See," she said, pointing to another photo of Obadiah holding the beautiful woman in his arms while standing in front of a bridge, "Her name was Elise, wasn't she beautiful?"

"Yes, very… You look a lot like her," Jace said.

Brielle blushed, "Thank you."

"What happened to her?" he asked.

"She died a long time ago. Right before I was born. Sadly, I never got to meet her, but Mama and Oba have told us so many stories and shown us so many photos, Ash and I feel like we know her," she explained.

"I'm sorry," Jace said.

"Thank you, I'm sorry about your grandma, too," she said.

Jace nodded, "Thank you," he said softly, then he looked at the photo of Obadiah and Elise again, "Is that one of the bridges that your grandfather built?"

"Yes, one of the many," Brielle replied as she pointed to some of the photos around the office, "As you can see, there are many more."

"I feel like I'm in a cool museum for engineering, so much history, so much equipment, both old and new," Jace mused.

Brielle laughed, "Oba loves modern technology but appreciates the simplicity and durability of old tools too."

Just then, she heard her mother's voice coming across the bridge, "Brielle, I don't mean to rush you, but if you don't come back to the kitchen soon, between Gideon and Asher, there won't be any food left," she joked.

Brielle and Jace left the study and went back to the kitchen table to find an array of snacks that Genevieve had prepared. As they sat down to join the others, Asher grabbed one more sandwich and headed toward the back door.

"Do you play basketball, Jace?" he asked.

"Yeah, well, a little," he said in his soft tone.

"Huh, you should, being as tall as you are," Asher said, "Giddy you comin' out?"

"You bet," Gideon said, "I'll be out when I'm done. Prepare yourself for great humiliation, my friend."

"Oh wow, so you can beat a ten-year-old," Keoni laughed, rolling her eyes, "Impressive."

"Hey, have you ever seen that kid play?" Gideon asked, "He's almost as good as me… almost," he said with a mischievous grin, taking another bite of his sandwich.

Brielle immediately dove in, taking some of everything Genevieve had prepared, and began devouring it with as much grace as she could in front of her guests.

"My goodness," Genevieve laughed, "you act like you haven't eaten all day!"

Without thinking, Brielle blurted out, "I haven't!"

Genevieve's eyebrows lifted in surprise, "Really? You didn't have lunch today? Why not?"

Brielle felt the heat of embarrassment quickly spread across her face, and she sat speechless, chewing her food, trying to think of a truthful answer. She didn't want to tell her mother the entire story. She glanced over at Jace, who looked at her under his long, dark eyelashes, a very wide grin slowly spreading across his face that he tried to hide with his sandwich.

Gideon was no help. "Yeah, Brielle," he said with a sinister tone, "Why didn't you have any lunch today?"

Keoni glared at her brother and came to the rescue of her friend, "Because of the lunch guest that *you* brought to eat with us," she said to her brother.

Genevieve looked at Keoni, "Uh oh, who was the lunch guest?" she asked curiously.

Brielle shook her head, her mouth still full, and mumbled, "You don't want to know."

"It was Taryn Cavanaugh," Keoni answered. "Gideon thought she should join us for lunch. Although Brielle tried to be nice to her, all Taryn ended up doing was to stir up trouble, so much so that Brielle left without eating."

Genevieve still had the surprised expression on her face, "Wow. What did she do that would make you leave food?" she asked with a giggle.

Brielle held up her finger as she finished swallowing, "She asked me if I wanted Lacy," she answered.

Genevieve was surprised, "Why did she ask that?"

"I guess she and Lacy are friends. She claims that Lacy told her I was stalking her and that I wanted to be friends with her because I liked her. You know, *liked her* liked her," Brielle said, and then immediately popped some chips into her

mouth.

Genevieve's expression now turned puzzled, "But… I'm confused. I thought you said that Lacy was usually alone."

The teens were quiet while they thought about this.

"Yeah," Keoni said slowly, "she usually is. I mean, I only see her a few times during the day and at lunch. But now that you mention it, I've never seen her hang out with anyone."

Brielle and Jace both nodded.

"Not to imply that Lacy couldn't be friends with Taryn or that she didn't say that to her," Genevieve said, "But… maybe Taryn just made that up."

"Why would she make something like that up about me?" Brielle asked.

"Envy," Keoni said in a low tone. "That girl has been envious of you since the first day of school."

"I don't know what there is to be envious about," Brielle said, "But today, she just totally pushed me over the edge. So, I left without eating my lunch, and I'm STARVING!" she said, grabbing another sandwich.

Genevieve laughed, "Kawala, you just have to let that kind of stuff go and not let it bother you. I know you didn't like Taryn's accusation, but don't let her upset you. If she made that up about you, then this is just the reaction she wants to get, so don't give her the satisfaction of knowing she succeeded," Genevieve said softly.

Brielle shrugged her shoulders, "Yeah, when you say it like that, I guess you're right. It was just a shock, plus I was upset that that might be what Lacy thought of me. I want to be her friend, not her lover."

"Unfortunately, right now you can't talk to Lacy about that. But you will, and when you do, it will all work out. God will see to that," Genevieve said.

Jace was taking all this conversation in. Brielle noticed he seemed to be really studying Genevieve, listening intently to every word she said. Just then, Obadiah came over to the table and helped himself to a sandwich.

"What's this I heard?" he asked curiously.

Genevieve filled him in on the conversation between Taryn and Brielle again as he stood quietly listening while he ate his sandwich.

"Sweetheart, you are quickly learning just how sheltered you have been. It is sad but true that kids will do and say things like that, and often, kids can be cruel and hurt one another. But your mother's right, you know the truth, and so does God. I know it's hard, but you must pray for people like Taryn, not fight them. That's what Jesus wants us to do because that's what Jesus did," he said.

"Yeah, I'll pray for her," Brielle said, taking another bite, "I'll pray she loses gravity, trips, and falls off earth," she mumbled, her mouth full of food, causing Keoni to start giggling.

Genevieve gave her daughter an exasperated look, "Now, now, let's not go to extremes," she scolded.

"Hey, Obadiah," Keoni said, "While we are on the subject of people being gay, I have a question for you."

"And you think *I* have the answer?" Obadiah chuckled.

Everyone laughed.

"The other day on the news, I saw a group of people who claimed to be Christians standing outside a gay bar with signs that said: 'God hates gay people'. It really upset me because I know that's not true, and these people's actions and words did not look or sound like *anything* Jesus would do," she said.

"No… no, it's nothing that Jesus would do. I saw that news story too, and it was heartbreaking. No, Keoni, God does *not* hate gay people. God does not *hate* people; God *loves* His children, but He hates sin, and sin is what His children choose to engage in.

"The Bible tells us in Proverbs 6:16-19 *"There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breakout lies, and one who sows discord among brothers."*

"Now, in order to understand that verse, we also must know Ephesians 6:12, which says, "*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."* By understanding that verse, we know there are powers of darkness that are at work against people, even at times, ourselves. So, when we read about the seven things God hates, we can see the effects of these powers of darkness are at work on the souls of those around us… does that make sense?"

"You mean, these dark spirits are working on our souls and the souls of others to try and tempt us to lie or hurt others and cause problems?" Keoni asked.

"Yes, that is exactly what spirits of darkness, or strongman spirits, as Jesus calls them, do. We know the things that God hates, and those things are connected to the work of evil spirits, but then, when we look at the plan of salvation, we can clearly see that God does not hate people. If God hated people, that would completely nullify the plan of salvation. Think about it. John 3:16 says, "*For God so **loved** the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life."* Now, let's break that down. *'For God so loved,* that's the first word to focus on, *loved.* It doesn't say God so hated the world, it says God so *loved the world,* and world means people. Let's move on. *That He **gave,*** let's focus on that word. God chose to *give*; God gave *His only Son*. Now, let's just stop there for a moment.

"I don't have a son, I have a daughter, and I love her with all my heart, and I love other people too, but I don't love other people enough that I would give my daughter's life for their sins. Yet, God loves us that much that He did. He *gave His*

only Son that whosoever, and whosoever means *anyone* in the world for *all time*, *believes in Him*, and Him means Jesus, *would **not** perish but have everlasting life*."

"Now, I ask you, why would God send His One and only Son to come to earth, to suffer, be tortured, beaten, scourged, nailed to a cross, and die *the most horrific* and gruesome death for all mankind if He hated people?" he paused. "That doesn't make any sense at all, does it?"

The kids shook their heads.

"No, it doesn't. God sent Jesus to be the Savior for *all* mankind because He *loves* His children so much, He wanted to provide them a way to be able to come back to Him. Jesus is *the* bridge for us to get back to God. Jesus tells us in John 14:6

"I am the way the truth and the life no man comes to the Father, but by me."

*"*God is *love*. He is the very definition of love. Not love as the way the world defines it, but as God defines it. Love so powerful, love so deep and pure, love so strong and limitless that our human minds cannot even fathom it.

"So, no, sweetheart, God does not hate gay people. God does not hate people. According to His Word, God hates sin. All sins need the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, which He provided through the blood that He shed upon the cross at Calvary, according to the scriptures in God's Word," he paused to take a sip of coffee.

"Some people in the world will say that their loving another man or woman of the same sex is not a sin but something beautiful because they are loving one another and love is love. Yet, God's Word defines what love is and that God Himself is love, as it is written in 1 John 4:8 *'But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.'* Then, if we turn to the second chapter of Genesis, we see it is written that God created woman for man. There are many other scriptures in the Bible to verify that man with man and woman with woman is not how God intended us to live. God's Word states very clearly in several places that it is not His will.

"If a person wants to argue my position, they will have to take it up with God because it is His Word that I am teaching and believing. I didn't write it, but I believe it, I stand upon it and try my best to obey it daily and apply it to my life," he said, taking a sip of his coffee, "It is also important for Christians to remember that Jesus taught us *not* to judge others and that we are to love thy neighbor as thyself as it is written in Mark 12:31. Jesus taught us this because He wanted everyone to know that their sins are covered by His blood and His grace. Did you know that there is only one unforgivable sin?"

The kids shook their heads.

"It's true, there is one sin that cannot be forgiven and that is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. That is the one sin that God warns us in His Word not to commit. Everything else, no matter what it is, the blood of Jesus Christ is so powerful, it

can wash that sin away and make the person's soul white as snow.

"In my opinion, it is wrong to stand and hold signs that say, 'God hates gay people', or any sign that would say God hates anyone at all. When we speak of those people who are holding those signs, we cannot judge them either. We must pray for them too, so they can find the truth of God's Word. I would much rather see them holding signs that say, 'Come to Jesus because He loves you!' or 'There is forgiveness found with Jesus!' because that is the message that Jesus carried here on earth, and that is the message we should carry now." Then he looked thoughtfully over at Keoni, "I hope that may be somewhat helpful to you."

"Yes, it is," Keoni said, "That's how I feel about it too. I have a good friend in my fashion design class at school. I've known him for a long time. His name is Terri, and he is the sweetest guy you could ever meet. He is somewhat shy and has told me he is gay, and he is very proud of it.

"I don't believe God hates gay people either, and I got to thinking, how are we supposed to tell people about the love of Jesus and have them believe us when they hear things like this being said by people who represent Christianity?" she asked.

Obadiah sighed, "It is a very challenging dilemma when there are so many voices out there that claim to represent Christ. It is hard for people to be able to know who Jesus is when they see and hear things like that from people. This is why people need to turn to God's Word. He tells us who He is in His scriptures.

"But let's go back to Ephesians 6:12, which talks about not battling flesh and blood but principalities of darkness. You must remember this verse-- especially when it comes to Terri, because you are not battling Terri, you are battling the spirit of homosexuality. Terri wouldn't see it that way, I'm sure that he feels proud of living his lifestyle.

"I feel the best that you can do for him is to keep loving him, keep praying for him, and when he will listen, share the Word of God with him, for only Jesus can reach his heart in that way."

Keoni nodded, "I will. I will do that because I honestly do love Terri; he has always been a great friend to me and is so kind and caring. I always want to be kind to him and show him love, even if I don't agree with his lifestyle."

"And so you should," Obadiah said, "You are not making that choice for him, his lifestyle doesn't affect your salvation, and neither should you judge him for it because of your salvation. Terri's sexuality is between him and God. It is possible for us to be friends with people who do not believe the same as we do.

"I think Christians worry if they are friends with someone who is not obedient to God, then they are displeasing God. Guilt by association, so to speak. While there may be some cause to take wisdom in certain relationships to keep yourself safe from getting involved in anything dangerous or irreverent to God, for the most part, having someone in your life who doesn't share the same faith

as you could be a divine plan of God. He could be the very One who placed that person in your life. After all, look at Jesus, He spent time with tax collectors and prostitutes, the outcasts of society who definitely were not obeying His Heavenly Father-- and why did He do that? Because He wanted to teach and influence them in the ways of His Heavenly Father. He didn't participate in anything that was disobedient to the Word of God, and when you are with Terri, neither are you. Let me ask you this: Have you shared your faith with Terri?" he asked.

"Yes, well… at least I try to, he isn't always open to listening, and I don't try to force him to," Keoni said.

"I understand, and you should not try to force him to. Jesus didn't force people; He led people. Yet, you have at least told him that you believe in God's Word and live for Jesus, correct?" Obadiah asked.

"Correct," she said.

"Alright, and have you ever told him how much he means to you as a friend?" he asked.

"Yes, many times," she replied.

"Good, then he knows that you love him, and he also knows that you love God and stand upon His Word. You have established an open and honest relationship with him, which is good. Even if he doesn't listen to you about Jesus right now, at least he knows where you stand. The next thing he needs to know is that you do not judge him. This is important because it is a step many Christians often forget.

"We must always remember that we all sin and we all need forgiveness from our sins. This is why we can never judge others' souls, because we *all* make our mistakes. Only Jesus gets to judge our souls because only Jesus died upon the cross for us, and thank You, Jesus, for doing that! Thank You, Jesus, for Your never-ending grace and forgiveness! Again, the reason why Jesus tells us not to judge others is because He wants everyone to know that they can come to Him for forgiveness of sins.

"Now, you may be thinking, how can you minister to Terri if he won't listen to you talk about your faith? Well, you can show him God's love in your life by example. God will reward you for showing the love of Jesus to Terri personally through your actions and what he hears in your words. That is exactly what God's Word instructs us to do: to *love* one another. Which is why it is good that you want to keep your relationship with him so you *can* keep pouring the love of Jesus into his life--who knows if anyone else is in his life to do it."

"That's true," Keoni thought intently upon Obadiah's words, "So… you mean I just need to let my light shine?"

"Yes! Absolutely, keep right on being his friend and let him know that God does love him, and keep praying for him, and pray for opportunities where you can speak the truth of God's Word to him. Who knows what can come from the seeds you are planting in his heart? Only God! And He always has a plan!

"Remember, Jesus ministered to *everyone He met--constantly*. He excluded no one who came to Him and He deliberately put Himself amidst the people He knew needed Him the most," Obadiah said with a grin, then he turned to Brielle, "You do the same thing with this girl… what's her name?"

"Taryn," Brielle said dryly.

"Taryn," Obadiah repeated, "You live by the example of Christ, and people will know who you are by what you show them-- not by the words of Taryn. Keep your head up, your eyes on Jesus, and keep praying for Taryn-- and Keoni, you keep praying for Terri. God hears all our prayers, and He is always working behind the scenes for our good. Put your faith and trust in Him, and He will work this all out for you."

Jace sat watching the family interaction with great intrigue.

"I'm sorry to change the subject," Genevieve began, "but what did you find out about Lacy today? How is she doing?"

Brielle put down her sandwich and wiped her mouth. She was quiet for a moment as she remembered Laura's words. "Her mother said that she is not doing well. Her blood pressure isn't good, her heart rate keeps fluctuating, and the doctors had to put her on a respirator because her oxygen levels were too low. She looked worse than she did the day before."

"Do the doctors know what she took?" Obadiah asked.

"I'm not sure. I didn't ask Laura too many questions. But she did give me Lacy's journal," Brielle said.

Genevieve and Obadiah were both surprised at this news. "You're kidding?" Genevieve gasped, "Why did she give it to you and not the police?"

"Oh, she did," Brielle answered, "but the police couldn't get much from it, so she thought maybe I could. I don't know exactly what was said; all I know is she said she gave it to them, and they gave it back to her. She's so desperate for answers, I guess she thought maybe I might be able to find something," Brielle answered.

"That's quite a compliment," Obadiah said, "Have you looked at it yet?"

"I looked at it briefly on the way home today. The stuff in it looked… disconnected from reality, nothing made any sense. Like the diary of a girl lost in darkness," she said, "I'm planning on going through it tonight to see if I can find anything."

"Pray about it," Obadiah said, "If there is something God wants you to find, He'll show it to you."

Brielle nodded in agreement. Then Genevieve asked, "Did you remember to ask her parents if I could come and visit them?"

Brielle nodded, "Yeah, Laura said she would love that. I'm not too sure about her dad, though. He is very nice, but he is struggling with all of this."

"I can't even imagine what they are going through," Genevieve whispered, "Those poor people, it's all so tragic."

“Lacy’s father left the room today when we asked to pray for her,” Keoni said, “Laura said he is battling his feelings with God. He doesn’t understand why God would allow this to happen to Lacy.”

Genevieve looked across the table at Obadiah, who placed his chin on his hand in thought. “Maybe I should go with you, Vivi, when you visit them,” he said.

“Yes, I agree,” Genevieve replied, “I think we should go over there tomorrow if you have time. Asher has basketball in the afternoon, so maybe we could go then.”

Obadiah nodded as he took another sip of his coffee,
“Absolutely,” he said, “we’ll keep a gentle approach.”

“So, Lacy is still in the hospital, not doing any better, and now there was another boy who collapsed today?” Genevieve asked.

Obadiah looked over at her, then back at Brielle, “What’s this?” he asked.

Gideon then spoke up to answer his question. “Yeah, today at practice, Dylan Whitfield just fell over while we were in the huddle. The coaches called the paramedics, and they rushed him off to the hospital. that’s why I was able to come over today, Coach cancelled practice.”

Obadiah crossed his arms and furrowed his brow in deep thought. “Had he been hit too hard or something?”

“No, in fact, he had just come onto the field. He had done warm-ups but hadn’t been involved in any plays yet. One moment he was standing there in the huddle, and then… he just fell over. He went down hard, too, like a ton of bricks. It scared us because he didn’t move an inch,” Gideon said.

Obadiah had his arms crossed on his chest while Gideon was talking, processing the information with a puzzled look on his face. Then he looked over at Genevieve, who had the same perplexed expression on her face that he did. “Something is going on here,” he said, “Something isn’t right. Two kids from the same school within the same week just collapse and have to be rushed to the hospital? There is no coincidence in that. Was this boy unconscious too?”

“It looked that way from where we were. I don’t think the coaches could get him to wake up,” Gideon said.

Obadiah scratched his head, his eyes revealing he was deep in thought, “What was that boy’s name again?” he asked Gideon.

“Dylan Whitfield,” Gideon replied.

“Do you think he does drugs?” Obadiah asked Gideon.

Gideon was caught off guard by Obadiah’s question, “I don’t know. I don’t hang out with him much. I mean, he’s cool; we just haven’t had a chance to get to know each other off the field.”

“I think he might,” Jace said. Everyone turned to look at him - it was the first time he had spoken in the conversation since they sat down.

“Really, why do you think so?” Obadiah asked.

"He's in my chemistry class, and he never comes prepared with his homework or ready to take a test. I always hear him asking his friend for answers to things. His hands tend to shake a lot when we are in the lab. Some days he comes in upbeat and full of energy, all hyped up and talkative, and other days he seems to be totally disconnected, like he's just spaced out – on those days he looks like he can't keep his eyes open. These are just a few things I've noticed in class," he said.

"You're quite observant," Obadiah said with a grin, "Those are interesting things to notice."

"I've uh… I've studied a lot about it," Jace said, lowering his eyes.

"About drug use?" Obadiah asked.

"Jace wants to be a doctor," Brielle said. Jace looked up at her and smiled.

"Wonderful," Obadiah said, "I'm impressed."

Jace quickly looked at Obadiah. His eyes were beaming with gratitude. Brielle remembered what Jace had told her about his father's opinion of his career choice and how he didn't approve of it. She could immediately see how Obadiah's compliment positively affected Jace.

"Why do you wonder if he does drugs?" Gideon asked Obadiah.

"Please don't misunderstand me," replied Obadiah, "I'm not judging the boy. I'm just wondering if perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye. I would be very interested to see what the doctors say about his condition. If he does have illegal drugs in his system, I'm curious to see if his diagnosis is similar to Lacy's and…" he paused.

"If he goes into a coma too," Brielle finished.

Obadiah nodded gently, not wanting to speak the words out loud.

"I will add him to the church prayer chain," Genevieve said.

"Please excuse me," Obadiah said, rising out of his chair, "I hate to depart all this fine company, but I have a phone call coming from New Orleans in five minutes. Jace, it's been a pleasure, please come back anytime and we'll talk more," he said sweetly. He said his goodbyes to the rest of the group and left the kitchen through the double doors that led to his study.

When everyone finished eating, they thanked Genevieve for the wonderful snack, and Gideon got up next to excuse himself, "I'm going to go whoop on Asher a little bit, wanna join me, Jace?"

"Sure," he said, then turned to Genevieve, "Thank you very much, everything was delicious." Then he followed Gideon out to the basketball court.

Genevieve began clearing the table, "My, my," she said in a southern belle tone, "that is one fine young gentleman," she said, looking at her daughter from the corner of her eye. "So polite, so smart and oh my goodness so handsome," she said, spinning around with the dishes in her arms to the sink.

Keoni laughed, "She gets your hint."

Brielle smiled at her mother, then looked outside. "Hmm, so they think they

can take my little brother, huh? I think I'll go outside and whoop on those guys a little bit. Keoni, you wanna help?" Brielle asked with a mischievous look.

"Uh---*what?* I know you're not talking to me! First, I don't have the slightest interest in *playing* basketball, only watching basketball, and second, my boots, hello," she said sarcastically.

"Yeah, so, what's the problem?" Brielle teased.

Keoni shook her head and waved her friend out the door.

"Go on and have your fun, mine will be to watch," Keoni said.

"And I will join you," Genevieve said, grabbing her cup of tea and heading for the back porch.

Asher, Gideon, and Jace were all taking some warmup shots when Brielle came out to the court. Gideon shook his head when he saw her coming. She had grabbed a band and was pulling her hair back into a ponytail. Gideon knew she meant business.

"Aw man, are you comin' to play?" he asked.

Jace quickly looked over at him in surprise.

Brielle didn't speak but nodded her head and raised her eyebrows to highlight her mischievous grin.

"Good! I get Brielle!" Asher said.

"Let's keep it balanced, okay?" Gideon said. Jace looked over at him, confused by his statement.

"What? Are you afraid of being beaten by a girl and a ten-year-old boy?" Asher said smoothly.

"Yes," Gideon snapped, "In fact, I hate it!"

"Wait," Jace asked Gideon, "they are going to play against us?"

Brielle took the ball and began to slowly dribble it as she walked around Jace, "What's the matter, Jace, are *you* afraid of being beaten by a girl and a ten-year-old boy?"

Jace looked back at Gideon in disbelief, "Come on, you're kidding, right?"

Gideon turned to Jace, "You guard Brielle since you're taller," he said. Then, giving him a serious look, he said, "Dude, you better be on your game."

"Let's go!" Asher yelled. The game was on.

Jace still had a look of disbelief and confidence on his face when Brielle passed the ball into play. Keoni and Genevieve became instant cheerleaders for the game, clapping and shouting their support for Brielle and Asher. Because the siblings had homeschooled together for so many years, playing basketball together outside was one of their main sources of physical activity. Obadiah had also signed them up for different city teams through the years, and he, himself being a rather tall man, liked to play and had taught them well. The two, when paired together, were an amazing team. Even though Brielle was a little over five feet tall and Asher was even shorter, they both had an amazing ability to jump and were deadly accurate shooters. But beyond that, they were fast and had

their own set plays that they liked to run to keep the defense guessing.

It wasn't too long before Brielle and Asher were 6 points ahead of the guys. Jace's look of confidence quickly changed into one of shock as he was stunned by the competency of the two younger and smaller challengers. He thought if he was going to save himself from great humility and shame, as well as his teammate, he had better do what Gideon had suggested and "*be on his game"*.

Gideon rebounded the ball and passed it over to Jace, who began to charge the net for a layup. On his way to the basket, however, Brielle flew by and stole the ball right out of his hands. She quickly passed it behind her to Asher, who took the shot from beyond the three-point line; nothing but net. The two siblings quickly gave each other a special hand slap they had created, and were right back into the game. The cheerleaders on the porch went wild.

Jace stood still and was stunned for a moment by what had just happened, but at that moment, he also looked at Brielle in a whole new light. "This girl is truly amazing," he thought to himself, "She's fearless, beautiful, and knows how to play ball." His mind at this point was truly not in the game, so much so that he had missed his teammate passing him the ball, which struck him square in the chest. It snapped him back to reality, along with more clapping and laughter from the porch-side cheerleaders. Asher then grabbed the ball as it bounced away from Jace and took it to the net for the final shot.

"That's game," Asher said, "Do you want to play again or have you had enough punishment for one day?" he coaxed, a mischievous grin on his face.

"We surrender, we surrender," Gideon said in a pitiful voice, his hands raised above his head, "Mercy!"

"Alright, alright, we'll grant you mercy," Brielle laughed, "but you have to say it."

Gideon started to walk off the court, shaking his head in defiance.

"Giddy," Brielle said in a high-pitched tone, "you know you have to, that's the rule."

"No, that's *your* rule," Gideon snapped back.

"Oh, come on now," Brielle teased, "Don't be such a sore loser. Just say it one time… come on," she said, cupping her hand up against her ear.

"Fine… I just got pummeled by a short girl and a ten-year-old boy with game," he said, rolling his eyes, "Happy now?"

"Yes! Thank you!" she giggled, linking one arm around his. They all walked over to the porch, where Genevieve already had refreshing drinks waiting for them.

"So Jace," Keoni asked, "how did that feel? Surprised?" she joked.

Jace shook his head, once again in disbelief, but for different reasons this time. "I'm quite impressed," he said.

This was not the response Keoni was expecting, nor the rest of the group. Genevieve gave her daughter a very approving gaze from behind her cup as she

took another sip of tea.

Asher was no help: “Good game, guys. Maybe we can play again. Aww, that’s so sweet! You were actually trying, weren’t you?” he teased, “Because if you were, maybe next time, I should put Mama on my team to even things up a bit for you.”

Everyone laughed.

“I’ll be right back,” Brielle said, trotting off to the bathroom to brush her hair and clean up a bit from her game.

“Don’t you have some homework to do?” Gideon asked Asher jokingly.

“Uh, nope, homeschool kid, remember?” Asher teased back as he tossed the basketball in the air and caught it with his finger, spinning it around on his fingertip.

“How about if I give you a video game beating?” Gideon asked.

Asher’s eyes lit up, and he tossed the basketball back to the court. He began to tell Gideon about his new game, which sparked Gideon’s interest.

“Hey Jace, you wanna join us?” Gideon asked.

Brielle had just returned from the restroom, looking beautiful in her ponytail and swipe of fresh lip gloss. She interrupted and answered Gideon before Jace had the chance.

“I was going to see if Jace would like to meet Piper. I haven’t finished giving you the tour of the house yet,” she said quickly, not wanting Jace to go with her brother and Gideon. Then, immediately feeling selfish, added, “But if you want to go with the guys, that’s okay.”

Jace looked at her thoughtfully, “No, that’s fine, I’d like to finish the tour,” he said, then he looked at Gideon and Asher, “Maybe I can catch the next game?” he asked.

“You bet,” Asher said, running on into the house, “Come on, Giddy! Are you ready to lose again?!” he teased.

“No way, kid, you’re going down this time,” Gideon yelled after him.

Keoni laughed and rolled her eyes, “Sometimes I can’t tell which one is the ten-year-old.”

“Come on,” Brielle motioned to Keoni, “let’s introduce him to the other family members,” she said.

The three teens walked through the yard to the stable, passing the small cottage where Magomu lived. The cottage was built with the same wood and stone materials as the main house. It was a single-story, two-bedroom house that possessed all the style and charm one might find in a country home on the Irish coastline. They could smell the smoke from his chimney, and it billowed above the rooftop as the sun was quickly setting in the September sky.

“That’s the home of our friend, Magomu. My grandfather hired him to care for the horses and the landscaping,” Brielle said.

“Magomu?” Jace asked curiously.

"Yes, he's another member of our family," Brielle said.

"He lives there?" Jace said, slowing down to look at the charming cottage.

"Yes, he has lived with us for over ten years or so," Brielle answered. "You will meet him in about five minutes," she said with a grin. Jace looked puzzled by her remark. "As soon as he knows we are in the stable, he will come to see if he can help," she explained.

"Really?" Jace asked.

"Oh, yes," Keoni said, "It's quite amazing. Brielle and I have tested him a dozen times, trying to sneak down here as quietly as we can or come up the back way so he couldn't see us, but he always knows."

"He can sense it," Brielle giggled, "He is very in tune with his surroundings."

"How do you know him?" Jace asked.

Brielle paused, thinking of how her father had saved Magomu's life. "I have known him all my life. He is a great friend, more like a big brother," she said, slowly opening the stable door. She entered and turned on the light. The stables were immaculately clean, and all the horses were standing at the door of their stalls waiting eagerly to be greeted by the guests--all the horses except for one.

Brielle walked to each horse and introduced them to Jace, starting with Sisco at the first stall on the left, then she moved over to Moon Dancer on the right. Next to Moon Dancer was Asher's horse, Apache. Then she moved back over to her left to the horse in the stall next to Sisco, who was named Kissa. She took her time to tell Jace about each horse, what kind they were, and about their personality.

"How did you say that horse's name again?" Jace asked, looking at Kissa's name plate on her stall.

"Oh, it's pronounced, Keesa," Brielle said, "It's an African name. Magomu said he named her after a girl he knew back home."

Jace listened intently and was very gentle with all the horses who greeted him warmly. In the stall next to Kissa was Brielle's sweet filly Piper, who seemed impatient to have to wait for Brielle to spend time with all the other horses before greeting her. Piper nodded her head in excitement and stamped her feet until Brielle came to her stall, and then she was as mannerly and proper as a princess.

"I love her coloring," Jace said, "She's so sleek and shiny, like dark silver," he said, rubbing Piper's neck and nose. "They are all so beautiful, so different," he said, looking down the stable at all the horses – each horse had its head sticking out of their stall door.

"Yes, together they make a wonderful family," Brielle agreed.

"Do you know how to ride?" Keoni asked Jace.

"No, not horses anyway. I'm used to things with handlebars," he laughed. "But I would like to try it sometime," he said, looking down at Brielle.

"I would be happy to teach you," she said, her heart pounding inside of her

chest at the thought of seeing Jace riding gallantly upon a horse.

"How long have you been riding?" he asked.

"About ten years," Brielle answered, "Keoni and Gideon too. Oba began teaching us when we were all six years old. But Asher started much sooner, even before he could walk Oba would let him sit on a horse. I try to get in at least one short ride every day. But we didn't get out today, did we, girl?" she asked Piper.

Brielle walked over to a leather pouch hanging at the end of the stable on the wall. She reached her hand inside and pulled out three sugar cubes and fed them to her horse.

"Will you forgive me?" she asked Piper sweetly.

The horse gobbled up the sugar cubes, enjoying the sweet treat with every crunch she made. Just then, they heard a loud bang in the stall behind them, which startled Jace. He quickly turned around to see the silhouette of the largest horse he had ever seen, standing silently in the shadows of its stall.

"Whoa," he said, "whose horse is that?"

"Nobody's," Keoni said dryly.

"What do you mean?" Jace asked.

"That… is Jellyfish," Brielle said with an irritated tone.

"I'm sorry, did you say Jellyfish?" Jace asked.

"Yep, that's his name. Oba bought Jellyfish for himself, but never even got the chance to ride him," Brielle explained.

"Why not?" Jace asked.

"Because he's meaner than a snake," they heard a voice come from the stable entrance. It was Magomu.

"Hey Magomu!" Brielle said, "I knew you'd come. This is my friend Jace. I was just introducing him to our horse family."

Magomu shook hands with Jace, "Hello Jace," he said sweetly with a broad smile and sparkling eyes, "It is my pleasure to meet you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too," Jace answered.

"You were asking about Jellyfish," Magomu said, "That horse has a very bad temper. It is my belief that someone brought him much pain in his young life. He does not like people, only horses. He has learned to trust me and the rest of the family to care for him, but he does not trust anyone to climb upon his back. I pity anyone who would ever try, but would give them great marks for courage!" Magomu laughed.

"Watch this," he said, reaching his hand into the leather pouch on the wall, and then extended his hand, which was filled with sugar cubes. The horse stayed at the back of his stable and stared at them, not moving.

"Watch what he does," he said as he took the sugar cubes and tossed them down before the horse on the stable floor. The horse stared at them and stamped his large, long legs hard on the ground.

"Now, follow me," Magomu said, taking a few steps out of view of Jellyfish's

stall, then stopping where the horse could not see them.

"Listen," he whispered. Jace stood silently listening. After a few seconds, they could all hear the sound of crunching, the same sound Piper made when she ate her sugar cubes. Jace peeked around the corner to see the horse eating the sugar cubes on the ground.

"He would rather eat dirty treats off the ground than trust a human hand to feed it to him. He doesn't even want a human to watch him eat!" Magomu said, "Ah, but there is still improvement in him, and someday he might learn to trust someone again."

"I'm really curious, though as to how he got his name?" Jace asked.

Keoni and Brielle both laughed, "When Oba first bought him," Brielle began, "we learned his name was Clambake. Then one day, after he tore Asher's shirt with his teeth, he said that horse wasn't named right. He said clams are calm and quiet, but that horse was a venomous, stinging Jellyfish. The name stuck and we've called him that ever since."

"Wow, so he's pretty mean, huh?" Jace asked.

"You have no idea," Magomu laughed.

The sun had set, and the night air turned chilly, so the friends said good night to Magomu and headed for the house. When they entered, they could smell the sweet aromas of Genevieve cooking dinner. Even though they had just eaten a couple of hours earlier, the smell of it made Brielle hungry.

"Smells good, Mama!" she said as they entered through the kitchen. "Are the guys still playing?"

"What do you think?" Genevieve joked.

Brielle laughed, "Come on, there is one more place I haven't shown you," she said as she headed into the living room, turning down the dark hallway that Jace had noticed before.

"Where are we going now?" he asked.

"The tower," Brielle said with a sinister tone and expression.

"Seriously? You can go up inside it?" Jace asked, enthused. "I thought maybe it was a cool accessory to the front of the house."

"Nothing in this house is just for show," Keoni said, "Obadiah has a reason for everything he builds."

"My grandfather was born and raised in Ireland-- as if you couldn't tell from his accent. He took my grandmother there for their honeymoon, and she fell in love with the castles she saw. So, when he built this house for her, he wanted it to look like her own castle. He always called her his queen," she said thoughtfully.

Keoni sighed, "Oba is a one-of-a-kind, not too many romantic men left in the world—at least I've never found one," she said with a hint of sarcasm. Brielle laughed and then looked up at Jace. She wondered if he had a romantic spirit in him.

The door to the tower was just as a castle door should look. It was arched and made of thick, dark wood that was bound together with black iron straps across the front. She turned the knob, and the door slowly creaked open. As they entered, Jace saw a large winding staircase to his left. It was constructed of the same gray stone as the tower itself, with a dark wood hand railing. The staircase wound itself up to the height of the tower, curving as it went until you could not see where it ended. But immediately inside the door to the right was something even more fascinating: a magnificent armoire with two beautifully carved doors on the front. The armoire was taller than Jace and over four feet wide. The carvings in the doors were of two identical crosses that had rays shining out of them. There were clouds that hovered above the crosses and rolling hills with flowers and trees beneath them. Jace studied the majestic cabinet attentively.

"This is incredible," he whispered, gently running his hands over the doors. Then he turned to Brielle with an inquisitive expression, "if we go in here, we will end up in a magical land?" he joked.

Keoni and Brielle laughed. "Maybe," Brielle said with a mysterious voice, reaching for the great doors to the armoire, "My family loves to read. This is where Asher and I keep our favorite books," she said, opening the doors wide to reveal dozens of books neatly arranged on shelves inside. The books were all very old-looking, with exquisite covers and intricate details on the binding, obviously books from other eras.

"Remember how I told you that my grandfather has traveled the world?" Brielle asked. Jace nodded without shifting his glance from the collection. "He loves to find antique books of classic titles. Some of these books are a hundred years old or more," she said. "A far cry from the world of electronic books, huh?"

Jace nodded as he looked over the shelves, pointing out his favorite titles.

"I loved these books when I was a kid, Treasure Island, Peter Pan, The Odyssey, and…" he paused, searching the titles quickly, "I don't see it," he said.

"What?" Brielle asked.

"Camelot," he said. Brielle quickly reached for it and immediately grabbed the book, pulling it off the shelf to hand it to him.

"There you go," she said, impressed that he had read so many of the classic stories.

Jace looked at the book, then glanced at the tower he was standing in. "I feel like I'm in this story right now," he said. "I like eBooks, but there is still nothing quite like holding a book in your hands, turning the pages…"

"I know!" Brielle delighted, "I love the feel of their cover in my hands, the smell of the pages. I could never stop buying books and only read digital ones. I mean, after all, what will future generations have to pass on, eBook files? No, I'm old-fashioned and like old-fashioned things like real books."

"I agree," Jace replied.

She looked at him with a look of appreciation; she was thrilled to learn how much they had in common.

They began to climb up the winding staircase through the gray stone walls, which were dimly lit by ancient-looking sconces that lined the steps on the way up.

"This is incredible," Jace said, "Your home is like nothing I have ever seen before."

"My grandfather is a pretty incredible man," Brielle said proudly.

"Yes, he is," Keoni said softly, the affection for Obadiah evident in her words.

Finally, as they climbed the last of the steps, they reached the top of the tower. It was a large, open circular room that would be best described as a high-tech, space-aged castle turret. Along part of the tower were built in cushioned benches. These benches connected in one continuous curving line, stretching halfway around the room and providing plenty of seating space.

Underneath the benches were built-in drawers where Brielle and Asher could keep their movies, board games, and video games. On one section of the tower was a small counter with a little sink, refrigerator, and cabinets stocked with beverages and snacks. On the opposite side of the tower, where there were no benches, there was a large flat-screen television on a stand that had digital surround sound. Two black video game chairs were on the floor in front of it, and in these two chairs sat Asher and Gideon, hard at work in a battle of skill against each other. They had moved on past their basketball game and were now both clutching plastic guitars, pushing buttons on them madly in an obvious battle for mastering musicality. Neither one of them broke their locked gaze from the TV screen when the others entered the room.

The most impressive part of this tower was the view. The entire tower top was constructed with tinted windows, which would keep a comfortable temperature during the day and, during the night, allowed the stars that sparkled above the treetops to be seen. Jace stood, taking in every detail of this place with a look of astonishment.

"I can't believe you have something this cool in your *house*," he said.

"Hey, Jace!" a voice from the dark sunken chairs called over the sound of the game circling through the room. "You wanna play?"

Jace walked over to the chairs to see Asher offering up his guitar to him. Gideon looked up at him from his chair, "Have you ever played this before?" he asked.

"Um, no, I haven't," Jace said.

"Oh, good, I'm tired of losing to this kid. Have a seat," he said.

Jace sat down, and Asher explained the guitar buttons and how the game was played.

"Think you got it?" Asher asked him.

"I guess we'll find out," Jace replied.

The game began, and Jace started slowly but then, after a while, not only caught on but rapidly passed Gideon in score, beating him at the end.

"Rematch," Gideon said, starting the game again. But now that Jace had the hang of the game, the more he played, the more he succeeded. This time, he beat Gideon's score severely.

"Man! I can't win anything tonight! I think I need a break," he said exasperated at himself.

"Poor Giddy," Brielle said, "having a bad time, huh?" she teased.

"If he weren't so obsessively competitive, it wouldn't hurt so bad!" Keoni said. "But we have to get going anyway; I have a lot of homework tonight."

"Yeah, me too," Gideon agreed, "How 'bout you, Bri? I bet you have tons of paintings to do and pots to make," he chided.

"What's the matter, Giddy? Jealous?" Brielle giggled, "If it makes you feel any better, I do have some Latin homework to do tonight, thank you very much."

Gideon whirled his fingers in the air in a mocking fashion, "Whoo-hoo! Study that dead language, then if you ever meet a monk, you can have a nice conversation," he joked.

"Monks don't always talk," Brielle said, "You'll see, someday there will be a purpose for my knowing Latin… can't think of any right now, but… someday."

Gideon and Keoni said their good-bye and headed back down the winding stone steps of the tower. Asher, growing hungry, followed them to check on dinner. Jace and Brielle sat down on one of the benches and looked out the window.

"I know I keep saying this over and over, but your home is absolutely incredible. I have never seen *anything* like it, not ever. I can't imagine having a place this cool to come to whenever I want. I would never get tired of seeing this view," he said.

Brielle leaned forward and whispered, "This is nothing. You want to see a great view? I'll show you a *great* view," she said, jumping up and over to the center of the room.

She then jumped into the air and grabbed a small chain that dangled from the ceiling. As she came down, there was a loud popping sound, and a door in the ceiling came open. She gave another tug to pull the door down a little farther so she could reach its edge and jumped again to use her weight to extend the door down wider. There was a compact ladder that was attached to the door, exactly like what might be found as a doorway to an attic. She carefully unfolded this ladder and stood on the bottom rung.

Then, looking back over her shoulder at Jace, who smiled delightfully back at her, she said, "Come on up!"

As they reached the top, Jace took a slow walk around.

Once again, he was stunned, "Wow!" he said, "This is *awesome!"*

The September night sky was a thick blanket of dark blue that stretched as far as the eye could see. Its darkness made the incandescent stars that shimmered across it look like fairy dust – a vision that was both brilliant and romantic. To top it all, there was a crescent moon glowing brightly amidst the stars.

The tower top was designed exactly like that of a medieval castle turret; however, instead of open spaces between the stone scallops around the edge, Obadiah had installed rod iron safety railings to prevent anyone from falling off. The tower reached the tops of the surrounding trees, leaving nothing to interfere with the magnificent panoramic view of the glorious star-filled sky.

Brielle reached down and covered the doorway with a safety net that Obadiah had installed, just in case someone forgot that there was a hole there.

"Your grandfather thinks of everything," Jace said.

"Actually, he said he didn't think of this until after he forgot about the door and fell through it himself!" Brielle laughed. "But yes, he does think of everything. Come here," she said as she walked over to the side of the turret.

There were two chaise lounge chairs that Obadiah kept there for star gazing on nights such as this. Brielle pulled them out to the middle of the turret, then sat down on one of them and reclined back for a more relaxing view. Jace watched her and did the same. They sat silently for a moment as they gazed at the beauty surrounding them. A chilly night breeze gently blew, passing through the trees.

"You have a richly blessed life, Brielle," Jace said. "Your home, your family, your friends, even your horses," he smiled, "You can really see the evidence of God in you and your family."

Brielle sat pondering these things in her heart. She had always felt that she was blessed to have the family she had and to live in a home such as this, but it was wonderful to hear it from another person's point of view. It made her so grateful to the Lord, even more than she usually was to know that she was so richly blessed.

"Yes. I really am. And I am very thankful for all I have too. Very thankful," she replied, "Tell me about your home," she said, not taking her gaze away from the brilliant sky.

Jace was silent for a moment, "Well," he paused in thought, "it's nothing as wonderful as this that's for sure."

"Where do you live?" Brielle asked.

"I live just outside of Fairfield. Oh look! There went a shooting star!" he exclaimed.

Brielle looked in the direction he was pointing, just in time to see the last trail of the fading star as it streaked across the sky.

"Beautiful!" she said.

"Can I ask you a question?" Jace asked.

"Of course," Brielle answered.

"Where is your father?" he asked, "Are your parents divorced?"

Brielle was caught off guard at the question. Although it was a natural question for people to ask and one that she had answered many times before, still, it always brought her great difficulty and pain.

Jace noticed the length of time it took for her to answer, "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. I was just curious."

"No, it's okay," she said in a delicate tone. "My father passed away when I was a little girl."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Jace said awkwardly. "I'm sorry if it's too painful to talk about it."

"Don't apologize. It's okay. It's a natural question to ask. It was a difficult experience for me, but I can talk about it," she said, looking over at him in his chair. "I was six years old when he passed away. That's when mama and I came to live here with Oba. My grandmother had also passed right before I was born, and Oba was very lonely. So. We all needed each other."

"Where did you live before coming here?" he asked.

"Uganda," she said.

Jace was taken by surprise, "*Uganda!?* Were you born there?"

"Yes," Brielle smiled.

"And Asher, was he born there too?" he asked.

"No, he was born in the country of Kenya which borders Uganda. We left to come to America a few days after He was born," she paused and took a deep breath, "Asher was born the day after my father died," she said softly, "It's so sad that he never even got to meet him."

Jace stared at her silently, not knowing what to say. He could see the pain his questions were bringing to her, and he did not wish to bring her more.

Although the memories of losing her father were painful, there had been much joy that she remembered about her years growing up in that land. She loved to talk about the village where she lived and her family's little hut home. She told Jace about how her parents were missionaries there and talked about some of their happy times together. She told him about her little friends and the games they played, about the foods that she ate, her little rag doll she loved so much, and her mat bed on the dirt floor. She even spoke some of the native language for him.

Jace was fascinated. He looked at her with wonder in his eyes, completely amazed by her.

"What about you?" she asked.

"Me?" he said sarcastically, "There's nothing as interesting about me as there is about you!" he laughed.

"What? Of course, there is! Everyone is important in this world and has an interesting story of their life. Seriously, tell me about your family, your home.

Where did you grow up?" she asked.

Jace returned his gaze up to the sky, "Well, I…" he began, but was immediately interrupted by the voice of Asher who was climbing up the stairs to the tower roof. Realizing the safety net was on, he stopped mid step and yelled up to Brielle, "Hey, Sis, mama has dinner ready. She wants to know if Jace would like to join us?" he asked.

"Okay! Be right down!" Brielle yelled back. Then she looked over at Jace, "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

Jace had begun to stand up and move his chaise back to the side of the turret, "Oh, thanks, you know, I would really love to, but I didn't realize what time it was. I'd better get home. I have to talk to my dad, and I have some homework to do," he said, "Maybe I could come back another time?" he asked gently.

Brielle was disappointed but understood, "Oh sure, anytime. You are always welcome here."

She walked over to the safety net and unfastened it so they could climb down. Just as she turned to take the first step, she felt his hand on her arm.

"I've been thinking… about… that kiss today," he stammered.

Brielle felt her heart start racing, her face flush and the butterflies attack her stomach all at the same time. She looked up, remembering that kiss had happened just today at lunch.

"I think we may need to try that again sometime. Not out of a demonstration to prove your interest in men or women, but… maybe…" he said, looking at her with his charming smile that melted her completely.

They stared at each other for a moment silently. Then slowly they began to move closer to one another. Brielle couldn't breathe and her hands were trembling; she thought her heart was going to explode out of her chest at any moment. Jace leaned down, gazing into her beautiful green eyes. She lifted her head toward him…

"Brielle!" Asher yelled, "Is he staying for dinner or not?!" he demanded from inside the tower.

Jace stepped back quickly, laughing nervously under his breath. Brielle shut her eyes in frustration and let out an exasperated sigh, "No, Ash," she said with a slightly irritated tone, "Tell her he has to go home."

"Okay, you better come on down, she's got everything ready and Oba's hungry.

Brielle shook her head slightly, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Jace answered, "I have to get going anyway."

They climbed down from the tower rooftop and went down the stone stairs back into the house. Jace thanked Genevieve and Obadiah for their invitation and said good-bye. Brielle walked him out to the front porch. He put on his jacket and started down the porch steps, then stopped and turned around to

her.

"I'll see you at school tomorrow then," he said.

Brielle nodded, "See you tomorrow," she said. She watched him as he started up his motorcycle and drove off into the night.

She looked up at the moonlit, star-studded sky, shining through the tall trees that surrounded her, "Thank You, Father God," she whispered, "for bringing Jace into my life."

11

When Brielle arrived at the school parking lot the next day, Keoni was waiting for her. As they walked to their lockers, Keoni filled her in on what she had heard about Dylan Whitfield.

"The word is spreading like wildfire, the whole school is talking about it," Keoni said, "Everyone is saying that Dylan is in a coma too--just like Lacy! Obadiah was right; this isn't a coincidence. If they are doing drugs, they must be doing the same kind to have this happen in the same way."

Brielle turned to her friend, a concerned look on her face. "You said something yesterday when you told me about your vision. You said that it has all happened before and it will all happen again."

Keoni didn't answer but thought about the words she spoke the day before, realizing Brielle was right.

"When you said it would all happen again, did you mean it would happen with Dylan or with someone else, a third person?" Brielle asked.

Keoni slowly shook her head, "I don't know, that was just what came to my mind at the time."

The two girls were almost to their lockers when Brielle noticed Rateesh down the hall. He was standing in front of his locker, and there was a guy with him, someone she had not seen before. From where she was standing, she could see the stranger had dark blonde hair and was wearing jeans, a dark colored shirt, and had a black backpack on his shoulder. But it was the look on Rateesh's face that caught Brielle's attention the most.

Keoni noticed Brielle's gaze. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

"Rateesh," she said to Keoni, nodding in his direction, "Who is that guy with him?"

"I don't know," Keoni answered, "but Rateesh looks…"

"Terrified," Brielle answered firmly.

"Come on, let's see what's going on," Keoni said.

"Wait," Brielle said, grabbing her friend's arm. The guy had just reached his arm up on the locker so he could hover over Rateesh in a very intimidating stance. Brielle's eyes grew wide. Quickly, she took out her phone and zoomed in as far as she could to take some photos.

"What's wrong?" Keoni asked curiously, looking down the hall at the scene, "What is it?"

"What is that on that guy's arm?" Brielle asked. Keoni tried to make it out, but just then the guy lowered his arm and walked away from Rateesh. Rateesh stood there for a moment, motionless and dazed.

"Okay, come on, and act casual," Brielle said, taking off down the hallway. She passed Rateesh and smiled, waving to him, but he still looked fearfully glazed over and did not notice her. She pressed on down the hall as fast as she

could, through the busy students on their way to class. She could see the guy at the far end of the hallway; he had already reached the door and headed out to his left. But by the time she reached the door, he was gone.

Brielle had lost Keoni in the crowd and turned to find her friend. When she found her, she asked, “Did you see his arm?”

“No, I tried, but he moved too quickly,” Keoni said, “What was it?”

“I’m not sure, I have to download my photos and enlarge them to see, but it… It looked like a large burn scar,” she said, tucking her phone back into her bag.

Keoni looked puzzled, processing the information, then it hit her, and her eyes grew wide, “Sidney!” she exclaimed, remembering the story Laura had told them at the hospital about the scar on his arm.

“Hey, Brielle,” she heard a voice come from behind her. She turned to see Zach Thompson from her art class standing there.

She smiled at him, “Oh, hi Zach. How are you?”

“I’m good,” he said with a sweet smile.

“This is my friend, Keoni,” Brielle introduced her friend, “Keoni, this is Zach. He and I are in the same art class.”

Keoni smiled as she looked at Zach. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, full lips, and long eyelashes. He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved knit shirt that clearly outlined the width of his chest and his broad shoulders. He had a slight cleft in his chin, and Keoni thought that overall, he was an extremely attractive guy.

“Hi,” she said softly, “it’s nice to meet you. But I think I’ve seen you before, you’re on the football team, right?”

He nodded, “Yeah, it’s my first year.”

“My brother is Gideon Toussaint,” she said.

“Oh yeah?” he answered politely, “Are you his big sister or his little sister?”

Keoni smiled, “Uh, I guess I’m the big sister, but only by a minute or so,” she laughed. Zach looked confused.

“We’re twins,” she said.

“Oh, gotcha,” he said, then he turned to Brielle, “Um, Brielle, I was wondering if you were free Saturday night? I’m having a party at my house, and I would love it if you could come, and of course Keoni and Gideon too,” he added as he handed her a paper with all his information on it. Brielle smiled graciously at him and looked over the flyer.

“Thank you. Is it your birthday or something?” she asked innocently.

Zach laughed, “No, I’m just… having a party.”

Brielle looked at him curiously, “You mean like a drinking party?”

“Legally… I can’t exactly say that,” he laughed, “I’m supplying the food, but I’m sure everyone will be bringing what they want to drink. Can you come?”

Brielle gave him a slight grin. “I don’t drink. But thank you anyway,” she

said, catching a shocked look on Keoni's face from the corner of her eye as she handed the paper back to him.

"You don't have to drink," he said quickly, "In fact, I won't be drinking anything either."

"I'm sorry," she said gently, "I found myself at a party like that once and it was a mistake. I didn't enjoy it. I like to hang out with sober people," she said gently, "But thank you for thinking of me, I'll see you in art," and with that she placed her hand on Keoni's arm and began to walk down the hall.

Keoni turned to Zach as they were walking away, "Bye Zach, it was nice meeting you," she said. Zach waved at her, his face full of disappointment.

After they had walked down the hall, Keoni turned to Brielle, "Girl, what is the matter with you?! He is totally hot!"

"Yeah," Brielle said casually, "He's cute."

"Cute!? That boy is more than cute, and he obviously likes you! Why don't we just go to the party? You're such a snob, we don't have to drink, we could just hang and talk with Zach," she pleaded.

Brielle stopped and looked her friend dead in the eye, "Please tell me you are not serious. Please tell me that you would not throw out your morals on underage drinking or hanging out in a drinking environment just because a guy is cute? Don't you remember that guy from the youth group last year and how he invited us to his, *birthday party*," she said using her fingers to create quotation marks as she spoke the words, "I mean honestly, do you *really* think it would be fun to go and hang out with a bunch of people we don't know and watch them turn themselves into intoxicated teen blobs of flesh doing crazy things and throwing up everywhere?"

Keoni sighed and rolled her eyes, "No, not really-- but why didn't you tell me about him before?"

"There's nothing to tell," Brielle answered, heading back down the hallway, "He's in my art class and he likes to paint-- he's a really good artist too. But that's all I know."

Keoni quickened her pace to catch up to her friend. "Okay, okay, I hear you on the personal morals and all that, you're right, that's not our bag of fun. But I think the only thing that could keep you from being at least a little bit interested in someone as gorgeous as Zach is because you already have your heart set on someone else?" she hinted.

Brielle grinned, "Perhaps," she said slyly, looking at her friend from the corner of her eye.

"Uh, huh," Keoni said, "To turn that blond boy down, I would say it's not a perhaps but a *definitely,*" she laughed.

Brielle grinned at her friend, "I'll see you in history," she said and then turned and walked down the hall.

Brielle's first class for the day was art, and noticing that she was a little bit

early, she quickly took out her phone to study the photos she had taken of Rateesh and the guy in the hallway. But it was no use; she would have to download them to a computer and try to enlarge them to see if the strange mark on the guy's arm was in fact, a burn scar.

"Is that your boyfriend or something?" Zach's voice came from over her shoulder, startling her.

Brielle grabbed her chest in fright. "Oh, Zach, you scared me," she laughed, "No, he is *not* my boyfriend."

"Who is he?" he asked, pulling up a chair to her table.

"I don't know yet," she said, bringing it closer to her, "But once I get this enlarged, I think I will be able to find out."

"What is it you are trying to see?" he asked, looking over to see the photo.

Brielle turned her phone to show him the image more clearly, "You see this guy's arm here?" she asked. Zach nodded, "See that strange mark on it?"

"Yeah, what is that?" he asked, intrigued by the photo.

"That's what I need to see," she said.

"Why?"

Brielle sighed, "It's kind of complicated. I just really need to see this photo larger. Oh well, nothing I can do about it right now," she said as she started to put her phone in her bag.

"Wait a minute," Zach said, getting up from the table to get his backpack. "I've got my iPad and I have a photo app on it. Why don't you send me those photos, and we'll enlarge them right now?"

"Really?" Brielle said excitedly, "That would be great!"

She sent him the photos, and in no time at all, he had them downloaded and enlarged. Seeing the photos on the large screen in such clarity, it was easy to identify the strange mark on the guy's arm was a severe burn scar.

"Sidney," Brielle whispered to herself.

"Who's Sidney?" Zach asked. Brielle was lost in thought, "Huh? Oh, uh, he's the ex-boyfriend of someone I know."

"Are you interested in him?" Zach answered.

"Oh! No, nothing like that," Brielle said, "He wasn't a good boyfriend to her. He broke her heart. I've just never seen him before today. I thought it was him, though, and it is," she said, looking harder at the photo. "Can you show me the other photo in there, the one where you can see his face?"

Zach pulled up the other photo and enlarged it, too. Brielle studied his face. Laura was right. He was just an average-looking guy. But the photo reflected a stern seriousness in his face, and something foreboding in his eyes as he stared down at Rateesh. He looked a little bit older, too, but he had a goatee, which might have contributed to that.

"Have you seen that guy before?" she asked him.

Zach studied his face, "No, but it's still September, I'm sure there are lots of

people I haven't seen yet," he replied.

Brielle sighed softly, "I wish I could print this," she murmured.

"Why? Is there a problem with this guy or something?" Zach asked curiously, "It doesn't look like he's having a very friendly conversation with that kid."

Brielle looked closely at Rateesh. She thought his face looked worried before when she saw him in the hallway, but now, looking at him closely, she could see his eyes were full of fear.

"Well, it's…" Brielle paused, "It's kind of a long story. I just need to show this photo to my friends."

"Gideon and Keoni?" he asked.

"Yeah," she answered, "and Jace."

"Jace? Jace, who?" Zach asked inquisitively.

"Jace Roberts," Brielle answered.

"Jace Roberts? He goes *here*?" he asked quickly with an irritated tone.

"Yeah, do you know him?" she said, putting her phone in her bag.

"Yeah," he said in a deflated tone, "I do. Is Jace your boyfriend?"

Brielle stared at him for a moment, unsure how to answer. "No," she paused, wishing she could respond differently, "We're just friends."

Zach looked at her for a moment, his face more uplifted from her response, then he glanced down at his iPad. "You can borrow this if you need to," he said.

"Really?" she asked, "You wouldn't mind?"

"No, it's fine, especially if it will help you. I can pick it up from you at lunch," he answered.

"Oh, thank you! I appreciate it so much, you have no idea how much it will help me," she answered.

"Good," he said, "and maybe you might change your mind about coming to my party," he said with his sweet grin as he stood up from his chair.

She laughed lightly, "Thanks, I'll take good care of it," she said, carefully placing it in her bag inside the same compartment as Lacy's journal.

All through the rest of her first and second classes, she could hardly concentrate. Thoughts of Sidney kept racing through her head. Was he a student here? If not, why was he on the school campus? What was he saying to Rateesh to make him so scared? Where did he disappear to so quickly today? She couldn't wait to talk to Keoni and Jace.

As soon as dance was over, she didn't change but threw her clothes on over her dance leotard and tights and raced over to her third class. Hopefully, there would be enough time to show them the photos before history class began.

As she entered the door, her eyes swept to the back of the room, where she saw Jace sitting in his seat. He already had his glasses on and was sitting back, relaxed in his chair. She couldn't help the change in her heart rate when she saw him, and she knew that although Zach was very nice, so good-looking, and quite

talented, there was only one guy for her. She smiled broadly when she saw him and headed for her seat.

Jace looked at her when she came in and smiled warmly at her, “Wow,” he said, “You’re here early.”

Brielle was so early in fact that Keoni hadn’t yet made it to class.

“How is it that you are always here so fast?” she asked curiously as she sat down and got settled.

“My second class is just across the hall,” he said.

“Ah, that would do it,” she giggled, “What class is it?” she asked, opening her backpack to take out the iPad.

“Creative writing,” Jace said.

Brielle felt herself immediately tense as she remembered Taryn saying they were in that class together. “Hmm,” she said, trying to sound casual, “do you like it?”

“Yeah, I love it,” he said.

Just then, Keoni came in and sat down, a puzzled look appeared on her face when she saw Brielle there, and her dance clothes peeking out from under her shirt.

“Why are you here so early?” she asked.

“That seems to be the question of the day,” Brielle answered with a laugh, not looking up from the iPad as she opened the photo files.

“Where did you get that?” Keoni asked curiously.

Brielle didn’t look up as she searched for the files. “Just a second,” she said, turning to Jace. “Okay, today when Keoni and I were in the hall, we saw this guy who was talking to Rateesh— “

“And Rateesh looked scared silly,” Keoni interjected.

“Yeah, he did,” Brielle agreed, “I noticed something strange about the guy who was talking to him, so I grabbed my phone and took some photos. This is what I got,” she said as she turned the iPad around to Jace and Keoni. They looked at it closely and then Keoni gasped, “That *is* Sidney,” she whispered.

“Sidney?” Jace asked in a confused tone as he reached for the iPad to take a closer look.

“Yeah,” Brielle said, “Remember yesterday Laura told us that Lacy’s ex-boyfriend was named Sidney and that he had a severe burn scar on his arm?”

A look of realization came across Jace’s face as he remembered Laura’s story, “Oh, yeah, that’s right. So, he is a student here.”

“That I don’t know,” Brielle said, “He took off and we tried to follow him, but he went out the hall door and just… disappeared.”

Keoni reached over and took the iPad from Jace to get a better look. “Poor Rateesh,” she said, “From this close up, you can see how terrified he is.”

“I’ve got to ask him about this,” Brielle said. “I know he might not talk about it with me, but I have to try. Something very wrong is going on here,” she said.

"Yes, but we don't know who this guy is or what he's up to," Jace said, "You should be careful. Let me try talking to Rateesh first and see what he will tell me, okay?"

"Okay, but what if he doesn't tell you?" she asked.

"Then maybe I start doing a little investigating myself to find out what is going on," he said.

"Yes, and you need to be careful too," Brielle said.

Keoni looked up from studying the iPad, "Hey, can you email me those photos? Maybe I should show them to Hadley and see what he thinks about it?"

"That's a great idea," Brielle replied.

"Hadley the cop?" Jace asked, remembering the first day he met him at the mini-mart.

"Yes, we're good friends with him. I'm sure he will be happy to help us," she said, handing the iPad back to Brielle. "You never answered me. Where did you get this iPad?"

"Oh, it's Zach's," she said as she shut it down and carefully placed it in her backpack.

"Zach?" Jace asked gently with a very curious tone.

Brielle looked up at him, "Yeah, he's this guy in my art class," she said casually.

"A *hot* guy in your art class," Keoni said absent-mindedly as she took out her book and notepad.

"Zach, who?" Jace asked.

"Zach Thompson," Brielle replied. She could tell from the look on Jace's face that he knew the name well; it was the same look that Zach had on his face when he heard Jace's name.

"Do you know him?" she asked lightly.

"He's on the school baseball team," he said, as he began to draw on his notepad.

"The baseball team?" Brielle asked, "I thought he was on the football team."

"He is, he plays both," Jace said, sounding slightly irritated with the conversation.

"He's in my first hour, and he saw me studying the photo and helped me enlarge it. Then he said I could borrow the iPad to show you guys the photos," she said, taking out her book and notepad.

Jace nodded his head but didn't look up from his scribbling. Just then, Mr. Bennet started class. Brielle glanced over at Keoni, who gave her a look with lifted eyebrows and a clenched smile as if to say, "I'm sorry about that."

Once class was over, the three friends headed to the lunchroom. Jace was quiet in the lunch line. Brielle got her usual variety of foods accommodated by a bottle of chocolate milk, and spotted a table for them. Gideon had already come

in and was seated with Taryn at her table. He waved to them as they passed by.

"I just don't know what he sees in that girl," Keoni sneered.

"Normally, I would try to convince you to be patient, but given my own personal experience with her… I agree," Brielle said. "I did want to show him these photos, though."

Then she looked at Jace, "Would you mind asking him to come over here for a moment to see these photos? I really would like to enjoy my lunch today *without* a side of Taryn Cavanaugh," she said with a bit of sarcasm.

"Yes, and I would like to *not* have indigestion either," Keoni agreed.

"Sure," Jace said as he got up from the table.

Keoni and Brielle watched him walk away. "He's not very happy about you having Zach's iPad," Keoni observed.

"No, he's not. I don't know what the problem is. I'm not interested in Zach," she said.

They watched as Jace crossed the lunchroom and talked to Gideon. Brielle saw Taryn's face light up when he approached the table. Then Gideon got up and started toward them. Jace began to follow him, but Taryn reached up and grabbed Jace's arm to stop him. Brielle's heart began to pound harder in her chest, and she felt her face flush. She took a slow, deep breath as she tried to see what was happening, but Jace had his back to her, and she couldn't clearly see anything that was going on.

"Just keep breathing," Keoni whispered in her ear, seeing the reaction her friend was having to the conversation taking place between Jace and Taryn.

"That *girl,"* Brielle whispered back, "I think she needs a good head slap."

"Yes, I agree," Keoni soothed, "but it's times like these when we need to use the fruits of the spirit like… patience… kindness… self-control."

"Right now, all I can think of is, *'I will raise My hand and strike*… Exodus 3:20,'" Brielle giggled.

Keoni looked at her and laughed, "Whoa, slow down there, Moses, are you going to finish that verse? Doesn't it say something like, 'I will raise My hand and strike *the Egyptians'*?"

"Yeah, I thought I would just skip that part. She's hardly an Egyptian, but all I need is the striking part," she said, turning around in disgust to sit down.

"What kills me," Keoni said, "is that Giddy is so blind to all her flirting and actions with other guys. I just don't know what's wrong with that boy these days."

Just as she finished her statement, Gideon reached the table. "Jace said you wanted to show me something. What's up?" he asked.

Brielle looked up at him and asked him to sit down, glancing over her shoulder to see that the conversation between Jace and Taryn was still taking place. She rolled her eyes and reached down to take out the iPad. She explained what had taken place that morning as she pulled up the photos.

"I don't know if Keoni told you or not, but we learned yesterday that Lacy has an ex-boyfriend named Sidney. Her parents said the drastic change in her took place while they were together. Then he abruptly broke up with her before school began," she said. "They believe he was the one who introduced her to using drugs. They can't prove it, but the pieces all seem to fit together. So, this morning, Keoni and I saw this guy talking to Rateesh, and I grabbed a photo of him with my phone. Take a look at this and tell me what you think that is on his arm?" she asked, handing him the iPad and looking back over her shoulder at Jace. He had finished talking to Taryn and was now headed back across the lunchroom.

Brielle was relieved that he was no longer talking with Taryn, but still didn't enjoy that he did. Jace approached the table as Gideon was looking at the photos.

Brielle turned her attention quickly back to Gideon, "What does that look like on his arm?" she asked.

"I'm no expert, but to me it looks like he was badly burned. Why?" he replied.

Brielle looked up at Keoni with a confirming expression. Gideon was the perfect test. He had no idea that Sidney had a severe burn scar on his arm, so for him to say that justified their suspicions.

"That's what we thought it was, too. Lacy's mother told us that Sidney had a severe burn scar on his arm. That has to be him; he fits her description perfectly. Have you ever seen him before?" she asked.

"No, not that I can think of. Who's he talking to here? The guy looks freaked out," Gideon commented.

"He is," Jace said, "that's Rateesh. He's the kid I've been worried about."

"Oh, okay," Gideon said, "Is this one of the guys you've seen harassing him?"

"No, they are four guys in our chemistry class. Two of them are football players; I'm not sure if the other two are, but I've never seen this guy before," Jace replied.

Then Brielle saw his facial expression change at something he saw behind her, and he shifted in his chair from being very relaxed to being very tense.

"Hey, Brielle," she heard Zach's voice from over her shoulder. She turned around to see him smiling at her.

"Hi, Zach," she replied sweetly.

"Hi, Zach," Keoni repeated. Zach looked over to see Keoni sitting by Gideon, "Hey Keoni, hey man," he said to Gideon.

"What's up, Zach?" Gideon said, reaching his fist out to give him a pound.

"Hey, Jace," Zach said a little reluctantly, "I didn't know you were going here now."

Jace tried to look friendly. "Yeah, I just transferred this year."

“Are you going out for the team?” Zach asked.

Jace slightly shrugged, “I’m still not sure yet.”

Brielle looked at the two guys, puzzled. “How do you two know each other?”

Both guys sat quietly for a moment, then Jace spoke, “We’ve played on club teams together,” he said in a low tone.

“For baseball?” she asked.

Jace nodded but didn’t speak.

Brielle looked back at Zach, who also nodded in agreement but didn’t say anything. It was obvious there was some sort of rivalry between them.

Zach changed the subject and turned his attention to Brielle, “Did you show them the photos?” he asked, noticing the iPad on the table.

“Oh, yes, thank you for letting me borrow this,” she said, picking it up and closing it down. “Now I don’t have to sit and wonder about that all day,” she laughed lightly, trying to cut through the tension in the air between Zach and Jace. She handed him the iPad back carefully, “Here you go, and thanks again,” she said, trying to think of something else polite to say without prolonging the awkwardness any longer.

“Glad I could help you,” he said gently. Then he leaned down to whisper in her ear. Brielle could hear Jace taking a slow, deep breath beside her. “And maybe you’ll reconsider my invitation for Saturday night,” he whispered. He rose with a broad smile on his face, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said to Brielle, then he said goodbye to the group while tucking the iPad in his backpack and leaving the lunchroom.

Keoni had been watching the scene between the two guys closely and tried to take the subject back to Sidney.

“What should we do about Sidney?” she asked lightly. Brielle seized the opportunity given to her.

“I think that your idea of talking to Hadley is good. But I wonder if there is any way we could check to see if he is a registered student here at Fairfield High. We can also hope that Rateesh will talk to you,” she said, looking at Jace. Now that Zach had gone, Jace had relaxed a little bit. His eyes were focused on his plate, where he was lightly tapping his fork on his French fries, obviously deep in thought. He didn’t respond.

“Jace,” Brielle said, “did you hear me?”

“Huh?” he said, looking up, “No, what did you say?”

“I said we have to hope that Rateesh will talk to you about Sidney,” she repeated.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, still slightly disconnected from the conversation, “let’s hope.”

Gideon stood up from his chair. “My lady is waiting for me to dine with her. I’ll catch you all later,” he said, then walked back over to Taryn and sat down.

Keoni, being an observant friend, saw that Jace and Brielle needed time to talk alone. She took the opportunity of Gideon's departure to gather up her food tray and bag. "Hey, Bri, Terri is over there by himself. I'm going to go sit with him today, okay?" she said casually, giving Brielle a quick wink. Brielle looked behind her to see Terri sitting at a table alone, reading a fashion magazine.

"You're such a good friend," Brielle said, sending Keoni a double meaning for her kindness. "I'll call you later," she said, patting Keoni's arm as she passed by. Then she turned to Jace.

"Are you okay?" she asked gently.

Jace looked at her intently, "What did Zach whisper in your ear just now?"

Brielle didn't want to cause any tension for him, but she also wanted to be honest with him. "He invited me to a party at his house this Saturday. I asked him if it was a drinking party, and when he told me yes, I politely declined. Just now, he asked me to reconsider his invitation."

"So… if the party wasn't a drinking party, would you want to go?" he asked.

Brielle didn't even have to think about her answer: "I would want to go if you were there."

Jace's eyes softened at her answer.

"He's in your art class?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Is he any good?" he smiled.

"Yeah, he's a pretty good painter," she said, taking a bite of her now cold mashed potatoes.

Jace sighed, "Great," he said sarcastically.

Brielle looked at him with a furrowed brow.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I just don't enjoy the fact that Zach Thompson is with you every day and that he has invited you to a party," he said in his regular tone but with more directness.

Brielle was feeling confused, "I can't help those things. I mean, I told you that I declined his invitation and that I would only want to go if you were there. Doesn't that make you feel better?"

Jace sighed, "Yes, it makes me feel good that you declined and that you would want to go with me. It doesn't make me feel better that he likes you and gets to spend time talking to you," he said flatly.

Brielle looked deep into his dark brown eyes as she thought about what he said. Inside, she was churning with emotion. Part of her felt wonderful at his concern, and part of her was completely frustrated.

"So, it's not okay for me to talk to another guy because you obviously have past issues with him, but it's okay for you to talk to Taryn over there even though you know she is flirting with you, and she completely hates me?" she asked.

Jace looked up quickly with an expression of surprise on his face at her response. “What? She just asked me about an assignment that we have coming up this month in our creative writing class.”

“Then why does it bother you so much that I am in a class with Zach Thompson and sometimes talk to him, something I cannot help, when you are in a class with Taryn, something you cannot help-- and yet you talk to her?” she asked.

Jace sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. “You’re right. You’re totally right. I’m sorry… I just, well…” he stammered, “…you’re right, I shouldn’t have acted like that. I’m very sorry.”

Brielle’s face lifted in surprise as this was not the response she was expecting. She softened her tone, “I’m sorry too. That girl gets on my nerves. I don’t like the way she looks at you.”

“How does she look at me?” he asked curiously, pressing to see what she would say.

Brielle rolled her eyes, “Come on! Are you blind? You mean to say that you can’t tell when she is flirting with you? As soon as you come anywhere near her, she immediately gets all mushy and starry-eyed.

Brielle decided that it was time to be honest with him about her feelings. Enough was enough; no more beating around the bush. She sighed and grabbed hold of the edge of her seat, trying to steady her trembling hands.

“Jace, what I want to say is… is that I really like you… I think you would have to be crazy not to know that already, so you don’t have to worry about Zach. He’s just a friend… now that I think about it, he’s not even that. Honestly, I barely know him. I probably talked to him today more than I ever have. I never even told Keoni about him before today. So please, whatever this thing is between you and him, don’t let it affect our friendship, okay?” she asked softly.

Jace watched her closely as he listened to her words, and as he did, a broad grin slowly spread across his face.

“Are you always so bold to speak your feelings like this?” Jace asked, a little awestruck by her bravery of heart.

Brielle laughed, “I sometimes speak what is in my heart and mind… sometimes that can be a bad thing.”

Jace looked at her for a moment, then lowered his eyes in thought, still holding onto his broad, beautiful smile.

“So… you like me, huh?” he asked, clearly enjoying the information. “That’s good to know.”

Brielle grinned back and felt her face flush, and her stomach was jammed with fluttering butterflies. She could hardly believe she just told him that. She gazed into his glossy brown eyes, but at that moment, she couldn’t find any words to say. Then Jace noticed the clock. They had completely lost track of time, and as they looked around the lunchroom, they found they were almost

the only two students there; even Keoni and Terri had left. Quickly, Brielle wrapped up her sandwich and chips and crammed them into her bag.

"When will you see Rateesh? In Chemistry?" she asked Jace.

"Last hour, we have a lab today, so I will try and talk to him then and see if he will tell me anything," he said as he gathered up his things. "I'll call you tonight and let you know what happened."

"Okay, I'll see him next hour, but I'll try to resist the urge to interrogate him," she laughed, and then they both headed out the door for their next class.

Brielle kicked Piper lightly into a trot to head down the pathway through the woods. She needed to get out to the open sky and spend time in prayer. As she rode, she thought about her day, about Rateesh and Sidney, about Zach and Jace, and then she just thought about Jace. She smiled to herself at the thought of him being jealous of her talking to Zach. It made her feel wonderful to know that he cared that much about her. Or did he? Now that she had taken the time to think about their conversation in the lunchroom, she had nervous thoughts. Boldly, she told him that she liked him and didn't hold her feelings back. But… he didn't respond. Did he like her in the same way? He didn't say. Why didn't he say? Maybe he didn't feel the same way about her as she did about him.

Surely his actions today could speak louder than words-- or lack of words, rather-- but why didn't he tell her of his feelings, too?

Once she started thinking about all her conversations with Jace, she began to realize that she didn't know much about him. She knew a few basic things, but it seemed as if every time she asked him a personal question about his family or his home, he either changed the subject or they were interrupted. She had opened up to him in ways she had never done with anyone outside of Keoni and Gideon. These thoughts and feelings were all things to pray about. She knew the Lord would help her with them.

Once she reached the clearing, she signaled Piper, and the two took off to race across the beach. How they both loved these moments together, being young and strong, racing against the wind fast and free. After a while, they ran in the surf, and then Brielle dismounted, walking with her precious friend along the sand before turning her horse loose to graze amidst the beach grass. Then she sat down on a familiar, rugged piece of driftwood where she often came to sit and pray.

Brielle began by thanking the Lord for His hand upon her that day. She prayed for her family and her friends. She prayed very hard for Lacy, Laura, and Jim, asking Jesus for His healing power to be upon them all. Then she asked God to reveal what was going on with Rateesh and Sidney, if that in fact was Sidney she had seen. She prayed about her relationship with Jace, asking God to guide and direct her in everything she said and did regularly. She wanted God's will to be done with her relationship with him. She turned all her worries and frustrations over to Jesus so He could help her. Although at times it was so hard

to do, she would trust in Him.

That night, after dinner, her cell phone rang. She thought it would be Jace, as he had said he would call her after he talked with Rateesh. When she picked it up, though, she saw that it was Keoni.

"Hey," she said happily.

"Hey," Keoni said with a hint of sadness in her tone, "How are you?"

"I'm good, how are you?" Brielle asked, concerned about how her friend sounded.

"I'm okay, just had a difficult day," she said.

"Why? What happened?" Brielle asked.

"I'm just sick of teenagers," she sighed.

"You do know that you and I are teenagers, right?" Brielle laughed lightly.

"Yeah, okay, let me rephrase that. I'm sick of *cruel* teenagers," she said. "You know how I left you and Jace today and sat with Terri at lunch?" she began, "I saw that there are some students here who torment him because he's gay."

"What kind of things do they do?" Brielle asked.

"They call him names, say embarrassing things, and tell gross jokes. You may not have noticed, but we left early from lunch because *I* couldn't take it anymore," she answered. "Although he hates it, he said it's something he deals with and expects."

"That's terrible, it makes me sad to hear it," Brielle said.

"I know," Keoni replied.

"What did you say to him?" Brielle asked.

"I just used the opportunity to talk to him about the love of Jesus and how no matter what anyone else said, Jesus loves him and was there for him," she answered.

"What did he say to that?" Brielle asked.

"Not much. He believes that God made him gay and doesn't understand why people who claim to be Christians are some of the very ones who are so cruel…" She paused, "I just need to spend some more time talking to Obadiah about it because I don't always know what to say. So, have you heard anything about Lacy today?"

"Mama told me she and Oba went to the hospital today to see her. She said she had a good talk with Laura and that Oba had made friends with her husband, Jim. She said that Lacy's condition is not any better; her vital signs are still pretty bad. But there was some good news, she said that when she and Oba asked to pray for Lacy that Jim didn't leave the room this time," Brielle answered.

"That is good news," Keoni replied. "Giddy went to the hospital to visit Dylan. He's not any better, but he's not any worse. Giddy's so frustrated; he asked if he could pray for him and his family while he was there, but they said no. They don't believe in God."

"What did Giddy say?" Brielle asked.

"You know, Giddy, he just politely said that he would pray for him at home," she answered.

"Oba always says he doesn't know how people who don't believe in God go from day to day with all the things that life brings," Brielle said, "Especially in times of crisis like this."

"I don't know either. I know I need God to help me every day of my life. Anyway, enough of my drama, what happened today with you and Jace?" she asked eagerly, sounding more uplifted.

Brielle filled her in on their conversation and everything that was said.

"When you told him that you liked him, he didn't tell you how he feels about you?" Keoni asked innocently.

This question stirred Brielle again about her former thoughts while at the beach. Even though she had decided to leave this issue with Jesus and let Him work on it for her, she picked it back up again, telling Keoni of her worries on the matter.

Brielle sighed, "No, he didn't say anything, and you know it didn't hit me until I was at the beach today on my ride with Piper. I played the conversation back in my head, and then it began to bother me. I guess I was too busy today to spend time thinking about his lack of response. I prayed about it to give it to God to help me. Still, I have to admit-- it does bother me. It kind of hurts, you know? I mean, how come he could try to kiss me last night, but he can't tell me how he feels?"

"Wait, wait, wait, when did he try to kiss you? Details girl! When did this happen?" Keoni demanded.

"Oh, yeah! I forgot to tell you about that! Last night, after you and Giddy left, I took him on the tower to look at the stars," Brielle began.

"Nice," Keoni added.

"Before he left, he said that he had thought a lot about the kiss I had given him at lunch and that he would like to try it again sometime just because I wanted to and not to prove a point," Brielle finished.

"Whoo-oo *girl*! What are you worried about? That proves it! He likes you!" she said, delighted.

"I guess. I just would like to hear it from him in words--you know I'm an incurable romantic," Brielle replied.

"Yes, and you've studied too much Shakespeare and read too many Jane Austin novels. But my mom says that men are creatures of the physical and women are creatures of the emotional. Remember, *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus*? That pretty much says it all," Keoni said.

"Honestly, it's so much more than him just telling me how he feels about me. He hasn't told me *anything* about himself, his family, his past, present, nothing," Brielle said flatly. "Like when I asked about his parents, I got no information. When I asked where he lived or what his home was like, nothing, he

always seems to change the subject on me, or we get interrupted, and he never goes back to answer any of my questions. It's almost like…"

"What?" Keoni asked, eager for her to continue.

"It's almost like he's hiding something," she said.

"What? You're crazy. What could he be hiding? He's so sweet and kind, he doesn't talk like most guys I know. He's always so proper, polite, and easy to get along with. Then there is his best quality of loving Jesus. What could he possibly be hiding? He doesn't seem the type to have some spooky dark past or something," Keoni said.

"Yeah, so then why doesn't he open up?" Brielle retorted.

"I don't know. He is pretty shy," Keoni said, "Maybe he just struggles with verbal communication."

Brielle sighed, "Yeah, that could be, he is so shy, huh?"

"Yes, but in such a sweet way. Don't worry, he'll come around. I think that boy is crazy about you. You can see it in his eyes," Keoni laughed. "Don't worry about it anymore; remember you said you gave it to Jesus? Then let Him have it."

"I'll try," Brielle said.

"I've gotta go, lots of homework to be done tonight. I'll see you tomorrow," Keoni said.

Brielle made up her mind that she wasn't going to think anything else negative about Jace. She would leave her worries with the Lord.

She looked at the clock; it was 7:30 pm. There was still time for Jace to call her. She decided to get her Latin homework done.

She looked at the clock; now it was 8:20 pm. There was still time.

Should she call him? No, he said he was going to call her tonight, so she would wait and see if he did. She thought about Rateesh and how scared he had looked that day. It took all her self-control in Latin class today not to ask him about what happened that morning in the hallway. She wondered if the guy who was talking to him was Sidney and what he wanted with Rateesh. She noticed that Rateesh did seem different today in class. He was always sweet and friendly, but today he seemed distracted, nervous, and a little more distant than usual.

The time was 8:35 pm. He still could call. Mama always said it was poor manners to make social phone calls past 9 pm, so she would give him until then.

Opening her backpack, she saw Lacy's journal and took it out. She had thumbed through it a few times but didn't have the time to study it until now. Starting on the first page, Lacy had written her name, address and phone number with a message saying:

This is the journal of
Lacy Weaver
It DOESN'T belong to YOU, so DON'T read it!

"She certainly gets to the point," Brielle whispered to herself as she turned the page, "Sorry, Lacy, but your mother asked me to."

It was clear to her that Lacy had been making entries in the journal ever since her breakup with Sidney. This must have been a tool she used to release her feelings and heartache. Brielle deduced this from Lacy's first entry. It was a poem.

A Lover's Lament

My head is aching, my heart is breaking,
My hands tremble and my eyes cry.
I loved Sidney, and he loved me, but how he's gone...
and I don't know why.
I'm lost within this darkened world
and I don't know what to do.
So, I'll change my head and lie in bed
and sleep until I'm new

The poem stunned Brielle, capturing her attention completely. Did Lacy try to put herself into a coma? Did she think that if she took enough drugs, she could sleep until her heartache vanished? Or worse, did she mean sleep until she passed away and became something different than a living human?

On the next pages, there were some strange drawings of broken hearts, roses, and skulls, combined with other monstrous images with large teeth and terrifying eyes. If these were the images trapped inside Lacy's mind, they were all very dark and frightening.

There were song lyrics quoted in a few places, and there were photos taken of Lacy with someone that Brielle assumed was Sidney, but she had scratched his face out or blackened it with a marker. Then she came to another poem, much darker than the first; this poem had no title.

The darkness has come, slowly creeping, closing in around me, bringing the demons with their jagged teeth and serrated claws. They've taken their hold on me and I cannot escape. They lacerate me, slicing my arms, laughing, tormenting me in glee. I look to the lighthouse, desperate for glow, but there is no light. I must wait until I can set my feet on hallowed ground, hoping to obtain the power to crush them, for I know, they will come again.

Brielle laid the journal on her chest. This poem was like nothing she had ever read before. It was so dark, so heavy, full of pain and suffering. More than anything else, the poem confirmed in her spirit how desperately Lacy needed Jesus. But would she be willing to open her heart to Him?

She closed her eyes and began to pray hard for Lacy. She called her name out to the Lord over and over again, asking for direction on what God wanted her to do. She fell asleep while praying for Lacy.

It was 10:15 pm. Jace never called.

That night, Brielle had a nightmare from the images and writings in Lacy's journal. She was inside the darkness in Lacy's heart, and she was seeing all the pain that dwelt there. She was running fast, running hard from the horrifying images Lacy's heartache harbored. Then she ran through a mist until she found herself in a cemetery. There were large hovering trees around her and old tombstones. Some were small, some were large, and there were crypts and mausoleums, all dimly lit by the light of the moon above.

As she walked, she saw in the distance a figure resting against one of the mausoleums that had an elegant angel on top with outstretched arms. From where she was, she could only see the backside of the figure. As she approached, walking through the haze that surrounded her, she began to see that the figure was Lacy. She started to call out to her when suddenly she walked into something, as if she had walked into an invisible wall. She could feel it in front of her, like a large pane of glass blocking her from traveling any farther in any direction. It was as if some unknown force had surrounded her and closed her off her movement.

Trapped there inside this transparent cage, she was only able to watch what was happening around her. She saw Lacy stand up and take something small and shiny from her pocket. She held it to her face momentarily, then she suddenly dropped her arms open wide, reaching outwards and tilted her head back, her face lifted to the angel on top of the mausoleum. Up from the ground, a bright red beam of light appeared, shining on her, revealing her completely in the mist as she stood in her vulnerable position.

Brielle placed her hands on the transparent wall in front of her and called out her name, "Lacy!" she shouted, "Lacy!"

Slowly, Lacy turned her head to look in Brielle's direction. Brielle called to her again. She pounded on the force that had her enclosed. "Lacy!"

Lacy seemed to give a slight smile, and she slowly raised her right arm in Brielle's direction, reaching for her. But within that moment, creatures of darkness came flying into the cemetery from all directions, circling Lacy. A terrible and foul odor plagued the atmosphere from their abrupt presence, and as they came closer to Lacy, they took the form of grotesque and terrifying demons.

Their skin was dark and scaly, like that of a serpent, and they oozed blood from their scales, making them look wet and slimy. Their eyes were oversized, bloodshot, and yellow with no eyelids, and they all had enormous razor-sharp teeth that glistened from the blood that ran down them. The sight of these demons alone was enough to petrify Brielle, but it was the look on their faces

that sent the bone-chilling fear down her spine. The demons were all laughing in ghoulish, grating voices, and the broad, sinister smiles stretched across their revolting faces revealed how much they treasured their evil works.

Brielle watched in horror as they grabbed Lacy with their knife-like claws, and she screamed violently in pain.

Brielle beat on the wall in front of her, screaming, "NO! Leave her alone! Lacy!"

But the demonic attack was severe and intense; they picked Lacy up in the air, throwing her body in all different directions while the girl screamed in agony, totally helpless under their control.

Brielle felt a powerful surge of the Holy Spirit rise within her, the same power she felt come over her in the mini mart that day with the robbers. She stood firm, her feet planted strongly on the ground. She placed both of her hands on the transparent force in front of her and shouted with authority, "In the Name of Yeshua Hamashiach, Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!"

In that instant, the demons stopped in mid-stride. Lacy's body dangled from their grasp, and they all turned to look at Brielle, who shouted out again, "I command you to leave NOW in the Name of Jesus Christ!"

As she shouted, she slammed her open palms against the wall, which exploded into countless shimmering pieces like shards of iridescent glass splintering around her, and then the glass vanished completely. Immediately, the demon faces lost their evil smiles, their ghoulish laughter ceased, and at the Name of Jesus Christ, they were terrified. Even more quickly than they entered the cemetery, they departed, dropping Lacy's limp body to crumple onto the ground. Brielle slowly walked to Lacy as she lay motionless underneath the angel on top of the mausoleum. Lacy's arms were cut severely, bleeding from the demonic attack. Lacy was asleep, softly breathing, but still as death.

Brielle, feeling troubled and helpless, was looking down at Lacy when something lying on the ground next to the girl glistened in the moonlight and caught her eye. It was the object that Lacy had taken out of her pocket and momentarily held up to her face. Brielle reached down to pick it up. It was a small gold compact with intricate designs etched on each side. Slowly, she opened the lid to reveal its contents. Inside, the small box was filled with a white chalky powder. Brielle knew what it was immediately and dropped it to the ground as if it were a poisonous snake, wiping her hands quickly. This was what called the demons to come and attack Lacy, mercilessly cutting her with their horrible claws. This was what caused her to lie in a hospital room, still, lifeless, sleeping in a deep coma. This was the reason her family was in pain, suffering daily in torment over their precious daughter. This was the tool that satan was using to try and destroy her young and beautiful life. This was the drug Lacy Weaver was taking.

Brielle looked at the compact box that held the powder, which had spilled

and scattered all over the ground next to Lacy. There was a mirror inside the compact that caught the light of the moon. As she looked down at the white powder inside the compact, she saw two tiny red glowing eyes looking up at her. The eyes then developed a face around them; the tiny face of a demon that growled at her and then grew larger. In one quick motion, the demon shot up out of the box toward Brielle's face, causing her to fall backward. She threw her hands up at the demon and screamed the only word she knew that could protect her, "Jesus!"

12

Brielle jolted from her bed, her hands in front of her - she was yelling the name of Jesus. A cold sweat ran down her brow. She was panting and out of breath. Her hands were trembling, and her heart was racing, the nightmare so real. Glancing around, she tried to get her bearings. She looked at the clock; her alarm was set to sound in thirty minutes. She reached over, shut it off, and went into her bathroom, bathed her face with cool water, and brushed her hair, trying to take slow, deep breaths to calm herself. Even though she was awake, clear images of the horrifying dream kept flashing through her mind. She was terrified. She went to her nightstand and opened her Bible. She needed to find a soothing word from the Lord to help her recover from the dream. She opened the Bible and thumbed through the pages until she reached the book of Psalms. The first one she found read, "*In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You, Lord, make me dwell in safety and confident trust.* Psalm 4:8"

"I'll read that one tonight *before* I go to sleep," she murmured to herself.

Then she turned again to the book of John, for there was a scripture in the back of her mind that she always liked to read when needing comfort. She found it in John 14:27: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

"That's the one," she said, reading it over and over again, remembering how she had quoted this verse to her father after the nightmare she had on their last night together.

After reading the verse and spending time in prayer, she felt much better. She asked God to pour out excessive blessings upon Lacy, Dylan, Terri, and Rateesh today, and their difficult and troubling situations. When she finished her prayer, she saw that it was her normal time to get up, so she got ready for school. She dressed, did her hair and make-up, gathered up her things, and headed down the stairs; the whole process took only fifteen minutes. She laughed to herself; Keoni could take fifteen minutes just choosing what scarf to wear.

When she walked into the kitchen, she saw Asher sitting at the table with Obadiah. They were eating their breakfast. She looked around the room. "Is Mama up?" she asked curiously, as Genevieve was usually the first person out of bed each day and would be up and cooking breakfast. Asher and Obadiah looked up from their cereal with serious faces.

"Yes," Obadiah answered, "but she's not here."

Brielle furrowed her brow in confusion as she knew that one thing Genevieve liked to keep was her schedule. "Where is she?"

Obadiah picked up his napkin and gently wiped his mouth. "She's at the hospital with Laura," he said, "Jim called us during the night, and Genevieve went to be with them."

Brielle felt her heart rate speed back up, and every part of her body was filled with nervousness. “What happened?” she asked slowly.

“I’m afraid that Lacy had a stroke,” Obadiah said quietly, “From what the doctors have told them, this can happen to overdose patients.”

Brielle’s jaw dropped open, “But she’s just my age! How could she have a stroke?”

“It’s because of the drugs she was taking,” Obadiah began, “They caused her to go into a coma. They also caused her brain to develop a small hemorrhage, which then led to the stroke. The doctors are still trying to diagnose the damage from the stroke, but right now they know…” he hesitated, “that she is paralyzed on the left side of her body.”

Brielle felt her energy leave her completely. She sat heavily on a chair at the table. Asher looked at her quietly, not knowing what to say.

“When Jim called, he said that Laura was hysterical, and he thought it would be helpful if your mother were with her, as they have become close friends so quickly. They don’t have many family members who live here in town,” Obadiah explained. “Your mother is going to stay for a little while longer, but she said to tell you that she loves you, she will be here when you come home, and to keep praying for Lacy and her family.” Then he turned to look at Asher, “And I am going to be the substitute teacher for you today, young man.” Asher smiled as he loved it when his grandfather taught his school lessons.

Brielle thought back to the prayer she had just spoken a few minutes ago and gave a deflated sigh, “Yeah, I just finished praying for Lacy. I asked God to pour out His blessings upon her today. So much for that, huh?” she laughed softly to herself.

Obadiah studied her closely, “You aren’t suggesting that God didn’t hear you… are you?” he asked softly, “Surely you of all people know better than that.”

Brielle looked up at him with guilty eyes. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I can’t believe this is happening. All of this with Lacy, with Dylan, and…”

“And what?” Obadiah asked patiently.

“There is just so much going on at that school. There are so many problems there, and kids are struggling. I keep praying and asking God to help, but I don’t see anything change,” she said.

Obadiah moved to sit in the chair beside her, placing his hand on hers, “Sweetheart, you know that God sees all that is happening. He hears your prayers, and He *is* working on the things you pray about. I know it is hard when we don’t see immediate results. We humans are so impatient. But God works in His way, in His timing, and we have to learn to be patient and to trust Him.”

“Yes, I know,” she replied with a guilty tone, “But why did Lacy have to have a stroke? I mean, her father already doubted God’s power; now this might just push him over the edge.”

“I know it is hard to understand these things, especially when you are the

one in the middle of the situation. Believe me, there have been many times I have had my faith tested. But these are the circumstances when we utilize that faith. So many times, I see Christians who talk about their faith in God, they sing about their faith, they teach others about their faith, but then, when something like this hits them… where is their faith? These are the moments when we reach and pull ourselves up by our faith in God and not just our faith in Him, but our *trust* in Him." he looked at her with loving eyes and squeezed her hand. "Now, I have known you all your life, and one of the many things I know is that you can always find something *good* to focus upon in a *bad* situation. You do that because of your faith, trust, and love for the Lord. So…. can you do that now?" he asked gently.

Brielle took a deep breath and released her tension. She looked up at Obadiah with certainty, "When I came in here and saw the look on your face, I thought you were going to tell me that Lacy was, that she had… anyway, learning that she was still alive, even with a stroke, is better news than it could have been."

Obadiah smiled and nodded, "Yes, that's true, and don't forget that Lacy can still receive a complete healing from the Lord, Jesus."

Brielle nodded, "'*With God all things are possible'* Matthew 19:26. There is always hope with God."

That afternoon at lunch, Brielle, Keoni, and Jace were unexpectedly joined by Gideon-- minus Taryn. Brielle had told them of Lacy's condition and what her family was going through.

"Is she paralyzed… forever?" Gideon asked.

"I don't know," Brielle answered, "Oba said that when she wakes up, she will have to go through a rehabilitation process. She may need to learn to walk, speak…do everything over again. I don't know for sure."

"It's amazing to think that all of this started because she tried drugs," Keoni said, "and now the drugs have ruined her life."

"I don't want to think that way," Brielle replied, "Let's say the drugs have altered her life. They have for sure, but God is still able to change things for her. We all have to believe that and pray that for Lacy— "

"-And for Dylan," Gideon interrupted, "after all, if he took the same drugs she did…" he didn't finish his sentence, but everyone knew what he was thinking.

"When we pray, why don't we start praying that Dylan doesn't have a stroke?" Brielle suggested. "Now that we know it is a possibility, let's ask God to prevent it from ever happening."

"Yes. I agree, we should," Gideon said. Keoni and Jace were in agreement.

Then they began openly discussing the situations that were surrounding them with their friends. Keoni was talking about how Terri had opened up to her during lunch the day before and said that he battles thoughts of suicide from

time to time due to struggles with his sexuality. Jace told how Rateesh didn't show up for chemistry class yesterday and was wondering if it was because of the fear he has of the four guys in there. Whatever it was that was going on, it was getting serious. Gideon was explaining how the football team was going to wear blue wristbands in honor of Dylan at the game Friday night. Then he told them about how, when he went to pray for Dylan in the hospital, his family told him they were not comfortable with that because they did not believe in God.

Brielle sat listening to her friends and their stories when suddenly, she had a powerful realization come to her.

"You know what?" she began, "I was just thinking, I have felt a heavy burden for Lacy since the day I saw her. Jace, you have your concerns for Rateesh and his safety. Keoni, you're upset for Terri, and Gideon, you have this situation with Dylan," she finished, looking at her friends for their reply. "Don't you find that interesting?"

No one spoke; they sat quietly looking at her, pondering her questions.

"What if there was a reason for that?" Brielle asked.

"What do you mean?" Gideon asked, "A reason that all our friends are falling apart?"

"What if there was a reason that each of them was connected to each one of us? I mean, we are all affected by what is happening to them as a group. But beyond that, each one of us has a special… burden on our heart, so to speak, for each one of them in particular. What if that *isn't* an accident?" she asked.

"I'm not sure I know where you're going with this," Keoni said.

Brielle sighed, "I don't know how to explain it. It just hit me that maybe these four individuals have been brought into our lives because we love the Lord, and we could minister the love of Jesus to them, but we might be more successful in that ministry if we worked together as a team. God knows our hearts, and He knows the needs of these friends. What if He intentionally brought the four of us together and laid each one of them on our hearts purposely so we could come together and do something to help them?"

"We have been trying to do something to help them by praying for them, right?" Keoni asked. "Isn't that what we are supposed to do?"

"Yes, of course, but what if there is something more? What if God brought us together to unite our Spiritual Gifts so we could help each other to help others?" Brielle asked softly, almost to herself.

Gideon shrugged, "Hey, I'm game. I'd be happy to know what to do to help Dylan, especially since his family doesn't believe in God."

"I sure could use some help," Jace said, "From the conversations that we have had, I'm pretty sure Rateesh and his family are Hindus. I'm not sure what to say to him about God."

"I know I could use help in knowing what to say to Terri, I just told Brielle that last night," Keoni added.

"Right, and from what I've seen in Lacy's journal, God might be the *last* thing on her mind," Brielle added. "I had the most horrible nightmare after reading it," she said, rubbing her forehead as she remembered.

"What was it about?" Keoni asked curiously.

"I'll talk to you about that later, just the thought of what I dreamt still scares me. But I think that we should talk to Obadiah on Sunday about all of this and see what he thinks.

"Maybe we could go to lunch together after church or something?" Brielle asked.

Everyone nodded that it was a good idea. What Brielle was saying made sense to them. It was completely possible that God had brought these four people into their lives so they could minister to them the love of Jesus; they just needed to know how to work as a team and have better ministry tools to do it.

Soon, it was time to start heading back to class. Jace asked if he could speak to Brielle for a moment before she left.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you last night," he said.

Brielle didn't let him off the hook easily, but she didn't want him to know she had waited all night for his call either. "Did something happen?" she asked lightly.

"Yes—no, I just got tied up with stuff for my father and lost track of time. I didn't want to call too late; I don't know what time you go to bed," he said.

Brielle wanted to ask for more information, but felt strongly she wouldn't get it, so she focused on what she wanted to know: "Did you say that Rateesh didn't show up for class yesterday?"

"No, he didn't. I saw him just before class, too; he looked like he was fine, but he was in a hurry. When he didn't come to class, it made me think that maybe this thing with those guys is bigger than we know," he said.

"Do you think there is something really serious going on?" Brielle asked.

"I can't prove anything, it's just something that I…"

"You feel?" she asked.

Jace smiled, "Yes, I know it sounds silly, but…"

"Why does it sound silly? Being in tune with your feelings is great. I think people would be a lot happier if they listened to their feelings. Mama says that is what her mother taught her. She says that can be a way for the Lord to guide you and talk to you. What's the plan then for Rateesh? Are you going to talk to him today?" she asked.

"If he comes to class, definitely. Are you going to see Lacy today?" he asked.

"No, Oba said that they are keeping her visitors down to immediate family only right now. I may have to wait until next week. They let Mama in because Laura was asking for her to come," she answered.

"Oh, okay then. Um," he hesitated, "I was wondering if you have any plans for Friday night?" he asked shyly.

Brielle's heart skipped a beat, but she knew she couldn't go on a date with him yet. "I was going to go to the football game with Keoni and watch Giddy play."

Jace's face brightened, "Oh good, that's what I was going to ask you," he said happily, "and then after the game… would you like to go get something to eat?"

Brielle smiled, "I would love to, only…" she sighed.

"What?" Jace looked worried.

"I have to go in a group," she said with a soft tone, "I'm not allowed to single date until I'm seventeen."

Jace looked relieved, "That's okay with me. Do you think Keoni and Gideon would like to come?"

"I'm sure they will!" she said happily, "Giddy eats like a horse after a game, plus Keoni is going to sleep over at my house that night. She wants to give me a manicure," she said, looking down at her unpolished and nail-bitten fingers.

Jace watched her as she looked at her nails. He slowly reached up and took hold of her hand. Brielle was caught off guard, and the touch of his hand on hers sent a volt of electricity through her. He gently brought her hand up to closely inspect it.

"Let me see," he said softly, "Hmm, I think your nails are just fine."

Brielle stood there looking at him, enjoying the moment of having him holding her hand, even if it was just to look at her tomboy hands. Then the bell rang. Jace looked down at her but didn't release her hand. He cradled it softly in his.

"I guess I won't see you until tomorrow," he said.

Brielle nodded quietly.

"Well," he said as he turned her hand around to gently grasp hold of her fingers, "I hope you have a wonderful day," then he finished his statement with a gentle kiss on the top of her hand.

Brielle looked into his dark brown eyes and felt joyous warmth slowly spreading over her from his romantic gesture. The fluttering butterflies now happily traveled all through her body. Throughout the rest of the day, whenever she thought about it, her hand tingled in the place of his kiss.

Finally, the week was over. It had been a challenging several days, and Brielle was looking forward to the weekend and having fun with her friends.

Jace had done some investigating to learn about Rateesh's sudden disappearance from class. He was trying to find out about the four guys in the chemistry class who troubled Rateesh. He had been right: two of them were on the football team, their names were Reed Radcliff and Sean Lewis; the other two guys were not on the team but were good friends with Sean and Reed. Their names were Morgan Claybrook and Ryan Ledger. Jace said that in class, Reed and Morgan were lab partners, and Sean and Ryan were partners, and when

they were in the lab, they always sat together, whispered a lot. They were always the last two groups to finish their assignment. From what he had heard, they were straight "A" students and had special gifts in chemistry. But he still couldn't figure out what they had against Rateesh and why they would harass him.

Brielle had prayed hard that day for her friends, and whenever they came into her mind, she would speak their names to the Lord for blessings. Right now, though, she was getting ready to go to her first high school football game. She had been to see Gideon play many times before, but this time she was an official Fairfield High student and had personal pride in cheering for her own school team.

Oba, Magomu, Asher, and Genevieve were all going too; they all loved to watch sports: football, basketball, and of course, baseball. A person couldn't call themselves a true citizen of Fairfield if they didn't love baseball, as Fairfield was a baseball-loving town, but tonight, everyone was all excited about football.

Her family members were going to watch the game with Alma, Gideon, and Keoni's mother. Genevieve and Alma were very close friends and had supported each other in their loss of husbands. But, unlike Genevieve, who had Obadiah, Alma was a single parent who had no other means of support. Alma worked difficult hours at the police station. Between working long hours to support her family and her volunteer projects at the church, she didn't have much of an active social life.

Brielle put her hair in a ponytail, threw on a clean pair of jeans, a pink sweater, and her cream-colored coat. The season of fall was upon them, and the September night air was now crisp and chilly. The family loaded up and headed for the school. Brielle was going to meet Keoni at the entrance. When they arrived, she saw her friend waiting for her and, as always, looking stunning. Keoni's style and beauty always flourished-- even for a football game.

The two girls climbed to the top of the bleachers. Jace said he had to help his dad and might be a little late, so he would meet them there. Both Keoni and Brielle agreed they would be easier to spot if Jace were on the ground and they were at the top of the grandstands. The stadium was full on both sides. The opposing team was number one in their division, while Fairfield was rated third.

The game opened with the Star-Spangled Banner sung by the Fairfield choir led by Miss Vandi Olson, the high school music director. The Fairfield Falcons charged onto the field through a large banner painted by the cheer team, ripping it to shreds. The stadium erupted with screams as the team emerged and then again for the kickoff. The Falcons had just completed their first play when Brielle's phone rang. it was Jace. He was standing at the bottom of the steps, but couldn't find her. She stood up and waved to get his attention, and then watched as he jogged up the stadium steps to her.

As she watched Jace approaching, her eyes traveled up through the

seats full of people and landed on a man. Everyone else in the stadium was facing forward, cheering for their team. But the man was not looking at the football field; he was looking back over his shoulder, staring directly and intently at Brielle. Their eyes locked for a moment. Brielle studied his face but did not know him. He kept staring at her, smiling slightly. The strange man had dirty blonde hair that looked straggly and unkempt. He was unshaven and had a strong jaw line; she noticed this as he was chomping hard on a piece of gum. He was dressed in casual clothes and wearing a light tan jacket. He kept staring at her as if he knew her. Uncomfortable with the man's intense gaze, she quickly looked away, trying to locate Jace. Finally, she spotted him. Jace had reached their row and was crossing through the crowd to join her. He looked *so good*. He was wearing a pair of jeans with a greyish-colored T-shirt and a black jacket. His brown tousled hair was a little more styled tonight, and his tall body towered over the people as he stepped past them to reach his seat next to Brielle.

"Whoo-oo, girl, that boy looks good," Keoni giggled in her friend's ear.

But Brielle was too captivated by Jace to hear her.

"Hey!" he said with his beautiful, bright smile as he sat down next to her.

"Hi," Brielle and Keoni both answered. Brielle slowly took in his aroma; he smelled *so* good.

"Anything good happen yet?" he asked.

"No, the game just started a few minutes ago, you haven't missed anything," Brielle answered, glancing over through the crowd to see the strange man: he was now watching the game.

Just then, Gideon raced from his place behind the quarterback to line up as receiver. He was too fast for the opposing team's linebacker, who was tasked with trying to cover him. As Gideon sprinted past the defender, the quarterback lofted a perfectly thrown pass directly into Gideon's outstretched arms. It was the first touchdown of the game. The Fairfield crowd went wild, as did Brielle and Keoni.

Keoni stood up and chanted, "That's my bro-tha, that's my bro-tha, go Gid-dy!
Go Gid-dy!" dancing in rhythm as she did.

Brielle was laughing and clapping for Gideon when she again noticed the strange man staring at her. He didn't look at her in a threatening way, he didn't look at her inappropriately, he looked at her in a friendly manner, but the way he kept staring at her was becoming unnerving. She decided not to worry about it, just focus on the game and enjoy watching her friend and her team.

The game was exciting. Both teams were out to win, and they were playing hard, eager to achieve victory. Before halftime, Gideon scored another touchdown, this time on a punt return. As the two teams headed for the locker room, the score was 17- 14, Fairfield. The band came out on the field and started the halftime show. Keoni leaned over to Brielle and said, "There's a man

over there who keeps staring at you."

Jace, upon hearing Keoni's comment, quickly glanced over the crowd in the direction she was looking to find the man she was talking about.

"I know," Brielle answered, "He's been doing it since the game began," she said dryly.

"Do you know him?" Jace asked.

"No, I've never seen him before," she said, "and I've had enough chances to look at him tonight to tell."

Right before the half-time show was over, the man got up and left. "I guess I won't have to worry about that anymore tonight," Brielle said happily.

The buzzer sounded, and the second half began. Gideon played valiantly. He was taking a beating all night from the opposing defense, but nothing could stop him. The game ended with a score of 31 – 24, Fairfield, with Gideon scoring 3 times. It was a great victory. After the game, Brielle met up with her family and Alma. She introduced Jace to Alma, and she noticed that when they left, Magomu walked Alma to her car.

After the game, a whole group of people were heading to Scutter's Sock Hop, a mom-and-pop BBQ and burger joint done up in the 50's style with roller-skating car hops and great milkshakes. Teens and adults alike enjoyed going there to eat, listen to the oldies, and hang out.

When they arrived at Scutter's, a huge crowd of students was already there. Keoni spotted Terri at a table and asked Brielle if they could join him.

"Absolutely," Brielle said happily, "I would like to get to know him better!"

Terri was sitting at a table with his new friend from school, Carlos. Keoni introduced everyone to Terri, and Terri introduced everyone to Carlos. Jace asked everyone what they would like to eat, including Terri and Carlos, but they had already ordered.

"You don't have to buy me anything," Keoni said sweetly, "I can get it."

"No, it's fine," Jace said, "it's my treat tonight."

Brielle raised her eyebrows and smiled at Keoni, "Let me give you some wisdom, my friend," she said, clearing her throat as if she was going to say something profound, "Never turn down free food."

Everyone laughed, and Keoni gave Jace her order, "I'll have the salad bar and an iced tea."

"Hmm, shocker," Brielle joked, "I would like the barbeque beef sandwich, an ear of corn, and some---"

"Wet fries and a bottle of chocolate milk?" Keoni chided, "Shocker!" She laughed.

"What about Gideon?" Jace asked.

"Don't worry about him, it looks like he's already been taken care of," Keoni said dryly.

Jace walked away to place their order, and Brielle looked around the room

for Gideon. “Is Giddy here?” she asked, stretching her neck to see around some of the players who were standing and talking.

“Yeah, he’s over there in the corner with Taryn,” Keoni answered, then turned to Terri and Carlos and said, “Taryn likes to ride the coattails of my brother’s victories to get attention—that’s what I think anyway. Needless to say, we *won’t* be eating with my brother tonight.”

Brielle was talking with Terri and Carlos and enjoying their conversation when Taryn and two of her friends came by their table to refill their drinks. She stopped and looked at Keoni. Brielle immediately noticed Terri tense up when Taryn went by their table.

“Look, there is Gideon’s twin, Keoni,” Taryn said to her friends smugly with her sarcastic smile.

Keoni looked up at Taryn but didn’t speak.

Taryn continued, “I *think* they are supposed to be twins, but I just don’t see it. I mean, I think Gideon is smokin’ hot!”

Brielle felt her heart start to pound in her chest, not the kind of pounding like when Jace kissed her hand today, but the kind where she was ready to pound something herself.

“You know, Taryn, if I weren’t a lady, I’d slap you right in the face,” Keoni said with as much control as she could muster.

“Oh, wow! Doesn’t that go against your *Christian* teachings?” Taryn laughed.

“Yes, it does, but Jesus told us to lay hands on others,” Keoni said, standing up from the table.

Brielle’s hands were shaking from her own feelings, and quickly she reached over to pull her friend back to her seat.

“Haha, you’re quite the jokester,” Brielle said, “You know that’s not what Jesus meant.”

Jace had just walked up with a tray full of food and drinks. “They didn’t have chocolate milk,” he said to Brielle as he came up behind Taryn, “so I got you a chocolate shake.”

When Taryn saw Jace standing behind her, she immediately turned her attention to him, going full force into flirt-mode. Just then, they heard Gideon’s voice from across the room yelling out to the crowd.

“Everyone!” he shouted, “Everyone listen up!” he yelled again.

Somebody whistled loudly, and everyone in the place quieted down to listen.

Taryn, completely disinterested in what he had to say, had her focus on Jace, who passed by without even looking at her to take the tray of food to Brielle. She tried to conceal her frustration at his ignoring her, but then she noticed who Brielle was sitting next to, Terri and Carlos.

Gideon continued speaking loudly to the whole restaurant, “As you know,

our teammate Dylan is in a coma," he began.

Taryn ignored Gideon's speech and turned her venom on Brielle.

"Well, well, Brielle," she said sweetly, "Look at you. I have to say, I honestly didn't expect this."

Brielle looked at her with a confused expression, "What are you talking about now, Taryn?"

"You almost convinced me that you weren't gay with your whole kissing of Jace demonstration," Taryn went on, "But maybe your whole 'Oh, I just want to give Lacy the love of Jesus' was nothing but a crock of crap act. I mean, look who you hang out with?" she said, gesturing to Terri and Carlos, "How could you possibly call yourself a Christian and sit with these beauty queens? Are you pretending to like them, and that you're friends with them? Because if you were actually a Christian, wouldn't you be judging them and condemning their souls to hell?" she asked with her sinister tone.

Brielle could feel the heat of anger boiling up inside her. Keoni saw it coming, and she knew enough about her friend to stay out of her way.

Meanwhile, Gideon was finishing his speech, "This win tonight was for Dylan. So, let's raise whatever *legal* substance it is that you are drinking and toast to our friend!"

Brielle stood up and grabbed her large chocolate milkshake, raised it high in the air with the rest of the group, and shouted, "To Dylan!" Then, after she had a quick drink, she tossed the rest of it on top of Taryn's head.

Taryn began screaming in surprise and anger, and her friends quickly ran to grab napkins to help clean her up. Brielle grabbed her bag, looked at Keoni, and said, "I'll be dining on the patio tonight if you would like to join me." Then she took her tray of food and headed to the tables outside. Everyone was laughing at Taryn-- especially Terri and Carlos.

"I didn't get to spend much time with your friend," Carlos said to Keoni, "but I *really* like her!"

Once outside, Brielle found a table and plopped down, completely exasperated with herself. Jace joined her at her table outside. His face wore an expression that read amusement and satisfaction.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I can't believe I lost it *again!"* Brielle said. "I have to work on two things in my life: one, controlling my temper, and two, staying away from Taryn Cavanaugh!"

Jace smiled, "I think you may be the bravest girl I have ever known," then he threw his hands up in surrender, "and I mean that as a compliment because I see that you have a little milkshake left in your cup there and I don't want to upset you or anything," he said with a laugh.

Brielle felt horrible.

"Maybe I should go in there and apologize to her," she said meekly, now

feeling guilty about her outburst.

Jace looked at her with a serious face, nodding his head, “Yeah, maybe,” then he started laughing again, “Nah, let her soak in it, maybe it will sweeten her up. Though I have to say, this scene wasn’t nearly as fun.”

“What? Fun?” Brielle replied, puzzled by his remark.

“Yeah, no kiss for me,” he laughed lightly, slightly blushing as he said it. Brielle smiled and shook her head, blushing as well.

She reached out and grabbed her sandwich and took a bite.

“Thank you for dinner--even though Taryn is wearing part of it. I’m still grateful,” she smirked.

“You’re very welcome,” Jace replied. “It’s good to know you are a girl who will share her food with your friends,” he teased. Brielle giggled at his reply but still felt guilty.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” she asked.

“I have to work,” he answered.

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot. Do you work every Saturday?” she asked.

“Pretty much, I was usually pretty bored on Saturdays, so it was a good way to pass the day and make some money for my truck,” he replied.

“Why were you bored on Saturdays?” she asked.

“My father works a lot. Until I met you, Gideon and Keoni, I didn’t have a lot of people to hang out with on the weekends,” he said.

“What about your mom?” she asked.

“My mom travels a lot for her job… she isn’t home very often,” he said, lowering his eyes.

“What does she do?” Brielle asked, taking a bite of her wet fries.

Jace took in a deep breath, “She’s um… she’s a theater actress.”

Brielle’s face lit up, “Really? That sounds fascinating!”

Jace raised his eyebrows and glanced at her quickly, “Yeah, it’s pretty fascinating.”

“What kind of acting does she do? I mean, is she into comedy, musicals, what?”

Jace was quiet for a moment. “She does a little bit of everything. I’ve seen her in plays from *Macbeth* to
Les Misérables,” he answered.

“Wow, she sings too?”

“She sings, dances, acts… and she is very talented. But she doesn’t sing like your mom,” he said, a warmth to his tone when he mentioned Genevieve.

“Are your parents divorced?” she asked gently.

“No,” he answered, looking at her to see her response.

She seemed surprised.

“How often is your mom home?” she asked.

“Not much. When I was younger and she was just starting, she would be

gone for a few weeks and then she would come home until she could find more work," he explained, "But now that she is more successful… I haven't seen her since the first week of August --and she was only here for a week.
The last time I saw her before that was in April."

"That must be incredibly hard for you," Brielle replied sincerely.

"My mother is a very complicated subject for me, both my parents are," he said.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be asking you so many difficult questions. I'm just trying to understand. How can they stay married and hardly ever see each other?" Brielle asked, "Do they love each other?"

Jace was quiet for a moment. Brielle quickly backtracked, embarrassed for her prying, "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"No, it's okay, I ask myself that every day. I think they used to love each other, but now they just love their jobs more," he said slowly.

Brielle's heart was heavy for him. Her family meant everything to her, and she couldn't imagine living the way Jace did. She thought about her mother and how much she loved her. She remembered the other day when she woke up and found that her mother had gone to the hospital to be with Jim and Laura; even then, she missed her. She couldn't imagine only being with her a couple of days each month-- if that.

"I'm so sorry, Jace," she said tenderly, "I can't imagine what that must be like."

Jace looked at her intently but did not reply. Then he changed the subject, "Tell me what you and Keoni have planned for tomorrow, outside of doing your nails."

Brielle had to think, "Oh, well, just the usual stuff girls do. She'll teach me about how to coordinate clothes, and we'll go for a ride on the horses, probably watch a good chick flick, listen to some music, eat a bunch of garbage--at least I will."

Jace laughed. Brielle was relieved to see his face light up.

"Tell me what all you do on your job," she said.

"I am just a lowly deckhand," he said with a grin, "that means I do whatever the captain, first mate, or boatswain tells me to do. I keep the decks clear and make sure the equipment is cleaned and put away. Sometimes I help with operating the fishing gear, and then I also clean, salt, and stow away the catch."

Brielle's eyes sparkled as she listened to him talk about it. She could tell how much he enjoyed this work.

"I like and respect my captain; his name is John Espindola. He started when he was younger than me as a deckhand, and now, he runs his own boat," he said.

"I thought your father owned the boat?" she asked.

"He does, but John is the captain, and he's great. We're good friends. But

he's getting pretty old. I don't know how many more years he can keep it up. It's very hard work for a young guy, much less an old guy," he said.

"Can he retire soon?" she asked.

"I think so, he talks about it every time we pass the old lighthouse," he said.

Brielle looked at him curiously.

"You know the old, abandoned lighthouse on Montier's Point?" he asked. She nodded. "Whenever we pass by it, he tells me how much he and his wife Debbie would love to retire there and run it. I go up there a lot to check it out. It's in very bad shape. My dream is to fix it up and give it to him someday. I think he could be happy there," he said.

Brielle was touched by the thoughtfulness and generosity Jace had for his friend.

Just then, she saw Keoni coming out with Terri and Carlos, getting ready to leave.

"I hate to break up the fun," Keoni said, "but it's almost pumpkin time."

Brielle giggled.

"Almost, what?" Jace asked, confused.

"That's just her way of saying we have to be at my house by midnight," Brielle said.

"Or else you will turn into a pumpkin?" Jace laughed.

"I don't want to find out," she said, gathering her stuff and looking up quietly at Keoni, communicating with her eyes.

"I'm just, uh, I'm just going to get the car warmed up," Keoni said, saying good night to Jace, Terri, and Carlos, who were also leaving.

Brielle looked at Jace, "I had a great time tonight," she said, "Thank you again for my dinner, it was great."

"You're welcome, I had fun too," he said, standing up to walk her to Keoni's car.

"Will I see you at church on Sunday?" she asked. "Obadiah said he is going to give us our Spiritual Gift test results."

"Of course," he replied, then he bent down and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, "I'll look forward to seeing you then," he said with a smile.

When the girls arrived at Brielle's home, Asher and Obadiah were already in bed, but Genevieve was still up. She was in her robe, sitting on the couch in front of a crackling fire with her Bible. She was relieved when the girls came in the door. Although she tried hard not to, she would worry anytime Brielle was out late. Yet, she knew this was part of her daughter growing up.

Keoni and Brielle plopped down in front of the fire and told her all about their night. Then Genevieve, settled now that Brielle was home safely, went up to bed. The girls, however, were still too excited over their evening to sleep, so they sat up and talked while the fire burned out.

"Do you feel better that Jace is finally opening up to you?" Keoni asked.

"Yeah, and now I feel so guilty that I was frustrated with him. Turns out he was hiding something, but now I can see why. He was embarrassed to tell me about his family," Brielle said.

"I have a question," Keoni said, "His mother is a theater actress and travels all the time, but what about his dad? Is he gone all the time, too?"

"I don't think so. I think he lives with him. He didn't talk about him that much tonight, but he had mentioned things before about going home to talk to his father, or the night he didn't call me, it was because he was doing stuff with him. Even tonight, he said he would be late because he was going to help his father with something," Brielle answered.

Keoni shook her head sadly, "I can't imagine what that feels like, being rejected by your mother like that. I mean, you and me. We miss our fathers every day. But they aren't with us because someone else took them away from us, not because they *chose* to leave us."

Brielle sat quietly for a moment, thinking about what Keoni said. She had not thought about it like that, but Keoni was right. If their fathers were alive, they would be together, but Jace's mother was alive and intentionally chose not to be with her son. This realization made Jace's situation even more heartbreaking.

"Now it makes more sense why he talks about Mama like he does. He watches her, taking in her every word; you can tell he thinks very highly of her," Brielle said.

"Speaking of your mom," Keoni began, "how is she doing? Any different?"

Brielle shook her head slowly, "Nope," she said softly, "she's exactly the same. No matter how many days or years go by," she said, staring down into the soft embers of the fire.

Ever since the night Brielle's father died, Genevieve could not accept it. At first, she seemed to be in such denial of his death, she even refused to have a formal funeral for Mark. She only agreed to having a small memorial service for family and close friends because Obadiah insisted that Brielle needed to have some closure. Then, the evening after the service, she, Obadiah, baby Asher, and Brielle went to the beach where they released sky lanterns to represent the love that would always be burning in their hearts for him. Every year on the anniversary of the night they lost Mark, they did this. Although Asher never knew his father, the act of releasing a sky lantern each year still impacted his heart deeply.

As time went by, Genevieve began to accept her loss but still could not move past his death. Even last year, a very handsome and kind gentleman who lived in Bridgeport tried to date her. She went on a couple of dates with him and thought him to be very nice. He wasn't forceful but tried again and again to develop a relationship with her, but it was to no avail. She ended up telling him that it was no good. Even though he was no longer with her, she was still deeply

in love with Mark. She didn't think it would be fair to the man to date him, knowing she could never feel more for him than friendship. He eventually found a lovely woman to date, and they were married.

But Genevieve's denial was now affecting Brielle. There would be times when her mother would say things like, "I'm sure your daddy is so proud," or "This will make daddy so happy!"

At first, Brielle thought that perhaps she was speaking about how he might feel from watching her grow up from heaven, but lately, she wasn't sure that was the case. Genevieve really could not let go of Mark and clung to his memory so hard that she couldn't speak of him as if he were dead. It was beginning to make those who were close to her concerned

"How about Alma?" Brielle asked, "I saw Magomu walk her to her car tonight?"

Keoni sighed, "She's trying. She has her moments where she feels lonely and wants to move on with her life, and then there are times when she misses Daddy so much… It's hard."

"I can't imagine what they have gone through as wives losing husbands. It's difficult enough to go through it as kids losing fathers," Brielle said as she reached over and squeezed Keoni's hand. "How do you feel about your mom possibly dating Magomu?"

"I'm like mom; I have my ups and downs about it. There are days when the thought of her being with anyone but my dad hurts. Then there are days when it hurts me to see how lonely she is, and I think that hurts me the most. I don't want her to be alone for the rest of her life. Magomu is one of the sweetest, most loving guys I know, and I Iove how he loves Jesus. If she decided to date again, I couldn't pick a better man for her to date," Keoni said.

"I've always felt like Magomu was my older brother," Brielle said, "Wouldn't it be funny if they got married? Then you would be like, my niece!"

Both girls laughed.

"There is one thing that my mom has mentioned about dating Magomu, and that is his age. She feels kind of funny that he is younger than her," she smiled, "She doesn't want to be thought of as a cougar."

They laughed again.

"I was thinking about something," Brielle began to change the subject hesitantly.

"About?" Keoni waited.

"About these students using drugs," Brielle began gently, "Do you think they could be…" she paused again, treading softly.

"Related to the drug dealers that killed my father?" Keoni finished for her.

Brielle nodded her head silently.

"I know they are," Keoni said.

Brielle's eyes opened wide, and her jaw dropped. "How do you know? Did

Hadley say something?"

Keoni shook her head, "I can't explain it to you exactly, but it's something that I feel. I just know that it must be related."

"Okay," Brielle started, feeling the green light to continue, "tell me again exactly what happened that night—only if you want to."

Keoni nodded, sat up, and took a deep breath. "I do. Years ago, there was a drug ring infesting Fairfield and the Gold Coast. My dad and Hadley had been working on a lead to learn how the drugs were being brought into our town. They had a tip come one day that the drop was going to be at a specific location, and so they went undercover. When they tried to make a bust, shots broke out and daddy…" she trailed off.

Brielle sat quietly and remembered the night the phone call came. Genevieve, Alma, and Antoine had all become good friends since their children spent so much time together. When Antoine died, Genevieve knew the pain that Alma was going through. Hadley was shot in the shoulder close to his collarbone and was in the hospital for weeks. But Antoine was shot in the head, killing him instantly, but not before he shot three of the men, killing two and wounding the third.

"I was just thinking maybe that night your father slowed them down a bit… but now they are back," Brielle said.

"I think so too because Daddy and Hadley had uncovered their operation. So, they had to come up with a new plan," she said dryly, "After all, there's *too* much money to be made from the Gold Coast. The dealers are not going to give that territory up easily."

The Gold Coast was the nickname for the southwestern part of Fairfield County, which was one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. Keoni's father always had a theory that the drugs were coming in through Fairfield and being distributed to the Gold Coast, along with the residents in Fairfield and other surrounding towns. The big money sales came from the Gold Coast, but the other middle-income residents were just as susceptible to addiction as the wealthy residents. They may not have the same resources for large sales, but still, the income the dealers generated to feed their habits was a perk. Seeing that Lacy and Dylan were both in comas due to drug overdoses was enough evidence for Keoni and Brielle that the dealers were back in business in Fairfield.

Finally, the fire slowly burned out. The girls, after their emotional conversations about their fathers, decided to go to bed.

The next day, the girls tried to sleep in. This was something that Brielle loved to do, but Keoni only did when she stayed with Brielle - Gideon was an early riser. They were still in bed, slowly waking up to the new day, when Keoni thought she heard Gideon's voice downstairs.

"Is that Giddy?" Brielle asked her.

"Yeah…" Keoni paused, confused as to why he was there, "That boy doesn't

let me sleep in even when I'm at someone else's home!" she said exasperated, throwing her pillow over her head.

Brielle got up, put on her robe, and went downstairs to find Gideon sitting at the table, talking with Obadiah and Asher about last night's football game.

"Hey, Giddy," she said drowsily, "What are you doing here so early?"

Gideon smiled, "I have something important to tell you and Keoni. Is she up?"

"I am now," Keoni said, coming into the room behind Brielle. "What's going on?"

Gideon stood up from the table, "Come in here," he said, moving into the living room, "Sit down. I need to talk to you."

Brielle and Keoni looked at each other with strange and confused looks on their faces, but followed him into the living room and sat down quietly.

Gideon sat down and then stood up nervously, wiping his hands on his pant legs. He started to speak and then sat back down again, trying to find his words.

"I wanted to tell you that I am very sorry for how Taryn treated you last night," he said. "She told me what happened when I asked why she had milkshake in her hair."

Brielle blushed.

Keoni shifted her expression from confused to irritated. "That's really sweet, Giddy, but why are you apologizing for her?"

Gideon continued, "Please, just let me finish. I'm sorry for *all* the things she has said to you," as he looked at Brielle, "and you," he said as he looked at Keoni. "But most of all," he paused, "I'm sorry for being such a jerk to stay with her."

Brielle and Keoni were now intensely waiting for him to continue.

"I know she is not the right girl for me, and so, I broke up with her last night," he finished quickly.

Both girls' faces lit up with joy.

"You did?" Keoni gasped.

"Really?" Brielle asked excitedly.

"Yes. I shouldn't have stayed with her as long as I did, and I'm sorry for hurting both of you by doing that. I told her last night that I was sick of how she treated my sister and one of my best friends and that it was over," he said directly.

Keoni and Brielle both jumped up to hug him, repeatedly telling him how much it meant to hear him say that and thanking him.

Then they all sat down again.

"Okay now," Keoni pressed, "you have to give us details, tell us everything."

Brielle smiled, anxious to hear the story. Gideon told them everything, and the girls listened intently to his every word.

"How did she take it?" Keoni asked.

"Um, let's just say… she's ticked. I don't think I have ever seen anyone

change from like to hate as fast as she did," he said.

"You truly think she hates you?" Brielle asked innocently.

"Uh, yeah," he said with a slight laugh, "She tried to punch me in the face."

Brielle and Keoni's mouths dropped open in surprise. "Wow," Brielle said, "I hope she doesn't try to do something to you, like to get revenge or something."

Gideon shrugged, "It doesn't matter, what matters is that I will not bring anyone else into my life that doesn't show my family and friends respect," he stopped, looking down for a moment at the floor, "Will you guys forgive me?" he said, looking up sheepishly.

Both girls moved from their chairs to sit next to him on the couch. They wrapped their arms around him and hugged him, telling him he was forgiven.

"I just have to ask you this," Keoni said, "and I know I said it to you a million times, but… what was it about her that made you like her so much?"

Gideon sat back and ran his hand over his head, "She just… I don't know," he paused, "she made me feel good. She was always bragging about me to everyone. She acted like I was a celebrity or something, stuff like that. I kinda liked it, I liked all her attention."

"Yes, but don't you see, we brag on you to you, she was bragging on you to everyone else like you were her prize or something," Keoni said.

"And we know how great and really special you are," Brielle added.

"I know, you do," Gideon said, "and I appreciate it, but you are my sister, and Bri, you're just like my sister, so it's a little bit different. I was taken in by her."

Keoni nodded, "Yeah, she caught you in her web."

Gideon nodded, "I think that's true. Seriously, though, she's like a man magnet. She's popular, rich, and smart… not to mention the fact that girl is *scalding hot!"*

Brielle and Keoni rolled their eyes and sighed.

"And there it is," Brielle said, lifting her hands in front of her.

"And the *truth* will set you free!" Keoni said, laughing. "At least you've come to your senses now," she said, hugging him again, "You know I'm not jealous of you having a girlfriend, I just hope you choose a girl that loves Jesus next time."

"Come on," Brielle said, pulling him up off the couch, "now that we have you back, we'll get you all caught up on things… while we eat, of course, I'm *starving*!" she giggled.

The rest of the day, Gideon spent time with his sister and friends. They played basketball, went for a ride to the beach, and enjoyed lunch together. Brielle was so happy that she wouldn't have to deal with Taryn as much now…or would she? Maybe now that she was free, would she try coming after Jace? Maybe that would be her plan of revenge? The thought of it made her spine tense up, so she put it out of her mind. She would pray about it and ask God to keep anything or anyone negative from hindering her relationship with Jace.

That evening after dinner, Keoni helped Brielle put together her clothes for Sunday morning. As they did, they talked about what they would learn in the Cross Café about their Spiritual Gifts.

"I'm so anxious about it," Keoni shared.

"Really? Why?" Brielle asked.

"I don't mean nervous-anxious, I mean excited to learn and see what my test results say," she said, pulling out a beautiful burgundy sweater dress with a loose turtleneck collar. "You should wear this tomorrow, you hardly ever wear your dresses!" she scolded, hanging the dress on the closet door. "You can wear this belt with it and your long black boots. Mmm, Mmm, girl that looks good," she said, turning around to look at her friend, "Gorgeous!"

Brielle looked up and smiled at the ensemble Keoni had put together for her, "One thing for sure, you have a gift for fashion. I really love that, it looks great!"

Are you excited to find out the results?" Keoni asked.

"Kind of… I guess." Brielle said, her excitement for the outfit now faded.

"What? Why do you say it like that? You sound like you don't care," Keoni questioned.

"I don't know," Brielle started, struggling to find her words.

She didn't finish her reply. She was quietly lying across her bed, tracing the pattern on her bedspread with her finger.

"What's the matter, Bri?" Keoni asked as she came to sit next to her.

Brielle didn't look up, just kept tracing the pattern with her finger and said, "I don't want to be a missionary. I want to do a great work for God somehow, but missionaries in my family don't have the greatest track record for survival. I know that may sound selfish. I loved my years growing up in Uganda. It's just with my father and grandmother, I just…"

"Don't want to be a missionary," Keoni said flatly. "There's nothing wrong with that. You know that God can use you right here at home or in this country as He can anywhere else. He knows your heart."

"Yes, but sometimes God tests us and sends people where they *don't* want to go-- look at Jonah," she replied. "I want God to use me. I just want to stay here with my family where it's safe."

Keoni lifted her eyebrows in surprise, "Safe? Uh, honey, did you forget what happened to you in the mini mart right here in your hometown? You call that safe?" she asked with a laugh.

Brielle nodded her head, "That's true. I guess it's just the fear of *other rulers* in other countries and what they can do to you… or take from you."

Keoni sighed. From the moment they met, she and Brielle had been the best of friends. But when Keoni's father was killed, the pain of loss bonded the two girls' hearts together with a powerful understanding and friendship.

“Let’s not worry about it anymore tonight, okay?” Keoni said, wrapping her arms around her friend, “Whatever God’s plan for you is, it will be perfect.”

13

On Sunday morning, the Cross Café students were all eagerly awaiting their Spiritual Gifts test results. Brielle looked lovely in her burgundy dress, and when Jace came in, he stared at her admiringly. He wore a pair of jeans with a long-sleeved shirt and a blue argyle sweater vest. He was so beautiful, she thought. He smiled broadly when he saw her and then came to sit with the rest of the group. Keoni was busily filling Jace in on Gideon's breakup with Taryn when Obadiah entered the classroom. When he walked into the room, he was surprised at the number of students who were not only on time, but early. He greeted them all warmly and took some time to chat with them for a while before it was time to start the class.

First, Obadiah asked for any prayer requests. Almost all the students raised their hands. He opened with prayer, asking God to bless each and every request as he repeated them back to the Lord with perfect clarity. After prayer, he reached into his case and pulled out a stack of papers.

"I'm sure you all remember the Spiritual Gifts tests that we took last week," he began. "Now let me just refresh your memory as to what that means. A Spiritual Gift is a divine empowerment that God gave you when He created your life. God designed you for a particular purpose. He equipped you with a certain type of personality, temperament, and specific skills and talents to accomplish all that He has planned for your life and fulfill that purpose. I am going to pass these result packets out to you, but before I do, I want to make sure that you all have a good understanding of something first.

"These results," he said, "are papers with words on them. If you took the test honestly, the words you will read should be a helpful guide in discovering the gifts that God has placed in you. However, as I said, they are only words. You should not completely depend on what these results say alone. It is far more important that you listen to the direction and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. God could easily plant new gifts in you as you grow and mature, or He may just call you in another direction entirely. So, you don't want to lock yourself into believing only what this says for the rest of your life. Listen to the direction of the Holy Spirit," he explained, holding the packets up in front of him.

"They are designed for discovering more about yourself and hopefully in that discovery, you will gain more understanding of who God made you to be and what He designed you to do. Does that make sense to you?" he asked the class, looking around for their response. Everyone nodded.

"Something else that is very important to remember," he said, "is that you do not have to share these results with anyone else if you do not wish to do so. Because a Spiritual Gift is an ability or talent that God has placed in you, it is something special between you and the Lord. If you wish to talk about your results openly, you are welcome to do so. If you are not sure you would like to

do that at this time, that is alright as well. You will find that this packet is loaded with information that should answer many of your questions about the gifts you possess and their full description. These gifts are not just something that man has devised to try and figure out his place of work for the Lord. These gifts are all listed in the Bible, and you will find the scriptures to validate them. Once I distribute the packets, we will have a discussion about the different gifts, and I am always available to you for any questions, guidance, or information you may need outside of class."

Obadiah then paused to look around the class, smiling his charming half smile. "Are you ready?"

The students all acknowledged Obadiah that they were eagerly ready, and with that, he began to distribute the result packets. The room quickly grew silent as students received their results and began studying them intently. Keoni was the first of the four friends to receive her packet.

On the first page, it listed all her Spiritual Gifts, the main one being:

"The Gift of Prophecy and Discernment"
Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10; Eph. 4:11

After that, there were other gifts listed that complemented her main gift. They were:

"The Gift of Intercession"
Luke 22:41-44; Acts 12:12; Romans 8:26-27; Colossians 1:9-12; 4:12-13; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; James 5:14-16

"The Gift of Knowledge"
1 Cor. 12:8

"The Gift of Craftsmanship and Artistry"
Exodus 28:3-4, 31:1-11, 35:30-35

The next few pages took the listed gifts one by one and gave a detailed written description of what each gift meant and how it could be used for the Lord's work.

Jace was the next one to receive his results. His main gift listed was:

"The Gift of Healing"
1 Cor. 12:9,28,30

Then his other gifts read:

"The Gift of Intercession"
Luke 22:41-44; Acts 12:12; Romans 8:26-27; Colossians 1:9-12; 4:12-13; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; James 5:14-16

"The Gift of Giving"
Rom. 12:8

"The Gift of Mercy and Compassion"
Romans 12:6-8, Luke 7:12-15, 10:30-37
Matthew 20:29-34, 25:34-40,5:7, Mark 9:41

Gideon received his packet next. The first Gift listed for Him read:

"The Gift of Leadership"
Luke 9:51; Acts 6:1-7; 15:7-11; Romans 12:8; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17.

The other gifts that followed were:

"The Gift of Intercession"
Luke 22:41-44; Acts 12:12; Romans 8:26-27; Colossians 1:9-12; 4:12-13;
1 Timothy 2:1-2; James 5:14-16

"The Gift of Administration"
1 Corinthians 12:28-31, Luke 14:28-30

"The Gift of Evangelism"
Acts 8:5-6, 26-40; Ephesians 4:11-14; 2 Timothy 4:5.

Brielle was the last of the four friends to receive her packet. Brielle was the last student of the whole class to receive it. As Obadiah read the names of each student aloud, her heart climbed higher and higher into her throat.

"Please don't say missionary, please don't say missionary," she thought over and over again in her mind. Then, one by one, as the students read their results around her and she watched their faces, she felt ashamed. None of the other students looked as if they were dreading having a certain gift. They all looked eager, thrilled in fact, to see their particular skill so they could serve the Lord with that gift.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, "Forgive me, Father," she thought to herself, "I want to serve You, and if being a missionary is what You want me to do, I will go. I want Your will, not mine." Just then, she was interrupted by the sound of her name.

Obadiah walked over to his granddaughter, a look of pride in his eyes as he did so. "Here you go, sweetheart," he whispered.

Brielle reached out slowly to take the packet. Her eyes moved past the introductory comments to the results listed in the middle of the page. The main Spiritual Gift listed:

"The Gift of Faith"
1 Corinthians 12:7-11, Mark 5:25-34, Acts 27:21-25, Hebrews 11, Romans 4:18-21

She smiled to herself when she read the words, but wondered exactly what that meant. Her eyes jumped down to the translations. It read: *The Spiritual Gift of Faith: The person has an extraordinary trust in God's promises, His power, and His presence. They have the ability to see something that must be done and know, without doubt, that God can do it--- even if it seems to be impossible. Because of their unshakable faith, they are able to make miraculous and heroic stands for the Lord and therefore tremendously impact the lives of those around them and for the church. The gift of faith involves a confident assistance from God for the supernatural to accomplish great things in dire circumstances.*

She was thrilled when she read the definition of her gift, for she knew this to be true. Ever since she was a small girl in Uganda, she has always possessed the most incredible faith in God and His power. Now she was excited and quickly moved back up to the middle of the page to read the rest of the gifts listed. They were:

"The Gift of Intercession"
Luke 22:41-44; Acts 12:12; Romans 8:26-27; Colossians 1:9-12; 4:12-13; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; James 5:14-16

"The Gift of Miracles"
1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 12:28-31, Mark 16:17-18, Acts 9:36-42, 20:9-12 Hebrews 2:4, Romans 15:17-19, Acts 8:13, 19:11-12

"The Gift of Wisdom"
1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 2:6-13, James 3:13-18, 1:5-8, 2 Chronicles 1:7-11 Acts 6:3-10, 1 Kings 3:16-28

And underneath that, Obadiah had written in:
"The Gift of Memorization"

The students all took their time to quietly read over their gifts; most of them were smiling to see just how accurate the test was, to point out the main characteristics they possessed. Some of them agreed with their results, some were a little confused, and one was just not satisfied; it was Gideon.

"I have a question," he began, raising his hand, "Actually, I have a few."

Obadiah smiled. He knew Gideon well and expected this reaction from him over his results: "Yes, Gideon, go right ahead."

"First, this says that my main Spiritual Gift is Leadership. That just can't be right. I've never led any*thing* or any*one*, any*where,*" he finished, causing the quiet class to break into laughter. Then he continued, "And then here it says that

I am an intercessor, I don't even know what an intercessor is. Then this gift says I have a gift of evangelism, and I can tell you right now that I have never evangelized. Then the last one says I have a gift of administration. Does that mean that I'm destined by God to work in an office?" He finished, more exasperated than when he started.

Obadiah chuckled, "No, Gideon, it doesn't mean that God made you to work in an office—you may someday, who knows, but that term means that you have the ability to develop strategies or plans. You set goals and work in an organized and efficient way to attain them. You know how to inspire people, assign tasks, and bring order to chaos," he paused to let the information sink into Gideon for a moment.

Gideon sat quietly processing the information and waited for Obadiah to continue.

"The gift of evangelism means that you are not ashamed, shy, or afraid to tell others of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of that boldness for the Lord, you will win many souls for the Kingdom of heaven," Obadiah said.

"Yeah, Giddy," Keoni interjected, "Just like with Dylan. You went to pray for him in the hospital all by yourself."

"Yes, and I learned that Dylan's family are all Atheists," Gideon replied.

"And you might be the very one to lead them to the Lord," Obadiah encouraged.

Gideon processed this information in his mind thoughtfully, "Okay, I get it, go on," he said.

"The main gift you have listed of leadership is a very powerful ability. The world is full of leaders, but we are always in need of more, especially leaders who follow the Word of God. This means that you are an effective communicator with people, you gain their trust, their respect, and you know how to give direction. You are a motivator, and you are responsible and full of vision, creativity, and intelligence. Don't underestimate yourself, son, who knows, you just might be an American President someday," Obadiah finished.

Gideon was now shining with joy as he learned what the test revealed his Spiritual Gifts to be. He felt great confidence and recognized through Obadiah's explanation that he possessed many of these qualities. Then he looked back down at his packet and raised his hand again, "But what about the gift of being an Intercessor?" he asked, "I honestly have no idea what that is."

"I had that too," Keoni said excitedly.

"Me too," Brielle said, "Not as my main gift but an additional one."

"I had it," Jace said, "just like you, under my main gift."

"Okay…" Gideon paused, "Anyone else?" He looked around the room, but no one else raised their hands.

Obadiah turned and grabbed the stool he kept at the front of the class and pulled it up to sit down, a joyful expression on his face.

"The gift of intercession is a very powerful talent given by the Lord. These are people who know how to pray and use prayer as their tool to accomplish great things," Obadiah explained. "Intercessory prayer is challenging; it takes a strong person because sometimes it can be difficult. But a person who is blessed to have this gift truly knows how to speak directly to God, be heard, and see miraculous results from their time in prayer. I think the best way to describe this gift is to say, to be an Intercessor… is to be a warrior."

"A warrior?" Brielle asked softly.

"Yes, most definitely," Obadiah replied.

"But a warrior engages in battles, right?" Keoni asked timidly.

"Most definitely," Obadiah answered.

"What do they battle?" Gideon asked.

"Evil," Obadiah said directly, "An Intercessor does not use weapons like guns or bombs because it is spiritual warfare they are engaged in, battling the forces of darkness from our enemy, satan."

The class grew silent as everyone listened to Obadiah's description of the gift. He looked around the room, slowly taking in all the students' expressions. "Does anyone else have a question about their gift?" he asked and waited.

"No," Gideon said, "we're all too frightened."

Obadiah broke into laughter, "Frightened? Never be frightened!" he said getting up from his stool to grab his Bible, "We have the end of the story right here!" he said holding the Bible high, "And in case you haven't read that far yet, guess what? We win!" he said with excitement, his eyes sparkling with the thought of it. "*Never* be afraid. I know that is easily said, but you must remember, you are a child of God, the one and only living God who will *never* leave you nor forsake you. So do *not* be afraid. That is why we are doing this, so you can discover the gifts, talents, and abilities God has placed in you, and you can go out and battle the enemy the way God intended. Some of you may not be called to be an intercessor, but that doesn't mean you can't give the devil a good punch in the nose! The Bible tells us in Joshua 1:9, *'Be strong and courageous, do not be terrified, do not be discouraged for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'* He has empowered you for a purpose, trust His will, and let Him use you for His glory."

After class was finished, they all went into the sanctuary for the main service. Keoni and Gideon went up to sing in the choir, and Jace and Brielle sat together with a few of the other teens in the youth group. When it came time for the offering, Brielle passed the collection bag and reached around to scratch her back.

"Are you okay?" Jace asked her.

"Yeah, I just now remembered why I never wear this dress," she giggled softly.

As she turned around, she thought she saw someone at the back of the

church staring at her. She tried to look again to be sure of who it was without being too obvious, but the ushers were in her way.

"What is it?" Jace asked her.

"Umm… I'm not sure," she said, trying to look around the moving ushers for a clearer view. Finally, the offering was done, and the ushers left the sanctuary. She then could clearly see there was no one in the back.

"That's so weird," she whispered. Jace looked down at her with curious eyes.

"I thought I saw…" she hesitated for fear of sounding paranoid, "I thought I saw that man from the football game the other night."

"The one who kept staring at you?" Jace asked, turning to look behind him for the man.

"Yeah, strange… I don't know, but there's no one there. I must be crazy, I guess," she laughed lightly, turning her attention to the choir as they began to sing.

After the service, the four friends all talked about their previous plans to go to lunch with Obadiah so they could talk to him about their friends at school. Obadiah, of course, was thrilled to go. Brielle told her mother of their plans, and Genevieve said that she, Magomu, Alma, Asher, and his little friend Matthew were all going out for Italian. With a hug, kiss, and prayer for safety, Genevieve sent Brielle on her way and told her that she would see her at home later.

Obadiah suggested they eat at North Shore as his treat. Since most teens couldn't afford that place on their own, they were thrilled. They were seated and placed their order with the waitress. To the surprise of his friends, Gideon was not interested in this one.

"I thought surely a fisherman such as yourself would have ordered one of the fish specials," Obadiah kidded Jace after listening to him order a chicken dish.

"Oh," Jace laughed, "No, Sir, I catch them, but I don't eat them."

"Really?" Obadiah asked.

"Yes, Sir, I try, but I just can't take the taste of fish," Jace answered.

"Do you like lobster?" Keoni asked.

"No," Jace said.

"Crab… shrimp?" Gideon added.

"Especially not shrimp," Jace said, certainly, "I can't take the rubbery feel of them. No shrimp, no crab, nothing."

"What about clam chowder?" Keoni asked again, "It doesn't have a strong fish taste."

"Nope, none of it," Jace replied.

"So, it's not that you just don't like fish, you don't like *anything* from water," Brielle said.

"Yes, that's perfect, nothing from water. I wish I liked it because that would

really help my reputation on the boat. All the guys tease me how I'm a fisherman who can't eat fish," he laughed.

"Did you work on your boat yesterday?" Obadiah asked.

"Yes, Sir, we had a pretty good day too. It started slow, but that afternoon, Captain Espindola found a good spot and we stayed for hours. He kept us out late until the boat was full," Jace answered.

"What is it that you enjoy the most about your job?" Obadiah asked.

Jace thought about that for a moment, "Hmm, that's a good question," he began, "There's quite a bit that I enjoy. I love being out on the boat for one thing, and I enjoy the fishing—not necessarily the cleaning and the packing part," he laughed, "but I really like all the guys I work with, especially Captain Espindola. It can be stressful sometimes, it's hard work for sure, but for the most part, I have a lot of fun."

"Did you ever think of being the captain of your own boat before deciding to be a doctor?" Gideon asked.

"Oh no," Jace said strongly, "I love it, but I think I love it because I only have to do it once a week. Doing what those guys do is a hard way of life. Sometimes I don't know how they keep going; it's very taxing work. No, I never saw my fishing job as anything more than a means to my truck."

Obadiah laughed.

"What about the old lighthouse?" Brielle asked, "Did Captain Espindola talk about it like you said?"

Jace was taking a drink when she asked him the question and he quickly set his glass down to respond, "Yes, we did. I forgot to tell you about that. We headed out past Montier's Point, going northeast, so we saw the lighthouse on the way out. Captain Espindola loves that old building," he said to the rest of the group, "He always says he wishes he could retire there. We looked at it like we usually do when we pass by and talked about what all would need to be done to get it functional again. It looked just as broken and rundown as it always does. But then, when we came back in later that night, I…" he hesitated for a moment, "I thought I saw something up there."

"What did you see?" Brielle asked, intrigued.

"It looked like it flashed for a moment," he said with a slight laugh.

"Are you sure you were looking at the lighthouse? I mean, if it was dark outside, maybe you saw something else?" Gideon replied.

"No, there was a bright moon outside last night, plus Captain not only talks about the lighthouse when we pass it on the way out, he talks about it when we pass it on the way in. He's been passing that thing for decades now and knows exactly where it is. I'm sure it was the lighthouse that flashed, but I've been up there before, and there is *no way* that it could generate any kind of light," Jace said.

"What did the light look like?" Obadiah asked.

“It was green in color. I was cleaning the deck when we passed by, and I heard the captain mention it, so I looked up. I stared at it for a few minutes, trying to think of how it could be repaired, and while I was looking at it, I thought I saw a quick flash of light coming from the lens. It only lasted a few seconds. I asked the captain if he had seen it, but he didn’t. He laughed and said I needed more sleep, so I didn’t even bother to ask any of the crew. I don’t know, maybe I do need more sleep,” he joked.

“When do you work again?” Obadiah asked.

“Not until next Saturday,” he answered, “I doubt if I'll see it again. We may not fish in that location next week or be out that late.”

“About what time was this?” Obadiah asked.

“It was ten o’clock,” Jace said.

“Wow,” Gideon replied, “You worked until ten o’clock and still made it to church on time this morning?”

“We docked about ten thirty, I didn’t even get home until after midnight,” he said.

“You’ve got my respect, man,” Gideon said.

“I can barely get out of bed for school every day, and I don’t work like that,” Keoni added.

Just then, the waitress brought an appetizer to the table. Keoni nudged Brielle to begin a conversation with her grandfather about helping their friends.

“Oba, we wanted to meet with you today because we have some questions to ask you,” she began. “You know that ever since the first day of school, I have had this… burden, I guess for Lacy, right?” she asked.

Obadiah nodded.

“Okay, there is this other guy, Rateesh. He’s a friend, and Jace has a burden for him because there are these guys at school who are harassing him,” she said.

“Then I have my friend Terri that I talked to you about the other day,” Keoni added, “He’s the one who is gay. I want to talk with him more about Jesus. He has a lot of struggles. He deals with bullies and has told me that he battles depression too.”

“And you know about my friend Dylan, who is in the hospital in a coma just like Lacy,” Gideon began, “I’m worried about him. He’s in this coma, and we don’t know what’s going to happen to him.”

Obadiah listened intently to the four youth, taking all their stories and situations to heart.

“We don’t think it is a coincidence that these four people are in our lives and that we have these burdens for them,” Brielle said.

“Good, because it is not a coincidence. There is no word for coincidence in the Hebrew language because there is no coincidence with God. He, Adonai, has placed you in these people’s lives for a purpose. These are divine appointments,” Obadiah said. “I used to believe in coincidences when I was younger because I

was still learning about the power of God. But now I know that God has His hand in everything, and He sees every situation. Even though we may not see it or understand it, somewhere God is in it. So, I agree that there is something greater going on here, and I am very proud of the four of you for recognizing this and being willing to do something to help."

"That's just it. We don't know what to do to help. I mean, we pray for them, but I keep feeling like there is something more that we could do," Brielle said.

"There is. You don't believe that it was a coincidence that the four of you all tested to have the Spiritual Gift of being an Intercessor, do you?" he asked, looking at each of them individually.

"I don't know," Gideon answered, "What does an Intercessor need to do?"

"That is a loaded question," Obadiah answered, "To be an Intercessor, a powerful Intercessor; you must be taught and trained. Your training could take years before you are finished, but you could still start utilizing the lessons you learn right away."

"Taught and trained?" Keoni asked, "Like going to school?"

Obadiah chuckled, "Oh, it's much more than just that. To be an Intercessor, you not only have to have a strong faith base in God and His Word, but you should also be healthy in your body and mind. I have lived all over the world, and through that time, God has blessed me with countless lessons I have learned from many people in different cultures and countries. But they all had one thing in common: a passionate love for Christ Jesus and God their Heavenly Father."

The four friends were intrigued and excited. "Will you train us?" Brielle asked.

Obadiah looked at them all again intently, "Is this what you all want to do?"

The teens nodded with certainty, "And you will make a commitment to the training you will receive?" Obadiah asked them.

Again, they nodded in agreement.

Obadiah smiled, "Then it will be my most sincere honor to train you all. Since there are no Sunday evening church services, would Sunday evenings work well as a time for all of you to meet? I know that is a school night, but we will keep to a good schedule, so you are not out late."

Each teen acknowledged that it would be a good night for all their schedules.

"Good. Then I will send word with Brielle for you this week. We will plan to begin next weekend." Obadiah said.

The waitress arrived with their food. They enjoyed the rest of their time together, laughing, talking, and listening to fascinating stories from Obadiah. All four teens had great anticipation in their hearts for this new journey they were going to take together. It excited them that they would be doing something that could bring help to their friends. But it excited them even more to know that they would be doing something for the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Even though they weren't completely clear on what it meant, they were all filled with an eager desire to become an Intercessor.

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At school the next morning, Keoni, Gideon, and Jace were eager to see if Brielle had any word from Obadiah on what he was preparing for their training. What was it that was taking so long? He said they would begin on Sunday, so what else was there that had to be done?

Brielle didn't have any word.

They waited until the next day and the next… but no word came.

As the days passed, the teens kept trying to do all they knew how to help their friends; by praying for them and asking God to give them direction. But their circumstances remained unchanged.

Lacy's stroke had done more damage to her body. In addition to the paralysis on her left side, the doctors also believed that it may have affected her speech. Brielle and Genevieve had gone for a visit one day and learned that she would not only have to go through physical therapy for her rehabilitation, but the chances that she would have to go to speech therapy were high as well. Lacy remained silent, stretched out on her bed. Brielle had been trying to dive back into studying Lacy's journal as often as she could, but she never read it before going to sleep.

Dylan's condition was not better. His vital signs were starting to slip, and he had been put on a respirator-- just like Lacy. But so far, there had been no sign of a stroke—at least that was something they could be thankful for. Gideon was not giving up on Dylan's family. He still visited Dylan. One time he took Keoni and Brielle, and one time he took Jace. Even though the Whitfield family would not allow Gideon to pray for Dylan in the hospital room, Gideon still prayed daily for Jesus to heal his teammate, giving thanks to God that He would heal his friend.

Things with Rateesh were still the same. Rateesh finally made it back to chemistry class, and Jace tried speaking to him about Sidney. Rateesh acted like he didn't know what he was talking about and kept reassuring Jace that everything was fine. Jace knew better. He began watching Rateesh more closely, trying to learn his schedule so he could keep an eye on things between classes. At lunch, he and Brielle both tried to get Rateesh to join them, but he wanted to stay with the rest of his friends and politely declined. Brielle thought he was keeping them at a distance so he wouldn't have to answer their questions.

The word spread quickly about Taryn's humiliation with Brielle's milkshake the previous Friday. But the humiliation didn't last long as the power of a popular girl quickly turned Taryn's humiliation into an act of violence. More students looked at Taryn as a victim and Brielle as a bully.

When she came into the lunchroom with a bottle of chocolate milk, the students would say things like, "Look out, she's got a chocolate milk, take cover!" or "Don't get on her bad side, she might attack you with her lunch!"

Brielle tried to brush it off, but deep down inside, she knew she deserved it. There was another part of her that wanted to stand up and let the whole school know that Taryn got what she deserved because she was a wretched, horrible creature disguised as a beautiful girl. But she knew that would do nothing but make her look worse and would not represent the way Jesus would act. That was the flesh and not of the Spirit.

Taryn had moved on from Gideon's breakup, proving that she was only with him because of his place on the football team. Now, she scooped up Reed Radcliff, the same guy who was harassing Rateesh. At first, this bothered Gideon until he saw her flirting with Jace in the hallway after class. Jace, of course, ignored her, but asked Gideon why he had never noticed her doing that before.

"Love is blind, my friend," Gideon replied, "Love is blind."

Keoni was still trying to minister to Terri as much as possible without driving a wedge in their relationship. Recently, a discussion began that Keoni was not equipped to handle.

"I know God loves me," Terri told Keoni one day at school, "God made me gay, and He loves me just the way I am."

"I don't believe God made you gay; that would not make sense," Keoni said gently.

"Why not?" Terri asked defiantly.

"God's Word tells us that we are to live a certain way and not live another. So why would He intentionally create us to go against His Word? It just doesn't make sense," Keoni replied gently.

"It makes sense to me," Terri said.

Keoni decided that she needed to continue praying for Terri, but until she gained more knowledge of how to minister to him, she would show him love in the best way she knew how.

Finally, it was Friday morning. Brielle had grown weary of asking her grandfather if he had anything to give them each day, so this morning she didn't ask. However, when they pulled into the parking lot of the school, he put his hand gently on hers.

"I want to give you this," he said, pulling out an envelope from his jacket pocket. "Please do not open it until you are together with Jace, Gideon, and Keoni, alright?"

Brielle nodded.

"Now, I've spoken with your mother and with Alma, but I couldn't reach Jace's mother or father. I will keep trying," he said.

Brielle sighed as she knew the reason why.

"After school today, I am sending you all on a little adventure," he said mysteriously, smiling his charming smile. "If Jace needs to get permission from his father, then you need to wait and schedule this for another day when you can all go together. But if he can go today, then I hope you have fun," he said

with a wink.

"There's some gas money in this envelope, too. Make sure you give some to Keoni and Jace. I will see you at home for dinner tonight," he said, pulling her over and kissing the top of her head. "Have a wonderful day today and be careful, I love you."

"I love you too, Oba," she said, hopping out of the truck, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Thank you!"

That morning, the classes all seemed to drag on forever until lunchtime. Brielle was so excited she almost didn't go through the lunch line…. almost. Once everyone had their lunches and were seated together at their table, they encouraged her to open the envelope. Inside, there was one note card and two twenty-dollar bills.

"Here," she said, handing one of the bills to Keoni, "Oba told me to give this to you for gas money." Then she reached out to hand the other one to Jace.

"Please, your grandfather has done so much for me already," he smiled, gently pushing her hand away.

"What does the card say?" Gideon asked, quickly losing patience.

Brielle laughed excitedly and held up the card to read it aloud. It was written in Obadiah's hand.

I've never traveled near or far; a steady hamlet is my pride.
Yet all my essence, dash, and life stem from dwellings far and wide.
And held inside, I've known more lives, more relics and tales that one could tell.
The world will sing and memoirs ring, through the clarity of a bell.

"What in the world does that mean?" Gideon asked sarcastically.

"It's a riddle," Brielle said, "Oba is making us work for this. He told me that he had already spoken to your mother and if Jace couldn't go with us after school today, we should wait."

"I can go," Jace said.

Brielle smiled, relieved they wouldn't have to wait, but also excited to spend time with Jace after school.

"Okay… so then we have to figure out this riddle because it will lead us to where we are going today?" Jace asked.

"Let's hope so!" Brielle said.

"This is so much fun! It's like we are on a treasure hunt or something," Keoni giggled.

"Yeah, but with a treasure hunt you get to use a *map,* not some crazy-riddle-Shakespeare poem thing," Gideon replied.

"You just don't like having to use your brain," Keoni scoffed. "Read it again, Brielle, line by line this time."

Brielle read it again. The four friends worked hard trying to decipher the

riddle.

"What if we can't figure this thing out by today?" Gideon exclaimed, "I want to go *today*."

"Hush, you, whiny baby, you're not helping at all. Where are all those leadership gifts at?" Keoni chided.

"Okay, let's use what we have," Brielle began. "He gave us a tip that we are *going* somewhere today, right? At least we know that this is a location."

"Yes, and that is verified in the first line of the riddle, *I've never traveled near or far, a steady hamlet is my pride*. A building wouldn't travel anywhere," Jace said.

"What?" Gideon asked, "How do you get that?"

"Because of the word hamlet," Jace said.

"Hamlet? I thought that was Shakespeare's play about a weird, sad man who played with skulls," Gideon said, taking a bite of his burger.

"Ha, ha, very funny," Brielle teased, "A hamlet also means a place or location."

"Okay, so we know it's a building, now what?" Gideon asked with his mouth half full.

"The next line says, *Yet, all my essence, dash and life, stems from dwellings far and wide,*" Brielle read on, "Life… hmm," she pondered the line for a moment, "Is that describing what the building holds inside… life? Like maybe a hospital building or somewhere people are living?"

"Could be," Keoni said, "but it says the *essence, dash, and life stem from dwellings far and wide.* I don't think the building contains living people. I think it houses things from dwellings and places of the past."

"Good point," Brielle said, "Okay, so then we know we have a building, and it has… what? Objects in it?"

"Maybe," Keoni began reading the next line over Brielle's shoulder, "Then it says: *And held inside I've known more lives, more relics, and tales that one could tell…* Oh! Is it a library? Maybe it's describing the books that are held inside, which tell stories of people's lives?" Keoni declared.

"That's a good thought," Jace said, "A library would be full of stories about people and their heritage from far and wide."

"What about a museum?" Gideon asked, still working on his burger.

"Nicely done," Keoni praised, nodding at her brother, "That's a good thought. What about that? Could this be describing a museum?"

"Let's write these down and then we'll do a process of elimination," Brielle said, taking out a pencil and writing down the words: Library and Museum on the envelope.

Brielle studied the words for a moment. "Wait," she said, "A library and a museum are public places, and Oba told me today that he was sending us on a little adventure. I doubt we would have much freedom for adventures in places

like that, do you?

"Yeah, that's true, you can't even talk out loud in a library," Gideon said.

"You would know," Keoni laughed.

"Yes, and you can't touch anything in a museum," Jace said, "Maybe we need to think of another location that would hold a lot of history about people that is not a library or a museum."

They all sat quietly thinking, finally, Brielle exclaimed, "I know! An antique shop!"

"Of course!" Keoni agreed. "That's perfect, just like Obadiah. Plus, it's open for anyone to come in and touch things and talk—which is good for Gideon," she grinned.

"Good grief, I can't believe I didn't think of that sooner, as much time as he likes to spend antiquing," Brielle said.

"Alright, so let's say that the location is an antique shop," Keoni said, grabbing the pencil to write it down and scratch off the other two ideas listed.

"But what about the last line?" Jace asked.

Brielle read the last line again, "*The world will sing and memoirs ring, through the clarity of a bell….* yeah, I have no idea that one throws me off."

"Exactly," Jace said, "The rest of the riddle is pretty much connected with giving us clues about a building and what's inside. Then there is this line that seems kind of random, like it's out of place."

Brielle sat quietly for a moment, thinking. She began to write down a few more words on the envelope. "Let's try pulling the most important words from the line," she said, going over the last line carefully.

"World… sing… memoirs…. ring... bell," she said as she wrote.

"Let's take off *sing*, because that really has nothing to do with an antique shop," Gideon said.

Brielle scratched off *sing.*

"In that case, I think we can take out the word *ring* because that was probably on there to rhyme with sing," Jace said.

Brielle scratched off *ring.* "That leaves world, memoirs, and bell," she said.

"I think the clue is in the word bell," Jace said.

"Why?" Brielle asked curiously.

"Because it stands out," he replied. "World fits with the rest of the riddle because the antiques probably were collected from countries all over the world. Memoirs fit with it, too, because those are records of history. But bell… what does bell have to do with any of it?"

"Good point, Sherlock," Brielle smiled, "Excellent reasoning."

"Maybe it's a clue as to where the shop is?" Jace asked.

"Or what it's called," Gideon said, done with his burger and now munching on his fries.

"Okay then, so we have the location being an antique shop and the word

bell. Are there any streets in Fairfield called Bell?" Keoni asked.

"I don't think so," Brielle said, "but I could be wrong."

"I still think it is telling us a name," Gideon said.

"Alright then, do we know of any shops that have the word bell in them?" Keoni asked.

Brielle thought for a moment, "I can't think of anything," she said. Jace shook his head.

"All I know is Taco Bell," Gideon said, drawing a look of exasperation from his sister. "Come on, are you seriously asking me if I know any antique shop names?" he asked her.

"Hang on a second," Jace said, reaching into his jacket,

"We can get a little help with this," he said as he took out his phone. "All we need to do is search for antique shops in Fairfield. There should be a listing or something we can search through," Jace said.

"I guess we're kind of cheating," Brielle said, "How did people ever find places before the internet?"

"Did Obadiah say we couldn't use the internet?" Gideon asked her.

"No, come to think of it, he didn't," she replied.

"Then we're not cheating. We're just using the tools we have to solve the riddle," he smiled happily.

Brielle laughed and shook her head at her friend.

The list came up, and Jace began to quickly scan through the shop names. Then his face lit up, "How about this?" he asked, holding up the screen to his friends, "It's called *The Liberty Bell."*

"Where is it located?" Brielle asked.

"It's a bit of a drive, it's on the outskirts of town, looks like an old home that has been converted into a shop," he said.

"That's it!" Keoni said, "It has to be!"

"Yeah, that's why Obadiah gave us the money for gas! We did it!" Brielle said excitedly, "Oh, I wish we could go right now!"

"Well, I can't," Keoni said, "I've got an algebra quiz today. Hooray," she said sarcastically, twirling her fingers in the air. "You'll just have to wait," she smiled at her friend.

"Yeah, I have to wait for all of you for an additional hour," Brielle sulked, "At least we know where we are going! This is *so* exciting! I've never done anything like this before."

"Yes, you have, when Pastor Nathan organized that youth scavenger hunt over the summer," Gideon said.

"That's not what I mean. That was a game for a bunch of crazy kids. This is different; it's… special --and real!" Brielle said happily.

"I just don't understand what all of this has to do with Obadiah teaching us how to help our friends," Gideon said, finishing his lunch.

"I guess we will find out," Brielle replied happily. "It's the start of something, and I can't wait to begin!"

"Yes, I feel it," Keoni said, "It's like we are at the beginning of something… not sure what it is yet, but the beginning of something wonderfully life-changing."

"The beginning… *exordium*," Brielle whispered to herself when she heard Keoni's words.

"What was that?" Gideon asked her.

"Exordium," Brielle repeated louder, "It was the first word we learned in our Latin class. Our teacher taught it to us on the first day of school because it means the beginning."

Once school was over, the friends planned to meet and travel together in Keoni's car. Jace had given Keoni the directions from his phone, and they started on their journey. The antique shop was located on the outskirts of town in a very quiet and wooded area. It looked like an old colonial village. There were restaurants and bed and breakfasts, quaint shops, and an outdoor marketplace. The sidewalks all had old-fashioned black lamp posts lining them. The trees grew thickly in between the buildings, covering the ground with layers of rich red, gold, and yellow leaves that had fallen from their branches.

Finally, they found the antique shop, "The Liberty Bell". It looked just as it should, lovely and quaint. It had the appearance of a very old colonial home. It was a perfect rectangle with a medium-pitched roof and pairs of chimneys on both sides of the house, one in each corner. The house was painted a beautiful regal blue with white trim around the windows and a red door for the finishing patriotic touch. It was a two-story home with four paned windows across the top and four across the bottom. The door was in the center of the house and was accented by two white columns with a decorative crown-style cover over the top. An American flag was mounted on the column beside the door. In the front yard, which was enclosed with a white picket fence, there hung a Liberty Bell, a replica, only much smaller than the original.

"Oh, isn't it darling?" Brielle asked enthusiastically.

Gideon laughed, "You know that's the exact word that popped into my mind when I saw it, *darling,*" he mocked, clasping his hands together by his face, "It's just darling!"

"Hush," Brielle said, patting the air with her hand.

They parked the car on the street and entered through the white picket fence.

"I'm so excited!" Keoni said as they approached the door, linking Brielle's arm in hers, "I don't understand why we are here-- but this is so much fun!"

"I think that's the point," Brielle smiled, "You know Oba, he loves to keep things interesting."

Just before they reached the door, it slowly opened, and an elderly gentleman stepped out.

"Good afternoon," he said sweetly, "I've been expecting you. My name is Benjamin Duncan. Welcome to The Liberty Bell," he said with a warm smile.

"Hello," Brielle said, "I'm— "

"Brielle St. Claire," Benjamin interrupted her, reaching out to shake her hand. Then he turned to the others, "And you are Jace Roberts, Gideon Toussaint, and Keoni Toussaint," he finished, shaking each one's hand and ushering them inside the store.

When they walked inside, they took their time to look around. The store was incredibly well organized, holding beautiful old antiques of furniture, paintings, dishes, sculptures, tools, and a vast array of collectibles. Everything was so clean and presented in such a way that it did not look as much like an antique store as it did a home. It was almost as if they had stepped back into the past just by entering the house.

"Would you like some coffee, tea, or hot chocolate?" Benjamin offered.

"I'd love some hot chocolate," Brielle said happily.

"I would like some tea," Keoni said.

"Wonderful, if you would please follow me," Benjamin said, heading into another room.

Benjamin was not a tall man; he was of average size and build. He looked to be in his seventies, but his face was so bright and cheery that his age was easily hidden behind it. He had lost most of his hair, and what hair he had was white as snow. He walked with a spring in his step, and as he took them through the house, he told them of its history—and his.

"This house was built in 1784, right after the victory of the Revolutionary War. It was once the home and shop of a tailor named Joseph Cartwright. He was a soldier in the Revolutionary War. After the war, he married and settled down in this house in a new, free America and opened his shop," he said.

Then Benjamin reached the dining table and invited them to join him, "Please sit down and make yourselves at home," he said, motioning the teens to sit around a beautifully set table. The table was spread with coffee, tea, hot chocolate, pastries, cookies, and cake.

The teens were delighted and enjoyed the delicious refreshments. After he served his guests, he continued with his story.

"My great-grandfather moved here from Litchfield and fell in love with it. He bought the house and almost everything in it from the Cartwright children. It has been passed from son to daughter to son, and when I leave this world, I will pass it to my daughter," he smiled sweetly. "She comes to work here but is afraid to stay too long for personal visits. She has a very lively three-year-old little boy who loves to play with everything," he laughed, "Someday I hope he too will carry on our tradition of keeping history alive."

Brielle looked around her. “Is everything in your store from the Revolutionary War?” she asked.

“Almost,” Benjamin said, “I love to barter and trade with people from other countries, but I would say that at least eighty percent of everything you see here is American artifacts from the incredible people who lived here during that time. I am proud to be part of that heritage. William McHenry Duncan was my great-great-great-grandfather… I think I said that right,” he smiled as he counted on his fingers. “He was a great soldier in the American Revolution. So, it is my honor to run this store and keep the American history of our forefathers alive and well. If it hadn’t been for their courage and determination, we would not have the freedom and the incredible country we are blessed with today,” he said proudly.

Benjamin seemed to be a true patriot. He loved his country and had dedicated his life to preserving and teaching its history. He told them about some of his prize findings and some of his most valuable items, which didn’t hold any monetary worth, just sentimental value. When he finished, he asked his guests if they would like anything else to eat or drink. The teens thanked him kindly as everything was delicious, but said they were quite satisfied.

Then Benjamin pushed his chair back and stood up.

“I know that you all are wondering why you have been sent here?” he laughed gently, “I have spent some time telling you about myself because I feel that I already know the four of you so well.”

The friends looked at each other, puzzled by the comment.

“You see, when Obadiah sends me a group of young people, I know that you must have a great passion for God. You want to serve Him in a very special and powerful way, and you are ready to take a stand against the forces of darkness that plague the world we live in,” he said.

Brielle was curious, “So… my grandfather has sent you others?”

“Yes. Not a great number, mind you, but through the years I have had the pleasure of meeting some of Obadiah’s apprentices,” he said.

“Apprentices?” Gideon said, “But Obadiah isn’t going to teach us how to build bridges… is he?”

Benjamin laughed, “I don’t know, he might! I know that is his day job, but his Spiritual work, his calling, is to be an Intercessor of the Lord.”

Benjamin walked over to the door. “If you are ready, I would like you to please follow me. I have some very special gifts to give you from Obadiah.”

He slowly walked down a hallway and stopped to pick up a rustic candlestick. He lit the candle and then headed up the stairs. The bottom stairs were well lit from the afternoon sun, but as they approached the second story, the light grew dimmer. When they reached the top of the creaky wooden staircase, Benjamin walked to a closed door, turned the old knob, and slowly opened it. A warm glow of light came pouring through the doorway. As the teens entered, they could see that there were beautiful old candelabras holding

lit candles all around the room. A fireplace was at the opposite end of the room with a warm fire burning brightly, adding to the light of the candles. The drapes were drawn, holding the sunlight out so only the gentle candles and firelight illuminated the room.

"This room was left completely in its original state, so it doesn't have electricity," Benjamin explained. "We keep the drapes drawn in the afternoon to preserve the color of the paintings and protect them from the sunlight."

All around them were exquisite paintings hanging on the walls. There were pictures showing scenes from the Revolutionary War, portraits of individuals and families, horses, and children playing in the countryside. The pictures were perfectly distributed around the room. The room was large and spacious. On the far left was an old bed with tall bedposts and a canopy adorned with an elegant cream lace bedspread and canopy cover. Next to that was a dresser with old brushes and mirrors lying upon it. On the right side of the room were two large wing-backed sitting chairs, elegantly upholstered in floral print material. Next to the chairs, there stood a very worn and weather-beaten upright piano.

Benjamin crossed the floor and moved over to the fireplace. There, in front of its blazing light, stood an antique wooden table like one that would be found in a commonwealth colonial kitchen. Set on top of the table, the teens could see four objects.

"These are special gifts for you from your teacher," Benjamin began with a smile, motioning his hand toward the aged table that had two brightly lit, brass candelabras standing on each end.

The four friends walked to the table to get a better view of the items. There was a little leather pouch that was heavily abraded, attached to a long leather strap that was also well-used. Next to that was a wooden case that lay on its side. It had a handle on the center edge and small metal latches on both ends. The sides of the case had once been lined with leather. The leather was now mostly eroded, leaving only faint outlines of its prior location. Next to the case was a very dainty, yet magnificently embroidered, cream-colored purse with a rustic little chain for the wrist strap. Last, there was an elegant little black box – in the candlelight, it looked to be made of copper and black onyx. On top, it was adorned with an impressive painting of a white lily.

"Our country began with a group of people who came here seeking freedom from religious persecution. The pilgrims who settled here wanted to freely worship and have the right to believe in God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit without persecution. This country was established by their descendants on that belief. They became soldiers, warriors," he paused, "They fought for it, and they died for it," he said, walking over to the table.

"These items date back to the time when our country gained its independence. They belonged to people who lived here and persevered --except for one item. They are all very fragile and quite valuable. Obadiah would like to

give you these gifts to start you off on your training to become an Intercessor," he paused, turning to place his hands gently on the wooden case.

"This is the case for a physician," he said, opening it to reveal some of the antiquated tools that it still held. Many instruments were missing. On the top edge beside the carrying handle, there were two small knobs attached to a drawer. The drawer slid down into the side of the case.

"These are the instruments of a caregiver, one who seeks healing for another to help them be restored to good health and strength," he said, turning to Jace. "This is for you. Let the talents and Spiritual Gifts of healing that God has put inside you be strengthened, not only by what you learn from those who practice medicine, but from the one who is called Jehovah Rophe; our healer."

Benjamin left the medical case on the table and moved to the purse, turning to look at Keoni.

"Your Spiritual Gifts have nothing to do with this purse," he mused, "but from what Obadiah said, you have great skills in fashion, which is still a God given talent. This gift is for you. Let it be a reminder to you that the God who gave you the knowledge of designing clothes also instilled in you even greater gifts of knowledge - to know things that others won't know and see things that others can't see. Trust in the Lord and know that He has given you these gifts for a special purpose. Let Him use you and guide you in all things," he grinned widely as he handed her the ornate silk handbag. Keoni was elated.

Benjamin then moved to the leather pouch and strap, which were lying on the table. He picked it up and said, "This is the only item that is not from the period of the Revolutionary War. It is from the Civil War, another time in our nation's past, where war was fought for freedom-- freedom from slavery. This is the actual haversack of a Civil War soldier. A soldier would wear this and carry the things in it that he needed when he was fighting the enemy," he said, turning to Gideon. "This is for you," he said, extending the haversack out to Gideon. "Obadiah took special care in selecting this gift for you, for it holds a very powerful meaning that you and your sister will greatly appreciate. This haversack is not just of any soldier of the Civil War, but of a soldier from the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. The first black regiment to fight in the Civil War… and fight they did - with honor and dignity," he said, patting Gideon on the back.

"Thank you," Gideon said, in awe of the gift.

"Take good care of it, and let it be a reminder to you of your Spiritual Gifts in leadership and administration. You have the ability to take charge, bring people together, fight for a common goal, and accomplish great things, just like the 54th Massachusetts. Let that common goal always be for the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Benjamin told him.

Last, he moved to the black onyx box. He gently picked it up with both hands and turned to Brielle.

"This gift is given to one who has the Spiritual Gift of great faith. Inside, it holds a powerful message in song. Always stay true to your heart, for your heart is filled with the love of the Lord. Always listen to that still, small voice which leads you, for it is the delicate voice of the Holy Spirit. Always do what God places in your mind to do, for He has equipped you with great power and has fortified you in your faith," he said softly, placing the box in Brielle's hands.

The friends studied their gifts in wonder and awe. They were so touched that Obadiah would give them such precious and symbolic gifts, but they still didn't understand what this had to do with learning to become an Intercessor.

Brielle lightly traced her finger around the beautiful lily etched on the top and then slowly lifted the lid to hear the music it played. As she did, the song held inside quickly filled the quiet room with its petite melody. She knew it immediately, "I Surrender All," she said softly, "That's my mother's favorite hymn."

Brielle looked up at Benjamin, who nodded happily. He was watching her with great anticipation. She looked back down at the box and noticed in the glimmer of the candlelight that there was something tucked down inside of it. She gently set the box on the table and pulled it out. It was an envelope. Her face lit with excitement as she turned to show it to her friends, who immediately began searching their gifts for an envelope as well.

Gideon carefully opened the buckles of the old soldier's haversack. Jace walked over to the medical case and slowly pulled on the knobs of the little drawer tucked to the side of the case. Keoni gently lifted the flap to her purse, and within seconds, they all produced an envelope.

The envelopes themselves were something mysterious and beautiful to behold. They were made from ancient parchment paper and were addressed to each of the youth personally, written in calligraphy with what appeared to be from a feather quill. On the back, each envelope was held closed with a red wax seal. The image depicted on the seal was that of two large rings that were slightly overlapping with each other as if they were linked together. The rings had a fascinating Celtic pattern woven around them, and coming from behind the center of the two rings was a cross.

"This is from Obadiah?" Gideon asked.

"Yes, I would know that seal anywhere," Brielle said.

"What does it mean?" Keoni asked.

Brielle took her finger and traced the first ring, "Obadiah," then she traced the second ring, "O'Sullivan," she said.

"And the cross of the Lord that He so faithfully serves and loves," Benjamin added.

Slowly, each opened their envelope and pulled out a formal invitation, also written on parchment paper. The invitations read:

Dear Servant of Christ,
Because you have asked the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart and because you have expressed the desire to do a greater work for Him in building His Kingdom, you are hereby invited to receive training and education on how to become an Intercessor of the Lord. Please search your heart diligently and seek the direction and counsel of the Holy Spirit before committing to your decision, for it is one that you will make for life. Should you choose to dedicate yourself to this most honorable, challenging, and rewarding work, I ask you to please join me this coming Sunday at my home to begin your training. Please arrive promptly at
6 p.m. so we can embark on this journey together. May the Blessings of God be upon you day and night in everything you do and everywhere you go.

For the Glory of Christ Forever,
Obadiah O'Sullivan
Intercessor of the Lord

15

After receiving their invitations to become Intercessors, the friends did exactly what Obadiah asked of them. They all spent time in prayer, seeking direction from the Holy Spirit on whether or not they should commit to such a task. The week seemed to drag on forever as they watched their friends struggling with bullies, struggling with secrets-- and struggling to stay alive. At the end of the week, the teens all received their answers from the Lord. There was no doubt as to what course of action they must choose. It was an imperative decision, easily made, and they were driven in their spirits to begin.

The following Sunday, after attending the morning church service, the four teens gathered at the home of Obadiah. They spent the rest of the afternoon together, waiting in eager anticipation to begin their Intercessor training. That evening, Genevieve called them to the kitchen, where she had a wonderful meal prepared.

"You need to eat a good dinner," she said, "You are going to need lots of energy."

"Can you give us a hint of what is going to happen tonight?" Brielle pleaded with her mother.

Genevieve smiled broadly at her daughter and pulled her close for a tight hug. "Yes. Your lives are all about to change for the better! You will never be the same again," she replied happily.

Brielle, Jace, and Gideon all ate well, but Keoni was too nervous to eat. "I can't eat," she said, "my stomach is already full—with a ball of nerves," she laughed.

"That's never stopped me," Brielle replied.

"Does anything stop you?" Gideon asked smartly.

"Hush," Brielle said, patting the air with her hand.

"Where's Ash?" Keoni asked.

"He's having a sleepover at another homeschool friend's house," Genevieve said, "He'll probably be sleepy tomorrow, but I wanted to be able to help Oba tonight. Plus, he's still a little too young for this. What you are doing takes great understanding, commitment, and responsibility. He can have this to look forward to when he is older," she said with an intriguing tone.

The friends were just finishing up their dinner, talking and laughing, when Magomu entered the room. "We are ready," he said.

"Thank you, Magomu," Genevieve answered. She looked at the teens and said, "Grab your jackets and let's go."

As they were headed to the door, Genevieve noticed Keoni's shoes. Keoni was wearing heels. "Oh, honey, you won't be able to walk in those. What size shoe do you wear?"

"Same as you, Mama," Brielle said.

"Thank the Lord for that. Brielle, please go upstairs and grab a pair of socks and my tennis shoes," Genevieve said. "I'll be right back."

Genevieve walked out the front door while Brielle did as her mother instructed. She laughed as she headed up the stairs, knowing Keoni was cringing.

"Tennis shoes? Really?" Keoni whined.

"Yes! But you'd do anything for Jesus, right?" Brielle asked, her voice trailing off as she went into her mother's room.

"Yes, yes, of course," Keoni replied, "I just wish I had known. I could have worn my cute army-style boots instead."

Genevieve came back into the house and waited until everyone was ready. When Keoni had changed her shoes, Genevieve smiled.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

They all nodded.

"Okay then, follow me," she instructed.

Everyone followed Genevieve outside and down a short path into the woods. There, waiting for them amidst the tall trees, were Obadiah and Magomu, both holding lit torches. Once she reached her father, Genevieve stopped to let Brielle and the others pass by. The brilliant orange glow from the torches cast radiantly over the four faces that quietly approached. They stood side by side facing Obadiah, first was Brielle, then Jace, Keoni, and Gideon.

"Welcome," Obadiah greeted them, "I am very happy to see you here tonight. Since all of you have decided to come, you are signifying that you are ready to commit your lives to this training. It is important that you know within your heart that you are ready to take your relationship and service for God to a much higher level."

They nodded in agreement.

"This place is your crossroads," Obadiah began. "The decision that you make in this moment will alter the course of your life forever. If you continue onward, the journey you are about to begin will lead you to the most amazing, miraculous, and glorious places in your walk with God and His Son Jesus Christ. That relationship will only grow stronger through time. Having said that, it will also bring you to some of the most challenging places you have ever experienced because once you begin this process of work for the Lord, you will have boldly declared war on satan and his entire evil kingdom here on earth.

"This commitment should not be feared, as God has called every one of you. He designed you for this purpose. He has empowered you with spiritual gifts and talents. He will protect and bless you, using that which He has placed within you for His glory and raise you up to conquer in His name," he paused, taking time to study each face before him.

"By making this choice, you will no longer be just an ordinary Christian teenager who loves the Lord; you will choose to become an *Intercessor.* Do you confirm now that you are ready to make this commitment of service to Him?"

The four stood silently for a moment. Brielle was the first to speak.

"Yes. I will go," she said confidently.

Jace answered next, "Yes. I will."

"Yes, I'll serve," Keoni nodded.

"Yes, I'm ready," Gideon answered.

Obadiah looked at Genevieve, who stepped forward. She was holding four necklaces in her left hand, which were reflecting the glow of the torchlight. Something was hanging from each chain, but the teens could not determine what it was.

"These necklaces are a gift to you," Genevieve began, "They are the symbol of your belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus showed you the greatest demonstration of love when He died upon the cross, and it is the cross that reminds us daily of His great love. They also represent who you are in Christ as one of His servants as an Intercessor," she said, slowly passing them out, starting with Gideon first and moving down the line.

"Wear them with pride to let the world see who it is you serve and represent. We believe that the best symbol of love is not the symbol of a heart, but of the cross. Please make sure that you are very careful with them; they are exceptionally rare and cannot be easily replaced. They were handmade by your teacher," she smiled, looking up at Obadiah.

When she reached Brielle, she gently took her daughter's hands in her own, and tears began welling up in her eyes.

"I'm so proud of you," she said softly, "and I love you so much."

Then she took Brielle's hand and opened it, gently placing the necklace on Brielle's palm. Brielle couldn't see what it was until her mother's hand moved from hers. Slowly, the light revealed the object. It was her father's cross. The same beautiful cross made of iron that she had always seen around his neck for as long as she could remember. The same cross she played with the last night they were together. Brielle didn't know what emotion to express first, the joy of seeing it again or the sorrow of losing her father. Her eyes also began to fill with tears.

"It's daddy's cross," she whispered, grabbing her mother close. "I never thought I would see it again."

"Your daddy told me that night to give it to you when you had made your choice," Genevieve said softly. "I know how proud this moment would have… how much it means to him."

"Daddy was an Intercessor?" Brielle looked at her mother, who smiled and brushed the tears from her daughter's eyes.

"Yes, he was. Taught by your grandfather in the same way you will be," she replied.

Brielle looked up to see her friends staring at her, listening intently to their conversation.

"This cross was my father's," she told them, "I remember it well…. except," she stopped, taking a much closer look at the center of the cross, "the stone is different. I thought daddy's cross had a stone that was gold in color…"

"An amber stone," Obadiah said, "Yes. It did. I changed the stone for you." Then he turned to explain the stones held in each necklace.

"The center stone in each of your crosses is different and is mentioned in various books of the Bible. They also have their own history of symbolic meanings," then he spoke directly to Brielle, "Your father's stone, the amber, is referred to in the book of Ezekiel and it symbolizes the presence and glory of God in judgment, purification, and sanctification. A perfect match for your father," he said lowering his eyes for a moment remembering Mark. "I still have his stone and will keep it for you," he said.

"Brielle, your stone is a ruby, which is referred to in the books of Job, Proverbs, and Lamentations, meaning wisdom, preciousness, of great value and prized treasure," Obadiah said, as he gave her a proud look.

All four necklaces were of a cross like Brielle's. Each chain was made of iron links, and the crosses that adorned the chains were also made of iron. Each cross was two inches in length and an inch in width. Each point of the cross was sculpted in a "budded" design which resembled a rounded three-leaf clover. Constructed within those ends was a crown with five points on top, each point of each crown pointed outward on the ends of the cross. Down each crossbar were inlaid pieces of distressed wood, and in the center of the cross were two circles. The first circle was large and extended behind the arms of the crossbars in the style of a Celtic cross. Inside this circle were four arrows that sat on each crossbar. The arrows had what looked to be a woven pattern through them.

It was clear that Obadiah included his family's Irish heritage in the design of the crosses. The arrows also had small diamonds located at their tips, and each tip pointed outward from the center in four different directions. The second circle was smaller, sitting within the first and just behind the four arrows. Deeper inside this circle was a glistening and precious stone. The only difference in the crosses that could be detected was the kinds of stones set directly in the middle. The teens began to examine each other's stones in the orange glow of the torches, expressing their thanks to Obadiah and their amazement at his masterful work.

Obadiah began explaining, "The diamonds which are set in the four arrows of your cross represent the four Gospels of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Diamonds are referred to in the books of Exodus, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Ezekiel and represent stability, right standing with God, being virtuous and unconquerable," he said, staring intently into their eyes. "You will be studying these Gospels as they will be the foundation for your ministry, and when you are empowered with the Word of God… you too will be unconquerable. The large circle represents the earth, and the four arrows point outward in the direction

you will take the Gospel of Jesus to the world: north, south, east, and west. The crowns of the cross represent the reward that is waiting for you in heaven when your journey here on earth ends. The wood reminds us of the old, rugged cross on which Jesus gave his life for our sins, and the iron of the cross is symbolic of the nails that held Him there."

Genevieve put her arms around her daughter and said, "My favorite verse for your stone is Proverbs 3:15: *'She is more precious than rubies, nothing you desire compares with her.'"* She smiled, hugging her daughter again.

"Um, Obadiah? Are these stones… real?" Gideon asked.

"Yes, Gideon, they are genuine. Try your best not to lose them," Obadiah smiled his charming smile.

Gideon marveled, "So this is an emerald? You gave me a *real* emerald? Wow, I don't know what to say… thank you," he said, flabbergasted, still studying the detail of his cross, "What does my stone mean?"

"The emerald is found in the books of Exodus, Ezekiel, and Revelation. It symbolizes the glories of God, being full of zeal, the essence of life, integrity, and success," Obadiah said. Gideon smiled proudly.

Then Obadiah turned to Keoni.

"Keoni, your stone is a pearl found in the books of Job, Matthew, 1 Timothy, and Revelation. It means the truth of God, costly experience, purity, humility, and harmony with the Lord.

Jace, your stone is a sapphire and is found in many books, some being Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation. It represents grace, reward, natural excellence, and healing. Seemed fitting for a someday physician. Oh yes, and it also means beauty," Obadiah said with a coy smile, patting him on the back.

Brielle looked up immediately at Jace to see his reaction to her grandfather's teasing. Jace's eyes, still fixed on his cross, did not look up; he just smiled and shook his head.

They took in Obadiah's words and the fascinating lessons they learned about the precious gems. Each one felt pleased that the stone accurately represented them and were astonished at how Obadiah already knew their spiritual gifts so well.

Since the chains were long, they were able to place their necklaces over their heads and around their necks without latching a clasp.

Then Genevieve spoke to them again, "Always remember this; the love of Jesus Christ…" as she spoke, Brielle, remembering these words over and over again from her father, joined her, "Is your key to life."

Brielle grabbed her mother again and held her close.

Obadiah walked back to the front of the group. "On the log behind you, there are four lanterns. If you are ready to begin your journey, Magomu will light them for you."

They turned and found four antique copper lanterns sitting on the log

behind them. They were old, rustic, oil-burning cargo lanterns that were once used on ships. Each lantern was twelve inches high with four glass sides. Picking them up, they opened their lantern doors and lifted them by the handle so that Magomu could light them. He also lit lanterns for Obadiah, Genevieve, and himself. Then he took his torch and Obadiah's and placed them in a bucket of water.

As the sizzling sound of the water extinguishing the torches filled the air, Gideon asked eagerly, "Is this part of some sort of ancient religious tradition?"

Obadiah smiled casually, "Not really. It's just very dark where we are going, and I thought you might like your own light."

Everyone smiled.

Then Obadiah paused, "But now that you ask, Gideon, I guess this has been an Intercessor tradition for quite some time. While it might not be connected to an ancient religious tradition, I would have to say it definitely is an Intercessor tradition."

Gideon nodded and smiled at Obadiah.

Obadiah then turned and grabbed his walking stick, which was leaning beside a tree.

He raised his lantern high and said, "Jesus told His disciples in John 8:12, *'I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.'* …if you are ready, your journey begins now."

He then turned and began walking into the woods. The friends looked at each other with puzzled expressions, but lifted their lanterns and followed in line behind him. If he was going to start training them on how to be an Intercessor, where on earth was he going? Brielle tried to think if she knew of a place, a house, an old building, anything located in the direction they were headed. She could think of nothing. She kept moving but looked back at her mother with a puzzled expression. Her mother just smiled and gently motioned for her to keep walking.

After a mysterious hike through the darkened woods, they came to a slight hill. Brielle giggled to herself as she heard Gideon asking Keoni where in the world they could possibly be going --and Keoni telling him to hush. Then she thought to herself to stop trying to figure it out and just enjoy it. Enjoy the adventure of the unknown. She knew her grandfather would never lead them into danger and that he knew these woods like he knew the back of his hand. So, she lifted her lantern and continued walking.

The moon was full and shining brightly. The hill began to level out, and they saw large rocks on their path. They had been walking through the tall, haunting trees for at least ten minutes when Obadiah paused.

"We are going to be entering into what I call *the Cleft in the Rock,*" he said. "Go slowly and keep your lanterns high. We are almost at our destination."

Brielle turned for a moment to look at her friends. It seemed that they were

no longer puzzled about where they were headed. They were all excited about the journey.

The group approached what looked like a large rocky mountain that seemed to go straight up. They had no idea how tall the mountain was, but from the glow of the moon and the starlit sky, the silhouette of it looked to be at least thirty feet tall. Brielle had seen the rocky region before while riding, but could not think of any reason why her grandfather would be taking them there.

Obadiah approached the massive rock structure from head on, when suddenly he made a quick turn to his right and disappeared completely. Brielle froze and gasped. The rest of the group stopped behind her.

"BOO!" Obadiah stuck his head out from behind the rock, startling the group. "Come on, let's go, we're almost there," he said, laughing as he saw the surprised look on their faces.

When looking at the mountain straight on, it appeared to be just a rugged, rocky surface. But as they moved closer and looked to the right, they could see an indent in the rocks and a thin cleft appearing between them. The cleft was about two feet in width. Once they made this quick turn into the mountainside, they took a few steps and then made another turn to the left.

Here, the cleft opened to a width of about seven feet. The walls of the mountain that surrounded them went upward as far as their eyes could see and were covered in areas with thick green moss. The moonlight, sliced by the rocky formations on both sides of them, shone down, and the stars sparkled over their heads. Strange and interesting sounds filled the cleft as the group passed through; the sounds of their lanterns creaking as they dangled from their hands, the sounds of fallen leaves crunching beneath their feet, and the sounds of birds and other small animals that dwelled among the crevices of the rocks.

Finally, Obadiah stopped. In front of him were two large trees, framing a large black opening between them. The rocks surrounding the black opening were thickly lined with moss and other foliage.

"What I ask of you now is a personal request," he began. "Everywhere we have walked tonight is upon land that I own. My wife and I bought it many years ago. It is special to me and to my family, so I ask that you not bring anyone else here unless you have my permission to do so.

"I have spoken with your parents to make sure that I had their permission to bring you here; having said that, I ask that you not tell anyone else about this place until later; all things in good time. I have brought you here tonight because I trust you and I want to teach you. But I have found in the past that when people hear stories of interesting places, they want to verify that the stories are true---with force if need be. For now, it would be best to keep the knowledge and location of this place within the confines of our group. Are we agreed?" he asked, waiting for a response.

As he spoke, Magomu and Genevieve quietly made their way past the group

to stand with him. Everyone nodded silently upon hearing Obadiah's words and stared intensely at the mysterious entrance before them. They were filled with an equal balance of excitement and nervousness. Obadiah turned, ducked his head, and walked into the large, darkened entrance. Slowly, the others followed.

When they entered, they realized how much the moonlight had helped them on their journey. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the dark surroundings. After a while, they could see they were in a cave. It had a high ceiling, well over six feet. Obadiah could stand up straight with ease. It was almost ten feet wide with scalloped arches layered in the rocks above them. The rock walls seemed to have a shimmer to them, and they were a mix of brown and purple colors. The depth looked to be about fifteen feet, creating a space comfortable enough for the entire group to easily fit. Obadiah, Genevieve, and Magomu all walked quietly around the cave, searching every area and crevice for forest wildlife.

Genevieve caught her daughter's eye, "Just checking for any of God's *other* living creatures," she grinned reassuringly, "But don't worry, the worst we've seen are skunks."

Gideon whispered to his sister, "This can't be for real; we aren't seriously going to study the Bible here?" he questioned.

Keoni shushed him again, keeping her eyes on Obadiah.

"This is a naturally formed cave," Obadiah began, "I found it with my wife many years ago when we were younger-- even before she was my wife. We came across it one day while walking through the woods," he paused for a moment and looked at Genevieve; she was the absolute image of her mother. In his mind, Obadiah replayed the moment they discovered this cave, recalling all the beautiful memories.

"Now," Obadiah began, "the crosses that you were given tonight - please remove them from around your necks," he said.

The group did as they were told.

"Do you remember what Vivi told you earlier?" he asked.

Brielle was the first to answer, "The love of Jesus Christ is your key to life."

"Good. The cross that you hold in your hand represents the unfathomable love that Jesus gave us when He died on Calvary. Take that cross in your hand and hold it up in front of you," he watched as each did as they were told. "The stone in the center of your cross, which represents you personally, is more than just embellishment," he explained, "Now then, gently press in with your thumb on that center stone."

When they did as they were instructed, the arm crossbars of the pendant both snapped from an extended flat position and folded backward as if the arms of the cross were reaching directly behind them. The undetectable device of the mechanism was quick, and they were all startled as their crosses sprang into the

new positions. They gasped in amazement, looking at each other in disbelief with surprised eyes.

Obadiah then placed his lantern on a ledge in the wall and moved to a rocky area on the side of the cave. What appeared to be a natural mass of deep cracks and crevices of stone was something much more to him. He was very specific in his movements and knew right where he was going. He reached the fingertips of his left hand inside the edge of one of the deeper cracks and, with his right hand about ten inches away from that crevice, pressed into the wall firmly. As he did this, a small, jagged rock panel door popped open.

Again, the eyes of the teens were wide with surprise and awe at what they were seeing. They lifted their lanterns and moved closer. Obadiah opened the rugged stone door to reveal a metal plate that was inlaid into the cave wall about four inches deep. The panel had four small vertical slots in it. The way they were laid out looked like two sets of equal signs, two slots on one side and two slots on the other, with a separation of almost five inches between them.

Genevieve and Magomu, who were still standing in the back of the group, grinned at each other and watched as the group took in every detail of what was being revealed.

Then Obadiah turned around, dusting his hands together, and said, “Brielle, Keoni, may I please see your keys?”

Brielle looked down at her cross, now altered into its new position, and back up to the eyes of her grandfather. Without a word, both girls gently handed their crosses to him. Obadiah held the crosses carefully and went back to the rock panel. He took Brielle’s cross with his large fingers and turned it sideways so that the head of the cross was pointing toward the left side. Slowly, he lined the ends of the arm crossbars along with the first set of slots on the metal plate; then he pushed the ends into it. There came a clicking noise when he did.

Next, he took Keoni’s cross and turned the head of it to the right, again lining up the arm crossbars with the slots on that side, and pressed it in. *Click*. The two crosses now aligned themselves together, end to end, forming what looked like a long, horizontal, beautifully decorated line.

Jace leaned over to Brielle and whispered, “I thought you said your grandfather was a bridge builder?”

“Yeah, I thought so too,” she said in amazement. “I guess he has a few other skills.”

Gideon, his eyes still wide with wonder, said, “A few?”

Obadiah looked over his shoulder and said, “The love of Jesus Christ is your *key* to life.”

Obadiah then reached in and grasped the cross keys as if they were a handle, turning them counterclockwise until they were completely vertical. They heard a loud click this time. Obadiah looked back over his shoulder to see that the group was overwhelmed with suspense. Then he pushed in the keys. When

he did, the entire metal plate inside the rock panel moved into the wall.

They heard the sounds of machinery in motion, which drifted eerily through the cave. The four jumped at the strange and loud noises. In astonishment, they saw that part of the massive rock formation along the back wall of the cave began to slowly slide open. It was a secret door that was built into the cave, completely undetectable to the unsuspecting eye. As the rock door opened, it slid into the rest of the cave wall, disappearing from sight.

Their faces showed their astonishment, excitement, and anticipation in their hearts as they stared into the dark opening that was open before them. Obadiah reached and turned the handle back to its horizontal position and removed the girls' cross keys.

As he handed them back to the girls, he looked at Gideon and Jace, "Sorry guys, we'll use your keys next time."

Then he showed them how to reset their crosses by simply lifting the arm crossbars back up, locking them into position. "Remember, these crosses are rare, so please take good care of them."

Obadiah picked up his lantern and walking stick and stood in front of the entrance. "It's time to move on, but before we do, I want to assure you that you are safe here. I would never knowingly place you in danger. It is important, however, since you have never been here before and don't know where you are going, that you please stay together—and with me. Alright then, here we go," he said with his charming smile, ducking down to enter through the cave.

He then lifted his lantern before him and boldly stepped into the darkness. Without hesitation, everyone followed him, their faces full of anticipation and their hearts racing with excitement. This was the kind of thrilling adventure that many people just dream about or hope for-- and they were savoring every minute of it!

Lifting their lanterns, they entered through the rocky doorway. Once inside, they could see Obadiah standing a few feet away. They were in a tunnel about seven feet wide and almost eight feet tall. The rock walls were rust colored. The air inside was cold, damp, and smelled musty.

Once everyone was together, Obadiah nodded to Magomu, who, upon entering the tunnel, turned to his right just inside the cave door. He lifted his lantern and hung it on a hook attached to the tunnel wall. The light from it revealed a large black metal box mounted along the inside of the cave. It was taller than Magomu, reaching almost to the top of the cave, and was about six feet in width. On the face of the box were several levers, buttons, and gauges. Attached to the box was some tubing that appeared to be made of metal. There were a few rows of tubes that came out from the top of the box and went up to the center of the rocky ceiling above them. These tubes ran the length of the tunnel as far as they could see.

Magomu took one lever in his hand and forced it into a downward position.

When he did, the black metal box sprang to life, humming with energy and illuminating the buttons and gauges with red glowing lights. He then pulled another lever downward, and immediately, the cave door slowly began to close. There was a locking sound as it latched shut. Once the door was closed, he pulled down one more lever, locking it in place.

Next, Magomu began pushing in the red glowing buttons in a methodical order. As he did, each button turned green, and they could hear energy traveling down the cave through the metal tubing along the ceiling. Small fixtures were lighting the tunnel with their dull glow. The lights were antiques that looked like the rustic cargo lanterns they were all carrying; only they were fastened to the wall like a sconce. The gauges across the black box also came to life, and Magomu took his time to carefully look over each one. Then he turned to Obadiah and nodded.

"The reason that it takes two cross keys to enter is because I do not wish anyone to ever come here alone. That is a rule not to be broken," Obadiah said, "But for now, you will only come here together as a group. This is for safety reasons. In time, we will teach you all you need to know so that you can enter and study here as you wish--- but not alone."

Keoni whispered to Brielle, "He has more faith in me than I do; I'd be too afraid to come here by myself!"

Obadiah turned and began walking, explaining more about the tunnel over his shoulder, "As I said before, this is a naturally formed cave… with a few modern touches here and there," he chuckled. "There is electricity, an air filtration and circulation system, purified water, Wi-Fi, and there is cell phone service here."

"You're kidding?" Gideon said in disbelief.

Jace already had his phone out to check and see if it would work in an underground cave, "I've got service!"

"How did you do that?" Brielle asked her grandfather curiously.

Obadiah turned to give her his charming smile, "I can't reveal all my secrets in one night, my dear," he said mysteriously, "But I can tell you that not every tree in the forest above us is a real tree."

Gideon raised his eyes in realization, "Ah, you've got a tree disguised as a cell tower, very nice."

Obadiah laughed and kept leading them down the passage. As they traveled, a new sound came from in front of them. It was a familiar sound but hard to define as it echoed on the rocks, distorting its noise. As they pressed forward, their minds were whirling with wonder at this incredible place and what was still to come. The sound traveling toward them grew louder with every step. After walking a short distance, they could see a light ahead. It was not bright but gave a blue glow to the tunnel's end.

Finally, they reached the opening and could all clearly identify the sound

that was now directly before them. It was the sound of a powerful and melodious waterfall. The mouth of the tunnel's end widened a bit as they walked into the most heavenly and immense cavern they had ever seen. The teens gasped when they saw it. The size of this cave expanded easily to over fifty feet in length. It was seventy-five feet wide, and the ceiling stood twenty-five feet high. On the far-left side of the cavern was a large waterfall that was pouring in from the top of the cave, not only allowing a mighty rush of water to plummet down but also allowing in the brilliant streams of moonlight.

The area where the group was standing was slightly elevated and wide enough for them to freely move about. Then it made a gradual drop, sloping down in elevation toward the water, and narrowed down to one single strip of rock that reached across the cave's width. The cool waters flowed throughout the entire cavern, and the teens were able to see that this strip of rock was a naturally formed land bridge. The water was able to flow all around the cave. The bridge that had formed over the millennia was the only way to cross the cavern on dry ground.

There were two large pools of water that had formed through the years on each side of the rocky bridge, and the beams of moonlight reflected off the dark waters and cast strange and shimmering patterns across the ceiling on the far side of the cavern.

All along the edge of the rocky landing was a weathered but sturdy wooden railing. This railing also lined both edges of the land bridge, reaching to the other side so that it could be crossed more easily. However, there was no railing lining the edge of the landing on the opposite side of the cave; it was open to the lapping waters.

Obadiah had not relied on moonbeams alone to light this cave. In this room were a few wall lanterns, which also lit the tunnel. The lights were attached to the outside walls of the tunnel behind them and the outermost walls of the cavern across the bridge before them. They also hung several feet high along the metal tubing, which ran through the cave from the black box at the entrance. With the help of this dim light, the teens could see yet another passage to explore.

They could not believe the splendor before them, and they stood motionless and silent, taking in every detail. Obadiah looked back and smiled at Genevieve and Magomu, who were watching and enjoying the kid's reaction to the magnificent cave.

"This is one of my favorite places," Obadiah said, "I have even installed benches along the cavern walls for when I want to come sit and enjoy the splendor of it all," he said, pointing out a couple of wooden benches on the other side of the cavern.

"I can see why you would want to spend time here," Jace said.

"I don't get what this has to do with studying the Bible, but man, I don't

care; this is the coolest thing I have ever seen!" Gideon exclaimed.

"I can't believe this, Oba," Brielle said, "and I can't believe you waited this long to bring me here!"

"This is a very special place," Obadiah said. "I had to be sure you were ready," he told her, kissing her on the head. Then he turned to the group, "There are more things I will teach you about this room later, but for now, let's continue our journey. Be sure to go slowly onto the land bridge and use the handrails. I have some wooden treads down to help in the crossing, but it can get pretty slippery in places."

The group began their slow descent to the narrow bridge. Once they reached it, they found that it looked easier than it was to walk on. Brielle and Keoni had their share of slips along the way. As they crossed the bridge, the black waters around them glistened with the reflection of their lanterns and the lanterns that dangled from above. The land bridge stood two feet high above the pools; still, they could feel the chilly atmosphere while this close to the water. The sound of the waterfall was thundering around them, and the spray from it misted them as they crossed over. The musty smell of the room was now temporarily hidden behind the fresh fragrance of the falling waters.

As they drew closer to the other side of the cave, the land bridge made a slight incline, elevating them back up from the cold waters. Once they had crossed closer to the other side, they could see the front of the waterfall. From this point, they could see there was another cave on the other side of the falls where the water entered, only it was open at the top and was almost cylinder-shaped. The waterfall cave opening looked to be twelve feet wide, but the teens had no idea how far it went up as they could not see the top of the opening.

While standing on this side of the landing, they could understand why Obadiah had installed benches to sit and enjoy the view. This side of the cave was even more magnificent than the other, as the moonlight poured in around the waterfall and glistened on the dark waters. They stood for a moment, gazing upon the splendor of this place.

"Obadiah," Jace asked, "if the water is flowing in here but the level doesn't rise, then there must be some sort of drain for it somewhere, right?"

"Very good," Obadiah smiled, "Yes, there are a few places I have found where the water drains, though you can't see them from above the water line."

"Do you swim in here, too?" Gideon asked.

"From time to time, when the water is right," Obadiah smiled, "You'll get your chance for that too. All things in good time, though, we will have to wait for the summer weather for that."

Then he began to lead them on. Almost directly across the cave from the first passage was the next one, exactly like it, only this tunnel was broader than the first. It was also lit with Obadiah's little lanterns on the walls; his devices were those of a highly skilled master.

They had not been walking very long when the tunnel began to widen, revealing an opening which held several smaller caves. Two smaller caves formed what looked like little rooms on their right side, and through huge openings in the tunnel walls, they could see yet another large cave on their left.

"Man, Obadiah! How big is this place?" Gideon exclaimed.

"You have no idea," Obadiah said over his shoulder, "Just stick to the main path and you'll be fine. These places are all naturally formed hollows in the rock; I don't use them for much--not yet anyway," he said, his mind always churning with new possibilities. "These caves have been here for thousands of years, something that God himself decided to form in the rock. They are not manmade. I have been through every inch of these tunnels and have made this place as sound and strong as I possibly can. I will never take you to any place in here that I do not feel is safe," he said, still moving forward.

"How long have you been coming here?" Jace asked quietly.

"I guess it would be over forty years or so," Obadiah answered, "I can't believe I am old enough to say that!" he laughed, "This has been one of my greatest engineering projects, not because of the complexity, but because of the purpose that it serves."

Gradually, the tunnel began to narrow, coming back to a width of six feet. They could see in the dim light that they were approaching a large wooden door. There was a massive metal frame built right into the rock of the passage. Installed in the frame was an impressive, ancient-looking, dark wood door. In the center of the door was a grand brass lion head, with shining eyes that stared deep into those of all who approached it. The handle was a heavy black ring made of iron. The anticipation of what was behind the great door grew strong, and the teens couldn't speak--except for Gideon.

"Obadiah," Gideon said anxiously, trying to lighten the nervousness they were all feeling, "are you going to tell us that you're really… *Batman?*"

The group laughed at Gideon's remark, the anticipation within them buzzing like electricity.

Obadiah grinned broadly, "You know, Gideon, I've always liked *Batman,* but I've actually been more of a *Captain America* fan myself," he said, grabbing the door handle and lifting it.

"But they're not real," he said, giving the handle a hard quarter turn to the left, "And I am," then the door latch released.

"I like to think I am something more," he said, pushing the door open.

"I am a warrior of God, just like you will be," he finished as he opened the door to their destination.

"Intercessors," Obadiah said, "Welcome… to the
Prayer Sanctum."

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The creaking of the door stopped, and the only sound they could hear was that of their footsteps as they all slowly entered the massive cavern. It was a space of approximately
sixty feet wide, eighty-five feet long, and twenty-five feet high. The door opened inward to an arch-shaped landing of rock which jutted out from the wall. It had been leveled so that it was a flat surface to stand on, like a large, solid balcony that extended out into the huge cavern. It was surrounded by a wooden railing, exactly like the one across the natural bridge in the waterfall cave.

As they entered, they were speechless. There was a calm, serene feeling in this place. The air was musty, different from the other places they had walked through. In this particular area, there was a mixture of the damp air, the rich smell of wood, and other sweet aromas. Even though they still carried them, there was no need for their lanterns. Hanging down from the center of the ceiling was an archaic light fixture that illuminated the room.

The ancient light was an extraordinary and primitive chandelier. It was made of iron and was in the shape of a spiral that started small at the top and twisted itself into a wide coil shape, expanding as it formed each new ring on its descent. Hanging from the spiral were little lanterns, much like the ones the friends were holding. Cut into the sides of the spiral were crosses that poured out beams of bright light. Those, along with the old sconces that hung on all the outer walls, created a feeling of antiquity, like they had stepped back in time.

The first thing that captured their attention was the cross that hung on the opposite wall facing them. It was a large wooden version of the crosses they wore around their necks – but it was twenty times their size. Underneath the cross, etched in the stone wall, were the words:

SANCTUM PRO ELECTUS

"Sanctum Pro Electus," Keoni softly read the words aloud, "What does that mean?"

Brielle spoke before Obadiah had a chance to answer. "It means, Holy for the chosen," she said, then looked over at her grandfather for verification of her translation.

Obadiah nodded, "Very good, that is exactly what it means. And the word sanctum also has a secondary meaning which translates to *cave,*" he said.

"Wow," Keoni whispered, "But how do we know for sure that we are chosen by God?" she asked Obadiah.

"Everyone is chosen by God," Obadiah said, "The Lord knows and loves each and every soul that He creates on this earth-- whether they love Him or not. Jeremiah 1:5 says, *'I knew you before you were formed in your mother's womb.'* You see, ancient Jewish wisdom teaches us that before we were born on earth,

our souls stood before God, and he assigned each of us a special mission. We know God has plans for all of us, and He wants to use us for that specific mission in this world. He chooses us *all.* The question is not how do we know that God has chosen us, but rather, will we choose *Him?*"

The group stepped to the edge of the landing and placed their hands on the railing, taking in everything before them. In the center of the landing, the railing gave way to an opening which led to a small flight of stairs carved in the rock. These stairs led to the floor of the Prayer Sanctum eight feet below.

Obadiah motioned them toward the staircase, "Come, Intercessors, and I will give you a tour," he said excitedly. "This is the Study Chamber," he said, opening his arms wide as he climbed down the stairs. "For many years, my wife Elise and I wanted to build a school where we could teach kids the Word of God on a very advanced level and train them to become Intercessors. When we discovered these caves, we thought they would make an incredible place to bring people to study—we didn't need a building, God provided all our needs right here—and showed me how to fix it up a bit," he said he with a wink.

"Yeah, but not too many people could have done what you have done here," Gideon said.

"Thank you, Gideon. I appreciate that. As you know, there is no word in ancient Hebrew for coincidence, because there is no coincidence with God. I knew it was a divine act of God for my wife, Elise, and me to find this place so we could turn it into… as you kids might say, a totally cool Bible school."

"Well, really cool Bible school doesn't quite do it justice," Gideon said, "This is beyond anything in my wildest imagination."

The others all agreed.

"God always has a plan for us if we just allow Him to guide us," Obadiah replied, "Just think of Jeremiah 29:11 *'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'Plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future*.' We are the ones who get in the way of God's goodness for our lives. We try to take over and make our own plans and then… we can often make a mess of things, but God, well, God never makes messes."

The group slowly climbed down the large, uneven stairs of rock, holding onto the railing to steady their descent, until they reached the cavern floor. There, on the floor in the middle of the room, was a grand table that was round in shape. It was made from wood and seemed to be very old. Looking at the tabletop from a distance, there appeared to be an inlaid pattern of the sun made from different shades of wood. But as they came closer, they discovered that it was that of a compass, with arrows pointing to north, south, east, and west. Around the table sat beautifully handcrafted high-backed wooden chairs with armrests and seat cushions that were covered in old, worn red velvet.

"A round table," Jace said in awe, "just like in Camelot."

"Yes," Obadiah replied, "we are all equals here. There is no soul or Spiritual

Gift that is more important to God. They are all equally important, special, and cherished by the Lord. There is no head of the table here, because God is always the One in charge."

Next to the table stood a large blackboard in an old wooden frame upon metal wheels that looked as if it were from a bygone era. It was perfectly cleaned and well stocked with chalk and erasers. Within the area of the Study Chamber, there hung on the stone walls bold shields of armor in various shapes and sizes. Each shield was designed with its own distinct artistic pattern, some bearing a coat of arms to represent a family or country, including the O'Sullivan family crest.

The O'Sullivan family crest was a magnificent piece of art to behold. There was a shield in the center of the crest that was divided into three sections, two smaller sections on the bottom and one longer one across the top. On the top section of the shield stood two red lions facing each other; in between these lions was a sword that had a serpent wrapped around it. On the bottom left section stood a large stag deer, and on the bottom right section stood a wild boar. Above the shield was the helmet of a king's knight. On top of the knight's helmet was a golden crown, and on the crown was perched a red robin, holding an olive branch in its beak. In between this shield and the others, swords were displayed, also of different sizes and styles, but all appeared to come from far-off times and places.

To the right of the main room of the Prayer Sanctum, there was another large cavern that Obadiah had transformed into a special room. There were light sconces in this room as well. They could see that the cave held row after row of tall shelves.

"What is that?" Brielle asked.

"That is the library," Obadiah said as he led the way to the room.

When they entered, they could see that the shelves were stocked with ancient books, Bibles, and scrolls. They wandered through the rows of antiquated texts, awestruck at the collection before them. There were Bibles and the Torah in almost every language, including papyrus scrolls with Hebrew writing upon them.

"To be an Intercessor, you must know the Word of God, every part of it, inside and out - as much as you possibly can. You see, the Word of God is not only our life instruction manual and God's law for us to abide by and be blessed by, but the Word of God is how we learn who God is. Remember, John 1:1 says, *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."*

The Word of God *is* God Himself; it is an extension of God. When we look at the words written in the Bible, we must remember that these are God's Word's in printed form, written by men that God chose and divinely spoke to and through who put His holiness onto pages for us to hold, read, study, memorize,

speak, teach, sing, live by, be transformed by, and be blessed by.

We all must understand that, because it truly changes the way we view the Bible. That is why I always call the Bible the Word of God. Hopefully, it will make us all revere the Word and hold it in the ultimate, highest respectful position of authority-- as we always should.

"The Word of God is also one of the greatest gifts from God to us of *His power*. Some believe that God's law means 'legalism', but the Hebrew meaning of God's law means 'the pathway to the blessing'! I don't know about anyone else, but I don't personally want to miss out on a single blessing God has for me!" Obadiah chuckled.

"God has given us His power to battle the evil that surrounds us day in and day out here on earth. There is tremendous power in *His Word.* Supernatural power! People on Earth do not always understand that or utilize it to its fullest potential, but we are going to learn how to do that! This library is for you to study the Word in its entirety--and I think it's good for people to spend time with actual books, not just look everything up on the internet," he grinned.

"These books are for you to use. I only ask that you not remove them from the library unless you have my permission, as they are very old—and very rare," he said.

"And probably very expensive," Gideon added, "Not something we'll find at the local bookstore."

Obadiah laughed, "No, that's highly unlikely."

Obadiah ushered them from the library back into the Study Chamber. As they exited, Gideon saw a long corridor that led down from the library to their right and into an unknown area. "Where does that tunnel lead?" Gideon asked curiously, holding his lantern up to try and see farther down the passage.

"There are dozens of caverns in this place. I will show them to you later, but I don't want to overload you with information too quickly and have you get lost in here," Obadiah chuckled. He heard Keoni gasp and turned to soothe her, "Don't worry, sweetheart, you'll learn where everything is as easily as you did your high school campus."

"Uh, yeah…" Gideon joked, "She still gets lost there too sometimes."

"Okay then," Obadiah thought again, "You will learn the layout of the Prayer Sanctum as well as you know… the mall."

Keoni smiled in relief.

"Oh, well, *that* won't be a problem then," Gideon teased.

They crossed back through the Study Chamber to the other side of the cave, where there was another cavern. This one had a mysterious glow. It aroused their curiosity because there was a gentle and lovely sound coming from inside.

Obadiah turned to the group, "I believe God designed this cave as a place for prayer," he said. "I think you will all find it to be an extremely calming and beautiful area. I love to come here to meditate on God's Word and spend time in

prayer. I call this room The Pools of Peace," he said, extending his hand, indicating that they should enter through a beautiful arched doorway.

The room was breathtaking; they were overwhelmed by its grandeur. Above them, stretching down to the cave floor, were dozens of stalactites of various widths and lengths. The sound they heard outside the room was that of lightly trickling water as the larger stalactites were continuously releasing little droplets from their tips. The water droplets were then caught in small, milky-colored pools beneath them on the cavern floor. When they lightly dropped into the pools below, they echoed through the cave ever so gently. The sound was melodious, like the most delicate wind chimes lightly ringing in the wind.

Obadiah had placed enhancing lights in this cave, which illuminated the stalactites in colors of green, purple, pink, and turquoise, and the milky pools reflected the light in such a way that they appeared to be glowing.

"I *love* this cave!" Keoni said.

"I've never seen anything like this," Jace added, "it's extraordinary."

"Please feel free to come here and use this room as your quiet place. A place where you need to be still and listen for the voice of God. It is good to find places of tranquility where you can rest in Him. I have spent many an hour here myself during times of trial or sorrow. What is so remarkable to me is that this was a place completely created by God himself, being the amazing engineer and artist that He is. Who else could possibly think to design something so grand?" Obadiah said, looking around the cavern in wonder.

When they finally came out of the Pools of Peace, Obadiah lifted his lantern to show them another tunnel that extended to their left, which headed in the same direction as the one outside the library.

"These tunnels all head north," he said, "but then branch off into other rooms and caves, one goes east, and one goes west. There are rooms that I will take you to eventually, but as I said before, all things in good time. There is no need to learn about those rooms quite yet. If you will please, follow me, I will show you one more cavern that is quite significant."

He walked back to the center of the Prayer Sanctum, set his lantern down on the table, and nodded to Magomu to come with him. On the wall where the large cross hung and just below where the words "Sanctum Pro Electus" were written, they could see the large opening to another cavern. To get to this cavern, they had to take more steps of stone and climb up to its opening. The cavern opening was covered with large, red velvet drapes, the same velvet as that on the chairs surrounding the round table.

"Ooh, I wonder what this cavern holds!" Brielle said mysteriously.

"I can pretty much bet that we aren't going to find the great and powerful Oz behind the curtain," Gideon said.

Obadiah smiled at his comment, "You are quite right, Gideon, but I am certain that this room will be of *great* interest to you."

Then Obadiah and Magomu reached behind the ends of the drapes and pulled on ropes that slowly opened the velvet curtains to reveal the cavern behind it. Within this cave, there were many tables with large glass cases on them, bookshelves, trunks, and chests, which were latched and secured with large padlocks.

"This was another one of the perks to finding these caves," Obadiah began. "As you know, I am a collector of rare antiquities. My wife and I used to keep our collection in our home; however, after our home was broken into by treasure-seeking thieves, we decided it would be much safer-- and more exciting for our students-- if we kept everything here. We call this 'The Cavern of History' and these items are not here just for the mere pleasure of looking at them, they will be most useful to you in your studies of the Bible and the people who lived during the time in which it was written."

"I was wrong, Obadiah, you aren't Batman… you're *Indiana Jones!*" Gideon said as he began to walk between the glass cases, examining the artifacts.

"Could *both* be true?" Jace asked in awe.

"What are these things?" Keoni asked, intrigued.

"These are items that I have found, bought, traded, or were given during my years of travel around this wonderful world of ours," Obadiah said thoughtfully. "I have tried to organize them according to country," he pointed out, "For example, here are artifacts from Europe and Africa, mainly Egypt," as he moved through the cases, "Here are some from South America, Asia and the Orient, here are things from our own Native American culture and over here," he said with a hint of pride, "are the artifacts from the Holy Land."

They took their time to look at the different items in the cases and on the shelves. Obadiah had so many different items he had collected through the years - ancient coins, jewelry, urns, pottery, tools, scales, reed pens, inkwells, spoons, arrowheads, and daggers, just to list a few. In the cases holding things from the Holy Land, he had collected oil and incense burners, alabaster bottles, boxes with perfumes and spices, shofars from ram's horns for anointing or sounding, and portions of tablets written in cuneiform. They were astounded at Obadiah's collection.

"I have a question, Oba," Brielle began, "Not that all of these things aren't incredible to have, but… shouldn't they be in a museum?"

"No need to worry about that. I have donated plenty of items to many museums all over the world through the years-- dozens of items, in fact-- and I never took a dime for any of them. But… these items are very special to me and hold with them precious, cherished memories," he said gently.

Brielle knew from the look on her grandfather's face that many of the items must be connected to her grandmother, which was why it was hard for him to let them go. Obadiah sat in silence for a moment, looking at some of the items, obviously reminiscing about his deceased wife, Elise.

“Obadiah,” Jace asked, interrupting his thoughts, “what do you keep inside the trunks?”

“Ah, yes, the trunks,” Obadiah said, walking over to them. “These hold training instruments that will be for a later time,” he answered.

“A much later time,” Genevieve’s voice spoke from downstairs in the Study Chamber.

Obadiah laughed lightly, “All things in good time. I hope you can now understand why I have asked you not to speak of this place outside your family just yet. I am not trying to be exclusive or have a place where others are not welcome. It is my dream to train as many kids as possible for this work in ministry. The Intercessors are *not* a secret society, underground association, a cult, or anything dark or mysterious like that. Not at all. I believe this incredible place was designed by God’s hand and was given to me as a place to train others to serve Him in powerful ways. I am only trying to keep this beautiful and sacred place safe, protected from those who would not give it and everything it contains the proper care and respect it all deserves,” he said, and then, walking toward the mouth of the cave, he turned and looked directly at the teens.

“Alright,” he said with enthusiasm, “now that you have been introduced to the main parts of the Prayer Sanctum, are you ready to begin your first lesson?”

They looked at him with sparkling, eager eyes and nodded that they were ready. All of them were astonished at this remarkable place.

Magomu had climbed down the stone steps from the Cavern of History and was busily preparing their learning materials on the compass table. In front of the four chairs where the arrows pointed to north, south, east, and west, he had placed an old-fashioned quill and ink well, a large leather book, and a Bible for each student. On the cover of the leather book was the Intercessor cross, and inside the book were the lessons they were to learn. He had also moved the old chalkboard near the table for Obadiah’s use.

“Please,” Obadiah gestured his hand toward the table, “sit wherever you like.”

Each of the students pulled out one of the regal chairs in front of a book and sat down.

“Do we need to sit in the same chair each time?” Keoni asked.

“Not if you don’t want to,” Obadiah said, “It’s good to change your point of view from time to time, get a new perspective,” he grinned.

“You don’t mind who sits in front of north or south or, whatever?” Brielle asked.

“Not at all,” Obadiah answered, “The compass on the table is not for your seating placement. It is there to remind you each time you sit down here that there are people in every direction of this earth who need to hear the message of Jesus Christ and His great love. So, when you rise from this table and leave the Prayer Sanctum you will share what you have learned with them.

The students were so excited that they did not notice Genevieve had left them until she came back into the Study Chamber pushing a small cart which had glasses, drinks, crackers, cheese, and fresh fruit.

"Well, well," Gideon said, leaning around to look in the direction from which Genevieve arrived, "So that's why you didn't show us where that tunnel went?" he said slyly to Obadiah, "You knew it led to food… and you were afraid Brielle would devour it."

"Hush, you," Brielle said, patting her hand in the air.

Genevieve brought the cart around to each of them so they could serve themselves. Once they were settled, Obadiah began their first lesson.

"Let us pray," he said, bowing his head, "Heavenly Father, I thank You for these four amazing young people who have come here tonight seeking a closer walk with You. I thank You for creating them with such beautiful hearts that they would want to dedicate their lives to serving You and doing Your will. They have come to further their knowledge of Your Word and take it out into this world, to be a light to shine brightly in the darkness and serve You by ministering to others in need. I ask that You bless this lesson tonight, that You bless and protect them in this work, and that they leave this place a more powerful warrior for Your Kingdom. In the Name of Your Holy Son,
Yeshua Hamashiach, Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen."

"Amen," the students repeated.

"Before we begin our lesson tonight, I wanted to speak to you about the significance of the decision you are making. I know you all love Jesus, believe Him to be the One and only Son of God, confessed Him as your Savior, asked Him into your heart, and to forgive you your sins. That is the most important first step any person can take in their life. Yet, you still need to know how special you are because there are millions of people in the world who have done that exact same thing… but not everyone makes the choice to become an Intercessor, a Warrior of God.

"During our time together, I will be teaching you how to become an Intercessor, a Warrior of God, and I just wanted you all to really understand how incredibly significant and special the choice you are making is. We are dedicating our lives to the service of our Heavenly Father, God, Adonai, Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He has many names, each name representing all that He is to us-- and we will learn them all, for He is *everything* we will ever need, *everything* we could ever want.

"John 1:1 says, *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God* ***and the Word was God****.'* That verse holds two important meanings. First, it describes how Jesus, when He became human and lived on earth, fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament, so he became the Word in living flesh. And it also means that all scripture is God breathed, as it is written in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 *'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting*

and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,' that this book, the Holy Bible, God's Word, *is* an extension of God, Adonai-- it *is* Him! The Word was God!

"There is another name, Elohim, which encompasses the Holy Trinity, the God Head, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and Elohim goes beyond all that we humans can imagine or comprehend about Who they are. Whatever it is you think you know about Them, They go beyond it, infinitely beyond it.

"You need to know that whatever Elohim speaks must happen and is true; therefore, it is to be placed in the *highest regard*, revered above *all other words*, both written and spoken. The Bible should be respected *above anything else*. It is *truth.* God's Word is not just written verses on printed pages. It is the highest authority of any instruction for lives, and it is the highest authority for the history of the world and everyone in it."

In this world today, everyone is seeking truth. You may hear the words, 'find your truth' or hear people say: 'my truth is…' but there is only *one* truth, and that is the Truth of God and His Word. His Word is a *'Lamp unto our feet and Light unto our path'* as it is written in Psalm 199:105. It is a source of supernatural power that has superseded the tests of time, placed right here in our hands! Given to us by the Lord Himself! The Bible is a weapon of Spiritual warfare that we can use in our lives. Ephesians 6:17 tells us to 'Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit,' which is part of the armor of God. We take these things to help battle the enemy, satan, who comes against us, because when we know and use the Word of God, all our battles will always be fought by the Lord as it is written in 1 Samuel 17:47. The Word of God is our peace when we are fearful, our strength when we are weary, our direction when we are lost, our joy when we are sad, our wisdom when we need answers, *everything*, absolutely *everything* we ever need to live a successful life is in God's *Good* Word!

"We will study it in depth to learn more about who God is, for He reveals to us in His Word who He is. The more we study, the deeper He will take us into a relationship with Him, and our wisdom will grow greater in who He is and how to obey Him. We will also learn that He seeks our obedience. We are saved through the blood of Jesus Christ, but when we obey God's law, he blesses us. In Greek, the law is interpreted to mean legalism. But, in Hebrew, the law is interpreted to mean: the pathway to the blessing! So, we always want to please and obey God, and He teaches us how to do that in His Good, Holy Word!

"We will learn that His Son, Jesus Christ, lived on this earth as a Jewish man. Jesus, whose name is Yeshua, was born to Jewish parents who raised Him to follow God's commands and obey all the Jewish traditions, feasts, holidays, and teachings. Jesus never stopped being Jewish and taught that He did not come to change one word or even a mark of punctuation in the Old Testament, the Torah, but came to *fulfill* it. He teaches us this in Matthew 5:17.

"Even though all of Jesus' disciples were Jewish men who never stopped being Jewish, they just added to their beautiful faith the awesome and irreplaceable teachings of their Jewish Messiah, Yeshua Hamashiach, Jesus Christ.

"This is why in this day and age, when antisemitism is on the rise in our world against God's chosen people, the Jewish Nation, and the Nation of Israel, we must speak out against antisemitism. The Jewish people are our brothers and sisters in the Lord! And millions upon millions are coming to accept Jesus Christ, Yeshua Hamashiach, as their Messiah! So, we must always show the Jewish people and the Nation of Israel our constant love and support and never turn from it.

"I will teach you that Christianity is not something separate from the Old Testament, not in the least. Christianity was *built* upon the Old Testament. We are going to study both the Old and New Testaments because they are joined together. You cannot have one without the other. They are all about the same Father God, the same Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the same Holy Spirit. The Old Testament is the promises of God concealed, and the New Testament, through Jesus Christ, are the promises of God revealed!

"You kids, well… you kids bless my heart so much because you are the next generation of Intercessors. You are the next generation of Warriors of God. Do you know that there is no word for coincidence in the ancient Hebrew language? That's because there is no coincidence with God! You have been placed in this specific time of day and year, this century, in this space of geography, with the gifts, talents, knowledge, abilities, and hearts that you have for a very special mission.

"Ancient Jewish wisdom teaches us that before we were born, our souls stood before God and He assigned us all a specific mission. It *blesses* my heart more than words can possibly say that you all recognize God has chosen and designed you for a special mission and that you accept His will to be used for His glory, to do His work, and accomplish that mission in this world. I'm *so* proud of you… all of you, and I am honored, truly honored to have the privilege of being your Intercessor teacher," Obadiah said with his charming smile as he wiped away tears from his eyes. Then he took a deep breath and said, "Ah, so, if you are ready, we will begin."

The Intercessors all smiled and nodded.

"Alright! Placed before you are your new Bible and your Intercessor Compendium," Obadiah said. After saying this, he noticed the puzzled look on their faces and he added, "That's just an old-fashioned word for instruction manual."

"Yeah, but it's a *cool* word," Gideon said, picking up his large leather-bound book. "Would you like to read my *compendium?* What's that? You have a question? Here, let me look that up for you in my *compendium*," he said with a

smooth and sophisticated tone.

Everyone laughed.

Obadiah smiled and continued, “The Bible and the Compendium are very important to your study as an Intercessor. You must not lose them; the Bible, of course, because it is the focus of our study and the Compendium for all your notes and lessons that you will learn about God’s Word. Take good care of them and be sure to bring them with you each time we come for training. Now, please, open to the first page,” he waited for them to do so. “Here you will find what is called ‘The Intercessor Decorum’; these are the requirements that I ask of you as my students. Obviously, the first requirement is that every student must be a Christian who has received salvation from the grace of Jesus Christ. You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t love the Lord and wanted to do an even greater work for Him. The rest of the rules listed are also important and required. So please take a moment to read over them, make sure you understand them, and then you will need to sign your name that you agree to uphold this decorum when you are inside and outside the Prayer Sanctum.”

The students took their time in carefully reading each of the points that were listed.

The Intercessor Decorum

-An Intercessor must strive to uphold in their daily life, the commandments of the Lord and the teachings of Jesus Christ found in the Bible, God’s Holy Word.

-An Intercessor must strive to utilize the teachings they will receive for the glory of God and strive to represent Him well with their words and actions.

-An Intercessor must strive to build the Kingdom of God and minister the love and Gospel of Jesus Christ to the hearts of those who need Him.

-An Intercessor understands that it is their job to love people, pray for people, and try to *lead* them to Jesus with the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

- An Intercessor understands it is <u>not</u> their job to judge people’s souls, treat anyone poorly because of their choices, or treat them poorly if they don’t choose to follow Jesus Christ. If the message of Christ’s salvation is rejected, remember Christ was rejected and still showed love.

-An Intercessor believes Jesus was Jewish, born to Jewish parents, never stopped being Jewish, and that all His 12 disciples were Jewish. Intercessors believe the Jewish people are God’s chosen people and stand with them, pray for them, and the nation of Israel, always speaking out against antisemitism.

-An Intercessor must respect the rules of the Prayer Sanctum, treating it as a holy place dedicated to the Lord’s work and those who also serve there.

-I hereby confirm that I have asked Jesus Christ into my heart and believe Him to be the One and only Son of God.

-I am a Judeo-Christian, believing in the entire Word of God through both the Old and New Testaments. I will strive to represent Jesus Christ daily as the Holy Bible instructs me.

-I will do my very best to uphold this decorum and to honor the Prayer Sanctum as a place of prayer, worship, and study of God's Word.

-I will honor the Prayer Sanctum with my behavior and words and keep respect and harmony with those who study alongside me.

-I will honor God with my life and give myself freely to His perfect Will and Mission for ministry so He may use the Spiritual Gifts He placed in me to fulfill His purpose for my life.

-I understand that by making this commitment to the cause of Christ, I am now and forever will be an Intercessor of the Lord.

Once each student had read and reread the decorum, they reached for their quill and ink to sign their names to the contract. Obadiah, Genevieve, and Magomu all beamed with joy at their decision. It blessed them to see such willing spirits ready to do this work for the Lord.

"Wonderful," Obadiah said, "Well done. Very well done indeed. I am most privileged to warmly welcome you into this ministry and give you all the name of being an official Intercessor. I can promise you one thing: you will never regret the commitment you just made for Jesus Christ, *not ever*."

He took a deep breath as he looked at each one of his students with loving eyes, proud of them and their willingness to be used by God. Genevieve and Magomu did the same; they were so proud of these teens and their desire to serve the Lord diligently with their lives. Then Obadiah clapped his hands and rubbed them together with enthusiastic eyes.

"Alright then, let's begin! Please open your Intercessor Compendiums and turn to your first lesson in the book," he said. Then he went to the blackboard and wrote the words:

The Power of Prayer

"To begin our training, we must all have a clear understanding of what it means to act as an Intercessor," he said, "First and foremost, an Intercessor *prays* and prays incessantly. When you pray for others, you present a petition for their circumstance before the Lord, God, Adonai. You are standing in or interceding on their behalf for their need. That course of action comes through consistent and earnest prayer. You present your petition to God through Christ

Jesus, who acts as an Intercessor for us. Jesus then takes our request, if it is a righteous request, to His Heavenly Father on our behalf.

"So, you see, we intercede for others, and Jesus intercedes for us—and He is always there, ready and listening! People have no idea what they are missing by not using the gift of prayer. There is nothing more powerful that you can do in times of trouble, for yourself and for others, than to pray! Sometimes I hear people say, 'All I can do is pray,' when they should be saying, 'The ***best*** thing I can do is pray!' Let's think about it, how would you describe prayer?

"Talking to God," Gideon answered.

"Exactly!" Obadiah said, writing his answer on the blackboard.

Let's just ponder that idea for a moment. Prayer is *talking to God.* The Lord God Almighty, Creator of the universe, heaven, earth, and everything in it, is eagerly willing and waiting to spend time with *you,* privately and personally! He is always there to listen to you, and He is always able to help. Whatever the circumstance, whatever the need, there is nothing too difficult for Him. His love has no measure, His grace has no boundaries, His power has no limits, and He desires to talk with *you*, one on one.

"We will spend much time learning *how* to pray, and much time as well *in* prayer. I've been learning for over 40 years how to pray, and I still don't know everything there is to know. Prayer is the most supernatural power you have. It is a direct line of access to Jesus Christ, God our Heavenly Father, and our friend, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who long to further Their relationship with you.

"We will learn how to meditate on the Lord, His goodness, His power, His love, and then, we will learn how to approach Him, to enter His courts with praise and thanksgiving. We will learn how to make our requests to Him and how to live expectantly in great anticipation for Him to move on those requests.

"The most important part of being an Intercessor is to know how to pray, and pray we will, together and independently. Just remember that God is always ready, God is always willing, and God is *always* able to help you, no matter the circumstance. Do you all understand this?" he asked the intrigued students. They all nodded silently.

"Now," he said as he walked to the blackboard again, "let's move on to the next lesson we will have tonight."

He picked up a piece of chalk and wrote:

<u>What's in a Name</u>

"Now that you have a better understanding of the power an Intercessor holds through prayer, we must all be on the same page for how we represent our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

"First, we must start with our name. The term Judeo-Christian began hundreds of years ago to describe those who had converted from Judaism to

Christianity, but it means far more than that. It is an honor to call ourselves Judeo-Christians because we are called to share the the scriptures of Ephesians 2:14-16, if you will turn in your Bibles to that passage we can read it together," he said as he waited for the Intercessors to find the verses, then he read, *"'For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations.* ***His purpose was to create in Himself <u>one new man</u> out of the two****, thus making peace,* ***and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross****, by which He put to death their hostility.'*

*"*Now, we will be learning much more about this verse in the lessons to come, but what this is teaching us is that it is *God's* intention, His desire, through the salvation and reconciliation of Jesus Christ, to bring peace to Jews and Christians and *unite* them together, both groups believing in the same Father God, the same Messiah, Jesus Christ, Yeshua Hamashiach, and the same Holy Spirit. This means that the Jews would come to embrace Jesus Christ and all the New Testament teachings, traditions, and holidays, and the Christians would come to embrace the Jewishness of Jesus Christ and the Old Testament teachings, the Holy days, the feasts, and celebrations, and by doing so would form One New Man.

"This scripture is already being fulfilled! Jews all over the world are coming to accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah, and Christians are coming to embrace the Jewishness of Jesus Christ and the Jewish roots of our faith-- and it is wonderful! When we call ourselves Judeo-Christians, we are letting people know we accept the Jewish roots of our faith, and we are also letting people know that we stand with the Jewish people and with the nation of Israel because they *are* God's chosen people, and Israel *is* God's chosen land and *always* will be. Does that all make sense?" he asked.

The Intercessors all nodded.

"Good! Let's continue! The next name I would like to talk about is the name we claim of *Christian.* This is a very privileged title, and we must see it that way. The world will mock you, will condemn you, and yes, they may even kill you for bearing that name. But what an *honor* it is to be called a Christian, for we have the blessing to represent the name of Christ our Lord and Savior.

"In doing so, we must be very careful. There are many people in the world who take the name of Christian, but sometimes they have given their interpretations of the scriptures to a serious extent and strayed away from His true teachings, misrepresenting Him greatly," he glanced over at Keoni, "Just like those who claim the name Christian and yet persecute others saying God hates them because of their lifestyle. This and other kinds of behaviors cause terrific conflicts for those who don't know the Lord to understand who Christians really are, which is why so many times Christians are thought of as hypocrites, judgmental, and self-righteous people--and rightfully so. We cannot preach one

thing and then do another. We must show the world the true meaning of the word *Christian* and what it is to be a follower of Christ.

"We must take it one step farther. We must make it our responsibility to represent Christ in such a light that we change the way the world views the name Christian. We don't want them to have defenses or anger toward His name any longer. Those who do not know Him must not be confused by what they see in us. We *must* strive to represent Him constantly with *consistency*, not according to our ideas, interpretations, or beliefs, but what is written in *His* Word, and His Word is about love. In doing this, I am asking you to raise the bar of your walk with the Lord and hold it high, with great importance. I know that there will be moments in your life when you will make mistakes too. We are, after all, still humans. This is why I use the word "strive". We need to strive to represent Jesus well and be consciously aware of it as much as we possibly can."

The Intercessors, taking in every word, all nodded in agreement.

Then he paused and turned to the blackboard.

"Let's write these few things down," he said. "First, we must represent Him in our *words,"* and he wrote "Words" on the blackboard. "We must try hard to take the time to *think* before we speak. This is very hard for humans to do. Again, you will make mistakes because you *are* human, and you will *never* be perfect. Yet, even if you fail daily, you must get up each day and try again to accomplish the skill of controlling what you say. Call on the Lord Jesus for guidance to take control of your tongue; He will help you."

Brielle thought about all the times she lost her self-control with Taryn. She was going to make that a matter of prayer. The question came to her mind, "Would Taryn know I love Jesus by what I've shown her?" The answer to that question, which she knew was true, made her sick to her stomach. No, there wasn't much that Brielle had shown her that would speak well of Jesus.

Then Obadiah turned to write another word on the blackboard: *Body.*

"The Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, '*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body*.' We need to treat our bodies with great care and respect. God created us individually. He loves us and wants us to love ourselves in a good, smart, and healthy way. Be careful of the places you go, be careful of the things you do to your body, watch what you eat, and be mindful of the things you wear. When people look at you, you want them to be able to see Christ in you. That's not to say that you have to walk around in collars to your chin, sleeves to your wrist, and legs covered to the ankle. It is only to say you want to send a good, positive message about who you are and who Christ is," he said, looking at the group. "Now, each of you already practices this; you always look attractive, yet respectful, and you all appear to be very healthy," he said.

Brielle sighed, "So, I need to watch all the junk I eat, huh?"

Obadiah smiled, “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, so what do you think?” he said, “God doesn’t give us commands because He has nothing better to do or because He has control issues. He gives them to us because He created the body your spirit dwells in, as well as your spirit, and as your Creator, He knows why you should take care of it. He also created so many wonderful, delicious, *healthy* foods to eat,” he said, pausing for a moment to clarify. “Now, let’s be *very* clear on what I am teaching you here. I am not telling you that you cannot go out and enjoy a burger and fries, or pizza and wings, or a milkshake and slice of pie from time to time.”

“Or all of the above in Brielle’s case,” Gideon teased.

Brielle smiled because she knew it was true.

“God wants you to enjoy your life; you just need to keep things in moderation and make healthy choices. I can tell you from personal experience that choosing wisely when it comes to your eating will give you a strong body, bones, teeth, hair, a healthy mind, and a happier spirit,” Obadiah said, “because I have eaten well all my life, I can tell you the results of eating healthy are well worth it. I, too, will still enjoy the slice of pie, or burger, or doughnuts from time to time, but I don’t make those foods my daily way of life.

“The other point that I need to make *excessively* clear is that while you are doing all these things for your personal walk of obedience with the Lord as an Intercessor, make sure you don’t become arrogant and judge others for *not* doing these things.

“I have seen so many people who bear the name Christian act in this manner. If someone didn’t eat right or was dressed in a seductive manner, they would treat them poorly for it. What they don’t realize is that they are closing themselves off from being able to minister to others because they are so busy judging them for their choices. ***It is not our job to judge another’s soul*.** That is the job of Jesus. Yes, of course, you need to make judgment calls on certain behaviors of a person’s character, especially if those behaviors are going to influence you or engage you in something negative or dangerous. That is not what I am talking about, there is a difference,” he said, looking back at Keoni.

“For example, Keoni, your friend Terri lives a gay lifestyle, something that goes against the Word of God. No matter how much people may hate it, debate it, or claim that God made them to be gay, the fact is that God tells us in many places in His Word that a gay lifestyle is not His will for people.

“Keoni, even though you know this, you have not judged Terri for it. You have kept your relationship intact and try to minister the love of Jesus and God’s Word to him when possible. Whether he accepts your message or not is entirely up to him, and if he doesn’t, that does not affect your walk with Jesus in the least. It just means that you disagree and believe differently. At least you have done what Christ asked you to do: share His love with another.

“I feel that there are many Christians in the world who think that if they

treat someone who is gay with kindness, they are sinning by being associated with them. But that is not true. I would have to ask, how can we share the love of Jesus with others if we keep ourselves disconnected from those whom He wants us to minister to?

"Growing up, my father taught me that tolerance meant people agreed to disagree on a matter with maturity and respect for one another. Just like Pastor Diffie teaches us, 'agree to disagree agreeably'. I am sorry to say that these days, I do not see an abundance of examples of that kind of tolerance taking place. People turn to judgment and anger so much faster than they turn to kindness and respect when disagreeing on a matter.

"I don't know what parents teach their children about tolerance, but it seems to me that the word tolerance these days has changed the translation into acceptance, but the two are not the same in definition. The definition of acceptance, according to the dictionary, *is the action of consenting to receive something offered or the action or process of being received as adequate or suitable, typically to be admitted into a group*. The definition of tolerance, according to the dictionary*, is the ability or willingness to tolerate something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with*.

"I am not teaching you acceptance of the sins which are defined by the Bible. I am teaching you how to show the love of Jesus to people, despite the life they lead and the choices they make, because that is what Jesus did when He was here on earth. He did that to teach people. I am teaching you to encounter those who disagree with you and your beliefs in the same manner as Jesus did when He encountered those who disagreed with Him or were sinning as defined by God's Word… with *grace*. I am also teaching you not to be judgmental of those who disagree with you because the right to judge another person's soul is *not* ours. That right has been given to Christ by God, the Father, after Jesus chose to become the sacrifice for our sins on the cross.

"We need to strive daily to follow the commands in God's Word. In doing so, it is important that we '*do not judge others lest we be judged*', as it is written in Matthew 7:1, for our sin is just as serious as anyone else's sin. All sin needs forgiveness, and we are all in need of that forgiveness. Fortunately, we can be saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. It is our job to help others learn that they can be saved from their sins as well.

"Keoni, you are on a good road toward ministering to Terri. You did not push him away because of the lifestyle he leads, and his lifestyle does not hinder your salvation because that is between Terri and God. Even though you two will disagree on the matter, as millions worldwide do, you do not want to place barriers between you and those who need to hear the message of Jesus. You are guaranteed to push people away by being judgmental, but by showing love and grace, you keep that door open so that anyone can come to you to learn about

the love of Jesus. Even if that person doesn't receive Jesus into their heart, still, you have planted the seeds of His love, and only God knows when and if those seeds might take root.

"We never know when our words might be remembered, even in the last hour. Then again, there are those who may never come to Jesus, but we still need to at least try to lead them to Jesus with the love of Jesus. You always want to keep your focus on succeeding for the Kingdom of God," he said.

The Intercessors nodded, taking notes from the instruction and thinking deeply upon them.

"I also want to make another strong clarification on the topic of how we dress. For many years, I have watched people who wanted to come to a church, but stayed away, because they didn't feel they had good enough clothes to walk in the door. At the same time, I'm sorry to say, I have also seen Christians within the walls of God's house cast harsh judgments on people who did not dress the way they thought was appropriate for church." Obadiah then picked up his Bible.

"I know God, it is more important for us to share all the love that is in this holy book with people's hearts than it is for us to worry about what they are wearing. When a child of God comes to seek Him, God is so thrilled that they are coming to find Him, He doesn't care what people wear to His house because He is looking at their soul. He is just rejoicing that they came looking for Him!

"Once a person gives their heart to the Lord and begins to grow in His Word, they too will want to represent Him the best way possible; in their dress, appearance, and words out of respect for their relationship with Him. But what is more important: a soul being won for the Kingdom of God or what they had on when they knelt at the altar?" Obadiah finished. He noticed the looks on the students' faces that his point had been made clear.

"So remember, take care of yourselves inside and out, watch your words, what you wear, and be patient and kind with others while they are still learning. If you have any questions about your apparel or style, just speak to Keoni. She has a great gift for knowing how to dress appropriately in the latest fashions and look tasteful, classy, modest, and beautiful all at the same time," he said happily.

Keoni beamed at the compliment.

Alright, let's get back to the name," he said, turning back to the blackboard. "What's in a name? Any answers?" he questioned.

"Your heritage," Jace said.

"Good," Obadiah said, writing it on the blackboard.

"Your identification," Brielle added.

"Yes," Obadiah said, writing that down on the blackboard as well.

"Anyone else?" he asked.

"Your purpose in life," Magomu said softly from across the Study Chamber.

"Ah, excellent," Obadiah said, writing it down on the blackboard.

"Years ago, and sometimes even now in some places, children were given

names that held significant meanings. Perhaps it was something that happened when they were born. For example, the meaning of the name Jabez was *pain,* which his mother associated with his birth," he said.

"Gee, I wonder why?" said Genevieve from across the room, causing everyone to laugh.

Obadiah continued, "How about a happy meaning then, like the name Emmanuel, which means 'God with us.' We also find the meaning of names throughout history coming from a person's job. For example, in Europe, the surname of Thatcher meant the person who repaired the thatching on house rooftops. Nowadays, people give names to their children, and they don't always know what they mean. Sometimes they do. They might have a name chosen for their child because of the meaning it holds. However, if I asked all of you right now what the meaning of your name was, you might not know," he said, looking around at each student.

They all looked at each other and shrugged, silently admitting that they did not know the meaning of their names.

"I do," Obadiah said sweetly with his charming smile, "But before I tell you the meanings, I want you to know it is not by mistake that you have the name you do. Your parents, together or separately, sought out to choose a name for you. When they heard the one name that you now hold, it grabbed at their heart. It rang true, it fit, and they knew that was the perfect name for you. Did you ever stop to think that God had something to do with that? Even if you've had your name changed or if someone else was responsible for naming you, there was a reason for that, too. God always has a plan in mind for His children, and even something as simple as your name can be life-altering in a very positive way," he said, turning around to the blackboard.

He took the chalk and wrote the students' first and last names on the board.

Keoni Toussaint
Gideon Toussaint
Jace Roberts
Brielle St. Clair

Then he went back to the top of the list and added the meanings of each name beside it.

Keoni Toussaint – Keoni means: One who sees and knows
Gideon Toussaint – Gideon means: Mighty Warrior, one who God gives battle plans to
Jace Roberts – Jace means: Healer
Brielle St. Claire – Brielle means: Warrior of God

"God *always* has a plan," he said, "even if you don't like your name or its meaning," he joked. "Then there are some who are given a name of greatness, but don't live up to it. Like the name Jezebel."

When Brielle and Keoni heard this, they thought of Taryn.

"The name Jezebel actually meant *purity*… but Queen Jezebel in the Bible didn't live up to that name. Not in the slightest. She helped turn Israel against God, and now, that name holds a different meaning to others when they hear it," he said.

"Yeah, now people think of a brazen hussy," Gideon said absentmindedly, making everyone laugh. "Sorry," he said, "Just thinking out loud."

"But it's true. That's what people often think because she did not represent the meaning of her name well at all. So be proud of your name, wear it well and live up to it, and not just your personal name, but most importantly, the name of *Christian,* because that is the name of Christ," Obadiah encouraged.

The Intercessors read the meanings of their names in silent wonder. They were astonished to see what they meant and how perfectly their names coincided with their Spiritual Gifts and abilities.

"I see that you are speechless," Obadiah said, "It does something to you, doesn't it, when you learn the meaning of your name? Especially when you see how well it represents who you are. I remember when I first read the story of Obadiah and how he hid the prophets of his time in caves to protect them from being killed by Queen Jezebel… and here I am," he chuckled with his arms extended wide, "In a cave!"

The Intercessors looked at him with a puzzled expression. He cleared his throat, "You aren't familiar with the story of Obadiah and the prophets?" he asked. The students shook their heads.

"Ah, well, you see, Jezebel wasn't only known for being a woman without any virtue, whatsoever, she was also a pagan woman who worshipped other gods and goddesses. One of those gods was Baal, who required his followers to sacrifice their children to him by fire. In ancient Greece, Baal was called Zeus, and Zeus also called for sacrifices to be made upon altars."

The Intercessors were disturbed by the stories, and the girls shuddered at the thought.

"Horrific, I know. Once Jezebel married King Ahab, she began to influence the power in Israel, and one of her first tasks was to order the deaths of all God's prophets. After all, she couldn't very well conduct all her worship of other gods and goddesses throughout Israel if all of God's prophets were still around calling her out and trying to get the people to stop listening to her. But the prophet Obadiah took over a hundred other prophets and hid them in caves, bringing them food and water to sustain them and saved their lives until they were safe, that is, until Jezebel was dead.

"Learning the meaning of my name transformed my life! I thought I was a

bridge builder-- and I am, but I didn't realize God had so much more for me than that until I learned the meaning of my name! And I am so proud of it," he said, turning to write his name on the board with its meaning next to it:

Obadiah - *means: A Servant of Yahweh.*

He stepped back to read all the names and their meanings quietly with the students.

"I can't believe it," Keoni finally said, "of all the names in the world my parents could have chosen for me, and this… this *is* who I am."

"I've always liked my name before," Gideon said happily, "but now, I'm gonna wear it with confidence!"

"I feel validated," Jace said, "God does want me to be a doctor, and even though my father didn't know it when he chose that name for me, it's like it confirms it."

Brielle sat quietly, taking all this in. Never before had it entered her mind that a frilly name such as hers could have such an awesome, bold, and powerful meaning. She used to think, because of the 'elle' part of her name, that it was French. Then later she learned it was an Irish name, passed down from her grandfather's side. But to hold such a powerful interpretation was not something she had expected. She thought back to that day she stood before the robbers in the mini-mart and how God used her with extraordinary power. Now seeing it written before her on the blackboard, it gave her a feeling of excitement and left her contemplating what kinds of things were in her future.

"I also find it really interesting," Keoni began, "and I never noticed this before because of how you pronounce our last name but isn't it fascinating that the word 'saint' is also in our last names--except for Jace," she said shyly turning to Jace, "Sorry, I didn't mean to…."

"Don't be," Jace interrupted, "Guess what my middle name is."

"Don't tell me, um, it's Saintfiticus?" Gideon joked.

"Hardly," Jace laughed, "…it's Christian."

The girls gasped.

"Even better!" Obadiah said.

"What?!" Gideon exclaimed, "That's incredible! Then you've got the same initials as Jesus! J.C."

Everyone laughed.

"God always has a plan," Obadiah said, "Hold that dear to your heart Jace, there is no coincidence in that name being yours," then he looked at the others, "All of you should be proud of your names. There is something very special about the four of you coming together, even for me," he paused to look up at Genevieve, "I haven't seen a group of kids like the four of you in a long time. God has His hand upon each and every one of you in a powerful way. He has created

you for a purpose, chosen you from the beginning," he slowly turned, extending his hand to the blackboard, "and, as it says in Isaiah 43:1, He has called you… *by name*.

17

The following morning, the Fairfield High School campus was electric with energy from the four Intercessors. They were ecstatic, completely exuberant from their experience in the Prayer Sanctum and Intercessor training the night before. Their spirits were full of joy, and they felt as if they were no longer touching the ground. It was a great way to start another Monday back to school. As each one came onto the campus, they greeted people with beaming smiles. The other students couldn't help but notice a difference in each of them from their apparent joy. When Brielle came into art class for her first hour, she was brimming over with happiness and felt full of energy, just bursting to share with someone all that she held in her heart.

"What's up with you today?" Zach asked her curiously in her first class, "Roberts propose to you or something?" he said rather dryly.

Brielle was taken off guard by his comment, "What? Oh, good grief, no," she answered, shaking off his comment, "Why on earth would you ask something like that?"

"Because of how you are today," he replied.

"And how am I today?" she asked sweetly, a broad smile across her face.

"You're just extremely happy-- happier than you usually are."

Brielle laughed, "That's because I *am* happy! I had the most incredible experience last night. Did you know that my name means *Warrior of God?* Me! A warrior of God, can you believe that?"

Zach smiled at her, "No, I didn't know that. God must have a sense of humor if that's true," he joked, "Because you are the littlest warrior I have ever seen."

Brielle agreed, "That's very true, but I serve a very big God who lives within me."

Zach didn't respond to her comment, but subtly changed the subject, "So then if you are not engaged to Roberts, I have a question for you," he said, leaning toward her and lowering his voice, "The Homecoming dance is coming up this month."

Brielle looked at him intently, suddenly feeling nervous, as she remembered they were now in October and Homecoming was only a couple of weeks away. She was excited about the event because she had never participated in a school dance before and wanted to go to one so badly.

"I was wondering…" he hesitated, looking down at the desk shyly for a moment, "if you would like to go to the dance with me."

Brielle smiled sincerely at him. Zach was a very nice guy, and Keoni was right, he was extremely attractive. Even so, deep in her heart, she knew that the only guy she wanted to go to the dance with was Jace… but Jace hadn't asked her to go to the dance yet.

In her heart, she didn't know what to say. If she told Zach that she was going with Jace, not only would she be lying, she would hurt him and throw more fuel onto the burning rivalry between them. At the same time, she didn't want to accept his offer because she didn't want to go with him. As she sat there nervously trying to think of what to say to avoid hurting his feelings, his expression changed.

Sadly, he said, "I take it from your silence that you are already taken by someone else. I'm too late," he said softly.

Brielle was relieved. She wouldn't have to say anything. He didn't say she was already going with someone else, but that she was taken-- which, when it came to her heart, was true.

"I'm sorry, Zach," she said gently.

"No, it's my fault for waiting as long as I did to ask you," he said. "I should have asked you when I first thought about it."

"When was that?" she asked curiously.

"The first day I saw you," he said, giving her a defeated smile.

Brielle was flabbergasted, and her face revealed it. Quietly, he went back to his drawing desk to work on his assignment. Brielle couldn't concentrate on her drawing. All she could think about was what Zach had just told her. It made her feel wonderful… yet, still not as wonderful as Jace made her feel.

As she thought about these feelings, she realized she had been so focused on helping her friends and her new Intercessor training that the dance had slipped her mind. But now she hoped that with it coming up so soon, Jace would ask her to go. She daydreamed about how much fun it would be to go to a school dance!

The thought of going shopping with Keoni for a dress, shoes, and all the accessories, getting her hair done, and maybe her nails. It was just the typical high school stuff she wanted to experience. Then on the night of the dance to be picked up by Jace, of course, she was still sixteen and wouldn't be seventeen until November, so she would have to go with a group—but who cares! It would be her first high school dance! She could dance in Jace's arms.

Brielle sat for a moment and thought of her younger days in Uganda with her daddy. He loved to dance with her. She was too little to dance, so he would pick her up and hold her in one arm to dance with her around the room, extending her other arm in the direction they would go. He would spin around and dip her up and down, making her laugh and a little dizzy, but she didn't mind; she had cherished every minute. She loved how close he would hold her; the feel of his skin as she held her hand around his neck to hold on. He was the dancer and the music. He would sing the melodies as they danced inside their little hut, and as they twirled their way to finish, he always ended their dance with a kiss.

Thinking about her father usually made her cry, but she didn't want to draw

attention to herself, so she quickly changed her thoughts back to Jace and the excitement of the Homecoming Dance. She couldn't wait to get to American History to see him.

Finally, her first and second classes were over, and she was on her way to American History. She knew that when she walked through the door, he would be there, sitting in his chair and wearing the glasses that made him look so sophisticated.

When she entered, there he was, looking just as beautiful as ever. He was reading a flyer in his hand and did not notice when she entered.

"Good morning, Brielle," Mr. Bennet said as he walked over to hand her the same flyer. "Here you are, we will be going over this first," he said happily.

Brielle looked down at the flyer, which read: 'American History Class Field Trip'. Underneath, it gave the information for the event along with a parental permission slip attached to the bottom. She read it slowly as she walked to her seat, then Jace looked up.

"Good morning," he said happily, a gleam in his eye.

"Good morning," she said sweetly, using all the charm she could--without being annoying.

"This looks interesting," he said.

"Yeah, that's a good word for it. I've never been on this tour. I was always too scared to hear about it," she replied, looking back down at the flyer.

"You? Scared?" he teased.

"I have a hard time hearing about tragic things that happen to people," she said still reading the flyer, then she looked up and said, "I'm sorry, I mean, I'm sure other people have a hard time with that too."

"It's okay, I understand what you mean."

The class was going to attend a town tour called 'The Burning of Fairfield'. Local historians give tours of this tragedy in colonial attire, teaching about the fateful night when 2,000 Crowned Forces landed on the beach on July 7, 1779. When their demands were not met by the local colonists who supported the fight for Independence, the British troops burned the town.

Even though Brielle had lived in Fairfield for the past ten years, she had never once taken the tour. In her mind, she came to Fairfield to heal from the pain she endured as a child. She didn't want the town, which brought her so much joy and helped her healing process, to be tarnished by the sadness it held in its past. She had just finished explaining this to Jace when Keoni came in. She was happy to see her other Intercessor companions.

Brielle could tell that there was something else that added to Keoni's joy, something that she was trying to calmly keep controlled while in class. Brielle didn't know what it was, but she would find out.

Mr. Bennet began class and went over the field trip flyer in detail. They would attend the tour at the end of the week on Friday. This was a special

engagement the town historians were doing for the high schools in the area. The tours are usually given on the date of July 7th, which is the anniversary of the tragedy. But because school was not in session during July, this would be a special tour for the students of Fairfield. The permission slips needed to be signed and turned in by Thursday morning.

Brielle glanced over at her friend, who was smiling to herself while reading the field trip flyer, and her exuberance had nothing to do with the upcoming outing with her classmates. Brielle quietly tore out a piece of paper and wrote Keoni a note.

What's that smile about? ☺

She passed the note over to Keoni.

I'm just really happy after our training last night, it was AWESOME!

Yes, I am, too! I can't wait for next Sunday!!!
Is that really all there is to that smile?

I'm just really excited about everything we learned and are going to do!

Sorry friend, I know you too well, just tell me!
What is it?

Keoni knew that Brielle was right. She did know her too well. There was another reason for her joyfulness-- in addition to their Intercessor training the night before. Quickly, she scribbled down the answer to her friend's pressing question.

I got asked to Homecoming today!

Brielle's eyes grew wide with surprise; she was thrilled for her friend.

By who? Did you say yes? Of course, you said yes- I hope you said yes! But who asked you?!

Giovanni Renda he's on the football team. I've met him a couple of times, but I had no idea he liked me enough to ask me!
I'm so excited!!!!

I'm so happy for you!!! And now this means…

SHOPPING! ☺

After class, Brielle told Jace that she would meet him in the lunch line, but she had to use the restroom first. Keoni went with her.

"Tell me what happened! I want details!" Brielle said excitedly as they walked down the hallway.

"He just came up to me this morning before school and asked me if I was

going with anyone to the dance. When I told him no, he asked if I would like to go with him," Keoni said.

Brielle waited, "And…" she coerced.

"And I said yes, I would love to. I mean, I don't know him very well, but he's cute and seems to know how to put an outfit together… for a football player. I wonder if he can cook," she pondered.

"Isn't he Italian?" Brielle questioned.

"Yeah," Keoni answered.

"Then he can cook. It's in their blood. The ability is absorbed into them while in the womb through the aromas of their parents' kitchens," Brielle laughed. Italian food was her absolute favorite cuisine, and she had never been to an Italian restaurant that she didn't love.

"This is great! We can double, and maybe we'll get to enjoy some excellent pasta before the dance… then again, maybe garlic before dancing isn't a great idea," Keoni said.

"Why did you not want to tell me this?" Brielle asked as they entered the restroom.

"You haven't mentioned anything about anyone asking you. I know how much you want to go, your first high school dance and all. I didn't want to gloat," she said gently.

"Keoni, for crying out loud, how long have we known each other? You're not just my friend, you're my sister! You can always tell me stuff like this, and I will always want to know so I can be happy with you! Life isn't all about me," Brielle said, digging through her purse to find a brush.

"I know… but you still haven't said anything about you going. Hasn't he asked you yet?" Keoni asked.

"That all depends on which *he* you are referring to," Brielle said as she brushed her hair.

Keoni looked puzzled, "I'm sorry? What other *he* is there? I meant Jace. Hasn't Jace asked you yet?"

Brielle sighed and put her brush away, "No, not yet. Of course, there is still time. I mean, he could ask me today for all I know."

"That's true," Keoni said, "Then who asked you?"

"Zach," Brielle answered.

Keoni's eyes grew wide with surprise, "Oh wow! You're kidding? That rivalry between them is strong! He knows you're with Jace, right?"

Brielle shrugged, "I don't even know that I'm *with* Jace. I mean, we spend a lot of time together, mainly in groups, and now with our training. I really like him and would like to be officially called his girlfriend. But he has never asked me for anything like that. He hasn't even told me how he feels about me, remember?"

"Well, what did you say to Zach?" Keoni asked, completely intrigued.

"I didn't say much of anything at all," Brielle began, "I was sitting there

thinking about how I should answer him. I didn't want to say no and hurt his feelings, even though I haven't been asked yet. But I didn't want to say yes because I want to go with Jace. While I was figuring out what to say, he just assumed from my silence to his question that I was already going with someone else and backed out of it gracefully."

"Oh girl, this is going to stir the fires of competition between them when Jace finds out," Keoni said.

"I'm not going to tell him," Brielle said.

"What?" Keoni exclaimed, "You just said that he hasn't asked you yet, when he hears that Zach wanted to take you, he'll *beg* you to go with him."

"That's my point," Brielle said, "I don't want him to ask me because he wants to keep me from Zach. I want him to ask me because he *wants* to."

Keoni smiled, "That's a good point. Sometimes I forget how old you are."

"What do you mean?" Brielle asked, "You know I'm almost seventeen!"

"Yeah, but you don't act like it," Keoni laughed, "Most girls our age would use that as a mechanism for entrapment to get what they want. But you're right; you need to know that he wants to take you for no other reason but to be with you."

When the girls reached the lunch line, Jace and Gideon had already gone through and were seated at a table. As they came through with their lunch trays, Keoni's face lit up. When she spotted Gideon and Jace, she saw that Giovanni was also seated with them. He smiled warmly when she approached the table and stood up to pull her chair out for her. Jace and Gideon watched as he did so.

"Ah man, come on, Giovanni, you're making us look bad," Gideon said.

Giovanni looked up in surprise, "What do you mean?" he asked, confused by the comment.

"Being all gentleman-like while we just sit here chowin' down, we look like…"

"You look like you always do," Keoni said, "Don't scold him for being chivalrous just because you're a slug."

"Yeah, see, like that! Now you're chivalrous and we're a couple of slugs," Gideon teased.

"I wasn't talking to Jace," Keoni clarified kindly, "just you."

"You might want to work on that, Giddy," Brielle chimed in with a giggle, "and don't eat any salt."

Gideon looked at her like she was from Mars.

"You know, because slugs will dissolve in… never mind," she said, clearly seeing that her point was not being made.

When Brielle and Keoni sat down to eat, they bowed their heads, and Brielle blessed their lunch. When she looked up, Giovanni was staring at her. She focused on her lunch and began some small talk about the upcoming field trip they were going to take.

"Man, I wish I was going on something like that, but no, I have to take a biology test on Friday," Gideon said.

"And the big game's that night!" Brielle said excitedly, "By the way, what team are you playing for Homecoming?" she asked, trying to subtly bring up the subject. Jace didn't notice.

They were all discussing the upcoming games and teams that would be played when the conversation made a turn to Dylan.

"I'm going to the hospital to see him on Wednesday after practice," Gideon said, "I can't make it tonight or tomorrow, so I thought I would go before church Wednesday night. Anyone care to join me?"

Everyone at the table, including Giovanni, said that they would go with him to see Dylan.

"Keoni and I were going to go visit Lacy today after school. Mama says that she is still not doing well," Brielle said.

"Mind if I come along?" Jace asked.

"I was hoping you would," Brielle answered. "I need to see her again. I think it will help me, at least I hope so."

"What do you mean?" Gideon asked.

"I had a horrible nightmare about her a few nights back," Brielle explained, "She was being tortured by a group of demons. We were in a graveyard, and I couldn't get to her. The demons all had long teeth and claws and kept grabbing her and biting her. I didn't know if the dream was just my imagination going crazy or if…"

"Or if demons were actually attacking her?" Gideon asked.

"Obviously, she is under attack from the enemy," she said, "The girl is in a coma and had a stroke from a drug overdose. I just need to see her and pray for her in person again. Every morning, I pray that this will be the day she will wake up."

She stopped to take a bite of her sandwich and noticed that Giovanni was looking at her again, only this time with a more concerned look on his face. Then Jace changed the subject.

"Hey, I found out something about Rateesh that I didn't know," he said, "His family has an Indian restaurant in town."

"Really?" Brielle said curiously, "He never mentioned that. I love Indian food."

"There's a surprise," Gideon joked; Brielle just gave him the same expression she usually did.

"Yeah, it's called Dilli Rasoi, he said that means Delhi Kitchen. I would like to go there and try it sometime," Jace said.

"I know that place," Giovanni said, "A couple of the guys on the team go over there to eat every other week."

"Who?" Gideon asked with his mouth half full of food.

"Reed and Morgan," Giovanni said.

Jace quickly looked at Brielle, "You mean Reed Radcliff and Morgan Claybrook?" he asked casually.

"Yeah, do you know them?" Giovanni asked.

"Not really," Jace said, "they're in my chemistry class. They must really like Indian food, huh? I mean to go there every other week?"

"Yeah, they love it. They took me with them a couple of times. I had curry chicken. It's not bad. It's not my favorite place, but they always took care of the bill, and I never say no to free food," Giovanni answered.

"Good man," Brielle said, "my sentiments exactly," she joked as she looked over at Jace. Her eyes quietly communicated that she understood what information Jace was trying to find. Now that they knew there was a direct connection between Reed, Sean, and Rateesh outside of chemistry, they would just have to find out what the problem was.

After school, Brielle and Keoni drove to Devereaux Memorial Hospital with Jace behind them on his motorcycle. When they arrived, they were pleasantly surprised to find Genevieve there. Genevieve greeted them all with hugs and then filled them in on what was happening.

"Lacy's body is going through withdrawal," she explained, "Her system is craving the drugs. It might be a bit of a blessing that she is in a coma during this time. It is a terrible process to go through, which is why it is so hard for a person to endure rehab."

"Can I see her?" Brielle asked, "I need to, Mama. I had a horrible nightmare about her, and I just need to see her."

"Yes, the Weavers just stepped outside for a while. It's so hard for them to sit here day after day watching their daughter in this condition. I suggested they take a walk together a few times during the day and get some air. They will be back soon," she answered.

Brielle walked into the room, and the only sound was that of the respirator and other machines that were attached to Lacy. Jace, Keoni, and Genevieve followed her, surrounding Lacy's bed. Brielle knew exactly what she was looking for. She gently reached out to touch Lacy's arm, telling her that she was there. Then she slowly turned Lacy's arm so she could see the inside of her wrist and forearm. Her heart began to pound as she gazed at what she feared seeing. There, up the inside of Lacy's wrist and forearm, were long, thin red lines, scars from razor cuts. There were several of them on her left arm. They had not seen these at school, as Lacy always wore long-sleeved black shirts. Keoni, Jace, and Genevieve were watching Brielle, and when her mother saw the scars, she gasped.

"How did you know those were there?" she asked Brielle softly.

"It was in my dream," Brielle said, "After I spent some time studying Lacy's journal, I fell asleep, and I dreamt that demons had her and were cutting her

arms with their claws and teeth. I wanted to see if this was something that was happening in real life. She is being tormented."

Keoni, listening to Brielle, slowly turned Lacy's other arm over to find the same long, thin, red scars on the inside of her wrist and forearm.

"This girl is under an attack of demonic spirits," Keoni whispered, "They have her by the drugs and by her pain. She's cutting herself."

Brielle took a deep breath. "I know we are still learning about Intercessory prayer," Brielle said, "but I feel led to pray for her right now."

They instantly agreed and joined hands, making a circle that included Lacy. Brielle took Lacy's left hand, and Keoni took her right. Then, together they began to pray, led by Brielle.

"Father God," she began, "We come to You with our friend Lacy. She is Your child, designed and created by Your loving Hand for a specific purpose in this life. The enemy knows how special she is and that You have great plans for her. He is trying to destroy her with everything he can. But we have come together seeking Your divine healing for Lacy. I ask You, Father, right now, to break the demonic forces that surround her and set her free from their bondages of pain and suffering. Restore her Lord, give her healing in her mind, spirit, and body, and let her be rid of these things which bring her life pain. We have come in faith and believe that by the stripes of Jesus Christ, and in the Name of Jesus Christ, Yeshua Hamashiach, she is *healed,*" she prayed boldly.

Just at that moment, Lacy's body gave a violent jolt. Her arms and legs had a sudden convulsion. It startled the group gathered around her. Directly after the jolt, two nurses came running in to check her monitors.

"What happened?" Keoni asked, "Is she alright?"

"Yes," the nurses said, "she just showed more brain activity than she has since she got here."

One nurse stayed to monitor Lacy while the other went to call for a doctor.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said, "but we are going to have to ask you all to leave now."

Brielle silently nodded her head, and they all exited, charged from the awesome presence of the Lord they felt in Lacy's room. They knew that God had touched her.

"We are going to expect great things now," Genevieve whispered to the Intercessors with a broad grin. "Jesus just touched that girl. Keep praying, He hears you."

The friends were still quiet, happy, but stunned by what they had just experienced.

"I haven't felt anything like that before," Keoni said.

"I have," Jace said, looking at Brielle and remembering the day of the robbery, "Once before."

"There is power in God's Word," Genevieve said, "Listen closely to

everything Oba teaches you, study your Bible daily, and keep the lessons of the Lord close to your heart. But most of all, pray. Always make time to talk to God in prayer, every day, throughout the day, call on Him."

They watched as the doctor arrived and listened outside as the nurse explained the sudden positive change in Lacy's condition.

"Do you think they would believe us if we told them?" Keoni asked, listening to the conversation taking place down the hall.

"Probably not," Jace said. "Doctors are mostly about the scientific approach—not the supernatural. There are a few out there who might."

"Like you," Genevieve said, patting him on the arm. "Don't worry, though, I'll be sure to tell the nurses, Jim, and Laura what happened. Jim needs to know."

Jace looked at Genevieve with such admiration in his eyes. Brielle knew he would give anything to have a mother like her.

Genevieve glanced up at the clock, "Kawala," she said to Brielle, "I am going to stay here for a while and be with the Weavers. Oba is going to pick up Asher from basketball and go with his team to get pizza. Do you mind cooking for yourself tonight?"

"Not at all," Brielle answered.

"Actually," Jace said, "Would it be alright if I took the girls to get something to eat?" he asked Genevieve.

Genevieve's face lit up with delight, "Of course," she said, "You are always such a gentleman, Jace, thank you."

Jace smiled, and Brielle knew exactly where he would be taking them for dinner: Dilli Rasoi.

As they were leaving the hospital, Keoni needed to stop in the restroom.

"I have a question for you," Jace said to Brielle, leaning against the wall while waiting for Keoni.

"Oh, yeah?" Brielle answered, trying not to sound too eager.

"Why does your mom call you a koala? Are you a marsupial in disguise?" he teased.

Brielle laughed lightly, disappointed that the question was not an invitation to the Homecoming dance. "No, she calls me *Kawala*, it's spelled K-a-w-a-l-a. It's something they called me while living in Uganda; my father learned it from the villagers. It means 'little girl' in their language," she explained.

"Oh, okay," he said, nodding his head in understanding. "That's cute," he said sweetly. "I like it. Is that what your father called you, too?"

Brielle felt that old familiar pain in her heart, and she just nodded. Her mind drifted back to the last night they were together, the night she had awakened from a terrible nightmare, the last night she heard him call her by that name.

Jace noticed the change in her expression and her silence. "Are you okay?" he asked gently.

Brielle nodded again, "Yes, I was just thinking of my father," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to---,"

"No, it's fine. Don't worry, Jace, I've dealt with his death for ten years. I have to handle it-- I don't like to, but I have to live in the real world. I want you to always feel free to ask me whatever questions you like at any time… about anything," she said, honestly not meaning to hint at anything in particular.

A nurse walked by Jace and Brielle as they stood outside the restroom door. She looked at them with a friendly smile and said hello. They greeted her as she passed, but then she turned and came back.

"Excuse me," she said, "but don't I know you?" she asked Jace.

Jace seemed surprised by her question, "Um, no, I don't think so," he answered politely.

"Yes, I'm sure of it… Maybe you were a patient here recently?" she said, trying to figure out where she knew him.

"It's possible. I've been here from time to time with a few baseball injuries," he replied.

"Oh, well… maybe that's it," the nurse said. "I'm terrible with names, but I never forget a face," she laughed. "You two have a good day," she said as she turned to walk away, taking one more glance over her shoulder at Jace.

Brielle looked at him curiously, "How often have you been in this hospital?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, "for baseball injuries? Maybe three or four."

"Is that a lot?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe she's just a very good nurse who remembers her patients," he said.

"Did you recognize her?" she asked.

"No, not at all," he answered.

"I can see why she wouldn't forget you. You don't exactly have a forgettable face," she said. She felt her face flush after her comment and quickly looked away from his gaze.

"You know…" he started in a softer, more serious tone. "I've wanted to talk to you about something," he started.

Just then, Keoni came out of the restroom. "Okay, ready to go?"

"Yeah," Jace said, "Let's go have an early dinner. Are you two up for a taste of India?"

Brielle sighed, sorry to have missed the chance to hear Jace's question, but she smiled and went with her friends out to the parking lot.

Keoni and Brielle followed Jace on his motorcycle as they traveled across town to the little restaurant. As they did, Brielle talked to Keoni about her conversation with Jace.

"Do you think he was going to ask you to the dance?" Keoni asked excitedly.

"I don't know," Brielle said, "he didn't seem to care that we got interrupted."

"I'm sorry," Keoni said sadly, "I had no idea…"

"Oh, no, no, I didn't mean it like that. It wasn't your fault; how could you know what was happening? It just seemed like he wanted the subject to be changed. If he was going to ask me to the dance, wouldn't he have said something else, like 'I'll talk to you about this later,' or something like that?" Brielle asked.

"Yeah, maybe," Keoni said. "You just have to keep remembering how shy that boy can be. He's doing much better, though, don't you think?"

"I guess," Brielle sighed, "It's just… sometimes I can't shake the feeling that there is something that he is not telling me. I can't put my finger on it, just a hunch. But I've been wrong before."

"Don't worry about it," Keoni said, "Let's just enjoy our dinner and see what we can learn about this restaurant."

"It is really interesting that Reed and his guys come here so often, and they are the ones harassing, Rateesh, isn't it?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, it is, and it's not a coincidence that Giovanni gave us that information today. I don't know what it is, but there is something here that I think God *wants* to show us." Keoni answered.

When they arrived, they parked their car on the street. The restaurant was a small establishment amidst many other mom-and-pop businesses. They had a lovely sign out front that read "Dilli Rasoi". The windows, which lined the front of the restaurant, had patterns of Indian columns on them in frosted glass. But Brielle's favorite features were the two little elephant statues that stood outside the front door, welcoming their guests with raised trunks.

"Oh, how cute! I love elephants!" she said, patting them on the head as she walked in the door.

Inside, the restaurant was decorated in bright, vibrant colors of red, gold, and dark purple. There were all kinds of beautiful pieces of art on the walls, mostly of Indian elephants. The front part of the dining area looked like a regular restaurant, with tables and chairs. But at the back of the room, Brielle spotted very short tables, close to the floor, surrounded by large, colorful pillows. She asked the hostess if they could be seated in that section, and the hostess happily led them to a table.

As soon as they were seated, their waitress came out and took their drink orders and returned promptly with their drinks. She was a short girl with long black hair, which she had pulled back into a ponytail. She had on a beautiful light green Indian outfit with flowing pants and a long dress-like blouse that was trimmed with gold silk and beading. Her big brown eyes were beautiful, framed with long black eyelashes; she had a sweet, round face and a lovely smile. She wasn't very tall and looked to be about nineteen or twenty years old.

"My name is Priyanka, and I will be your server today," she said, glancing over at Jace, giving him a shy smile.

"Thank you," Brielle said, "We just found out that this restaurant is owned by the family of our friend from school. His name is Rateesh. Do you know him?"

Priyanka giggled, "Yes, I know him well. He's my little brother."

"Really?" Brielle said excitedly.

"Yes, he is here. I will go get him for you," Priyanka said happily.

Brielle and Keoni were happy to get to see Rateesh, but Jace looked a little worried.

"What's wrong?" Brielle whispered.

"I'm not so sure he is going to be happy to see us," he said.

"What? Why not? We're his friends," she replied.

"Yes, but if he has been trying to keep us from finding out what is going on, he might not be so thrilled about us being here," he answered.

"But didn't you come here today to try and figure out what is going on?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I didn't know he would be here. Let's just keep it light, maybe he will be alright," he said.

Just then, they heard someone yelling from behind the door to the kitchen. They turned to see a young man emerge through the door; he stopped and looked at them. He was a short, freckled-faced, strawberry blonde-haired man in his late twenties, obviously not a member of the family, perhaps an employee. He looked at the three friends, then locked his focus on Keoni. He appeared to stare at her angrily for a moment, then he turned and stormed down a back hallway until they couldn't see him anymore. Keoni gasped.

"What's wrong?" Brielle said, grabbing her friend's shoulder, "Are you alright?"

Keoni placed her hand on her stomach and looked up at Brielle.

"Who was that?" Brielle questioned, "Have you ever seen him before?"

"No," Keoni whispered, shaking her hand and reaching for her glass to take a drink.

"Why did he look at you like that?" Brielle asked.

Keoni grabbed her trembling hands to steady herself. "There is something evil in him," she whispered.

Brielle looked at her with a worried expression and then at Jace, who also had the same expression.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I could feel it," Keoni said.

After a moment, Priyanka returned to their table with Rateesh, who greeted his friends warmly.

"I had no idea that your family owned a restaurant, Rateesh," Brielle said sweetly, "As soon as we heard about it today, we came right over for an early dinner."

Rateesh's warm smile slightly faded, and he looked at her inquisitively,

“How did you hear about it?” he asked.

Brielle looked at Keoni, who was still shaken from seeing the man.

“Giovanni Renda told us,” she said, “He’s taking Keoni to the Homecoming Dance and joined us for lunch today,” she said, glancing over at Jace, who met her eyes but quickly looked at Rateesh to add to the conversation.

“He said that he has come here a few times with Sean Lewis and Reed Radcliff from our chemistry class. He said that they come here every other week,” Jace explained.

At this statement, Rateesh’s demeanor changed. He became nervous and uneasy.

“Yes, yes, they are very good customers here,” he said quickly. “I’m sorry, but I am so busy in the back. If you will please excuse me, I must return to my work. It was so nice of you to come. I hope you enjoy your dinner,” he said sweetly. Then he quickly walked back into the kitchen. Priyanka watched curiously as her brother departed, but then turned to wait on her customers.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “You can’t enjoy your dinner if I don’t take your order first,” she laughed.

They gave Priyanka their order and watched quietly until she left them to go into the kitchen.

Brielle looked at Jace, “Why won’t that boy just tell us what is going on?” she said, frustrated. “He is *so* bad at hiding whatever it is he is hiding.”

“It’s eating him up, too. Those guys have a hold on him for something, but he’s too terrified to talk about it. They have him locked up tight,” Jace said.

Brielle turned to Keoni, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Keoni said, “That just really scared me.”

“How could you tell he was evil? Could you see it?” Brielle asked.

“No,” Keoni said, pausing to try and find the words to explain it, “I felt it. It felt like this darkness, like something heavy, came over me, and I got sick to my stomach. My hands started trembling… I just felt horrible. It just felt like an evil presence was with him.”

“Have you ever felt that before?” Brielle said.

“Yeah, I used to feel that way sometimes when I would go back to my grandmother’s house in New Orleans. There are a lot of people down there who are into voodoo and black magic. I could feel the evil with those who were involved in it, even when I was a kid,” she said.

“I wonder if Rateesh might answer some questions about Brian,” Brielle asked Jace.

“I’ll try. I’m not giving up on this. It’s like Obadiah said, these friends were placed in our lives for a reason,” he answered.

The friend’s conversation was pleasantly interrupted by the delicious aromas of their meals, which Priyanka brought to their table.

“You will notice that there is silverware on the table, but this dish,” she said,

looking at Brielle, “is quite enjoyable when eaten with your hands.”

“Sounds good to me,” Brielle said, placing her napkin in her lap and reaching over the table to take Jace’s. “Mind if I use this? I may need it more than you,” she laughed.

“Don’t worry,” Priyanka said, “I will bring you more and a washing bowl too,” she said, turning to retrieve the items. Jace gently placed his hand on her arm to stop her from leaving the table. She turned to look at him as if he had just melted her heart.

“May I ask you a question?” he said charmingly.

“Of course,” she answered softly.

Brielle and Keoni sat back to watch the scene unfold. She was like putty in his hands.

“Those two guys I mentioned before, Sean Lewis and Reed Radcliff, do you know who they are?” he asked.

“Yes, they are regular customers here. I wait on them all the time,” she answered, staring into his beautiful brown eyes, mesmerized by him.

“Do they come here every other week?” he asked lightly, not wanting her to become suspicious of his questions.

“Yes, every other Thursday evening; ever since last summer began. They come together, they are good friends with Brian,” she answered him, thrilled to have his attention.

“Brian?” he asked curiously.

“Yes, he works for our family,” she said, nodding toward the kitchen.

“Oh,” Brielle said, “I think we saw him a moment ago, does he have strawberry-blonde hair?

“Yes, that’s him,” she said, temporarily breaking her gaze from Jace to acknowledge Brielle. “He brings us a lot of business. We have received dozens of new customers because of his recommendations,” she answered, looking back at Jace, “which is great for my family.”

“Do you know Sean and Reed?” Priyanka asked Jace.

“Yes, not really well, but we have a chemistry class together,” Jace answered, “That’s also how I know your brother. He’s my lab partner.”

“Rateesh is a genius; he is only fourteen years old and already a Junior. He is an accelerated student,” she said.

“Yes, I know, and probably the main reason I am doing so well in that class,” Jace laughed, “He teaches me a lot. He’s a good friend.”

Priyanka beamed, “That is good to know. He’s a good brother, too.” She looked up to see that people were entering the restaurant.

“Please excuse me,” she said, turning to look at Jace. “It was very nice talking with you,” she said with a shy smile, then she walked over to greet her customers.

Brielle looked at Jace, “Okay, we are making progress here,” she said.

“How?” Keoni asked in confusion, “We still don’t know what’s going on any more than we did before; we just added more people to the puzzle.”

“Yes, but now we have more information to connect some things,” she said, “Sean and Reed are friends with Brian,” then she looked at Keoni, “And we know that something is going on with Brian that’s-- not good. I wonder if the connection to Sean and Reed harassing Rateesh could come from Brian being here in his restaurant.”

“Yeah, but he won’t tell us what it is,” Keoni argued.

“True,” Brielle said, “but we can pray. God can reveal what is going on here. Even if He doesn’t reveal it to us, He can stop whatever it is that’s happening.”

“Whatever it is, they’re up to no good,” Keoni said.

“And Rateesh knows it,” Jace said, “I think that is what the problem is. They are trying to keep him intimidated so he won’t tell whatever he knows about them, or what they are doing.”

“Mama said today that we need to spend more time talking to God. That is how we will find out how to help Rateesh,” Brielle said softly, “We *must* keep praying.”

18

When Brielle came down for breakfast the next morning, she was told a most amazing story by her mother to start her day. Lacy was starting to show signs of improvement! She was still in a coma and on a respirator, but the doctors had told Jim and Laura that perhaps the damage to her brain from the stroke was not going to be as bad as they thought. God was healing her, and it gave them all hope, especially Jim and Laura. When they learned of this healing touch, Brielle and her family, along with the other Intercessors, gave God praise throughout the day. Every time they thought about what God had done for Lacy and what He could still do, they spoke words of thanks and praise.

After the doctors had shared the news with Lacy's parents about her condition, Genevieve told them about the prayer and what had happened to Lacy while they were praying. Genevieve said that she wasn't sure Jim believed her at first, thinking perhaps she was telling this story to get him to believe in God's power again. But God had proof for Jim. Carrie, one of the nurses on duty at that time, heard the group praying for Lacy and came to stand outside the doorway to listen. She saw Lacy's body jolt during the prayer and believed that the sudden changes in her brain activity were a result of the healing power of Jesus. While Genevieve was telling Jim and Laura about what happened, Carrie came by to share what she had seen and witnessed. Genevieve said that Jim broke down and cried, and they all asked if they could come to church on Sunday—including Nurse Carrie.

Though Lacy didn't know it, her circumstances were bringing blessings of God to others. Everyone was so excited for Sunday to come and for these new friends who would be joining them-- and hopefully come to live a life with Jesus.

Brielle was excited for another day of chances for Jace to ask her to the Homecoming Dance… but he didn't. In Latin, she had a hard time talking to Rateesh without demanding that he answer a list of questions she had about his situation… but she didn't. She had planned to go shopping with Keoni after school, and she was looking forward to that. Since Keoni was so deeply interested in fashion and worked part-time in a clothing store, being in a store was like being at home for her. Brielle didn't go shopping very often, so she was excited to get out and get her mind off her frustrations with Jace and Rateesh. She would keep her joy intact while rejoicing over God's touch on Lacy and spending time shopping with her best friend.

Keoni wanted to go dress shopping for Homecoming, but when she found out that Jace still hadn't asked Brielle to go, she felt bad about asking her to come along.

"I don't want this to be sad for you," she said to Brielle.

"Why is it sad? I love to go shopping with you," Brielle replied.

"Yes, but when I originally asked you to come today, I thought we would

both be shopping for dresses, Keoni said. “I don’t want this to make you more disappointed that Jace hasn’t asked you yet.”

“It won’t,” Brielle said confidently, “I can still look right? I mean, Homecoming is still a couple of weeks away, he still could ask me, and if… I mean, *when* he does, I’ll know exactly what dress to buy. But this isn’t about me, this is about you! I want to be with you as you get *your* dress!” she giggled.

“Thanks, Bri. I love you,” Keoni said, hugging her.

“I love you, too!” Brielle said happily, hugging her friend.

“What’s that boy waiting on anyway?” Keoni said as they climbed into her car, “You’ve been dropping hints like crazy, and so have I. Surely he knows the dance is coming?”

“With posters up all over school, he would have to be blind not to know it,” Brielle said, “I’m just giving him some time because you said yourself just how shy he can be about things.”

“That’s true,” Keoni agreed, “He is sweet that way. Maybe he is afraid to ask you.”

“Afraid? Why on earth would he be afraid?” Brielle questioned.

“You can be pretty intimidating sometimes,” Keoni said as she turned out of the parking lot.

Brielle thought about her friend’s statement for a moment, “I can?” she asked sincerely.

Keoni laughed, “Come on, like you don’t know that about yourself?”

“No, I didn’t know, I mean I don’t know,” she stammered, “I know I can be assertive… perhaps a little strong-willed— “

“A little? You have a will of steel--or iron, which one’s stronger? But it’s all good, it’s who you are and the way the good Lord made you…” Keoni said.

Although she was still speaking, Brielle no longer heard her friend’s words. Walking down the street ahead of them, Brielle had spotted Rateesh. He was walking slowly when two guys came up behind him and started talking to him.

“…and I love you just the way you are, too,” Keoni said, noticing she did not have Brielle’s attention, “Hello? Did you hear me?”

“Can you get into the outside lane and head toward that bus stop?” Brielle asked intensely, “That’s Rateesh, and those two guys just came up behind him.”

Keoni pulled over into the outer lane and headed toward Rateesh. “What are you going to do?” she asked, and then she gasped as they came closer to the group, “That’s Brian with him.”

Brielle whispered a quick prayer as they approached the three guys on the sidewalk, “God, please keep Rateesh safe,” she said. “Pull right up alongside them,” she directed Keoni.

As they came closer, Brielle could see the look on Rateesh’s face – a look of pure fear, even worse than the photo she had taken of him and Sidney that day. Her heart pounded rapidly inside her chest, and she knew she had to calm down.

“Help me, Lord, give me Your self-control,” she whispered. Then she rolled down her window and put on the biggest smile she could muster.

“Hey Rateesh!” she said happily as Keoni pulled the car in front of the three guys. “I’m sorry we missed you back at school.”

Rateesh had a mixed expression on his face of relief for the interruption to his conversation, and because he didn’t know what she was talking about.

Brian was facing the car as it pulled up, but the other guy had his back to it. When he heard Brielle’s voice, he spun around to look at her. Brielle heard Keoni gasp beside her again, but she tried to keep her face happy and casual. The other guy was Sidney, or at least who they thought was Sidney. She reached out to open the car door to get out.

“What are you doing?” Keoni whispered. She had locked eyes with Brian, who was staring at her with the same stern look as he had yesterday in the restaurant.

Brielle jumped out and introduced herself, “Hello,” she said sweetly to the guys, and then she looked at Rateesh, “I’m glad we caught you,” she said lightly, “Why are you walking silly? Keoni was a little late getting out of class today,” she said, trying to sound convincing.

“Who’s your friend?” Brian asked Rateesh in a low voice.

“I’m Brielle,” she said, extending her hand for him to shake. Brian took her hand slowly, staring at her with an unbroken expression of intensity.

“Didn’t I see you yesterday at the restaurant?” he asked curtly.

“Yes, my friends and I had just come from…” she heard a voice in her head say, *‘Don’t mention Lacy’, “*We actually heard how wonderful your curry chicken was, so after school we wanted to try it,” she answered cheerfully.

Then she turned to the other guy, determined to find out if he was Sidney.

She reached her hand out to him, “Hello,” she said sweetly, “I’m Brielle.”

He reached his hand back out to her with a sinister smile as he looked her up and down. “Hello,” he said with a sly tone, “it’s very nice to meet you.”

The way that he looked at Brielle and the sound of his voice gave her chills. He was wearing a jacket, so there was no way to look for the scar on his arm, but she had studied his face from her photos long enough to know that he was the same guy she had photographed with Rateesh that day before school.

“We were just on our way to do some errands,” she said evasively, “but Rateesh took off too soon. Are you ready to go?” she asked, stepping to open the back door for him.

Rateesh immediately followed her nervously to get inside Keoni’s car.

“I’ll talk to you later at the restaurant, Rateesh,” Brian said. Rateesh did not acknowledge him.

Once Brielle and Rateesh were inside the car, Keoni drove away. Brielle smiled and waved out the window at the two guys on the sidewalk as they stood there watching them leave.

When they were out of sight, she turned around to Rateesh and looked at him kindly, “Are you okay?” she asked.

Rateesh looked like he was going to burst into tears.

“Why did you do that?” he exclaimed, “You have no idea what you have done!” he said, leaning forward and burying his face in his hands.

Keoni was watching him in her mirror. Brielle turned around to put her hand on his shoulder, “Rateesh, hey Rateesh,” she said, “it’s going to be okay.”

“No!” he shouted, “No, it’s *not* going to be okay! Now *you* are in danger!”

Brielle’s eyes widened with surprise, and so did Keoni’s.

“Why am I in danger?” Brielle asked gently, trying to calm him.

“I cannot tell you,” he answered, tears coming down his face, “I can’t tell anyone… I don’t know what to do!” he said, breaking down completely.

“Keoni, maybe you should find some place we can park the car and talk,” Brielle whispered. “Can you call Jace? See if he can come and meet us.”

Keoni found a quaint café in town and parked the car in their lot. Rateesh didn’t move to get out but sat with his face in his hands. Brielle got out and sat with him in the back seat while Keoni stood outside to call Jace. She knew that Gideon had practice until after 5 o’clock, but she left him a voicemail, so when he got the message, he could pray for Rateesh.

Brielle found a tissue in her bag. “Here,” she said, gently patting his back. “Just take deep breaths and try to calm down.”

“I can’t!” he yelled, “I can’t calm down! I can’t take this anymore!”

Brielle didn’t speak but sat quietly. She knew that when she was angry, sometimes it was best to just work through her anger for a while and vent her frustrations before she could calm down and talk.

Rateesh cried hard, sobbing heavily, “I’m so scared all the time, for myself, for my family, and now for my friends!”

Brielle came closer to him and wrapped her arm around his back. She whispered prayers for peace, “Lord Jesus, please help my friend, he needs Your peace, and he needs it right now. Thank You, Jesus.”

Rateesh kept crying, but stopped his ranting and gradually began to relax.

He took the tissue from Brielle, cleaned his eyes and blew his nose, then he turned to look at her.

“Why did you do that?” he asked her.

“Why did I do what?” she answered.

“Why did you stop to pick me up?” he asked.

Brielle had to stop and think for a moment, “Well… I…” she stammered, “I thought you were in trouble.”

“Why would you think that I would be in trouble with those two guys?” he asked.

“Were you in trouble with those guys?” she replied.

“Please, I need to understand this,” he said, shaking his head, “What made

you do that?"

"Because I believe you are in trouble," she said softly, "and you are too scared to tell anyone about it."

Rateesh sighed and looked at the floor of the car, taking another tissue and blowing his nose again.

"Are you in trouble?" Brielle asked.

He paused for a moment, thinking of how to answer her. Then he looked up at her through swollen eyes.

"Yes," he whispered.

Brielle took in a slow, deep breath. "Thank you for trusting me," she said, putting her hand on his arm. "Rateesh, we care about you, and we want to help you."

"You can't help me," Rateesh said, his tone starting to grow frustrated again.

"How do you know?" she asked defensively, "How do you know unless you tell us what is happening?"

"That's just it," he said, "I can't tell you. I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because they'll kill me!" he shouted, "And my family too!"

Brielle was stunned by his reply. She had no idea how to respond to him. She thought he was having trouble with bullies harassing him, and she worried about him receiving a beating. A thought like the explanation he gave had never crossed her mind. She closed her eyes and took another deep breath, searching for direction from the Holy Spirit. Then she heard His voice telling her what to say.

"Rateesh," she began, "I serve a Great and Mighty God. So do Jace, Keoni, and Gideon. God has been placing you in our hearts daily. We have been watching what is happening to you, and we have been praying for you every single day. I do not believe for one moment that it was any kind of coincidence that I happened to see Brian and Sidney talking to you just now. You need to know that there is a plan directed by God and He has placed in our hearts to help you. I don't know exactly what that means, but you need to know that you are not alone. God and all of us are here with you."

When she finished speaking, Rateesh stared at her inquisitively, "How did you know his name was Sidney?" he asked slowly, "He didn't tell you his name, neither did Brian."

Brielle explained that his sister, Priyanka, had told them Brian's name in the restaurant yesterday. Then she explained the whole story about Lacy and Sidney and everything Laura had told her about him. She told him about the scar on his arm and how she had seen Sidney one morning talking to him, and even had photos of it. She grabbed her phone out of her bag to show him.

"We have all been concerned about you, especially Jace. He has been

worried about you since school began because of the four guys in chemistry who harass you. Keoni has a gift of… sensing things in people, and she can tell that Brian is not a good man. Just to know that all these guys are bothering you so much, there must be something serious going on. We have all been praying and asking God to reveal to us how to help you," she said. Then she looked him square in the eye and asked, "Can you honestly tell me that you don't want help? Can you honestly say that you don't want all of this to stop?"

Rateesh looked at her, the tears beginning to well up inside his eyes again. "I do," he whispered, "I do want it to stop, and I don't know how to stop it."

"Let God help you," she said softly.

"I don't know your God. My family and I are of the Hindu faith. So why would your God help me?" he asked.

Brielle knew exactly how to answer this question: "Because He *loves* you, whether you believe in Him or not."

Rateesh looked at her thoughtfully, pondering the words she had just spoken and not knowing what to say.

They heard the sound of a motorcycle pulling into the parking lot. Brielle looked out the back window to see Jace parking his bike and taking off his helmet. Her heart began to pound again. She was so happy to see him and relieved that he was here to show Rateesh how much he cared about him. Keoni met him and explained everything that had happened.

"Would you like a coffee or something?" Brielle asked Rateesh.

"I'm shaking so much I wouldn't need any caffeine for a week," he replied.

"Would you like to go inside and talk for a while? Do you have time?" she asked.

"Yes, I have time. I need to try and do this," he said softly.

They both got out of the car, and Jace walked over to Rateesh, extending his hand to him, "Hey man," he said as Rateesh took his hand to shake it, "You okay?" he asked.

Rateesh nodded.

"Would you like to grab something to eat and hang out for a while?" Jace asked.

"That sounds great," Rateesh nodded again, "Thank you."

The four friends went into the café and found a quiet table outside on the back patio. It was a beautiful setting with lovely trees and flowers growing all around, and there was a delicately trickling fountain next to their table. The entire atmosphere was very tranquil and soothing, just what Rateesh needed.

Jace kindly bought everyone a latte and ordered some appetizers for them as well. They were all thankful.

"What exactly is happening to you, Rateesh?" Jace asked gently.

Rateesh took a slow, deep breath and began.

"Okay, so you all came to visit our restaurant yesterday, which was very

nice of you," he said with a grin. "My parents dreamed of having their own restaurant for years, before any of their children were born," he said.

"You mean you and Priyanka?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, and we have another older brother named Nakul," he said, "When my parents first came to America, they went to New York, but they didn't like the fast-paced city, so they settled here in Fairfield. They fell in love with the town as soon as they saw it. They bought a house and finally opened their dream restaurant. Then they started their family, and in time, it became difficult for them to juggle all the responsibilities of the restaurant and still have time to spend with us.

"That is when they decided to hire an assistant manager who could run the place on days when my parents needed some time off. They hired this nice lady who lived here in Fairfield, named Barbara. She did a good job and worked for our family for almost ten years, but then her husband got a great job offer in Arizona, and she moved away," he paused as the waitress brought them appetizers. Nobody reached for food, not even Brielle. They were intently listening to Rateesh's story.

"My father needed to hire someone else to take her place. He interviewed several people and decided to hire Brian because he had so much experience working in restaurants. When Brian first took the job, he tried to act nice, but I could tell it was just an act. There is something very…" he paused, searching for the right word.

"Sinister," Keoni finished for him.

"Yes, there is something very sinister about him. I felt it immediately. I tried to talk about it with my father, but he wouldn't listen to me. As time went on, my parents were thrilled with Brian's work. Not only was he incredibly efficient in running the restaurant and handling the money, but he was also bringing them lots of new customers. Every week, there were new groups of people coming into the restaurant to eat, and my family was making more money than ever before." he reached out to grab an onion ring and take a bite. "Plus, he told my father that for a small raise, he would add a few days to his work week. My family was making more money, and they were getting more time off to spend together; it was a great setup. Even I started thinking that perhaps I was overreacting and being too suspicious of Brian," he paused to take a drink.

"Then some of the cooks and other employees started talking to my sister and me. They began to tell us how cruel he was to them and how he would yell at them and get very angry over trivial things," he said.

"Yes, we heard him yelling in the kitchen yesterday," Brielle said.

"He does this whenever my parents and older brother Nakul are not around. When they are present, he acts nice and patient. But he has learned that my father will not listen to me or Priyanka when it comes to his behavior, so he doesn't care how he acts when we are there," he said.

"Then you have told your parents everything the other employees told you?" Jace asked.

"Yes, but they won't listen. My father says that if there was a problem, they would come and talk to him directly, but they won't," he said.

"Why not?" Keoni asked.

"Because they are frightened. Brian threatens them; he threatens their jobs. He tells them that he will lie and create a reason that they need to be fired, and my parents will believe him. He tells them that because of his connections, he can make it so they will never work in a restaurant again," he replied, grabbing another onion ring. "These people need and want their jobs, so they stay and deal with it."

"I see. Because Brian brings in so much money, your parents won't listen to anything negative about him." Jace asked flatly.

"Yes, my father loves the way his life is going right now, and he doesn't want it to change, so… Brian stays," he said.

"But why is he threatening to kill you?" Brielle asked.

"Over the summer, I decided that I was going to gather proof of Brian's cruel behavior – proof that I could take to my father. I watched him constantly whenever I could. I just thought there had to be something I could find which would convince my father that although the money was coming in, damage was being done to the workers of his restaurant," he paused to take another drink.

"What did you find?" Keoni asked.

"I noticed that sometimes there was a takeout bag that he kept under his desk. It was just an ordinary white paper bag. We stock the bags to let our customers take their leftover food home. The first time I saw it, I didn't think anything of it, just thought he was taking home some food for dinner or something. But then I noticed it again… and then again. It struck me as strange because most of the time, if our employees take food home, they wait until right before they leave, so it stays hot."

"That makes sense," Brielle said, reaching for an onion ring.

"Right. But when I saw the bag, there were still many hours left to work on his schedule. So, I asked myself, why would he keep food under his desk all night?"

"Yeah, gross," Keoni agreed.

"Right! I began to keep a notebook of the dates I saw it there." He turned to dig in his backpack for the notebook, "Here, see?" he said, showing the documentation he had written down. "I thought maybe this bag was for a special occasion, I mean, it could have been anything. Maybe he had a special date on this night and wanted to take her some food. Or maybe he had a card game with buddies and wanted to take them something to eat. But then I began to notice that every time the bag was under his desk, it was the same night that Reed, Sean, Morgan, Ryan, and Sidney would come in to eat. You see?" he pointed to

the dates, “Every other Thursday.”

He reached for a cheese stick and then continued his story, growing more relaxed as he spoke.

“Naturally, I had to find out what was in that bag. The curiosity was just too much,” he said.

“Well, you know what it did to the cat,” Keoni teased.

“Yes, but they also say that cats have nine lives,” he joked. “I don’t. I made sure that I was working on the Thursday when they would all be coming in for dinner. Then, while Brian was out in the dining area, I grabbed the bag and took it out back into the alley. I hid behind the trash bins and opened it.” He stopped for another drink.

“What was in it?” Brielle asked.

“Food. Containers of food from our kitchen,” he said.

“That’s it?” Keoni said, disappointed, “Just food?”

“No,” he said softly, leaning his elbows down onto the table to speak with a low voice, “I stuck my fingers down inside the container to see if there was anything inside it, and there wasn’t. But when I reached down, I hit the bottom of the container too soon. I could feel around the inside to touch the bottom of it, but when I did, my finger was only going halfway into the cup. There was a fake bottom tucked inside to hold the food, but there was something underneath the food that he was hiding there. I reached inside the garbage bin and pulled out a used cup to pour the food in so I could look at what was lying underneath. Once I removed the fake bottom… I found a small plastic bag of powder tucked down inside,” he said quietly.

“He’s selling drugs in your restaurant,” Jace said.

Brielle looked at him in shock, “Are you serious?” she gasped.

Rateesh looked across the table and nodded his head at her. “I think he is the supplier, and then Reed, Sean, Morgan, Ryan, and Sidney are the sellers,” he said.

“Did he catch you? Is that why he is threatening you?” Keoni questioned.

“No, he didn’t catch me, but he was suspicious of me,” Rateesh answered.

“What happened? What did you do?” Brielle said anxiously.

“I poured all the food back into the cup and cleaned everything, so it looked normal. Then I hid the bag outside and asked Priyanka to keep him busy for a couple of minutes so I could put it back under his desk,” he said.

“Did you tell Priyanka about it?” Brielle asked.

“No, that would only put her in danger,” he said.

“Then how did he know it was you?” Keoni asked.

“He caught up with me when it was just the two of us the next day. He watched me pack up some food in a bag for a customer. He told me that he always folds his bags with two folds, and I fold mine with three,” he answered.

“He knew it was you because of how you folded the bag back?” Brielle said

in disbelief.

Rateesh nodded, “He’s a sinister man, but not a dumb one. He pays attention to details and watches everything and everyone,” he said with a tone building in frustration.

“Tell me exactly what he has said to threaten you,” Jace said.

“He told me that I needed to stay out of his business and not speak of what I knew to anyone, or he would ‘have me taken care of’. I told him that his business had no place inside the walls of my parents’ business,” he answered.

“Good for you!” Brielle said.

“That’s when he said that he would have my family taken care of too… and then it would all be just *his* business,” he said weakly.

“But with a threat like that, why don’t you go to the police?” Keoni asked.

“Because. He told me that going to the police wouldn’t do me any good and I would still wind up dead if I did,” he said.

“Why do you believe that?” Keoni asked.

“He seemed pretty confident that going to the police would do nothing,” he answered.

Brielle reached across the table to place her hand on his. “We are going to pray for this,” she said, “We are going to pray that God will protect you and your family and that this evil will be removed from your parents’ business and your lives once and for all.”

Rateesh looked at her but did not respond. “Yes,” Keoni agreed, “We are here for you, Rateesh, and so is God.”

Rateesh just lowered his eyes to the table.

“You don’t believe that, do you?” Brielle asked gently.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. Right now, I *know* my family and I are in danger,” he said.

“She’s right, Rateesh,” Jace said, “We’re not going to give up on this. We are all here for you, Gideon, too, and we do serve a *powerful* God.”

“Thank you,” Rateesh said, his voice heavy with emotion.

“What about going to the school principal?” Brielle said, “Surely she could at least help you with the guys at school?”

“Yes, I’m sure she could,” Rateesh began, “But they still have access to me *after* school. Besides that, I haven’t told you the best part,” he said shaking his head, “They told me that not only would they kill us, but they would frame my family for the drugs and disgrace their name by making it look like we were the ones responsible for these kids in the hospital. My family here and back in Chennai would be ruined forever. No, I can’t go to the principal. I can’t go to the police. I can’t go to anyone.”

“You can go to Jesus,” Brielle said gently, “I know that you serve another god, I just want to let you know that our God is here for you, and so are we.”

Rateesh let out a sigh, “I feel like I am endangering your lives right now just

by telling you all this."

"No, you need to talk about this," Jace said, "We believe that there is a divine reason you are telling us all this right now."

The girls nodded their heads.

"There is one thing I'm curious about," Brielle began, "I don't know if you would even know the answer to this question."

"Try me. It feels good to finally talk about this," Rateesh said.

"Where does Sidney come into all of this? I mean, why was he with Lacy? Was he trying to get the drugs to be sold from inside the Blue Moon restaurant, too?" she asked.

"That's a good question," Keoni said, looking at Rateesh for his answer.

"It is a good question, but I honestly don't know. I do know that I heard Brian and Sidney talking in the restaurant one day just before the school season began. Sidney was telling Brian that the relationship had gone on too long. They had the information they needed, and so he was going to end it before it went any further. I can only assume he was talking about Lacy, but I don't know for sure," Rateesh said.

"Hmm," Brielle pondered this new twist. "Information. What information did he get from Lacy?"

"Maybe it was information about the Blue Moon?" Keoni asked, "Like Rateesh said."

"I'm not too certain about that. Brian would have to have someone on the inside to work for him that he could trust. Do you think Lacy would do something like that, sell drugs?" Jace asked.

Brielle shook her head, "I have no clue."

"I don't think so," Keoni began, "Then again, she's changed a lot since last year. She might do anything for Sidney if she were deeply in love with him. But the girl I knew in Biology was too smart for that."

Brielle's mind was whirling, processing all this information.

"How do you think he is transporting the drugs?" Jace asked, "I mean, if he is putting them in containers with food on top, then where is he preparing the containers? Do you think he is just bringing the takeout bag already prepared from home, or do you think he is hiding the drugs somewhere in the restaurant?" he asked.

"I have asked myself that question a thousand times," Rateesh said, "At first, I thought he would have to be bringing it all from home and then adding the food when he got to the restaurant. Then I remembered something. A few months after he started working there, he brought my parents a present. He said it was a thank-you gift for hiring him. I thought that was weird, but the gift was beautiful. It was a large statue of an Indian elephant. It's bigger than the ones we have out front. This one is elaborately decorated with drapes, jewels, and a blanket over its back, just like an Indian palace elephant. He said he thought it

would look good in the foyer by the restrooms, so that's where my mother put it, right in between the restroom doors.

"One night while I was cleaning the floors, I accidentally tripped on the rug and fell back onto it. I almost knocked it over, but caught it before it broke. I heard something move in it, though, like a piece was shifting. I thought I broke it; I checked everywhere and found that underneath the blanket on its back was a very well-hidden compartment. When I opened it, I found it was hollow inside. I quickly covered it over and didn't think anything about it-- until the night I discovered the contents of the takeout bag."

"You think he's hiding the drugs in the belly of an elephant?" Brielle asked curiously.

Rateesh laughed lightly, "I know sounds like a crazy thought. But it is big enough that he could store the drugs in there, where they would be safe and hidden. Then at night, when he closes up, he could easily take it out and prepare the cups with the plastic bags inside. He would have plenty of time to hide the drugs one night and then pack them another. I mean, when he closes the restaurant, he is here by himself."

"But would the hot food placed on top affect the drugs?" Jace asked.

Brielle looked at him inquisitively at his question.

"I don't know," Rateesh said, "But the food was cold, something I noticed right away when I felt inside the cup."

"Man! This is such a mess!" Keoni said.

They all sat quietly at the table for a moment when suddenly, Brielle had a thought pop into her head, "Biology!" she said. Everyone stared at her with curious faces. "Keoni, you said that Lacy was good in Biology. Could it be that she was friends with either Reed, Sean, Morgan, or Ryan? I mean, if they are good in chemistry and she is good in biology, maybe they knew each other well?"

"It's possible," Keoni said, clueless to her friend's statement, "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Maybe that was how Sidney was able to meet other kids at Fairfield. Maybe he had a relationship with her to learn who might be good at selling the drugs there. It's just a thought," she said, slightly embarrassed at her reasoning.

"That's a good thought," Jace said, "Do we know if Sidney is a student at Fairfield?"

"No," Rateesh said, "He's not, I checked."

"How?" Brielle asked curiously.

"I did a little investigating; it wasn't hard. Our school's computer security is weak. He's not a student there. All I know is he's a friend of Brian," he replied.

"Then it is possible that Sidney might have started up a relationship with Lacy just to get to know some of the students there," Jace said.

"Yeah, I guess so," Rateesh said.

"Poor Lacy, and now look where she is because of him," Keoni said.

"I hate where Lacy is, and I know Sidney played a wicked part in it, yet… at the same time, Lacy chose to follow him down the wrong path, right?" Brielle asked.

"Yeah, that's true. It's sad to see girls do crazy—and in this case, dangerous things just to try and get a guy to love them."

Brielle looked over at Jace, who was already looking at her. Nervously, she quickly looked away and grabbed a cheese stick.

Keoni sighed, "Okay. So, what do we do?"

"I haven't known what to do for months," Rateesh said.

"All I know to do is pray," Brielle said.

"While you are praying for me and my family, you better add yourself to the list," Rateesh said directly, sounding as if he was tired of hearing about prayer and God.

Jace looked at Rateesh seriously, then back at Brielle.

"Why do you say that?" Jace asked.

"In Brielle's efforts to help me today, she politely and *deliberately* introduced herself to both Brian and Sidney," Rateesh answered.

Jace came forward in his seat and turned to Brielle, "You did what?" he asked.

"I was making it up as I went along," she said innocently, "I just wanted to get Rateesh out of there."

"Yes, but we could have just pulled up alongside him and told him to jump in that we would take him home or somewhere else," Keoni chimed in. "They wouldn't know your name, and I doubt they would have had enough time to remember your face."

"Thanks for your support," Brielle whispered.

"I'm just saying, Bri, you didn't have to get out of the car and shake hands with them," Keoni said.

"You got out of the car?" Jace drilled, "And shook their hands?"

"Why is everyone coming down on me about this? I did what I did to help Rateesh. I thought we were *all here* to help him?" she said defensively.

"Yes, we are all here to help him, but that doesn't mean that we intentionally place ourselves in danger in the process," Jace scolded. "We have to be careful."

"I know, that's just how I talk to people, okay? I'm used to introducing myself to someone, being friendly, and shaking hands…"

"Not when they are drug dealers," Jace said directly.

Brielle sat back quietly in her chair and crossed her arms.

"I'm sorry, Brielle. I don't mean to sound ungrateful because I did appreciate your help today. But I am worried about you now," Rateesh said.

Jace sat back in his chair with a sigh and ran his hand through his hair. "You have to be on guard now. You need to be careful about everything you do and

every place you go. We all do. We have to watch out for each other, and Obadiah has to be told about all of this, immediately."

"Who's Obadiah?" Rateesh asked.

"Her grandfather," Keoni answered. Brielle was still sitting quietly in her anger.

"We need to talk to Gideon too," Jace said.

"Yes," Keoni agreed. "But most of all, we just need to keep praying."

As they were leaving, Jace asked to speak to Brielle alone for a moment. He walked her over to his motorcycle while Keoni and Rateesh got in the car.

"I'm sorry if it sounded as if I was attacking you earlier," he started, "It's just that… I care about you, and I'm just worried about something happening to you. I couldn't…" he trailed off, gazing into the distance and shaking his head at the thought.

Brielle was softened by his words, "Please, don't worry. Yes, I shook their hands, and they know my name, so what?"

Jace sighed, "Brielle, I know you had a terrible tragedy when you were young, and I know it was a horrible thing. I am just thinking that since you have lived here, you may have really lived a pretty sheltered life. You don't understand how horrible people can be."

"I have a pretty good understanding of two pretty wicked guys we came across one morning in a convenience store," she said directly.

"Yes, but you have forgotten how ruthless they are. Drug dealers are some of the most selfish people on the planet. All they care about is money. Money is the bottom line. They don't care about the lives they are destroying by selling the drugs, like the parents who sit in the hospital rooms with their child in a coma, or the families, reputations, and businesses they destroy. What about the child who loses their mother because she can't get enough of the drugs that *they* sell her? They don't care about anyone but themselves and their bankrolls; that's all, nothing else," he said, releasing a deep breath when he was finished.

Brielle stared at him, speechless.

"Please. You need to take this seriously. You don't understand how dangerous these people are. We need to pray and ask for God's protection over you, and we need to talk to your family about it tonight. Do you understand?" he said directly.

Brielle didn't speak but slowly nodded her head in agreement with his advice.

"Good," he said, his tone relaxing, "Do you want me to come with you when you talk to Obadiah?"

Again, she did not speak but simply nodded her head, ashamed of her previous defenses. Jace was right; she had led a very sheltered life. She did not realize how her actions today could place her in danger. She did not feel fear, but she did have a better understanding of why Jace, Rateesh, and Keoni were

concerned.

Rateesh's home was on the way to Brielle's house, so Keoni dropped him off as they headed to talk to Obadiah and Genevieve. As he left, Rateesh thanked them for their friendship and help.

"I have never met people like you," Rateesh said, "People who would risk their safety for another in need. I'm still worried, but I feel as though a huge weight has been lifted from me by telling you what is happening. For the first time in a long time, I don't feel alone. Thank you," he said sweetly.

Both Keoni and Brielle hugged him and told him again that they would be praying for him. He smiled and went into his house.

When they arrived at Brielle's home, Genevieve's car was not there. Brielle forgot that Asher had basketball practice on Tuesday nights. They went into the house and found Obadiah in his study; he was working on the levy project for his friend in Louisiana. He greeted them warmly but knew in an instant from the looks on their faces that they were about to deliver serious news.

Jace asked Brielle if she wanted to explain everything, or should he? She said she would. As she told Obadiah everything, he listened carefully, only asking a few questions here and there. It took her half an hour to tell the whole story. When Keoni looked at the clock, she excused herself.

"I'm sorry, but I told my mom I would be home by six tonight. I'd better go, I'll see you tomorrow," she said as she hugged Brielle, Obadiah, and Jace, then left the study.

"Do you think that these men will harm you?" Obadiah asked her.

"I don't know," Brielle said, "I don't know why they would. I mean, Rateesh is around all kinds of people every day at school and the restaurant, and none of them have been hurt."

Obadiah nodded his head. "Did they say anything to you today that made you feel afraid?"

"No, not at all, although…" she paused, remembering Jace was sitting next to her.

"What?" Obadiah asked.

"Sidney made me feel uncomfortable," she said softly.

"What did he do?" he asked.

"He looked me up and down and then spoke to me like he was trying to; I don't know… charm me or something. It felt gross," she said.

Jace shifted in his chair, leaning his arms down on his knees and placing his chin on his clenched fist.

Obadiah and Jace looked at each other, communicating without words, and then Obadiah stood up.

"I would like to do this with your mother as well, but I feel impressed to pray for you right now," he said, taking her hands. "Jace, come over here behind her and place your hands on her shoulders. we are going to speak a covering

prayer over her together and agree that she will not be harmed by these men."

Jace moved to stand behind her. Brielle had sensed his presence behind her every day in history class since he introduced himself to her that day in the mini-mart, but to feel him stand behind her with his hands on her shoulders to pray for her, warmed her heart in a very beautiful and special way. Her mind traveled back to her days in Uganda when, as a little girl, she would see her father come and stand behind her mother like this to pray for her in times of need. Now she knew what that felt like.

"Heavenly Father," Obadiah began, "I come to You now with my Brielle. Lord, You know the hearts of the men who she met today, and You know their intentions. I pray, Father God, that You give her the protection of Your Mighty Hand. I speak a shield of Your protection to be around her constantly in the Name of Jesus. That Your angels will keep watch over her always. Guard her and keep her wherever she is so that these men will not bring her any harm. We agree together in this place, and we claim it in the Holy Name of Jesus Christ, Your Son. Thank You, Lord, for bringing that protection to her; we trust in You that she will be safe. We ask all these things in the Name of Jesus, Amen."

There was a feeling of peace in the room after Obadiah's prayer. Though he spoke the prayer aloud, in between his words, she could hear from behind her the soft whisperings of a prayer from Jace. In addition to the peace that she felt from the Lord, she also felt something warm and beautiful in her heart. To know Jace cared enough for her to stand with her and ask the Lord to keep her safe from harm gave her a feeling of importance in his life. She thanked them both for praying for her, and she knew that God heard their prayers and would keep her safe.

It was almost six o'clock, and Brielle was starving. She had been so engrossed in Rateesh's story that the only thing she ate at the café was a couple of cheese sticks.

"What time will Mama be home?" she asked Obadiah.

"Asher's practice doesn't end until 6 pm," he said, gazing at the clock, "But Vivi was going to take him to get something to eat afterward with some of his teammates. He needs that social time with his friends. I guess we are on our own tonight for dinner. I was just going to grab a sandwich so I could keep working, so don't worry about me," he said as he hugged her and kissed her on her head.

"What is it that you are working on?" Jace asked curiously.

"One of my good friends in New Orleans is in charge of strengthening the some of the levies before the hurricane season comes, after what Hurricane Katrina did there…," he trailed off with a sigh, "Anyway, I had been working on this new design idea I've had for years and he wants me to complete it and see if they could use it on one of the weaker levies," Obadiah explained showing Jace some of the plans he had laid out on his drawing table.

"Wow, that's pretty incredible," Jace said in awe, "I'm amazed at people

who can design and build things, it's a talent I wasn't given."

"Ah, but you have so many other talents that other people like me find just as amazing," Obadiah smiled.

Although Brielle was enjoying watching the interaction between Oba and her friend, her hungry stomach kept interrupting her attention.

"I'm going to go do some cooking," she said. "Would you like to join me?" she asked Jace with a hopeful tone.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Jace said, looking over at Obadiah, "if that's okay with you?"

Obadiah smiled broadly at Jace, but spoke to Brielle, "Fix this young man whatever he would like—as long as you know how, of course," he chuckled.

"Thank you very much," Jace said.

"Jace, you are always welcome in our home. You are a pleasure to have around," Obadiah said warmly.

Jace looked at him with great appreciation. "Thank you," he said, smiling shyly. Then he followed Brielle into the kitchen.

Brielle dove into the refrigerator to figure out what she should cook. It was not very often that she got to cook because of her high school schedule, but when she homeschooled, she was in the kitchen with her mother to help with every meal.

"What sounds good?" she asked, "Sandwiches, spaghetti, or I know, how about chicken parmesan?" she asked excitedly.

"You know how to cook chicken parmesan?" Jace asked in surprise.

"Yes, and farfalle pasta in garlic cream sauce, vegetable primavera, and mushroom stuffed manicotti-- which sounds good, but we are out of mushrooms. Those are some of my favorite Italian recipes, I've practiced them a lot," she said, "So, what would you like?"

"Um, how about chicken parmesan—unless it's too much work," he said politely.

"Not at all, I love to cook," she said happily, taking out the ingredients for their meal.

"Wow," Jace said, walking over to the counter and crossing his arms to look at her with admiration, "I'm impressed. You're an excellent student—one of the smartest people I know. You dance, you play a mean game of basketball, and you cook?"

Brielle felt herself blushing. She never needed personal praise or attention for her abilities, but it was nice to know that Jace was noticing her this way.

"Is there anything you can't do?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered quickly, "Sew."

Jace laughed, "Oh yeah? Have you tried?"

"Unfortunately, I have," she said, laying out waxed paper on the counter and placing the chicken cutlets on it. "I have tried and tried, but I fail miserably. If I need anything repaired and no one is around to help me," she leaned forward

to whisper, “I glue.”

Jace laughed heartily.

“It’s true. I have also been known to tape-- and once, I even tried staples,” then she glanced at him quickly, “I was desperate that time,” she said, causing Jace to laugh again.

She took out a kitchen mallet and set it down next to the cutlets, which she had also covered with waxed paper.

“Why don’t you come and flatten these while I get the breading ready,” she said, walking to the pantry.

Jace walked over to the mallet and picked it up. “Um, so I just pound this on the chicken like a hammer?”

“Yeah,” she said from inside the pantry, “they need to be nice and thin so they will cook faster and be kind of crisp.”

Jace began his work on the chicken, and Brielle began to mix the breading and get the sauce ingredients ready.

“Do you like garlic?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, concentrating on his task.

“Oh, good, Asher hates it and I always have to make a special batch just for him,” she said.

Jace finished thinning the chicken and asked her to inspect his work. “How did I do?” he asked.

Brielle walked over to look. “Perfect! You’re a pro,” she smiled.

“I’m glad you think so,” he said, laughing.

“What do you mean?” she asked, taking the cutlets and breading them.

“I’ve never really… cooked before,” he said meekly.

Brielle’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, “Really? You’re kidding?”

“No, I’m serious,” Jace said, watching her, “I have no cooking experience at all.”

“Wow,” she said, still surprised, “I mean, I didn’t figure your mother did much cooking, but I thought maybe your grandma might have taught you things now and then.”

“I remember her baking me cookies and things like that. Good grandma stuff, you know,” Jace said, smiling, “My best memories with my grandmother are when we would go to church together.”

“Hmm, that sounds sweet,” Brielle said warmly. “Well then, who does the cooking for you at home?”

Jace looked up at her, “My father takes care of our meals. He plans them all out at the beginning of each month. He *really* enjoys food, something that you both have in common,” he joked, “He loves to try new dishes from various places. He also loves going to new restaurants. He would love Rateesh’s restaurant. Do you want me to do something with these while you do that?” he asked, looking at the chicken before him.

"Sure, you can grab that turner there and flip them over once they have browned. What's your father's name?" she asked.

"His name is Holbrook," he said.

"Holbrook?" she asked, "That is such a cool name. I love that. Holbrook," she said to herself, "Holbrook and Jace. Both of you have very cool names."

Jace smiled, "Thanks, my name means healer, you know."

"Yes, I know," she grinned, "That is so amazing, isn't it? I mean, who knows how your parents were led to choose that particular name for you, but they did, and it was meant to be. God had a plan," she said bringing the pan of sauce to the stove and setting it to cook.

"What is your mother's name?" she asked, happy to be learning more about his family.

"Serena," he said softly.

Brielle looked up at him, "Serena? That's a beautiful name," she said, almost surprised. She didn't expect her to have such a lovely-sounding name. Brielle noticed how quiet Jace got at the mention of his mother.

As the two stood there together by the stove cooking their dinner, Jace glanced down at her, just quietly looking at her with an expression of contentment.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

"Nothing," he replied.

"What was that look for?" she asked sweetly.

"I was just thinking… this is so nice," he said.

Brielle reached down into the cupboard to get a large pan for the pasta. "What's nice, having chicken parmesan or having it with me?"

"Both, all of it, just being here in this house, spending time with you, cooking," he paused in thought, "It's just really nice."

"I'm glad you're having a good time," she said.

"I am. Can I ask you a question?" he asked.

Brielle's heart leaped in her chest as she thought this might be the invitation to the Homecoming Dance. "Of course," she said, tending to the sauce.

"Is this the kind of life you see yourself having, you know, when you're older?" he asked.

Although Brielle was hoping for a different question, she wasn't disappointed by this one.

"Yes," she said happily, "I want to have a home here in Fairfield. Somewhere I can decorate, clean, and cook," she said as she stirred the boiling pasta, "I would like to have a family of both humans and horses," she laughed, "I would like to travel and see the world, but I want to have a place that my family knows as home, you know what I mean? I want a home where my children will feel the love of the Lord as soon as they walk in the door. A place where they can gather for holidays and special occasions when they are grown, somewhere

they can come in times of need," she said thoughtfully, "That's what I have here and that is what I want for my family... someday anyway," she said.

Jace didn't say anything; he just listened.

"Of course," she continued, "that probably sounds pretty old-fashioned by today's standards. I've never met anyone who says they dream of having a home where they can clean and cook!" she laughed.

"I don't think it's old-fashioned," Jace said seriously, "I think it's rare, but not old-fashioned. I think it sounds beautiful, happy and safe. It sounds like a place people would want to be."

"Thank you," she said proudly, nodding her head to him as she took the chicken off the stove and got down two dinner plates from the cabinet.

"I also think that it is quite grounded," he replied.

"How's that?" she asked, intrigued by his comment.

"It shows that you are content in your life. You are content with what you have, so much so that you dream of having the same things for your children someday. It also shows that you are happy, and you don't need *things* to make yourself feel good. You just want a good, honest, simple life that is centered on God, family, a home, and… love," he said, softly.

Brielle stopped to look at him for a moment. She loved that he was starting to open his heart a little bit about his feelings, and she was even more surprised to see how much of a romantic he was.

She smiled and nodded, "Mama always says a simple life is a happier one. I think it's kind of sad that so many women in the world today seem to think that being a homemaker isn't an important job anymore. I mean, I don't think there is anything wrong with women having careers. I'm not sure what I want to do yet, but I don't see why I couldn't fulfill my dreams of doing a job and still make a home for my family. I think taking care of a family is one of the most important and *the most* beautiful jobs a person can do, not just for women but also for men."

She turned to take off the pasta and drain it in the sink.

"Would you mind getting us something to drink?" she asked, pointing him toward the glasses and ice.

Brielle prepared two plates of chicken with pasta and covered them in parmesan cheese and sauce. "Okay," she said, bringing the plates to the table, "dinner is served."

They sat down across from each other at the table.

"Let's pray," Jace said, reaching over the table to take her hand. The butterflies flew into place as soon as she saw him reaching for her. She took his hand, and he blessed their meal.

After he took a bite, his eyes grew large, "Holy cow! That's amazing!"

Brielle laughed, "What did you expect it to taste like? Dog food?"

Jace shook his head, "No, I mean, I expected it to be good, but this is

fantastic!" he said, taking another bite.

"I'm glad you like it-- oh, I forgot to make garlic bread," she said.

"No, no," Jace said with his mouth partially full, "this is good enough without it."

Brielle's heart was warmed by his compliments.

"Going back to our previous conversation," she started, "You don't think I'm old-fashioned?"

"I don't think you're old-fashioned. I think you just know what you want, and what you want is very good and important," he answered.

"Most of the time Keoni teases me, telling me I should have been born in the 1940s," she said, "They knew how to take time for things back then. They didn't have cable, or internet, or any of the millions of technical devices for entertainment. They had church, books, music, movies, dancing, and good food," she said, holding up a piece of chicken on her fork. "They just knew how to enjoy the simple things of life."

"I agree," he said, taking another bite, "So you like that era?"

"There are some things I enjoy about it. I enjoy watching some of the old black and white movies of the forties, especially old musicals with big band music and dancing with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. I *love* big band jazz music, the style of the cars, the clothes, the hairstyles, and things like that. I always thought all the women seemed to be so beautiful back then. I wish I could go to fancy clubs like they used to have where the women would wear elegant gowns and they would have dinner and dance while the band played songs like "I'll be seeing you," she sighed, "good stuff. But there are things I wouldn't have been able to handle, like the racism that was so prevalent, and I didn't like the inequality that women had to deal with in many facets of life," she paused to take a bite of chicken, "Mmm, you want to know something really funny about me?"

Jace grinned and nodded, "Of course!"

"I *love* watching classic monster movies!" she giggled, "You know, those really old black and white movies that Universal produced? Like *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy*, and *Creature from the Black Lagoon*? Ash and I like to watch them every fall, oh yeah, and Kong, I love classic *King Kong*!" she said with great enthusiasm.

Jace, who had been eating while she said this, began to laugh and choked slightly.

"Are you okay?" she asked with concern.

He took a drink and nodded, "I'm fine, I just wasn't expecting you to say that."

"Yeah, I'm kind of a nerd," she said softly.

"No, I love it!" he said happily.

"Really? Good! Well, then, umm, I love classic books and classic *Star Wars*,

and—"

"I'm sorry, classic *Star Wars*?" he asked.

"Yeah, I like the original stories more than some of the new ones. I also like comics."

"DC or Marvel?" he asked.

"Both!" She smiled, "Again, the classic stuff. Some of the new stuff is a bit too radical for me. I just enjoy fun stories. I also love the *Narnia Chronicles* and Jane Austin Books, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, I *love* mysteries."

"Now *that* I know," he smiled, "Are there any sports you're into?"

"I like a few, but my favorite would be F1," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"F1 as in Formula 1?" he asked.

She nodded as she took a drink.

"So, you like car racing, but you don't like to drive?" he asked with a laugh.

"I know! I'm so weird! I'm trying to love driving, I just have to get used to it, I guess. Right now, it just makes me nervous. Do you like F1?" she asked.

"Love it," he said with a broad smile.

"Yay! That's good to know! We can watch some races together!" Brielle said as she lightly clapped her hands.

"I'd love that," he said with a smile that melted her heart, "Let's go back. You said you love the 1940's but what do you think about the fifties?"

"There are some things I love about that era. The music, for sure, the poodle skirts, ponytails, bobby socks, and saddle shoes. The sock hop dances, juke boxes and burger joints, the drive-in movies and getting pinned," she said.

"I'm sorry, getting pinned?" he asked.

"Yeah, you know, couples would get pinned," she said, seeing that he had no idea what she was talking about. "You've never heard that expression?"

"Not until now," he laughed.

"Really? Okay, I'll tell you all about it!" she said excitedly, "Getting pinned was what they would do in high school when a guy wanted to ask a girl to just date him exclusively. He would take his school pin, which, of course, he was very proud of, and pin it on the girl's sweater. She would wear it every day to signify that her heart belonged to the guy who gave it to her. It was such a sweet, innocent, and respectful act of courtship back then. Like in the movie *'Bye Bye Birdie',* the whole first song is just about a couple who got pinned and everyone was talking about it," she said, talking enthusiastically like she did when she was with Keoni.

Jace listened intently to every word she said, taking in how much it all meant to her. She possessed the very innocent sweetness she was describing when she talked this way. He loved watching her, listening to her, seeing the excitement in her eyes. He had never met any girl like her before.

“And all this time I thought to get pinned meant some massive guy—or girl, flattened you out like this chicken and held you to the ground,” he said jokingly. Brielle laughed.

She looked at his empty plate. “What chicken? You really did enjoy that, huh?” she asked.

“You are an amazing cook,” he said, “It was delicious, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said.

He took a drink and cleared his throat. “I wanted to talk to you about something,” he started, “There has been—“

“Hello!” the voice of Asher came sounding through the house. “Jace? Are you here?” he asked, rounding the corner to the dining room. Once he saw Jace, he ran over to hug him, “Hey Buddy! I didn’t know you were coming over tonight!”

Jace laughed as he hugged him back, “I didn’t either, actually, it was kind of a spur of the moment thing,” he said, looking over at Brielle.

“Do you have time for a game?” Asher asked excitedly.

Jace pulled out his phone to check the time. “WOW!” Asher exclaimed, “Can I see your phone? That is so cool!” Jace laughed again as he gave the phone to Asher.

“Well, hello,” Genevieve said as she came into the dining area. Jace stood up immediately to greet her.

“Hello,” he said sweetly.

She walked over and hugged him, “What a nice surprise,” she said, then looking down at the two dinner plates quickly said, “I’m so sorry, are we interrupting you?”

Brielle got up to clear the two plates from the table. “We just finished dinner,” she said, then walked over to hug and kiss her mother and brother.

“Mmm, she made her chicken parmesan for you?” Genevieve said, “Wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Fantastic,” Jace said, “and I’ve had some great chicken parmesan in my life to compare it to. That was honestly the best I’ve ever had.”

Brielle blushed.

“Jace, can you stay and play a game?” Asher asked again, not looking up from his phone.

“Buddy, I’m sorry but I do have to get going. My father doesn’t like me riding my bike a lot at night. Can we plan it another time?” Jace asked.

“Okay,” Asher said, “Anytime you’re ready for some humiliation, just come on over.”

Jace shook his head and laughed, “You are one tough little man,” he said, grabbing Asher in a light headlock, “The sad part is, it’s true, you usually crush me.”

“We would love to have you back over,” Genevieve said, “Maybe we can

plan a barbecue or something, have all the Intercessors over for some fun soon."

"Sounds good to me," Jace said. "Thank you, it was good to see you, have a good night."

"I'll walk you out," Brielle said, walking him to the door.

When they reached the front steps, Brielle reminded him of his last statement before he was interrupted by Asher. "What were you going to say earlier?" she asked, "Before Asher came in, you started to tell me something."

Jace took a deep breath. "Something has come up. Something that I have to do with my father, and it may take me away from an Intercessor meeting," he said nervously.

Brielle watched him, feeling as though he wasn't telling her the whole truth, "Okay, I'm sure that won't be a problem."

"I'm trying to work it out so that I don't have to go, but I'm not sure yet," he said.

"Where do you have to go?" she asked curiously.

"It's just this thing with my father's work," he said,

"You mean for his fishing boat?" she asked.

"Yeah, mostly anyway; I think I have to go with him, and I don't know if I can get out of it or not," he answered.

"Is it over a weekend?" she asked.

"Right now, it looks like that is when we will have to go… I'm not exactly sure, but when I find out everything, I'll let you know, okay? I'm sorry to eat and leave so quickly. Thank you for the dinner, it really was excellent," he said. Then he bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

"Good night," he said softly in her ear. Brielle had chills go down her body.

"Good night," she answered. Then she watched as he climbed onto his motorcycle and drove off into the night. This was the second time she had stood on her porch and watched him drive away. The last time she felt nothing but joy. Tonight, however, something was tugging at her spirit about him.

"Oh, Jace," she sighed to herself, "What are you keeping from me?"

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"Brielle!" she heard Asher's voice calling to her from inside the house. "Telephone, it's Keoni," he called.

Brielle turned and went inside to get the phone in the piano room. "Hey."

"Hey," Keoni said, "are you busy?"

"No, what's up?"

"I just wanted to make sure you checked to see if you could go visit Dylan with us tomorrow. Gideon can't go until after practice, and since we didn't go shopping today, I thought we could go and look at dresses until he was done. When practice is over, we could pick him up and go to the hospital to see Dylan," Keoni suggested.

"That sounds great to me, I'll check with Mama in a second, but first I wanted to talk to you about my evening with Jace," Brielle said.

"Yeah?" Keoni asked with great curiosity, "Do tell?"

Brielle told of their talk with Obadiah about Brian and Sidney and how they both prayed over her.

"I'm happy they did that. I prayed all the way home for you and Rateesh. I know you don't like to hear it, Bri, but sometimes you do have to be careful who you are friendly with. There are a lot of dangerous people out there," Keoni said.

"I know, you're right. I wasn't thinking. I wanted to get Rateesh out of there, but didn't know what to do. I've learned my lesson. I will be more careful about jumping out of cars and shaking hands with strangers," she said.

"Good. So, Jace prayed over you, too, huh?" she asked thoughtfully, "that's beautiful."

"It was special. That showed me how much he does care for me. It reminded me of when Daddy would pray over Mama," she said.

"You're going to be alright," Keoni said reassuringly, "God will protect you, just be more careful."

"I will," Brielle said.

"Then what happened? Did he go home after praying for you?" Keoni asked.

"No, he actually just drove away when you called," Brielle said, "I cooked dinner for him, and we had a wonderful talk," Brielle said, filling Keoni in on all the details of her evening.

"Wow, you shared a lot with him. That's stuff I've only heard you share with me and your mother," she said.

"What's the matter? Jealous?" Brielle laughed.

"Ha, ha," Keoni teased, "I'm just so proud of you for opening yourself up like that. And did he ask you to Homecoming?" she asked delicately.

Brielle sighed, "No, not yet. In fact, that was what I wanted to talk to you about. He told me that he may have to miss an Intercessor class because he might have to go out of town with his father."

"What for?" Keoni asked.

"He wouldn't exactly say. He said it was something for his father's work with the fishing boat. He didn't know if he had to go, but if he did, it might be over a weekend, and he didn't want to miss anything," Brielle said.

"Do you think this is why he hasn't asked you to Homecoming?" Keoni asked.

"Yeah, I do, but…"

"But?" Keoni waited.

"I don't know. He acted so nervous about it. I mean, so what if he has to go out of town to help his father with his boat? That's no big deal, right? But he acted like it was something that he was kind of afraid to say. I don't know, maybe I'm just overanalyzing it," she said.

"Maybe," Keoni said, "but then again, maybe not."

"Why do you say that? Do you think he's hiding something too?" Brielle asked.

"I don't know. I haven't had the same conversations with him that you have," Keoni said, "All I know is that I am trying to listen to the still small voice of God and pay attention to my feelings, visions, and dreams. God could be trying to say something to you. There is a reason that you keep feeling this way, so pray about it."

"You're right, I will," she said. "Then I guess if he is going out of town, I won't be going to the Homecoming Dance," Brielle said sadly.

"When will he know for sure?" Keoni asked.

"He didn't say. He just said he was trying to get out of it. Maybe I shouldn't have turned Zach down so quickly," she laughed lightly.

"Would you have enjoyed it as much? I mean, since you wanted to go with Jace so bad?" Keoni asked.

"Probably not," she said, "but at least I would still get to go to my first high school dance," she said. "Zach is very nice, but…"

"He's not Jace," Keoni finished softly.

"Nope," Brielle sighed, "He's not Jace."

Just at that moment, Obadiah came into the room to talk to Brielle.

"Excuse me, sweetheart, are you talking to Keoni?" he asked.

Brielle nodded and told Keoni to hang on.

"Can you ask her if she would like to make a little money tomorrow? You too?" he asked.

Brielle asked Keoni.

"Sure!" Keoni said excitedly.

"I have some blueprints I have been working on for a friend who lives on the Gold Coast. I was wondering if you two might deliver them to his house tomorrow after school. I have another meeting and can't get over there at the time he needs them," he said.

Brielle and Keoni both agreed they would be happy to help.

"Good, thank you both so much!" Obadiah said, "And I will be happy to make a contribution to the Homecoming dress funds for both of you," he said with his charming smile. He walked over and kissed Brielle on the head. "Good night, sweetheart, I love you. Tell Keoni I love her too," he smiled, "and thank you both for your help." He started to walk toward the stairs and then turned back, "Be sure to talk to your mother tonight before you go to bed. She is pretty concerned about what happened today," he said.

Brielle sighed and nodded.

"This is excellent!" Keoni said, "I don't get paid again for another week, and didn't have any money to buy a pair of shoes. This is perfect timing! Thank You, Lord!"

"It's been a long time since I have been to the Gold Coast," Brielle said. "I love looking at those mansions. Thanks for helping Oba," she said.

"Are you kidding? I would have done it for him for nothing," Keoni said.

"I know, but he would never let us."

"It sounds like fun. I'll see you tomorrow then. Get some sleep," Keoni said.

"You too, see you in the morning."

After hanging up, Brielle went into the kitchen to make sure she had cleaned up everything from her meal. She played the conversation with Jace over and over in her head. She was very glad to learn that he shared the same kinds of family values she did, especially since he had such a strained home life.

As she tidied up the kitchen, she began to pray. Once again, she asked God to bless her relationship with Jace and that if there was anything he was hiding that he could trust her enough to tell her. And if he wasn't hiding anything that God would help Brielle to trust him and remove her curiosity.

She got a glass of water and headed up for bed. Obadiah always went through the house and made sure all the doors and windows were locked, and the security alarm was set. He took good care of them, and she always felt safe inside her home. But today, after her actions with Sidney and Brian, she felt a bit uneasy. She told herself over and over again that she needed to think before she acted and asked God to help her with that, too. She would trust that God would honor the prayers spoken over her today and keep her safe.

As she climbed the stairs, she remembered what Obadiah said about her mother being worried. Brielle went to her mother's door, which was slightly cracked, and could hear her mother whispering. Brielle thought her mother was praying, but as she looked through the cracked door, she could see her mother was holding a photo of her father and was softly talking to his photo.

The pain of losing her father began to rush through her. To see her mother talking to his photo like this made it even worse. She stood there for a moment, not knowing what to do. Then Genevieve got up and set Mark's photo back on the table by her bedside. She went to the bathroom to get a tissue. When her

mother closed the bathroom door, Brielle decided to go in and lie down across her mother's bed. Genevieve heard her and called out, "Hey, Kawala, I'll be right there."

Brielle lay down on the bed and waited for her mother. She rolled on her side so that she could stare at her father's photo. He was such a striking man, so handsome. She remembered his eyes and how they seemed to have a smile all their own. She remembered his spirit and strength. He could work for hour upon hour, all the while singing a joyful song to the Lord. She thought about how he would hold her hand, which could fit completely inside of his. His hands always felt rough and dry, yet warm, strong, and wonderful.

How Brielle missed his stories at night, his hugs, and his kisses, but most of all, she missed his voice. How she wished she could hear him sing her lullaby again. As she thought of her father, she remembered the words of Jesus in John 15:13 *'There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.'* Her father had done this. He had laid down his life to protect his family. All these memories were so precious to her. Still, each time she took herself into these beautiful and private places with her father, the sting of losing him would always lacerate her heart.

"Are you okay, baby?" Genevieve asked softly as she saw her daughter staring at her father's photo.

Brielle turned to look at her mother. She had just washed her face and put on her nightgown. She was so beautiful.

"Yes, Mama," she said softly, "I'm okay."

"Thinking about daddy?" Genevieve asked, sitting down on the bed next to her and slowly running her hand through her daughter's hair.

"Yes," Brielle answered, "I miss him so much."

"I know, Kawala, and you always will. I miss him every day," she said, looking over at his photo beside the bed. "But he's still with us. His spirit is with us, surrounding us. His life lives on in you and Asher. I see it more and more as you get older."

Brielle didn't respond, just looked thoughtfully at her mother.

"I don't tell you this enough," Brielle said, "but you are a wonderful mother."

Genevieve looked down at her daughter with pleasant surprise, "Well, thank you, my love."

"I mean it. You are a wonderful, loving, patient mother. You taught me so well in school and are still teaching Ash. You work hard at the church, doing all the worship and choir stuff. You take care of our home and cook great meals; you do so much for everyone else. You give out so much so freely, and you do it all by yourself," Brielle said.

Genevieve stared silently, listening to Brielle's words, tears slowly refilling her eyes.

"I don't tell you enough just how wonderful I think you are," Brielle said, rising to hug her mother. "I love you, Mama, and I'm so thankful for you."

Genevieve hugged her close, "Thank you, baby. I love you and I'm so thankful for you and am so proud of you," she whispered, kissing Brielle on the head. "You're so precious, but I'm not alone. I couldn't do any of it if I didn't have the help of Jesus. God is so good to me and helps me every day. He has blessed me richly. You and Ash are everything to me."

Genevieve held Brielle in her arms, cradling her like she did when she was a small child. She gently pulled the hair back from Brielle's face and kissed her forehead. Then she took a deep breath.

"I need to talk to you about what happened today," she said.

Brielle lay quietly on the bed, waiting to hear what her mother had to say.

"For years after your father… I just couldn't let go of the fear of Jabari coming to find us. I was so protective of you and Asher, and I worried about it all the time. But I could see that fear was beginning to take over my life, and I didn't want that for myself or you and Asher. I asked God to heal me of my fear, and He led me to a scripture," she said, reaching to her bedside stand to grab her Bible. "I'm not as gifted as you are with memorizing scripture," she smiled as she opened the Bible and read, "2 Timothy 1:7 *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind,"* she said, looking up at Brielle. "I have to say this verse every day. As a mother, there are so many things to worry about regarding the safety of your children. You will learn this someday when you have children of your own. It is a beautiful world we live in; unfortunately, it is full of evil and dangerous people. I can't be with you at all times to protect you, so I have to put the care of your life and Asher's life into the hands of God. I call upon His angels to watch over you for every minute of the day," she said, closing the Bible and placing it back onto the bedside stand. "At the same time," she said, reaching her hand to touch Brielle's face, "I also need you to be more careful with what you do and the choices you make. When you were a little girl, I taught you about 'stranger danger' and when to be friendly and when to be careful. I know that you have a gift of loving people; having said that, all gifts need guidance on how to use them. One of the things you are going to have to do with your gift of loving people is to also ask the Lord for discernment. The sad truth is you just can't trust everyone you meet."

Brielle nodded, "I know, Mama. I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking today."

"The fact that we now know that these men are drug dealers is something that must be taken very seriously. I would like to talk to Hadley about this and see if he can help," she said.

Brielle thought about that for a moment, "Rateesh said Brian told him he couldn't go to the police, that it wouldn't do any good."

"Hmm, that is an interesting thing to say. Well, at least we know we can

trust Hadley. He loves Alma, Gideon, and Keoni so much and has always been there for them since their father died. I think Brian is just trying to keep Rateesh from talking to anyone who could help him, but I think this is something that should be shared with Hadley. He would want to know about this and wants to help," Genevieve said. "Do you think Rateesh would talk to him?"

Brielle shrugged, "I don't know. He was afraid to tell us anything. Then once he started, it was like a flood gate opened, and he told us everything. But I'm not sure he will talk to the police yet. I mean, I think he would have already if he trusted that something could be done. Maybe Keoni could talk to Hadley until Rateesh is ready. She was there and heard everything Rateesh said. She could give Hadley all the details."

"That's a good idea, talk to her about it tomorrow and see what she thinks, okay?" Genevieve asked.

"I will," Brielle replied.

"Okay. I know that Oba and Jace prayed over you tonight, and I am going to as well," she said, reaching down to pull Brielle back into her arms. Then she prayed over her daughter a powerful prayer of protection and for the hand of God to constantly be upon her.

When she finished her prayer, she kissed Brielle a dozen times, telling her how much she loved her, something she had always done with both of her children. It always made Brielle giggle.

"Mama," Brielle said, "can I ask you something?"

"Yes," Genevieve said, getting up to brush her hair before bed.

"Are you an Intercessor, or are you just helping Oba for our training?" she asked.

Genevieve smiled, "I am an Intercessor. Oba trained your father and me at the same time, along with some other friends."

"If you are an Intercessor… then where is your cross necklace?" Brielle asked.

Genevieve sighed, "Honestly? I'm not exactly sure. I assume it is somewhere on the African continent."

Brielle looked confused.

Genevieve sat back down on the bed. "When your father and I were ministering in Uganda, we had many ups and downs financially. Oba was always sending us funds for what we needed. But there came a time when he was in another country and couldn't wire money to help us. We were in pretty desperate need, so… I sold my Intercessor cross."

Brielle looked at her curiously, "Why didn't daddy sell his?"

"He was going to," Genevieve said, "but I didn't want him to. Your father…" she said, trying to find the words to explain her heart, "…he was so completely amazed by everything he learned in his Intercessor training. He didn't just listen and memorize what he learned; he *lived* it, breathed it. Being an Intercessor for

the Lord was something he was so proud of. He wore his cross with such pride, and I just didn't ever want to see him without it," she said, reaching down to pull Brielle's cross, which was once her father's, up to hold it and gaze upon it. "I love being an Intercessor, and I was so proud to be one. I felt it was just easier for me to give up my cross than to see your father without his. But I always will be an Intercessor-- with or without a cross to prove it," she smiled.

"Why didn't Oba make you another one?" Brielle asked.

Genevieve raised her eyebrows and whispered, "I never told him what I did. I didn't want to hurt him."

"But he would understand if you needed the money, right?" Brielle asked.

"Of course, that's not what would hurt him. It was the fact that he couldn't be there to help us," Genevieve said. "It would hurt him if he knew why I had to do that. I'm sure he knows the cross is gone, as I never wear it-- and you know Oba notices everything. But he has never asked me about it."

Brielle thought about her mother's words.

"What was the money for? Why were you so desperate?" she asked her mother.

"Because I was about to have my first baby," she said sweetly, "and we needed the money for doctor bills and other things."

Brielle smiled at her mother warmly, then she thought some more.

"Why was Oba not available to help you? He's always there to help where money is concerned," she said.

Genevieve's smile softened. "It wasn't that he wouldn't help us, Kawala, he was in another country, and he couldn't help us at that time. He was away for months helping others who were in need in *great* need-- much worse than ours." Her tone grew softer as she spoke. Then she quickly tried to brighten her voice, "But, I got the money I needed to pay for all the doctor bills, *plus* buy you all the baby supplies I needed—for a while at least. But we'd better get to bed," she said softly, giving Brielle a kiss, "we have another busy day tomorrow. Oba told me that you and Keoni are going to deliver some plans for him to a mansion on the Gold Coast?"

"Yes," Brielle said, sitting up on the bed, "and then afterward, Gideon and Keoni invited me to go to the hospital to see Dylan and pray for him. Is that okay?"

"Of course, it is. That's your responsibility as an Intercessor to pray for those who are in need," Genevieve answered. "I guess I will just see you at church, then tomorrow night. I'll give you some extra money in the morning for your meals; you'll have to eat lunch and dinner out since you'll be gone all day."

"Did you talk to Laura today about Lacy?" Brielle asked.

"Yes. I didn't have time to go by the hospital today, but Laura told me that even though Lacy's brain activity showed improvement, the doctors are planning to keep her in a coma if she begins to wake up," she replied.

"Why on earth would they do that?" Brielle retorted.

"It's because of the withdrawal her body is experiencing. The doctors feel that if she wakes up, it would be too hard on her body to cope with what the detoxification process will do to her. I understand it is a very painful and difficult process for a person to go through. They told Laura it would be in Lacy's best interest to let her sleep through that. But, so far, she hasn't shown any signs of trying to wake up. If I have time tomorrow after Asher's classes, I will go and visit them again. They are still coming to church on Sunday, including the nurse Carrie and her family," she said happily. "Now, you need to get to bed, my girl," she said, giving Brielle one more kiss and hug. "Good night, Kawala, I love you."

"I love you too, Mama," Brielle said.

When she got into her room, thoughts of Lacy were racing through Brielle's mind. Some of the pieces of the puzzle were starting to fit together. Lacy got her drugs from Sidney, and Sidney worked with Brian to distribute them from Rateesh's family restaurant into the community, using Reed, Sean, Morgan, and Ryan to help them. So, where were Sidney and Brian getting the drugs? Were these the same drug dealers who had shot and killed Keoni's father? What was happening to the drugs now to cause people to go into a coma?

Jace was right; so many people were hurting because of these drug dealers and their selfish, wicked actions. Lacy and Dylan had used the drugs and were now both in comas, and their families were suffering along with them. Rateesh was suffering in fear and worry of what might happen to his family because of the drug dealer's threats, and Gideon and Keoni… well, they had suffered the greatest loss of all, the life of their father. She remembered Jace's words today and how he said, '*They don't care about the people they may destroy or the child who loses their mother because she can't get enough of the drugs they sell her.'* Did he mean *his* mother? Was there more to the reason why she stayed away and only visited him occasionally? Her mind was whirling with questions.

Brielle opened Lacy's journal once again to look for any kind of information-- even though she had vowed not to read it before she slept. She had to try and find answers to the mystery, so she prayed that God would protect her mind from any nightmares and that He would reveal something in the journal which might help them figure out what was happening. She remembered 1 Corinthians 14:33: 'For *God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.'*

She would call upon the guidance and wisdom of the Lord to help her figure out this mystery, to help remove the chaos, and find answers to the questions that remained. In her heart, she knew that she was created for this, to help others. God had chosen her to do so. She was now and always would be an Intercessor.

The next day after school, Keoni met Brielle in the parking lot. Brielle had taken the plans to be delivered from Obadiah. The plans were in a long black

tube that he sent with her that morning, along with the girl's payment for their help. She met Keoni in the parking lot, and they placed the case in the trunk of her car. Now that they were ready to go, she broke out the directions to the home, and they started on their way.

"Can we grab something to eat?" Brielle asked, "I'm starving."

"You hardly ate anything at lunch today," Keoni said.

"I know, I had a nervous stomach. I kept hoping that Jace would ask me to the dance or let me know if that was the weekend he was going to be out of town or… something," Brielle sighed.

"Where is Jace?" Keoni asked.

"He said he offered to take Rateesh to his home or to the restaurant after school," Brielle replied.

"That sounds like a good idea," Keoni said.

"Yeah, I'm so glad he did. He told me that he would pick him up for school, too, but Rateesh said no. I guess Priyanka drops him off each morning, so at least he won't be taking the bus home each day," Brielle replied.

"We have to keep praying over Rateesh when he is at that restaurant," Keoni said, "and with that nasty Brian," she mumbled.

"Yes. God has protected him all this time. We need to keep asking God for his continued safety so that it doesn't get worse before it gets better," Brielle said.

"Speaking of prayer, did Jace say if he was going to come with us to pray for Dylan today?" Keoni asked.

"Yeah, he said he would meet us at the hospital around 5:30 pm," Brielle answered.

"Good," Keoni said, "with Dylan's family being Atheists, we may be the only ones who pray for him."

Once Brielle had something to eat, the girls were on their way to the Gold Coast. They loved to come and drive among these gorgeous homes, traveling slowly as they passed so they could study each mansion from every angle. Every home was a work of art, and the girls were astounded at their magnificent and unique beauty. The mansions sat sprawling over acres of land, rich with lush landscapes. They were elegantly placed along Connecticut's picturesque coastline.

Finally, they found the home they were looking for. It was a brick Tutor-style home that stood boldly amidst tall trees. The girls pulled up to the security gate in front of the house and announced their arrival. Once they were admitted into the driveway, they parked the car and delivered the prints to one of the servants who worked inside the home.

"Wow," Keoni whispered as they walked back to the car, "can you imagine? Having servants in your own home?"

"Nope," Brielle said, "I just imagine what I know: Mama, Oba, Ash, and me

doing all our chores," she laughed.

"I can imagine it," Keoni said, "I can imagine me never having to do dishes again!"

Brielle agreed, "You know what I think when I see a house like this?"

Keoni shook her head.

"I think that these must be highly educated and hard-working people to have earned so much money to have a home like this," she said.

"Yeah," Keoni said, "or they inherited it, do absolutely nothing, and have no brains about them."

Brielle laughed, "You're so mean!"

"I know, I know, but it could be true," Keoni said.

"Even so," Brielle stated, "somewhere along the line, *someone* had to be hard working and smart."

They got into the car and headed down the long driveway.

"Let's go this way," Brielle said, "according to the map, it will curve around and take us back toward town. I don't think I have ever been down this road before, have you?"

"I don't think so, but I love to see these homes, so this will be a treat!" she replied.

They drove for a mile, taking in all the magnificent homes they had never seen before, when suddenly they came to an estate that was surrounded by a tall, iron fence. Through the fence, they could see the home in the distance, far back from the road. This home did not lie along the coastline, but was more inland and was surrounded by lustrous, majestic trees and rich green grass that seemed to stretch on forever.

Most of the homes that were along the Gold Coast were much too large to be called houses and easily held enough square footage to be called mansions. But this home was the largest and most elegant home they had ever seen anywhere. It didn't even have the appearance of being called a mansion; it seemed more fitting to call it a palace. The home had an eloquent and elaborate structure to it, resembling that of some of the finest homes in England. The kind of home that is so big, it must be given its own name.

"Oh, my heavens," Brielle whispered, "have you ever seen anything like that in your life?"

"Not in person," Keoni whispered back. the two girls were awestruck by the imperial estate before them, enough so that they felt the need to whisper.

"Go slowly," Brielle said, "I just want to look at it for a moment. It reminds me of a home that would be in a Jane Austin novel. Isn't it just lovely?"

"That's too common a word to describe a home like that," Keoni said, "How about *pulchritudinous*?"

Brielle slowly turned her gaze from the home to look at Keoni with an expression of bewilderment.

"It means beautiful--but sounds much better. I like reading the dictionary from time to time," Keoni giggled, shrugging her shoulders in explanation of such knowledge.

"How about I just say it is lovely--at least I can *pronounce* that," Brielle laughed.

"How about exquisite or divine?" Keoni replied.

"How about *heavenly*?" Brielle replied.

"I wonder what those people did to be able to own such a home," Keoni said.

Brielle didn't speak but nodded her head in agreement.

Keoni lifted her foot from the brake and began to slowly accelerate past the estate, still having acres of land to cross before they could completely pass it. Suddenly, a man on a motorcycle pulled out onto the road in front of them from inside the iron gates of the estate.

"Was that… Jace?" Brielle asked in confusion.

"It sure did look like him," Keoni said.

"Hurry and see if we can catch up to him," Brielle said.

Keoni sped up, but she could not catch up to the motorcycle and didn't want to drive unsafely to do so. Once they reached the end of the road, he was nowhere to be seen.

"How weird," Brielle said, "if it was Jace, what on earth was he doing there?" she asked, puzzled.

"I don't know," Keoni said, just as bewildered, "we'll ask him when we meet him at the hospital."

The two girls headed for their shopping trip; they still had several hours before they were to pick up Gideon and go to the hospital to visit Dylan. Keoni found not one, not three, but *five* dresses that she loved.

"You're going to have to make a decision at some point," Brielle said.

"I know, but maybe you would like to wear one. That way, if I don't get it, at least I can enjoy you wearing it!" she said happily.

"You're so crazy," Brielle laughed, "I actually wouldn't mind this one," she said, holding up a sparkling white gown, "it looks like it was made of moonlight, something I might wear in a lustrous dream."

"Yeah? Then you get that one!" Keoni said, the excitement of it all rushing over her.

"I would love to," Brielle said, "but right now I have no reason to."

Keoni's excitement and smile were quickly subdued. "I'm so sorry, I forgot. This is what I was worried about. I don't want to make you feel bad."

Brielle looked up at her friend warmly, "You are not making me feel bad at all. I am happy to be here with you choosing dresses. I could still buy it. Who knows, maybe I will get the courage to go it alone. Who needs a date?"

Keoni was frustrated for her friend, "Why can't he just work this thing out

with his father and ask you to the dance already?"

"Who knows if he even wants to?" Brielle said, "I mean, maybe he agreed to this whole thing with his father in the first place because he didn't want to go to the dance?"

"Okay, now you're just being ridiculous," Keoni said from inside the dressing room. "He's already tried asking you out on a single date…"

"Yes, but…." Brielle interrupted.

"*And* he's tried to kiss you," Keoni continued.

"Maybe he doesn't dance…" Brielle tried again.

"*And* he came to your house to *pray* for you," Keoni said, emerging from the dressing room in a beautiful bronze satin gown that complemented her gorgeous figure and long legs in a way that made her appear regal. She was stunning.

When Brielle saw her, she gasped, "Keoni, oh my goodness… yes, that's the one!"

"You like it?" Keoni asked, stepping in front of the mirror, "But there are still two more to try on."

"Try them on if you like, but that one gets my vote. It's perfect," Brielle said.

"Thank you, so now what about you?" Keoni asked.

"What about me?" Brielle replied.

"Are you going to try that dress on? Just in case you get that date you hope for?" Keoni smiled.

"Well…" Brielle said, looking at the dress in her hands, "I guess it couldn't hurt."

Keoni clapped her hands, "Yay!" she delighted, "I can't wait to see it on you!"

The girls went back into the dressing room to change. Keoni came out first in a deep navy-blue gown studded with sparkling jewels across the bodice. She liked it, but had to agree that the bronze dress was much better. Just then, Brielle came out in her white gown.

"Bri, baby," Keoni said sweetly, "you look just like an angel!" She said walking around Brielle. "This dress was made for you! You *have* to get it!"

"You think so?" Brielle said, stepping in front of the mirror to admire the dress. Keoni came up behind her and lifted Brielle's hair, twisting and piling it on top of her head. "Girl, you look like you just stepped out of *Romeo and Juliet*."

Brielle laughed, "As long as I don't have an ending like theirs."

"Seriously. You have to get this dress. You need this dress! It fits you perfectly, it makes you look like a heavenly host ---and it's on sale," Keoni said, holding up the price tag. "You can't get better than this."

"But what if no one asks me to the dance?" Brielle protested.

"Who cares? There will be a use for this dress somewhere, sometime--plus you still *don't* know yet that you are not going to the dance," Keoni said.

Brielle smiled and hugged Keoni, "What did I do to deserve you as my best

friend?" she asked.

"God knew that you needed my fashion sense and took pity on you," Keoni teased, hugging her friend in return. "Come on, we've got to get going, it's almost time to pick up Giddy."

They checked out, took their new gowns, and hung them very carefully in the back seat of the car. Then they drove to the high school, picked up Gideon, and headed to the hospital to see Dylan. When they arrived, it was not quite five thirty, the time they had agreed to meet Jace.

"Hey, if you guys don't mind," Gideon said, "I'm going to run in here and see if there is anything to snack on. I'm starving. I'll be right back," he said, going into the hospital lobby. Brielle and Keoni stood outside the main entrance and waited for Jace, who, at almost exactly five thirty, pulled into the parking lot.

"Are you going to ask him about the house?" Keoni asked Brielle softly.

"Am I going to ask him? Hello? Do we know each other?" Brielle teased.

Jace walked up to the two girls. Brielle was temporarily distracted by watching him as he approached; even his walk was beautiful.

"Hey," he said, looking around, "where's Gideon?"

"He's inside finding something to munch on," Keoni said, "He'll be right back."

Brielle snapped herself out of the "gazing at Jace mode" and decided to skip the small talk.

"Where all did you go today?" she asked.

Jace looked pleasantly puzzled by her question. "What do you mean?"

"Where did you go today?" Brielle pressed with a smile.

"I went to school," Jace said slowly, "I took Rateesh home, I did a few errands for my father…"

"We saw you on the Gold Coast today," Brielle interrupted him, "We saw you coming out of the gates of the
pul-chri -too-dinous home," she said, trying to remember the word Keoni used to describe the home and butchering it completely.

Jace looked at her in confusion, "Is that English or Latin?" he asked sincerely.

"English," Keoni added, "it means beautiful."

"Was it you?" Brielle asked.

"Was what me?" Jace asked, still confused.

"Was it you we saw coming out of the gates of the most awesome home we have ever seen on the Gold Coast?" she pressed.

"It might have been," Jace said, "I did some errands for my father this afternoon on the Gold Coast. The man who owns the fishing company I work for lives there."

Keoni's eyes widened. "Wow, there's *that* much money in fish?"

Jace laughed, "Kind of, he also owns many other companies too. I had to

pick up some papers and mail them today for my father."

Brielle nodded, "That's so cool! Do you know the people who live there well?"

"Pretty well," Jace said.

"Have you been inside that house?" Keoni asked excitedly.

"Yeah, it's *incredibly* big and beautiful," he said lightly.

"You don't sound very impressed," Brielle replied.

"It's a very impressive home, fancy, elegant, full of antiques and expensive things," Jace said, "It's just not what I dream about having someday."

"What do you dream about having?" Brielle asked softly.

"A home like yours," Jace said sweetly, "That would be my dream house. It's beautiful, creative, and warm. It feels like a home should feel."

"Where do you live?" Keoni asked.

"I live just outside of town," he said.

Brielle could sense something was bothering him and asked a different question.

"What's the man's name who owns the home?" she asked.

"His name is Devereaux," Jace replied.

"That's his first name, Devereaux?" she asked innocently.

"No, it's his last," Jace said, "His name is H.R. Devereaux."

"Devereaux," Brielle whispered to herself, "Where have I heard that before?" She snapped her fingers and remembered, "This hospital," she exclaimed, "is called Devereaux Memorial."

Jace nodded.

"Wow, so they must have a lot more than just fishing boats," Keoni said.

"Hey, don't knock the fishing boats," Jace joked. "They are my present resource for currency."

Just then, Gideon came outside with a bag of chips. "Hey man," he nodded at Jace, then looked at the girls. "Let's go."

They all followed him inside the hospital and into the elevator. "He's down this hall," he said, leading the way to Dylan's room. When they reached it, there was a man sitting outside the door reading a magazine. When he saw Gideon and the rest of them coming, he stood up. His face did not hold a welcoming expression.

"Hello," Gideon said, extending his hand to the man, "I'm Gideon--"

"Yeah, I know who you are," the guy said, refusing to shake hands with Gideon.

Gideon stood there for a moment in silence, confused by the man's attitude.

"We've come to see Dylan," Brielle said gently.

"Yeah, I know," the man said. "I'm Derrick, Dylan's brother. My parents told me that you have been coming to see Dylan," he said, looking at Gideon.

"Yeah, I have," Gideon answered gently, "So… can we see him?"

"No, you can't," Derrick replied flatly.

"Is there something wrong? Is Dylan alright?" Keoni asked, concerned.

"He's the same," he answered.

"Then why can't we see him?" Gideon asked softly.

"Because we don't want your *kind* here," Derrick replied coldly.

Gideon's eyes narrowed, and he took a slow, deep breath. "I'm sorry," he said, "and just what *kind* would that be?"

"The *Christian* kind," Derrick said nastily.

Brielle's eyes popped open. "What?"

"You heard me. My family doesn't believe in your *God,*" he said sarcastically, "and we don't want you and your *God* around Dylan."

Gideon continued with a puzzled look on his face. "Look, Dylan is my teammate and my friend. I care about him, and I just wanted to come and see him for a moment."

"Dylan doesn't even know that you are here," Derrick said angrily.

"You don't know that," Keoni said softly, "Lacy Weaver's doctors tell her family to talk to her all the time because they don't know what the subconscious might hear."

"I don't care what Lacy's doctors say. Dylan doesn't listen, he doesn't speak, and he doesn't move. So why don't you all just go back where you came from and take your *God* with you," he replied.

"You know," Gideon began coolly, "that's the third time you've said that."

"Said what?" Derrick spat back hastily.

"*Your God,"* Gideon replied. "I thought you and your family were Atheists?"

"We are!" Derrick said, his anger prevalent now.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought Atheists don't believe there *is* a God. Yet, you've just referred to Him three times as if you are acknowledging that there *is,"* Gideon said.

This statement pushed Derrick over the edge, and he pushed Gideon in the chest, "I told you to leave. Are you going to go quietly, or do I have to remove you?"

Jace, who had been standing behind Gideon between the girls, gently pulled them behind him and moved up to stand beside Gideon.

Gideon was calm. It was evident that he was allowing the Holy Spirit to guide him in this confrontation. "Look, man," he said softly, "I don't want any trouble. I just came here to see my friend," then he changed his tone to speak kindly to Derrick. "I know this must be hard on you, watching all this happen to your brother. I can only imagine how I would feel if it were my sister in there in that condition," he said, glancing in through the door to Dylan's room. "But getting mad at the world isn't going to change it, and it's not going to make Dylan any better either."

Derrick silently stared at Gideon as he spoke.

"What you need to know about us is that we, as Christians, respect your family's wishes. We aren't here to force our beliefs about our God on you or anybody else. Jesus didn't work that way, and neither do we. We just came here to let Dylan and your family know that we care about him and we're all hoping he gets better," Gideon said.

Even though Gideon was speaking calmly, his words seemed to stir Derrick's anger.

"None of us know what's going to happen to Dylan, not even his doctors. Now, I have asked you twice to leave. don't make me ask you to do it again," Derrick said harshly.

"Come on, Gideon," Keoni said, "let's just go."

"He can't stop us from praying for Dylan," Brielle said flatly, "he can only stop us from praying for him here in this room."

Gideon looked at Derrick for a moment and turned to walk away with his friends, but there was something else he felt led to say.

"You know, Derrick, I've been a Christian my whole life. I don't know life without God in it. I've always wondered what it is that Atheists do in times like these. I've always thought about how you handle it or how you feel in times of crisis, just like this one that you're in right now," he paused for a moment as Derrick rolled his eyes.

"But you have answered that question for me quite clearly today. It's not that you just don't have anything to believe in… it's that you have no hope," he said, looking straight into Derrick's eyes, "That's got to be a hard way to live."

Then he turned to walk away, but stopped one more time, "If you ever want to change that way of life, just let me know. I can promise you, you won't regret it."

Gideon then walked to join Jace, Brielle, and Keoni, who were waiting for him. Keoni and Brielle each grabbed one of his hands and squeezed them to show him their support.

As they entered the elevator, none of them spoke, but they all knew in their hearts that they would not be leaving that place without praying for Dylan. They found the hospital chapel and went inside. The chapel was empty, so the Intercessors gathered in the altar area. They stood, held hands, and joined their hearts together in asking the Lord to heal Dylan and to let their examples of love minister to Derrick and his family. They prayed and prayed for Dylan's healing and for his family.

Little did they know that standing outside the chapel door listening to their prayers… was Derrick.

20

By the time Brielle arrived at school the next day, word was already spreading about Dylan. A miracle had taken place. Last night, Dylan had mysteriously awakened from his coma. According to what his family told Coach Barnes, "One minute he was still, lifeless, silently breathing with the help of a respirator… the next moment, he opened his eyes and was awake. Just like magic."

Brielle knew it wasn't magic. Jesus doesn't do magic, He does miracles, and this was a wonderful one, another answer to the prayers of the Intercessors for their friend. She wondered if Dylan was going through the same withdrawal symptoms, and if so, would his doctors keep him in a drug-induced coma until his body was detoxified? But she did not waste her time on such thoughts. God was responsible for this; it was His miracle, she knew it, and so did Gideon, Jace, and Keoni. As soon as they heard the news, they began to give God thanks. Their joy and excitement were uncontainable at lunch as they rejoiced in God and His power.

"If God healed Dylan like this, He *will* heal Lacy, I know it!" Brielle exclaimed as she sat down to her usual spread of food.

Giovanni had joined Keoni again for lunch and was taking in all the conversation.

"How do you know God healed Dylan?" he asked.

"Because! We went down to the hospital last night and prayed for him," Brielle answered.

"Who went to the hospital?" Giovanni asked.

"We did," Gideon answered. "I have been going to visit him, and I asked Brielle, Jace, and Keoni to come with me yesterday."

Giovanni looked at Gideon suspiciously, "I thought Dylan was an Atheist?"

"He is," Gideon answered, "and so is his family."

"Especially his brother," Keoni added.

"But *that* could change!" Brielle said hopefully to Keoni.

"Yes, it can," Keoni agreed, "*With God, all things are possible*."

"You're telling me they let you come in and pray for Dylan?" Giovanni asked.

"No, that they didn't," Gideon replied.

"Then how do you know it was God that healed him?" Giovanni asked again.

"Because we went into the hospital chapel and prayed for him," Brielle answered, "and we prayed hard that God would heal him. We know God hears us when we pray and that He answers our prayers."

Giovanni lifted his eyebrows and nodded, "Oh, okay," he said coolly.

Brielle looked at him and gently asked, "You don't believe in God?"

Giovanni smiled and nodded, “I believe there is a God. Who or what, I don’t know, but I believe there is some sort of higher power out there.”

“Do you believe in the Bible?” Brielle asked again.

Giovanni laughed, “Uh, yeah, most of it anyway.”

“Do you read it very often?” Brielle asked, speaking very gently.

“Not often,” Giovanni said.

“The Bible is God’s Word, and in it, He tells us exactly who He is. He leaves nothing out. He clearly defines His being, His love, and His power. He does this so that those who study His Word will know Him and not have to wonder,” Brielle said softly.

Giovanni had a smirk on his face, “Okay, because you believe that just because you prayed for Dylan last night, that God answered your prayers and that is the only reason why Dylan woke up?”

Brielle did not hesitate, “Yes, absolutely.”

“Hmm. O-kay then,” Giovanni said again, lifting his eyebrows and making a mocking expression.

Brielle smiled, “Yeah, you know me, I’m your friendly neighborhood Bible nerd.”

Giovanni nodded, then he turned to Gideon and started talking about the upcoming up football game.

Brielle looked over at Keoni, who was staring blankly at him as she stirred her salad. Just then, Jace noticed Rateesh coming into the lunchroom with his friends.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Where are you going?” Brielle asked.

“I just want to talk to Rateesh for a second,” he said.

He crossed the room to Rateesh’s table. Rateesh and his friends had not yet taken their seats, and they were still holding their lunch trays.

“Hey, Rateesh,” Jace said, “I have a chemistry question for you. Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure,” Rateesh said, turning to his friends, “I’ll be right back,” he said as he walked over to the condiments counter with Jace.

“I’ve been thinking about something you told us, and I wanted to double-check on it,” Jace started.

Rateesh nodded.

“You said that the four guys from our chemistry class come in and eat at your restaurant every other Thursday, was that right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Rateesh answered, putting ketchup on his French fries, “They’ve done that since before school began.”

“You’re sure it is every other Thursday?” Jace asked again.

“Yeah, why?” Rateesh asked curiously.

“When was the last Thursday they were in?” Jace asked.

"Last Thursday," he answered.

"Then they will *not* be there tonight?" Jace asked.

"Correct. According to my records, they were in last week, so they will not be there until next Thursday. Why?" Rateesh asked again.

"I had an idea about something, and I want to check it out. Don't worry, though; it has nothing to do with you or your family's restaurant. I'll let you know if I find anything new," Jace said, patting him on the back. "I'll take you home today, okay?"

Rateesh smiled, "Okay, thanks."

Jace made his way back to his table. Brielle had not taken her eyes from him since he left to talk to Rateesh.

"What was that about? Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, he's fine. We're just working some things out. I'd like to keep taking him home each day after school," he answered evasively, picking up his sandwich.

Brielle studied him closely; she knew there was something he was not telling her. It seemed like she was feeling that way most of the time now. She tried to shake it off. She thought the enemy was trying to distract her from the joy of Dylan's healing.

After lunch, Gideon pulled Jace aside to talk to him before their next class.

"Hey man, um, I don't mean to pry," Gideon spoke nervously, "but… are you going to ask Brielle to the Homecoming Dance?"

Jace sighed and shook his head, "I don't know… I don't know yet if I can go."

"What do you mean?" Gideon asked.

"I'm pretty sure I have to go out of town that weekend," Jace answered.

"For what?" Gideon asked.

"I think I have to go with my father on a short trip," he said.

"Can you get out of it?" Gideon asked.

"I've been trying to, but… I'm pretty sure I'm going to have to go," Jace answered sadly.

"How about another weekend?" Gideon pressed.

"No. I already know that," Jace said.

Gideon looked at Jace curiously. He wondered what it was Jace had to do, but Jace wasn't going to explain it to him. He sighed, "Okay, I just wanted to check and see what was going on."

"She wants me to ask her, doesn't she?" Jace asked.

"Man, where do you live, under a rock? She totally wants you to ask her!" Gideon replied with a laugh.

Jace's face lit up, "How do you know? Did she say something to you?"

Gideon was exasperated, "Jace, what in the world is wrong with you? How can you spend so much time with her and *not* know that she likes you? No, she didn't say anything to *me,* but she talks about it every day with my sister, which

is just like telling *me.* She wants to go to this dance. It's her first high school dance--ever. She is waiting for you to ask her and she…"

"What?" Jace asked.

"I don't know if I should tell you this," Gideon said.

"It's too late now, so go on," Jace pressed.

"She's already bought a dress," Gideon said.

Jace ran his hand through his hair and closed his eyes,

"Oh man! You're kidding me?" He took a slow, deep breath, shaking his head in frustration, "So she *has* been waiting for me to ask her."

"All I know is that she went dress shopping with Keoni yesterday and found a dress she loved and bought it… Plus, it was on sale," Gideon said. "She wants to go to this dance, and she wants to go with *you.*"

"I'm toast. I don't know what to do," Jace said, his expression looking more devastated as the conversation continued.

"How can I help you?" Gideon asked. "What is this trip you have to do with your father?"

"It's for his work," Jace said, staring at the floor, his mind deep in thought.

"For what, his boat?" Gideon asked.

"Yeah, that's part of it," Jace said dejectedly.

"Listen, man, I've gotta go to class, but if you think of a way I can help you in this, let me know," Gideon said, patting him on the back as he left to go to class. Jace stood in the hallway a while, trying to figure out what to do.

"Thanks, man," he said to Gideon as he turned toward his class. "I'm going to break her heart," he thought to himself.

He walked to class with a heavy spirit. Even the joy of Dylan waking up from his coma wasn't enough to pick him back up. All day long, the only thoughts that were usually in his head were of Brielle, her smile, her voice, and her eyes. He counted down the hours until he would see her again each day. But now he *knew* he was going to disappoint and hurt her, and he couldn't stand it.

In chemistry, he was still in a daze and didn't notice what was happening around him. He was trying to get his mind focused on the lab with Rateesh, but nothing was working. He got up to get some of the materials needed from across the room. On his way back, Reed purposely bumped into him, hard, causing him to drop everything he was carrying, and his supplies went crashing to the floor. The chemistry teacher left the lab to get a broom, and Jace bent down to start cleaning up the mess on the floor.

"I'm so sorry about that," Reed said aloud for the surrounding students to hear him. Then he bent down to help Jace clean up.

"I understand you're taking your little lab partner home from school each day?" Reed whispered to Jace. Jace looked up, surprised at the comment, but didn't answer.

"I'm kind of curious as to why you're doing that all of a sudden?" Reed

whispered.

Jace just shook it off, “I’m just being his friend.”

“Yeah? Well, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave it alone,” Reed whispered.

Jace looked up to meet his glare, “Are you threatening me?” he asked.

Reed smiled wickedly, “No, not at all. I’m just a friend passing along information to you,” he said with a sinister snicker.

At that moment, the chemistry teacher returned with a broom and dustpan to help Jace clean up the mess on the floor. As Reed walked by Jace to go back to his seat, he mouthed the words, “Leave it alone.”

Jace’s heart was racing. He was already full of frustration from the news about Brielle, and now these words from Reed made him angry, angrier than he had felt in a long time. He walked back to his lab desk, sat down, and rested his head on his hand.

“Jace,” Rateesh whispered, “are you alright?”

Jace did not respond; he was praying. He needed the peace of God and guidance.

Rateesh gently patted his arm, “Jace,” he said again eagerly.

Jace looked up from his prayer to see Rateesh’s face. Ever since their discussion the other day, Rateesh seemed calmer and more relaxed. Now he had the same fearful expression on his face. Jace felt the Holy Spirit leading him to comfort Rateesh. He forced a smile to reassure his friend.

“I’m fine,” he said calmly, his heart slowing down.

“Did he say something to you?” Rateesh asked.

Jace looked over at Reed, who was glaring at him across the room.

“Yeah, he just made an idiot of himself for making me drop all our lab stuff,” Jace said lightly. “Which, by the way, we still need,” he said, getting up to go back to the table to retrieve more materials.

“I’ll go get it,” Rateesh said.

Jace stood up slowly, making direct eye contact with Reed, “No buddy,” he said, patting Rateesh’s shoulder, “it’s okay. I’ll get it.”

He walked back to the supply table. Reed watched him closely. Jace knew that if he acknowledged Reed’s comment, they would know that he had talked to Rateesh and knew what was going on. He whispered prayers for direction while he gathered his supplies; he needed to know what God wanted him to do. Once he had his materials, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He turned around to see not just Reed’s eyes upon him, but all four guys - Sean, Morgan, and Ryan too.

Jace felt empowerment come over him; it started in his heart and quickly rose, bubbling up all through him. This was not a feeling of antagonizing or of ego, but the very strong and bold confidence of the Holy Spirit moving through him. Slowly, carrying the lab materials on a tray, he felt led to walk over to the

table where Reed, Sean, Morgan, and Ryan sat staring at him.

"You know, I don't think I will," Jace said.

Reed looked at him through narrowed eyes, "What are you talking about?" he asked in a stern tone.

"What you said earlier about leaving it alone," Jace replied.

"That's right, just leave it alone," Reed said.

A broad smile slowly spread across Jace's face, and he began to shake his head, "No," he said calmly, "I don't think so. Rateesh is my friend, and I'm here for him, no matter what."

Reed's face instantly changed from that of a sinister bully to that of an angry monster, but it didn't frighten Jace. He was going to trust in God and knew that God would be with him. He remembered Obadiah's words from the Sunday they had lunch together when he confirmed that it was not an accident that Rateesh was brought into Jace's life. God had a plan for Jace as an Intercessor, and Jace would stand before God and intercede for Rateesh to try and help him however he could.

That night after dinner, Brielle raced upstairs to call Keoni. She wanted to see if she noticed Jace talking to Rateesh today. She just couldn't shake the thought that Jace was hiding something from her.

"Hey girl," Brielle said cheerfully.

"Hey," Keoni said softly. Brielle knew immediately from the tone of her friend's voice that something was wrong.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Keoni sighed, "Yeah, I will be."

"What do you mean? What happened?" Brielle asked, concerned.

Keoni paused for a moment before explaining her situation.

"Today, after school, Giovanni walked me to my car before heading off to football practice. We were talking about Homecoming and the plans he was making to take me to dinner. I told him the color of my dress, and he was excited about it," she started.

Brielle waited for her friend to continue, nervous for what she was about to hear.

"One thing led to another in our conversation, and he asked if Gideon was going with anyone. I told him that Giddy wasn't interested in anyone right now and wasn't sure if he was going to ask anyone or not. Then he asked if you were going with Jace. I told him that I wasn't sure what was going on, but Jace had said he might have to be out of town that weekend," she stopped again.

"And…" Brielle anxiously responded.

"And he said Jace probably was just saying that because he didn't want to take you," she said softly.

Brielle's hands began to tremble, and the heat of anger swept over her. "Why on earth would he say something like that?"

"He said Jace probably can't take hearing you talk about Jesus all the time," Keoni replied.

Brielle's hands stopped trembling, and she instantly calmed down.

"He said that you are a total Jesus freak and that as much as you talk about God and the Bible and stuff, you would be a pretty boring date," Keoni said.

Brielle started to smile.

"I told him that Jace was crazy about you and that if he thought you were a Jesus freak, then he probably wouldn't want to take me on a date because I am just as freaky as you," she said.

Brielle laughed lightly, "Wow! Good for you, what did he say to that?"

"He said that God was good and all, but asked me why *everything* had to center around God all the time. I told him because God is *in* everything," Keoni explained.

"Nice," Brielle said.

"Then I showed him my Intercessor cross. I told him that I was so committed to God that I was in special training to learn how to be an Intercessor of the Lord, to serve Him with my life and be a stronger witness to others," Keoni said.

"Amen, girl!" Brielle praised.

"I told him that Jace and Gideon both were in the same training and that Jace was drawn to you because of your deep love for God and your desire to be used by Him," she said.

"Do you think that's true?" Brielle asked softly.

"Yes, I think that's true! It is no coincidence that the day you officially met each other, God used you in a miraculous way! What happened in that mini mart that day is what led Jace back to God. He even told you that, remember?" Keoni asked.

"Yeah," Brielle said, remembering his words, "He said that even if I had invited him to come to church before then, he might not have come."

"That's right," Keoni replied.

"What did Giovanni say to that?" Brielle asked eagerly.

"He didn't, he just shook his head. Then I told him that I wasn't ever going to change. I love Jesus and I know that He loves me, and I am now and always will be an Intercessor," Keoni answered.

"That's awesome!" Brielle said excitedly, "You're amazing!"

Then she softened her tone, "I know how excited you were about going to the dance, and I know how much you like Giovanni. I am so proud of you for taking such a stance for Jesus. It's *really* inspiring."

Keoni sighed, "Every time I get upset about it, I think of Jesus and all He did for me. It wasn't a hard decision to make, just an unpleasant experience."

"Yes, but at least you're alive," Brielle said.

"Yeah… wait, what?" Keoni asked, confused.

"Think of all those who have taken a stand for Jesus and lost their lives for that belief. The only thing you lost was a date with a guy who obviously doesn't deserve you anyway," Brielle replied.

"Thanks, Bri," Keoni said.

"You're welcome, and it's true. How did you leave it with him?" Brielle asked.

"At first, I was upset and hurt. But I wanted to show him the love of Jesus truly is something that lives in my heart. It's part of me and not just something I talk about or study. So, I thanked him for asking me to the dance and told him that I still would like to be his friend. Then I told him that if he ever wanted to know more about the love of Jesus, I was always here to talk to," she replied.

"See? What did I say? You're *amazing!* Truly!" Brielle said, "I know myself *and* my temper too well, and I think you allowed the Holy Spirit to use you today. I don't think I would have handled that as well as you. You did let your light shine," she said, so impressed with her friend.

"Yeah, well, he just laughed at me and told me that since you don't have a date either, I should just go with you and we could talk about God all night," Keoni said.

Brielle sat silently for a moment, letting her friend's words sink in, then she exclaimed, "That's a *great* idea!"

"What?" Keoni asked.

"We should go to the dance together!" Brielle said.

"Are you serious?" Keoni asked, deflated.

"Yes, I am totally serious, and if Gideon isn't going to ask anyone, he could take both of us!" she said happily.

"Uh, yeah, no offense, but going without a date is sad enough, but to go with my brother?" Keoni said sarcastically, "No thanks."

"Come on! It would be fun! I can't think of anyone else, outside of Jace, of course, that I would rather be with. Plus, if Jace had asked me, we planned to all go together anyway, so why don't we all still go?" Brielle pleaded.

Keoni laughed, "I don't know. I'm too tired to think right now. I'll talk to Gideon about it and see what he thinks."

"Good! At least I would still get to go to my first high school dance and enjoy it with my best friends," Brielle said happily, then she noticed the time, "Oh, wow, I'd better let you go. I've got some homework to finish."

"Me too," Keoni said, "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Okay, don't forget your permission slip," Brielle said.

"Permission slip? Oh man, is the field trip tomorrow? I did forget. Thanks elephant! You never forget," she laughed.

"You're welcome, get some sleep and remember how much Jesus loves you," Brielle said sweetly.

"I will, good night," Keoni said.

After Brielle hung up, she realized that she had completely forgotten to ask Keoni about Jace and Rateesh's conversation at lunch. She shrugged it off and knew it could wait. Then she began thinking about the Homecoming dance. She got out her new dress and tried it on again. She felt like a princess in this dress. She would still need to buy some shoes, but she was so excited that she would get to wear it to her first dance. True, she wished she were going with Jace, but if he had to be out of town, there was nothing she could do about that. She still wanted to go with her friends and have fun. But right now, she had to finish Latin homework.

The next morning was Friday, the day of the big field trip for Mr. Bennet's American History class. The students were to board buses and leave directly after their second hour. They would spend their regular class time with Mr. Bennet on the trip and then their lunch hour together before returning to campus. All the students were excited, some didn't care about the tour they were taking, but were more excited to have a break from their usual schedule. Others were very excited about the tour as they wanted to know more about the history of their town.

As they boarded the bus to leave, Jace took Brielle's hand while she climbed up the stairs. The butterflies filled her stomach from the gentlemanly gesture and the softness of his touch. They sat together with Keoni across the aisle so they could all talk. They were still rejoicing over Dylan's touch from God.

"Has Gideon heard anything else about Dylan's condition?" Jace asked Keoni.

"He heard that he had awakened off and on several times throughout the day yesterday and that he was talking to his family and answering questions," she said

"That is incredible!" Brielle said, "God is so good! Then he didn't need to be kept in a drug-induced coma to deal with any withdrawal from the drugs?" she asked.

"Not that I know of, but maybe he wasn't taking them as regularly as Lacy," Keoni said, "Gideon's dying to go visit him but is afraid the family won't let him in."

"If they only knew that it was the God they don't believe in who healed their son," Brielle said.

"We believe that because we know His power and we know He answers prayer," Jace said, "But some people spend a lifetime not knowing anything about God. The only time they may even hear His name is when someone is swearing."

"Yeah, that's true," Brielle agreed, "I have to stop and remind myself of that to help me be more patient and understanding. I just can't imagine what it would be like to live without my relationship with God in my life."

Before long, they reached the tour site on Beach Road. As they exited the

buses, they were warmly welcomed by Fairfield Historians who were dressed in colonial garb. All the students were now intrigued to see what they would learn on this adventure, even those who didn't care about it in the beginning.

There were several guys dressed as Minutemen in Revolution-styled hats and coats - they carried rifles and wore haversacks which resembled the one Benjamin had given to Gideon. Another man was dressed in period costume as a minister - he held an unlit lantern and wore little round spectacles on his nose.

Then there was a woman with golden blonde hair who was dressed in an elegant colonial gown. Her hair was partially up with curled ringlets that hung down gracefully around her neck. Her dress was cream-colored with a green floral print. The gown was long, flowing down to her feet, and cinched up in the back with golden ribbons. She spoke with great articulation and eloquence. "We would like to welcome the history class students of Fairfield High. My name is Emma, and I will start you on your tour."

"First," Emma continued, "we would like to tell you that this is a special occasion for all of us giving the tour today. We usually do this tour on July 7th to commemorate the day that the burning of Fairfield took place. However, we want to reach more local students of our community and in doing so, have offered to do these special tours while school is in session," she said, taking out a small black book.

"Before we begin, I would like to tell you now where we gathered our information about Fairfield. The people who lived in our beautiful town during the year 1779 kept excellent diaries. These diaries have been preserved by the Fairfield Historical Society. The people who lived through this terrible tragedy told of their experience in great detail. In many parts of the tour, we will read portions from those hand-written experiences to give you a clearer understanding of just what happened here over two hundred years ago," she said. With that, she began the tour.

Emma was completely engaging in her discussion of Fairfield history – not just because of her beauty, but she was an excellent teacher of history. All the students were fascinated by the story she told.

Brielle was listening intently when suddenly she felt a sneeze coming on. She reached into her purse for a tissue. She hadn't thought about taking an allergy pill today, but obviously, there was something in the air here that did not agree with her system. When she looked up from her purse, she noticed someone standing across the road by a large oak tree. Many other people were walking around the area who were not part of the class tour, so she wasn't surprised to see someone standing there, but she thought she recognized the person.

As she stared at the person by the tree, she heard Jace's voice whisper, "Are you okay?"

She looked up at him and smiled, "Yeah," she whispered, "just having some

allergies," as she took out another tissue to keep in her hand.

Brielle tried to get her mind focused back on Emma's story. Emma told of the thousands of British soldiers who landed on the shores of Fairfield. Because of the town's strong support for the rebellion against the Crown, the British troops began to plunder, terrorize, and burn the homes of those who lived in Fairfield.

"The Majority of the menfolk of Fairfield were away fighting in the Revolutionary War," Emma explained, "So most of the people here that night were women, children, and the elderly."

Brielle looked back at the Oak tree to find the person she had seen a few moments ago. She saw no sign of him.

"What's wrong?" Keoni asked, noticing her friend's expression.

Brielle shook her head, "Nothing," she whispered.

After Emma had given her introduction to the tour, the class walked down the street following guides dressed as Minutemen. One guide was young and handsome - Keoni looked over at Brielle with bright eyes and lifted her eyebrows quickly to express her interest in the guide. "I wonder how old he is?" she whispered to Brielle.

"He would make a nice date to Homecoming," Brielle whispered back. After she said this, she noticed Jace listening to their conversation. His eyes immediately dropped to the ground. Brielle felt bad. She didn't mean a date for her; she meant for Keoni. She was about to explain this to Jace when she saw the stranger by the Oak tree.

The man was standing at a distance, watching the group. He was the same shaggy blonde-headed man who stared at her during the football game. The same man she thought she saw one morning at the back of the church. He was standing across the street, leaning against the tree, just watching her. She knew he spotted her, and she saw him smile. A spark of fear shot down her spine, and she gasped.

"What is it?" Jace whispered.

Brielle looked up at Jace, trying to calm down, "I saw that man… I saw that man again. He's standing back there by that tree." When she looked back across the street, the man was gone.

Jace turned to where she was looking and whispered, "Who? What man?"

Keoni came closer to hear what was happening, "What's wrong?" she asked.

Brielle stared at the ground for a moment in confusion, then she turned back to look for him again. He was nowhere to be found.

"What is it, Bri?" Keoni pressed.

"I saw that man again," Brielle whispered in a puzzled tone, "at least I thought I did."

"What man?" Keoni asked.

"The man from the football game who kept watching me," she whispered, "I thought I saw him one day at church, and just now I thought I saw him by that tree. He was watching me, and when I looked at him, he smiled."

Jace turned and walked closer to the street, looking up and down for anyone who looked like the man. Keoni could see her friend was shaken, and she put her arm around her, "It's okay, Bri, maybe he just looked like that guy."

"Yeah, maybe," Brielle said.

The group moved to another location on the tour. Brielle tried to shake off her experience and concentrate on the story another guide was telling.

"The British troops set fire to every building they could find before leaving the town," the guide began. "The total establishments burned were 169, which included homes, two churches, farms, barns, the county courthouse, and the county jail," he said. "The destruction was so severe that when President George Washington visited Fairfield in 1789, ten years after the attack, he made the note in his personal journal that read *'The destructive evidences of British cruelty are yet visible both in Norwalk and Fairfield, as there are the chimneys of many burnt houses standing in them yet."*

Brielle was just getting her mind back into the story when she had the feeling she was being watched. Slowly, her eyes searched the area. She didn't want to give away her intentions and have him disappear again. She covered the areas to the front, then all the areas around her to the right, and then to her left. She couldn't find him. She told herself she was just being paranoid and forced herself to focus on the story.

"There were no firehouses back then," the older gentleman guide said, "people could only use buckets of water to put out a fire. This would be a difficult task if it were just one small house on fire, so imagine the entire town engulfed in flames… There was nothing the townsfolk could do to stop it," he said.

"I see him," Keoni whispered quickly, causing Brielle to jump in surprise, "he's across the street behind us. Don't look or he might run off again."

"Who is this guy, and what does he want?" Brielle whispered.

The fear came rushing back through Brielle, and instinctively, she grabbed Jace's arm. Jace reached up and placed his hand on hers. "It's going to be okay," he whispered, slowly positioning himself so he could see in the direction Keoni was looking.

"Is he wearing a light tan jacket?" Brielle whispered.

"Yeah," Jace answered, "I see him."

"What should we do?" Keoni asked.

They all stood there silently pretending to listen to the tour guide's story, then Jace took his hand and gently pulled Brielle's grip from around his arm, holding her hand softly for a moment.

He looked at Keoni, "I want you to keep her here with Mr. Bennet," he said,

giving Brielle's hand a light squeeze, then before either girl could speak, he turned and walked away.

The man immediately saw Jace walking toward him. They locked eyes for a split second, and then the man turned and ran down the road back toward the Historical Museum. Jace broke into a hard sprint, chasing him down the road. The man turned suddenly to the right and threw himself over a stone wall that surrounded a cemetery. Jace was close behind him and followed him over the wall and into the cemetery. The chase continued as the two leapt over headstones and dodged low-hanging tree branches. The man saw the entrance to the cemetery and headed out the main gates with Jace fast on his heels. He headed back on another road and ran directly into an intersection. A car skidded to a stop to prevent hitting him.

Jace was so close to the man that he had to jump onto the car and slide across the hood to avoid being hit. The man ran down the sidewalk, knocking into people, then headed down an alley. Jace did not hesitate to follow, but was more careful of the people he passed. The man ran to the end of the alley, where there was a chain link fence. As he was a very tall and lanky-framed man, he easily scaled the fence and dropped to the other side before Jace reached the end of the alley.

Jace followed, climbing up the fence and dropping to the ground running. He followed the man through a residential neighborhood until he saw him run into the forest behind the homes. By the time Jace reached the edge of the woods, he could not see the man. Without hesitation, he started to go into the forest. Suddenly, he heard something,

"Jace, stop," whispered a voice. He froze midstride and quickly looked behind him. Not seeing anyone, he started to head toward the woods again.

"Jace, stop," the voice whispered. Jace spun around in surprise, searching in all directions to see who was speaking to him. He saw no one. He stood for a moment and leaned his hands on his legs to catch his breath, frustrated that his chase ended in failure. He tried to calm himself and closed his eyes.

"God, is that you speaking to me to stop?" Jace whispered. Just then, the sound of cracking wood split the silence. Jace opened his eyes to see a large branch of a tree break off and fall, completely blocking the trail the man had taken.

Jace's eyes widened in astonishment; there was no more need to question whether or not the Lord was trying to stop Jace from pursuing the man any farther. A mixture of emotions rushed over him: the excitement of seeing the hand of God do something so deliberate, the shock of audibly hearing God's voice speaking to him, and the humility to know that the God of all creation cared enough about him at that moment to stop him from potential danger.

"Thank You, God," he whispered, "thank You. Please don't let that man hurt Brielle. Please, keep her safe and help us find out who he is," he prayed.

His prayer was interrupted as he heard someone calling to him, but this wasn't the voice of God; it was a police officer. Jace turned and ran to the officer. when he got closer, he saw that it was Hadley, the officer he had first met at the mini mart the day of the burglary.

"What's going on?" Hadley asked, "Are you alright?"

Jace nodded, "Yes, Sir, I'm fine."

"Can you tell me what happened?" Hadley asked. Jace began to explain, starting back to the night that Brielle first saw the man at the football game.

"You know you shouldn't have gone after him like that," Hadley said, "Who knows what could have happened to you?"

Jace lowered his head, "I don't know what came over me, it all happened so fast."

"Okay," Hadley said, "Give me a description and then I'll drive you back to your class. I'll need to talk to Brielle and Keoni too," he said, opening the door to get into his police car.

As they drove back, they saw that Mr. Bennet had returned to the Historical Museum with Brielle and Keoni. Not all the students had seen Jace chase the man, but Mr. Bennet had. The teacher made his way to the back of the group to Brielle and Keoni to ask what had happened. He left the students with the group chaperones and called the police. He then walked Brielle back to the museum to wait for an officer. When Brielle saw Jace, she was immediately relieved.

"Are you alright? What happened?" she asked eagerly.

Jace reassured her, "I'm fine, but he got away," he said.

Hadley hugged Keoni and then Brielle, "Okay, honey, he said, why don't you tell me everything you can about this man?"

While the girls were talking to Hadley, Mr. Bennet approached Jace, "Are you alright?" he asked.

Jace nodded, "Yes, Sir, I'm fine," he said.

"Brielle told me about this man," Mr. Bennet said, "We need to report this to Principal Stevens, and I think it would be a good idea if she called her parents."

"Only her mother is living," Jace said softly, "but she also lives with her grandfather," Jace said, taking out his phone. "I know him well. I'll call him now."

Jace called Obadiah and explained what happened. Oba told Jace that Genevieve and Asher were out on the horses and didn't have a cell phone, so he would come immediately.

"I hope that the officer already reprimanded you for chasing after that guy," Mr. Bennet said kindly to Jace, who nodded shyly.

"Why did you do that?" Mr. Bennet asked curiously. Jace stood there silently for a moment, looking at Brielle while trying to find his words.

"I… well, I just…" he stammered, looking from the ground to Brielle.

Alright," Mr. Bennet said, patting Jace on the shoulder, "I can see it in your

eyes when you look at her, but you're still a kid and can't place yourself in danger, okay?" he nodded at Jace and then excused himself to check on the rest of his students.

Brielle and Keoni had told Hadley everything—not only about the mysterious man, but also all about their conversation with Rateesh.

Just as Brielle and Keoni finished telling their story to Hadley, Obadiah pulled into the parking lot. Brielle went out to meet him. He hugged her and kissed her on the top of her head. Hadley, Jace, and Keoni came out to greet him.

"Do you want to go home or go back to school?" Obadiah asked Brielle.

"I'll go back to school. I'm fine, really," she said.

Obadiah hugged and kissed her again. "Alright. Why don't you three go ahead on back to your class while I talk with Hadley?" They all said their goodbyes to Hadley and Obadiah and then caught up with the group to finish the tour. Mr. Bennet stayed close to Brielle for the rest of their time together.

After the tour, they had lunch. They boarded the bus to go back to school. Brielle sat with Jace. She didn't know what to say to him. To know that he chased after a stranger who was possibly dangerous for her was a little bit overwhelming.

"Can I ask you something?" she asked Jace softly.

"Sure," he said, looking at her with his beautiful, dark brown eyes.

"Why did you do that back there? Why did you go after that man?" she asked.

Jace took a deep breath, "I don't know. I guess I wanted to find out who he was."

Brielle looked at him, dissatisfied with his answer, "You don't know why you took off after a man and chased him for over a mile?"

"Why did you jump out in front of a robber with a gun?" Jace asked.

Brielle was taken aback by his question, "I don't know. It wasn't something I thought about. I just did it."

Jace nodded, "Okay, it wasn't something I thought about. I just did it..."

"But people could have been hurt in the robbery, or even died," she said, "I wasn't in any real danger just now."

"You don't know that," he said quickly, then tried to retract, "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to scare you or anything, it's just that…"

Brielle waited for his answer. "What?"

Jace lowered his head. "It's just that I worry about anything dangerous happening to you."

Brielle sat quietly processing his answer. It warmed her heart.

"You shouldn't worry, you know. The Bible tells us that when we worry about things, we are not exercising our faith that God will take care of us. It's in, um," she said, tapping her forehead lightly with her eyes closed, trying to

remember, “It’s in Philippians 4:6, *‘Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God,’*” she recited.

Jace stared at her with a look of amazement. “How do you remember so much?”

“It’s remembering the book, chapter, and verse that I am working on now, but I learned the verse years ago. My father taught it to me,” she said softly, looking out the window.

“Did he teach you a lot of scriptures?” he asked.

“Yes. He was a pastor, you know, a missionary. He loved to teach me scriptures, and I loved to see the look on his face when I could remember them. It worked out well for both of us,” she smiled, “I liked pleasing my earthly father and my Heavenly Father, because it’s pretty awesome to know God’s Word.”

“I need to know more of it,” Jace said.

“Me too,” Brielle said, “it’s like I can never learn enough about the Bible.”

“I know,” Jace agreed, “I can’t wait to get to the Prayer Sanctum on Sunday. I wish we didn’t have to wait until the evening. I wish we could go sooner and spend more time learning.”

“Who says we have to wait?” Brielle asked, “Obadiah said that he wanted us to use it whenever we wanted to, we just have to go in pairs.”

“Do you think we could go there after church on Sunday, I mean like right after lunch?” he asked.

“Sure,” she answered happily.

“Good,” he said, “I wish we could spend a whole day there sometime.”

“If you ever decide to take a Saturday off, we can,” she said.

Jace nodded, “I’d like to do that.”

“Do you work all day tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “but I’m looking forward to it. I love working with those guys and being out on the water.”

“Just be careful,” she said softly.

Jace looked at her and smiled shrewdly, “You’re not worried about me, are you? What was that scripture you just said again? Do not be anxious about *anything,*” he teased.

“Hush,” she said, patting her hand in the air. He reached up and grabbed her hand to hold it gently in his, sending the butterflies soaring down through her arm and on through the rest of her.

“By the way, thank you,” Brielle said softly.

“For what?” Jace asked.

“For caring about me so much,” she said.

21

As the fall season progressed, it brought with it cold October mornings, especially when out on the open seas. Jace got ready to go to work that Saturday. He dressed in layers and pulled on a black knit toboggan hat to wear underneath his motorcycle helmet. As he left, there was no one there to tell him goodbye, no one to pray over him or hug him and wish him a good day. The sun still had not risen as he headed down the road to work.

On his way to the docks, he stopped at the mini-mart to get hot chocolate and a package of powdered donuts; powerful memories of the day he met Brielle flooding his mind as he did. Ever since he started to work on his father's boat, he had stopped at this store before his Saturday shift to grab a bite to eat, but he never knew any of the people who frequently occupied it. After the day of the robbery, he changed that. He was now friends with the manager; both clerks and even the two old men who liked to sit, play checkers, and tell fishing stories by the front window over a cup of hot coffee. It was like the incident, as horrible as it was, had united them. Now, when Jace came in on Saturday morning, he was warmly greeted by everyone who was usually there. He made sure that he left his house a little early so he could spend some time visiting with them before work.

While riding to the boat docks, he talked with God, thanking Him for sparing his life that day and for sparing the lives of the others who were there. Most of all, He thanked God for bringing Brielle into his life. He thought about the man he had chased the day before and asked God once again to keep His hand of protection around Brielle, her family, Keoni, Gideon, and Rateesh. Then he prayed for the day's work ahead. Working on a fishing boat always had its risks, so he asked the Lord to bless the boat, Capt. Espindola and the rest of the crew.

When he arrived at the docks, he was greeted with the usual teasing and jokes that he received from his crewmates. All was done for good fun, and Jace had come to know that it was their way of making him feel like part of the crew. Capt. Espindola always had a bright smile for Jace each week as he gave him his list of grueling chores – chores that none of the other crewmates wanted to do. But Jace took all his tasks happily and was a diligent worker, never complaining and always trying to do the best job he possibly could, a trait he had learned from his father.

Capt. Espindola had plans to fish along the north coast and told Jace that if the Lord showed them favor, he would be home and in his warm bed by ten o'clock. When Jace heard this, he began to pray extra hard for the blessings of God to be upon them. He needed to be finished before ten o'clock tonight, and God knew why. All through the day, every time a full net of fish was brought up onto the boat, Jace gave God praise. Even though it meant smelly, dirty work for him, he did it with joy. So much so that the rest of the crew noticed his

excitement and jokingly said he was the boat's best fish packer they had ever seen.

Throughout the day, as Jace rejoiced in the fish that were being poured upon them, he still hoped they would be done early, as Capt. Espindola had said. As he worked packing and salting the loads of fish the crew was catching, his mind began to wander about more pleasant things. He thought about Brielle. Just the thought of her beautiful face could make the worst circumstances seem better. He couldn't wait to see her again tomorrow; just knowing he would spend the entire day with her was exhilarating. To be able to look at her, talk to her, take in her sweet aroma, hear the sound of her voice, and, when he could, hold her hand. It was enough to make him work harder as if hard work would make the time go faster.

The time did go by quickly, though, and soon the sun began to set. Capt. Espindola said they would cast out a few more times, but that God had shown them great favor that day, and they would be able to head for home soon. Jace knew that the work on the docks would still take him several hours, but he also knew that if Capt. Espindola was true to his word, he would be finished well before the ten o'clock hour—and Capt. Espindola tried to *always* be true to his word.

Soon it was seven o'clock, the crew had collected more full nets of fish that day than they had in a long time, and the hold could fit no more. Capt. Espindola turned the boat to head back for the docks. Jace, finished with his work on the boat, sat down on a deck crate and took in the vast sea around him. He loved to be out on a boat. The motion of the sea was not something that had ever bothered him physically, and he loved the spray of the waves on his face and the salty wind blowing around him. He relaxed for a moment and stretched his legs out as he took in the view. Javier, one of the crew members, came over to talk to him as they enjoyed the ride home.

"Want a cigarette?" Javier asked.

"No thanks," Jace said politely.

"You don't smoke, huh?" he asked.

"No," Jace answered.

"Never? Never even took a hit or nothin'?" Javier asked, surprised.

Jace shook his head, "Nope, nothin'."

"Huh," Javier replied, "Good for you. It's a terrible habit," he said as he lit a cigarette, "I wish I'd never started."

"How long have you been smoking?" Jace asked.

"Lemme see," Javier said, squinting his eyes in thought, trying to remember, "it's been so long. I guess over 20 years now. I started when I was about your age—how old are you?"

"Seventeen," Jace said.

"Nope, I take it back… I was younger," Javier said.

"Do you want to quit?" Jace asked.

"Yeah, sure… I've tried dozens of times. Get healthy, ya know? I've tried gum, patches, medication, heck, I even tried… what's it called? Hyp-no-therapy? But, nothing worked," he sighed.

Jace took a deep breath. "Have you ever tried Jesus?" he asked softly, feeling a bit nervous as this was his first time witnessing someone.

Javier looked at him with raised eyebrows, "Jesus?" he asked, then he sat back in thought for a moment, "No… I can't say that I have tried that," he laughed.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" Jace asked gently.

Javier nodded, "Yeah, man. My family is from Portugal, and we're Roman Catholic."

"Smoking isn't too hard for Jesus to help change, you know. There is nothing too hard for Jesus," Jace said, "If you would like, I can pray for you about it."

Javier smiled, "Are you a priest?"

Jace laughed and put his head down, "Nope. But I know how to pray, and I will pray for you about it."

"You think your prayers would help?" Javier asked.

"Yes, I do," Jace said, "Matthew 19:26 says, '*With God all things are possible*'."

Javier took a long drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly, "Okay, you pray for me, and I will tell you how it goes," he said, standing up to pat Jace on the shoulder. Then he went back to his work on the deck. Jace gave a sigh of relief. Although he knew Capt. Espindola and his wife Debbie loved God, but he had never discussed God with any of his crewmates. He was happy he had the chance to finally do so and that it went well.

Before long, Capt. Espindola was pulling into the docks, and Jace got a second wind of energy. He jumped up and began his work to transfer the fish from the boat to the dock. He worked fast, getting into a rhythm, and he didn't miss a beat. The rest of the crew couldn't keep up with him.

"If you haven't smoked anything in your life," Javier teased, "What on earth are you taking to move so fast?"

Jace just laughed and said, "The joy of the Lord is my strength! Nehemiah 8:10!"

Javier smiled at Jace's reply and nodded his head, "I like that, that's good…" he laughed, "The joy of the Lord…. that's good."

The time was 9:15 pm when Jace was mopping up. He was already finished with transferring and packing the day's catch. Capt. Espindola and the rest of the crew thanked him for his excellent work.

"I think he had too much coffee," one of the crew members said.

"I think he ate too many powdered donuts," said another.

"No, you're all wrong," Capt. Espindola said, "I know where energy like that comes from… that boy's in love."

At this comment, Jace stopped mopping and looked up at Capt. Espindola in surprise, he didn't say a word--and he didn't have to. The rest of the crew jumped on the comment as prime teasing material and hounded Jace until each one of them had left the docks, saying "See ya later, Romeo!" as they departed.

Jace looked at his watch; it was 9:45 pm; he had plenty of time. He jumped on his motorcycle and headed down the coastline toward Montier's Point. Ever since Rateesh had told him about the four guys from chemistry class coming into his restaurant every other week, a thought had plagued his mind. He decided to come here and watch the abandoned lighthouse for the mysterious green light that he had seen at ten o'clock one other Saturday night while out at sea. He couldn't stop thinking about it. He had prayed and asked the Lord for direction and felt strongly led to come and watch the lighthouse. After the boat had such a successful fishing day and he got off so early, he believed that this was the hand of God helping him along.

His plan was not to go up to the lighthouse, but to stay on the shore in an area where he would clearly see anything out of the ordinary. There was a perfect place he knew about along the shore. He rode there, then parked his motorcycle, took off his helmet, and waited. It was six minutes until ten o'clock. The sea winds were blowing strongly, and as he sat there waiting, he grew very cold. He walked a little way down the beach to stand on the shore, just staring at the lighthouse. He didn't want to look away for a second – he wanted to know the origin of the strange light.

The moon was a waning crescent, so the sky was dark-- except for the stars that brilliantly sparkled around him, but there was just enough light to see the lighthouse. He stood still, gazing at the dilapidated old structure; it stood as a silent silhouette on the edge of the cliff. How wonderful it would be if Capt. Espindola could see his dream come true and retire there with his wife Debbie.

"Capt. Espindola," he thought to himself, "Why did he say I was in love? Do I act like I'm in love? Is what I feel for Brielle what love feels like?" he wondered to himself.

Jace did not remember seeing many examples of love in his home outside of his relationship with his grandmother. He believed his parents both loved him in the best way they knew how to love, but not enough to be a constant part of his life. He knew how he felt about the Lord and the love Jesus had for him, but this was different. He thought about Brielle most of the time. He had tried to discipline himself *not* to think about her so he could concentrate on school and other things. He wanted to be with her every chance he could. To be in her company, listen to her thoughts and dreams, and look into her green eyes. He loved how she loved God, and he wanted to learn everything he could about her and, most of all, to keep her safe. He couldn't bear the thought of anything

happening to her. So then… was that what being "in love" was?

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted as he saw it: a bright green light shining in the mirror of the lighthouse. His heart began to beat faster. There was a surge of energy that swept over him as he was validated in his feelings to go there that night.

Jace stood motionless; his eyes fixed on the light as it glowed for a few seconds and then went out. He stood there, a rush of adrenaline flowing through his entire body. He was thrilled to know that he didn't imagine seeing the light, or that it was because he needed more sleep. Suddenly, it flashed again. It lit the tower top in a strange green light, held for several seconds, and then vanished. He was even more excited to have it proven again, but at the same time, puzzled by the second illumination.

"Strange," he thought to himself, "I know it lit once the last time. What does this mean?"

Patiently, he stayed, watching and waiting to see if more illuminations appeared, but after a while, he grew too cold to stay and decided to head for home.

When he reached his house, it was quiet as usual. His father was away working, and he hadn't heard from his mother in weeks. He took a hot shower and found some leftovers in the kitchen. Looking at the clock, he saw it was almost eleven, and he wondered if Brielle was sleeping and how she had spent her day.

He thought about her family and their beautiful home and how he could feel the love and joy there by just walking in the front door. How he loved to be with all of them, and Gideon, Keoni, and he couldn't wait for tomorrow when he could be with them and go back to the Prayer Sanctum. He got excited just thinking about it. He completely enjoyed his Intercessors training and was hungry for more. But tonight, he needed to sleep. He wanted to ride up to the lighthouse first thing in the morning to check it out and see what he could find. Was there some sort of mechanism that was creating the light? What was it for? Who was it signaling and why? All these questions would have to wait until tomorrow.

At seven-thirty in the morning, Jace's alarm went off. He slapped the snooze button a few times—a few times more than he thought he did. When he finally woke, it was eight o'clock. He jumped up and dressed for church, still determined to ride up to the lighthouse before going to the Cross Café. He grabbed a bag and threw in a change of clothes so that he could go straight to the Prayer Sanctum after lunch, as Brielle had mentioned.

He grabbed a quick breakfast and was on his way by 8:15 am. As he rode, he prayed and thanked God for the beautiful day, asking Him to keep Brielle and her family safe. He prayed for all his friends, especially Lacy and Rateesh. He asked God to please help Javier quit smoking, permanently. He thanked God for the

miracle of Dylan's healing, and he asked that God would use him that day to do something good for His glory to fulfill His purpose.

After a chilly ride, Jace finally pulled up to the old lighthouse. He used to come here often before he met Brielle. It was a place where he could sit with his thoughts and dreams and enjoy the amazing view of the town nestled along the seaport. The lighthouse was mostly used as a party place for teenagers now, and the partygoers "tagged" it through the years with graffiti and other works of art.

Jace reached into a compartment on his motorcycle and pulled out a can of mace. He also took a small buck knife that had belonged to his grandfather. Something or someone had to create the light in the tower last night, and if it--or they were still there, he wasn't going to take any chances.

Jace passed by the abandoned house attached to the light tower. It was severely weathered - its doors and windows were gone. He could see that no one was inside. As he looked up to the outer part of the lighthouse tower, he walked around its circumference in search of any kind of device or lighting mechanism that could have triggered the perplexing green light from the outside. There was none. Carefully, he approached the doorway to the lighthouse. The door had long ago been torn down by destructive kids, leaving the tower open for intruders, including seagulls and other seashore birds. Jace remembered the time when he came in to find a pelican sitting on the staircase railing, which was quite a surprise as pelicans don't normally travel this far north.

Slowly, he entered the tower and stood, letting his eyes adjust to the light inside.

"Hello!" he called out, his voice echoing up the tower walls.

"Hello!" he called again.

Once his eyes had adjusted to the dim interior and he could see clearly, he slowly entered the tower. There wasn't much left other than the metal staircase - it spiraled up to the service room. There were several old wooden crates stacked around, beer bottles and cans were scattered on the floor, along with piles of trash. Toward the back of the tower, there was a doorway that led to the attached house. Just past that doorway, there was a short hallway. Jace slowly walked toward it. The sunlight from the tower door showed there was no one there either. He stepped back and used his foot to nudge an old cleaning bucket full of dirty water out of the way.

Jace looked around at the graffiti, paintings, and writings that covered the walls. He had spent many an hour examining these works when he had visited before. Some of the paintings were quite good, and some of the poetry, but mostly, it was just a mess of artistic expression done from teenage boredom.

Slowly, he walked to the steps and began his ascent upward to the service room. With each step, a muffled thud of pressure rumbled up the metal staircase. As he climbed higher, his heart pounded faster; a combination of physical exertion and adrenaline for what might be in store.

Finally, he reached the top step and entered the service room. There were several places where the glass had been broken from the top of the windowpanes. Yet, ironically, the mirrors of the lens remained completely intact; an apparatus that even the most rebellious teen would find intriguing enough not to destroy.

He walked the circumference of the service room, searching outside and in for some sort of device that could have created the green light, but again, there was nothing to be found. He stood there perplexed for a moment and then glanced at his watch. He needed to get going so he would not be late for church.

Slowly, he came down the metal stairs, as many of the steps needed repair. Around and around, he went until he had almost reached the bottom, when something caught his eye. He stopped and stared, trying to recall seeing it here before, but he did not. He climbed down the steps and walked over to stand directly in front of it. There on the wall was a new drawing, one he had never seen before and would certainly remember if he had. It was of an arm and hand that was holding several rings, which were connected and dangling down. They were not the kind of rings one would wear, but just circles linked together. One ring was missing from the middle, separating those that were in the hand from those hanging lower.

Jace studied the drawing closely. It wasn't a good drawing, like some of the others, but it stood out for two reasons: it was something new, and because of the way it looked. The other drawings or paintings were done with spray paint or markers. But this image was not done with either. The image was done in all black lines, but the lines were too thick to be that of a marker, and they were too thin and dull in color to be that of paint.

He reached out and touched the image to see what instrument was used to make the drawing. To his surprise, the image came off the tower wall and onto his finger.

"Is this charcoal?" he wondered. Thinking that this was something significant enough to photograph, he reached into his pocket for his smartphone and snapped a few pictures.

Jace walked out of the tower and passed by the house, taking another look at the photo on his phone before climbing onto his motorcycle to head for church. He looked at his watch and saw that he was already late. He had always promised his father that as long as he rode the motorcycle, he would be careful and never speed. But he had also learned from his father not to be late. So, he settled in for the ride and prepared to apologize for his tardiness.

When Brielle arrived at the church that morning, she was met at the door by Gideon.

"Did Keoni tell you about Giovanni?" he asked.

"Yeah, I talked to her about it the other night," she said, "I feel so bad for her and yet, at the same time, I'm so proud of her."

"Me too," Gideon said, "I'd like to deck that punk for hurting my sister," he started, "But I know I can't."

When they walked into the classroom, Keoni was talking with Valerie and Taylor. Brielle greeted everyone and grabbed her usual chocolate milk and powdered donuts from the food and beverages Obadiah served each Sunday. She couldn't wait to see Jace.

Brielle took her food and sat down to chat with the other kids in class until Obadiah came in to begin the day's lesson. Brielle looked at the clock; it was nine o'clock exactly. "Where was Jace?" she thought.

Obadiah greeted the class, opened with prayer, and then began his lesson.

"Today, we are going to learn more about our Spiritual Gifts. I like to call this lesson *'The Three U's of Spiritual Gifts,'*" he said as he wrote them on the board, "They are: Understanding, Using, and Unraveling."

Gideon raised his hand, "Unraveling?" he asked, perplexed, "Doesn't that mean to untangle?"

Obadiah chuckled, "Yes, it can mean that too, but it also means to expand."

"Ah," Gideon said sincerely, "then why didn't you just say that?"

"Well… I wanted to call the lesson the three "U's", and I needed another "U" word," Obadiah grinned.

The class laughed, including Gideon, "I got it," he said.

Brielle looked at the clock; it was now 9:10. Keoni saw her looking at the time.

"Is Jace coming today?" she whispered.

Brielle shrugged, "I thought so."

As Obadiah continued with his lesson, the time passed. Soon it was 9:20, and Brielle was beginning to worry; she couldn't concentrate on her grandfather's lesson.

Brielle looked over at Keoni as if to say, "Where is he?"

"I'm sure he's okay," Keoni whispered.

"I know you like them, but I *hate* that he rides a motorcycle everywhere. It scares me to death. I'd rather he rides a horse," she whispered.

Brielle tried to quiet her mind and focus on the lesson. Obadiah had called Valerie to the front of the class to talk to her about her Spiritual gifts and show her how she could use them. Brielle was trying to focus on listening to Valerie when she heard the sound of a motorcycle engine passing by their classroom window. Though she couldn't see out to the parking lot from where she was sitting, she breathed a sigh of relief to find out that he was there and alright. A moment later, he walked through the door with a humble look on his face. He crossed the room to sit by Brielle, disrupting the class as all the girls in the room turned to watch him.

"Hey," he whispered, "I'm so sorry I'm late."

"I'm just glad you made it," Brielle whispered.

Now that Jace was here, safe and sound, she could give one hundred percent of her attention to her grandfather's lesson.

After class, Jace immediately went to apologize to Obadiah for his late arrival.

"Don't worry, Son, I'm just glad you made it," Obadiah smiled, shaking Jace's hand. "Most young men who work a Saturday shift like you might not even try to make it to church on a Sunday morning."

"Thank you, Sir," Jace said shyly, "I appreciate that. I would like to ask you a question before we go into service."

"Of course," Obadiah said.

"I was wondering if we might be able to start our Intercessor training earlier this afternoon?" he asked.

"Yes, do you need to be done early?" Obadiah asked.

"No, it's not that," Jace said, "I don't have to leave early at all. I just would like to spend more time studying all I can."

Obadiah's face lit up, "Absolutely," he said cheerfully. "I assume you all will go out to eat for lunch today. Why don't you just come on over when you are finished?"

Jace smiled broadly, "Thank you. I'd love to," he answered happily. Then he went out to join Brielle for the morning service.

The service was beautiful and refreshing for all those in attendance. The worship was powerful, and the Spirit of the Lord was strong in the sanctuary. The choir sang a song which featured Gideon as a soloist. Jace was impressed by the talent he didn't know his friend possessed. Pastor Diffie gave an inspiring message to the congregation on constantly seeking God's will for everything.

Lacy's parents, Jim and Laura, along with nurse Carrie and her family, all came to the service just as they said they would. Obadiah and the Intercessors made sure they sat with them to make them feel welcome and part of the church family. Pastor Diffie had a special prayer for Lacy during the service. During the prayer time at the altar, both Jim and Laura went down to receive prayer for Lacy and themselves. God truly blessed the service with His presence.

After the service was over, Obadiah and Genevieve introduced Jim, Laura, and Carrie to many of the church members, who all said they would be keeping Lacy in their daily prayers. Obadiah and Genevieve wanted to take them out for lunch, but Carrie had to go to work, and Jim and Laura wanted to get to the hospital to be with Lacy, so they took Alma and Magomu out to lunch instead.

Jace was anxious to talk to Brielle, Keoni, and Gideon about his discoveries at the lighthouse. He suggested lunch. "I was wondering how you feel about Indian food?" he asked Gideon.

Brielle and Keoni immediately knew why Jace was asking this question.

"I don't know that I have ever eaten Indian food…" Gideon began.

"Good grief, here we go," Keoni said dryly, "Mr. Picky strikes again."

"As I was saying," Gideon said over his sister's interruption, "I will try anything at least once."

"Excellent!" Jace said excitedly, "Let's go to Rateesh's restaurant. I have something I need to tell all of you and Rateesh."

Brielle was thrilled to hear that Jace wanted to talk to them about something and couldn't wait to hear it.

The friends headed to *Dilli Rasoi*. When they arrived and were seated, Priyanka came and greeted them at their table. She was thrilled to see them, especially Jace.

"Is your brother working today?" Jace asked her.

"Yes, he's in the back. I will get him for you," Priyanka answered.

"Is Brian working today?" he asked softly.

"No. Brian takes Sundays off, but my father is here. Is there something that you need?" she asked.

"No, no," Jace smiled at her sweetly, "I was just curious. But if Rateesh isn't too busy to talk, I would like to speak with him."

Brielle sat quietly, taking in this conversation. She had to admit that Priyanka's obvious attraction to Jace made her feel a little jealous.

"What's going on?" Keoni asked Jace when Priyanka had left the table.

"Let's place our order and then I'll tell you all about it," Jace said.

Once they had all figured out what they wanted and were ready to place their order, Priyanka returned with Rateesh. Jace asked if he had time to talk with them.

"Yeah," Rateesh said, "But first, what can we bring you to drink?"

He then went and retrieved their drinks before joining them at their table. All were eager to hear what Jace had to say—especially Brielle.

"Rateesh," Jace began in a low tone, trying to subdue his voice so as not to be heard by others, "Do you remember when you told us that Reed and his guys would come to eat here every other Thursday?"

"Yeah," Rateesh answered, "they were not in this past Thursday, but they were in the week before that."

"Okay. Two weeks ago, we were out fishing around Montier's Point when I saw a strange green light that was glowing in the old, abandoned lighthouse," he began. "This light was not like something I had ever seen in a lighthouse before. It only illuminated the tower top for a few seconds, and it only flashed once."

"When was this again?" Rateesh asked.

"Two Saturday nights ago," Jace said almost in a whisper. "I haven't stopped thinking about that light since I saw it, and I felt led to go watch for it last night," he said.

"Did you?" Keoni asked, intrigued.

"Yes," Jace answered, "We had an incredible fishing day and got back much earlier than we usually do. God worked it all out for me to be free last night.

When I finished my shift, I rode down to Montier's Point on the shoreline where I could see the tower clearly," he paused to look around the table, "And at exactly ten o'clock, it did it again."

"Really? Did it look the same as before?" Brielle asked.

"The light was the same green color," Jace said, "But this time, instead of it flashing once, it did it twice for a few seconds each time."

"Wow," Keoni whispered, "that's bizarre."

"Yeah, and it gets more so," Jace said softly, leaning forward, "This morning before church, I rode up there to check it out and see if I could find what made the light appear. I couldn't find anything; there was nothing at all that could create any kind of light."

"That's why you were late to class this morning," Brielle said.

Jace grinned, "That and the fact that I couldn't get out of bed this morning," he answered, then he lowered his voice again, "The mirror of the lens is completely intact. The lighthouse could most definitely give off some sort of light reflection, but there is nothing I saw there that could generate any source of light inside or outside."

"What do you think is creating it?" Gideon asked.

"I'm not totally sure, that's why I wanted to talk to all of you about it. There was also something I saw inside the tower that was different," Jace said.

"What do you mean, different?" Brielle asked.

"I used to go up there a lot," Jace replied. "I always hoped there would be a way for it to be restored, and then Capt. Espindola could live in it," he answered. "The whole inside of the lighthouse tower is covered with graffiti. There are paintings and poems plastered all over the place. Some of the art is very good, and when I've been up there, I take the time to study it all. But I saw a drawing today that I had never seen before. It didn't seem to fit with all the other artwork there. It wasn't a great drawing; it just stood out because it was so bizarre. Plus, it looked like it was done in black chalk or charcoal."

"Charcoal?" Rateesh asked, "You're kidding?"

"Uh-huh," Brielle said, "We've used charcoal as a medium in our art class at school."

"Yeah, well, when I touched it today, it came off the wall and smudged onto my finger," Jace went on, "The drawing was all done in thick black lines and didn't look like the other art in there."

"What was the drawing?" Brielle asked eagerly.

"Here, I took a photo of it," he said, producing his phone from his pocket. "It was of a hand, it looked like a man's hand. It was holding these rings; there were two or three rings in the hand hanging down, and then there was one missing. Below the space of the missing ring, there were two more rings," he said, searching for the photo.

"Rings?" Gideon asked, "Like rings on your fingers?"

"No, they were like, umm… Olympic rings," Jace said, "They were all connected, except for the missing one in the middle. Here, look, this is it."

"Can I please see that?" Keoni said, grabbing the phone abruptly from Jace's hand.

She stared at it intently, a look of shock appearing on her face.

"Are you okay?" Brielle asked her friend, who just kept staring at the photo, speechless.

"Keoni?" Brielle said, touching her friend's hand, "What's wrong?"

"I have to show you something," she said, standing up from the table, handing the phone to Brielle. "I'll be right back," she said softly as if in a daze.

Brielle took the phone and looked at Jace and Gideon with a confused expression as she watched Keoni run out to her car. Then she turned the phone so she could study the photo of the drawing as well.

"Hmm," Brielle pondered, "It is interesting, isn't it? It looks just as you described."

"Let me see it," Gideon said, reaching for the phone. After he looked, he showed it to Rateesh, who also agreed it was something strange and out of place.

It wasn't long before Keoni came back to the table. She had her book bag in her hand. She did not sit down but stood quietly for a moment as she looked inside her bag.

"Is everything okay?" Brielle asked.

"I don't know. I need to show you something," she said softly, taking out her sketch book that she used for her fashion design ideas. She opened it to a specific page and stared at it for a moment. She then handed it to Jace, who reached for it with a puzzled expression on his face.

As he turned the sketch book to see the page, his eyes widened in surprise, and he looked up at Keoni in disbelief.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"I drew it," she whispered, "the other day."

"What is it?" Brielle asked.

Jace stared at the drawing for another moment, then he turned it around for the rest of the table to see. There on the page was a perfect drawing of a man's hand holding a broken chain. The rest of the group gasped when they saw it.

"Where did you see that?" Gideon asked.

"I dreamt it," she said.

"You dreamt this?" Jace asked, looking at the image again.

"Did you draw it in the lighthouse?" Rateesh asked.

"No. I've never even been to the lighthouse," Keoni began. "Ever since I learned about my spiritual gifts, I try to keep my sketch pad and notebook close by so when I wake up, I can write down whatever I saw in my dreams—if I have

any dreams that night." She extended her hand toward the drawing, "The other night, I had a dream, and this is what I remembered."

Jace looked at it again, "This drawing is much better than what I saw in the lighthouse. Seeing it done so well helps me to understand it better. Those aren't rings; they're links of a chain."

"And there's one missing," Keoni said, "I didn't understand it when I dreamt it, and I certainly don't understand it now."

"I don't understand any of it," Gideon added. "Why would you have a dream about this drawing? And why would Jace find the same drawing on a lighthouse wall?"

"This is not a coincidence," Brielle said, "God is trying to communicate something to us. You and Jace both saw the same image for a reason. Now… we just need to figure out what it all means."

"What are you thinking, Jace?" Rateesh asked.

"It's just a theory," he said, "but I think that the green flashing light is a signal. It could be a stretch, but what if it was sent from the main drug dealers as a signal to notify the local distributors?" he asked.

"Yeah," Brielle said slowly, her mind processing his statement, "like that is their way of letting the distributors know the drugs are ready to be picked up or something."

"Or already here," Jace said.

The table was quiet for a moment. "I want to go up there," Keoni interjected. "I want to see that drawing."

"What? Right now?" Gideon protested, "We just ordered lunch!"

"And our lunch hasn't come yet," she insisted, "We can get it to go."

Gideon mumbled something about having to eat in the car while Keoni gathered her sketch book and bag.

"Rateesh," Brielle said, "Can we get that order to go?"

Rateesh got up, "On one condition," he said seriously.

What's that?" Jace answered.

"You take me with you," he said.

Jace stood and smiled at him, "I'll help you pack up the food," he said, as he followed Rateesh.

Brielle looked at Keoni, bewildered. "God has His hand on you, girl," she said softly, "It is so awesome how you are obedient to Him. I don't know what this drawing means, but I can't wait to find out."

"I wish I felt the same way," Keoni said, "It's all beginning to scare me."

Brielle put her hand on her friend's arm. "Because of what we'll find out?"

"Yes," Keoni admitted directly.

"Whatever it is, God is showing this to you for a reason. He knows He can use you. Don't be afraid, that is just the enemy trying to stop you from doing God's will," she encouraged.

Keoni nodded her head, “Thanks, Bri.”

Just then, Jace and Rateesh came back to the table with several large bags of food.

“Are you ready?” Jace asked.

“Yes,” Brielle said, reaching inside her bag, “How much do we owe you?”

“No worries,” Rateesh said, “it’s all been taken care of.”

Brielle looked at Rateesh sweetly, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes, now come on, let’s go,” he said eagerly, walking out the door.

Rateesh rode in Keoni’s car with Gideon and Brielle as they followed Jace on his motorcycle to Montier’s Point and the old lighthouse. Gideon and Brielle rode in the back and ate on the way, passing pieces of curry chicken on a fork to Keoni while she drove. When they arrived, they parked their car beside Jace’s motorcycle. Keoni grabbed her sketch book from her bag.

“Isn’t it amazing up here?” Brielle exclaimed, standing on the windy mountain top to gaze at the magnificent view. Jace came and stood beside her and looked down at the town, harbor, and seacoast.

“It’s pretty easy to understand why Capt. Espindola wants to live here, huh?” he asked.

“Where is the drawing?” Keoni asked.

“Follow me,” Jace said, walking toward the tower. The group walked past the old house, taking time to look around before heading to the front door of the tower.

“Take your time coming in here,” Jace said, “let your eyes adjust, there’s a lot of stuff to trip over,” he said, kicking some of the trash and crates out of the way to make a wider path from the door.

The group stopped and looked around.

“Wow,” Brielle gasped, “It’s like an art gallery of graffiti,” she said.

“Where is the drawing?” Keoni asked again.

Jace walked over to the staircase and stared at the wall. He walked up the staircase a few steps and then back down. He then walked over toward the door and the window, searching desperately for the drawing, his face growing perplexed.

“What’s wrong?” Brielle asked.

Jace didn’t answer but kept searching.

“What is it?” she asked again.

“It’s… It’s not here,” he said, confused, “It was right here this morning, but now I… I can’t find it,” he said, his eyes searching the walls.

“Let me see your photo,” Brielle said. Jace stopped his pacing long enough to pull up the photo on his phone and hand it to her.

“Okay. Let’s look at the art which is around it,” she said, studying the photo closely. Keoni and Jace both gathered close around her.

“Look,” she said, “here is the word Amor painted on the wall with a heart

for the letter ‘o’. It would have been just below the drawing. Let’s find that.”

“It was right over here in this area,” Jace said, because it caught my eye as I came down the stairs.

They all moved over to the area Jace showed them and began to look for the painting.

“There, it’s right there,” Rateesh said as he pointed to the ‘Amor’ painting with the heart in it.

Jace was right, the drawing was gone.

“I don’t understand this,” Jace said, “Thank God I took that photo or you would all think I’m insane.”

Brielle walked over and placed her hands on the wall. She bent down and looked closely, all the way to the floor.

“Jace,” she called, “Come here!”

The group gathered around her, “Look!” she said pointing to strange black streaks that ran down the wall to the ground, “Someone has washed it off, see?” she said following the light trail of black streaks with her finger, “These are watermarks left from washing the wall. They run all the way down… and look,” she said kneeling to examine more closely, “The ground is wet here from the water.”

They all looked closely at the ground. She was right. Someone had washed off the drawing, leaving only the black watermarks as evidence.

“Why would someone do that?” Gideon asked, “Take the time to create a drawing and then wash it off?”

“It’s part of the signal,” Brielle said, jumping up to search around the tower.

“What are you looking for?” Keoni asked curiously.

Brielle didn’t answer at first, but entered the small hallway that separated the house from the tower. She bent down to pick something up, then turned around slowly, “This,” she said, holding up her discovery.

There in her hands was an old cleaning bucket, the same one Jace had seen this morning. Inside the bucket was dirty black water and an old sponge.

“Maybe the drawing ties in together somehow with the light,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Keoni asked.

“I don’t know,” Brielle said, “But don’t you think it’s crazy that Jace found the drawing this morning after he saw the strange light in the tower---and now just hours later, it’s gone?”

“Yeah,” Keoni agreed, “that is crazy. Why do you think someone took the time to wash it off the wall?”

“They didn’t want it to be seen,” Gideon said.

“Yeah,” Jace said seriously, “But that means whoever it was that washed the drawing off was here in the past few hours. We should leave. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought you all here,” he said, taking the bucket from Brielle and leading her to the doorway. “Come on, let’s go.”

They all left the lighthouse quickly and took Rateesh back to his restaurant. The five of them stood outside the restaurant and talked about all they were learning.

"I would like to talk to Obadiah about all of this," Jace said, "see what his thoughts are."

"I agree," Gideon replied.

"Alright then, let's go," Brielle said, turning to hug Rateesh goodbye.

"Thanks for telling me about all of this," Rateesh said, "I appreciate the help you guys are giving me."

"You're welcome, man," Gideon said, giving him a fist bump.

"We'll let you know what we find out," Jace said.

Keoni hugged him, "You be careful, okay? And stay as far away from Brian as you can," she whispered.

"I will," Rateesh said.

Brielle hugged him last, "It was nice to see you today, and thank you for lunch, it was delicious."

"Even though we ate in the car," Gideon mumbled again. Keoni rolled her eyes at her brother.

Rateesh leaned close to whisper in Brielle's ear as she hugged him, "Jace bought you lunch, not me," he said. Then he stepped back and smiled at her. Brielle looked at him and then at Jace, who was already starting his motorcycle.

"I'll see you in school tomorrow," Rateesh said.

Brielle nodded and as she turned to walk away, she said, "We're praying for you, Rateesh, and Jesus loves you." She smiled broadly at her friend.

Rateesh didn't reply but gave her a slight grin as he watched them drive away.

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When they arrived at Brielle's home, they were greeted by Obadiah's voice calling to them from the corral.

"Hello!" he called cheerfully, as he exited the corral gate and walked to meet them. "Did you have a good lunch?"

"Yeah," Gideon said, "I have to say that I really liked that chicken, it was good, what was it called again?"

"Curry chicken," Keoni replied, reaching up to hug Obadiah.

"Yes," Brielle answered, "it was… interesting to say the least."

"Really?" Obadiah asked, "Why is that?"

"It's a long story. We'll tell you all about it, but I think we are all ready to go to the Prayer Sanctum now if that's okay with you?"

Obadiah grinned, "The Prayer Sanctum is your place of study, you are welcome to visit it at any time," he said, shaking hands with Jace and Gideon and kissing Brielle on the head. "I thought we might ride up to it today, what do you think?"

"I'd *love* to!" Keoni said excitedly.

"Let's go! Bring on Apache," Gideon said, rubbing his hands together.

"And how about you?" Obadiah asked Jace, "Do you have much riding experience--other than motorcycles that is?"

Jace's face looked nervous, and his eyes darted from Obadiah to Brielle, then back again. "Uh, no, Sir, I sure don't," he said timidly.

"That's okay," Obadiah said, patting his back, "Brielle here can teach you, she's an amazing rider." Then he walked back to the corral where all six horses were running around. He turned back to call to Gideon, "You want to come help me saddle them up, Son?"

"Sure," Gideon said, following Obadiah to the corral.

Brielle turned to Jace, "You don't need to worry, we won't run them in the woods or anything; it's very easy."

"And fun!" Keoni interjected.

Jace nodded and tried to force a smile through his nervousness.

"Do you want me to teach you how to saddle a horse?" Brielle asked happily.

"Actually, if it would be alright, I thought I would eat my lunch," Jace said.

"Oh my gosh! I completely forgot! We ate in the car, and I helped Keoni eat while she drove, but you were on a motorcycle, you must be starving!" Brielle said, slapping her hands on the side of her head in shock. "I'm so sorry. Come on, I have your lunch right here," she said as she found the bag with his food order.

"Do you want to go to the table on the patio?" Brielle asked.

"No, this is fine. I love being in the woods like this. I'll just sit here under the trees and eat if that's alright," he said, taking the food and sitting on a rock

under one of the large trees.

"That's fine with me," she said, "I have to go into the house to change. I'll bring you a drink." She started to walk away but stopped. "By the way," she said softly, "thank you."

"For what?" Jace asked, confused, with his mouth half full.

"For buying us all lunch today," she said.

Jace's face flushed, "Rateesh!"

"You don't have to do that, you know. We know you work hard for your money and that you are saving to buy a truck. You don't need to use it up on feeding us, but still, thank you," she said sweetly.

"Please don't worry about it," Jace replied.

"But I want to pay you back," she insisted.

"Brielle, please," he said, his dark brown eyes piercing into hers.

"But I—"

"If you're so insistent on paying me back, you can pay me in kind, not in cash," he said, taking another bite.

"Like what?" she asked curiously.

"Like… maybe cooking me another chicken parmesan dinner sometime," he said, smiling broadly as he chewed his food.

Brielle lifted her eyebrows in surprise and put her hands on her hips, "Okay! You liked it, huh?"

"This is great," he said, pointing his fork at his bowl, "but if I could choose between this and your chicken parmesan, I would choose your cooking, no contest."

She couldn't help the bright smile that spread across her face. "Alright, then. I'll be happy to do that."

"Brielle! Are you coming?" Keoni called down to her from the balcony of Brielle's bedroom, where she had gone to change.

"Yeah, I'll be right there!" she said, turning back to Jace, "I'll get you something to drink on my way back." Then she turned and headed to the house.

Gideon and Obadiah were busy saddling the horses. Obadiah had his horse Sisco ready to go, and Gideon was working on saddling Moon Dancer, Genevieve's gentle Palomino Arabian. Gideon was distracted, though, because Obadiah had let Jellyfish into the corral as well--even though no one would be riding him. It was just Obadiah's way of trying to let him feel part of things and be around people.

Jellyfish did not like Gideon. Jellyfish didn't like *anyone.* Gideon, along with everyone else who knew the horse, understood that Jellyfish was a grouch most of the time and could give quite a sting, especially when he saw Moon Dancer leaving the stable.

As Jace finished his lunch, he watched as Gideon brushed Moon Dancer and then placed a saddle blanket on her back. Obadiah had the saddles sitting on the

top of the corral fence. When Gideon walked over to get Moon Dancer's saddle from the fence, Jellyfish walked over to Moon Dancer and took the saddle blanket from her back with his teeth. Jace's mouth dropped when he saw what the clever horse had done. Gideon turned around with the saddle in his hands and saw that the blanket was missing. Then he saw who had it.

"Um, Obadiah?" he asked, "Can I get your help here?"

Obadiah was busy saddling Kissa and looked over the horse's back to see how he could help Gideon. When he saw Jellyfish standing across the corral with Moon Dancer's saddle blanket, he just laughed.

"I can't do much better than you would," Obadiah said.

Gideon looked back over his shoulder at Obadiah in a panic, "You're not going to help me?"

Obadiah laughed again, "No way, you're on your own. Think of this as part of your Intercessor training. Develop a plan. After all, he's only a horse, a much better opponent to battle than, say… a demon."

Gideon sighed and looked at Jellyfish, "He may be a horse… but he may be a demon."

Jace snickered.

Gideon walked slowly to Jellyfish, his hands slightly raised in front of him as if to surrender. "Okay, Jellyfish," he said gently, "I know you love Moon Dancer, and you will miss her, but Obadiah says she has to go with us. It's not my fault; I had nothing to do with that decision. So, don't get upset with me, okay? Just give me the blanket," he said, moving slowly toward the horse. "Everything will be alright, just give me the blanket," he said in a coaxing tone.

The huge horse shook his head as if to say "No" to Gideon and began to move away. Gideon turned to try and get in front of him, all the while saying, "I know you don't like it, but it's not my fault, alright? Just give me the blanket, please?"

Jace watched this with great enjoyment. This was wonderful entertainment, and he laughed every time the horse dodged Gideon. Finally, Gideon gave up and turned back to Obadiah.

"Do you have any other saddle blankets I can use on Moon Dancer? Jellyfish is *not* going to give that one up?" he asked.

Obadiah laughed, "Yes, there in the tack room on the shelf by the door."

Frustrated, Gideon walked out of the corral and into the stable to retrieve another saddle blanket. While he was gone, Jellyfish trotted over to Moon Dancer and dropped her blanket on the ground beside her. Then he backed up a bit to wait for Gideon. Jace smiled when he saw the intelligence and deliberate orneriness of the animal. He watched quietly as Gideon returned to the corral, another saddle blanket in tow. When Gideon closed the corral gate and turned around, he saw what Jellyfish had done and threw his arms in the air in frustration. Jace laughed at Gideon and waited to see what would happen next.

Gideon walked over to Moon Dancer and placed the new blanket on her back. Then he bent down to pick up her other one, which was now covered with dirt. He walked over to the fence of the corral to beat it against the post, and when he did, Jellyfish followed him. Jace wasn't sure what was going to happen as the horse was moving so slowly behind Gideon, but he thought he would warn him just the same.

"Behind you!" he yelled to his friend.

Gideon whirled around to see that the face of the mighty horse was five inches away from his.

"Easy now, Jellyfish, easy," Gideon said sweetly.

Obadiah finished saddling Kissa and saw what was happening.

"Take it easy, Jellyfish," Gideon soothed, "Just relax now."

The horse stamped his foot hard on the ground as if pouting about Moon Dancer leaving. Obadiah called out to the horse. "Jellyfish," he said strongly, "You back off and let Gideon do his work."

The great horse turned to look at Obadiah like a child caught being a bully on the school playground. He turned back to Gideon and looked at him, then one more time to Obadiah to see if he was watching. Then, in an act of sheer meanness, Jellyfish quickly reached down, grabbed Gideon's shirt with his teeth, and tore it. Then he turned and ran to the other side of the corral.

"Jellyfish!" Obadiah yelled at the horse.

"Aw Man!" Gideon exclaimed, "I loved this shirt! Come on!"

Jace laughed loudly.

Obadiah walked over to the corral gate and opened it. "Let's go, Jellyfish," he said sternly. "If you can't play nice, then you can't play at all," he scolded.

The big red horse raised his nose in the air and strutted out of the corral and into the stable like a pouting child being sent to his room.

"Jellyfish," Obadiah said, "you know I want you to be part of this family, but you are the one being difficult."

Obadiah followed the horse into the stables and secured him in his stall. Then he came out to see the damage done to Gideon's shirt.

"I'm so sorry, Gideon," Obadiah said, "I'll buy you another shirt."

"No, don't worry about it," Gideon said, deflated. "What's wrong with that horse?"

"I believe he came from a very abusive home, and he just doesn't know how to love," Obadiah said.

Jace heard Obadiah's words and thought about what he said. He didn't grow up in what he could call an abusive home. In fact, there was hardly ever anyone there to *do* any abuse. But it made him think about what Capt. Espindola said about him being in love. Maybe he couldn't recognize love because he was a little like Jellyfish; he still needed to learn how.

Just then, Brielle and Keoni came walking up the path from the house. They

had changed into jeans, sweaters, and jackets, and each of them had a bag on their shoulders. Brielle handed Jace a cold bottle of water to drink.

"How's it going?" Brielle asked, "Does Obadiah need help with the horses?"

Jace tried not to laugh. "I think maybe Gideon does."

Gideon came out of the corral gate holding his shirt up to show everyone the large tear caused by Jellyfish.

"Poor Giddy," Keoni said, "What happened to your shirt?"

"I'll give you one clue and it starts with Jellyfish!" he said as he stormed past them, "I have to go change."

"I think I'll go with him," Jace said, standing up to brush himself off. "We'll be right back."

After a few minutes, Jace and Gideon returned, and everyone was ready to go. But Jace's nervousness had quickly returned now that it was time to ride a horse. Obadiah would ride his horse Sisco, and Brielle would ride Piper, of course. Keoni loved to ride Moon Dancer, and Gideon enjoyed riding Asher's paint, Apache.

"Is Jace going to ride Kissa?" Brielle asked Obadiah.

"Yes, Magomu will not be joining us today, and he welcomed Jace to ride her," Obadiah said.

Brielle looked around. "Where is Magomu?"

"He went with Alma, your mother, and Asher to see a movie this afternoon," Obadiah said gently.

Brielle looked over at Keoni and raised her eyes in surprise, but didn't say anything.

Jace looked at Gideon to see his reaction to the news, but Gideon was quiet.

"Oba, can you help me attach my bag to the saddle?" Keoni asked.

"Certainly, Sweetheart," Obadiah said, coming over to help her.

"Has that got my…" Gideon said in a deep, sophisticated voice, "…*compendium* in it?" he asked with a debonair expression.

Keoni laughed, "Yes, little brother, I have both of ours in here."

"Little brother," Gideon grumbled, "I'm bigger than you are."

"Yes, but you are younger," Keoni said.

"Only by a minute or two!" Gideon protested as he climbed up onto Apache's back.

Jace put on his backpack and walked over to Kissa. She was such a sweet and beautiful horse. She had gentle eyes and looked at Jace kindly as if to say hello.

"Do you know how to do this?" Brielle asked softly.

"I have no idea how to do this," Jace said, the anxiousness reflected in his voice.

"Okay, you're going to hold her reins here, and place your hand on the saddle there to help pull yourself up," she said, showing him how to do it.

“Keeping hold of the reins will help prevent Kissa from lowering her head.”

“Why shouldn’t Kissa lower her head?” Jace asked.

“If they have any mischief in them, it will make it easy for them to get you off by tipping you forward,” she laughed. “Plus, you must hold the reins to keep control, so that way you’ll have them in your hand. Next, you put your left foot in the stirrup and pull yourself up onto the saddle. It’s important to know that you only get on a horse from the left side.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Well… the left side of a horse is called the ‘near’ side and the right side is the ‘off’ side,” she said.

“So, I get on from the left and off on the right?” Jace asked.

“Um, no, you get on and off on the left side only,” Brielle answered.

“I’m not sure I understand that,” he said, “but okay.”

“It’s told that this method originated with the knights who would ride horses into battle,” she explained, “Most knights were right-handed and therefore kept their sword scabbards on their left side so they could easily pull the sword out with their right. Because their scabbards were on their left leg, it was easier for them to swing their right leg over the horse to get on and dismount. Some horses used in battle were trained to be mounted from either side, but most commonly, horses are trained for the left side,” she finished.

“Ah, okay, now that makes sense,” Jace said, “I’ll give it a try, but I am no knight,” he said as he swung himself up onto the horse.

Brielle looked up at him dreamily. More than seeing a man on a motorcycle, this is what she thought was wonderful: a man on a horse.

“Don’t sell yourself short just yet,” she said softly, “It’s just your first ride.”

Once everyone was mounted and ready to go, Obadiah led the group through the path in the woods to the Prayer Chamber.

“I’m so excited!” Keoni said, “Ever since we left the Prayer Chamber last week, I couldn’t wait to come back.”

Obadiah grinned, “I’m happy to hear it,” he said. “Now tell me, what happened today at lunch that was so interesting?”

Brielle turned to Jace, “Would you like to ride up to the front with me to talk to Oba?”

Jace’s horse was last in line, and Brielle was staying close to Jace to be with him and to give him instructions on how to handle the reins.

“Umm, what would that require?” he asked skeptically.

“You would give Kissa a little kick, and she will trot so you can catch up to Oba,” she explained.

“Trot means to go faster? Umm, no, that’s okay, we’ll just walk,” he grinned, “Why don’t you ride up and tell him about it?”

Brielle looked at him curiously, “Will you be okay?”

“Oh yeah, we’re doing just fine back here. Plus, Gideon will help me along,

right, man?" he asked Gideon, who was a little ahead of him.

Gideon pulled Apache back to turn and look at Jace, "What?"

"I said you'll hang back here and help me in case I have any riding questions, right?" Jace asked again.

"Yeah, man, I got your back," Gideon said, reining in Apache so Jace could catch him.

"Okay then," Brielle said, "Just call me if you need me." Then she gave Piper a little kick, and she trotted to catch up with Obadiah, motioning for Keoni to join her on the way.

Once Jace and Kissa reached Gideon and Apache, they settled in at a nice, relaxed walking pace side by side.

"I see that you and Jellyfish are great friends," Jace teased.

"Awe man, that horse is something else," Gideon said. "I don't know why Obadiah keeps him. From what Magomu says, he eats almost double what the other horses do, he's a giant grouch, and no one can ever ride him, so what's the point?"

Jace said, "Yeah, I don't know. Sure, is a beautiful horse, though."

"What's the saying? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder? He's big, he's red, he's mean, and he doesn't like anyone. I'd say he's the devil!" he said, "In horse form that is."

Jace laughed. "Can I ask you something?"

Gideon looked at Jace, "Are we gonna talk about the Homecoming Dance situation?"

Jace shook his head, "No-- I mean we can, but I was going to ask you something else."

"Okay, yeah, go ahead," Gideon said.

"How do you feel about your mom spending time with Magomu?"

"I'm okay with it," Gideon answered.

"Really?" Jace asked, surprised, "I mean that's great. I just wasn't sure."

"Yeah, you know I look at it like this. I love my mom and Magomu. I've known him a long time, and he's a good man. He loves God, and he is really fun to be around. Plus, I don't like to see my mom alone all the time, and sad all the time. If he loves her, takes good care of her, and can make her happy, I'm cool with that," he said.

Jace nodded, "That's awesome. I was just wondering how you felt about it because…"

"Because of my dad?" Gideon asked.

Jace nodded again, "Yeah."

"I know that no one will ever replace my dad. My mom knows it, and Magomu knows it; that's why he's so cool. He doesn't try to be my dad; he's just my friend. I've known he's liked my mom for several years. I'm pretty sure he had a crush on her even when my dad was alive," Gideon said.

"Really? You think he liked her then? How do you know?" Jace asked.

"What do you mean, how do I know?" he laughed, "Because… I know. It's not hard to tell when a guy likes someone, especially someone like me," he said, looking over at Jace.

"You mean…" Jace waited for him to fill in the blank.

"I love the ladies," Gideon said, "I don't mean that I actually *love* them, and I have to say that I have never treated a girl badly. I just have a great appreciation for God's creation of the opposite sex. Ladies are just beautiful creations all the way around, inside and out, from head to toe. Even the ones who don't think they are beautiful, there is always a quality they have that is," Gideon said.

"Then all the flirting and stuff, that's not you just being smooth?" Jace asked.

"If I'm being honest, yeah, there's a little bit of that going on too," Gideon joked, "But seriously, I'm honestly not a player, I just truly appreciate women. I think my mom is incredible, and my grandma, my great grandma, my aunts, and even though we're always teasin' and fightin' with one another, I think Keoni's amazing too. I think women are incredibly special, ya know? And I love being around them. I love their minds and their ideas, their creativity, their voices. It's like this; you know how some people enjoy fine, um," he stammered, trying to find an example of what he wanted to describe.

"Art?" Jace asked.

"Maybe not just art, because that's only one-dimensional, maybe fine… I don't know what you can possibly compare to the fine creation of a woman."

"That's true," Jace agreed, "But don't you think that the way you come off might be mistaken as being a player instead of an appreciator of women? I mean, honestly? I thought you were a player."

Gideon shook his head, "I need to work on that then. I probably won't find true love that way; will I?"

Jace was quiet on the question of true love, and Gideon noticed.

"Don't you believe in true love?" Gideon asked.

"I think so," Jace said, "I want to."

Gideon looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Jace rode quietly for a moment, trying to find the words to express his thoughts.

"I don't really know. Does that exist? From what I've seen, it's only in the movies," Jace began, "My parents, huh. I don't know what it is that they have for one another. I think it used to be love, but now…"

"Are your mom and dad divorced?" Gideon asked.

"No, they are still married, just not together very often. It's a very strange relationship that I don't understand-- that I have not understood in a long time.

"Are they legally separated?" Gideon asked again.

"Nope," Jace said with a hint of disgust. "They won't do anything like that

because…"

Gideon waited for Jace to finish his reply, but no reply came. "Because?" Gideon prompted.

"Because of me. I don't think they want to go through a custody battle or something like that… I don't know, maybe when I turn eighteen it will change," Jace said. "It doesn't make any sense. I don't know who they think they are fooling. My mother has had three different boyfriends that I know of, and my father… well, my father thinks he's married to my mom, but he's married to his work."

"I'm sorry, man," Gideon said.

Jace tried to smile, "Thanks. I've dealt with it for a long time. Someday I'll be out on my own and away from all their games," he paused to take a deep breath, "Someday."

"I can see why you say you don't know what true love is," Gideon replied.

Jace nodded, "Yeah."

"Do you still have to go out of town over the Homecoming Dance weekend?" Gideon asked, lowering his voice, though Brielle, Keoni, and Obadiah were deep in conversation over the lighthouse drawing and green lights.

"Unfortunately, I do," Jace said despondently. "But I had an idea about that. Remember how you said if there was anything you could do to help?"

"Yeah," Gideon answered.

"Well… why don't *you* ask her to the dance?" Jace asked.

Gideon raised his eyebrows in surprise, "What? Are you kidding?"

"Why not?" Jace protested, "You said that you weren't going to ask anyone else at school and that she wanted to go because it was her first high school dance."

"Yes, but don't you get it? It's not exciting for her to go to a dance to be with her best friend's brother; it's exciting for her to go with someone she *wants* to dance with," Gideon said.

"I know, I know," Jace reluctantly agreed, "but if she could at least *go."*

"Man, I know where you're going with this," Gideon smirked, "You're not fooling me. You want me to ask her because you don't want her to go with anyone else."

Jace looked at him, shocked for a moment by his reply. Then, as he began to think about Gideon's words, he knew there was some truth in his statement. "I hadn't thought about it like that. I just can't stand the thought of her being disappointed on my account, and yet… maybe you're right. Maybe I can't stand the thought of her being with someone else either."

"At least you're man enough to admit it," Gideon laughed. "I think you're really scared that Zach Thompson would take her, huh?"

"It certainly wouldn't feel good if he did," Jace muttered under his breath.

"What's the deal with you and that guy anyway?" Gideon asked.

Jace was quiet as the memories passed through his mind. He shook his head silently but didn't answer.

"Come on, you can tell me," Gideon pressed.

Jace thought about it and then began to explain, "Years ago, I used to play baseball in a city league. My father knew how much I loved to play and tried to make sure I was on a team as often as possible. A few times, I was on a team called the Renegades. Zach's dad was the coach of the team. He saw different abilities in my pitching and asked my father if he could work with me on my mechanics to smooth my delivery, which, of course, was great because of my father's work schedule. Less time to have to spend with me," he added under his breath.

"Mr. Thompson began meeting me early before the regular practice so he could teach me more about pitching. I think Zach began to feel resentment because of it. He was very jealous of the time that I was spending with his dad, even though it wasn't a lot of time. It was the fact that— "

"He wants to be a pitcher," Gideon said, looking over at him, "You forget I also play on the baseball team. I know that Zach thinks he should be the number one pitcher. He tried hard last season, and he's pretty good, but— "

"He's a much better shortstop," Jace said.

"Exactly," Gideon agreed, "I know. The guys talk about it all the time. He is almost unstoppable in that position, but he seems to think that all the glory goes to the pitcher."

Jace nodded, "He's not always team-minded. So, this became a conflict between us. Mr. Thompson worked with Zach just as much as he did me; in fact, he worked with him more, naturally, that's his son. But Zach didn't care. It was because I was doing what he wanted to do, and his dad was helping me do it. I played on Mr. Thompson's team for a while, but the problem got so bad that I had to change teams. Zach was becoming consumed by his jealousy, and I couldn't stay on his dad's team anymore," he paused in thought. "But I appreciate Mr. Thompson and all the time he gave to train me. It meant a lot," Jace said.

"Wow," Gideon said, "I guess when you showed up at Fairfield, it pretty much rocked Zach's world."

Jace nodded, "I guess."

"And he likes your girl, which makes it even worse," Gideon said.

Jace didn't reply but thought about Gideon's words, "your girl". Brielle wasn't his girl, not formally or officially anyway. So many times, he wanted to talk to her about being with only him, but he couldn't. He honestly didn't think he was worthy of a girl like her.

"Are you going out for the team?" Gideon asked.

"I'm not sure," Jace said, "I would love to play, but I don't know. If Zach's on the team, I think it would just start all over again."

Gideon shook his head, “No way, man, you can’t think like that. If Zach’s got a problem, it’s *his* problem. That should not stop you from being who you are and doing the things God gave you talents to do. Besides, we need a pitcher—*bad.* You any good?”

Jace looked down and smiled, “I do alright.”

“I hope you don’t let that guy’s jealousy keep you from trying out for the team,” Gideon said, looking ahead. “It looks like we are at the cleft in the rock. It looks *really* different here in the daytime, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Jace agreed. “Hey, think about what I asked you, about taking Brielle to the dance, okay?”

Gideon rolled his eyes, “Yeah, yeah, I’ll think about it. But even if I did, I can’t make any promises that she would even go,” he said as he got off Apache to lead him to the tree where the other horses were tied, “Because that girl only has eyes for *you.”*

23

Once the horses were secured, the group began to make their way through the cleft in the rock, which led them through the mountain passage to the first cave. Although the journey to the Prayer Sanctum did not hold as much mystery for them as the first time they came, the exhilaration of knowing where they were going was thrilling. This time, as they traveled, the afternoon sun still shone down on them, giving their trip a whole different appearance than before when all was lit by the light of the moon and the lanterns they carried.

Today, when they passed through the main entrance, Gideon and Jace were instructed to use their cross keys to trigger the enormous slab door of rock. Once they entered, Obadiah taught them how to turn on the power that provided the cave with air circulation, power, and lighting.

The Intercessors, though thrilled to be back, still traveled silently. Once again, they took in every detail of this magnificent place. When they reached the waterfall cave, Brielle gasped at its beauty. The sun, which was pouring in its bright light through the main opening of the waterfall, also revealed a few other small openings in various places around the cave. The light was glowing down from these places' soft beams, which glistened on the waters below. The water then sent the reflections of light in all directions as it gently ebbed and flowed, casting a beautiful and shimmering illumination on the surrounding walls.

Finally, they reached the large door with the lion's head, and their hearts began to pound in anticipation. Obadiah opened the grand door, and they stepped into the Prayer Sanctum, breathing in its distinct musty aroma.

"I don't care how long I come here," Keoni said, "I will never stop being amazed by this place."

"I love the smell of it!" Brielle said, "But Oba, there is a scent I can't place. I smell the wood, the musty dampness of the water and the walls… but there is something so beautiful, so sweet, yet I can't figure out what it is."

"Frankincense," Obadiah answered. "I keep the Prayer Sanctum anointed as a holy place of worship, study, and prayer, and I love to use the *Oils of Frankincense*," he said.

"I love it!" Brielle said, "I would rather wear that than perfume."

"That's exactly what people in Biblical times did," Obadiah said, "Those who could afford it, that is," then he motioned his hands to the stairs, "Go ahead and take a little time before we begin our class. I have some things to take care of before we begin."

The Intercessors took their bags and backpacks, which held their Bibles and Compendiums inside, and placed them on the round compass table.

"I'm going to spend some time in the Pools of Peace," Keoni said, heading toward the mouth of that cavern.

"I'd like to go and check out the artifacts in the Cavern of History," Gideon

said, heading for the stairs that led there, leaving Jace and Brielle standing in the Study Chamber.

"Where would you like to go?" Brielle asked him.

"Wherever you are," he said softly. Brielle blushed and then turned toward the library.

"Ok then; let's head to the library," she said. "I've been thinking about this room since I saw it last. They walked across the floor of the Sanctum to the smaller doorway of the library cavern.

"I could get lost in here for hours," Brielle said dreamily, looking at all the books before her.

"Just think of all the history and knowledge that is piled up on these shelves," she whispered, walking over to open a large book with a dark green cover.

"Deliverance…," she read aloud, "the Forgotten Ministry of Jesus."

Jace walked over and opened another antique book, "*The Dangers of Witchcraft and Sorcery: The Truth Behind the Magic,"* he read.

Brielle read another, "*Angels: Warriors of Heaven's Armies*."

Jace read another, "*How to Defeat Evil Entities and Demonology*."

Brielle's eyes widened, "Yikes, maybe the angels can just fight the demons for us?" she said, pointing to the book about Angels which lay before her.

"Yeah, let's pray for that," Jace agreed.

They walked slowly through the library looking at the different Bible translations, the Torah, the Septuagint, the Tanakh, and books about the history of the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

"Wow," Brielle said, "Oba certainly covers it all, doesn't he?" she asked.

Jace walked up behind her to look at the same shelf. His presence made her knees weak and filled her stomach with butterflies. Suddenly, she sneezed, once, twice, then three times.

"God bless you," Jace said.

"Excuse me," she said, "must be the dust in here. I'll be right back."

She left the library and went back to her bag to look for a tissue. She couldn't find any. She looked around the Study Chamber to see if there were any tissues or anything else she could use, but there were none. She had seen Obadiah go down the tunnel to the right of the Prayer Sanctum and remembered her mother coming out of this tunnel last week with a cart of snacks and napkins. She decided to look for a room where they were kept.

Slowly, she walked down the dimly lit tunnel, unsure where she was going. She passed a dark cavern on her right, but from what she could see, it was empty. She walked down the tunnel, marveling once again at the size of this place, when she came upon another opening to a cavern on the left. There were two wall sconces outside this cavern and one inside it. This room was brighter than the passageway, and she could see that this was where food was kept.

There was a baker's rack that was full of different kinds of nuts and granola, a small wood-burning stove in the corner with a long black chimney that went out through the top of the cave, a little wooden table with four chairs around it, and along the backside of the cave was a sink with cabinets. She stood there smiling in awe of her grandfather's talents as she looked around the little cave kitchen.

Finally, she spotted napkins on the counter and grabbed one. She blew her nose and then took another napkin and stuck it in her pocket. Then she walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet. Ice-cold water came flowing out of the tap, and she quickly washed her hands and dried them on a towel hanging on a rack nearby. She turned to walk out of the cave when she heard a sound echoing down the tunnel in the opposite direction. Quickly, she stopped to listen closely as she wasn't certain about the sound. Then, it was silent. She started to walk again when the noise came softly echoing through the tunnel wall.

Determined to find out about the strange sound, she headed down the tunnel to look for it. She went to another very small cavern and stuck her head inside to investigate. It was not very deep or wide, so she turned to head back down the passageway when she was startled.

"What are you looking for, Sweetheart?" Obadiah asked.

Brielle jumped from fright. If she had been tall like him, she might have bumped her head on the top of the cave.

"Oba!" she exclaimed, "You scared me!"

Obadiah laughed, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

"I came looking for a tissue," she said, "The dust in the library made me sneeze, and I didn't have one. I found the kitchen and got some napkins, but I heard a noise."

"What kind of a noise?" Obadiah asked curiously.

"I don't know, it sounded like… I'm not sure. I couldn't make it out. I was looking to see what it might be," Brielle said.

"I guess I had better show all of you where the bathroom is located," Obadiah said, changing the subject.

"You have a bathroom in here, too?" Brielle asked.

Obadiah smiled, "You know every school must have a bathroom, that's the law. Besides, I wouldn't ask you all to come here where we are so isolated in the woods without having some personal comforts available," he chuckled, turning to head down the tunnel.

Brielle caught his face for a moment in the light of the sconces.

"Oba," she asked softly, "are you okay?"

Obadiah turned around and looked at her curiously, "Yes, Sweetheart, why?"

"I just wanted to check and make sure you were okay," she said softly.

Obadiah reached up and dried the corners of his eyes. “The dust in here tends to flare up my allergies, too. I need to work on that. Come on, I’ll show you and the others the bathroom.”

Obadiah went into the Study Chamber and called the others to follow him. He then headed down the passageway that extended from the left side of the Sanctum, the side of the Pools of Peace, and into the first cavern on the left.

“In case you are here and need the comforts of a bathroom, here it is,” he said.

The Intercessors were once again dazzled by the incredible craftsmanship of Obadiah’s work. There was a large arched-shaped door that led to a huge bathroom complete with a toilet, sink, bathtub, and shower. But not just an ordinary shower, it was a waterfall. The tub had been hollowed out of the rocks from a portion of the cave.

“Does the water get hot?” Brielle asked.

Obadiah looked at her condescendingly, “What do you think?” he teased.

“I think it gets hot, and I also think you’re awesome!” Gideon delighted, “I want to take a shower in here just because it looks so cool!”

Obadiah laughed. He was always blessed to hear of Gideon’s enjoyment of his work.

“Alright,” Obadiah began, “if you are ready, let’s go back into the Study Chamber and begin our training session.”

The students settled into their high-backed red velvet chairs and took out their compendiums, eagerly awaiting their next lesson. Obadiah pulled out the blackboard and wrote across the top:

Being Empowered with God’s Word

“The Bible is *the* most, not one of the most, but THE most popular book ever sold and read. It will never be found on the New York Times Bestseller list or be rated among the top book clubs for high recommendation. Nevertheless, it is the only book that is constantly in demand and constantly in print worldwide. It has been translated into 2,018 different languages throughout the course of history. At present, in the English language alone, there are at least thirty different versions of the Bible, from the traditional King James Version to The New English Standard.

“The Bible is an amazing compilation of letters and books composed in three different languages by over forty different authors over a time frame of fifteen hundred years. The authors who wrote it were all given their inspiration from the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s law, His promise, His Word. But it is also something else, something that Christians today seem to have forgotten, it is His power given to *us.*

“In our studies, we will be learning everything we possibly can about the Bible. We will learn the history and differences of the Old and New Testaments. Learning first that the word testament means covenant, or, for a more common

word, a promise. It is our covenant with God that holds and binds us to Him just like a contract. We will learn the books of the Bible in order, the focus of each book and its teachings, and we will study the author and the history of each book as well.

"We will learn important elements and entries—if you don't know them already, such as: The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, the Fruits of the Spirit being: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. We will also study the Beatitudes Jesus taught on His Sermon on the Mount.

"We will learn the true history of Israel, how the land has always belonged and always will belong to the Jewish people. We will also learn about the Jewish Holidays, the wonderful feasts, and celebrations that God gives us throughout the year, about the three special offering times God promises to bring us special blessings when we obey Him, and what it means to be called a Judeo-Christian and a Messianic Jew. And, of course, we will study and memorize the scriptures of the Holy Word of God to use and speak in our daily lives.

"As you have learned from your Spiritual Gifts tests, you all have special talents that the Lord has created in you. Jace," he said, turning his focus to Jace's dark brown eyes, "your name means 'healing' or 'one that heals,' which is one of your main spiritual gifts as well. We will start your study of scripture by learning all the healing verses in the Bible, especially focusing on the verses that tell of Jesus healing others.

"Keoni," he said, turning to look at her intrigued face, "your main spiritual gift is in prophecy and discernment, so we will be studying the scriptures of the words of the prophets. Since your name means 'one who sees and knows,' we will also be studying wisdom scriptures, starting with the book of Proverbs.

"Gideon," he said, turning to look seriously at the young man, "your main spiritual gift lies in leadership, and your name means 'the one God gives the battle plans to'. You will be studying the scriptures that tell of war. For in all the wars where God was in charge, there *always* came a victory. You will also study the scriptures of the great leaders in the Bible, starting in the Old Testament with Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, among many others. Oh yes, and of course we can't forget to learn about the first Gideon," he smiled. "In the New Testament, you will study the leadership of Christ. After his ascension, we will focus on the words of Apostle Paul, who wrote thirteen of the New Testament books of the Bible, unless he was also the author of *Hebrews;* then he would have written fourteen books.

"Brielle," he said, turning to his granddaughter, "your name means 'Warrior of God' and your main spiritual gift is that of faith. Your gift may seem to be a little less defined than the others. It may not seem very specific for ministry, as faith does encompass all aspects of serving the Lord. But really, that's not true at all. You will be studying the scriptures that deal with spiritual warfare, to know

the right scripture for the right moment so that you can call out God's Word to defeat your enemies. God has already shown you that you can do this," he said with his charming smile staring deep into her green eyes, "on a cold, dark morning inside a local mini-mart." he paused to let his words sink into her heart. "We must prepare you for the battles which are yet to come."

He turned around and wrote on the board the words:

Memorization: Book, Chapter, and Verse

"As you have all shared with me, there was a point in your life when you went to Sunday school. Perhaps you went to a vacation Bible school or a youth camp. When you were involved in these programs, I am quite sure that you all learned memory verses," he said.

Each of the students nodded.

"Many of you still remember those verses, or at least most of the words to the verse. I know I still do. The Lord has shown me that it is most important for an Intercessor to not only memorize the words of the verse but also to know exactly where the verse is located. It is important that you know the book where the verse is found, along with the chapter and scripture line. God has shown me that His Word holds tremendous power. Having said that, when engaged in a battle of spiritual warfare, an Intercessor will make the demons tremble when they quote not only the words of the verse but also where it is located. It validates to the enemy that you *truly* know the Word of God, that you have studied, and it is deep within the fibers of your very being.

"It can be easy to remember important scriptures by saying them in patterns or by putting them to music, but to remember the book, chapter, and the number for the verse line is much harder and takes more effort and commitment.

"Here's a question for you to think about. Years ago, before there were Bibles in print, how did the people come to learn the scriptures?" he asked, quietly waiting for replies.

"That is a good question," Gideon said, "and something that I honestly never thought about."

Obadiah nodded, "We have always had Bibles within our reach. We take them for granted. But the people back in those days did not have a Bible in their homes. Many of them could not even afford to buy the scriptures written out on either papyrus or parchment paper. That was only a luxury for the wealthy. The people had to listen and memorize the scriptures as they were being read by the priests. They would go to the synagogues, and when the scriptures were read, they memorized them and tried their best to follow them on a daily basis. Imagine how challenging that would be? How hard it would be to remember all of God's law when you only heard bits and pieces of it from week to week."

"Wow," Keoni said, "no wonder there was so much chaos in those times. I

have several Bibles in my house and one in my car. I read the Bible daily and still make mistakes."

"That's right," Obadiah said, "and yet look at how God was still able to use them! Look at Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, their children, and all the others who may not have had access to a printed, complete compilation of God's Word. But God used them for great things. They didn't have printed words to read, but they had the spoken words of God Himself. He was able to speak to them directly and use them to accomplish great things.

"God gave the High Priests a list of books that would later become the books of the very Bible we read today. This collection of books was called The Cannon. The priests would read scrolls from the Canon in the temple to the people who would come to listen. Those who came to honor God would sit, listen, memorize, and keep the words they heard close to their hearts. They spoke the words over and over again on their lips and applied them to their lives.

"The power the Word of God contains is limitless. Just stop and think for a moment about creation. How did God create the light, the earth, the water, and all living creatures?" he asked.

"He spoke it," Brielle replied.

"Yes! He *spoke,* and the power of His words alone was enough to create the entire universe and everything in it. He just *spoke,* and it came to be. Here's another example to think about. In the scripture found in Revelation 19:15, it says: '*Out of His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.'* Now, what do you think the first part of that scripture means?" he asked.

"I have no idea," Gideon said.

"I've wondered about that scripture for years," Keoni added.

"The book of Revelation is quite complicated and not as clearly cut as some of the other books of the Bible in its meanings and translations," Obadiah began, "Of course, the scripture is speaking about Jesus when he comes back to earth with the armies of heaven. He comes back to defeat satan, the beast written about in Revelation chapter 13, and all their armies of demons, kings, and followers. So, what do you think is actually being said by the phrase '*out of His mouth comes a sharp sword'*?"

"The power to defeat the enemy comes from his mouth?" Jace said, uncertain of his answer.

"Exactly!" Obadiah said, "He doesn't literally have a sword sticking out of his mouth. The verse says the sword will strike down the nations, meaning the nations of evil. But the sword is symbolic of His *words.* The words of God, His Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are so powerful that all they have to do is *speak* when they want something accomplished, and it's done. It can be hard for our minds to comprehend that kind of power, but our God is a *big, mighty, all-powerful* God, and *nothing* absolutely nothing is too difficult for Him. Now, let's go ahead

and turn in your Bibles to Revelation 19:21."

The Intercessors opened their Bibles to the passage.

"Gideon," Obadiah said, "why don't you read it aloud?"

"'*The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh'.* Sounds… delightful," Gideon said.

Obadiah chuckled, "This verse tells us that the power of Jesus conquers satan and everything evil, and all He has to do is *speak*! He doesn't have to lift a hand, a sword, or any other kind of weapon. Jesus is *so powerful* that His *words* are more than enough to defeat His enemies!

"An enemy of God does not want to hear His Word spoken because they know that the Word of God holds more power than they do. *No* power can stand against Jesus Christ," he said.

'Greater is He that is in me, than he that is in the world," Brielle said.

Obadiah looked at her, "Very good--and the location of that verse?"

Brielle smiled, "Umm…" she stammered.

"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world, 1 John 4:4," Obadiah said. "There is *power* in God's Word! And He has *given* it to us," he said, picking up his Bible, "Not only did He give us His Son, His love, His gift of salvation and eternal life, He gave us His *power*! It's right here, gift-wrapped in the pages of His Word… but we don't use it. We don't *use* God's power on a daily basis.

"We choose instead to allow ourselves to do things our way, which leads to us being beaten down by satan, the devil, our enemy, who seeks to destroy us. He injures us, makes us sick, and brings us sorrow, pain, and suffering. We worry and fret; we get angry or fall apart when these attacks come instead of utilizing the power that has been given to us. Why? Why do we do this when we know that God loves us and is on our side?" he looked at his students, waiting for their response. They were looking at him, eagerly waiting for his reply.

"Because we haven't taken the time to study His Word, to *really* know it, memorize it, and then use it as our weapon to battle the evil which comes against us. We need to speak the Word of God to the trials that come in our daily lives.

"Turn with me now to the book of Matthew, chapter 4," he said, waiting for the students to find their place.

"Here, Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tested before He begins His ministry. There is something most significant that you need to know. Let's read this together beginning on verse one. '*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. The tempter came to Him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'*

'Jesus answered, 'It is written (in Deuteronomy 8:3) 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

'Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God," he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written in
Psalm 9:11-12 'He will command His angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'

'Jesus answered him, 'It is also written (in Deuteronomy 6:16): 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

'Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'

'Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, satan! For it is written (Deuteronomy 6:13): 'Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.' Then the devil left Him, and angels came and attended Him.

"As you can see, Jesus himself used the Word of God to defeat His tempter. He didn't zap satan with the blast of a lightning bolt or use some other supernatural miracle for battle. No. He turned to the scriptures, using the very words that we have been given to use right here in this beloved book," Obadiah taught, holding up his Bible.

"I notice that even satan tried to use the Word of God against Him," Gideon said.

"Yes, he did, because he knows that there is power in it. You must never forget that satan was first named Lucifer and was the most beautiful angel in heaven. He knows all about God's power, Jesus' power, and the power of the Holy Spirit. He also knows the Word of God. It was when he tried to become more powerful than God that he was cast to earth with his angels, who became his demons.

"Although he correctly spoke the words of the scripture to Jesus, he misused them. Twisting it, as he always does, to try and serve his purpose, after all, he is the great deceiver. But again, he was defeated," Obadiah replied.

"God has *empowered* us with His Word. He has given us all the tools we need to have victory over our enemies in *all* things, at *all* times. So, we will revere the power of the Bible, we will honor the teachings and law it holds; we will apply it to our daily lives; but most of all, we will utilize the power that God has given us and in doing so, we too will conquer evil."

"This is *awesome*," Jace said. "I never thought about God's Word like this before. I always believed in the Bible. I knew the stories in it, the lessons and the commands for us to follow, but I never thought about being empowered by it like this, using it as a weapon to battle my situations in life."

"Praise God!" Obadiah rejoiced, "That's what becoming an Intercessor is all about! Alright, so the first act for us to come to the Lord is to believe in Him, His

Word, and to receive forgiveness of our sins through His Son Jesus Christ. Once we are forgiven, or 'saved' from our sins, we must do as the Bible commands us. We must learn God's law and be obedient, changing our lives completely to live as God's Word instructs. This should not be hard! This should be a wonderful change! A change that we want to make, that we welcome, embrace, and are excited about! After all, a life lived for Jesus is the *best* life we can ever live!

"Next, we must become servants of the Lord, act upon 'The Great Commission' as taught in Matthew 28:19-20. *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely,* ***I am with you*** *always, to the very end of the age.*

*"*Jesus wants us to spread the message of His love and salvation to every person we possibly can. He will return one day and wants to take as many of his beloved children to heaven with Him as possible to save them from the evils of the world. In doing so, He has *empowered* us. Just as His Word says in this verse, telling us that *all* authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him, and He will be with us to the very end. He knows the battles we will encounter will be challenging, painful, difficult, and sometimes frightening. He tells us this in John 16:33 *'I have told you these things, so that you in Me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But have courage! I have overcome the world!"* Jesus knew living in this world where satan dwells would be difficult, that's why He came to help us.

"The Bible tells us in Deuteronomy 31:6, *'Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified or discouraged because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you, nor forsake you.'* Again, in Joshua 1:9, God tells us, *"Be strong and courageous, do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the Lord Your God is with you wherever you go."*

"God's Word verifies to us time and time again, no matter where you are or what situation you may find yourself in, God *is* with you and will never leave you. He *wants* to fight your battles for you. He is a great and Mighty God, who is bigger than you and all your problems and your enemies… so let Him," Obadiah said gently.

The Intercessors sat quietly, taking all this information into their hearts and minds, and making notes in their Compendiums.

"Oba, I have a question," Brielle said. "About The Great Commission."

"Yes," Obadiah said.

"I have been feeling like I need to do more to tell people about Jesus, and I think I should start by doing it at school. There are so many students there who seem so lost. I think by all that we are experiencing with Lacy, Dylan, and Rateesh, there is a great need for the power of God to be shared," she said.

"I couldn't agree with you more," Obadiah said.

"I was thinking that maybe we should, as Intercessors, do something to like… declare our high school for God so that He will protect the students there," she said.

"Ah, yes!" Obadiah said, turning to the blackboard, upon which he wrote:

Staking A Claim

"Staking a claim is what you can do as an Intercessor, someone who stands in for someone else before God. You can decree that the high school is claimed in the Name of Jesus to be covered by the protection and power of God."

"What about the students who don't believe in God?" Keoni asked.

"Good question," Obadiah said, "You can still ask God for help in ministering to those students. Even if they reject you, by staking the claim for the Lord, you have asked for His blessings to be upon that place and all those who dwell there. Remember, God loves *all* His children even if they don't believe in or love Him back. He is not a selfish God; He will still answer your prayers for those students. But by claiming the high school for the Lord, it is like an invitation for the Holy Spirit to come and dwell there. Who knows what possibilities could open with the movement of the Holy Spirit flowing on that place?"

"What exactly is it that we do?" Gideon asked.

"Years ago, when someone would stake a claim, whether it be for land, gold, or even a spouse, they would mark that place or person with a symbol of their affirmation that it or they was to be theirs. A stake in the ground for some things, an engagement ring for others," he chuckled, "But the claim meant 'hands off' to anyone else. In staking a claim for your high school to declare it a place under the protection of the Lord, you are saying 'hands off' to the devil."

Brielle's face lit up. "What do we need to do to stake a claim for Jesus at school?"

Obadiah thought for a moment, "First, you must all be in agreement that if you do this, you will see it through. Making a commitment like this is a blessing and at the same time, will promise to bring its challenges. Next, if I were you, I would walk the perimeter of the place. Show God all the boundaries that you are claiming for Him. Then I would find a place on or by that property to pray.

"When you pray, you should declare that your high school is no longer a playground for satan and his demons to prey. You must cancel his agendas for the students there and then invite the Holy Spirit into that territory, welcoming Him to the place. Once that is accomplished, you should meet regularly at that place to pray. When you meet, pray for the students, the teachers, the staff, everyone who sets foot on that campus, and ask God to keep His hand of protection upon them.

"You should ask the Lord for divine appointments so that you may be able to share His love with other students at the school. Then invite them to join you. Even if only one person comes to know the Lord through your efforts-- it would

all be worth it," he finished.

The students were charged by his words and began to rattle off ideas of all they could do in getting started.

"I do recommend," Obadiah interrupted them, "that you talk with your principal and see what the rules are about starting an on-campus prayer group like this. She will be able to tell you about that process. Christians must always be respectful and live by example. Jesus never went around grabbing people by the shirt collar and forcing them to believe in Him. He went respectfully, happily, and humbly ministered. When He wasn't welcome, He departed with wisdom and grace. We must always look to the example Jesus set for us and strive to represent Him well."

They all agreed that this was something they wanted to do. Brielle said she would be happy to make time to speak to the principal tomorrow after school. Once again, they busily discussed their plans to stake their claim for the Lord at their school when they were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Hello Intercessors!" Magomu said from the main entrance, "I come bearing gifts of food," he said happily.

"Food!" Brielle exclaimed. They had been so involved in their lesson that they didn't notice the time was well after six o'clock.

Magomu made his way down the stairs, carefully carrying two big brown paper bags.

"I have for you all one of Alma's world-famous Muffaletta sandwiches," Magomu said, smiling broadly.

"What? Are you serious? Fantastic! Thank you, Mom! And thank you, Magomu, for bringing them to us!" Gideon said, opening the bag and pulling out one of the hot, juicy sandwiches.

Alma and her late husband were originally from New Orleans. Her family still lived there, and she was one of the most amazing 'Nawlins' cooks. She made Muffaletta's and shrimp gumbo, soft shell crab with turtle soup, and jambalaya; she even knew how to make alligator on a stick—not that there was a lot of alligator meat to be found in Fairfield, Connecticut.

The students were very grateful and thanked Magomu, who joined them for their delicious dinner as well. Obadiah retrieved some drinks from the kitchen cavern and sat down to eat with his students, taking the opportunity to discuss the matters of the lighthouse and the mysterious drawing Jace had discovered.

"Jace," Obadiah began, "Brielle and Keoni filled me in during our ride here about the lighthouse. Can you tell me more about the green light that you have seen?"

"Do you remember a few weeks ago when we went to lunch at North Shore? I had seen the light the night before," Jace said.

"Yes, you said you saw it around ten o'clock, correct?" Obadiah verified.

"Right, it only flashed once that night. But last night, it flashed twice," Jace

answered.

"How long did it shine?" Obadiah asked.

"Several seconds each time with a pause in between flashes," Jace answered.

Obadiah sat back in thought for a moment, then asked. "And last night it also flashed at ten o'clock?"

"Yes, exactly ten o'clock. I was waiting for it this time," Jace said.

"And when you went up there, you found no lighting device?" Obadiah asked.

"Nothing. The lens and mirror are still somewhat intact, but there is no way it could produce any source of light at all in the condition that it's in," Jace answered.

"Could someone have created the light with a device and then taken it away?" Keoni asked.

"It's possible," Obadiah said, still deep in thought.

"Do you think it was something else?" Jace asked Obadiah.

"I'm just wondering… when you saw the light, did it only illuminate the lighthouse tower top, or does it cast out over the waters like a regular lighthouse beam?" Obadiah asked.

"It casts out over the waters," Jace said, "but it's stationary and it doesn't turn. The beam was not very long, and it only casts out in one direction."

"Interesting," Obadiah said, placing his hand on his chin in deep thought.

"What do you mean, one direction?" Gideon asked.

"When a lighthouse is working and in operation," Obadiah explained, "it casts a beam or multiple beams of light from its tower in a circular motion. So, the light beam can be projected out to sea in all directions, warning ships of the coastline at night. Every lighthouse has its own signature in its method of light projection. For example, I saw one off the coast of Maine that had a spinning lens which sent three steady beams of light out to sea constantly in different directions. The lens spins, turning the light beams around five times. Then it pauses and starts over again.

"Not all lighthouse patterns are the same. The lighthouse at Montier's Point had a method of sending out four beams of light in a set of three rotations, then it would pause and start again. If the beam that Jace saw was stationary and didn't travel, then we know it couldn't have been produced from the tower's machinery. Someone had to create a source of light in the tower that was powerful enough to reflect off the mirror and cast a steady beam out to sea," he said.

"In which direction was the beam cast?" Brielle asked.

"It was southwest, reaching toward the direction of the harbor," Jace said.

"Both times you saw it?" Obadiah asked.

"Yes. The first time I saw it, we were coming into the harbor, so I was on

that side of the lighthouse," Jace answered. "That's where I went to wait for it last night."

"Tell him your theory," Brielle suggested to Jace.

"It may be farfetched, but I was thinking perhaps this is some sort of communication system between the drug dealers and the distributors here in town," Jace said timidly, "It's just a thought, though."

"It's an excellent thought," Obadiah said, "and one that should be investigated."

"If my calculations are correct," Jace said, "the guys will be at Rateesh's restaurant this Thursday. So, we will have to wait another two weeks before we can see the light again."

"I will mark that down," Obadiah said, "Will you be working that night?"

"Yes, Sir. I don't know when we will be back in port, but if I talk to Capt. Espindola explained everything to him. I'm sure he would be happy to help. As much as he loves that lighthouse, I know he would be interested."

"I'm curious as to why the lighthouse got into that condition?" Gideon asked, "I mean, if it is so important for oncoming ships to signal them of danger, why isn't it working anymore?"

"As the town expanded, there were so many stationary lights along the coast and the harbor that it became easier for ships to recognize where the land was located. After old Mr. Jacobson passed away, no one took his place. The lighthouse was abandoned and just fell into disrepair," Obadiah answered. "I'd like to try and see this light while out on the water," Obadiah said to Jace, "Do you think Capt. Espindola would mind my coming along?"

"I want to go too," Brielle said.

"No," Obadiah said flatly, "your mother would never approve of that. Jace is an experienced seaman and is the one who saw the light. If Capt. Espindola agrees, and Jace's parents, then Jace and I, will be the only ones to go out with him on the boat."

Brielle sighed, knowing that he was right. Her mother would never agree to her doing something like that. Deflated that she couldn't join the investigation, she asked her grandfather why he wanted to see the light from the sea.

"I'm wondering if it is being generated from inside the tower with some sort of portable device or…" Obadiah said, pausing in thought.

"Or…" Brielle pressed.

"Maybe it is being projected into the tower from somewhere else," he answered.

"Projected?" Keoni asked, "How would that work?"

"Laser beam," Gideon answered, "Is that what you're thinking, Obadiah?"

"Exactly," Obadiah said.

"A laser beam? Is that possible?" Keoni asked.

"Yes. The theory with lasers is that they have no distance limit as long as

they are not absorbed or stopped by another object. That would also account for the green glow. Lasers come in all colors these days, but the most common colors are red and green," Obadiah said.

Jace thought about Obadiah's idea carefully, then something came to him, "You know what?" he said, thinking back in his mind to recall the detail, "Now that you say that, I do remember something. The beam shone for several seconds each time it flashed, and it seemed to slightly move up and down. I noticed it because the first time I saw it, I was out at sea and thought perhaps it was because I was on the water. But I noticed it again last night, and I was on land," Jace said.

"How did it move?" Gideon asked.

Jace took his pencil and held it up in a horizontal position. "I noticed that it slightly moved or bobbed up and down like this," he said, demonstrating the motion of the light with the pencil.

"I didn't think much about it until you said that perhaps the light was projected into the tower."

"You think the person who is projecting the light has an unsteady hand?" Gideon asked.

"Or the person was on a boat," Jace answered.

Obadiah nodded, "That's exactly what I would like to find out."

"Then they could be bringing the drugs here by boat?" Brielle asked. "Fairfield is a quaint and wholesome town. If a drug dealer wanted to bring drugs here, it would be easy to sail into our harbor and drop them off without being detected."

"Yes, but we have no proof of that. It is only our theory," Obadiah said.

"But what is the meaning of the light? Why did it flash twice last night and once on another?" Gideon asked.

"Excellent questions," Obadiah said, "Jace has only seen it two times. The first time it flashed once, the second time it flashed twice. Who knows how many times it could flash the next time we see it."

Jace nodded, "That's true."

"Let me change gears here for a moment," Obadiah said, "Tell me about this drawing that you found on the wall inside the lighthouse tower," he said to Jace.

Jace explained everything he saw earlier in the morning and how, when they went back up there after church, it was gone. He took out his phone to show the drawing to Obadiah.

Obadiah studied the drawing carefully. "I can't place it right now… but I've seen this before, somewhere." He studied the drawing more closely. Then, without breaking his gaze from Jace's phone, he asked, "Keoni, do you have the drawing you made of this object with you?"

"Yes, I do," Keoni said, reaching into her bag to pull out her sketchbook. She turned to the page where she had done the drawing and gave it to him. Obadiah

marveled at her artistry in capturing the realism of a man's hand and then said, "This is truly amazing." He turned to look at her over his shoulder, "And you say that you dreamt this?"

"Yes," Keoni said.

"Remarkable," Obadiah whispered. "Jace, can I please send this photo to my computer? I would like to analyze it and figure out where I've seen this before."

"Absolutely," Jace said.

"Whatever this is, if it was there this morning and deliberately washed off by the time you all arrived at the lighthouse, it holds a significant meaning," Obadiah said.

Brielle was listening carefully to everything being said, thinking about the mysterious green light and the strange drawing on the wall. As she thought about these things, suddenly, an idea came into her mind.

"I just had an interesting thought. What if the green light in the tower is the signal that the drugs are here in town, and the drawing on the wall is telling them where they are located?" she asked curiously.

Everyone stared at her quietly for a moment.

"That's a *really* good thought," Obadiah said. "I think you may be on to something."

"What do we do with that thought?" Jace asked.

"May I make a suggestion?" Gideon asked.

"Certainly," Obadiah replied.

"I think we should write all these ideas down so we don't forget the details we've thought of and learned here," Gideon began, "We need to spend time in prayer about it and ask God to reveal to us what it all means--if it is His Will for us to know. Then I think we should make plans to 'Stake a Claim' for our school immediately so that God protects us from the evil of these drug dealers—and anything else that may come our way."

Everyone was staring at him.

"Wow, Giddy," Brielle smiled, "That was impressive. You really are the one God gives the battle plan to."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Obadiah said, standing up from his chair and patting Gideon on his back. "'*And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, 'The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor'*. Judges 6:12," Obadiah said.

"Man!" Gideon exclaimed, "How do you do that?"

Obadiah looked at him, puzzled. "Do what?"

"You just quote scripture after scripture after scripture. It's like you have the whole Bible memorized. How do you *do* that?" Gideon asked.

Obadiah smiled, "Years and years of practice-- and you will too. Now is the time for you all to begin your studies of God's Word. If you turn in your Compendium, you will find the in-depth lessons that I have created for you to

learn about the books of the Bible. It is a study that will take a very long time, but remember this is a process, not an event. To quote the encouraging words of Plato, '*The beginning is the most important part, for that is the time that character is being formed*.'"

"Exordium," Brielle whispered to herself.

"What was that?" Obadiah said.

"It was the first word I learned in Latin," she explained, "Exordium, it means 'the beginning'."

Obadiah nodded, "I like that. Yes, this is the Intercessors Exordium."

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The dawn of a new day brought a great surge of energy and determination to the Intercessors. They had decided to 'Stake a Claim' for the Lord's protection to be upon the students and faculty of their high school. They worked on a plan the night before during their training session in the Prayer Sanctum, so after school, they met at the large oak tree in front of the library.

"Okay," Gideon said, "We'll start at the main entrance of the parking lot, and we'll walk the entire perimeter of the campus and pray. Jace and I will head east, and Bri, you, and Keoni can go west."

Brielle looked at Jace for a moment. She didn't want to alter the plan, and she knew they needed to be focused and pray, but she still wished she could walk with him.

"I have something for us," Keoni said. She opened a small bag and asked Gideon to cup his hands together. Then she poured the contents of the bag into Gideon's hands. The rest gathered around to see. Inside Gideon's hands were beautiful little plastic crosses with a stake attached at the bottom.

"I made these last night when I got home," Keoni said, "I used all the crosses from my jewelry kit and glued toothpicks to the bottom of them. They look kind of silly, but I thought we could stick them into the ground every so often as we walk the campus.

"I don't think they look silly," Brielle said softly, picking up a little cross to examine it closely, "I think this is a brilliant idea."

"Thanks," Keoni said happily, "They're small enough that they will go down into the ground easily, and no one should get hurt on them. I just thought we should have a special 'stake' for our claim," she smiled.

"Let's pray over the crosses as our stakes for the territory that we are claiming," Brielle said, "and ask God for His love, protection, and guidance for all who set foot here."

Keoni divided the crosses between them, and they joined hands and prayed that God would recognize their request to claim their school for Him. They invited the Holy Spirit to dwell freely on the grounds in the hopes that everyone who came upon the campus would feel His presence, love, peace, and safety there. They asked God to let the students feel that something had changed, something was different, and it was good.

They began to walk, Keoni and Brielle heading west and Jace and Gideon heading east. Slowly, they traveled along the outside of the campus, leaving no part of the perimeter unclaimed. As they strolled along from place to place, they would stick one of Keoni's little cross stakes into the ground, all the while praying and asking God to bless their campus and allow His Spirit of love to dwell there. They asked Him for divine appointments to witness the love of Jesus and

His gift of salvation to others—not just the students, but also for the faculty and even parents, for they were on a mission to help build the Kingdom of God. They asked for protection from those who would bring harm to any of the current students or for those yet to come. Then they asked for God's perfect will to be accomplished in that place daily.

The four met on the other side of the campus and began walking back to the main entrance where they had started, crossing through the baseball field to save time. As they walked through the field, Gideon bent down and placed a few cross stakes in the ground.

"What are you doing?" Keoni asked, "We covered the entire campus boundary and asked for everything inside of it to be under God's hand."

"I know," Gideon smiled, "and now I'm asking for God to bless our field and our team when we are out here playing."

Keoni shot him a look, "I don't think God cares one bit whether you all win or lose a game."

"Well, seeing as how we don't know that for certain, I'm doing it. That way, in case He does care, we're covered," he laughed.

"You can ask for His protection for all the teams who play here," Brielle said, "God cares about that."

Gideon pointed at her with a look of validation, "Good! Yes! I'll do that too," he said.

Just then, Jace noticed something happening. As he was walking through the infield, getting close to home plate, he saw a group of guys on the other side of the bleachers. He couldn't tell for sure, but he thought it looked like Rateesh--along with Reed, Morgan, Ryan, and Sean. He moved quickly to see around the bleachers, and he was right, it was them.

Brielle was watching him and trying to see what he saw.

Then she heard him say, "Rateesh," and he began to run in that direction, "Come on, Gideon, we've got a problem!"

The Intercessors ran across the field to reach the parking lot. When they arrived, Rateesh was lying down on the ground while the four other guys stood hovering around him. When Brielle saw this, she couldn't help but cry out.

"Rateesh!" she exclaimed, running to the boy's side, not paying any attention to the four foreboding youth now staring at her, "Are you alright?"

Rateesh was on his hands and knees trying to get up. He had his head down, facing the ground. "I'm fine," he whispered to her, out of breath.

"What's going on?" Gideon asked Reed.

"Nothing," Reed smiled innocently, "Rateesh tripped and fell. We were just checking on him."

"Tell the truth now," Brielle said, "Because we all know that isn't what happened."

Reed's innocent smile and sweet tone quickly turned sharp and ugly at her

words, “Are you calling me a liar?” he demanded.

“You bet,” she said, standing up to meet his glare.

Jace stepped in front of her, pulling her behind him, and whispered to her, “Please, just help Rateesh.”

Keoni and Brielle helped Rateesh to his feet and saw that his lip was cut and bleeding, and his clothes were dirty from his fall. Keoni pulled out a tissue to help clean up some of the blood. Brielle’s hands began to tremble.

“I don’t understand why four guys like you would be picking on someone like Rateesh,” Gideon said calmly. “Doesn’t make much sense to me or seem like fair odds, does it to you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Morgan answered lightly, “It’s like Reed said, he fell down and we came over to check on him,” then he turned to Rateesh, “Isn’t that right?” he said, looking at Rateesh.

Then Morgan pressed again, “I said, isn’t that right, Rateesh?” he asked directly.

Rateesh kept his face down, and he nodded his head quickly, “Yeah… that’s right.”

“Rateesh, you don’t have to lie to protect them,” Brielle said. “We know that’s not what happened. They’re not fooling anybody,” she said, turning her glare at the four.

“You’ve got quite a mouth on you for such a little girl,” Sean said. “You might want to think a little bit more before you speak,” he said in a calm, cool tone, but with a piercing glare into her eyes.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Brielle said, “I’ve seen worse.”

The guys laughed and mocked her comment.

“Look, man,” Gideon began, “whatever it is that’s going on here with Rateesh and you, it needs to stop.”

“Is that right?” Reed said, walking up to get close to Gideon, “Is that a threat or a request?”

“Actually, it’s a command, but since you obviously don’t know the difference, I’ll break it down for you-- and I’ll speak slowly. A threat would be if I said I was going to do something to you if you don’t stop. I just said, it needs to stop,” Gideon said in a condescending tone. “But if it’s a threat you need, then I’m happy to say that I won’t blink an eye at telling Coach Barnes about all of this,” he said flatly.

“He knows what a threat is,” Jace said in a calm tone, “He’s good at making them.”

Reed’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re smart, you and your friends will mind your own business and leave it alone.”

“Where have I heard that before?” Jace asked calmly, “Oh, yeah, that’s right, you said it to me in chemistry the other day. You know, you lack originality. If the truth is that Rateesh fell and you were just checking on him, then what’s

the need for statements like that--unless, of course, it's like Brielle said, you are lying."

Brielle watched while he spoke so evenly, so cool and relaxed; he was the anti-her in situations like these.

Reed glared at Jace, "You think you're really smart, huh?" he said angrily.

"I know I'm smart," Jace said coolly.

"Well," Reed laughed, coming closer to Jace, "let me tell you something, Mr. Genius, you just watch yourself. I already told you this once; you feel the need to protect your friend? I'm sure someday you'll get your chance."

"Now that's a threat," Gideon said, stepping closer to Reed.

"You watch your back, too," Reed said to Gideon.

"Come on, Reed," Sean said, "We need to go. Practice will be starting in ten minutes."

While Reed, Sean, and Morgan were talking with Gideon and Jace, Ryan looked nervous and never spoke a word. As they turned to walk away, Reed noticed Rateesh had dropped his calculator from his backpack.

"Here you go, Ratty, you dropped your calculator when you fell," he said, taking his shoe and kicking it in front of Rateesh.

Jace watched Reed and noticed that he was wearing a white pair of athletic shoes, and the right shoe had a black mark across the toe.

When they were gone, Jace turned to Rateesh, "What happened? I thought you said your dad was coming to pick you up today."

"He was supposed to, but then he had to go do an errand and told me to just walk. I waited in the library, hoping they would be gone to practice, but I guess I didn't wait long enough," Rateesh said, still dabbing his cut lip with the tissue.

"Man, if that happens again, you *call* me," Jace said. "I will come and take you home or at least make sure you are not alone until someone else does, okay?"

Rateesh nodded silently.

"Why did they hurt you?" Brielle asked.

Rateesh shook his head, "They said it was something about me talking to my friends too much, but I don't know why they thought that - unless someone saw us talking at the Café the other day."

Jace sighed and shook his head. "No. This is my fault."

"Your fault?" Gideon asked.

"What did Reed mean when he said, 'he told you this before'?" Brielle asked.

"The other day he asked me why I was taking you home," Jace said, looking at Rateesh. "He said he didn't know why I was doing that, but I needed to leave it alone."

"Is that what happened in chemistry when he made you drop your tray?"

Rateesh asked.

"Yeah," Jace replied, "I made him mad when I told him that I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?" Keoni asked.

"Leave it alone," Jace said. "I'm sorry, Rateesh. I wasn't thinking that they would hurt you like this. I should have just ignored him."

"Jace, this is not your fault, none of it is. But I thank you," Rateesh said, looking at all of them, "I thank you all for trying to help me."

"Well, no matter what, you can't be alone now," Gideon said.

"But that's not possible," Rateesh said, "I mean, you all have lives and schedules, and so do I. I just have to work it out somehow."

"Why don't you tell your parents what is happening?" Brielle pleaded, "At least tell them that you have bullies-- or guys at school that are harassing you and you don't want to be alone."

Rateesh shook his head, "I don't know. My father is always trying to teach Nakul and me how to be strong and to take care of ourselves. He will just think that I am weak."

"What if we talked with him? You know, if I verified how serious it is. Would that help?" Keoni asked.

"I don't know about that either," Rateesh explained. "My father is a very strong-willed and determined man. He does not like to be told what to do-- especially with his family and his business. I'll have to think about this."

"We'll pray about it," Brielle said. "Would you let us pray for you now?" she asked gently.

Rateesh smiled, "That's okay, Brielle. Thank you for all your help, but you know that I do not believe the same way you do. I will just be more careful."

"Okay, we will keep praying for you, and if you ever change your mind, please know we are here for you," Brielle said softly.

"Thanks," Rateesh said, "I need to get going. My father told me to meet him at the restaurant by four o'clock."

"I'll take you there," Jace said. Then he turned to Brielle, "Are you going home now?" he asked.

"Keoni and I are going to visit Lacy and her parents first," she said.

"Okay, if I meet you there?" he asked.

Brielle smiled broadly, "Of course," she said happily, then she and Keoni hugged Rateesh, and they all said their goodbyes.

"I've got to get to practice too," Gideon said, "I'll catch you all tomorrow."

Jace and Rateesh headed to the restaurant, and Brielle and Keoni got into her car to go to the hospital. When they arrived, they found Laura in the room with Lacy. No one else was there.

Laura was happy to see them and greeted them warmly. Keoni and Brielle walked to Lacy's bedside. They were shocked at her appearance, for although they had heard the good news about her brain activity, the rest of her body was

struggling.

Brielle looked at Keoni and whispered, “I didn’t think it was possible for her to look anymore pale.”

“Or thin,” Keoni whispered back.

“You girls feel free to talk to her,” Laura said from her chair. “The doctors have been telling us to talk to her, read to her, play music for her, and watch television with her. We don’t know what her subconscious can hear, so we are trying everything we can.”

Brielle nodded at Laura, then softly took hold of Lacy’s hand. Lacy’s skin was cold and tight. She looked at Keoni, “Maybe you should go first,” she said, “You knew her better than I did.”

Keoni nodded and took Lacy’s other hand.

“Hi, Lacy,” she said gently. “It’s Keoni from school, and Brielle is here too. You may not remember her, but… but she is the one who caught you the day you… The day you fell.”

“Talk about happy things,” Brielle whispered.

Keoni tried again, “We’ve come to visit you and see how you are doing. We really love your mom and dad. You have a great mom and dad,” she said, unsure of what to say.

Then Brielle spoke, “We are praying for you, Lacy, every day. We know that God touched you the other day, and we believe that He can completely heal you and get you back home with your family.”

On hearing these words, Laura began to cry. Brielle and Keoni both turned to see her sobbing. They went to sit with her and comfort her.

“Every day I sit here in this chair and look at her, my precious baby,” she whispered, “I keep waiting for that moment when her eyes will start to open. I remember watching her as an infant in my arms, so small, so beautiful, and I just loved watching her sleep. I always thought that there was nothing more peaceful than a child when they are sleeping,” she shook her head and pulled a tissue from the box on the nightstand. “But now… now all I can think about is seeing her eyes open. I’ve dreamt about it so many times, and every day I come here with new hope, but… she sleeps,” she said, tears filling her eyes.

Both Brielle and Keoni put their arms around Laura, tears filling their eyes as her pain engulfed them.

“I know that words don’t mean much right now,” Brielle said. “But I believe that God is working on Lacy. We can’t see it and we don’t understand it, but there is something good that is still to come. I believe that.”

Laura nodded, “I know, you’re right. God did touch her that day you all prayed for her, and I know He can heal her, it’s just so hard… so very hard,” she whispered.

Jace walked into the room. When Laura saw him, she stood up to greet him with a hug.

"How are you doing?" Jace asked sweetly.

"I'm holding fast to God's unchanging hand," Laura answered.

Jace smiled at her reply.

He found a chair and then sat back down to talk with her.

"What are the doctors saying about Lacy's condition now?" he asked.

"They said that the chances of her having speech problems look much lower, and that her brain doesn't show as big a damage level from the stroke as it did before," Laura replied with a smile.

"That's a miracle," Jace said in amazement.

"Yes, and it is what I am holding onto to believe God will heal her completely," Laura said. "They also said that her body is going through the detoxification process from the drugs and that the one positive thing about the coma is that she won't have to remember going through that."

"I've heard that it is a very painful process," Keoni said.

Laura nodded her head, "The doctors told me that the drugs Lacy was taking were a very strange mixture. They know for sure that it was a combination of methamphetamines, barbiturates, and baking soda. I am learning that this is quite common now in the drug world. If the drug dealers can dilute the drug with something else, they can spread it out and make more sales.

"This then makes the drug user crave more drugs more often because they are not getting as much of a high, it doesn't last as long, so they use more and more," she said, her eyes filling again with tears.

"Yes," Jace said, "and then the user needs to buy more and more..."

"Which makes the drug dealers more money," Keoni finished. "I learned that from my father. I think I may have told you he was a police officer here in town."

"Yes, I had the privilege of meeting your mother, Magomu, and Asher the other day; they came to visit with Genevieve. She told me how your father died," Laura said, starting to sob again. "I'm so sorry these horrible drug dealers took your father away, too."

Keoni nodded, a lump deep in her throat, tears filling her eyes. Laura reached out and hugged her. Jace looked over at Brielle somberly. She remembered his words the other day as he told her how the drug dealers don't care about all the families they hurt, the mothers, fathers, and children. All they care about is money.

Laura took a few more tissues and handed them to Keoni, keeping one for herself to dry her eyes. She took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess today," she said.

Brielle patted her arm reassuringly, "I think you're pretty amazing," she whispered. "You and Jim have handled this so well."

Laura smiled, "I do feel much stronger now that I've met your mother-- and Jim and I are back in church. I feel like I have a connection to God again."

Brielle nodded and smiled, patting Laura's arm gently.

Jace looked at Lacy. "Laura, the doctors said the drugs were a mixture of meth and barbiturates?"

"Yes, they said it was an odd combination. The baking soda was just there to let her think she had more than she actually did. But I don't understand it all," Laura answered.

"It is a strange combination," Jace said, almost thinking out loud. "Meth mixed with barbiturates. Do they think that is the reason for the coma?"

"Partially," Laura said, "they said the overdose alone could have placed her in this condition, but with the barbiturates in her system, it just made it much worse."

"Methamphetamine is the opposite of a barbiturate," Jace explained to Brielle, "It is a drug to wire you, like speed. The barbiturate is to slow you down, a sedative to help you sleep, so with an overdose of that mixture, her body probably didn't know what to do."

"Yes," Laura agreed, "the doctors said there are many drugs which, if overdosed, can cause strokes, comas-- all kinds of things. Drugs are just nothing but a tool of satan to destroy lives," she whispered.

Brielle grabbed Laura's hand, "We just have to keep praying and believing that Jesus will heal her. The blood of Jesus Christ is much more powerful than the effects of those drugs."

"Let's pray now," Keoni said, standing up and moving to Lacy's bed.

The four gathered around Lacy's bed, held hands, and began to pray. As they did, a fifth person came in and joined them in their prayer. They looked up to see who the additional prayer partner was and found that it was Nurse Carrie.

The group did not rush, they did not tire, they took their time to pray and wait upon the Lord. They didn't pray fancy, they didn't pray loud, they just opened their hearts to Jesus and asked Him to bless Lacy with His healing power.

After their prayers and visiting with Laura and Lacy, the three friends said their goodbyes and said they would come back soon. Laura was grateful for their time together and felt more hopeful that God would help her daughter.

"I'm starving," Brielle said as they walked down the hall.

"This cafeteria is quite good," Jace said.

Brielle looked at him curiously and laughed, "Really? You come here often?"

Jace shook his head and laughed, "There have been a few times when I was here that I ate at the cafeteria. They have a great selection of food; you would love it. Want to grab a bite?"

The girls both agreed that they were hungry, so they headed to the cafeteria. They found a table and sat down. Suddenly, a strange look came over Keoni's face.

"Are you okay?" Brielle asked her.

"I don't feel good," she said.

"Are you going to be sick?" Brielle asked.

Keoni sat quietly, not responding, just very deep in thought with a strange look on her face.

"I just think I need to step outside," she finally said, grabbing her bag. "You go ahead and eat. I'll be back in a minute."

"Can I come with you?" Brielle asked, concerned for her friend.

"No, I'll be okay. I just need to get some air. I'll be alright, you go ahead and eat," she replied.

"Okay, call me if you need me," Brielle said with a worried tone.

Keoni nodded as she headed for the cafeteria door.

Brielle and Jace watched as she left. "Something's wrong," Brielle said.

"How do you know?" Jace asked.

"I know her. I know that look on her face," she said, "Ever since she was little, she has had the gift of discernment. Of course, we didn't understand it back then like we do now. But she gets these feelings about things, she has dreams-- you saw what she did with that drawing from the lighthouse," Brielle said, picking up her sandwich to take a bite.

"Yeah, that was pretty amazing," Jace agreed.

"When we were little, we went to Black Rock Lake together. I wanted to go swimming, and she told me she didn't feel that we should go—even though we had gone every day we were there. I decided to ignore her, and when I walked down toward the Lake, she grabbed me and was pleading with me not to go. She made such a fuss that her parents and my mom came running to see what was going on. Ten minutes later, we learned that a group of men had killed a huge timber rattlesnake – it had been killed by the very dock I was going to swim by."

Jace's eyes grew wide with surprise. "Wow, that's incredible."

"That's God in Keoni," she said. "Timber rattlesnakes are not water snakes, yet one was there. That's not even the most incredible story," she paused. "One night, Keoni had a horrible nightmare. She woke up completely hysterical and ran into her dad, Antoine, begging him not to go to work the next day. She couldn't tell him anything other than that, but she was certain that he should not go. He didn't listen to her," she said softly, looking out the window.

Jace sat silently listening to the tragic story.

"I think that Keoni suppressed her gift after that because she didn't speak much about dreams, visions, or feelings until this year. After she took the spiritual gifts test, she understands that she has that ability because God wants to use her for His special purposes. I'm so proud of her for being open to it now," she said.

"I admire them both," Jace said, "She and Gideon are a testimony of the power of God. To lose their father in such a way, yet they never act angry about it. They try hard to be happy, and I've never heard them complain about their

situation."

Brielle nodded and smiled, "Yeah, I don't know what I would do without them. They're pretty awesome."

"You're pretty awesome too," Jace said, causing Brielle to blush.

Then he took a deep breath, "Brielle," he started, "I've been meaning to talk to you about something for a long time, and it seems like every time I did, we were interrupted."

Brielle's heart began to pound against her chest.

He looked down at his plate, unsure of what to say,

"Remember how I told you that I thought I would have to go out of town for a few days with my father?" he asked.

Brielle nodded, her excitement now crossing over to nervousness.

"Well, I have to go," he said sadly, "I tried every way possible to get out of it, but it cannot be changed."

Brielle nodded quietly.

"The weekend I have to leave is the same weekend as Homecoming," he said, deflated. "I wanted to ask you to the Homecoming dance," he said nervously, "but now I can't."

Brielle felt the rush of disappointment sweep over her, but at the same time, she believed that he was telling the truth; his beautiful, dark brown eyes told her that he felt terrible about it.

"I'm so sorry," he said gently.

Brielle grinned at him, "It's okay. I understand."

"Gideon told me that Keoni broke off her date with Giovanni too," he continued, "because she was too much of a Jesus freak for him."

Brielle laughed lightly, "Yeah, she did."

Jace grinned, "That's actually pretty cool."

"Yeah, it is," she agreed, "I was proud of her for taking a stand for Jesus."

"Gideon said he was going to ask you and Keoni if you both wanted to go to the dance with him," Jace said, watching for her response.

Brielle did not hesitate; her eyes widened, and she began to laugh. "What? Oh, my goodness! That's very sweet of him, but I seriously doubt that you will find Keoni at any dance at any time with her *brother,*" she giggled.

"What about you?" Jace asked, "Would you go with him to the dance?"

Brielle smiled at him, "It is *very* sweet that he would think of us like that, and I would totally go with the two of them in a heartbeat. But I honestly don't think Keoni will do it, and I wouldn't want to go without her. No, it's alright, we'll just plan a sleepover or something that weekend; take our mind off it."

Jace leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair. "Oh gosh! Now you're really making me feel bad!" he laughed.

Brielle shook her head, "I'm so sorry, Jace, I honestly didn't mean to."

"He also told me that you and Keoni already went dress shopping," he said

shyly.

Brielle's eyes popped open again in shock. "He told you that? I can't believe he told you that!" she said, embarrassed.

"Don't be upset at him, he was trying to help. He was letting me know that if I was going to get this trip changed, I had better do it fast," he sighed, "I'm just so sorry to disappoint you."

"Jace, it's okay, if you have to go with your father, you have to go. Things happen; I appreciate that you tried to change it for me. I shouldn't be so selfish. I mean, you will get to spend time with your father," she said sincerely. "Where is it that you are going anyway?"

"We have to go up to New York for a few days, just a boring business trip. But I had no idea it would take me away over this particular weekend," he said. Then he reached across the table and gently took her hand in his. She felt the warmth of his touch shoot through her arm and down to her stomach, where the butterflies were waiting.

"I'd like to make it up to you, though," he said almost in a whisper.

Brielle did not speak but looked at him with quiet anticipation. He hesitated, and Brielle could see how terribly nervous he was.

Then he looked into her beautiful eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "Would you go to the prom with me?"

Brielle felt the butterflies explode all through her. She had to admit that she really didn't know what he was going to ask her, but this question made all the disappointment of him not asking her to Homecoming disappear. First, she smiled, then she giggled, covering her mouth to hide her excitement, and then she nodded her head.

"I would love to," she said, sweetly. "Wow, prom? I bet I'm the only girl at school who already has a prom date," she laughed.

Jace's nervousness left him, and he looked peaceful and relieved. "I just wanted to make sure I asked you before anyone else did. Besides, I would love to see you in the lovely white dress Gideon said you bought."

Brielle's face was once again shocked, "He told you that *too!"* she exclaimed.

Jace laughed, "So… am I forgiven for Homecoming?"

Brielle looked at him curiously, "Did you just ask me to prom so that I would forgive you?"

Jace looked surprised, "No, of course not!"

Brielle squeezed his hand and giggled, "I know, I'm just kidding! Don't be silly! There is nothing to forgive! This trip with your father is not your fault, and I hope you have a great time spending time with him."

Jace squeezed her hand back, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said softly.

Brielle then remembered Keoni, "Oh, my gosh! We have to check on Keoni,"

she said, reaching into her bag to grab her phone.

She dialed the number twice, but twice it went into Keoni's voicemail.

Brielle quickly gathered up her things, "Come on, she's not answering. We have to find her."

They headed down the hall and Brielle ran into the first ladies' room she found and called for Keoni. No answer. Then she went a little farther down and found another ladies' room, she wasn't there either.

"She said she needed air," Jace said, "Let's go check outside."

They headed out the main entrance and spotted her sitting on a bench. She was talking on her phone. As they approached, they heard her end the call.

"Okay mom, I love you too," she said as she hung up.

"Are you okay?" Brielle asked sitting down next to her friend on the bench.

"I don't know," Keoni answered, "I just feel sick to my stomach. Not like I'm going to throw up or anything, just like… something's wrong."

"Was that Alma?" Brielle asked.

"Yeah. I just called her to see if she was okay. I tried calling Giddy, but he's at practice. I don't know what's wrong with me," she said putting her head into her hands.

"Do you want to pray about it?" Brielle asked.

Keoni did not raise her head, but sighed, "I have been. I asked God to reveal to me what is going on. I feel like I'm going crazy."

Brielle rubbed her friend's back and looked at Jace, who sat down beside her.

"We'll pray for you," Brielle whispered, wrapping her arm around her friend. "Heavenly Father, You know why Keoni is feeling the way she does. We don't understand it, and she doesn't understand it. We ask you, Lord, right now, in the Name of Your Son Jesus Christ, that You would please bring a calming presence to her and that if there is something You want her to know, that You would reveal it to her now so she can have peace. In Jesus' Name, Amen," she finished.

No sooner than she had finished praying, Keoni's phone rang. She quickly looked up at Brielle in amazement and looked at the number calling. A puzzled expression came across her face.

"It's Giddy. But he can't make calls at practice," she said as she answered the call.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Keoni," Gideon said, his voice sounding weak. Keoni immediately knew something was wrong.

"Giddy, what's wrong?" she asked quickly.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," he soothed.

"You don't sound okay," she said, looking at Brielle and Jace, who stood up eagerly awaiting news on their friend.

"Where are you right now?" he asked softly.

"I'm at the Devereaux Hospital," she said, "Why? Where are you?"

"I'm at the Devereaux Hospital," he said.

A look of shock and fear quickly came across Keoni's face. "What? Where are you?" she asked quickly, gathering up her bag and motioning for Jace and Brielle to follow as she headed for the main entrance.

"I'm in the emergency room," he said, "I'm okay, really. I'm just in a lot of pain right now."

Keoni covered the phone with her hand. "He's here in the emergency room," then she spoke to Gideon, "What happened?"

"It was Reed and Morgan," he said, "They took me down during practice."

"Took you down? What do you mean took you down?" she replied.

"We were on opposite teams for a scrimmage today. Reed and Sean slammed me down hard and drove my shoulder into the ground. I completely dislocated it," he said.

Keoni gasped and relayed the message to Jace and Brielle as they quickly closed the gap between them and Gideon in the hospital. Brielle's hands began to tremble in anger. This had all gone too far; something had to be done to stop Reed and his guys.

"Did you call Mom?" Keoni asked Gideon.

"Coach Barnes is calling her; he is the one who brought me here. They can't treat me until she gets here to give permission. I hope she makes it soon, I need some help," he replied with a faint laugh.

Keoni was always so amazed by Gideon's bravery.

"Okay, don't worry about anything, Giddy. I'm here, I'm just outside the door now," Keoni said, "I'm going to have the nurse bring me back."

The nurse said that only one of them could go back at a time. So, Jace and Brielle sat down in the waiting room. Brielle made calls to her mother, Oba, and Magomu, who said they were on their way.

Oba was already in town, so he was the first to arrive. Then Alma came, and the nurse took her to Gideon immediately. Genevieve, Asher, and Magomu all arrived together

"How is he doing?" Genevieve asked.

"We don't know yet," Brielle answered, "We were here visiting Lacy when Keoni got his call. He said that some guys tackled him hard into the ground, and he dislocated his shoulder."

"You're kidding? Did they check him for any other injuries?" Genevieve asked.

"I don't know, that's all he said," Brielle answered. She then began to tell them what had happened earlier that afternoon with the four guys at school; how they had hurt Rateesh and threatened both Jace and Gideon.

"This must be reported," Oba said, "Those young men are out of control."

After another twenty minutes, Keoni came into the waiting room.

"He's okay," she said, much calmer now. "His shoulder was dislocated, and the doctor adjusted it to put it back in place. He feels better but is still in pain."

"Is Coach Barnes still here?" Obadiah asked.

"Yes, he hasn't left Gideon's side since they arrived," she said.

"Did Gideon tell him about Reed and his threats?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, he did. Gideon was pretty upset because the doctor said that he wouldn't be able to play for a few weeks. He said they will keep him here for a while longer, but he can go home tonight," she said.

"Tell your mother that I am here and will stay here to help her get him home," Magomu said.

"Why don't you go on back and talk to her?" Keoni said.

"I can go back there?" Magomu asked sweetly.

"Of course, you can," Keoni smiled, "You're part of our family too."

Magomu hugged her, and she could feel him trembling. Though he didn't show it on the outside, she could tell Magomu was terribly worried about Gideon.

Brielle looked at Keoni, "You were right. There was something wrong."

Keoni looked down and nodded.

"What happened?" Obadiah asked.

Brielle explained how Keoni suddenly felt sick, like something was wrong, but she could not figure out what it was. Then she got the call from Gideon.

"The Lord will continue to reveal things like this to you, Keoni," Obadiah said, coming to put his arm around her, "Sometimes it will be pleasant, and other times, like this, not so pleasant. But He speaks this to you for a reason. As you grow and develop your relationship with the Lord, He will reveal to you His plan for this gift.

"I know that we can't all go back there," he continued, "but why don't we gather here and pray for Gideon. Let's pray for the pain he is in to get better, for God to bring him a complete healing, and for God to bring His justice to these young men who did this to him."

Then they stood together in the waiting area of the Emergency Room and prayed for Gideon. Oba, Genevieve, Brielle, Jace, Keoni, and Asher all called upon the Name and healing power of Jesus Christ, a Name above all other names, and asked Him to give His blessings and His healing touch to their friend and brother.

Although Brielle prayed hard for Gideon to receive a complete healing, she prayed a little bit harder for God to bring His justice to Reed and Morgan.

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Later that evening, Brielle sat with Asher and waited on the front porch for Magomu to come home. Keoni had called at seven o'clock to say that Gideon had been released from the hospital, and Magomu was going to help them get him home. At eight-thirty, Magomu arrived with the news that Gideon was resting comfortably in his own bed. Everyone was relieved to know that he would be alright.

Magomu explained, "The doctors told him that he definitely cannot play in this weekend's Homecoming game or next week's game, but that if he rests and takes care of his shoulder, he still may be able to play the rest of this season". The worry on Magomu's face was evident. He had known Gideon and Keoni since they were six years old, and he loved them dearly.

"God will take care of him," Obadiah said, patting him gently on the back. "Who knows, maybe something good can come of this brutality."

"Yes," Magomu nodded, "I will pray for that."

Genevieve took Asher and Magomu into the kitchen to get them something to eat, and Brielle and Obadiah sat down on the front porch swing. He loved to sit outside in the evening, and he especially enjoyed a hot cup of coffee while on the porch. It was colder now, so Brielle wrapped herself up in a blanket that her mother kept there just for that purpose.

"There are so many things that I don't understand about today," Brielle said softly, gazing up into the night sky. "Why is it that immediately after we finished staking our claim for God, and asking Him to bless and *protect* everyone who came there, two of the high school students get hurt---*intentionally* hurt?" She asked her grandfather, who listened to her concerns.

"I know that may be confusing and probably feels very frustrating," Obadiah began, "You need to understand that just because you staked a claim for your school doesn't mean that the devil is going to give it up without a fight. What I should say is, *because* you have staked a claim for your school, the devil is going to fight for it."

Brielle shifted her gaze from the stars to her grandfather's green eyes and looked at him curiously.

"Do you remember when you learned about the Great Land Run of Oklahoma in 1839?" he asked.

Brielle nodded.

"Do you remember some of the stories that were told about that event? Not all of them had happy endings. Some of the marked territory was very desirable land. They were rich in soil, lush with thick trees, and had natural water sources. There were some disputes over those pieces of land-- and some battles," he said.

Brielle nodded, remembering the lessons her mother had taught her about

the historical event.

"It's the same with your high school," Obadiah said, "The enemy sees that high school as a prime piece of territory. It is rich with young, influential souls who are trying to find themselves; a perfect place to cause havoc. It's priceless to him - all high schools are, because they are full of teenage lives-- and he is not going to give up trying to destroy those teenage lives easily. He's going to fight for it."

Brielle sighed, fully understanding what Obadiah was saying to her. "So as soon as we claim something good for Jesus, satan comes to try and snatch it back?" she said.

"Yes, and he came immediately to fight you for the claim you made," Obadiah answered, "He wants that territory. He doesn't want you to win any of those kids for Jesus, and he definitely doesn't want God's protection on that place."

She nodded in silent understanding.

"Now that you have claimed that place for the Lord, you need to keep praying for it and speaking God's Word upon it. Of course, when you do, you are going to shake the enemy up again—but don't be discouraged, remember who wins in the end," he grinned and sipped his coffee. "I know it's hard to think this way because you saw your friends hurting, and I can understand that. I guess the best way to look at it is that you all are creating a great problem in satan's world, and he is trying to stop you."

"Yes, I guess that's true," she said, "At the same time, I just worry about my friends."

"Trust in the Lord and don't worry. God will not fail you," Obadiah said. "Never doubt that He heard your requests and prayers today. He always hears you, and He always listens to a humble heart."

"But… why didn't He protect them as soon as we asked for it? Then neither Gideon nor Rateesh would have been hurt today," she said.

"I don't pretend to understand all the ways of the Lord, I can't. His Word tells us in Isaiah 55:8, "*My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts", says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine."'* God does work in mysterious ways… but even though we do not always understand what He is doing, just know that He is *always* working for our good. You keep your head up and your eyes on Jesus. He will not fail you," Obadiah answered.

That night before she went to bed, Brielle felt led to spend time reviewing Lacy's journal. She prayed before she opened it.

"Please, Lord, don't let me have nightmares from reading this. If You are leading me to read it now, please reveal to me what it is You want me to know," she said.

Brielle had already gone through the journal several times, and outside of

heartbreak, pain, and loss, she didn't know what else could be discovered. She opened it slowly, reading through the passages and poems, looking at the drawings and song lyrics. Even though she had read them through many times, she didn't find anything helpful to Jim and Laura about Lacy's drug use.

Frustrated, she closed the journal, placed it on her bed stand, and turned out her light. She lay in bed and prayed for all her friends and for God to move upon her high school in a powerful way. She prayed incessantly, as an intercessor should, until she quietly drifted off to sleep.

The next day in school, she was eager to get to her American History class to see Keoni and find out how Gideon was progressing with his recovery.

"He's home, stretched out on the couch with the remote control," Keoni said, "He made a joke that at least he had one good arm to work the remote."

Brielle and Jace smiled as they listened, glad that he could still joke around in his condition. They missed their friend.

"But other than that… he's very, *very* quiet," she said.

Brielle sighed, "That isn't like Gideon, is it?"

Keoni shook her head, "No, it sure isn't. I can't tell if he is depressed about the injury or just mad at the guys who gave it to him."

"Probably both," Jace replied, "I know how I would feel if that happened to me-- especially by my own teammates."

"Yeah, and he was having such a great year, too. Those idiots hurt the whole team. Without Gideon, they probably won't make the playoffs this season," Keoni said.

"Drug dealers only care about their money," Brielle said, glancing over at Jace.

Jace nodded his head silently.

"What is Coach Barnes going to do about it?" Brielle asked.

"He told Gideon that he has plans to discipline them as his players on the team, but that he also would like to discuss the matter further with Principal Stevens. He told Gideon that Principal Stevens may need to talk to him, too," Keoni answered.

"What about the rest of us?" Jace asked, "We were all there and heard their threats against him."

"And don't forget he threatened you too," Brielle added, "All of this stems from their treatment of Rateesh."

"I know I would love to talk to someone who could get something done about those guys," Keoni remarked.

Mr. Bennet arrived and began class. "I have some review worksheets for you for next week's test," he began as he passed out the worksheets. "This test will cover everything that we learned from the beginning of the year until what we have been studying now on the American Revolution."

Once the students all had their worksheets, he began reading the questions

and asking the students for answers and explanations. The test would cover material from the early settlers in Jamestown through the Revolutionary War. Brielle tried to focus on what Mr. Bennet was saying, but she couldn't concentrate. Her mind was racing through the images and events that had taken place since school began. She thought about the first day she saw Lacy and how God placed the lost girl in Brielle's heart. She thought about the situation with Rateesh and his restaurant, about Brian and Sidney, Reed, Sean, Morgan, and Ryan. She thought about Jace and the lighthouse with the strange green light and the mysterious drawing on the wall that vanished. Her mind flipped through the pages she had read and reread in Lacy's journal with its bizarre writings and drawings. She tried to forget outside thoughts, and she realized she needed to concentrate on the worksheet.

"On the night of April 18, 1775, there was a signal sent out to warn the Patriot messenger riders and militia waiting across the river – it was to tell them how the British were arriving. One if by land and two if by sea were the instructions by Paul Revere to three Boston Patriots. How many lanterns were lit that night, how long were they lit, and what were the events which followed, after the signal was given?" Mr. Bennet asked.

Brielle began writing answers to the questions on her worksheet. Then she stopped, her mind searching through her mental files. Then, all at once, it hit her.

"I know what it is!" she whispered to Keoni and Jace behind her.

Keoni looked up with a puzzled expression. "Of course you do," she whispered back sarcastically, "Your mother taught you about the Revolutionary War for years."

"No, I know what the lighthouse signal is," she whispered.

"What?" Jace asked, leaning forward to hear.

"One if by land, two if by sea," she said. "It's a signal for how they will be delivered!" she whispered excitedly.

"Uh, is there a problem, Miss St. Claire?" she heard Mr. Bennet ask.

"Oh… um, no, Mr. Bennet. I'm sorry," she said meekly, embarrassed as every pair of eyes in the room was now focused on her.

Brielle grabbed her notepad and began writing everything that God was revealing to her, whispering prayers of thanks to Him as she did. There was so much to tell, so much that God was showing her, not just with the green light in the tower of the lighthouse, but also with the drawing on the wall. When she was finished, she quickly filled in all the answers on the worksheet. She knew all the answers from time spent with her mother on the subject.

Brielle tried to sit quietly until class was over, but she was so excited, anxious energy was pouring out of her. First, she started tapping her foot until Keoni gave her a look to stop. Then she was lightly tapping her pencil on the desktop until the girl sitting to her right looked over at her with an irritated

expression. She tried taking deep breaths to relax, but it seemed like time was standing still. She was bursting to tell Jace and Keoni what God had shown her. He had answered her prayer; it didn't come last night like she was hoping, but it came while sitting in American History class, and she was thrilled as she knew that God's timing is always perfect.

Finally, class was over, and she immediately spun around in her seat to show Jace and Keoni her notepad.

"Okay, listen to this," she began, "I think the green light in the lighthouse is a signal to let the distributors know where the drug delivery will take place. If they shine the light once, then it's going to be a land location. If they shine the light twice, then it will be on the sea or a seaside location," she said softly so as not to let anyone else in the room hear what she was saying.

Jace agreed, "That would make perfect sense."

"Unless we find out next Saturday night that there is a third or fourth light," Keoni said.

"Yeah, that's right," Brielle said, "but just as a theory, what if this is true?"

"Then I guess our next step would be to find that location," Jace answered, trying to contain his excitement.

"I have an idea," Brielle giggled, still thrilled, "I was reading in Lacy's journal again last night. I have read it over and over, but nothing stood out to me before, not even last night. But just now, when the idea came about the lighthouse, I remembered a poem that Lacy wrote that has stuck in my head. It goes-

'*The darkness has come, slowly creeping, closing in around me, bringing the demons with their jagged teeth and serrated claws. They've taken their hold on me, and I cannot escape. They lacerate me, slicing my arms, laughing, tormenting in glee. I look to the lighthouse, desperate for glow, but there is no light. I must wait until I can set my feet on hallowed ground, hoping to obtain the power to crush them for I know, they will come again.'*"

When she finished, Keoni's expression was one of shock.

"She wrote that? Wow… that poor girl. She really is drowning in pain," she said softly.

"I can't believe you could remember all of that," Jace said in shock, not concentrating on what she said, but that she could memorize all of it.

Keoni looked over at him, "This girl's mind will blow you away; memorization has always been a gift for her. You'll get used to it."

"I'm impressed," Jace said.

"Thank you, yes, I am thankful for God's gift of memorizing things, but we're getting off track," Brielle said quickly, "Did you hear what she wrote? I look to the *lighthouse* desperate for *glow*. She must know that the lighthouse is a signal and when the light comes, she will be able to get her drugs again," she said, still keeping her voice down.

Keoni and Jace looked at each other, both getting excited that God was

helping them put more of the pieces of the puzzle together.

"Can you recite the last part again?" Keoni asked, "Without all the demon stuff."

"*I look to the lighthouse, desperate for glow, but there is no light. I must wait until I can set my feet on hallowed ground and obtain the power to crush them, but I always know, they will come again*," Brielle recited.

"What does she mean by 'set my feet on hallowed ground'?" Keoni asked. "Is she talking about a church?"

"I think maybe she means a cemetery," Jace replied.

Brielle's mind was once again a whirlwind of processing information as she recalled her nightmare after reading this poem for the first time. It took place in a cemetery.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, "That *has* to be it! Remember when I told you that I had a dream about Lacy the night I first read her journal? It was about these horrible demons that were tormenting her and cutting her with their claws. It took place in a cemetery!"

"Would you recognize the cemetery if you saw it again?" Jace asked her.

Brielle lifted her eyebrows in thought, "I think so," she said, closing her eyes to recall the images of her vivid dream. "It was nighttime in my dream, but I remember there were a lot of large, dark trees, big tombstones. Lacy was in front of a huge mausoleum," she paused, "but that's all I can remember. I guess I just described what most cemeteries look like, huh?"

"That sounds exactly like the cemetery I chased that man through the other day on the field trip," Jace said.

Keoni and Brielle's eyes lit up, "You're kidding!" Keoni said.

"Can we go there after school today and check it out?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, mom took off work for a couple of days to stay with Gideon in case he needed anything, so I'm free," Keoni said.

"What about you?" Brielle asked Jace.

"Priyanka is taking Rateesh home today, so I'm free as a bird," he smiled.

"Perfect! I wish we could go now," Brielle said.

"Ha ha, and cut class? You are excited," Keoni said jokingly.

"I know!" Brielle agreed.

"So excited that you forgot it's time for lunch? You remember lunch? When you eat a variety of foods, you remember that, right?" Keoni teased.

Brielle gave her friend an exasperated look, "You're hilarious. I know it's time for lunch and I want to get a nice big, juicy cheeseburger with fries to power up for our adventure today!" she said with a happy, indulgent look on her face.

The three friends found their usual table and took their seats. They started to discuss Gideon and how much they missed his company when Coach Barnes approached their table.

"Hello," he greeted them, "How are you all doing today?" he asked.

They each acknowledged they were doing well.

"How is Gideon doing?" he asked Keoni, who told him about his quiet disposition.

"That doesn't sound like Gideon," Coach Barnes agreed, "I'm hoping he is better soon, for his sake, of course, but also for the team. We certainly will miss him. I'll call him tonight after practice to check on him."

"Thank you, that would be great," Keoni said.

"I wanted to let you know that I have spoken with Principal Stevens, and she would like to have a meeting with all of you and your friend Rateesh directly after lunch. She has already excused you all from your next period, so once you are finished, please come to the school office," he said, then noticing the concerned look on Keoni and Brielle's face, he added, "Don't worry, you are not in any trouble. We just need to talk to you about these four students and get more information on what is going on," then he looked over his shoulder across the lunchroom, "Is that your friend Rateesh over there?"

"Yes, that's him, in the light blue shirt," Brielle answered.

"Good, I'll tell him about the meeting," Coach Barnes said. "See you later."

They all nodded and said they would be there, then watched as he walked over to speak to Rateesh. They watched as his face went from an everyday expression of casual talk over lunch to a look of worry. When Coach Barnes left, Brielle looked at Rateesh and motioned for him to come over to her table. He excused himself from his friends and took his tray over to join Brielle, Jace, and Keoni.

When he pulled out a chair to sit down, Brielle gasped. Not only was his lip still healing from yesterday's attack, but he also had a black and purple mark under his left cheekbone. Brielle leaned over casually from her seat to examine him closely.

"Rateesh, what did they do to you?" she whispered so as not to draw attention to him, something she knew he would not want.

Rateesh sighed, "Yesterday, before you came, Reed was telling me that I needed to keep my mouth shut and quit involving my friends-- especially you," he said, looking across the table at Jace. "He got in my face, and I fell backward over the curb. I dropped my backpack, and some books and stuff fell out. He bent down to give me my book, and I thought he was going to hand it to me, but he hit me in the face with it instead."

He dropped his head in embarrassment.

"That must have been some hit," Jace said, "to split your lip and give you a bruise like that."

Brielle looked into her friend's eyes, "Why didn't you tell us this yesterday?" she asked gently.

"What good would it have done?" he asked her, "What could you have done about it? It had already happened, and if I said something to you, then they

might hurt all of you—look what happened to Gideon. I couldn't take a chance like that. I've involved you enough already."

Brielle put her arm around Rateesh's shoulder, "Do you remember what I told you? That we are your friends and friends are there for one another in times of need."

"And this is a *great* time of need," Keoni added.

"I know that you don't believe in our God," Brielle said, "But we all believe He brought us to you so that you could have help in this situation. You are not alone."

Rateesh sighed again, "Thank you," he said humbly, "But having Principal Stevens' involvement will only make things worse for me."

"How can you say that?" Keoni asked, "You cannot possibly keep handling this on your own."

"It is hard, yes, of course it is," Rateesh replied, "but what happens if Principal Stevens suspends those guys? Or even expels them? Then what? Who will protect me and my family from their revenge? We all still live in the same town; it's not like she can suspend them from living here, too. What then? What happens when they are angry and come after me when I'm *not* at school?"

"We go to the police," Keoni answered. "I think you should talk to our friend Hadley Jenkins. He has been a police officer for over twenty years. He was my father's partner. Even if Brian said you can't go to the police, you can go to Hadley, and he will help you."

Rateesh stared at the table in deep thought.

"Just ask yourself this question," Jace said, "if you knew that going to Hadley *could* make a positive difference for you… Would you try it?"

Rateesh lifted his eyes to meet Jace's, "I'm just so…"

"Scared," Brielle whispered to him.

Rateesh nodded, "Terrified," he corrected softly. Even though Rateesh was a junior in high school, he was still a fourteen-year-old kid, and the fear of what these guys could do to him was overwhelming.

After lunch, they all headed for the school office. When they arrived, the secretary walked them back to Principal Stevens' office. As they entered, Principal Stevens welcomed them. She was an attractive woman in her fifties with shoulder-length brown hair and glasses, which made her look sharp. She was not very tall, still taller than Brielle, and she was dressed very professionally in a beautiful light pink blouse with a black pencil skirt.

The four students came in to sit down and saw Coach Barnes sitting in a chair to the left of the principal's desk. He also welcomed them.

"I received a call this morning from your mother, Keoni," Principal Stevens said, "She told me that Gideon already informed Coach Barnes of what happened yesterday. But this meeting is for me. As the Principal of Fairfield High, I would like to know what is happening and how it is affecting all of you."

The students all nodded in acknowledgement, and Brielle glanced over at Rateesh, who looked terrified.

Principal Stevens then turned her focus to Rateesh, “I would like to start with you, Rateesh. If you would please share with us what the situation is between you and these four students,” she paused to pick up a notepad, “Reed Radcliff, Sean Lewis, Morgan Claybrook, and Ryan Ledger,” she finished, placing the notepad back down on her desk to look up at Rateesh.

Rateesh looked over nervously at Brielle, who urged him to speak with a look of encouragement.

“Well… I… uh,” he stammered. “I, um…” he paused, trying to find his words.

Principal Stevens looked at him kindly and with a very delicate tone said, “Rateesh. If these students have placed a lot of pressure on you not to tell the truth about what is happening, you don’t need to be afraid. The only person who can take the power of fear away from them is you. You can choose to keep allowing them to have control over you, or you can take that control back. The choice is up to you. Having said that, in order for us to help you, we do need to know what is going on,” she said sweetly.

Rateesh’s demeanor didn’t change; he seemed to be just as rigidly set in his fear as ever.

“Rateesh, you are in a safe place here. We only want to help you,” she reassured him. “Let’s make this a little easier. How about if we just start with what happened to you yesterday afternoon by the baseball field?”

Principal Stevens looked at him, quietly and patiently waiting for him to reply.

Rateesh looked down at the floor. “I was just walking home, and I tripped and fell. Those guys were just walking by and came to check on me,” he said softly.

Brielle gasped, “Rateesh!” she whispered, then she looked over at Principal Stevens. The principal then shifted her attention to Brielle.

“Did you see what happened, Miss St. Claire?” Principal Stevens asked.

Brielle sighed and shook her head, “No, Ma’am, I didn’t.”

“Did either of you see what happened?” she asked Jace and Keoni.

Sadly, they both shook their heads that they had not.

“Can you tell me what you *did* see?” Principal Stevens asked.

Brielle looked at Keoni and Jace, “Well,” she began, “we were coming across the baseball field to the parking lot when Jace called out to us that he saw Rateesh in trouble, so we ran to where he was.”

“And where exactly was that?” Principal Stevens asked.

“It was just behind the bleachers on the baseball field, by the parking lot,” Brielle answered.

“So, you were on school property?” she asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Brielle confirmed.

"Alright, go on," Principal Stevens said.

"When we saw Rateesh, he was down on the ground, and Reed, Morgan, Sean, and Ryan were standing around him. We ran over to help him and saw that his lip was bleeding. Keoni helped clean the blood off his face, and Jace and Gideon talked to the guys," Brielle said.

Principal Stevens then looked at Jace, "What did you say to them?"

"Gideon asked them why they would be picking on Rateesh and that it didn't seem fair," Jace began, "They denied they were and said that he fell, and they were just coming over to check on him. Then Gideon said that whatever the problem was with Rateesh, it just needed to stop, and that if it didn't, he would talk to Coach Barnes about it. Things got a little heated after that, and Reed said that if we were smart, we would mind our own business. He said that if I felt the need to protect my friend, he was sure I would get the chance," Jace explained.

"Is that the only thing he said to you?" Principal Stevens asked.

"At that time, yes," Jace answered.

"Was there another time?" she asked.

"Yes, he told me the same thing in chemistry class one day. He said he didn't like me talking with Rateesh, even though he is my lab partner in class," Jace said.

"Why doesn't he like you talking with Rateesh?" Principal Stevens asked.

"I don't understand why," Jace replied.

"Alright. Let's go back to what happened at the ball field yesterday. What else happened?" she asked.

"Then Reed told Gideon that he needed to watch his back, too," Jace said. "Then they left."

Principal Stevens and Coach Barnes took notes on everything being said.

"And you ladies both heard all of this?" she asked.

Keoni and Brielle both nodded.

"Do you have anything else to add? Anything else that happened in the parking lot at that time?" she asked.

They all shook their heads no.

"Gideon has spoken extensively to Coach Barnes about things that he believes are taking place, however, he has no proof of anything," Principal Stevens said turning her focus back to Rateesh, "Rateesh, if you do not talk to me personally and tell me if there is a problem between you and these students, I can't do anything to help you. I want to help you, but legally, I can do nothing without hearing from you first. I can't go on the hearsay of other students," she said.

Rateesh sat silently.

"You do understand, then, the choice that you are making?" she asked.

Rateesh still did not speak, but looked at her directly to show that he

understood the message she was giving him.

"Alright then," she said. "I thank you all for coming in to talk to me today, and if anything else happens where these students are concerned, please let me know. Rateesh, if you decide that you would like to talk to me, my door is always open to you."

She started to stand up, but before she did, Brielle asked her a question.

"Principal Stevens, I wanted to find out from you what the process is to start up an on-campus prayer group?" she asked.

Principal Stevens sat back down. "For anything like that to take place here on campus, a formal request must be made to our School Board for a decision."

"If we made a formal request, how long would that take?" Brielle asked.

"It's hard to say, isn't it, Coach?" she said, looking over at Coach Barnes, who grinned and rolled his eyes. "Honestly, it could take a few weeks. If you would like to make a formal request for such a group, you could visit Student Activities, and they could explain what you need to do. There must be a group sponsor, a specific location, and meeting time; there are requirements that must be met by the group for safety; there's quite a lot that goes into it. But I will be happy to have my secretary, Mrs. Whitmore, assist you with the process if that is something you would like to do," she said sweetly.

Brielle hesitated, "I don't know that we can wait that long," she said, "We need to start praying for our school right now."

"I'm very sorry, that is just the process for our school district," Principal Stevens said kindly.

Brielle nodded, "I understand. Thank you for your help."

Principal Stevens thanked all the students for coming and once again extended an open door to Rateesh. Coach Barnes stood up, and as the students left, he left with them.

Rateesh pulled his backpack up to his shoulder and headed out quickly.

"Rateesh!" Brielle called. Rateesh turned around and said, "I'll see you in class," then turned back around and headed down the hallway.

"I can't believe he wouldn't say anything to her," Keoni said.

"I know, he had the perfect opportunity for her to help him," Brielle agreed.

"He's terrified," Jace said, "and you know what, he may be right. Principal Stevens can only handle things that happen here at school, but off campus, he's on his own."

"Miss St. Claire," they heard Coach Barnes' voice behind them. "I have an idea for you."

"Yes?" she said.

"Tell me more about this prayer group that you would like to start," he said.

"We were feeling led to do something for God in our high school," she said. "We thought that if we could get some students together to pray for our school and each other, maybe these problems of bullies, violence, and drug use

wouldn't be such… problems."

Coach Barnes grinned broadly, "I like the way you think. I would like to make a suggestion to you, if I may?"

"Of course," Brielle said.

"Consider having the prayer group meet somewhere off campus so that you don't have to deal with the red tape of the school board. after all, there is always the chance that they won't approve your group. It's just an idea, but you do what you feel led to do. In fact," he paused to look around them, then lowered his voice, "if you go to the east side of the campus, just across the street, you just may find the perfect place," he said with a wink. "Look for a pretty little yellow house," he said, looking at his watch. "I'm sorry, I've got to get to my next class. Keoni, I will check in on Gideon tonight."

Then he turned and trotted off in the direction of the football field.

"Thank you, Coach Barnes!" Brielle called after him. He looked back over his shoulder and waved at her. "Before we head over to the cemetery," she said, "I think we had better check out what's across the street on the east side of campus."

After school, the three friends walked to the east side of the campus. They stared across the street. It was a neighborhood of older houses.

"Okay. I'm not sure what Coach Barnes meant by this, but I'll take a step of faith," Brielle said as she began to cross the street. Jace and Keoni followed along.

Just as they reached the sidewalk on the opposite side, they saw an old lady coming out of one of the houses two doors down from where they were standing. The house was darling, old, but well-kept. It was painted bright yellow with black shutters on the windows and a large American Flag hanging on the doorpost. The grass in the yard was lush and covered with fallen leaves from the large oak tree, which stood in the left corner of the yard. They watched as the little lady got out her rake and began to rake the colorful leaves.

They walked toward the house, and as they drew closer, Brielle noticed an old car parked in the driveway. It was a classic 1957 Chevy painted light blue and white, and on the bumper was a bright sticker which read: "Honk if you love JESUS!"

Brielle began to giggle as she pointed it out to Jace and Keoni and said, "Oh yeah, this is the place."

"Excuse me," she said sweetly to the lady, who didn't turn around. "Excuse me!" she said a little louder to get her attention.

The lady turned around and when she saw them, smiled warmly, "Well, hello there!" she said happily.

"I was wondering if I could ask you a question," Brielle said.

"Of course, of course, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"My name is Brielle St. Claire, and these are my friends Jace and Keoni. We

are students at the high school across the street," she explained, pointing to the school. "We were told today that we might be able to find a place on this side of the street where we could have a prayer group for the students who would like to come. I know this may sound strange, but I was wondering if this might be the place we were told about?"

The lady looked at her with a sparkle in her eye, "May I ask who sent you?" she asked.

"It was the football Coach, his name is Mr. Barnes," Keoni answered.

The lady grinned broadly, "Ah, I see, so Coach Barnes said that this would be a good place for you to have a prayer group, huh?"

"Yes, he did, but we don't wish to impose on you," Brielle began.

"What time would you like to have this group meet?" the lady asked.

Brielle turned to look at Keoni and Jace, "Well, we were thinking about trying to meet here for about forty-five minutes or so each day after school, since the mornings will be so cold."

"Do you want to have it outside?" the lady asked.

"Oh yes, ma'am, we don't want to intrude on your home. We originally wanted to meet under the old oak tree by our school library, but we learned today that it could take weeks to get approval for such a group. We were hoping to start as soon as possible… if that's possible," Brielle said politely, turning to look at the beautiful large oak tree in her yard. "With your approval, this oak tree would work just as well as the one by the library."

The lady shook her head, "I like the way you think."

Brielle looked at her curiously at her choice of words.

"I would be quite honored if you would gather here each afternoon for a time of prayer with your fellow students. And if you wouldn't mind, I would like to come and join you," she said gently.

Brielle's eyes lit up excitedly, "Oh yes! Absolutely! That would be wonderful, thank you, thank you so much!"

Keoni and Jace both came over to shake the lady's hand and thank her for her assistance.

"When would you like to start this group?" she asked.

"Tomorrow," they all three answered together.

"That is, if that would be alright with you?" Brielle asked kindly.

"I will be delighted to have you and will look forward to it," the lady said.

"That's excellent!" Brielle said, "Then I guess we will see you tomorrow after school."

"Wonderful, I will see you then," the lady answered.

"Thank you, thank you so much--oh, I'm sorry I didn't get your name---" Brielle began.

"Henrietta, Mrs. Henrietta Barnes," the woman replied.

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As the three Intercessors left the little yellow house of Henrietta Barnes, they were excited about the new prayer group they would get to start the next day. Keoni said that when she got home that night, she would design an invitation that she could copy before school. They could then pass them out to their friends and other students.

They had spent a lot of time in prayer and planning for this group during their training the day before. They felt certain that God's hand was in it as He led them to Coach Barnes and the home of his elderly mother across the street from the high school. They believed they were doing God's Will, and He was opening the right doors for them at the right time.

They walked back to the school parking lot, and Jace got on his motorcycle with Brielle and Keoni following in Keoni's car. They headed to the old cemetery - the same cemetery where Jace had chased the strange man the day of the field trip.

When they reached the cemetery, they parked outside the gates and walked in quietly. It was a complete oxymoron; a lovely, yet forlorn place. The large trees, rich in colors of the fall season, stood majestically amidst fallen leaves and statues of angels. Yet the despairing sight of the old tombstones standing boldly amidst the beauty of nature's setting brought a strange mixture of sorrow and tranquility. The place was quiet, calm, and serene, so much so, it seemed eerie.

"I've never liked cemeteries," Brielle said, "I know they are needed and important, but…"

"I know what you mean," Keoni said, grabbing Brielle's arm as they walked slowly through the dozens of gravesites.

They stopped and looked around at the enormity of the cemetery and the acres over which it was spread.

"Look at this place," Keoni said, "We don't know what we are searching for, and look at all the ground we have to cover."

Brielle looked around for a moment and made a suggestion, "Okay then," she said, "Let's pray and ask God to show us what we need to see," she said, reaching her hands out to Jace and Keoni to form a circle of prayer.

"Heavenly Father, I believe that You brought Lacy's poem to my attention and what she wrote about the cemetery for a reason. We don't know what it is we are to find, and we need Your help. Please guide us in the direction we need to go and reveal to us what it is You want us to see. In Jesus' Name, Amen," she prayed. Then she rubbed her hands together excitedly, "Okay, let's go!"

Jace looked at her, perplexed, "Go where? We don't know where we are going?"

Brielle looked at him with a furrowed brow. "You don't believe God can lead

us to what we need to find?"

He still looked at her with a puzzled expression, "Yes, I just,"

"Haven't you ever lost something? Like your keys? Or a shoe, and you looked everywhere but couldn't find it? When I do that, I pray and ask God to lead me to what it is I am looking for, and when I do… I *always* find it," she said happily, "Sometimes it just takes me a little while."

"I believe God can help you find something you have lost. It's just that… we don't know what it is we need to find. We don't know what we are looking for, so how will we know when we get there?" Jace asked.

"We'll know," Keoni said, "I feel very strongly that there is something here, a clue or something that will help us figure out what is going on in our town. Come on, let's do like we did earlier when we took that first step of faith and found the house of Henrietta Barnes," she said, taking Brielle's arm in one hand and Jace's with the other.

As they walked along, they stopped to read some of the tombstones, some of them dating back over a hundred years. Each time they reached an old tree, Brielle would stop and look around. She was trying to find anything that resembled the area in her dream – the terrible dream about Lacy and the demons.

"What are you looking for?" Jace asked.

"When I had the dream about Lacy, or nightmare rather, I was walking up through the tombstones, and there was a huge tree to my left. I looked ahead in front of me, and in the distance, I saw Lacy leaning against a large crypt," she said softly, recalling the details in her mind.

"A large crypt? Like a family mausoleum or something?" Keoni asked curiously.

"Not quite as big as that, it was like a big tomb, and there was a statue on the top, I think it was an angel. It was hovering over her as she leaned against the side of the tomb wall..." She trailed off, letting her mind search through the files of her memories from that night.

"That's helpful," Jace said, "We can narrow the search down considerably." He climbed up onto a bench nearby to look around the vast graveyard. "Over there, let's head that direction," he said, jumping down and leading the girls over to a large crypt-like tomb.

Brielle walked all around it, "No, there was a large tree here," she said, pointing to her left side.

"There's another one over there," Keoni pointed out. They walked slowly toward another large burial chamber, but again, Brielle immediately knew it wasn't the right one.

"No," she said, "there was a statue on top. I remember it looked like it was opening its arms to her."

Jace lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the late afternoon glare. Through

the sunlight on the far side of the cemetery, he saw another large tomb. “There,” he said, pointing, “it looks like there is a statue on top of that one.”

The three Intercessors started toward the crypt but found it would be easier and more respectful to take the pathway across the cemetery than to cut through the graves. As they approached the crypt, they had to shield their eyes from the afternoon sun. Brielle paused to look at it for a moment and then walked around to the other side. She stopped again and examined everything around her carefully. She closed her eyes to concentrate on her dream. She could remember most of the area she walked through in the cemetery, but it was nighttime in her dream, so it looked different now. She walked a little farther and stopped again. Just ahead of her to her left was a large tree, and just beyond that in the distance was the tomb.

“This is it,” she said as she slowly walked through the tombstones, moving at the same pace as she had in the dream.

As she walked, the images of her dream kept flashing through her mind. Although it was daytime and Lacy was not here, this was the exact place she had visited in her sleep. She had a surreal feeling come over her as she experienced this. She was retracing steps in real life that she had taken weeks ago in a dream; it was incredible. Keoni and Jace slowly followed behind her as she moved through the cemetery, reliving her vision.

“I came right through here, and I saw her leaning against the wall there. Then the demons came flying in from every direction and attacked her.” She felt chills run down her body as she recalled the horrific moment. “They picked her up in the air,” she said, lifting her hands to demonstrate, “and they threw her around violently, cutting and biting her with their teeth and claws.” She paused, remembering the terrifying details. “Then they dropped her body to the ground, and she didn’t move.”

Brielle stared at the place where she remembered Lacy’s body falling. She didn’t say anything else, just waited for Jace or Keoni to reply, but there was nothing but silence. She spun around to see their eyes fixed upward on something which was now behind her. The looks on their faces were not that of fear, but of shock and bewilderment.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her heartbeat increasing from their silent expressions.

They looked at each other in disbelief and then back behind her. Keoni swallowed hard and nodded her head, “Look at the side of the tomb.”

Brielle turned around quickly to see what had captured her friends’ attention. She looked at the top of the tomb and saw the beautiful figure of an angel with its arms outstretched wide before her. Then her eyes traveled down to the side wall of the tomb, and what she saw there made her gasp and cover her mouth in surprise.

“Oh, my Lord in heaven,” she whispered slowly, “is that…”

"My drawing," Keoni whispered.

"The hand holding the rings drawn on the lighthouse wall," Jace added.

They walked closer to see the engraving. Sure enough, there on the side of the tomb wall was the same drawing that Jace had found in the lighthouse and Keoni had drawn after her dream. It was a sculpture of a hand holding a broken chain.

"This is incredible," Jace said in amazement, "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Brielle looked up at him, "I'm not the one you doubted," she said with a half grin. "Matthew 19:26, *'With God all things are possible.'"*

Brielle walked around the tomb, looking at all the sides of it closely. "This is the only side that has that picture on it. There is a wreath on this side, writing on the front and nothing on the back at all."

"What does it mean?" Keoni asked, "Why is this picture on the side of a tomb?"

"Let's take some photos of it so we can show it to Oba," Brielle said.

Jace took out his phone and photographed the engraving.

"Whatever it means, we know this cemetery has to do with the drugs in our high school," Brielle said. "The drawing on the lighthouse wall must have been a symbol to communicate that this is the place where the drugs would be sold."

"Or left," Jace said.

Brielle's eyes lit up, "Yes! That's true. They could have been hidden here or something. Then whoever bought them, by seeing the drawing on the lighthouse wall, would know where to find them. They could just come out here at night and pick them up."

Keoni shivered, "Ooh, I couldn't imagine being out here at night!"

"Which is why it is the perfect drop-off place; who else would be out here at night? No one would see them drop off or pick up the drugs. It's perfect," she said. Then she spoke out loud to the Lord, tilting her head back to look up at the sky and opening her arms out wide, "Thank You, Jesus, for showing us the way! Thank you for leading us to what You wanted us to find!"

Jace began to walk around, placing his hands on the tomb in different areas.

"What are you doing?" Brielle asked.

"I was just checking to see if there were any loose parts or secret compartments where something might pop open," he answered. "Like a compartment where the drugs could be placed."

"Um, Jace," Keoni began calmly, "you do remember that you are pressing on a tomb. If anything *pops out*, odds are it won't be alive--or good, and I don't want to see it."

Jace stood back and looked up at the angel with her open arms; her gaze was fixed directly on him. Then he jumped up and placed his arms on the top of the tomb to pull himself up next to her.

"Now what are you doing?" Brielle asked.

"I just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything loose up here," he said, examining the angel closely and the base on which she stood. Then he jumped back down.

"I don't know," he said, "it all seems to be solid."

Brielle stood in front of the angel. She moved her eyes down to the front of the tomb to read the writing and learn who was buried there. She read the name out loud, "Luke Ingram Oak, born on April 26, 1848, died on March 25, 1919," she said.

"How old would he have been?" Keoni asked, "I can't do fast math in my head."

"He would have been seventy-one years old," Jace said, still walking around the tomb to investigate it.

"Luke Ingram Oak," Brielle whispered to herself, "Luke Ingram *Oak*," she said again.

"Yes, we heard you," Keoni said, confused by her friend.

"Don't you see? It's not the tomb they use," she said, turning to the large oak beside her, "it's the tree!"

Jace looked at her and then at the oak tree beside the tomb. They went to the large tree, searching around its trunk. For what they were looking, they did not know.

"Look out," Jace said as he grabbed one of the branches and swung himself up into the mighty tree. He climbed around until he reached the upper portion of the tree trunk, the girls struggling to see him through the blazing red and orange leaves.

"Be careful!" Brielle said, "We don't need you falling out of there and breaking your leg." Jace laughed, "Well, then I could keep Gideon company."

They waited while he climbed around in the tree, searching its trunk full circle, when suddenly he said, "Here! I found a hollow place!"

Brielle and Keoni jumped with surprise and excitement at his words.

"How big is it?" Keoni asked.

"It's good-sized, at least a foot deep and wide. Maybe a squirrel or something nested here before… but it's completely hollow and cleaned out. Wait…" he said.

"What? What is it?" Brielle asked excitedly.

"It's nothing, just a chewing gum wrapper," he said.

"I'm going to take some photos of this," Jace said.

"A chewing gum wrapper? That's all that was in there?" Brielle asked.

"Yeah, that's it," Jace said.

"That's a little odd. In all my years, I never heard of a squirrel, bird, or any other animal chewing gum. I mean, maybe an animal could have grabbed it while gathering, but still, why don't you take a photo of that too, Jace." she said.

"Got it," he said, "I'm coming down."

As Jace began climbing down the tree, Keoni watched him, but Brielle was deep in thought.

"I think we need to go talk to Oba about all this," Brielle said.

"I agree, and I think I should also talk to Hadley," Keoni added.

"Yes. I know that we don't have any solid proof of anything yet, but this has got to be one of the ways they are smuggling drugs into our town," Brielle said.

"One of the ways?" Keoni asked.

"If the lighthouse signal is one if by land, two if by sea, then this could be one of the land drop-off locations. Let's say they send the signal for land, the buyer goes up to the lighthouse, sees the drawing for the location, and knows to come and pick up the drugs here in this tree. But there must be more than one drop-off location on land, or they wouldn't need to draw the clue on the lighthouse wall, right? Yes," she said mostly to herself, "There must be more than one pick-up location, or else why take the time to draw the clue to instruct them where to go?"

"Have I ever told you that you would make an excellent detective?" Keoni teased.

Brielle lifted her eyebrows in surprise, "Hmm. I never thought about that before. But you know, I always had a mystery novel in my hands growing up. I loved reading all the Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew, and Hardy Boys books, so I'll take that as a compliment! Come on, let's go talk to Oba and show him everything we've discovered."

As they were leaving the cemetery, Keoni's cell phone rang. It was Gideon. Keoni took his call as they walked through the cold grounds; the late afternoon sun was not able to keep the chilly cemetery warm, and the girls were beginning to shiver. As they reached the car, Keoni hung up her call.

"That was Giddy, he's going crazy sitting at home alone," Keoni said.

"Do you think he would be up to coming over to my house for a while?" Brielle asked.

"He told me that if I wasn't coming home, I had to come and get him and take him somewhere, so yes," Keoni laughed.

On the way to Brielle's home, they stopped and picked up Gideon. He was still in pain but delighted to get out of the house and off the couch. His arm was in a sling, but he seemed to be handling his injury well and didn't act like he was uncomfortable. As they headed for Brielle's house, Keoni and Brielle filled him in on their latest discovery.

"Man!" he exclaimed, "I can't believe all of this is happening in our quiet little town! I'll be very interested to see what Hadley has to say about this."

"Oh, yeah," Keoni said, "that reminds me, I need to call him and see when he can come and talk to us."

When they entered Brielle's house, they could smell the delicious aromas of

Genevieve's dinner cooking on the stove. She greeted them warmly and invited them all to stay for dinner. After smelling the mouth-watering meal, they eagerly accepted her invitation.

"Dinner won't be ready for another thirty minutes at least," she said.

"Is Oba in his office?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, do you need him?" Genevieve asked.

"We have learned some new information and want to talk to him about it," Brielle told her mother.

"Really? How exciting! Yeah, go on in and talk to him. He'll be happy to see you all!" Genevieve said as she tended to her meal.

The Intercessors crossed the bridge to Obadiah's study, and Brielle knocked her special knock on his door.

"Come in, Sweetheart," Obadiah called through the door.

Brielle opened the door and stuck her head in. "Mind if we come in?"

"Not at all, come on in," Obadiah said, warmly welcoming them.

They entered, and Brielle began to tell of their discoveries that day. Obadiah was completely intrigued.

"You are really on to something here," he said. "Have you talked to Hadley about it yet?"

"No, I was going to call him. Let me do that right now," Keoni said, taking out her phone.

While Keoni made her call, Obadiah looked at the photos that Jace had taken of everything they discovered in the cemetery.

"I had to leave a message," Keoni said, hanging up her phone.

"May I make a suggestion?" Obadiah asked.

The Intercessors all nodded.

"I think you should put these ideas, along with all your clues, onto your own investigation board. Get it all in front of you so that you can see the pieces of the puzzle and how they fit together," he said.

"Yes!" Keoni agreed, "That's what our dad used to do when he was trying to solve a case."

"Allow me to help you with that," Obadiah said as he walked over to a door on the opposite side of his office. There was a small panel built behind a picture that he opened and manipulated, but none of the teens could see what he was doing from their location.

"Are we going into another cave?" Gideon joked.

Obadiah laughed, "Not exactly."

Brielle's face lit up, "He's taking us into The Vault!"

"The Vault?" Jace asked, "Like where money is kept?"

"Again… not exactly," Obadiah answered, "This is where I lock up and protect my most important creations."

He finished with his work inside the panel, and there came a loud swishing

sound as if air was decompressing. The door then slowly unlatched and opened. Obadiah stood before it, extending his arm in welcome to enter.

"Ladies first," he said with his charming smile and Irish accent.

When they entered the dimly lit vault, they looked around the room curiously - there was nothing except a small table and a few chairs. On three of the walls, there appeared to be a large window that was covered with elegant black drapes. Other than that, there was nothing in this room.

"I thought this was where you kept your most important creations?" Gideon asked, confused.

"It is," Obadiah smiled as he closed the door behind them.

"Okay, I'm confused," Gideon said.

"That's because you are thinking of important creations as being only material objects that you can touch," Obadiah said. He picked up a remote control from the table and clicked a button. The lighting became more subdued, leaving only a small track light shining down on the table. "But that's not always the case. Sometimes a person's most important creations are his *ideas*."

Obadiah clicked the remote again, and the thick black drapes began to open on all three windows - only they weren't windows at all. The opened drapes revealed three large panes of what looked to be frosted Plexiglas. Obadiah hit the remote control again, and these three large panes began to glow with a bluish light.

"Whoa!" Gideon exclaimed, "Man, Oba, first I thought you were Batman, then I thought Indiana Jones, now I'm wondering if you're 'Q' working for James Bond."

"Maybe I am," Obadiah chuckled, "Alright, so these are highly advanced graphical user interface screens, also known as GUIs. Basically, it's a very hands-on way of interacting with my computer system. My friend in D.C. helped me build it, and he kept calling it Xerxes, but… I'm not sure I'm a fan of that name, you know, Persian ruler described as a tyrant and all, then there are those who believe he may be the king who was married to Queen Esther... anyway he set up an interfacing system with his so that's what we call it… for now anyway," he said as he prepped the system.

"Now, don't get me wrong, I still like the old fashion way of drawing my designs out with a pencil on paper, but then I must admit, it is fun to come in here and create computer graphic versions of my inventions and test them digitally to see what works and what doesn't," he explained, "As you can see, they are great places to create data boards to store information."

"Yeah, they are, like the stuff that you see in CIA movies," Gideon said turning to Obadiah, "So that friend of yours in D.C., does he work for the FBI, NSA, or CIA? Is that another one of your secrets? That you work undercover as an agent for the government?" he teased.

Obadiah smiled broadly at Gideon's comment, "I wouldn't be able to tell

you if I did," he chuckled. Then he clicked his remote control again, and out from inside the wall came a keyboard.

"You can access high-speed internet, download, and upload files, create, and save documents just like any other system. It's fully loaded with advanced search engines and software to assist you in tracking down tough information. I thought it would be a good place for you to create an investigation board."

The Intercessors were thrilled at the amazing technology that Obadiah possessed and was so willing to share with them.

"This is so cool!" Keoni said, "And you said they are all touch screens?"

"Yes, watch," Obadiah said, turning to the first screen and touching it to open the toolbox on the sidebar of the screen.

"Why don't you use this board for your suspects?" he said, setting the screen up for them to fill in their information.

"Yes," Brielle said, "Let's make a box that is empty at the very top. This will be for the name of the main drug dealer… who we don't know yet. But we do believe that Brian and possibly Sidney work for this person in bringing the drugs to Fairfield."

Obadiah worked quickly. Using his fingers as his writing tools on the large touch screen, he created a box at the top and placed a question mark on it. Then underneath that box, he wrote the names Brian and Sidney.

Obadiah took her phone and effortlessly uploaded Sidney's photo to the screen. Okay, what else?" he asked.

"We believe that there are four guys at school named Reed, Sean, Morgan, and Ryan who pick the drugs up from Brian and sell them to students," Gideon said.

Obadiah added the names of the four students down underneath Brian and Sidney, and as soon as he added all their names, school or work information, and the town of Fairfield, Connecticut, the computer began searching for and found photos of each person.

The Intercessors were amazed.

"This is incredible!" Gideon said.

"Yes, but I am very respectful with this system. I never use it to collect information on people unless it is for something like what we are doing right now, to prevent any kind of unethical spying on people. This will only be for our eyes, and perhaps we will show it to the police. Now, take a good look. Are you missing any suspects from the board?" Obadiah asked.

The Intercessors studied it closely but didn't know of anyone else who might be involved in selling the drugs.

"How about if we list the victims, we know who have been directly hurt by taking the drugs?" Jace suggested.

"Or who are being hurt *because* of the drugs, like Rateesh," Brielle added.

"Alright. We'll put them over here," Obadiah said, walking to the third

screen to set it up. On the board, he added the information for Lacy, Dylan, and Rateesh, and the system created profiles for each.

"Alright, what?" Obadiah asked.

"I guess we should use the center screen for all the information we have gathered that connects them," Brielle said.

Obadiah went to the board and set it up. "Here you go," he said, motioning for them to take over.

"Really?" Brielle asked.

"Absolutely," he replied, "this is your investigation."

"Where do we begin?" Keoni asked.

"Why don't we start by downloading all our photos of drawings, and important places into the system?" Jace said.

"That's easy," Obadiah said, "Just put each photo or drawing in front of the scanner here," Obadiah said, directing them, "and Xerxes will scan it into the system."

They all took turns scanning their photos, and once the information was collected into the system, Brielle began to organize on the board.

"Brielle, when you want something that you are saying to be written down on your board, just tap this button here," Obadiah said, "a little feature I added to help me save time when I have a quick thought."

"Wow. Okay, then," she said as she began to create the investigation board. "This is what I think may be happening," Brielle began. She took the photo of the lighthouse and placed it in the top left-hand corner of the screen.

"The lighthouse signal is sent out to the local distributors, who could be Sidney and Brian," she said, adding the two men's names by the lighthouse photo. We think the signal is one flash of a green light in the tower if the drugs will be left somewhere on land, and two flashes if they will be by sea. Information we can hopefully nail down for sure this Saturday."

"Then, whoever delivers the drugs to them draws a code on the lighthouse wall," she said, moving Jace's photo of the hand with the broken chain next to the lighthouse photo, "And whoever picks them up washes the code off the wall."

"That drawing still bothers me. Why is it found on the side of a tomb?" Keoni asked.

"You found that on the side of a tomb?" Obadiah asked curiously.

"Yes, today at the cemetery," Keoni answered, "What does it mean?"

"Here," Obadiah said, "let's find out."

He then tapped the image of Jace's photo and the image they had scanned of Keoni's drawing, both were of the hand holding rings, which were linked together like a chain, but one ring was broken and one link was missing.

"Xerxes, can you help us find information on these images?" Obadiah asked.

The computer began searching and, in a moment, he had a match.

"Look, here. The system found similar photos in other cemeteries. This website is called 'Gravestone Symbolism', and it says that the picture of a hand holding a broken chain is a symbol of a loss in the family. Apparently, this drawing is quite commonly used on headstones and tombs. I knew I had seen it somewhere before," he said.

"Incredible," Brielle said, "Whoever set this drop-off system up must have done some homework. I mean, how many people out there know about tomb art?"

"Right," Keoni said, "I know I had never seen it before."

"God showed it to you in a dream for this very reason. He truly works in mysterious ways," Obadiah said.

"Alright," Brielle continued, "We have the broken chain drawing and the poem from Lacy's journal, which took us to the cemetery and led us to the hollowed spot in the oak tree," she said. She then dragged Jace's photo of the side of the tomb, the photo of the hollow opening, and the gum wrapper in the tree, and placed them next to the lighthouse. She took a moment to explain their findings in the cemetery oak tree to her grandfather.

"What are we missing?" she asked, stepping back from the screen to look at it.

"We know from Rateesh that the drop off in his restaurant is every two weeks. The lighthouse signal comes every two weeks, which confirms this," Jace said, adding this information on the board. "So, the drop off must be on the same Saturday as the light signal. But Brian doesn't give the drugs to Reed and his guys until the following Thursday."

"That's interesting," Gideon commented, "I wonder why that is?"

"A missing piece to the puzzle," Jace said. "Perhaps he has to put it in smaller packages or something." After he had added his information, he too stepped back to look at the screen.

"How about adding Rateesh's restaurant?" Keoni asked.

"Ah, yes," Brielle said, as she added the name of Dilli Rasoi to the screen.

"I have a photo of that too," Jace said, scanning the photo from his phone and adding it to the board. Next to that, Brielle added the words 'drugs distributed in take-out bags every two weeks on Thursdays.'

They all sat silently and studied the information before them. Obadiah looked at all the screens carefully and then gave a summary of their collected information.

"Alright, let's go over it. So far, your theory is that someone is bringing in drugs from outside of Connecticut via the harbor. You don't know who yet, but you believe you know who is working for them: Brian, Sidney, Reed, Sean, Morgan, and Ryan. The people who are bringing the drugs into Fairfield are sending a flashing green light signal in the lighthouse tower. Your theory is that if there is one flash, it means the drugs will be left somewhere on land, and if there

are two flashes, that they will be somewhere by the sea."

"Next, these people go to the lighthouse and draw a picture or code that represents the location of where the drugs will be dropped off on the inside of the lighthouse wall. You believe that Brian and Sidney watch for the light signal to come from the lighthouse tower, and once they see it, they go up to the lighthouse, see the drawing code, wash the code off the lighthouse wall, and go to the designated location to pick up the drugs. You think this happens every two weeks.

"You believe that one of the places for the drugs to be picked up is in the hollowed oak tree in the cemetery. Once the drugs are picked up, you think they are taken to Rateesh's restaurant, where they are stored in the belly of a hollow elephant statue until they are delivered to the distributors through take-out bags."

The four sat silently as they listened to Obadiah's interpretation of their theory. They wanted to make sure they were not leaving any important information off their investigation board.

"Yes," Brielle said, "but we forgot the most important thing." She walked over to the third board where Lacy's and Dylan's names were written and added the words: Victims in comas and families who are suffering. Then she listed the names of Lacy and Dylan's families.

"I can't believe we have figured all this out," Gideon said.

"We didn't figure it out," Keoni said, "God knows what is happening and He is revealing it to us."

"That's right. God is truly bringing important information to you," Obadiah said, "So what you need to now ask Him for is *proof*."

"Isn't there enough proof right here with what we have found?" Gideon asked.

"No, this is all just your *theory*. You have no proof of who is sending the lighthouse signal. You have no proof of who is drawing on the wall of the lighthouse or washing off the drawing. You have no proof of who is picking up the drugs. I think you should show this to Hadley by all means. It may help him track down who is behind this. Remember, this is excellent work, but it is just a theory. He will not have enough evidence here to arrest anyone without more proof," Obadiah said.

"What about what Rateesh discovered with Brian in his restaurant?" Brielle asked.

"That could be *some* proof, but Rateesh needs to come forward to the police. He is the one who saw it, not any of you," Obadiah answered. "God is revealing remarkable things to all of you. Keep praying and ask for His guidance and perfect will. Stay close to what He speaks to you at all times. He will show you the way."

There came a soft knock at the door to the vault. Obadiah opened it to find

Genevieve there.

"Hey guys," she said happily, "come and eat, dinner's ready."

Obadiah smiled, "We'll be right there." Then he invited Genevieve in so that they could explain all their information to her. She was impressed, yet very quiet. Brielle knew that this investigation would make her mother nervous.

Obadiah turned to the Intercessors, who were still staring at the information they had collected. "I think what we need to do is contact Hadley and have him come and see what you have here. In the meantime, we will all join in prayer that God will direct you. Anytime you want to come and see all you have created here, or if you find more information that you need to add, just let me know. I am always here to serve you."

The Intercessors made their way across the hall bridge and back into the kitchen to find a wonderful meal prepared for them. It smelled delicious, and they happily gathered around the table to eat. Because Asher was joining them, Genevieve whispered to Brielle that she didn't want any discussion of their latest discoveries taking place. Brielle nodded in understanding and kept their conversation topics focused on their upcoming prayer meeting at Mrs. Barnes' house tomorrow after school.

"I am *so* excited about this!" Keoni said, "I want to design a cool flyer that we can pass out to students tomorrow."

"I just hope people will come," Brielle said.

"Why wouldn't they?" Asher asked.

"Things are a little strange and confusing when you are in high school," Brielle explained.

"That's very true, most of the students are strange and confusing," Gideon teased, "look at Keoni."

"Ha, ha," Keoni mocked, "I think this just might be something some of our friends have always wanted and were just too scared or unsure of how to start it."

"I agree," Obadiah said, "I think what you are doing is outstanding and just what those kids need. There *is* power in prayer, especially from earnest hearts that ban together to call on God. Prayer changes things. Who knows what all you will be able to accomplish with the help of the Lord?"

"I think it would be nice if we could also sing a few songs," Keoni added.

"Why don't you?" Genevieve asked, "Music is a powerful tool; you might draw more kids in that way."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking," Keoni said, "I guess we will have to try and find some tracks to sing with. I'll see if I can find anything by tomorrow, or we'll just sing without music. Maybe we will attract some musicians; it sure would be nice to have some live music."

"Well, um… I would be happy to help," Jace said.

"Great!" Keoni said happily, "Do you have some worship tracks we could

use?"

"No… but I can play for you if you like," he said.

Everyone looked curiously at Jace.

"What do you mean, play for you?" Brielle asked, "You play an instrument?"

"Three actually," Jace said shyly.

"What? You play *three* instruments?" Brielle said, trying to control her shocked tone. She was pleasantly surprised that he was able to play so many instruments, but there was also a feeling of confusion inside her heart that he had never told her this about himself.

"I play the guitar, drums, and a little piano," he said.

"Jace, that's wonderful!" Genevieve exclaimed, "How long have you played?"

"I have played the drums since I was about five years old. My father put me in drum lessons because I walked around beating on everything inside the house. Then I started learning the guitar when I was eleven. But I pretty much have taught myself piano. I only know some chords based on what I know from guitar," he answered.

"This is such a blessing!" Genevieve delighted, "Not only is it a blessing for your prayer group, but I'm hoping it will be a blessing for our church as well."

Brielle looked at her mother inquisitively, "What do you mean, Mama?"

"I just found out last week that our church drummer is moving away," Genevieve answered, "His job transferred him to Texas."

"Tommy?" Gideon asked, "In Texas? Hmm, that will be quite a change for him. I'll sure miss him, he's a great guy."

"Yes, he is a great guy and a great drummer. I have been praying for the Lord to send me a new drummer before he leaves. There is one other man who has played before, but he cannot commit to our rehearsal schedule. We practice on Tuesday evenings. I don't know if that would work for you or… if you are even interested in taking his place?" Genevieve asked Jace with hopeful eyes.

"I'd love to," Jace said excitedly, "Thank you."

Genevieve was thrilled and jumped up out of her seat to hug him, "Thank *you,* Sweetheart! And Thank You, Lord!" she said, hugging him tight, "This is so great!"

Brielle smiled and watched this scene taking place before her. She was happy that her mother's prayer was answered. She was happy that Jace was getting more involved in the church; still, that sting of confusion was biting at her. In all the time that they had spent together over the past several weeks, why was it so hard for him to mention that he played three instruments? Not one, or two, but *three*-- and he played them so well that he could become a member of her mother's worship band. She was trying to focus her mind on the positive side of this, but the questions kept biting at her: why was it so hard for him to open his heart to her about who he was? Did he not trust her? Did he not

care enough for her to know who he was? Did he not want her to know who he was?

She smiled, took a slow breath, and thought a prayer to the Lord to help her with her feelings. She felt the peace of God slowly come over her. This moment was not about her; this was about Jace using his talents for the Lord. She needed to be happy and change her attitude about it.

After dinner, Keoni and Gideon said their goodbyes and headed home. Gideon's pain medication was wearing off, and he needed to go home and rest. Keoni was excited to get busy designing the flyers for the prayer group.

"We need a cool name for the group," she said as she hugged Brielle goodbye.

"Yeah," Brielle agreed, "Maybe we should ask some of the others who come to help us with that."

"That's a good idea, I'll see you tomorrow then!" she said as she and Gideon headed out to the car.

Brielle waved, "See you tomorrow!"

Jace had lingered on the porch, waiting for Keoni and Gideon to leave so he could talk to Brielle alone.

Brielle watched as her friends drove away, then she felt Jace come up beside her.

"I wanted to talk to you about… um…" he stammered.

Brielle turned to face him, waiting for him to speak.

"I saw the look of surprise on your face when I told your mom that I'm a musician," Jace said.

"Yeah, that's really cool," she smiled, trying to keep her attitude in check, "I think it's great that you will be playing with the worship band, I know my mom will love having you be part of that."

"Thanks. I'm sure I will too… I know that is something I have never mentioned before," he said, lowering his gaze.

"No… You never have," Brielle said softly, "Why is that?"

Jace looked up at the night sky, "I don't know. I guess I'm just not used to talking about myself much."

"Yeah, I guess," she sighed, "Jace, I would like to be honest with you about something, is that okay?"

"Yes," Jace said, gazing into her eyes with his full attention.

"Right now, I can say that you and I are friends and I… well… I really like you," she began gently, "and I would like to get to know you more to see where this relationship could go.
I guess, well, we can't do that if you don't open up and let me into your life."

Jace took in a deep breath, "I know," he whispered, "You're right."

"I mean, don't get me wrong, I think it's incredible that you play three instruments, really, and that you play well enough to be with my mom's band for

church and our prayer group. I just think that it's a perfect example of something important that you could have shared with me," she said gently. "It just kind of makes me feel like maybe you don't want to let me get to know you more."

Jace put his hand on her arm, "Brielle, I know it may seem like that, but honestly, that's not true. I do want to get to know you more and for you to know me. Thank you for telling me that. I like you too," he said dropping his eyes to the ground in shyness. "I understand what you are saying and I… I— "

"Brielle! You have to help me with the dishes tonight!" Asher called from inside the house.

Brielle rolled her eyes. "That boy's timing is just impeccable."

"It's okay," Jace said, "I need to get going. But I want you to know that I do want you to get to know me more, okay?" he said, looking directly into her jade green eyes.

Brielle could see how sincere he was. "Okay," she nodded with a slight smile, "I'm glad to know that."

"I'm sorry, I'd better get going," he said, hugging her goodbye, breathing her in as he did. "I had a great day with you today. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I had a great day with you, too," she said, "I'll see you at school tomorrow, drive safe, okay?"

Jace nodded as he smiled and walked down the driveway.

Brielle stood on the porch to watch him drive away as she had several times before. But this time, she felt as if things would be different between them. She really believed that he was going to let her into his heart and life… and the thought of it made her smile.

27

The next morning at school, Keoni met Brielle in the parking lot. She was excited to show her the new flyer she had designed for the prayer group. Brielle's face lit up when she saw it.

"Keoni! This is so great! You are so talented!" Brielle exclaimed. "I could take art for years and never be able to do something like this."

"Thanks, Bri," Keoni said sweetly, "Here, take some and start handing them out. I put four on a page and made a hundred copies. Since they are small, we can each give out a hundred," Keoni said.

"Each? You mean Gideon is here?" Brielle asked happily.

"Yeah, you know him. He's too hyper to sit for too long, and he's so tough he said he would rather come to school and be in pain than sit at home," Keoni said dryly.

"Sounds like him," Brielle agreed.

"Okay, this is great! I've got to go, I'll see you in History," Keoni said, and she hugged her friend goodbye and headed down the hall.

When Brielle arrived in her morning art class, Zach greeted her as he did every day. When he did, she placed a flyer in front of him on his desk.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's an invitation to our new student prayer group," she answered happily. "We are having it after school each day at Mrs. Barnes' little yellow house across the street. It won't be something too long, we're going to sing a few songs and pray together for our school."

"Mrs. Barnes?" he asked curiously.

"Yes, Coach Barnes' mother lives across the street, and she said we could meet in her front yard whenever we like. It was easier than trying to get things approved for an on-campus group. Plus, it's directly across from the school… so do you think you will come?" she asked gently.

"Hmm, prayer, huh? I don't know, I'm not very experienced in that," he smirked.

"That's okay. If you want to come, we can pray with you," she said.

"You would pray with me?" he asked.

"Of course, I would," she replied.

"What would you pray for me about?" he asked.

Brielle shrugged, "Whatever you want to pray about," she said, pausing, then asked softly, "Do you know Jesus?"

Zach smiled broadly, "I know who He is, if that's what you mean."

"No, that's not what I mean," she said sweetly, "I mean… if some unforeseen accident should happen to you---God forbid… do you think you would make it to heaven?"

Zach looked at her through slightly squinted eyes, "I'm not sure about that."

"If you would like to be sure, you should come. We can pray together, and if you want to, you could ask Jesus into your heart," she answered gently.

"Actually… what I meant was, I'm not sure about all that heaven stuff," Zach said.

"I see," Brielle said gently, "You don't believe in heaven or hell?"

Zach didn't reply but just smiled at her.

"What about God and Jesus, do you believe in Them?" she asked softly.

Zach shrugged, "You know, I just haven't put much thought into it. I never really needed to."

Just then their teacher called the class to attention.

"Well, if you would like to come today, we would love to have you. If not, I am always here if you would like to talk about some of those things," she said softly. "But I hope you will come."

The rest of the morning, all the Intercessors passed out their flyers to the students, inviting them to come and join them to pray for their school. When they reached the lunchroom, Brielle took the opportunity to walk around to all the tables and invite as many students as she could. Jace had easily gone through all his flyers, as most of the girls in the school were eager to get his attention and talk to him. Keoni had passed out most of her flyers that morning to the freshmen and sophomores. Gideon was quite tired and in a lot of pain, so Brielle took his leftover flyers and added them to hers to distribute among the lunch students. She covered the whole room, even inviting her friend, the lunch lady. But as she turned to talk to the last table of students, she stopped abruptly. Taryn and her friends were sitting there with Reed, Morgan, Sean, and Ryan. She knew more than any other group of students in the entire school; these were students who needed to be invited the most. But she was dealing with the struggles of her flesh. Her brain told her to leave, to forget it, they wouldn't come anyway. But her heart knew better. None of this, she reminded herself, was about her, all of this was about Jesus, and she would None of this, she reminded herself, was about her, all of this was about Jesus, and she would do the hard things, like invite Taryn and her friends to the prayer group, for Him.

Brielle took in a deep breath and said a quick prayer, "Okay, Jesus, here it goes. I would appreciate all the help I can get."

Brielle lifted her head, put a smile on her face, and walked to the table-- glancing out of the corner of her eye at Jace, Keoni, and Gideon, who were watching her closely.

"Oh, no-- she isn't," Keoni whispered as she watched her friend in disbelief.

"Oh, yes, she is," Gideon contradicted her.

As she approached their table, Taryn saw her coming and an ugly scowl quickly covered her face. She elbowed Reed, who also turned his attention to Brielle. The rest of the table soon had their eyes fixed on her. Brielle felt her hands begin to tremble as she came closer. She held on tight to her flyers and

pressed on.

"Hi," Brielle said nervously, "I wanted to invite you all to come to our new student prayer group after school."

She placed some of the flyers on the table before them. Ryan Ledger and a couple of Taryn's friends reached for a flyer, but Taryn, Reed, Morgan, and Sean just glared at her.

Taryn scoffed, "Huh, prayer? You? What, like you're some sort of religious person or something?"

"I'm a Judeo-Christian," Brielle answered gently.

"What is a Judeo-Christian?" Sean asked.

"It means we are Christians who embrace the Jewish roots of our Savior, our faith, accept Yeshua as our Messiah, support the Jewish people and the nation of Israel as an undivided state," Brielle explained kindly.

Sean lifted his eyebrows as if he had never heard this information before and slightly nodded his head.

"Oh, *really*?" Taryn scoffed, "I would never have guessed that by what I've seen from you. Tell me, Brielle, in what chapter of the Bible does it tell you how to saturate someone's head with a chocolate milkshake?" she asked crossly.

Brielle lowered her head in shame. She knew that, as horrible as Taryn could be, in this case, she was right. There had been nothing in her actions toward Taryn that would show her that she loved Jesus and strived to follow His commands. She steadied her trembling hands and looked up at Taryn.

"There is no place in the Bible that teaches that. You're right, Taryn, that was very wrong of me, and I'm sorry," Brielle replied humbly, sincerely sorry for her actions.

"You know, you all wear those decorative little crosses around your neck so proudly, but aren't crosses a symbol of Jesus? I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought Christians were supposed to represent *Christ,"* Taryn said defiantly.

Brielle swallowed hard, reaching up to place her hand on her cross and hold it in her fingertips. She was so proud of it, so proud to wear it wherever she went. In her heart, she knew that she tried daily to follow the teachings of her Master and Savior, Jesus Christ; however, Taryn had a valid point. Brielle had not been a good example of the love of Jesus to her.

"You're right again, Taryn, I did not represent Jesus well to you at all, and I'm very sorry for everything I've done and said that has hurt and embarrassed you. I'm also sorry that I haven't come and apologized to you sooner, that was wrong of me too," Brielle replied.

Ryan's head snapped up from looking at the flyer when he heard Brielle speak, and Taryn's friends looked at her curiously as well.

Taryn's scowl, however, did not budge. "Yeah, right, whatever. Like I'm supposed to believe that?"

Brielle humbled herself again, "I know that it may seem like that sometimes.

The truth is, we are just humans *trying* to do what God commands. Unfortunately, none of us are perfect or ever will be. We all make mistakes, and I certainly have made mine. So, I would like to tell you again that I am sorry I hurt you, Taryn. I acted completely out of anger. It was wrong, and I would like to ask you to forgive me."

When Brielle finished speaking, the table was quiet. Many of the students turned their attention to Taryn for her response to Brielle's heartfelt request. Taryn just began to laugh at her.

"Wow, that was actually pretty good," she said, clapping her hands as she mocked Brielle's apology. "I have to say, that was almost believable. You Christians," she said, placing her fingers in the air as if to speak the word in quotes, "are all alike; you're all a pack of hypocrites. Listen, do us all a favor, okay? Why don't you take your little flyers and go bother someone else with your prayer group? We are all doing just fine *without* it."

Brielle stood dumbfounded. She had truly asked Taryn for forgiveness for her actions toward her, and to hear this response was baffling. She didn't know what to say.

She looked at the other students at the table and tried to give them a forced smile. "We'd like to have you come, you're always welcome," she whispered, then she departed, leaving the flyers on the table with the group.

As she walked away and headed toward her friends, she felt the sting of tears begin to well in her eyes and a lump start to form in her throat. But she shook it off. The thought of Taryn seeing that she had made her cry was enough for her to quickly regain her composure.

"What happened?" Keoni asked, "What did she say to you?"

Brielle relayed her conversation with Taryn and then began to quietly eat her lunch.

"You did the right thing," Gideon said, "I think God would be pleased with you. You did exactly what His Word instructs us to do. You humbled yourself, admitted you were wrong, apologized, and asked for forgiveness. The rest is up to her, but you did good, Bri," he said encouragingly.

"Thanks, Giddy," she said softly.

"Let's not let that girl ruin our joy for what we are going to do today," Keoni said, "The enemy knows we are going to do great things that could change this school and the students in it forever. Let's not let her stop us, okay?"

Brielle smiled, "Okay."

"Remember, Oba says satan always goes after those who will do the most damage against him," Jace said.

"That's right, and we need to remember that these things will come up from time to time. But God has placed this ministry in our hearts for a reason. We prayed for it, and we are prepared. Even if just one person comes, it will be a success," Keoni said, holding Brielle's hand and giving her a warm smile.

Brielle nodded, “Yeah, and that’s true. Still, I have to stop and think about how much I humiliated Taryn when I tossed that milkshake on her. I deserved to eat some humble pie just now, and I am glad that I finally apologized to her. I should have done it sooner. It was just how she reacted to prayer that surprised me. But you’re right, even if one person comes today, it will be a success, so let’s talk about what we are going to do today,” she said, feeling better for having apologized to Taryn.

After school, the Intercessors walked over to Mrs. Barnes’ house. Jace had his guitar case, and he and Keoni were excited to play some of the songs they had picked out the night before. Gideon noticed his guitar case.

“Did you ride your motorcycle to school with that thing?” he asked.

Jace laughed, “Uh, no, that would have been quite comical. I drove my dad’s SUV today. He’s been letting me use it when I need to take Rateesh home.”

“That’s nice of him,” Brielle said.

“Is he riding your motorcycle around?” Keoni asked honestly.

Jace smiled, “No, not a chance. He’s out of town on business this week, so he doesn’t need it.”

Brielle looked at him with sorrow in her heart. She hated to know he was left at home alone so much.

When they arrived at Mrs. Barnes’ home, they were surprised to find that not only was she waiting for their arrival, but also had a table with drinks and snacks all prepared for her visitors on the driveway.

“Mrs. Barnes, this is wonderful! Thank you so much!” Brielle exclaimed, hugging the old woman.

“Mrs. Barnes? Let’s have none of that, please,” the sweet woman replied. “You all call me Henrietta,” she smiled. “I’ve been so excited about this I could hardly sleep last night!”

Keoni took time to introduce Gideon to Henrietta, as he was not with them yesterday.

“Did you bake these cookies?” Gideon asked.

“Yes, I did,” Henrietta said proudly.

“They’re awesome! You could go into business with these,” he said, hugging her with his good arm.

“Henrietta, we want you to know that we won’t expect you to do this every day. It might be too much for you to do all the time,” Keoni said softly.

“Nonsense,” Henrietta replied, “this is a wonderful blessing to me. I have been praying for the Lord to allow me to do some kind of ministry from my home. I lost my husband a few years ago, and my eyes aren’t the greatest for driving. I’m here all the time except Sunday when my son and his family take me to church, so this is giving me something to look forward to every day. There couldn’t be a better way for me to live my elderly days than to spend them

ministering to and praying for young people. It keeps me young," she smiled, her eyes sparkling and brilliant with joy.

"You're a remarkable woman," Brielle said, finishing her cookie and giving her a hug of gratitude.

After they had a snack, they walked over to the oak tree to get ready. Henrietta had a lovely little wooden bench that she had placed under the tree on which to sit. They waited patiently--and nervously-- to see if anyone would come.

Within a few minutes, they were very happy to see a small group of freshmen girls come to the house, followed by a couple of sophomore guys, and then a few more upperclassmen as well. Total, they had twelve students gathered, thirteen with Mrs. Barnes.

After they had met everyone and enjoyed refreshments, Brielle began the prayer meeting.

"I just want to thank you all so much for joining us today. My name is Brielle St. Claire, and these are my friends Keoni and Gideon Toussaint and Jace Roberts," she said, introducing her friends to the group.

"We have started this group to pray for our school and claim it for God," Gideon said, "We want to be able to pray with any student on our campus who wants prayer and not just the students of Fairfield High, but the staff too. We want to ask God to protect our school from all harm and anything that would come against us or hurt us."

"We want to tell other students about Jesus and His love," Brielle continued, "Jesus loves you, all of you, so much, and He just wants to have a relationship with you. Whatever you have going on, God already knows it, and He wants to help you. We believe that there is power in prayer, and prayer can change things. So, we are so excited that you all have come to join us today, and we look forward to getting to know you more."

"Before we begin our prayer time, Keoni and Jace are going to lead us in a few worship songs," Gideon said, sitting down in the grass with the rest of the group.

Then Keoni came forward, "The reason why we sing songs of worship is to welcome the presence of God to this place. Singing songs to the Lord is our way of letting Him know how much we love Him," she explained.

Then Jace began to play. He was wonderful, a very gifted musician.

Brielle knew that the worship time was meant to prepare her mind and heart for the presence of God, but she could hardly take her eyes from Jace as he played. He was so accomplished and played beautifully. Seeing him do something like this drew her to him even more.

Keoni began to sing, and some of the others joined in. Brielle tried to sing, starting with just a soft hum, but that was all she could get out. She sat and whispered the words to the songs, unable to bring herself once again to sing.

Brielle took a slow look around her and noticed she was not the only one mesmerized by Jace. The little group of freshman girls was all staring at him, dreamy-eyed. Brielle thought it was a good thing they were sitting down, so they didn't swoon and fall over.

As Keoni began her last worship song, the teens became more relaxed and sang strongly together. Even though there was the constant sound of traffic from the street and distant voices of students still leaving the campus across the road, the teens were not distracted. They could sense a sweet and beautiful presence of God in Henrietta's yard. Keoni's beautiful voice, along with Jace's guitar, was anointed by the Holy Spirit and ushered in the presence of the Lord to the place.

After the last song, Gideon stood up to read a scripture.

"There is an awesome spirit here in this place. It just goes to show that God will meet you right where you are," then he opened his Bible.

"In Matthew 7:7-8, it says, *'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. '*

Next, Brielle stood up to lead the prayer time.

"I would like to begin our prayer time by praying for our school first. After that, if anyone here would like to have personal prayer time, we will be happy to pray with you," she said sweetly.

"If you don't mind, I would like to ask you to all join hands. When we are praying for something as a group, we want to come together in agreement. The act of holding hands unites us and makes us more powerful," she said.

The students all reached out around the yard to grab hands with someone else.

"I believe that God will answer our prayers; His Word confirms He will, so let's agree together for the protection and guidance for all the students and staff of our school. Please, let's all pray together," she said as she began to pray aloud.

When they were finished, Brielle said, "I would like to ask if you will please pray with me for the two students who are in the hospital, Lacy Weaver, and Dylan Whitfield, for the healing power of Jesus to come on them. If you know of any other students who are sick or in serious situations, please pray for them as well," she said. They prayed for Lacy and Dylan, and other students at their high school who were in serious or life-threatening situations, that God would lead them, heal them, and give them direction.

Then Brielle took out her Bible to read another verse.

"The Bible tells us in John 14:6, '*I am The Way, The Truth, and The Life. No man comes to the Father but by Me'.* Having Jesus in your heart is a wonderful experience by itself, and it is also the way that your soul can make it to heaven when you pass away. If there is anyone here who has never asked Jesus into their heart and would like to, we would like to pray that prayer for you."

"The Bible also tells us in Philippians 4:6, '*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.'* If you already have Jesus in your heart but would like prayer over other situations, Jace, Keoni, Gideon, Henrietta, and I will all be happy to pray with you as well," she said.

They prayed once again with some of the students who wanted to ask Jesus into their hearts and for the students who had special requests. When they were done praying, Brielle closed the meeting.

"If you need to go, we hope you will come back again, and thank you so much for coming to join us today. We cannot tell you how wonderful it was to have you here with us. This was amazing," she said happily.

But no one was ready to leave. Some of the students made their way to sit with Keoni or Gideon, and some went to talk to Henrietta. The freshmen girls all gathered around Jace, and one of the seniors came over to talk to Brielle. His name was Max.

As the small groups were talking or praying, Brielle was listening to Max talk about his mother. She had been very sick for the past few months, but didn't want to go to the doctor.

"She's just not herself anymore," he said sadly. "My dad and I don't know what to do for her."

Brielle reached her hands out to take Max's in hers. "Let's give this situation to God and ask Him to heal your mom," she said warmly.

They prayed together, and as they finished, she looked up at Max. Suddenly, something caught her attention in the corner of her vision. Driving by the house at that moment in a red Jeep were Reed, Taryn, Morgan, and Sean. Two of the guys were in the back, Taryn was in the front passenger seat, and Reed was driving. She noticed that Ryan was not with them.

They were driving by slowly to take in the scene as they passed. They were all glaring harshly at the group, as if disgusted that other students showed up to pray. Brielle met Taryn's eyes as they drove by; her glare at Brielle was full of disdain. Brielle felt a cold chill sweep over her as she saw them and softly whispered, "God protect us."

The Intercessors were thrilled with the turnout for the prayer group and all the things that God did in their time together. They shared their stories of who they met and prayed for that day, and they couldn't wait to come back tomorrow and do it again.

The next day, as they walked over to Henrietta's house, they noticed there were already kids waiting for them. Not only did all the teens from the day before return, but they had brought friends. That day, they had fifteen students attend, and God blessed the prayer group just as He had the day before. The Intercessors and Henrietta marveled at what God was doing, and in such a short

period of time.

The days that week seemed to fly by, and before they knew it, Friday had come. When the Intercessors stood on the sidewalk opposite Henrietta's home, they were amazed. There in the yard, already gathered, laughing, talking, and enjoying cookies, were twenty students! They stood there for a moment, speechless at how fast the group was growing and thrilled to see what God was doing for the students at their school. Henrietta was in heaven; she was having the time of her life with all these kids. She looked like a new woman, transformed somehow in just four days - the kids in her yard were filling her with new joy and energy.

The group began their meeting, calling everyone together for worship. The sound of their singing was now drawing Henrietta's neighbors out of their homes. Brielle noticed them standing on their driveways, listening to the beautiful songs being lifted to God. She thought to herself that she would go over to their homes and let them know that they were welcome to come to the prayer group as well.

Then it was time for prayer. Brielle had asked for prayer requests on the first meeting day, and a few hands went up. So, she thought it was important that this be something they do regularly. A few hands went up again today when she asked for requests, then she read scriptures the Lord had laid on her heart to share. Once again, they all joined hands and began to pray for the requests together.

Some of the students were comfortable enough to say their prayers out loud. Some just whispered them, and some just bowed their heads and closed their eyes, speaking to God in their hearts.

Suddenly, the melodious sound of teens calling out to God in prayer was interrupted by the sound of jeering, laughter, and shouts of mockery. Brielle looked up to see Reed in his red Jeep, followed by Morgan in an old blue pick-up truck. Their vehicles were full of other students who stood up in the back of the vehicles and began pelting the prayer group with raw eggs. The students were taken off guard and had nowhere to run to shelter themselves from the surprise attack. They jumped up and darted in different directions, but the number of assailants was large, and they came heavily prepared.

Henrietta did not waver, hide, or run. She grabbed her broom from her porch and headed toward the vehicles. Gideon saw Henrietta moving toward the street and knew that the attackers were cold-hearted enough to show no mercy to an old woman. Quickly, he ran to her and jumped in front of her. Reed, seeing his act of kindness, was disgusted at his compassionate act, and told everyone to focus their ammunition on Gideon. By the time they drove away, Gideon had been pelted with a dozen raw eggs.

After it was over, Henrietta brought out paper towels, bath towels, dish cloths, anything that could help the students clean themselves. Brielle, Keoni,

Gideon, and Jace all kept encouraging the students not to be discouraged by this act and to please come back on Monday. But from the saddened expressions on the students' faces, they weren't sure if anyone would return. Henrietta was also encouraging the kids not to let these bullies keep them from returning on Monday.

"We should come back even stronger," she told them, "And let them see that they will not stop us from calling out to God. We need to stand together."

Brielle looked at the group and felt completely helpless, not knowing what to do or say. Then Gideon walked back to the center of the yard and stood. Suddenly, he began to sing out, "Oh, how I love Jesus, oh, how I love Jesus! Oh, how I love Jesus, because He first loved me."

As he sang, Keoni walked over to his side and grabbed his hand. Jace and Brielle quickly followed, and then one by one, the rest of the teens, along with Henrietta, forgot that they were soaked with sticky, smelly, cold raw eggs. They all walked into the yard to join hands with the others, forming a large circle in the yard. Each time they sang, they grew stronger, and the saddened faces began to brighten as their spirits were uplifted by the powerful presence of the Lord.

The neighbors who had witnessed the event were so touched by what they saw, they too were drawn to the circle and joined hands with the students who kept singing their praises to God.

The Intercessors, along with the rest of the prayer group, proved on all accounts that they would not be discouraged or stopped by the hands of those who opposed them. On the contrary, it only made them *stronger* in their resolve to keep gathering there to pray and serve their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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At last, the big weekend of Homecoming was upon them. After the prayer meeting on Friday, Jace left to go with his father on their trip. Brielle, still emotional over the egg attack on their prayer group as well as feeling forlorn about missing the Homecoming dance--and Jace had invited Keoni and Gideon to come over and stay the night at her house. It was Friday night, and the big game between Fairfield High and Eagle Hill – Southport.

Brielle and Keoni sat in the stands, trying not to let their anger and frustration overtake them as they watched their team struggle to play. Coach Barnes had suspended Reed and Morgan from playing in the Homecoming game because of the threat they made to Gideon and the injury he sustained from their actions. He also told them they would not be starting in the next game and if their behavior didn't improve, he would suspend them from the team altogether. Reed and Morgan didn't show up to the game at all, but Gideon, being the true teammate and leader that he is, sat on the bench cheering and encouraging his team as they played. It was to no avail; the Fairfield Falcons lost by a final score of 38 to 14.

"If Gideon had been out there, they wouldn't have lost this game," Brielle said.

"They might not have lost so bad," Keoni said, "but this was a pretty tough team."

"It serves them right for what they did to Gideon," Brielle replied.

"Well, the whole team didn't do it, just Reed and Morgan," Keoni said.

"That's true… but I hope they learn they can't win without him," Brielle pressed.

Keoni laughed and hugged her friend, "At times, I'm not sure if I'm his twin or you are."

"Let's get Giddy and get out of here," Brielle said, frustrated that the football game was lost. To make things worse, she would not have the chance to go to the dance tomorrow night.

They all went to Brielle's house, where they spent the evening in the tower eating pizza, watching movies, and playing video games. It was the best medicine for them all to be with each other and spend time together laughing. Brielle's thoughts kept drifting away to Jace. She would look out the window and wonder where he was and what he was doing. Mostly, she wondered why it was so hard for him to talk to her about it.

The next morning at breakfast, they were discussing their plans for the day. Asher needed a new pair of shoes, so Genevieve was planning to go to the mall.

"If anyone cares to join us for some shopping and lunch, they are welcome," Genevieve said as she served them a lovely pancake breakfast.

"I will have to politely decline," Obadiah said, "I have to prepare my lesson

plans for tomorrow's class. But I wish you all well and lots of great sales," he joked.

Brielle reached over to grab a powdered sugar doughnut and dipped it into her chocolate milk. "You don't have to ask me twice," she laughed.

"Huh," Gideon teased, "You don't have to ask Keoni at all. She is ready, willing, and able to join you for shopping at any time, come rain or shine."

"Ha, ha," Keoni chided, "very funny."

"And very true," Asher added.

Keoni laughed. "The last time I was there, I was shopping for a dress that I loved, which I bought and have not had the chance to wear."

"Save it for prom. It makes a better prom dress anyway, much too elegant for just a Homecoming dance," Brielle said, taking a bite of her doughnut.

"Prom? That's ages away!" Keoni said.

"I'm saving my dress for prom," Brielle said.

"Oh really?" Keoni asked.

"Yep, and I already have a date," she answered happily.

Keoni raised her eyebrows in surprise. Genevieve stopped flipping pancakes to give her daughter her undivided attention.

"And just when were you going to tell me this?" Keoni asked.

"Here, here, me too," Genevieve agreed.

"I forgot," Brielle said, "there's been so much going on, it just slipped my mind."

"I can't believe you've been so upset about missing the Homecoming dance when you already have a date for prom," Genevieve said, "I'm assuming you're going with Jace?"

"Yes, I'm sorry," Brielle answered, ashamed of her pouty behavior, "You're right. I should be thankful. Jace said he felt so bad for not being able to take me to Homecoming, he asked me if I would go to the prom with him."

"Wow!" Gideon chimed in, "I think you may be the only girl at Fairfield who has already been asked."

"You never know," she smiled, "Now we just have to find a nice 'Jesus freaky' guy for Keoni."

Keoni agreed, "Yes, Amen to that! I'm so happy that you will get to wear your dress! I love that dress on you, it makes you look like a princess. Which reminds me, I had the most wonderful dream last night."

"Ooooh? About what?" Brielle asked as she began eating her plate of warm banana nut pancakes.

"It was about you," she began.

"Do tell," Brielle asked, ready for a good story while she enjoyed her tasty breakfast.

"I'm not exactly sure where you were," she started, "but you were wearing a breathtaking dress and you had on the most elegant tiara," Keoni said, her eyes

full of excitement.

Brielle stopped eating and stared at her friend. “Sounds good to me,” she laughed.

“Hey!” Asher said happily, “Brielle, you’re going to be a princess!”

“And just where am I going to meet a prince?” Brielle asked, taking another bite of her pancake.

“You could always scout around London,” Gideon said, “Maybe there is a single prince of England roaming around over there.”

“Hmm, I’ve watched too many documentaries on the royal family. There’s not a lot of freedom there,” she said.

“Are you saying that you wouldn’t like to be a princess just because you couldn’t do what? Go to the mall when you want?” Asher teased.

“You do know that this is all about a dream and that none of it is actually taking place, right?” Brielle kidded her little brother, “The chances of me ever becoming a princess are less than slim.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily agree with that,” Obadiah chimed in, “The Bible says in Psalm 24:8, *‘Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty; the LORD, invincible in battle.’* It also says in 1 Timothy 6:15, *‘For at just the right time Christ will be revealed from heaven by the blessed and only almighty God, the King of all kings and Lord of all lords.’* Jesus is the King of Kings, and the Bible tells us that we are all the children of the Lord.

“I think it is very safe to say that those of us who have received Christ into our hearts and bear His name as Christians are all sons and daughters of the King. In 1 Peter 2:9, it says, *‘But you are a chosen people, a **royal priesthood**, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.’* Therefore, we *are* royalty. We are all princes and princesses of the Kingdom of God, and you can’t find any other title on earth better than that,” he finished with a bite of banana pancake and his charming smile.

“So… *I* am a prince?” Asher asked sincerely.

“Yes, your royal highness, you are a prince of King Jesus!” Genevieve answered happily.

“And just as kings, queens, princes, and princesses of countries far away, we have responsibilities for our Kingdom. We must represent our King well, follow His commandments and laws, and work to help build His Kingdom,” Obadiah added.

Gideon took his last bite of breakfast and wiped his mouth. “I have to say, that gives me a whole different perspective on things.”

“Just don’t let that *perspective* go to your head. We need to be humble princes and princesses,” Keoni laughed, looking over at Brielle, “As if he wasn’t bad enough, now he knows this.”

“I can safely say I will happily take the title of being a princess for my King

Jesus any day," Brielle said, "but as far as marrying a real prince… I think I'll pass."

"You sound like a girl who already has her mind set on something--or someone," Genevieve said from the stove.

Brielle felt her face blush.

"Yeah, she wants to marry Jace," Asher said with a sinister tone. How he loved to tease his sister.

Brielle's face went from a light shade of pink to bright red at Asher's comment. "Um, Ash, how about if you go for a ride on Apache? A nice, long ride… like to Vermont perhaps."

"That's alright, Sis," Asher said, standing up from the table, "I'll pass, but I will go shoot some hoops," he said, placing his plate in the sink and dashing outside.

"Your dream certainly is intriguing, Keoni, and something you should write down," Obadiah said.

"I just wish I could figure out where you were," Keoni said. "Who knows, maybe we were in a palace in London, or one of those beautiful old homes in the Jane Austin movies," she said dreamily, "Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

That triggered a memory in Brielle, "Like that wonderful house we saw on the Gold Coast that day?" she asked.

Obadiah was listening intently while he ate his pancakes. "Which home was it that you saw?" he asked curiously.

Brielle told him about how they drove around enjoying the grand homes after they had delivered the plans for him and how they came upon one truly magnificent house, one that stood out above the others. She and Keoni described it to him in detail.

"Keoni had a word for it…" she said, looking over at her friend.

"Pulchritudinous," Keoni repeated the word proudly.

"Ah, yes, it means beautiful," Obadiah said simply.

Brielle shot a shocked look over at her grandfather, stunned that he, too, knew the meaning of the word. "What, do *you* like to read the dictionary too?" she asked.

Obadiah laughed, "That sounds like the uh, what's the name of that estate?" he asked, looking at Genevieve.

"Chateau Les Devereaux," Genevieve said with a French accent, "Has a nice ring to it," she said, waving her spatula in the air.

"How do you know that?" Brielle asked.

"The Devereaux family has been in Fairfield for decades," Obadiah said. "It is one of the many homes of A.C. Devereaux."

"A.C., what's that stand for?" Brielle asked.

"Abelard Clement Devereaux," Obadiah answered.

"I see why he goes by his initials," Gideon said, "that's quite a mouthful."

"Then he is the man who owns the fishing company Jace and his father work for," Brielle said.

"Really?" Genevieve asked.

"Yes, we saw Jace coming out of the gates to the mansion that day. He told us he had to deliver some papers for his father and that the man who lived there owns the fishing company they work for," Brielle explained.

Obadiah chuckled, "That's one of the many things they own. The Devereauxs are known for being extremely successful businessmen. They own many companies and mansions worldwide. A.C. was known for being a highly intelligent man as well as a hard worker. He didn't become a billionaire by being lazy."

"That explains why that house is so incredible. As we drove by it, I said that it must have been a hard-working and smart person to earn a home like that," Brielle said.

"You said successful businessmen, are there more Devereauxs?" Keoni asked.

"Yes. A.C. had two children, I believe: a daughter and a son." Obadiah said.

"Wow, and Jace works for them. At least that's something I know," Brielle said to herself.

"Speaking of Jace," Obadiah said, "where is he this weekend?"

"I don't know," Brielle said with a sigh.

"What do you mean?" Genevieve asked, bringing another stack of pancakes to the table.

"He said he had to go away with his dad. Something about his dad's fishing boat, that's all I know," Brielle said.

"You sound a little frustrated," Obadiah observed.

"Well," Brielle started, "I mean, Jace is… wonderful-- and beautiful and I like him a lot," she admitted, "but he is so quiet about his life. I think he might be embarrassed by something."

"Have you talked to him about it?" Genevieve asked.

"I've tried, and I have opened up to him about myself, thinking that might help him do the same. I've talked about things I dream of, hope for, and like to do. I've even talked to him about daddy," she said looking down at her plate.

Genevieve shot a glance at Obadiah. They knew that this was a subject Brielle never discussed with anyone unless she felt extremely close to them.

"I try to get to know him on a deeper level, but he just won't open up to me. For example, I was quite surprised to find out the other night that he plays three instruments. Stuff like that should be easy to say-- but not for him. Sometimes I think that he just doesn't feel the same way about me as I do him," she said softly.

"Yeah, he does," Gideon spoke up.

Brielle lifted her eyes to his, "Why do you say that? Has he told you

something?"

"He doesn't have to. I can see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice when he talks about you. He feels the same way about you, trust me," Gideon said.

"Then why is it so hard for him to let me get to know him?" Brielle asked in confusion.

"Just be patient with him, Kawala," Genevieve advised. "Not everyone was raised the way you were. Some families never sit down and talk to one another about their thoughts or feelings. That is something people have to learn how to do. Opening yourself up to another is a very vulnerable thing and can sometimes be kind of scary. You said his parents work all the time and he is alone most of the time, right? If that's the case, maybe he was just never taught how to be open with another person. Give him some time, he'll come around," Genevieve advised.

"That's very true. Learning to communicate feelings can be something difficult, even if a person is raised to do so. It may be a combination of lack of teaching at home as well as shyness, or even perhaps lack of confidence," Obadiah said.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Brielle replied.

"You also have to remember how much he chooses to be around you," Keoni said, "He wants to be with you, he proves that all the time. He's with you every chance he gets; he wouldn't do that if he didn't truly like you."

Brielle nodded, feeling better about the situation.

"It's a good thing he has a job that is linked to the Devereaux Family. They are good people. They do a lot of charity work worldwide," Obadiah said. "They are very giving and generous; he could learn a lot from them."

"Who knows, maybe if he becomes a doctor, he will work for them at the Devereaux Memorial Hospital someday," Genevieve said. "Which reminds me, I am going to visit Lacy and the Weavers today, how about if we all go together after our shopping trip?"

"Sounds great!" Brielle said.

"Yes, and afterward I'd like to visit Dylan too," Gideon said.

"Do you think we should?" Keoni asked, "I mean, after what happened last time…"

"I know," Gideon admitted, "but Dylan is awake now. If he is coherent and knows who I am, maybe he will want to see me. I would just like to try, who knows, maybe big brother Derrick will be out when we get there."

Once they had finished breakfast, they went to the mall. Asher got a new pair of shoes and was very happy. Although Brielle was excited to go shopping, she didn't find anything that interested her. Keoni, however, did - she came away with a lovely sweater for the holidays and a new pair of jeans, all on sale.

After lunch, they all headed to the hospital to visit Lacy, Jim, and Laura. Obadiah and Genevieve had picked up gift cards for them so that the couple

wouldn't have to worry so much about cooking for themselves; they could eat out and relax.

When they arrived, they spent several hours talking with Jim and Laura about Lacy's condition. So far, nothing had changed. Lacy remained in her state of deep sleep. The doctors had scheduled physical therapy for Lacy within the first few days of her hospitalization, so her muscles and joints did not begin deteriorating or get too stiff. The nurses turned Lacy's position every two hours to prevent bed sores and to help with her circulation and to try to prevent pneumonia from setting in.

There didn't seem to be an answer as to how long Lacy would stay in this condition. The group spent time in prayer for Lacy along with Laura, Jim, and Carrie, the nurse, who happened to be working her shift during their visit. Even though Lacy's condition had not changed, it was good to see Jim and Laura. They seemed so much stronger, so much more peaceful. Genevieve thought them to be some of the most courageous people she knew to handle the situation with their daughter with such faith.

After they visited with Lacy, Asher said he felt sick to his stomach. Genevieve knew that it was probably a case of overeating as he had downed four large pizza slices during lunch, but she graciously excused herself from visiting Dylan and took Asher home to rest.

The three Intercessors drove over to the other hospital to check on Dylan. When they arrived, they did not see Derrick sitting at his guard post outside of Dylan's door. They walked down the hall to Dylan's room, and when they reached the doorway, they could see Dylan propped up in bed. He had his head resting on a pillow. His mother was with him. She was sitting in the chair by his bed, knitting something. Gideon hesitated to enter the door, but when Dylan saw him, he smiled happily and invited them all to come in. Dylan's mother greeted them warmly and invited them to sit down.

"I'm going to get something to eat," she said.

"You don't have to leave on our account," Gideon replied.

"Please, take your time. I missed lunch today, so I will go and grab something while you have a nice visit," she said happily.

Then she picked up her bag and headed for the cafeteria.

"How you feeling, man?" Gideon asked Dylan.

Dylan sighed, "I'm still not a hundred percent. The doctors thought it might be good to keep me here until I… well, for a little while longer, until I regain my strength. But I'm feeling better every day. How about you? Coach came by to see me and told me that you had hurt your shoulder."

Gideon grinned, "Yeah, well, something like that," he said.

"Reed and Morgan took him down in practice last week and drove him into the ground," Keoni said, knowing her brother would never talk negatively about his teammates.

Dylan looked at her with a concerned expression on his face, then looked back at Gideon, “You’re kidding?” he asked.

“I’m afraid she’s right,” Gideon said, sitting down on the corner of Dylan’s bed.

“Why did they do that?” Dylan asked.

Gideon sighed, not knowing how to answer him.

“Because they were harassing a kid at school and Gideon stood up for him,” Brielle responded.

“Who’s the kid?” Dylan asked.

“Rateesh Kedar,” he replied.

“Why are they harassing him?” Dylan asked curiously.

“It’s a long story,” Gideon said, “but it doesn’t matter right now. What matters is how you are doing.”

“I heard about the game last night,” Dylan said, shaking his head, “*That* didn’t help me much.”

“I hear ya,” Gideon replied, “It was pretty tough to watch.”

“Yeah, I bet, so you went to the game?” Dylan asked.

“We all did,” Keoni said, “it was... somethin’.”

“Are you going to the dance?” Dylan asked.

They all shook their heads and said that they weren’t going. Just then, Dylan’s nurse came in to check on him and to take his lunch tray.

“My brother Derrick told me that you all came by to visit me. He told me that you came by several times,” Dylan said to Gideon, who nodded.

“Thank you for that,” he said softly, “Outside of Coach Barnes, my parents said that no one else came to see me. So... I really appreciate it.”

“Absolutely, you’re my friend, and you’re important,” Gideon said.

Dylan was deeply impacted by Gideon’s words, and his eyes filled with tears, “It’s moments like these when you learn who your real friends are.”

The teens all nodded.

Dylan turned to Brielle, “I’m sorry. I’ve been lying here trying to figure out who you are, but I just can’t remember. Maybe I have amnesia.”

Brielle laughed, “No, you don’t have amnesia. We’ve never really met. I’ve seen you around school, but that’s about it. My name is Brielle.”

“Brielle,” Dylan said, looking at her with a sweet smile, “it’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too. We’re so glad you are doing better. We’ve been praying for you,” she smiled.

Dylan raised his eyebrows in surprise, “Oh, okay.”

Then Gideon interrupted, “Brielle, Keoni, would you mind if I talked to Dylan alone for a moment?”

Brielle and Keoni looked at him curiously but stood and excused themselves, saying good-bye and wishing Dylan well.

Once they were out of the room, Gideon came around the bed to sit in the chair closer to his friend.

"You and I have been friends for a while, right?" Gideon asked.

"Since third grade," Dylan said, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, dark rings circling underneath them.

"Okay, I want to know if I can ask you something straight out," Gideon said.

"Sure," Dylan replied, confused by his friend's serious demeanor.

Gideon took a deep breath and looked Dylan in the eye.

"Where did you get the drugs you were taking?" he asked.

Dylan lay his head back on the bed and closed his eyes. "I can't tell you that."

"Why? Are you planning on buying more?" Gideon asked.

Dylan didn't answer.

"Are you planning on buying more?" Gideon pressed softly.

"No, I'm not. I promised my family that I would get into a program and quit. I'm leaving here in a couple of days and going to rehab," Dylan said.

"Then why won't you say who sold them to you? I mean, these drugs, they could have easily killed you. Don't you want to see the people selling them stopped?" Gideon asked.

Dylan didn't answer.

"What if this happens again, and you could have done something to stop it. What if it was a kid younger than you? Wouldn't you want to help?" Gideon asked.

"Yes, of course I would," Dylan said, "It's just that…"

Gideon waited for the rest of his statement, but Dylan said nothing.

"Come on, man, think of what these drugs are doing to our school," Gideon said. "Our town, even, I mean, who knows how many other people are using them."

Dylan didn't reply.

Gideon took another deep breath and asked one more direct question, "Did you get them from Reed or Morgan?"

At this question, Dylan's head jolted up to look at Gideon, confused by his question.

"What? Reed or Morgan? On our team? Why would you think that?" he asked curiously.

Gideon stared at him, shocked by Dylan's surprise. "Well, did you?"

"No, of course not," he answered certainly, "Why would you think they would be involved with something like that?"

Gideon stared at him, once again not knowing how to answer his question. Then he decided to bypass it altogether. There was too much to explain. Dylan wasn't in any condition to hear about it right now, and Gideon didn't feel like telling it all.

"I'm just trying to find out who did this to you and Lacy Weaver. You remember that she is in a coma too, right?" he asked.

Dylan nodded quietly.

"If you didn't get your drugs from those guys, then who was it?" Gideon asked again.

"Why is this any of your business? Why do you care so much about who I bought drugs from?" Dylan asked defensively, his tone sharp and cross. Gideon was cut to the bone by his words, and it struck a chord in his heart.

"Because I care about you," Gideon replied.

"That's so sweet," Dylan said sarcastically, "so does my family, and they aren't pestering me about it. Why should I tell you? Why is any of this your business?"

"Because drug dealers killed my father," Gideon said, standing up from his chair. "And I don't want to see them get away with what they are doing."

Dylan stared at Gideon, a mixture of guilt and regret spreading over his face from his statement.

"Gideon… I'm sorry," he said softly, "I wasn't thinking."

Gideon stood silently for a moment, the pain of losing his father overwhelming him. "Yeah," he said, staring at the floor. Gideon desperately wanted to leave. "I think I'd better get going. I'm glad to see that you're okay. I hope to see you at school soon. I'll be praying for you while you go through rehab." Then he left.

Brielle and Keoni had gone to the waiting room while Gideon talked to Dylan. When they saw him walk by, Keoni knew immediately that something had happened to her brother.

"Are you alright? What happened?" she asked him.

"Let's just go. I'll tell you in the car. I just need to calm down," Gideon replied.

As they drove to Brielle's house, Gideon regained his composure and told them of his conversation with Dylan. Though they understood why Gideon was upset, they were also intrigued by the new information Dylan provided.

"Wow… I thought that Reed and his gang were the sellers. Hmm, if he isn't getting the drugs from Reed or Morgan, then who?" Brielle wondered.

"Maybe you should have asked if he was getting them from Sean or Ryan," Keoni suggested.

"I don't think so. He was so shocked that I mentioned another student that I don't think he is getting the drugs from any of them. I think it is someone else, someone he doesn't know personally," Gideon said.

"Brian or Sidney?" Brielle asked.

"I don't think Brian is selling them on the street. He seems too busy for that, but perhaps it is Sidney," Gideon said.

Brielle thought about this information carefully, "Okay, if Reed, Morgan,

Sean, and Ryan aren't selling the drugs… then what is their role in all of this? Why are they being so mean, hurting Gideon and giving threats to Rateesh and Jace to leave things alone?"

"I don't know," Keoni said, "I thought we were on the right track, but now I'm confused."

"I'm right there with you," Brielle said softly, her mind whirling in thought.

Keoni dropped Brielle at her house and then headed home for the night. They had church in the morning and then another Intercessor training session planned for that afternoon. Though they knew they needed rest for all they had to do the next day, they couldn't quiet the question in their minds… how were Reed, Morgan, Sean, and Ryan involved in all this?

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The next day at church, Brielle realized how much she missed Jace. His absence from church made her long to see his face with his beautiful, bright smile and captivating, dark brown eyes. She tried her best to concentrate on Pastor Diffie's sermon, but she kept thinking about Jace. Why couldn't he let her get close to him? She was afraid to ask him about it directly for fear that he would close himself off altogether. There were so many emotions she struggled with when it came to Jace. On one hand, he was this wonderful, sweet, kind, talented, smart, and fun guy that was one of the most beautiful creations that God ever made. Then, on the other hand, he was quiet, distant, like he didn't want anyone to get too close to him.

Brielle thought about all the talks they had together and all the personal places of her heart that she had shared with him. The only things she knew for sure were that his parents loved to work more than they loved to be with him. Jace worked on a fishing boat, which seemed to bring him a good paycheck, and he loved being an Intercessor. That one piece of information warmed her heart when she thought about it. He really did love Jesus. That in itself was his best quality.

Brielle's mind traveled back to what her mother had said about Jace. As far as she knew, Jace was an only child. At least he never mentioned any siblings, and his parents were gone all the time. Maybe her mother was right; perhaps he had never learned how to communicate his feelings and thoughts to others. He might never have been taught how. She was going to try to be more patient with him, to try and help him to trust her and feel comfortable enough to let her into his world.

After church, Brielle and her family, along with Keoni and her family, all enjoyed a lovely lunch together. Then it was finally time to head to the Prayer Sanctum for their next training session. Along with their homework for school, the Intercessors had added their studies of the Bible that Obadiah had given them. They had been working hard on learning all the books of the Bible, who wrote them, and the main purpose each book taught. Along with that, they were studying some of the main scriptures that Obadiah thought they should have memorized, such as the 23rd Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, the Fruits of the Spirit, and, of course, the Ten Commandments.

Brielle was ahead of all of them as she had mastered these scriptures as a young child. With her ability to memorize large verses more easily than others, she was making great strides in her Intercessor studies.

Keoni, Gideon, and Jace all teased Brielle that it wasn't fair. They couldn't keep up with her as her brain seemed to function like a high-speed computer.

Before she started her Intercessor training, Brielle didn't see how being able to memorize things quickly was something that could be used for the Lord. Now,

it seemed to be one of the greatest assets she possessed. To be able to read and write scripture after a number of times and have it completely stored in her brain's database was not only a gift; it would be her most powerful weapon when standing in a spiritual battle.

Obadiah had made it very clear that this was not a competition, and the Intercessors themselves did not treat their studies as such. He would tell the Intercessors, "Don't focus upon others with the intent to compete; that road leads to struggle and defeat." Obadiah also taught them not to be envious of anyone in any way, for envy was a powerful tool of the devil, and when a person allowed the seeds of envy to take root in their heart, if they didn't ask Jesus for help, their envy could consume them. Obadiah wanted the Intercessors to see each other as members of a powerful ministry, or even better, soldiers in God's army of Light.

Each student moved at his own pace and enjoyed the process of learning more about God's Word. For not only were they becoming empowered by the scriptures they learned, but they were also drawing closer in their relationship with the Lord as well.

The group decided to ride to the Prayer Sanctum on the horses, taking with them their Compendium's and lanterns to light their way through the cleft in the rock where the horses could not go. Every time they reached the entrance to the cave, they got butterflies of excitement and anticipation. Brielle didn't think she would ever become accustomed to the thrilling feeling of exhilaration and adventure she felt each time she stepped into the main tunnel entrance that led to the Prayer Sanctum.

They were just sitting down at the grand Compass Table and getting their study materials out when they heard the main door to the sanctum open, its sound echoing through the iron ore walls. They turned and looked up to see Magomu enter, followed by Jace. Brielle's heart began to pound at the sight of him. He immediately looked at her and smiled.

"Look who I found?" Magomu said happily.

"Hey, Jace!" Keoni said, "I thought you were out of town?"

"I was," Jace said as he jogged down the stairs into the Study Chamber, "I just got back about an hour ago. I hope I'm not too late?" he asked, looking at Obadiah.

"You are never too late to learn about the Lord, Son," Obadiah said happily. "Welcome! I'm so glad you could join us."

Jace pulled out a red velvet high-backed chair next to Brielle and looked over at her, his beautiful, dark brown eyes melting her heart.

"Hey," he whispered as he sat down beside her, "I missed you."

Brielle was shocked by his openness and beamed, "Thanks, I missed you too," she whispered.

Then Obadiah began his lesson. He walked to the chalkboard and wrote the words:

Rejoice and Be Glad

"I want to start tonight by commending you on a job well done at your prayer group the other day. Brielle told me that your group was attacked. Although I am sorry the attack happened, it was a great test for you all; one that you passed with brilliant colors. I am so proud of how you all handled that situation. Gideon, you showed great leadership in bringing the group back together, and all of you should be proud of yourselves for joining him to take a stand for the Lord," he said, smiling at them. Then he opened his Bible and read to them.

"Jesus tells us in Matthew 10:22, *'All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved'.* Jesus knew that these kinds of things would come for all those who believe in Him, but He encourages you to stand firm--and stand firm you did. You all did, and He is proud of you for it," he said.

"Turn with me to Matthew, Chapter 5. Jesus is teaching what are known as 'The Beatitudes', which is a word that means: *supreme happiness*. These are the lessons Jesus taught us all to find that supreme happiness in life. Matthew 5:11-12 says, '*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*.*'*

"So do not worry when these things come along. Rejoice that these people see Christ in you. Even if they don't like it or believe in Him, be *glad*. Always stand strong and let the world see that you are not ashamed of Him.

"I would like you to do something with me. Close your eyes and relax your mind," he waited as the Intercessors did as he instructed. "Alright, I want you to picture Jesus before you. Just take a few deep breaths and try to visualize Jesus in your mind," he paused for a moment, lowering his voice to just above a whisper. "Now… picture Him being taken away. He is arrested and beaten severely. Can you see those who are persecuting Him? How they spit on Him, strike Him, and pull the beard from His face?

"They took Him before Pilot, who could find no fault in Him, and ordered Him to be scourged to satisfy those who condemned Him. Can you see them taking Him to the whipping post? Savagely whipping Him, each strike tearing and ripping His flesh from His body; His blood running out of his wounds and down onto the ground," he paused again to give them time to visualize his words.

"Do you see the soldiers take Him and mock Him, placing a crown of thorns deep into His scalp, cutting and puncturing his head, causing His blood again to freely flow? Can you see Him? Can you hear them condemning an innocent Man

to death? In the days earlier, when He came to Jerusalem, the people praised Him, crying out, 'Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!' Now, He is being led out of Jerusalem to the Hill of Golgatha, the place of the Skull, also called Calvary… where He will be crucified on the cross," he paused again, this time from his own emotions building inside his heart.

Obadiah took a deep breath.

"Now see Him, His body weak, skin torn from his body, bleeding, and hardly recognizable as a man at all from the torturous beatings He has endured. Do you see Him struggle to walk up a hill with His cross, a cross that He is stretched out upon and nailed to? First one hand, then the other, then a seven-inch spike through both of His feet, anchoring Him to the cross with excruciating pain that you and I can't even begin to imagine. Can you see Him? Can you see His bloody, broken body and torn flesh writhing in pain as He hangs there on the cross of Calvary?" he sighed and dried the tears from his eyes.

"Now I want you to see Him look at you. Everyone else on earth is gone, and it is just you and Jesus. Can you see Him as He hangs there? He sees you. He saw you before you were ever born. He saw you while He was still living in the glories of heaven, and He knew that you needed Him. He saw you in the Garden of Gethsemane as He prayed alone. When He saw you and me and everyone else in need of salvation, which is everyone, He made the choice to come to earth and go through everything He did, all the suffering, all the pain, all the shame… just for you. If you were the only person alive on this planet, Jesus still would have come willingly and endured all that He did, just-- for -- *you*. He loves you that much, more than you will ever understand. You can believe it. You can depend on it because God's Word says it is so, and God's Word is always true, *always*.

"Jesus *loves* you, adores you, you are most precious in His eyes, and He died for *you*," he paused again, allowing the students to take in this powerful lesson of love.

"Alright… slowly open your eyes," Obadiah waited for the Intercessors to do as he asked them. Each of them had tears streaming down their faces. Obadiah leaned his hands down on the massive table and looked at them closely.

"Can you see why it is so easy for us to celebrate, to rejoice, and endure such simple persecutions on His behalf? Why is it so easy to not be ashamed of Him and His Word, and to take a stand whenever and wherever we can for His Name's sake? It is our responsibility, for as long as we live, to take this message of love to every single man, woman, and child we possibly can in this world so that they, too, may know of His love and salvation. We do it because we love Him and we love Him… because He first loved us," he walked over to the chalkboard and wrote down a verse of scripture. It read, *'All you who put your hope in the Lord, be strong and brave.' Psalm 31:24*

"You will want to memorize this verse. There will be challenges, obstacles,

and battles in your life that you will have to face. But take comfort that God is there for you and has given you all the power you need through His Son Jesus Christ and His written Word to conquer the attacks of your enemy and claim the victory," then he opened his Bible.

"Just remember what it says in Matthew chapter 5: '***Rejoice and be glad,*** *because great is your reward in heaven.'* Rejoice and be glad," he repeated, "When you are insulted or persecuted because of Him… *rejoice and be glad*," he paused to take off his reading glasses and look at them.

"The devil doesn't care about those he already has. He goes after those he doesn't have. But even more than that, he wants most desperately to *destroy* those who are working hard to build the Kingdom of God. For the rest of your days, you will find yourself battling the enemy, satan. This situation that you are in right now with those kids at school and all, which God is revealing to you about the drugs in our town, is a battle. But should you fear that it won't go well? No," he said confidently holding the Bible up in his hand, "Because we already know that you have the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. And so it should be with every battle that comes across your path in the future. Do *not* fear; do *not* worry, but *trust* in God."

The Intercessors took all of this to heart, allowing the message of the Lord to fill them completely.

"What I would like to do now is spend a little time with you personally tonight. I know that you all have situations with friends at school that you need help with. Jace, I would like to start with you and then Keoni, I will talk with you next, then Gideon and Brielle," he said.

Keoni got up and went into the Pools of Peace chamber to spend some time praying, meditating, and reflecting on the lesson she just received. Brielle and Gideon headed for the library to do more study on their lessons of learning about the Bible. Obadiah came and sat down next to Jace with his Bible in his hands.

"I'm so glad you made it tonight, Son. I want to tell you how proud I am of you and all that you have been doing in your walk with the Lord. Each time I see you, you seem to be glowing in happiness, and that comes from having a close relationship with God," he said.

Jace smiled shyly, not used to having such personal praise given to him. "Thank you, Sir."

"There is something that I have been feeling led to talk to you about regarding your Spiritual Gift of healing," Obadiah began, opening his Bible to find the scriptures he wanted to give Jace.

"I know that when you first received that information, you were thrilled, as you have a great desire to become a doctor someday. That is a desire placed in you from the Lord. He created you with that longing and talent to help others. It is something that He designed you to do. However, He has spoken it into my

heart to let you know that being a doctor is not the only way to utilize your Spiritual Gift. As an Intercessor, you are called to pray for others in need. There is no greater tool than prayer for any circumstance. So, when you pray for someone for healing, it is most important that you learn how to pray as Jesus commanded us to," he said, putting his reading glasses back on.

"It says here in the book of Mark that Jesus teaches us *to lay hands on people when we pray,"* he said, thumbing through the pages to find the verse. "Ah, yes, here it is starting on Mark 16:15, *and Jesus said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all,"* he said looking for the part he wanted Jace to hear the most, "Yes, and this is the verse I wanted to share with you, verse 18… *'They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.'"*

Jace looked at Obadiah with a bit of confusion. "I get most of that verse," he said, "but what does Jesus mean they will pick up snakes and drink deadly poisons?" he asked.

"Jesus is telling His disciples in these verses that they will be greatly favored and live under the protection and power of God. However, in Acts 28:3-6, Paul literally was attacked by a viper as he was building a fire, and he shook the snake off his hand into the fire. He suffered no consequences from its venom," Obadiah replied.

"Throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New, you will find instances where people prayed for one another, and they would lay their hands on them. But when we do this, according to the scripture John 14:13, 14 where Jesus said, *'Whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.'* What I want to teach you is that your gift is also in praying for people for healing. When you pray for someone to be healed of an ailment, affliction, injury, or disease, you should lay hands on them and ask it to be done in the Name of Jesus.

"We must, as always, do what the scriptures command us to do because there is always a reason for everything that God says and does. So, you will need to spend time with the Lord asking Him to develop this Spiritual Gift of healing so that you allow Him to use you properly. Not just in your medical knowledge and treatment, but also in prayer. When you do, you need to follow His instructions found here in His Word. Does this all make sense to you?" Obadiah asked.

Jace nodded.

Obadiah continued, "Next, I have a list here of several 'healing' scriptures in the Bible. These are not the scriptures that tell of all the healings Jesus did, you would have to memorize a good portion of the New Testament to keep up with

those," he chuckled, "—not that it wouldn't be wonderful to do that! But these are the ones that you can use when you are praying. When you offer up a prayer to the Lord, you can always be assured He *always* hears you. When you speak to Him, His own Words that He has declared, it is pleasing to Him. He loves all His children and pays close attention to those who truly seek Him by having a close relationship with Him and in knowing His written Word," then he turned in his Bible again to look up another verse.

"I like to believe the reason why Jesus tells us to lay hands on others is because we are acting as His hands extended. When we allow ourselves to be used by the Holy Spirit, we become an open vessel for Him to move through. Like a garden hose. The hose is something separate from the water, but when the water flows through the hose, it can be spread around to many places in the garden, bringing the proper nourishment and refreshment the garden needs. You are a vessel of the Lord. When you place your hands on someone to pray for them, the power of Jesus flows through you and out to that person. Of course, Jesus doesn't *need* your hands to accomplish something. He can do anything He wants to, and you must always remember it is *never* you who does the healing. It is only the power of God, and what a beautiful way to be used on this earth for the Lord!" he beamed.

Jace laughed, "I never thought about being a garden hose before. But that is a great way for me to understand how the Holy Spirit can flow through me and out to others."

Obadiah smiled. "Good! Now, before we talk more, I would like to give you a very important verse that every person with the Spiritual Gift of healing should believe, memorize, and use in prayer. May I?" he asked, as he took Jace's Compendium in his hand and wrote down Isaiah 53:5. Then he placed a piece of paper in the book, which had a list of healing scriptures that Jace could study.

When Obadiah finished, he spent some time talking to Jace about the situation with Rateesh. Obadiah listened to Jace's feelings on the matter. He encouraged him that what he was doing with praying for Rateesh, being there for him as a friend, and helping him get home from school so that he wasn't alone, were wonderful attributes of Jace's good character and desire to minister to his friend.

"Have you asked Rateesh if he will talk to Hadley?" Obadiah asked.

"Yes, but he is still too scared. We're all trying to convince him to do that, but… I don't know if he will," Jace replied.

Obadiah shook his head in understanding. "What about his father? Has he talked to him yet?"

"Not that I know of, he seems to be too afraid of his father, too. He said that anytime he has tried to talk to his father about Brian in the past, he won't listen," Jace answered.

"Poor kid, he's in a tough place. I wish there was more I could do to help

him," Obadiah said, standing up, "but the *best* thing we can do for him is to pray. God can show me what to do to help him," he said, patting Jace on the shoulder. "I'm very proud of you, Son, you're doing a wonderful work for the Lord."

After Obadiah's talk, Jace felt a tremendous sense of pride. Not in an arrogant or boastful manner, but one that helped him feel confident and good about himself in his heart. It inspired Jace to press on with ministering to Rateesh. Obadiah gave him the encouragement and the affirmation that he needed to know he was doing well.

Obadiah could not fully appreciate the positive impact his words had on Jace. Both Obadiah and Genevieve meant so much to him. He had a strong respect for them and had grown to love them both dearly. He found in Brielle's family the relationships that he longed to have. They made him feel like he was part of their family. Something he had wished for and wanted for a long time.

Obadiah walked into the Pools of Peace. Keoni had finished her time of prayer and was sitting quietly in the beautiful cavern meditating on the goodness of the Lord. She enjoyed listening to the crystal sounds of dripping water, like glass chimes, as it fell delicately into the shimmering, glowing pools below.

"Hello, my dear," Obadiah said as he walked in and sat next to her, "is it alright if we spend a few moments talking?"

"Of course," Keoni smiled warmly at him. She loved Obadiah dearly. He had always shown her nothing but love, support, and care after her father died.

"I wanted to give you some scriptures that might help you with your friend, Terri," he began, opening his Bible.

"The issue of homosexuality is nothing new. It is something that has been on earth since the Bible days," he said, "It is a very serious matter and one that should be handled with love and patience- both being Fruits of the Spirit, and great compassion, always compassion."

Keoni nodded.

"I don't know what the Lord is leading you to say to your friend, but I can tell you this. No matter what Terri may say to you in defense of his choices, try not to let his words hurt you.

Remember, your battle is not with Terri, it is with the spirit of homosexuality. Please keep Ephesians 6:12 in the front of your mind, '*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'*

*"*When someone speaks the truth of the Bible to another who is not living a life according to the scriptures, it can usually spark defenses to rise. These defenses are not about you personally; they are with the scriptures you are speaking, which hold people accountable. People don't want to hear what the Bible says about the way they live, especially if they are happy with the way they are living. They don't want to be told they are doing something against God's

Word because they don't always want to change. This is why Jesus and His Heavenly Father have always been controversial subjects. Try to be patient with Terri. Think of how Jesus sees him and how Jesus would speak to him. Terri is a child of God, and although God does not love all our choices, He still loves his children and He loves Terri," Obadiah said.

"I think what I need help with the most is knowing what to say to him when he tells me that God made him gay. It just doesn't make sense to me. Why would God knowingly and purposely create a person who would desire to live a lifestyle which would go against His Will and His own Word?" Keoni asked.

Obadiah nodded. "That is an excellent question. As you said, that would go against God's Word, and God's Word is *always* true, *always*. God does *not* contradict Himself, no matter what people may say. So, going against His Word is something God cannot do because that would be going against Himself, and God *cannot* go against Himself—not ever.

"We do know, according to the scriptures, God is always working for our good. I have prayed for wisdom concerning this matter for years, and while I know I don't have all the answers, I do know this: this world is *not* our home. Nor is it the home of God our heavenly Father, or His Son Jesus Christ, for their Kingdom is in heaven. Although God created the earth and everything in it, satan and his demons dwell here and are at work daily to try and destroy this world and all the souls who live in it. That is their only mission and always has been. They *hate* us all and want to *destroy* us all.

"From the moment Lucifer was cast down from heaven to earth, as it is written in the book of Revelation 12:9, *'And the great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil and satan, deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.'* Ever since then, he has been working his evil acts of destruction upon all those who live here--constantly. The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 5:8 *'Be sober, be watchful, the devil your adversary prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*.'

"Ancient Jewish wisdom teaches us that before our souls were born upon this earth, we stood before God and He assigned us a mission for this world. With that mission, God has blessed every person with special talents and skills so that we can fulfill the mission He has for us to bring Him glory.

"It is my thought that once a baby is conceived and is living here on earth, the baby is no longer in the divine protection of the glories of heaven-- which is our true home, our destiny. God is always with us and has His angels for children; Jesus tells us that in the book of Matthew. Having said that, once the baby's soul is placed inside a woman's body here on earth, satan will try in every way possible to attack that life as often as possible so that God's will and mission for its life cannot be accomplished.

"For example, I don't believe that God intentionally creates people to be

alcoholics, ultimately someone who will self-destruct under the manipulation of alcohol. Yet, we know there has been discovered an alcoholic gene which can be passed down from parent to child. Then what would be the explanation for that? Is that a curse? Many curses are spoken of in the Bible being passed down from father to child from generation to generation; curses that they brought upon themselves because of their sins and their disobedience to God. Or could it be that the enemy just wants to injure and hurt the life of that child so much, he attacks it through its gene pool?

"Could this be what happens to a child where homosexuality is concerned? Does the enemy want to attack the child to pull it away from God, and use this method of creating confusion within it? Again, I don't have all the answers, only God knows for sure, but there is one thing I do know for sure. God *loves* us, and He creates us with *love*. Genesis 1:27 tells us, *"God created man in His own image."* He does *not* create us to be the very beings His Word warns us not to be. Sadly, the road of disobedience is a path people choose on their own. That is not the work of our loving, compassionate God; that is the word of man.

"God knows we are human, will sin and make choices that go against His will, this is why He sent us His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross so that we could receive forgiveness for our sins, but I do not believe He purposely creates us to go against Him and His commands. That's cruel, and our God is not a cruel god; He is a *good* God, a wonderful God, and loves us far too much to do that. The good thing is that whenever we have a question, we can always go to His Word to find His answer to it. That is where I want to direct you for all your questions in life. It is where I want to direct you now for the answers you are seeking to what God's will is on homosexuality.

"As you know, in the world we live in today, the gay lifestyle is embraced by many all over the globe. If anyone speaks out and says the gay lifestyle goes against the Will and Word of God, they are called 'homo-phobic', accused of using "hate speech", can be 'cancelled', sued in court… or worse.

"They have dedicated the entire month of June as the month to celebrate gay pride, yet, what they may not understand is the Bible warns us in Proverbs 16:18, *'Pride goes before destruction and a proud spirit before a fall."*

"Yes, I remember reading that verse," Keoni said softly, "that's why I keep trying to minister to Terri. He and I have been good friends for many years. We met in elementary school. He was such a compassionate friend to me after my father died, and we were always close. I love and care about him. I don't want him to fall into any kind of destruction or have a fall."

"I know exactly what you mean. You know, I have a cousin who lives a gay lifestyle," Obadiah said.

"You do?" Keoni asked.

"I do. He's a little bit older than me. We grew up in the same church, learned the same scriptures, sang the same hymns, and were raised in

households with similar rules. He was very good to me when we were younger," Obadiah said, "but he said he just couldn't live the life of a straight man."

"Are you still in contact with him?" Keoni asked.

"Certainly, I love him. He knows I love him, and he loves me too. Just because a person makes choices that do not coincide with God's Word doesn't mean that they don't deserve love. Please understand, I am not teaching you the *acceptance* of sin. If God's Word says we should not do something, we should live every day trying our very best to fulfill His commands to obey Him. What I am teaching you is to love people in spite of their sin, just as Jesus does, just as *you* want to be, because we all make our disobedient choices and sin. Romans 3:10 says *'As it is written, 'There is none righteous, no not one,'"* he explained.

"But that's just it, Terri doesn't think he is doing anything wrong. People who are gay and part of the LGBTQ community don't believe there is anything wrong with their lifestyle. They say, 'love is love' and if anyone says how they are living is sinning against God and going against His will… well-- look out. They are right, God's Word is wrong, and anybody who agrees with God's Word is wrong—actually… anyone who agrees with God's Word or stands up for God's Word is not just wrong, they are the *enemy*. We Christians are now the wicked ones of the world. When we speak God's Word, it's like you said, we are accused of hate speech. We are the evil and wicked ones because we believe what God says is *truth* instead of believing what the world believes."

Obadiah sighed, "Yes. We are in this world, but we are not of this world. The Bible warns us that this will happen—and it has happened before in ancient Israel. Isaiah 5:20 tells us, *'They say that what is right is wrong and what is wrong is right; that black is white and white is black; bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter.'* The Bible doesn't call satan the great deceiver for nothing, and this is one of his greatest deceptions."

Keoni nodded, "So, you and your cousin, how do you keep a good relationship when you disagree on the matter?"

"Pastor Diffie always says we should learn to 'agree to disagree agreeably'," Obadiah smiled. "My cousin knows my priority and loyalty are with God first-- *always*. I believe and stand upon the Word of God, nothing added, nothing taken away, and nothing will ever change that. He knows the scriptures and understands that God gives us free will to choose Him, or not. Now, it is just between him and God. Just like with Terri. You can take the message of God's Word to him gently and with love, but whether or not he chooses to receive it, ask Jesus into His heart, and live according to the scriptures, well, that is not your responsibility; it is his. I think that is a problem many Christians struggle with these days."

"What?" Keoni asked.

"For whatever reason, Christians seem to think that if they present the Gospel to someone and the person doesn't receive it, then they can't be

connected to that person anymore. I guess it would depend upon the circumstances, but for me, if they didn't receive Jesus right away, that would be the very reason why I would *want* to keep my connection with them, you know what I mean? So, I could keep pouring the love of Jesus into them every chance I got!" Obadiah said happily.

Keoni sat quietly for a moment, thinking about all that Obadiah had shared with her, and smiled at him. She had always known he was a very special man with an unusual heart and love for people, but hearing him talk in this moment proved it even more.

"That is a really interesting idea you have about how the enemy attacks a person early on," Keoni said.

"Satan attacks us *all*; no person is exempt from his attempts. Remember, he was once named Lucifer and was the grandest angel in all of heaven; he knows the glory and the power of God. He knows that God has a plan for every single child that is born, and that God loves those children dearly. But satan, remember he *hates* us-- all of us and wants to destroy us all because there is also one more thing he knows… God's Word… and at the end of all things, he knows he loses, and he wants to take as many souls with him as he possibly can.

"God is who we trust, and He has given us His scriptures to guide us and instruct us. We must study His Word as much as possible so He can reveal His answers and His Will to us through it. What I told you earlier is only a human theory, and our human minds don't work like the Lord's. God tells us in Isaiah 55:8-9, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts your thoughts."* What I do know is we *all* sin. We all make mistakes, and as I've said before, according to the scriptures, *all* sins are covered by the blood of Jesus Christ. Because a person is living a gay lifestyle doesn't make him a person unworthy of the grace of God. On the contrary, the grace of Jesus Christ is for *all* those who reach out to claim it! God sees us as irreplaceable treasures, which is why He put the plan of salvation through Jesus Christ into place! The sins of a gay person are covered with the same blood as my sins and your sins. There isn't some special process for salvation to take place or forgiveness to be given just because they are gay.

"This is the exact reason why I keep teaching you kids over and over again not to be judgmental of others. We don't get the right to judge others for their sins because we sin ourselves. Only Jesus earned the right to judge souls because only Jesus suffered, bled, and died on the cross for us at Calvary.

"One thing you can know for certain and keep faith in is that God *loves* us. He desires to have a close relationship with His children and know they are following His commands and striving to live according to *His Word*. Again, while I don't have all the answers to life's questions, *God does*, so keep searching His Word and He will reveal His answers to you.

"God loves Terri and He wants to have a relationship with him. I believe that God chose you to share His Word with him. *That* is your job, that and to love Terri. It is not up to Christians to judge whether or not a person is going to make it to heaven. That is *not* our job. Like I taught today, our purpose is to tell others of the Gospel, the good news, love message of Jesus Christ! We must let them know how much He loves them to at least give them that chance to know Him, and then we must *love* them, whether they accept Him or not. Do you understand?" Obadiah asked.

"I understand, and that is exactly what I will do. I would like to know more scriptures of the Bible that teach what God says about a gay lifestyle. It would help me a lot," she said.

"I have them written down here for you, but I want you to take the time to research them as well. I think it is important that you read what God has to say about it straight from His Word yourself. I feel that when people read from the Word of God directly, it holds much more power. Some of the verses are about how God feels about homosexuality-- and He is very clear and direct about it. Some of the verses are about how it is God's will for men and women to marry one another," he said as he handed her a list of written scriptures, "And some of the verses are about pride. There are a few other important verses which may be helpful for you in there too," he said with his charming smile.

Keoni looked at the list and read it aloud.

"Genesis 1:27-28 *'So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.'*

Genesis 2:24 *'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.'*

Leviticus 18:22 *'Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.'*

Leviticus 20:13 *'If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.'*

Matthew 19:4-5 *'"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?"'*

1 Corinthians 6:9 *'Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men*.'

1 Timothy 1:9-11 *'We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.'*

2 Timothy 2:19 *'Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."'*

1 Corinthians 6:18 '*Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.'*

Galatians 5:19-21 '*Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God.'*

Proverbs 11:2 *'When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.'*

Proverbs 29:23 *'One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.'*

Proverbs 16:18 *'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.'*

Proverbs 16:5 *'Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not go unpunished.'*

James 4:6 'But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."'

1 John 2:16 *'For all that is in the world-the desire of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.'*

Matthew 7:1 *'Judge not lest ye be judged.'*

Mark 12:30-31 *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*

"Wow," Keoni said as she finished reading the list. "I didn't know there were this many."

"There are more than this in the Bible; these are just some I thought would

be helpful to you. Remember, if Terri or anyone else becomes angry or defensive, try not to take it personally. Pray that God helps you to show them love and patience. I will pray for that too. It is the Word of God they don't want to hear. They don't want to be told that the way they are living goes against God's will, as it is written in God's Word. They don't want to hear God's truth. They only want to hear their truth. But there is only one truth, and that is Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us in John 14:6, *'I am the way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father but by me.'* This is why Jesus was despised and rejected, He called wrong, wrong and brought accountability to people for their sins and how they were living—and that's not limited to just LGBTQ people but for all of us. But! He also gave His life and shed His blood so we could be forgiven of our sins and be made *righteous* in the eyes of God!

"One verse in particular that you should memorize for all situations is John 17:17, *'Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth,'"* he said.

"I will," Keoni said, "I have another question for you. I saw a television program the other night, and they were talking about the power of prayer and people who were once gay who were giving their hearts to Jesus, and after they came to Jesus, they no longer wanted to live as a gay person lives. It was interesting, but there was another part of the show that confused me. There were some other people on the show saying that they were gay Christians, and they all had asked Jesus into their hearts. They said they knew that Jesus loved them, they had their own church, and believed they were going to make it to heaven just as they were, living gay lifestyles.

"I know Jesus loves them, and I don't question that they asked Jesus into their hearts, and they love Him. I guess… especially after reading these verses and how very clear God states things on the matter, I don't understand why people believe they can live part of what the Bible says but not all of it and still receive all the rewards of heaven," she said.

"That is an excellent question," Obadiah replied, "To begin, we cannot judge anyone's soul, which means saying whether or not they love Jesus and can enter into heaven—only Jesus knows a person's heart and only Jesus earned the right to sit upon the Mercy Seat and hold the power of judgment," he said standing up to stretch his legs for a moment and take out his Bible, "I am reminded of a very powerful teaching I remember hearing about how there are people in the world who do not understand what it means to call Jesus their Lord *and* their Savior."

"Are they different?" Keoni asked.

"Oh, yes. You see, when a person comes to give their heart to Jesus Christ, they are confessing they believe He is the Son of God, they are asking Him to forgive them for their sins, and they make Him the *Savior* of their life. They believe that Jesus Christ has saved them from the punishment of an eternity in hell, and through Him, they receive the reward of eternal life with Him in heaven. Jesus is their *Savior*.

"We also know there are people who like to pick and choose which verses of the Bible they believe. It is easier for them to do that because there is less accountability that way. They can just choose the verses they want to apply to themselves and disregard the others. The reason they do this is so they can keep living the way they want instead of the way God commands them to… The problem is, it doesn't work that way with God. You must accept Him and obey His Word, not in part but in whole.

"Thomas Jefferson himself did this. He created his own Bible by cutting out the verses he did not like and only studying and following those that he did. He removed all verses about miracles and only kept the law. People can still buy a copy of his version of the Bible today - not that you would want to," he said quickly. "Thomas Jefferson was the writer of our Declaration of Independence. He was our third President and has been highly regarded in history through the years for certain things. Yet, he took the liberty of rewriting God's Holy Word, removing anything dealing with the supernatural miracles of God in the Old Testament and the miracles of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, along with many things he thought were misinterpretations of the four authors of the Gospels. I will never understand the arrogance of a human mind that believes they are able to take the Word of our Creator, the Creator of all the universe and everything in it, and 'improve' upon it," he said, shaking his head.

"There are many scriptures that teach about not adding to or taking away from God's Word, but I am only going to teach you a few right now, the first being found in Revelation 22:18-19 *"And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."* That's pretty clear, don't you think?" he asked.

Keoni smiled and nodded.

"Then there are those who might say, but wait, if the Word of God was written by the hands of men, why couldn't it be changed by the hands of men? That would lead us to look at
2 Timothy 3:16, where it is written, *'All scripture is **God breathed** and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.'* This verse confirms that while very specific men were chosen by God to write His Word down so that it could be passed from year to year, century to century, still, every Word was breathed into their spirit by God Himself. In other words, the men wrote nothing on their own; God was in control of everything these men wrote at all times.

"Jesus Himself confirmed the written Word was Holy and of God because during His life whenever He would quote the word He always began by saying, *'It is written,'* but He also said *'For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth shall pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled*.' Which is to say that not even He, the Son of God, would make any

changes to even the smallest detail of the Word of God.

"Then there are two more very important verses we should look at, starting with
John 1:1: *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.'* This verse right here is enough to teach us mere mortals that we should never *ever* think about adding to, taking away from, or altering God's Word in any way, because it proves that the Word of God is not just words on paper, it is an *extension* of God. The Word of God *is* God—and not just part of it, *all* of it.

"The last verses I wanted to share with you are Deuteronomy 4:2 '*You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of*
the LORD your God that I command you.'

"As for me, I think God makes it very clear how He feels about anyone adding to or taking away from His Word and what the consequences will be if they do," Obadiah paused.

Keoni, who was busy taking notes on all that Obadiah was teaching her, nodded, "It sounds pretty clear to me, too."

"Now that you understand the importance of not adding to or taking away from God's Word, it is important to understand that when a person asks Jesus into their heart, it is an act of surrender. They are surrendering their life and heart to Jesus so that He can wash them clean of their sins, their past, and their old life, and give them a new heart and a new life.

"Once they receive that new life, Jesus tells us that we are to follow Him, which means we form a relationship with Him through prayer, worship, and obedience, and that obedience comes through studying His Word. By being obedient to Him, following Him, knowing His Word, surrendering to His will, and allowing Him to guide and direct us, we choose to make Him the *Lord* of our lives.

"If we truly make Jesus the Lord of our life, then we want with all our heart to please Him, which would mean obeying God's Word. We can't live with one foot on a path following Jesus and then have another foot walking on the path of the sins of the world. That's not obedience.

"We cannot pick and choose to follow some of God's Word and then omit other parts because they don't fit into our lifestyle, or we don't agree with them. That's not obedience. If we want to claim Jesus as our *Lord*, then we must obey Him, submit our lives to Him, and follow His commands, not in part, but in whole. When we disobey God, we are not able to receive the fullness of God. Our disobedience keeps us from experiencing all God has for us, all His wonders, His mysteries, and the blessings that He wants to give us.

"You see," Obadiah continued, "if people make the choice to not follow *all* of God's Word, that is something that lies between them and God. The problem

is that if a homosexual person asks Jesus into their heart and then continues to live in a lifestyle that deliberately goes against the scriptures… again, it is not for me to judge their soul; it just sounds like a person who has not made Him the Lord of their life.

"What I do know is, according to the scriptures, that is not how the plan of salvation works. God's plan of salvation was to send His Son to build a bridge back to His children to be reconciled to Him. As I have taught you before, when people ask Jesus into their hearts to forgive them and cleanse them of their sins, Jesus comes to them *immediately* and does just that. This is why it is called being 'saved' because Jesus literally saves us from our sins. Acts 16:31 tells us, *'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!'*

"Knowing that, if a person deliberately keeps living within that same sin they asked Jesus to forgive them from, the sin which is *defined* as sin by the Word of God, with full knowledge of what they are doing, that is complete disobedience to God. But what I can't understand is why they would *want to*? The Bible tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17, *"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a* ***new creature****; the old things passed away; behold,* ***new things*** *have come!"*

*"*Only Jesus can change a heart, and it is such a powerful, beautiful, supernatural experience! I can't imagine why anyone would want to disobey Him! To keep living the same life as before they came to Jesus doesn't make any sense. They need to fully surrender their heart to Jesus and make Him their *Lord* and Savior because when they do, He *will* give them a brand-new, amazing life! A wonderful, beautiful, rich, miraculous life full of the irreplaceable blessings of God!

"Most people who strive to follow the teachings of Christ wake up each day and make efforts to be obedient to God's Word and rid themselves of their old habits, ways of life, and sinful nature. Are people going to make mistakes and fall short of the grace of God? Yes, it happens. I know I have-- and do. The difference is that I wake up each day striving to do better to *please God*. I strive *to be like Jesus* and live according to His Word and instruction, and not stay in the same life and make the same choices as I did before He saved me.

"I do not ever want to live without the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of Jesus. I need Him more every day, and I want to please Him and obey Him every single day. But… I can only speak for my life and my heart, not anyone else's.

"These people who say they are saved by Jesus and are still actively living a gay lifestyle, none of that is up to us. The best we can do is pray for them, direct them to the truth of God's Word, and hope they will receive it.

"It is important to remember that how a person chooses to serve the Lord and follow His Word is not something that anyone else can control. This is why I keep telling you to love your friend, Terri. Keep showing him the love of Jesus, no matter what he chooses. After all, his choice is only going to affect *his* eternity, not anyone else's. However, anyone who abuses or mistreats someone who is

gay is going to have to stand before the Lord and be held accountable for their actions. So, make the Lord proud. Love all your friends, whether they come to know Jesus or not. You never know, someday they may change their mind about Him. If you can keep the door to your heart open for them and keep showing them the love of Jesus, who knows? You could be the very one to lead them to Him," Obadiah explained.

"That's such a good way to look at it," Keoni agreed, "I mean, Jesus showed so much love and compassion to so many multitudes of people everywhere he went. Yes, He stood up for His Father's house, and He taught the truth of God's Word, but He didn't go around getting in people's faces forcing them to believe in Him-- and whether they did or not, He still loved them."

"Yes, that's true. Some people come to Jesus immediately, exchanging their old life for a new one at once. Some come to Him slowly, testing the waters, so to speak. There are the Atheists who don't believe God exists, and there are those who may not be Atheists but just won't ever choose to know Jesus. Then there are those of different faiths, and I'm sure you know many people who believe differently from you.

"Let me tell you a great example about a friend I have that I met years ago while building a bridge in China. He is a devout Buddhist. He does not believe in God the Father, His Son Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, and he does not believe in the Bible. Does that mean that we cannot be friends? Of course not, we have a good relationship with one another. Are we going to agree on our spiritual beliefs—not at this point and time," he smiled. "But, once again, I go back to Pastor Diffie's words of wisdom, 'agree to disagree, agreeably,' and so we do.

"I have always tried to love my friend as Jesus would love, and not *force* my beliefs or teachings on him. Jesus never did that… no, that is not how He worked and not how He should be represented. I have shared with my friend the Gospel of Jesus, and though he has not received Jesus yet, I tried to do as Jesus did and leave that door open to him. And do you know what? There were two times when he had terrible moments of crisis, one for himself and one for his child… and he called me for *prayer,"* he said with a sparkle in his eye.

"Really?" Keoni asked in amazement.

"Yes, he did, two times. Of course, I prayed and prayed for his circumstances. I believe God answered my prayer and helped him and his child. I don't think he acknowledged it was God, and he has not changed his stance on his faith. But that doesn't mean I choose to close the door for him to come to me because he believes differently than I.

"All we can do is what Jesus told us: teach others about His message of love and ask if they would like to receive Him. If they don't, we are not to judge them or treat them differently. We should always look to His example of love for how to treat others. Mark 12:31 says, *'Love thy neighbor as thyself.'* That verse doesn't just apply to those who live next door to you. It means anyone close to

you in the moment. Wherever you are, wherever you go, the people all around you are your neighbors, and you need to love them as you would yourself, at least try to anyway.

"Remember, I'm not talking about acceptance of anything that goes against God's Word. We must hold strong to these truths that God has given us and apply them to our lives while ministering to others, whether they believe as we do or not, all with the love of God.

"Most importantly, we must pray and ask God for the Holy Spirit to direct us and speak through us, just as Jesus did. And when we are called the enemy in this world or persecuted because we stand up for the truth of God's Word—not in part but in whole, just think about how you represent Jesus Christ and how He prayed for those who were crucifying Him, *'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'*," he paused.

"Yeah," Keoni said softly, "When you think about it like that, it's incredibly powerful."

"*Everything* in God's Word is powerful, sweetheart. That is why I have dedicated my life to teaching kids all that I can about it. I hope this is helpful to you. I will be praying for Terri and for your time with him. I'm proud of you for caring so much about this young man, and I believe that God is using you to minister to him," he said, hugging her, then he left her to have some time to meditate upon the scriptures and pray in the Pools of Peace.

As Brielle finished her studies in the library, she saw that Obadiah had moved on to talk with Gideon. Feeling hungry, she decided to go to the kitchen cavern to find something to eat. She wanted to ask if Jace or Keoni would join her, but they were hard at their studies of scripture, and she didn't want to disturb them.

Once in the kitchen, she found many kinds of food that Obadiah had stored for moments such as these. She grabbed a few things along with a bottle of water and started toward the Study Chamber to resume her work.

As she came out of the kitchen, she looked to her left and remembered seeing her grandfather return from that direction a few days before; he had tears in his eyes, and she wondered what would make him so sad.

Brielle listened closely to hear the echo of her grandfather's voice as he spoke to Gideon. After a moment, she heard his laugh, something that was to be expected, after all, he was talking with Gideon. She knew he was busy teaching, so she turned and slowly began to walk down the dimly lit passageway.

The light sconces on the walls lit her path. Yet, their glow seemed to diminish as she went further into the tunnel. She passed a few small empty caverns, believing there had to be something down this path. She felt led to walk on as if she was being drawn down the tunnel by an unseen force.

Brielle walked further and came to an opening in the wall. The cave was

dark, and she did not have her lantern to assist her. Quickly, she pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and, using the flashlight app from her phone screen, she slowly entered the cave. Once she was certain she was on level ground, she placed her hand on the wall to guide her. Slowly, she rotated the phone in an arc motion to help her see what was hidden in the cavern.

Carefully, she moved to the wall to her right. There, along the wall, was a long wooden table. Sitting on top of the table was a strange-looking brass fixture. It resembled a thick yardstick. Along this brass stick, every few inches, were round brass bell-shaped fixtures. Each bell held a thick black strip at the top.

Turning to her left, she found a second table along the wall. It too held a brass fixture identical to the first. After reaching its end, she turned to her left again and found yet a third table. This table, unlike the other ones, did not have a brass fixture but instead had a picture frame, followed by another and another and another.

Brielle picked up one of the framed photographs to study it. It showed a handsome African man. He looked to be young, perhaps in his early twenties. He had a beautiful smile and was holding a soccer ball under his arm. Underneath his photo was written, 'Fabrice Cyemezo, God's Precious Treasure'.

She placed the photograph back on the table carefully and then picked up the next one to examine it. This was a photograph of a small African girl who looked to be no older than eight or nine. The girl was holding a small ragdoll. The doll looked just like the one she had received on her fifth birthday. The doll had been a gift from one of her village friends in Uganda. The last time she saw her doll was the night she lost her father. Underneath the photo of the girl were the words, 'Yvonne Uwera, God's Precious Angel'.

Then she moved to another photo. This one was of an African man and woman. They were standing together, their arms wrapped affectionately around each other. The caption under their photo read, 'J. Claude & Odette Rwabukumba, God's anointed.'

Brielle's heart raced as she placed the photograph back on the table. She understood that this room was some sort of memorial. These were photographs of people who had died. She moved to the next photo. Just as she reached to pick it up, she heard a strange sound behind her, it was a quick scratching noise. She jumped with fright and turned to see the silhouette of her grandfather in the cave doorway. He was holding a lit match. He walked to one of the tables and lowered the match to the tabletop. Suddenly, a whoosh of sound echoed through the cave as the brass bell-shaped objects on the tables burst into flame.

Obadiah walked to the other table and lit that fixture as well. He then turned and walked across the floor to light a third fixture on the opposite side of the cavern. Brielle stood still, stunned at the beauty of the brass burners and how the walls in this cave sparkled and reflected the light of their glow.

"I thought that you and I would spend some time talking about how to hopefully minister to Lacy tonight," Obadiah said, "But I can see that the Lord had other plans for our time together."

"I'm sorry, Oba," Brielle said. She felt disappointed with herself for sneaking in here. She had disobeyed her grandfather by exploring other parts of the Prayer Sanctum alone, exactly what he had requested all of them *not* to do. "I just felt as if something was drawing me here," she said, almost in a whisper.

"I know," he said, giving her his charming half smile. "It's alright. We didn't want to tell you when you were younger-- you had already been through so much, but it's time you know the whole story."

"The whole story?" she whispered.

Brielle looked around the cave. Her guess had been correct. This room was much smaller than most of the caverns she had seen. Other than the three tables holding the brass fixtures, there was only one large table that held the photographs. She looked at all the photos. Behind some of them were beautiful crosses of various sizes and designs. She looked at each of the faces in the pictures. They were happy, smiling, ordinary people. There were many framed pictures on the table and even more hanging on the wall above it. Some of the people were Africans, some of them looked to be Asian, some were Latin, and then there was one photo that captivated Brielle the moment she laid eyes on it.

Seeing this beautifully framed photograph sent a shock through her. The shock seemed to pierce through her stomach like a knife. It was a photo of her mother. She picked it up quickly and read the caption beneath it, 'Elise Jacqueline O'Sullivan, Most Beloved Wife, Mother, Grandmother and Servant of God. You are and forever will be in our hearts. Brielle stared at the photo; her heart was racing, and her hands were now trembling.

"This is… grandma," she whispered.

"Yes," Obadiah replied softly, "When she was very young."

"I thought it was Mama at first," she paused.

"Looks just like your mother, doesn't she?" he asked.

"It's remarkable," Brielle said, amazed at the resemblance between her mother and grandmother.

Slowly, she turned and looked up at her grandfather, whose eyes were filling with tears.

"Oba, what happened here? How did all these people die?" she asked, almost afraid of her own question.

Obadiah lowered his eyes to the ground. "They were killed," he whispered, "These are all people that I have known throughout my years of ministry who died either by senseless acts of violence… or for the cause of Christ."

"You and Mama always said that Grandma died on the missionary field. Mama always said it was a noble death, but that was all I knew," she said.

"We could not tell you the truth of what happened to her until you were

older. You had already gone through too much with the loss of your father. No child should have to hear such things," he said softly as he walked over to pick up a picture of a small child from the table, "or experience such things…. and you experienced too much pain too soon."

Brielle stared at him silently, waiting for him to continue.

"But I know that it is important for you to know the truth. It will help you know the incredibly amazing person your grandmother was. I just ask you, please not share this with Asher, yet. He is still a bit too young for this story. We will tell him when the time is right."

Brielle nodded silently, her stomach in knots for what she was about to hear.

"I was contacted by a pastor I knew who lived just outside of Kigali, Rwanda. He asked me if I might have any time to come and help him build a new church for his village. Your grandmother couldn't wait," Obadiah chuckled at the memory of his wife, "Nothing gave her more joy than to serve the Lord by helping others, especially to build a new church. So, we left for Kigali."

Brielle's heart began to pound hard against her chest for fear of what was coming.

"We arrived and, within days, began construction on the new church. It was a very exciting and wonderful time," then he paused in deep thought. "While we were there, a group of people began one of the most violent and unthinkable acts upon innocent men, women, and children… the act of genocide. There were three tribes in Rwanda, the Tutsi, the Hutu, and the Tse. Two of them were major tribes, the Hutu and the Tutsi. These people who began the genocide belonged to the Hutu Tribe.

"The Hutu Tribe believed that there only needed to be one tribe: Hutu. So, they set out to kill everyone who wasn't," he paused again, trying to control the emotion in his voice.

Brielle's trembling had now spread throughout her entire body.

"Your grandmother and I were working with about a hundred of the villagers building the church just outside of Kigali when a group of Hutus suddenly were upon us. We had no idea what was happening as we had been so preoccupied with the church. We had not heard the news of this movement, which was quickly spreading through Rwanda and we were not aware that we were in any danger.

"I was mixing cement and wasn't paying attention at first. I just thought perhaps the trucks were carrying more workers to help us. How wrong I was. They carried large machetes and were armed with guns. They grabbed me and your grandmother and took us aside at gunpoint. They held us captive while they lined up the rest of the villagers," he stopped, leaning both hands on the table. Telling the story was draining him of all energy.

"As you know, many people who live in more primitive areas of Africa have

no means of technology or communication with the outside world. We were not aware of what was happening in other parts of Rwanda. Your grandmother and I thought perhaps they were attacking us because we were building a Christian church, as Voodoo, Santeria, and witchcraft are prominent practices in many African countries.

"We began to pray, asking for God's mighty hand of protection to be upon the villagers and for us all to be delivered from this evil. The Holy Spirit came over your grandmother in one of the most powerful ways I have ever seen. Even her appearance seemed to change; she was… radiant, bursting with the power of God." As he told this part of the story, his face changed from one of sorrow to an expression of sheer amazement and wonder, remembering all he witnessed that day.

"Elise began to speak in the language of the Holy Spirit, something she had done many times before… but not like this. The power of God was magnificently surging through her. The men who were holding her captive were terrified of her and let her go, running away from her.

"The men who held me were also afraid and dragged me away from her, separating us. They forced me to the ground, holding a machete to my neck," he said, pulling back his collar to reveal a long, thin scar that started a few inches below his left ear and came down across to his chest. When Brielle saw it, she gasped. She realized at that moment that she had never seen her grandfather in any other kind of shirt other than one with a collar. The collar hid this scar from the view of the world.

"I was so in awe of the presence of God upon her, all I could do was stare at her. I couldn't move; I couldn't breathe. I just knelt there, trying to pray, silently overwhelmed by the presence of God surrounding her," he said.

Brielle was so engrossed in his story that she could hardly breathe.

"As soon as her captors released her and ran, she stood up and began to walk toward the men who had the villagers trapped against the church walls. They were all heavily armed, brandishing machetes and guns. She raised her hands in front of her and directed them toward these evil men. Then she began to shout in a mighty voice, still speaking in the language of God which was flowing through her. I don't know what she was saying, but I remember hearing her say the name Jehovah Nissi, which means God our Protector.

"Just as she did, a mighty rushing wind came from heaven itself. It was powerful like that of a small tornado, blowing harshly around all the men. They fell and tumbled violently backward, forcefully blown away from the group of villagers; some of them landing upon one another. When the dust settled, we could see that many of those who fell died instantly as they landed on each other's machetes and were run through. Some got up and ran away, wailing as they did; the evil which lived within them was terrified of the presence of God surrounding them. Some men were injured and lay on the ground, stunned, hurt,

too scared to move. The two men who were holding me released me and ran in fear.

"The villagers began to run away, except one little girl who became separated from her mother and was so petrified she was unable to move," he began to wipe the tears that were streaming down his face. "I looked over and saw one Hutu man who was injured but was still alive. He slowly reached for a gun and pointed it at the small child… but your grandmother ran to her. No, it was as if she flew, swift and fast, like an angel. She picked up the girl and turned to run away with the child, but the man took his aim… and shot your grandmother," he said, his voice breaking with emotion.

Obadiah lowered his head again, the pain of the memory rushing over him.

Brielle looked down at the photograph of her grandmother through tear-filled eyes, trying hard to gain focus on her lovely face. Her mother had always described her death as being noble. Now she truly understood just how noble her death was. Gently, she placed the photograph back on the table and walked over to her grandfather - he took her into his arms in a loving embrace.

"There was nothing I could do to stop it. She was too far away," he whispered. "I was trying to get to her, running as fast as I could and crying out to the Lord, but I was too late," he stopped, taken over by his emotions. He squeezed Brielle tightly in his arms for a moment and sighed. Then he pulled her back, holding her by her shoulders to look down into her eyes as he spoke.

"Your grandmother gave her life to save another. She saved the life of that little girl just as your father did to save all of you. Jesus says in John 15:13 *'There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.'* The little girl that she saved lived, and so did dozens of other villagers who managed to get away, all because of what she allowed the Lord to do with her life," Obadiah whispered to her. "Although we miss her every single day, I take comfort in knowing that she was obedient to God and He used her to do something remarkable. I also have the promise of God through the life of Jesus, that we will be together again for all eternity in the glories of heaven," he said softly.

Brielle cried softly and wrapped her arms back around her grandfather, hugging him close.

"But why did she have to die? Why couldn't God have spared her life as well?" she asked.

"I don't know, sweetheart. The Bible tells us we should not question God, as His ways and methods of doing things are above our comprehension. He teaches us that in Isaiah 55:8-9, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*."

"We must learn to trust that He knows best, which leads us to Proverbs 3:5-6, '*Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths*.'

"Even though the situation we may be in is the darkest of our lives, we must keep trusting in God because even though horrible things will happen here on earth, our God is a very good, *good* God," he sighed, "It can be very hard to do. But I do know that if your grandmother had not allowed the Lord to use her in the way she did, every single person there would have been killed-- including her. But God used her to save the dozens of people who are alive, well, and still serving the Lord today," he said, swallowing hard, "…Including me."

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When Brielle heard her alarm go off the next morning for school, she didn't just want to slap the snooze button; she wanted to bury the alarm clock in the backyard.

After learning the details of her grandmother's heroic and tragic death, she spent the night in her mother's room. They talked, cried, prayed, and held each other close throughout the night. The time they spent together bonded them in a powerful way. For the first time, Genevieve could speak openly about her feelings and how she lost her mother, something that she had kept from Brielle until now. Asher would still be protected from this information until he was older and more mature.

Brielle gained not only insight as to how special her grandmother was and how God was able to use her through the power of His Holy Spirit to accomplish incredible things, she also had enlightenment for herself. There had been so many times in the past when she would hear comments made by Oba or her mother about how much she reminded them of her grandmother. Now, she recognized it too. It wasn't in how she looked, it was in how she loved the Lord and how she possessed the Spiritual Gift of faith, always believing the words of Matthew 19:26, *'With God all things are possible'.*

Ever since she was a little girl, whether learning the stories of the Bible from her father, mother, grandfather, or Sunday school teachers, Brielle had believed absolutely *everything* she was taught. There was never a doubt or a concern that anything the Bible said was not true. It was not an *inherited* faith - she truly and personally believed it all; willingly, easily, and without hesitation.

As she grew older, she wondered why miraculous stories, such as those in the Bible, were no longer happening. If they were happening, it wasn't something the media was reporting. If they weren't happening, it wasn't because of the lack of power of God. She knew that God was still on His throne; He had not changed. He was the same God who had made the waters of the Red Sea divide so the Hebrews could walk on dry ground. He was the same God who had delivered the Philistine giant Goliath into the hands of a small twelve-year-old shepherd boy who carried a rock in a sling. He was the same God who sealed the mouths of a den of lions, keeping His servant, Daniel, safe from their attack. He was still the same God today that He was then. His sovereignty and mightiness had not changed. He had not altered in any way or lost His power through the years. He *always* would be the same.

Jesus, the Miracle Worker, would never lose His power. He turned water into wine; He raised the dead, healed the sick, the lame, the deaf, and the blind. He was crucified, died, was buried, and then rose again three days later, conquering death and the grave forever.

Brielle had thought about these things for many years as she was growing

up. She wanted to see God's power in action. She wanted to see evil overthrown, and people live victoriously through the power of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Most importantly, she *believed*. She believed in the miracles of God and knew they could still take place.

Then it happened. That day, on a chilly September morning, God had revealed His miracle-working power in a small mini mart. When the barrel of a robber's gun was pointed directly at her, she believed in the power of God and His Word—and she used it… and God gave everyone in that store a miracle and delivered them from the evil which had come there.

Now, after hearing how God had used her grandmother to do something miraculous in the same way, she understood the answer to her years of questioning. It wasn't the fact that God wasn't able to do miraculous things. It wasn't that the power of the blood of Jesus or in speaking His name was no longer effective or able to do the impossible. *Everything* written about the power of God was just as true now as it was then. The power of God was still there, constantly surging around all His children, wanting to flow mightily through them. It was the people who had changed.

The people of the world no longer looked for miracles, or if they did, they didn't always truly believe they were possible. They no longer believed the impossible *to be* possible. They had been plagued with too many lessons of the world of common sense, practicality, realism, and disappointment, which had been programmed in them daily through a variety of tools, parent teachings at home, public opinion, through their peers at school or work, social media, and other multi-media platforms. People pass on their disbeliefs to one another, and most of those beliefs do not include God or His power. Is it any wonder that gradually, many people of the world stopped looking and *believing* in miracles happening?

Brielle felt a strange combination of being emotionally drained from the sorrow of her grandmother's death, with a magnificent resilience in her spirit that God would choose to use her to accomplish great things-- just like her grandmother. She felt the joy of knowing that she was fulfilling her destiny by becoming an Intercessor of the Lord. A powerful warrior, trained for battling the enemy, satan, the evil one, and all those in his army. Yet, the painful loss of her grandmother added to the tremendous fears she felt of serving the Lord as a missionary. When she arrived for school, these thoughts and feelings were stirring in her mind and heart, and she was quiet and distracted from her lessons.

At lunch, she barely ate, just picking at the few items she had chosen. Her friends noticed and tried talking to her about it. She had so many things unsettled within herself, but she didn't feel she could communicate these things right now and tried to change the subject.

"Keoni, have you talked to Hadley yet about meeting with us so we can

show him our investigation board?" Brielle asked.

Keoni, sipping her iced tea, nodded, "I did. He sounded interested in seeing what all we have discovered, but he is going out of town this week."

"Rats," Brielle said, "I was hoping we could meet with him sooner."

"I was hoping that we could talk to him before this Saturday," Jace said.

"Why, what's this Saturday?" Brielle asked absent-mindedly.

Keoni looked at her, puzzled, "You're kidding? You've forgotten about this Saturday?"

"This is the Saturday that the mysterious green light should show up in the lighthouse," Gideon answered with a scary tone.

Brielle's eyes grew wide with surprise. With everything she had learned the night before about her grandmother, she had completely forgotten this was the weekend *that* would take place.

"Oh yeah! I forgot that! What's the plan? What are we going to do?" she asked eagerly.

"I already know that our mother said we are not going out on a boat at that time of night to watch for it," Keoni said sadly, "And you know that Oba and your mother aren't going to let you go either," she said to Brielle.

"I had an idea about that, though," Gideon said, "I asked Mom just this morning how she would feel if Magomu were to go with us."

"What did she say?" Keoni asked eagerly.

"She said that she may consider it, but that if she was off work in time, she would come too," he answered.

Keoni's eyes lit up in surprise, "Really? Cool! Knowing mom, that's pretty close to a yes! If our mom goes, then maybe Genevieve will come and let you go too!" She was delighted.

Brielle's heart began to beat faster at the thought of the new adventure. "Why don't we plan what we would do based upon a hypothetical yes from both our moms?" she asked, looking at Gideon and Jace.

"Okay, the first thing we need to do is figure out what locations would be the best to observe the lighthouse," Gideon said.

Jace smiled, reaching for his backpack. "I'm glad you brought that up," he said, pulling out a folded map, "I have been working on this ever since the night we discussed it in the Prayer Sanctum."

He cleared away his lunch tray and opened the map across the table for all of them to see. The map revealed the rocky coast of Montier's Point and the waters that surrounded it. Jace had drawn a large red circle around the lighthouse's location on the map.

"Here is the lighthouse," he said, pointing to its location. "Here are the boat docks across the harbor," then he pointed to another red circle he had made on the map. "This is where I was standing the last time I saw the light."

The teens all studied the map closely.

"I wonder if I could convince Mom to go with Magomu and Keoni to cover one side of the lighthouse on land while Genevieve takes Brielle and me to the other," Gideon said.

"Why do you get to go with Brielle and not me?" Keoni asked.

"Because that way each group has a man," he said.

Keoni smiled, "Oh brother."

"Yeah, literally. I am your brother," Gideon teased.

"I think it's very chivalrous of you, Giddy," Brielle replied.

"That would be perfect," Jace agreed, "Then if Obadiah came with me on the boat, we could have almost every angle completely covered."

Keoni clapped her hands together, "Yay! This is so exciting!"

"Let's not get too excited just yet, we're still not sure our mothers will agree to this," Gideon said, then he looked at Jace, "Are your parents okay with you doing this?"

Jace looked down at the map and began to fold it up slowly. "My parents don't notice much of what I do," he said softly.

The table was quiet after his response. They did not know what it was like to have parents who were not directly involved in their lives. They all felt bad for him.

"I do," Brielle said, gently placing her hand on his arm, "and I'm glad that Oba will be with you."

Jace looked at her and smiled, "Obadiah and Capt. Espindola," he said.

"You told him about this?" Brielle asked, surprised.

"Yeah," Jace answered, "he loves this town and would do anything to help protect it, especially from the hands of criminals. He told me that he would make sure we are finished with our work in time to get the boat back out by ten o'clock," he sighed, "With all of this planning and people willing to help us, let's hope this light appears again."

"It will," Keoni said, certainly, "I feel it. All of this is happening for a reason. It wasn't a coincidence that you saw that happen the first time or the second. It will happen again."

"What we need to do is spend time in prayer together that God reveals to us what He wants us to learn --and that He protects us," Gideon said.

"I just wish Hadley was coming along," Brielle said, "Where did he say he was going to be?"

"He is going to visit his mother in New York for a week. She is really old, he said it was her 90th birthday, so he was going to spend some time with her," Keoni said. "He has always been such a good son to his mother. He said he would meet with us as soon as he returned to Fairfield."

"Did you tell him about this mysterious light and what we are planning to do?" Jace asked.

"Yes, I did, he didn't seem to be as interested in that as he was in the

information we had. He was working the day I called him, and so we didn't get to talk for very long," Keoni replied.

"Do you think we should talk to another officer?" Brielle asked.

The group thought about it for a moment, then Gideon said, "I personally would only trust Hadley. If Brian has warned Rateesh that going to the police won't help him, maybe there are some bad cops in our town. I'd rather wait and just show all our information to Hadley when he gets back."

"I agree," Jace said.

"Let's hope we have some new information to add to our investigation board to show him when he comes home," Brielle said.

After school, the Intercessors headed to Henrietta's house for their prayer group. They were thrilled to see that everyone who had endured the egg attack on Friday had returned. A few new students also came to join the group. They began their time with a few praise songs, Brielle gave the devotional, and then they began to pray. Today, Keoni felt led to have the group stand in a large circle and hold hands.

Before they started to pray, the Intercessors asked if there were any requests. While they were listening to the requests of the other students, Brielle saw Taryn and Reed driving down the street toward them. The two vehicles were full of the same students who had been part of the egg assault. Brielle squeezed Jace's hand to get his attention focused on the approaching group. Jace looked down at Brielle and then caught where her eyes were focused; he too turned his attention to the street. Keoni had also seen the group, and she got Gideon's attention. Gideon was taking the prayer requests from the students, but when he saw the group coming, he politely interrupted the requests.

"I'm sorry, but I need to interrupt for a moment," he said kindly, "I feel there is something that we need to do."

One by one, the prayer group turned toward the street to see the vehicles slowly pulling up beside them on the road. Henrietta had spotted them as well and had walked to her porch to get her broom as if she was going to sweep them down the street. The look on the faces of the entourage in the cars was not that of joy, mockery, or arrogance; it was one of disbelief.

Suddenly, with a voice, loud, strong, and clear, Gideon began to sing, leading the prayer group in the chorus of the old song, '*Oh How I Love Jesus*'. As they began to sing, the Intercessors felt a powerful surge of the presence of the Lord, filling them with joy and peace. They sang louder and louder as those in the vehicles slowly drove by, watching and listening to their worship. They had come to the prayer group today, hoping to see that they had intimidated them. But they had not. The only thing they had accomplished was making this prayer group stronger, binding them together with the ties of unity for Jesus.

Brielle made direct eye contact with Taryn as she passed by. Taryn's eyes had a look of contempt that she did not want to retaliate, so she looked at the

truck following behind her. She saw the same angry expressions on the faces of Morgan, Sean, and Reed, but she noticed that Ryan did not share the same expression. His face reflected shame, humiliation, and regret. As the students sang and happily rejoiced in the Lord, the others passing by could no longer stand to hear or see them. They took off down the road, squealing tires as they did. The prayer group burst out spontaneously, clapping and cheering, feeling victorious over those who sought to persecute them. Still, Brielle couldn't help but think of the look on Ryan's face.

"If I could just talk to you for a moment before we begin to pray," Brielle said, calming everyone down, "I feel proud that we all took a stand for Jesus last Friday and we showed others that we will not be ashamed or stopped from praying and asking God to bless our school," she paused. A scripture she learned as a child in Sunday school suddenly popped into her head. "I also think it is very important that we don't shut anyone out. We need to do as Jesus said in Matthew 5:44 '*But I say, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you!'* Because they are souls that are lost, too, and need to know how much Jesus loves them. Before we begin to pray for the requests that were spoken earlier, I think we should begin by first praying for those students who just drove by."

The students listened closely and were humbled by Brielle's words. They once again joined hands and began to pray for those in the group who had been so cruel to them, for it was evident that they needed the love of Jesus in their lives.

That night, Brielle had talked with Oba, Magomu, and Genevieve about the plan for Saturday night, while Keoni and Gideon talked with their mother about it. Genevieve was more hesitant to agree as she did not like any member of her family or her friends to be in dangerous situations, but after speaking with Alma, she felt calmer and was willing to participate.

Alma was looking at this situation from a whole different point of view. If there was something she could do that might help bring information that could lead the police to those responsible for her husband's murder, she was in. Although it wasn't certain that these were the same men who were involved with killing Antoine, she was happy to help stop any additional crimes from taking place in her town, especially crimes that were hurting teenagers like Lacy and Dylan. Once Genevieve looked past her personal feelings and saw the heart of her friend, she was ready and willing to do what she could to help.

They all came together to Obadiah's home on Tuesday night to go over their plans. Genevieve prepared a wonderful dinner for everyone, and then they gathered around the kitchen table to discuss what was going to take place. They had invited Capt. Espindola to come, but he was too busy working on his boat that day. Jace would meet with him early on Saturday morning before his shift, and they would go over the plans then.

Asher was very disappointed that he was not going to be part of the adventure. Genevieve had sent him to stay at a friend's house as she did not want to trouble her young son with the information about the drug dealers and what they were doing to their hometown.

Obadiah agreed that Gideon's plan to break into three groups was an excellent idea. That way, they would be certain they could see the lighthouse from every possible angle. Alma, Magomu, and Keoni would take the north side, while Genevieve, Brielle, and Gideon would take the south side. Then Capt. Espindola, Obadiah, and Jace would travel around the surrounding waters on the east side of Montier's Point, known as the Long Island Sound.

"Alright, in order to be able to do this observation properly, we will need the right equipment," Obadiah said, producing two large, shiny, silver briefcases from his office. He laid them carefully on top of the table and unlatched the locks holding them shut.

When he opened the first case, everyone saw there were ten pairs of black sunglasses safely tucked inside of soft gray foam, which held them in place.

"Um, Obadiah, you do remember that we have to watch for the light to shine at *night*, don't you?" Gideon partially joked, curious as to why Obadiah was bringing them sunglasses to wear.

"Yes, Gideon, my boy, I certainly do," he said with a wink, pulling out a pair of these glasses, "Which is precisely why you will need to have a pair of these."

Obadiah unfolded the glasses to reveal that they were not the ordinary sun-blocking eyewear one would wear at the beach. Though they had the appearance of a regular pair of sunglasses from the front, the kind that completely block the sun from all angles, what couldn't be seen from straight on was that these sunglasses had a special thick edge surrounding the eye piece across the top and along the bottom almost like a diver's mask so when they were worn, no light could shine in from the side, top or bottom. Obadiah carefully opened each pair, flipping a small switch located on the side of each set, and distributed them to everyone sitting at the table.

"Go ahead, put them on," he said, walking over to the light switch.

Everyone looked at him with a puzzled expression, including Genevieve, but did as he requested. Obadiah then turned off the lights. The reaction from each one was thrilling for Obadiah to hear, and he chuckled as they marveled over the devices.

"These are one of our newest little inventions-- mine and a good friend who helped me build them," he said. "I call them Night Shades and as you can see, they will help you to observe everything you need to see in the dark with perfect detail—and they won't blind you whenever you see bright light."

"Wow, Oba!" Brielle exclaimed, "This is *amazing*! They're night vision sunglasses!"

"Yes, but they won't attract attention like a regular set of night vision

goggles," Obadiah answered. "Of course, people will still wonder why you are wearing sunglasses at night, but still, they're smaller, lighter, and not as bulky as those the military use."

"Why doesn't the military have these?" Jace asked, "They are so easy to handle. To look at someone head-on, you wouldn't know that they are wearing a night vision device."

"I'm sure they will have these someday soon. The technology is available; it's the durability that I still need to perfect. Which reminds me, you must take extra care of these as they are expensive to make—and to repair," he said. "You will find these may be useful in your work as an Intercessor. You'll quickly learn evil comes out and does its work mainly at night."

"Okay, Oba," Gideon said, "I'm beginning to think the friend you work with is Ethan Hunt at MI6!"

Everyone laughed.

"I couldn't tell you if it were," Obadiah chuckled, "but I will admit to having some 'highly classified' friendships here and there." He walked back over to the light switch to turn the lights back on. Everyone removed their Nightshades and waited to see what was next.

"Okay, so the night shades are totally cool, and I can't wait to use them, but my curiosity is killing me. What do you have tucked in the other case?" Keoni asked.

"I'm getting there," Obadiah said with a wink and his charming smile as he popped open the second case, "Now that you will be able to see everything in the dark, we will also need a means of instant, open communication so you don't have to hold cell phones, plus cell phone can't get wet and these can."

Inside this case were more technical devices, all very small, with the exception of three pairs of binoculars. There was a section of the case that held tiny, rounded cone-shaped buds, which were flesh colored. There were also thick, black wrist watches and what appeared to be black necklaces.

"Fantastic!" Brielle delighted, "Spy stuff!" Everyone was in awe as they looked at the items in awe, waiting to be told what they were. Obadiah pulled out the small cone-like objects first.

"These are micro-covert two-way communication ear devices. These are the smallest of their kind, even smaller than a hearing aid device, which makes them virtually undetectable. But don't worry, they are perfectly safe, there is a small thread attached here," he said, demonstrating, "so you can easily remove them from your ear. They allow you to hear someone who is speaking to you from another location, and this small thread is also a microphone, so you will be able to speak to one another, hands-free. Or if you prefer, you can choose to wear the waterproof two-way wristwatch," he said, taking out one of the watches. "With the watch, you just turn it on here, then you can talk and listen. The only problem with the watch is that the conversations are not as private or quiet," he

explained as he demonstrated how the device worked.

The Intercessors were thrilled about all the high-tech gadgets they would get to use for their mission to investigate the mysterious green light in the tower of the lighthouse. The adults were just as excited.

"We will plan to meet at the pier at 9 p.m. Saturday, so we can have plenty of time to get into our positions for observation. It is important that we all understand that the only purpose of this is to try and see who or what is creating the light in the tower and pinpoint where it is coming from. We are not police officers, so please do not follow anyone. If we see something peculiar, we will use these," he said, pulling out one of the pairs of binoculars.

"These are not only night vision binoculars; they are also cameras. Each group will take a set of these so that if they see anyone or anything which is creating the light in the tower, they can video and photograph like this," he said, demonstrating how they could simply press buttons like on a regular camera, "I call it a Binocam."

Everyone was amazed.

"Obadiah, you have one astonishing mind!" Keoni marveled.

"Alright, now that you all have the equipment you need, Gideon, Jace," Obadiah asked, "do you have anything else to add before we pray?"

"I don't know what the pattern to the light flash is," Jace said, "so you need to make sure you have your eyes searching at exactly ten o'clock. However, many times it flashes, it will last only a few seconds."

"Yes, and once you reach your location, you may want to assign specific areas for each of you to watch so you can cover more ground," Obadiah agreed.

"What do we do if we see something?" Keoni asked.

"Try to get video and photos of it with the Binocam," Obadiah said, "then let us all know *what* you saw and *where*. But remember, we are not there to chase or pursue; we are only there to collect information on this green light."

Everyone nodded their heads in understanding.

"I have one more gift for the Intercessors of the group," he said, momentarily disappearing into his office and returning with a box in his hands. "These are for you to keep and use tomorrow night," he said.

Out of the box, he pulled out a medium-sized black leather pouch. It had two long straps attached to it so it could be latched together around a person's body.

"You can clasp this around your chest and shoulder," he said, "or you can clasp it around your waist, like this," he demonstrated, "They are for carrying your communication devices, your night shades, and anything else you may need."

The girls were thrilled and happily took one of the bags, deciding to clasp theirs around their shoulders.

"Uh, Obadiah," Gideon began, "that looks a lot like… a purse," he said

reluctantly.

Obadiah held the bag out in front of him and looked at it. “Really? Hmm, these are the latest gear bags that my friend recently designed for a group of US Navy Seals. But if you don’t feel comfortable carrying one--”

“Please, by all means, pass it on down,” Gideon said quickly, reaching out to grab one of the pouches, causing everyone to laugh.

“You will have to share them with your mothers and Magomu for this event, but other than that, they are for your personal use and storage of your equipment,” Obadiah said.

The Intercessors all thanked him graciously for their gifts, equipment, and devices. After a while, Asher began to lose interest and said he was heading up into the tower to play video games. As soon as he left the room, Gideon got a very serious look on his face.

“I have something I would like to say,” he said softly. “I believe that God has chosen us to do this. I feel that He knows we can be trusted with this information, and perhaps what we learn this Saturday will help us find out who has been bringing the drugs into our town that have hurt Lacy, Dylan, and taken our father,” he said as he looked at Keoni and his mother. “I am going to go this Saturday with the confidence that God *is* with us, and *He* will give us victory.”

Everyone at the table was quiet as they listened to his words.

Obadiah softly cleared his throat, “Amen, Gideon. I am in agreement with you.”

The others also acknowledged they were, too.

“And now, let’s join hands together and pray that God will use us, guide us, and protect us,” Obadiah said.

Then the group prayed and asked God for His perfect will to be done that Saturday night.

The days seemed to drag on forever that week until Saturday finally came. Brielle hardly slept a wink the night before, and she wasn’t alone. When Keoni and Gideon came, they were crazy with anticipation for their adventure that night. Jace, on the other hand, had gone to bed as early as possible the night before because he still had to work his shift with Capt. Espindola that day.

Genevieve dropped Asher at his friend’s house earlier in the afternoon. Then she and Alma cooked a wonderful meal for the group to eat before they left, packing Jace a special dinner bag to take along. Keoni and Gideon were far too excited to eat, but not Brielle - she wasn’t about to pass up such a fine home-cooked meal.

At last, it was time to leave. Once again, the group gathered for prayer, asking God to be with them all. They asked His hand to be upon them and allow them to find out the information they needed to help their town.

Obadiah headed out in his truck to the pier to meet Jace and Capt. Espindola. Genevieve took Brielle and Gideon in her car, and Alma, Magomu, and

Keoni headed out in Magomu's truck to their locations to observe the lighthouse.

They arrived at precisely nine o'clock. Each group took the time to study the territory and break up the areas to be watched among them. They took out their night shades and checked that their communication devices were on and ready.

Brielle was nervous about Jace going out on the boat while the rest of them were on land, but Gideon reassured her that he was used to being on the water and that both Capt. Espindola and Obadiah would watch out for him.

Her worries began to lighten as the group enjoyed the fun of testing their technical equipment, talking to one another in silly voices, and telling jokes.

"Hey Alma," Genevieve said, "Wasn't there a song about wearing sunglasses at night when we were young?" she asked with a giggle.

"Yeah, I remember that song! Never made much sense to me--until now," she laughed.

Everyone was laughing and having a good time when suddenly, Brielle heard Jace's voice cutting through the noise of the group.

"Hey guys," he said, "I just wanted to let you all know that we are leaving the dock. The time is now 9:30, and Capt. Espindola says he is taking the 'Bonnie Jane' out for the deeper Long Island Sound waters." This was the body of water in the Atlantic Ocean that encompassed the entire Connecticut coastline.

Brielle's heart began to race when she heard him, and she blurted out, "Be careful, Jace," not caring that everyone else could hear her.

"I will," he responded.

The next few minutes seemed to pass like hours as they waited for ten o'clock to come. At five minutes to ten, Capt. Espindola stopped the Bonnie Jane about a quarter of a mile from the lighthouse. They would wait on its southeast side where they could clearly see any light projected into its tower.

Obadiah spoke to the group to make sure they were ready, "Is everyone in place?"

They all acknowledged that they were. Jace was using the third Binocam on the boat and had offered Capt. Espindola, the use of his night shades. But the Captain politely insisted that his eyes were accustomed to the sea at night and needed no help from modern technology. He turned the lights off on the boat and held it in position, keeping his eyes focused directly upon the old lighthouse he adored so much.

Jace was scanning the waters with the Binocam slowly when Obadiah announced that there was only one minute left until ten o'clock. Everyone stood perfectly still as the last minute ticked by, hardly breathing as they waited for the mysterious green light to appear. Suddenly, it did. With a quick burst of light that split through the night sky, they saw the top of the lighthouse shining with a brilliant green glow. It was held in the tower's top, reflecting off the mirror of the lens for only a few seconds, and then quickly disappeared.

The group waited, not moving even an inch, to see if another flash of light appeared.

It did.

Just as it had suddenly illuminated the tower before, it repeated itself once again, holding for a few seconds and then vanishing. They stood silently, waiting to see if a third flash was to follow. But there was nothing. Gideon and Magomu had been scanning their areas thoroughly before and after the light flashes, trying to find the source of light. No one was talking, no one was moving, just searching the dark coastline.

"I've got it!" Jace yelled out. "I see where it came from, there's a boat at eleven o'clock! About 500 yards from us," he shouted, giving Capt. Espindola the direction with his arm where the boat was located.

"Are you certain?" Obadiah asked.

"Yes, I saw the light flicker of the green laser beam from its direction, and there is no other vessel in the area," Jace answered, still looking through the Binocam.

"I see it too," Magomu confirmed, "They are just south of where we are located!"

"I see them!" Gideon shouted.

"Can you zoom in on them, Son?" Obadiah asked Jace eagerly.

"Yes," Jace said, adjusting the Binocam to zoom in on the boat and the men in it. "It's called The Minotaur, and there are three men that I can see," he said, taking video of the boat's name and as many photos of the men on board as he could.

"Excellent!" Obadiah said excitedly.

"I'm getting video from this angle. I also see three men," Gideon said.

"Me too, they are all wearing black," Magomu added.

Those on shore listening to all the banter began to celebrate, thanking God for giving them the information they asked Him for.

"Still," Gideon said, not lowering the Binocam from his eyes, "This really isn't anything concrete that the police will be able to investigate. I mean, right now, all we have are three guys in a boat who shined a laser beam into the lighthouse tower. There's hardly any harm in that. We need to find something more."

As Jace listened to Gideon speak, he suddenly froze. He lowered his Binocam for a second, then quickly raised them back again to see that he too was being watched by a man on the Minotaur with binoculars. He was looking directly at Jace. Jace looked back over his shoulder across the Bonnie Jane; there were no visible lights shining on the vessel. He wasn't sure how they spotted them—unless the man had a pair of binoculars with night vision. He raised his binocam to look across the dark waters one more time to be certain. This time, when he did, the man was not only looking in his direction but was now directing

his shipmates to look in the direction of the Bonnie Jane.

"We've been spotted," he said, "They've seen us!" Jace called out. He watched as one of the men pulled out a long black gun. He swallowed hard. "Obadiah, they just took out a rifle!"

Obadiah took off his night shades and took the Binocam from Jace's hands, focusing on the boat. The men were in motion, quickly turning the boat and heading in their direction. He could see the man holding the gun in his hand and moving to the upper deck.

"They're coming this way!" he said to Capt. Espindola, who immediately threw the Bonnie Jane into high gear and turned to try and outrun them.

"I'm gonna head for the port and radio for help!" Capt. Espindola yelled, turning the wheel sharply in the direction of the harbor and grabbing the radio with the other hand.

Obadiah looked toward the Minotaur again; they were coming on fast, driving a high-speed performance boat. He knew full well that they would easily catch up to the slower fishing vessel.

"They're gaining on us," Obadiah called out to Capt. Espindola, who was pushing the Bonnie Jane as fast as she could travel.

Just then, the sound of gunshots rang out, and a bullet struck the edge of the boat, breaking off a piece of the stern rail with a sharp cracking sound.

"Get down!" Obadiah yelled, pushing Jace to the floor of the boat. Then he turned to yell to Capt. Espindola, "They're firing at us!" He said running into the wheelhouse to help give information on the radio.

Those standing on the shore froze in fear at what they were hearing.

"Did he say they were shooting at them?" Gideon asked. Then they heard the sound again, it was hard to hear from where they were, but they all recognized that it was definitely the sound of a shooting gun.

Gideon called out to the group, "Pray! Everyone, pray together right now!"

Alma began praying, pulling out her cell phone as she did. She nervously dialed the cell phone for Officer Stockton for help as she knew that Hadley was out of town. While she called and told him of all that was happening, the rest of the group lifted their voices in prayer to God. As they watched the scene playing out before them, they cried out to God to intervene and protect their loved ones who were being chased by these evil men.

As Brielle began to pray, she felt the familiar presence of God come upon her. She slowly reached up and took out her earpiece so that she was not distracted by any other sounds. She lifted her eyes and hands to the Lord and knew that He was watching this scene unfold underneath the black, star-filled sky.

"Father God!" she yelled, "Deliver them from this evil just as You have delivered Your children so many times before. Protect them with Your Mighty hand and save them from this danger!"

Her hands began to tremble, and as she prayed, the story of Moses, the Hebrews, and the Egyptians came pounding into her mind. The Holy Spirit fell upon her, and she began to pray the verses of the story out loud and with authority, "*'Do not be afraid! Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today… the LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.' Exodus 14:13"*

When Gideon and Genevieve heard her speak these words, they turned to look at her. Brielle then opened her eyes and lowered her hands to reach out in front of her in the direction of the boats. Continuing to pray in scripture, "'*Take your rod and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the waters!' Exodus 14:16."*

Just as she spoke these words, a strong wind came swiftly, blowing in from the east. The winds came fast, hard, and strong over the ocean waters, causing the waves to violently rise higher and higher. The boats were tossed effortlessly to and fro across the furious waters.

"Hold on!" Capt. Espindola said as he tried to navigate the Bonnie Jane through the sudden raging waters that were surrounding them.

Obadiah wrapped his arm through one of the deck ropes and tried to steady himself to look through the Binocam for their pursuers. He could see them; the waves were crashing all around them violently, slowing their progress in their chase. He placed the Binocam in his jacket and anchored his other arm to the rope as well.

"Jace! Are you alright?" he yelled through the crashing waves, which were heavily pelting down on the deck.

"Yeah!" Jace yelled back, his voice muffled by the sound of the roaring waves. The two then began to pray to God for His help and protection.

The waters were beating down upon their boat, sending tools and fishing equipment hurling in different directions. Jace latched himself onto some of the fishing nets, which had been bound up on the edge of the boat to brace himself. Capt. Espindola, though at the wheel, was trying hard to hold the boat steady as well as hang on.

Over and over again, the waves came beating down, pummeling the boats with their icy salt waters. Then a sound came in the distance like that of a roaring train blasting its way to them. It was the reverberation of an enormous wave coming toward them. It echoed loudly as it traveled across the sea, making those on the shore tremble with fear. Magomu, Alma, and Keoni were on higher elevated rocky ground, safe from the waves' reach. But Genevieve and Gideon were standing with Brielle on the pier, and at the sight of the oncoming wave in the distance, they started to run. Brielle did not move.

When Genevieve saw the power of the Holy Spirit upon her daughter in such a magnificent way, she did not touch her nor try to move her, but dropped to her knees and began to pray with her again while Gideon whispered his

prayers through stunned lips.

Brielle, still heavily anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit, kept her hands focused directly in front of her. Reaching out in the direction of the boats, she lifted her voice and began to pray in scripture again, "'*Stretch out your hand over the sea so the waters flow back over the Egyptians… Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea went back to its place! The* LORD *swept the Egyptians into the sea!' Exodus 14:26,"* she shouted.

Capt. Espindola caught a glimpse of the brawling wave storming toward them and was awestruck. "BRACE YOURSELVES!" he yelled as the monstrosity of water reached their vessel.

At first, the giant wave picked the boats up, lifting them high in the air, tipping them to that they were almost completely on their side. All the men on both boats felt the tumultuous cold waters crashing down upon them, slamming them down into the waters as they broke. Capt. Espindola was thrown against the wheelhouse wall, striking his head against the glass of the window, and breaking it. Jace was still clinging hard to the fishing nets and came up gasping for air. Obadiah, still wrapped tightly in the deck ropes, was also choking on the salty waters… but they were all alive.

Brielle collapsed to her knees beside her mother, and she held her mother close.

Just as quickly as the winds and waves had come from the east, they died down, disappearing into the west, and the waters slowly returned to normal. The Bonnie Jane leveled out, and Jace quickly got up to help Obadiah and Capt. Espindola. Other than a few bumps and scrapes, everyone was alright.

"Jace! Jace!" Brielle's voice called over Oba's watch, the sound was distorted from being drenched in the wave waters.

"Yes, Brielle, we're here," he said, trying to speak through shivering teeth.

"Oba? Is everyone alright?" she asked.

"Yes, we're all fine," he answered.

"Is Jace okay?" she asked.

"Yes, sweetheart," Obadiah answered, "We're all here and we're alright! Thanks be to God!"

Upon hearing this news, Brielle and Genevieve hugged each other in tears, overwhelmed with emotion. They began to give thanks to God for His miraculous power and protection. Gideon lifted his eyes to the star-studded sky. He knew that beyond what he could see before him, there was a God, a God bigger than he could possibly ever imagine.

Gideon had experienced the awesome power of that mighty God—his God, in a magnificent way that night. He knew that he would never be the same. He lifted his hands and his face to the Lord in worship, tears welling up in his eyes. He was so awestruck by what he had just witnessed God do that he could not speak. But God could see the gratitude inside his heart.

Alma, Magomu, and Keoni all knelt in worship where they were, hardly able to speak words of praise and thanks as they were completely overcome with experiencing God's power.

Back on the Bonnie Jane, Capt. Espindola assessed the boat to make sure it was sound and able to stay afloat. Then they set out to search for the Minotaur.

Jace retrieved his nightshades from his gear bag, which he had stored in a locker on the deck. Obadiah took the Binocam out of his jacket pocket and began to search the dark waters for the other boat.

After a minute or so, he called out, "I see it! The Minotaur!" He stood for a moment in shock at what he saw. The boat, which had been so rapidly chasing after them, had capsized in the massive wave and was smashed into a hundred pieces. It was unbelievable.

Capt. Espindola quickly turned the Bonnie Jane around and headed in the direction Oba told him. Then he got on the radio again and called for assistance.

"Brielle," Jace said, "our boat is sound, and we are going to stay out here and search for the men."

"Alma called the police, they should be here any moment," she said, "Please be careful, all of you."

As they came upon the wreckage of the Minotaur, Obadiah and Jace readied the Bonnie Jane's rescue equipment. They shined the giant search lights all around the fragmented pieces of the vessel, expecting to find the three men--hopefully alive. They listened carefully in case anyone was trying to call out to them. But they saw and found no one.

Brielle borrowed the Binocam from Gideon and stood staring out to sea. She could see the searchlight of the Bonnie Jane in the distance as they looked for the survivors. Her mind was a whirlwind with what had just taken place. They knew this task could be risky, but they had no idea that something like this would happen. Why would these men open fire on them? Just because they were in the waters close by? The Fairfield Harbor was busy with fishing boats in and out of port. Surely, they must have come across other boats that may have been in the area in the past, so why would they choose tonight to fire at them? It didn't make any sense.

Just then, the sound of a helicopter was heard flying in the distance. Capt. Espindola came out and sent a beam up from his rescue light to give them their location. Then he ran back to the radio to inform them of the three men who were still lost.

On the horizon, Jace spotted the Fairfield Police boat headed in their direction. He gave a sigh of relief, knowing that with their lights and equipment, along with that of the helicopter, the men could be found much faster. He only hoped that the rescue teams would find them in time.

Officer Stockton arrived on the pier to meet the entire group who had gathered to wait for the Bonnie Jane to return to port.

Finally, the old fishing boat made its way into the harbor and docked at the pier. The group ran over to greet them. Brielle's heart was racing. Just as she reached the dock, Jace stepped off the boat. Without hesitation or thought, she ran directly into his arms, holding him tightly, unable to let go. She had so many emotions whirling inside of her, but she held him silently, incapable of speaking the feelings that were in her heart. After a moment, she realized that he was freezing. He, along with Obadiah and Capt. Espindola were drenched from the icy waters of the waves, and Jace's body was shivering uncontrollably from the bitter cold and wet clothes he still wore.

Brielle forced herself to let go of Jace. He stood for a moment, staring down into her lovely green eyes, still full of tears. He took his hand and gently wiped the tears from her face and smiled at her.

"The whole time," he whispered, "I just kept asking God to let me see your face again."

Brielle felt a rush of warmth flow all over her from her head to her feet. She stood up on her tip toes and gently kissed him in this miraculous moment, but when she felt how cold his lips were and saw they were almost blue, and felt his hands trembling on her face, she knew he needed help.

"I'm so thankful to see yours. Come on," she said, taking him by the hand and helping him to walk to the paramedics, "We have to get you warm."

The paramedics were already treating Obadiah and Capt. Espindola for hypothermia and the cut that Capt. Espindola received when his head hit the window. Brielle rushed over to grab her grandfather and tell him how much she loved him, so thankful that she did not lose the only man she had as an earthly father.

Officer Stockton spoke with everyone in the group. When he had learned about the shooting, he too thought it strange that they would suddenly open fire. It isn't unusual for a fishing boat to be seen out on the water at that time of night. So why would their first reaction be to start shooting? It was something that warranted investigating.

Obadiah then produced the Binocam from his soaked coat to show Officer Stockton some of the photos they had captured of the boat and its crew while they were on the water. But it wouldn't work. The water had affected the Binocam's memory device, and none of the photos had been saved. Then he remembered Gideon's Binocam and the photos he had taken.

"That would be excellent," Officer Stockton reassured him, "I'm hoping we will find the men on that boat, and when we do, we can get some answers to these questions."

After all the statements had been given and the police felt satisfied that they had collected all the information they needed, they said everyone could go home. Capt. Espindola was taken to the hospital for the night, just to be observed.

Once Obadiah got out of his wet clothes and into some dry ones and had wrapped himself in a warm blanket, he was fine. But Genevieve was worried about Jace. She didn't think he should go home by himself and invited him to come and stay with them in their guest bedroom. Jace didn't want to go home alone either. He knew that his father was out of town again for work and he hadn't heard from his mother in weeks, so he gratefully accepted her offer.

Together, the family went home, all the while giving thanks over and over again for the miraculous rescue the Lord had given them. God answered their prayers, and they knew that it was by His hand and His hand alone that the winds from the east could have been produced. It was by His hand alone that the waves became tumultuous and violent, slowing the men from catching them and hurting –or killing them. But most of all, they knew that it was by the Mighty and all-powerful hand of God that they were protected from the destruction of the massive wave that hit them. Their boat, an old fishing boat with thousands of miles on its engine, loaded with fishing gear and equipment with years of wear and tear on its hull, was completely protected. The other boat, a much newer, faster, sleeker, beautiful vessel, was completely destroyed.

Seeing the actions of these men tonight gave the entire group the confirmation that there was a terrible evil which was plaguing their town; one that had to be removed, never to return again. They would trust in God and follow His will and direction on what to do about it. But for tonight and all the days ever after, they would praise and glorify His name with grateful hearts for saving their lives.

Everyone had a full understanding that everything that had taken place that night was not by coincidence, it was not by chance, and it was not a twist of fate or a stroke of luck. What happened that night was a deliberate demonstration of the awesome, almighty, and sovereign hand of God that purposely and intentionally intervened in a dire situation to save His children. Brielle got to see yet again, another miracle from the all-powerful God she loved to serve. God did it because He is never slow to answer the prayers of those who cry out to Him day or night. But most of all, He did it because He *loved* them.

31

Even though the Intercessors and their families were all completely exhausted physically from an evening full of adrenaline and intensity, they were eager in their spirits to get to the house of the Lord the next day. There was much celebration given by them in thankful praise to the Lord for His help the previous night. Each one who had been at the lighthouse the night before was individually transformed in their spiritual walk after having seen the almighty hand of God in action. They all loved the Lord, loved serving Him, and believed His Word to be true. Still, having experienced His awesome power, they would never be the same. What they witnessed was something that would never be forgotten.

Jace had called the hospital early that morning to check on Capt. Espindola. He learned that the old Captain was doing well and enjoying the rest and much-needed sleep he was getting. This news only brought more elation to the group in their thankfulness for God's mighty, protective Hand.

After church, Keoni, Gideon, and Alma decided to go home for lunch and rest. They hardly slept after having such an amazing and emotional night. Genevieve had prepared a crockpot lunch and wanted to invite Jace to join them. She asked Jace when his father would be returning home from his trip. He said his father wouldn't be back until Tuesday.

"Jace, may I ask, do you just stay home alone during the time he is gone?" Genevieve asked, concerned.

"Sometimes I have Oliver there to keep me company—that is when he's not working," Jace said.

"Who's Oliver?" Brielle asked curiously, once again learning something new about Jace that she had never known before.

"He works for my father. He's been with him since before I was born. He's more than an employee, though; he's more like a very close uncle," Jace said thoughtfully, expressing his obvious affection for the man.

"When Oliver is there, does he watch out for you?" Genevieve asked.

"Yes, but he's very busy with his work too, and sometimes he goes with my father on his business trips. But it's nice when he's there; I like spending time with him. He's always been very good to me," Jace replied.

Inside Genevieve's heart was breaking. The thought of any child, no matter how old they were, having to be alone so much was wrong. It was not how it was supposed to be. Jace, like all children and teenagers, needed a family. To have people there for him, not just to care for him, but to talk to him, teach and guide him, to pray with him… to love him. As a mother, she could not turn away from the needs of this young man. She immediately asked if he would like to come for lunch and stay until their Intercessor training session began that night. He happily accepted.

After they enjoyed a lovely lunch of homemade stew and bread, Asher decided to go for a ride on Apache with Magomu and Kissa. Obadiah, Genevieve, Brielle, and Jace enjoyed hot tea on the patio and talked of the events that had taken place the night before.

"I spoke with Officer Stockton again this morning," Obadiah began, "He said that the search continued all through the night until daylight. So far, no men have been found. They are still sending teams out today as well."

No one spoke when they heard this news.

Finally, Jace said, "I just wonder why they began shooting at us like that."

"I've been wondering the same thing," Obadiah said.

"I thought about that last night," Brielle said, "I was thinking that if this has been going on since… well, we know it has been going on at least since the summer-- if not longer, then surely they would have come across other boats out on the water at that time of night. Don't you think?"

"Most certainly," Obadiah agreed, "the Fayerweather Yacht Club isn't too far from that location, and there are usually people out enjoying the waters, day or night. I think there was something very deliberate about that attack."

Jace looked at Obadiah intently, "You don't think they were trying to kill us, do you?"

"I don't know. I would hope not, but it certainly did appear that way. Antoine was killed by drug dealers, and he was a police officer. If they would kill an officer of the law, they wouldn't think twice about killing people like us. I hope they were just trying to scare us away," Obadiah replied.

"But why? Why wouldn't they have just seen that you were on a fishing boat and thought you were working late or something? I mean, that happens right?" Brielle asked, looking at Jace.

"Oh, yeah. Our boat comes back to port for the weekends, but for many boats, the guys just live out on the water," Jace answered.

"See? Then why would they attack you like that?" she asked.

"It's a good question," Obadiah said, "I know that Officer Stockton was just as curious about it last night, and it's something that should be discussed with Hadley tonight."

"Tonight?" Genevieve asked, "He's coming over tonight?"

"Not exactly. Officer Stockton contacted him and told him about what happened. Hadley was very concerned and called me after the service this morning. We had a good talk, and he is going to call Gideon tonight while we are meeting in the Prayer Sanctum. The important thing is that you give him all your information. We can always have him over to review the investigation board when he returns," Obadiah said.

"Wonderful!" Brielle said, clapping her hands together, "I'm so excited! I just wish we could get Rateesh to come forward and talk with him."

"That would be helpful, but you can't force him until he is ready. You just

need to be patient and keep praying for him. I'm sure Hadley already has a lot of our information; he just can't reveal it. But perhaps there are some things the Lord has shown you which He hasn't shown Hadley or Officer Stockton. Let's just pray that justice is done, and these drugs and dangerous people are prevented from hurting anyone else," Obadiah said.

Genevieve excused herself and came back with a tray of different homemade breads and butter.

"Wow," Jace admired, "Do you make these yourself?"

"Yes, I do," Genevieve smiled, "Please, take your pick. This is banana nut bread, this is a glazed brioche, and this is pumpkin bread - a perfect bread for such a lovely fall day," she said happily. "I just warmed them up; they are so yummy with melted butter."

Jace took a slice of the banana nut bread and spread it with butter. The warm bread melted the butter slowly and made the bread flavorful and rich in taste. He smiled as he sat there on the porch. How he loved being here with Brielle and her family. Jace loved the simple things they enjoyed in life: a good view of God's beautiful land, a comfortable chair on a porch to sit back, relax, and enjoy a good slice of homemade bread. Most of all, he loved the conversation and time spent with those around him.

"I'm glad you said that, Vivi," Obadiah said, "that reminds me, John told me that he would be bringing the pumpkins on Wednesday morning so I can get a head start."

"John Newsom?" Brielle asked.

"Yes," Obadiah answered, then turned to Jace to explain who the man was. "John Newsom is a dear man at our church. He works with the local markets and collects unused or extra food from the stores, then takes it to the needy. We've worked together from time to time, helping the homeless. He's a good man and always helps me get as many pumpkins as I need."

Jace looked at Obadiah with a curious smile, "Pumpkins? What do you need pumpkins for?"

"For Halloween, of course," Obadiah said, helping himself to a slice of brioche.

Jace lifted his eyebrows, "Halloween?"

Brielle looked at Jace and laughed, "You have heard of Halloween, haven't you? You know, people carve pumpkins, kids dress up, ask for candy; stuff like that."

Jace smiled, "Yes, I've heard of Halloween," he mused, "I just didn't know that you celebrated it."

"I wouldn't say we celebrate the day. I would say we *minister* on the day," Obadiah said. "Were you raised not to participate in Halloween?"

"When I was a kid, I got to dress up and go trick or treating. But I remember some of my grandmother's friends being very against it. They said that no

Christian should ever participate in anything that had to do with Halloween. I just wasn't sure how you felt about it," Jace said.

Obadiah smiled, "Actually, I have some pretty strong feelings about it."

"Oh, goodness," Genevieve laughed, "here we go." Then she turned to Jace, "Oba is quite the expert on Halloween and its history."

Obadiah laughed, "I'm not like some God-fearing people when it comes to Halloween. I know many Christians who will shut their doors, turn off their lights, and say that it is a night of the devil. They won't have anything to do with it and do not think any other Christians should either. While I do respect their opinions-- I have a different one.

"First, I do not understand why anyone would *ever* say the devil gets a night, or the night is of the devil. Why in the world would people say that or give him that? Why does he get to have something that is not his? He didn't create the day; he didn't create the night-- God did! So, who decided that the devil should get a night of his own? Not me. I think it is our job as Christians to take back what satan is trying to steal from the Lord."

Jace nodded his head. "That's a good point," he agreed.

Obadiah continued, "My question to these Christian people who are closed off in their houses is this: How many times a year do you have children and adults knocking on your door where you could witness the love of Jesus to them?"

Jace lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "That's a really good question."

"And a question I pretty much know the answer to—none. There is no other night of the year when families in your neighborhood are outside, walking around, having fun, and coming to your door. It only happens on Halloween. Plus, since we know that there are very dark and wicked things taking place on that night, wouldn't that be even more incentive to get out and take the light of Jesus to those in your neighborhood?"

"I would think so," Jace replied happily.

"Exactly! In my opinion, I love Jesus and want to fulfill His commands, so I am not going to skip such a wonderful opportunity to reach out to others for the Lord. As I am always teaching you kids, it is our job to tell people about the love of Jesus, right? To honor Christ's command of *The Great Commission* and take His love to the world, so why not *use* Halloween to do that? It is a *perfect* opportunity for ministry in the community! As for me and *my* house, we will serve the Lord, that means every day—*especially* on Halloween," Obadiah said.

Again, Jace nodded, feeling inspired by Obadiah's words.

"Again, let me make it clear, I know that there are horrific evils that take place on Halloween night. In fact, I have studied the origin of the night for decades--after all I am from Ireland and have lived amidst the folklore, legends, and history," he said. "But I for one like to try and take whatever tool I can and turn it into a ministry for Jesus-- especially Halloween."

"I would love to know the history of Halloween," Jace replied.

"Alright, I'd better get comfy," Brielle said, reaching for another slice of bread, "try to give him the short version of it, Oba, please? We need to leave for the Prayer Sanctum soon," she teased with a giggle.

Obadiah chuckled, "Thank you for your support, Sweetheart." Then he turned to Jace, "Halloween as we know it today is a mixture of traditions and beliefs practiced by the Ancient Celts, the Catholic and Roman Churches, as well as some European and American traditions added here and there," he began.

"The ancient Celts had a holiday they called Samhain. It is spelled S-A-M-H-A-I-N, but it is pronounced *Saw-wen.* It is the Celtic word meaning summer's end. Many people have believed for years that Samhain was a Celtic god of the dead. However, the Celts believed in many gods, the sun being one of them. The *Feast of Samhain* was actually a tradition where the Celts believed their god dies and would later be reborn.

"They were not a people who feared the One True Living God and did not know of His promise to Noah of the four changing seasons. The Celts believed that the New Year began on November 1st, not January 1st, as we believe. They associated the darkness that came during this time of year with the dying of nature. The falling leaves and cold days that followed just confirmed their beliefs. All of this in their minds was the work of evil spirits. They believed there was one day a year when the season of life met the season of death. That day was the thirty-first of October.

"The Celts thought that the spirits of those who had died could return on that day to roam the earth—which included evil spirits, and they greatly feared these evil spirits. They would light great bonfires to keep these spirits away and take-home torches from these bonfires to light their hearths at home—in the hopes of keeping the evil spirits away from their homesteads. They also would sometimes wear frightening masks and costumes made of animal hides to ward off these evils from coming close to them. Many people today believe that the wearing of a costume on Halloween was for a person to *represent* a person being something evil, when in fact the Celts were using masks and costumes to *repel* evil from them.

"Rumor has it nowadays that they carved pumpkins to attract these evil spirits. I met a lady who believed that pumpkins were homes for these evil spirits on Halloween night. Again, this is a misconception of history. The Celts did not have pumpkins like we do. Pumpkins originated in Central America and, throughout the years, have finally made it to other continents. The Celts would carve out scary faces on turnips or potatoes, but not pumpkins. The carving of pumpkins actually began here in America when the immigrants who came here brought their traditions to this country. Pumpkins were just easier to carve - plain and simple. But it is important to know that they did not carve these evil or scary faces to attract evil spirits or house them either; they did it to scare them

away.

"Now don't misunderstand me. I am in no way defending the beliefs of the Ancient Celts. You could not be a Celt, Druid, or Wiccan and be a Jewish, Christian, or Catholic believer of God and His Word. That would be a complete contradiction. The Celts, Druids, and Wiccans definitely were pagans who believed in their earthly gods and the power of magic. So again, I am in no way trying to justify Halloween by the information I have given you. I truly do respect people's opinions on this matter and do not wish to impose my beliefs on anyone else, just as I would not want them to impose theirs on me. I just feel it is important that people should know the truth about their history, and I like to teach the truth about some of the misconceptions there are about some of the things which are not as wicked as people think.

"I also think it is important that other Christians not judge those who do participate in family-friendly activities with their children on Halloween if they choose to do so," he said, "As I always say, it is not our job to judge others' souls."

"I have a question," Jace began, "It may seem lame, but I'm not exactly sure what a pagan is."

"No, it is an excellent question. I do not like to think that any question is lame. If there is something a person needs to know, it is only lame not to find the answer," Obadiah smiled. "A pagan, by definition, is a people or community observing a polytheistic religion, or more simply put, people who have belief systems and gods that are not connected to the Christian, Jewish, or Catholic faiths. We could do a month's worth of study on all the different types of groups of paganism and the smaller groups within those as well," he continued, "But the Celts were the pagan group with which Halloween is associated the most."

"Tell him about how Halloween got its name," Brielle said, finishing off a slice of bread and reaching for another.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought I had to keep it short?" Obadiah teased his granddaughter with his charming smile.

"No, please go on, this is very interesting," Jace said.

"Alright, if you insist," Obadiah smiled, reaching for a slice of bread. "Since at least the second century AD, there have been celebrations of a holiday known as All Saints Day. The first historical reference to a feast celebrating All Saints was in 373 A.D. This was a day designated by the Pope to honor those who were deceased. The celebration was set on the date of November 1, 373 A.D. This was done intentionally by the Catholic Church to have a religious holiday that would overshadow the Celts' traditional pagan celebration of Samhain. They understood the theory of taking back for Jesus, the Lord of light, something that was used for the devil, the Lord of darkness.

"All Saints Day was created to celebrate the lives of loved ones who had passed away. You also may have heard of Día de los Muertos. This is a holiday

celebrated in Mexico and many other countries in North, Central, and South America. People remember the lives of their ancestors by having feasts, festivals, and parades to honor their memories. This holiday is held annually on November 2nd, and the celebrations begin the day before, which coincides with All Saints Day.

"The night before All Saints Day, the thirty-first of October, became known as All Hallow's Eve. *Hallow* means holy or sacred, and *eve,* of course, means night. As time went by, that name became *'All Hallows E'en'*, which turned into Hallowe'en and then gradually became what we call Halloween. So, in essence, the *name* of Halloween derived from a Christian celebration, not a pagan one.

"As I said before, the traditions of All Hallows Eve came to America with the immigrants from different cultures. In the 1800's the people of America began to make it their own holiday, cultivating it into a time of community for family and friends to have moments together and celebrate the season of the harvest in a fun and festive way," Obadiah explained.

"I always wondered about all of this," Jace admitted. "The names of Thanksgiving and Christmas make sense, and the holidays make sense, but I always wondered where Halloween originated."

"Because October 31st is surrounded by celebration days of the dead-- as well as a pagan celebration-- this holiday has held a lot of controversy. Again, I know fully well that there are horrible evils that do take place on Halloween night, most certainly. It is considered a night of action for those who engage in wicked and vile things. Satan and his demonic allies *are* absolutely in full force on that night, and there are those who do practice rituals that are dangerous and sinister on that day—I am coming out *against* it! I want to fight back to take away what the devil is trying to accomplish—and I can't do that if I am locked up in my house. I must come out and let my light shine—especially on that night. I believe we should come out strong, blazing brilliantly, with the Armor of God upon us, prepared for battle against our enemy of darkness. So, in our home, we use the night of Halloween as a night to minister the love of Jesus to everyone we possibly can!

"We have a huge party here for our neighbors and anyone in the Fairfield community who would like to attend. We provide games, activities, horse rides for the children, and snacks and treats for all who come. The whole family and some of our close friends pitch in to make it a great night. I have to say, it's so much fun!" he said with his charming smile. "I look forward to it every year. We take Halloween and make it a night for Jesus!"

Jace nodded, "That's so cool! I never thought about Halloween like this before!"

"Anything out there the devil is using for his glory, we should take to glorify the Lord; whether it be music, art, dance, literature, movies, or holidays," Obadiah said, biting into another slice of bread.

"Tell him what all you do for those who come," Genevieve encouraged, proud of her father.

"I pass out ministry tracts-- along with candy, of course, to all the children and let them know how much Jesus loves them," he answered modestly.

"Yeah, and he gives great candy," Brielle said.

"I have to say that I pride myself on my candy distribution. I give the good stuff that the kids love. Name brands only," Obadiah joked.

"Yeah, and full-sized!" Brielle chimed in happily.

"But that's not all of it, tell him about the display," Genevieve pressed.

"Well, I like to set out some eye-catching pumpkins to attract people's attention for Jesus," Obadiah said, humbly.

"No, that still doesn't tell him what you do," Genevieve said.

"He will carve like fifty pumpkins," Brielle began, too excited to wait for her grandfather to explain, "Sometimes even more. He carves all day long for days before Halloween night. Then he puts them all out for display on the porch, the yard, the street, everywhere, and lights them up! The pumpkins alone are enough to attract people to come to visit us."

Jace looked at her with a curious expression, "Wow, that sounds amazing… but I'm not sure I understand how carved pumpkins can attract people for Jesus."

Brielle began to explain, but Obadiah stopped her, "Wait, don't tell him, let him come and see it," he said happily. "That is, if you are free on Halloween night and would like to join us to minister to the community?

Jace's face brightened, "Yeah, I would! I'll come and help with all of that. It sounds awesome! I'm intrigued to see this pumpkin display."

"They are *great* pumpkins, Charlie Brown!" Brielle laughed, "It's so cool! We all help him a little, but Oba is a master pumpkin carver."

Obadiah laughed, "I should be after all these years."

"Do you dress up on that night too?" Jace asked.

"Certainly," Obadiah said, "I see nothing wrong with little children dressing up in a favorite costume and asking for candy. What child *wouldn't* love that?"

"We don't wear anything evil, dark, or scary," Brielle added, "Just fun things. Last year, I was a taco, and Keoni was Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz."

Jace laughed, "A taco, huh? Soft or crunchy?"

"My personal preference would have been crunchy, but I could only find a soft costume," Brielle replied with a smile.

"Did Keoni wear ruby slippers?" Jace asked.

"Now, what do you think? It's *Keoni* we're talking about here," Brielle laughed.

"You know, in the book the slippers are silver," Obadiah added, "The director just made them red for the movie because he thought they would show up better on screen."

"Hmm, I didn't know that," Jace said.

"Silver, red, doesn't make a difference. If it sparkles, Keoni will be more than happy to wear it," Brielle laughed.

"Are you going to dress up?" Brielle asked Jace.

"Sure," he said happily.

"As what?" she asked.

"Since I have to wait in suspense to see the pumpkin display-- you will just have to wait too," he said slyly.

"I'm so glad that you can come," Genevieve said, "and please feel free to invite your parents and Oliver," she added, "They are always welcome here."

Jace looked at her shyly, "Thank you," he said, "I'll let them know."

Just then, they heard Gideon's voice coming from the front yard. He was laughing at something.

Obadiah looked at his watch, "Oh, goodness, it's almost 4 pm. I told Gideon and Keoni to come early for our Intercessor training so we can have plenty of time to talk with Hadley tonight."

Once everyone was ready to go, they headed up for their journey through the woods to the Prayer Sanctum. As always, they enjoyed every moment of every passageway they entered until they were once again seated in their high-backed, red velvet chairs at the compass table, ready for their next lesson.

"After the events of last night, I think we all have an even more awesome reverence for the power of God. I think it is very important, if I may suggest it, that you take some time this evening to spend with the Lord. Of course, you should thank Him for His divine protection, but you should also just… sit with Him. Be in His presence. Absorb what He wants to say to your heart, what He wants to show you. Meditate on Him and just allow Him to draw closer to you, as the Bible says in Psalm 46:10 *'Be still and know that I am God.'* We all believe that He is God. We felt Him in our hearts and spirits and have seen Him answer prayers. Having said that, after last night's experience-- even for someone as seasoned as myself, there should never be a moment in your life of ever doubting that He *is* exactly who He says He is. You have proof.

"Not that God has to prove Himself to us-- that is not my message. In fact, throughout the four Gospels, you will find passages where Jesus tells people He healed, *not* to tell anyone. That is because He wants us to believe in Him because we choose to, not because we have proof of who He is. Not because we have seen or experienced miracles, but because we choose to believe in who He is and that His Word is truth. I just want you to always hang on to the memory of that experience. Remember it. Write it down so that when you are older, you can share your story with your children and grandchildren and they can remember it as well and pass it on," he said, picking up his Bible. "After all, that is what this is, a historical documentation of the miracles of God and His only Son, Jesus Christ. It is *His story,* history. The experience you had last night, for

some of you," he said, looking at Jace and Brielle as he remembered the mini-mart robbery, "it may have been your first experience—but as long as you are Intercessors of the Lord, it won't be your last. Always remember what God does for you so that your faith and your trust in Him will be stronger. Does this all make sense?" he asked.

The Intercessors all nodded that they understood.

"Good, because that will lead us into our next lesson," he said.

Then he turned and wrote on the chalkboard the words:

Become What You Believe

"When you are out living life, you must try every day to represent Christ and take His light to a dark and dying world. Jesus also tells us in Matthew 5:13-14 that *'you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.'* He teaches us in verse 16 '*In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.'* When others come to knock you down, get up, dust yourself off, and keep right on going. Do not let anyone stop you or distract you. Take the light of Jesus and keep it burning brightly in your heart for *all* to see. I know there will be times when this is easier said than done. But if you keep *'fighting the good fight of the faith'* as it is written in 1 Timothy 6:12, God will give you the strength to keep pressing on," he smiled warmly at them.

"You might have heard the phrase, 'What Would Jesus Do?' I'm sure," the youth all nodded in agreement. "That is an excellent question and one that should be asked daily. However, it isn't enough to just *ask* the question. A person must *do* what Jesus did. You cannot just believe what the Bible says; it must go deeper than that. It must become part of you, living, breathing, walking, talking, everywhere you go, because the Word of God is a living Word, breathed from our living God. According to John 1:1, the Word *is* God.

"Everything you do should be based upon what the Word of God instructs in the Old Testament and what Jesus did in the New. Just like the old song, 'To Be Like Jesus'. We will never achieve the perfection of Christ--but we must strive for it daily. We must become what we believe. We must remain consistent in our walk with the Lord, never fluctuating or being influenced by anyone around us. Never be as concerned about pleasing other people as much as you are about pleasing God. I always taught my daughter, and she has taught her children, 'Strive to obey and please God, and you will always please me.'

"Jace, do you *believe* that you are a Spiritually Gifted healer of God? Keoni, do you *believe* that you are gifted with prophecy and discernment? Gideon, do you *believe* that you are a leader of others called and directed by the Lord? Brielle, do you *believe* that you are a warrior of God? If so, then don't just think it, don't just speak it, and don't just believe it. *Become* it. Yield yourself over to the power and Will of God the Father, His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Allow them to take control. In the middle of Romans 4:17, it says, *"—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."* What this verse is teaching us is that whatever God speaks happens. What is not there suddenly is there. What was not, suddenly is. So, we too can believe with the gifts that He has given us, even if we may not see it right now, it's coming! And we can speak about it as if it already is—because God said it is. We can call what is not, as if it is, because God says it is.

"Let's say it like this. Jace, you know that you have the desire to help people get well, and we know that desire is good, and it was placed inside you by God. Even though you haven't been to medical school, that doesn't mean that God can't use the gifts He has placed within you right now, just as they are. So, you need to say to the Lord, 'God! I am here, ready, and willing to be used for Your mission, for Your plan, for Your glory at any given time! I believe in the gifts you have given me, and I know they are real because I know You are real!' You see? And we all can do this—and it is not limited to just our spiritual gifts either, but any promise that God has made to us, we can speak it into our lives because we know that God said it and God's Word is true and His promises are for all of us! "Let your light shine brightly in the darkness. Be proud, be strong, and do not fear, and when you are pelted with raw eggs because of Him, *rejoice,* and persevere,*"* then he paused and put his Bible down on the table.

"I don't have to tell you that the world in which we live is growing darker with evil. It becomes worse day by day. But what I can tell you is that God has chosen you for a purpose. There will come many more attacks from the enemy and battles you will find yourselves in. As you all grow stronger in the Lord, the evils you face will grow darker. There is no way of knowing all that God has in store for you, but you can know that when you find yourself in one of those situations, He is with you. It says in *Hebrews 13:5 '…Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'* He tells us in His Word that He will not fail us. He will not abandon us, not *ever*. Always hold on to the unchanging hand of God as you walk through these battles in life. He will be with you to the end as it says in *Matthew 28:20, 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'*

Obadiah then dismissed the group so that they could either study or spend time meditating on the Lord. Forty-five minutes had passed by when Gideon's cell phone buzzed. It was Hadley. Gideon took the call in the Study and gathered everyone around the compass table. He placed the phone on speaker so that Hadley could hear everyone there. Hadley was sincerely sorry that he was not there in person, but the Intercessors were just happy to be able to talk to him and give them all the information they had.

The Intercessors took their time to cover every detail they could think of, from the events that happened the night before, to Brian and Sidney, to Rateesh and the four guys at school. Hadley listened intently to their information, writing it all down and asking the teens questions from time to time.

When they finished, Hadley thanked them all sincerely with great appreciation, and Obadiah as well. Again, he gave his most sincere apologies for not being able to meet with them in person. However, he said that the information that they had collected was excellent and would be very helpful with the investigation. He told the group how important it was that they backed off from trying to find any further information.

This situation had now gone to a level of danger, and he didn't want anything to happen to them--especially for Alma, he was determined to keep Gideon and Keoni safe. He assured them that he and Officer Stockton would stay on this and bring these men to justice. Gideon and Keoni were so grateful, for although it hurt them to see others who were suffering from these drugs, more than anything, they wanted to see justice done for the murder of their father.

The Intercessors thanked Hadley for his help and wished his mother a happy 90th birthday.

"That went well," Gideon said after they hung up.

"Yes, he seemed interested in the details we gave him," Keoni said.

"I still want to show him our investigation board," Brielle said, "I think he needs to see some of the photos we have collected and how they all fit together."

"We will try and arrange that when he returns home, or we could just email him everything," Obadiah began, "But I do have to say, I agree with Hadley about backing off anymore investigating. After last night, this incident went to a new place where danger has seriously come into play. We need to let the police do their jobs."

"But then why were so many things revealed to us?" Brielle questioned.

"Perhaps this is the reason, so we could pass it along to Hadley and be done with it. He said that everything you all had learned was very helpful to his investigation; you all have done an excellent job. But most importantly, this whole thing has brought the four of you together to train as Intercessors. Don't you think that alone is a great reward?" he asked gently.

"Yes, you're right," Brielle said softly, "I didn't think about it like that."

"You have done a great job in putting this information together. Now that it is done, you still have another task before you: to keep praying for a resolution to the situation. Intercede for Hadley and Officer Stockton in prayer that they can bring the criminals hurting our town and our loved ones to justice. In fact," he said, "We can start right now."

The Intercessors, along with Obadiah, joined hands and began to pray, first for Lacy and Dylan and then for justice and safety to be brought to their lovely hometown of Fairfield.

The next few days brought much anticipation to the Intercessors as Halloween was quickly approaching. They were excited about the night of ministry they would be able to have with their neighbors and other members of

the community who would come. Each day after school, Jace came to Brielle's house, after taking Rateesh to his restaurant, to help prepare for the fun.

They were also very excited for Friday night's football game. Gideon had healed well enough to return and play with his team. The Intercessors had invited all the students in their prayer group to come to the party at Obadiah's, including Henrietta Barnes. Although she was thrilled to be invited, she told them that she loved to do the same thing, not the big party and activities, but hand out tracts about Jesus' love and salvation through His forgiveness and give candy to children. She loved to spread the love of Jesus that night to everyone she could.

The Intercessors invited as many students at school as they could, telling them to bring along their little brothers and sisters and handing out directions to Brielle's house.

On Wednesday, Obadiah received his delivery from John Newsom; fifty bright orange pumpkins were brought to his front yard and placed everywhere. With the beautiful orange and red leaves dangling from the trees and all the color of the pumpkins in the yard, Obadiah's house truly set the tone for the fall season.

Friday night came, and Gideon played incredibly. Not only did he intercept two passes on defense, but he also scored three touchdowns on offense. The Falcons were no longer on the losing end but were victorious over the opposing team with a final score of 32-21.

The next day was Saturday, October 31st. Jace and Keoni had come over early that morning to help set up tables, chairs, and some of the games for the children to play. Asher was busy grooming Apache and Moon Dancer for the children to take rides on, and Alma and Genevieve were busy preparing food and drinks for those who came. Obadiah had been carving pumpkins since Wednesday morning and was still busy carving the last few pumpkins for that night. He had them all turned around and wouldn't let anyone see them until they were lit and glowing that evening.

Finally, they were done. Everything was ready for their night of ministry. The theme of the party was "Jesus Loves You," as it was the theme every year. Brielle and Keoni went upstairs to freshen up and get dressed, and Jace went home to shower, change, and pick up Rateesh.

Jace had asked Rateesh what he and his family did for Halloween. Rateesh said they just usually worked that night and dressed up in costumes as they waited on people to make it more fun. Jace asked him if he would like to come to the party and explained what Obadiah and the family did together. He had been trying to gently plant seeds of the love of Jesus in Rateesh's heart and not be forceful, as he knew Rateesh was of the Hindu faith. When Rateesh agreed to come, Jace was thrilled. He said he would pick him up at six o'clock, and to make sure that if he dressed up, it wasn't anything evil or scary.

When six o'clock came, Jace pulled up promptly to Rateesh's restaurant in his father's SUV and parked outside on the street. The whole town was richly decorated in fall colors. Bright orange pumpkins were everywhere. Down the street, a little princess, a fairy, two tiny firefighters, and a hot dog had already begun their trick or treat quests for candy. Jace smiled as they passed him. He was dressed as a surgeon, and the costume fit him well. He went into the restaurant to see that the dining room was packed.

"Hello, Jace," came a voice from behind him. It was Priyanka. She looked him up and down and smiled. He was quite striking in his surgeon scrubs.

Jace turned around to see her dressed in a traditional belly dancer costume, veils and all. He didn't mean to stare, but she was lovely in the outfit.

"I love your costume," Priyanka said, "You do look like a doctor."

"Hopefully someday," Jace smiled, "I like yours too," he said shyly, "is Rateesh ready?"

"Yes, I'll go get him. You are going to laugh when you see him," she giggled. "His costume was my idea."

Priyanka went into the back and came out with a young man dressed in khaki pants that were about five inches too short and pulled up high over his waist. The pants were being held up by two bright red suspenders. He had on a blue plaid button-down shirt that had a pocket protector on the front full of pens and a big green bow tie. His hair had been slicked down—all except for one which stuck up in the back and he was wearing thick, black rimmed glasses. Jace laughed when he saw him. Rateesh smiled and revealed an additional costume element: a blackened tooth.

"Umm, Rateesh," Jace said, "I thought Brielle told you it was a costume party," he said seriously.

"Yeah, I know," Rateesh answered.

"Do you want to go change into your costume?" Jace asked, trying not to laugh.

Priyanka broke out into laughter at Jace's comment. Then she pinched her brother's face.

"Isn't he cute? Our little nerd!" she teased, pulling off his glasses to clean them up with one of her veils.

Rateesh laughed as well, grabbing his glasses and putting them back on. "I'm okay with being a nerd. I can relate to it well. Just remember, nerds usually wind up being major motion picture directors or billionaire computer tycoons."

Jace nodded, "That is true. We can say we knew you when."

Priyanka brought out a large white bag full of delicious Indian delicacies to take to the party and gave it to Rateesh.

"Have a wonderful time!" she said happily as they headed out the door for the party.

While they drove, they talked about the party and tried to guess what

everyone would be dressed as. By now, the sun had gone down, and as they got farther out of town, the darkness settled upon them. Jace was just in the middle of telling Rateesh about all of Obadiah's amazing pumpkin carvings and how he couldn't wait to see them at night when suddenly, he stopped the SUV.

Lying in front of them on the side of the road was a person's body. The person was dressed in dark clothing, but Jace had seen the reflection of white tennis shoes in his headlights. He slowed down and parked the SUV on the side of the road, leaving the headlights on so he could see.

Jace quickly jumped out and ran over to the body to see if the person was alive. Rateesh followed. Gently, Jace rolled the body over to see that the person was dressed in a pair of jeans with a black shirt, masks, and gloves that were painted to look like the bones of a skeleton. The sight of it gave Jace and Rateesh chills. Jace reached his hand under the bottom part of the mask to remove it.

Suddenly, he felt a hand quickly tighten around his wrists, and a deep, strange, electronic voice said, "Ah, ah, ah, not so fast, Doc." It was the voice of the skeleton. The person inside the costume was alive.

Jace and Rateesh jumped back as the skeleton slowly stood up, tilting his face from side to side in a creepy manner to look at them and snickering sinisterly as he did.

"Rateesh, go get in the car," Jace whispered.

Rateesh got up and turned to run back to the car when he froze in his tracks.

"Jace," he whispered, paralyzed with fear.

Standing there in front of the SUV's headlights was a person dressed in a long-sleeved black shirt and jeans, wearing a mask of a horrifying demon. He was also wearing gloves that made his fingers look freakishly long with sharp, pointed nails. Standing next to the demon was another person dressed in black and wearing a terrifying mask of a bald old man. He wore black gloves and an unbuttoned long-sleeved flannel shirt over a black one. They were slowly walking toward Jace and Rateesh.

Rateesh instinctively turned around to run in the other direction and was once again frozen with fear. Coming up behind them was the skeleton and a fourth person dressed all in black with bright white gloves and a creepy clown mask. The masks were all equipped with some sort of voice-altering mechanism, and when they spoke, it sounded low, gruff, mechanical--and demonic.

"Where do you think you're going?" the clown asked.

Rateesh stepped back to stand close to Jace, who didn't know which way to turn as their assailants were closing in around them. Jace put his hands up in front of him. He tried to calm his mind and think of a scripture that he could use as he had seen Brielle do, but he couldn't think of anything. "Look, we don't want any trouble," he said.

"You have more trouble than you could possibly imagine," the clown said.

At that moment, the old man's face and the demon's face grabbed Jace from behind, forcing him down to the ground. As Jace tried to fight his attackers and break free, the other two grabbed Rateesh. One held him with his arms pinned behind his back while the other one punched him repeatedly in the face and ribs.

"NO!" Jace yelled, "Leave him alone!"

Jace was quickly subdued by his attackers, who took turns striking him in the face and head. He began to lose his orientation. Looking through blurry eyes, he tried to stay alert and focused.

"God, please help us," he said, spitting blood onto the black road beneath him.

The demon growled in his electronic voice, "God can't help you right now, so shut up!" he laughed, kicking Jace in the stomach. Jace lifted his head to watch as Rateesh's small fourteen-year-old body was struck again and again, finally crumpling to the pavement in a limp mass.

While Jace's assailants held him down on his knees, the clown kicked Rateesh repeatedly over and over again in his side. Jace could hear the impact of the clown's feet pummeling Rateesh's ribs. It was more than he could bear. He tried to stay alert, but everything around him seemed to be moving in slow motion.

Then the skeleton, who had been holding Rateesh, began to talk to the clown.

"Hey, that's enough," he said, "Stop it! You're gonna kill him!" The clown then turned on the skeleton. "You want to be next?" he asked.

The skeleton backed up from the clown.

"This wasn't the plan!" he shouted.

The clown turned his wicked face toward the Skeleton and walked over to him, grabbing him by the shirt. "Shut your mouth and do your part," he said, throwing him backward.

The skeleton stumbled back and fell to the ground, the clown hovering over him in intimidation, then he went back to kicking Rateesh.

Jace locked eyes with Rateesh for a moment and could see life slowly ebbing out of him with every blow the clown delivered. He knew Rateesh didn't have much time left. At last, a scripture came to his mind, and he began to whisper it to himself.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," he said, growing louder, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, Philippians 4:13," he repeated, growing stronger and rising to break free of his captors hold, punching one in the face and back kicking the other in the stomach. Jace ran straight at the clown, hitting him hard and tackling him to the ground. He wrestled with the clown violently, finally pinning him to the pavement. As he did, the skeleton got up off the

ground and ran into the woods.

The clown broke his arm free and reached up to punch Jace in the face, but Jace didn't falter. He pinned the clown back down, determined to pull the assailant's mask off his face and reveal his identity. The clown held onto his mask with both hands, calling out to his partners for help.

As Jace wrestled with the masked assailant, he suddenly felt an excruciating pain on the side of his head. It froze him in place, stunning him completely. His blurry eyes tried to focus on the objects around him. The world began to spin around, and he felt again as if everything was moving in slow motion. He fell like a stone to the hard blacktop road, his head bouncing on the pavement as he landed. As he lay on the hard, cold road, he watched as a club-like tree branch landed on the ground in front of him, dropped by the long fingers of the demon attacker.

Jace tried to stay awake, not letting his eyes shut for fear that he would never open them again. He could see the feet of his attackers moving around in front of him and could hear their mechanical voices speaking, but was still too dazed by the blow to his head to understand what they were saying.

Jace watched, unable to move, as one of them walked over to stand in front of Rateesh for a moment. It was the clown, he was looking down at him curiously, unsure if Rateesh was going to live or die, but the clown seemed unaffected whether he did or not. The clown then walked over and stood in front of Jace, who could only lift his eyes as high as the clown's feet, which were placed directly in front of him. Jace didn't look up; he couldn't. The pain coming from his head was overwhelming. He just lay there on the road and stared at the feet standing in front of him.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he heard one of the strange voices calling to the clown who was hovering over him. The feet stayed in front of him for a moment, then they slowly turned and left. Jace heard the sound of his SUV doors slamming, and the headlights, which had shown brightly all around them, began to move away. They were stealing his father's vehicle. As he heard the engine fading in the distance, he began to panic. In his befuddled mind, he knew the SUV didn't mean anything; it could be replaced. But Rateesh could not; his life hung in the balance, and Jace's phone was inside the SUV. If Rateesh did not have a cell phone, they had no way to call anyone for help.

The bright full moon shone down brilliantly upon them, and he could see that Rateesh was severely injured. He tried to focus his mind to the scriptures he had just whispered earlier, Philippians 4:13, *'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'.* He began to recite the verse to himself over and over. As he did, he found the strength to get up and crawl over to Rateesh, leaving a trail of blood behind him from his injured head. When he finally reached the boy, he was not moving. Jace could hear in his breathing that his lungs were full of fluid as they rattled with every struggling breath. Rateesh began to cough, making a

strange gurgling noise as he did. Jace could see in the moonlight that he was coughing up blood as it covered his chin and ran down his neck.

Gently, he unbuttoned Rateesh's shirt and felt his chest, immediately pulling his hands back in shock at what he discovered. The right side of Rateesh's rib cage was caved in. His ribs had been crushed by the repeated kicking of the wicked assailant. Jace believed his lung had been punctured and was filling up with blood. He knew that Rateesh didn't have much time.

"My phone was in the SUV," Jace whispered, "just lie still. I'm going to check to see if you have yours with you."

Rateesh could not speak to respond to his statement. Jace quickly checked his pockets but found nothing.

Jace lifted his face up to the moonlit, star-filled sky, tears filling his eyes. They were stranded in the dark without any help, and unless someone happened to come by, Rateesh would not make it. He brushed away the flow of blood from his left eye that was pouring down his head. He also knew that if help didn't come in time, Rateesh wouldn't be the only one who wouldn't make it.

"Father God," he whispered, "please help us. Please help my friend Rateesh. I don't know what to do. We need You and we need You right now."

He lowered his head, placed his hand on his own profusely bleeding wound, closed his eyes, trying to focus on Jesus and listen to the direction of the Holy Spirit. As he did, his mind traveled back to the Prayer Sanctum. He remembered Obadiah teaching him how to use his spiritual gifts of healing. "*The gift of healing is much more than just becoming a doctor*," Obadiah said, "*…being a doctor is not the only way to utilize your spiritual gift…there is no greater tool than prayer for any circumstance… it is most important that you learn how to pray as Jesus commanded us to and lay hands on people when we pray."*

Jace's eyes opened, and he looked down at his dying friend. The Holy Spirit had spoken to him, and he knew what he had to do.

"Rateesh," he whispered, "I know you don't believe in Jesus, but I do. I know that He is real and so is His power. So, I am going to pray for you now," he said slowly, gently placing his hands on both sides of Rateesh's rib cage. Then he began to pray.

"Lord Jesus, I come to you with my friend Rateesh. You know he has been severely injured by evil hands. Although he does not serve You; I know that You love him dearly. Your Word says in Matthew 7:7 '*Ask, and it shall be given to you'*; and so, I ask you Lord, please heal Rateesh. Right now, in the Mighty Name of Jesus, I ask you to heal my friend," he whispered, then he placed both hands carefully over the crushed side of Rateesh's ribcage and said, "'*He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by His stripes we are healed.' Isaiah 53:5."*

Jace lowered his head and closed his eyes, his hands still in place on

Rateesh's broken ribs.

Slowly, he raised his head, and his eyes opened wide, full of amazement. For underneath his hands, he felt Rateesh's rib cage moving. The crushed bones slowly began to restore to their regular shape and position. The concaved section of Rateesh's chest began gradually filling in under Jace's hands until finally, his ribcage felt just as normal and complete as the other side. Jace's hands began to tremble violently from the miracle power of Jesus Christ that he felt working through them. Jace knew that it was nothing he was doing. The miraculous healing power of Jesus Christ had completely healed his friend.

Rateesh's struggle of gasping breath began to even out until he was breathing steadily without complication. He lay there in silent shock for a moment, then slowly turned his head to look at Jace, both of them were completely overwhelmed by what had just happened.

Jace's tear-filled eyes sparkled as he smiled and began giving praise to the Lord.

"Thank You, Jesus, thank You, thank You Lord," he whispered over and over again, sobbing as he spoke. The joy of the miracle overtook him completely, so much so that he didn't even feel the pain in his head anymore.

Rateesh rolled over and up onto his elbow, tears streaming down his face. He stared at Jace momentarily, silent, still not sure of how to express his feelings about what he had just experienced. Then he grabbed Jace and hugged him close, his voice quivering with emotion.

"Thank you, Jace," he whispered, "Thank you for praying for me… and thank… thank You… Jesus."

The party at Brielle's house was a tremendous success. Everyone was astonished at the magnificent display of Christian artistry that Obadiah and the family had created for the evening. The house was brilliantly aglow with intricately carved pumpkins, which illuminated a variety of artistic crosses, hearts, angels, and the words 'Jesus Loves You'. The colorful orange pumpkins brightly communicated the love of Jesus to all who saw them.

Obadiah did exactly as he said that Halloween night-- as he had for many Halloween nights before. He welcomed his neighbors and all visitors who came to his home. Though there were not a lot of local neighbors in their isolated neighborhood, his reputation for his version of what a Halloween night could be had spread throughout Fairfield over the years. People all over town made plans to drive out and bring their families to visit his home, and it wasn't just because of the festivities there, but because they truly felt a loving presence from Obadiah and the rest of his family; the presence of God.

Genevieve, dressed as Betsy Ross, had several volunteers from the church who came to help her keep the food hot and ready to eat.

Asher, dressed as a cowboy, was leading Apache around the corral to give

rides to the children.

Magomu, dressed as a Renaissance Knight, manned the safety of the bounce house they rented for the event. Alma, dressed as a Renaissance Lady to match Magomu, distributed hot chocolate and warm apple cider.

Gideon came as a Union soldier from the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, inspired by his authentic Civil War haversack.

Keoni came dressed as a 1920s jazz singer in a beautiful teal colored, flapper-style dress and gold beaded headband that had a beautiful peacock plume on it. She was stunning.

Brielle was dressed as a sock-hop girl of the 1950's complete with ponytail, saddle shoes, and pink poodle skirt. She, Keoni, and Gideon were playing games with the children on the basketball court. Obadiah, dressed as a 1940s baseball player, welcomed all who came and gave out treats. With every treat he gave, he also included a beautifully illustrated 'Jesus LOVES you!' tract for each child and adult. He loved Halloween night and did not hide from it, for it was, as he believed, a wonderful opportunity to have people come to his door to minister to. Everyone received their gifts warmly.

As Brielle, Keoni, and Gideon were playing games with the children on the basketball court, Brielle kept watching for Jace.

"What time is it?" she asked Keoni.

"I don't know. A watch or phone doesn't really go with my costume," she laughed.

"I left my phone in the house," Gideon said, heading toward the house. "I'll check and see."

Keoni saw the anxiousness in her friend. "What time did Jace say he would be here?" she asked.

"He said that he had a few things to do for his father, and then he was going to pick Rateesh up from his restaurant at six o'clock," she answered.

Just then, Gideon came back, "It's seven-fifteen," he said.

"Wow, I lost track of time," Brielle said.

"I just tried calling Jace, but he's not answering his phone; it just goes directly to his voicemail," Gideon said.

Brielle stopped playing her game. "How many times did you try calling him?" she asked.

"Three," he replied. "But you never know, his battery could just be dead or something."

"Maybe," Brielle said, "but I'm going to try and call Rateesh."

Brielle left her games with the children and went inside to call Rateesh's phone. She only received his answering message. Now she was concerned. She quickly looked up the number for Dilli Rasoi. The phone was answered by a voice that she believed to be that of Rateesh's brother, Nakul. She cleared her throat and politely asked to speak to Priyanka. Brielle took a deep breath while the man

on the phone went to fetch her.

"Hello?" Priyanka answered.

"Hello, yes, Priyanka? This is Brielle St. Claire, Rateesh's friend," she said.

"Hi! How are you?" Priyanka asked.

"I'm good, I was just wondering if Jace had picked up Rateesh for our party tonight?" she asked.

"Yes, they left well over an hour ago," Priyanka said.

Brielle's heart began to pound. "Really? Oh, well, they haven't arrived yet and I've been trying to call them, but neither one of them is picking up their phones."

Priyanka thought for a moment, her tone now sounding concerned as well, "That's strange. Maybe they stopped to pick something up before they came. I sent a bag of food with Rateesh. was Jace supposed to bring something?"

"Yes, he was going to bring hot dogs and buns," Brielle said.

"Hmm, maybe they went to do that after they left here," Priyanka suggested. "I will keep trying, Rateesh, and if I get him, I will have him call you immediately."

"Okay," Brielle said, "If I get him, I'll do the same. Thank you so much."

As she hung up the phone, she tried to tell herself that everything was fine. If something was wrong, Jace would call her to let her know. She took a moment to pray over them that God would keep them safe, and everything would be alright. She was sure that Jace would pull up in front of her house soon. So, she went back outside to join all the fun and laughter of the children who had come to their house for the evening.

Jace and Rateesh moved to the side of the road to make sure they were not in the way of anyone driving by, but still in sight to be seen so they could flag down help. Jace was growing weaker by the minute. His head was still bleeding profusely. He placed his hand on his head and began to pray for himself, asking God to please send someone to help them and to heal his injury. Rateesh watched and listened intently to everything Jace did and said.

It hadn't been five minutes that passed when suddenly, they heard in the distance the sound of sirens. The sound drew closer and closer until finally they could see the flashing lights of the ambulance in the distance. Rateesh, still sore in some places, stood up and began to wave his arms. The paramedics were there for *them*. Once again, Rateesh was speechless. First, he had experienced a personal miracle of the healing power of Jesus Christ, and now Jace's prayer produced for them the help he asked for. Even though he was very concerned for his friend's injuries, he was somehow filled with a powerful joy and amazement from all he had witnessed Jesus do that night.

The paramedics blocked off the road and immediately began to assess

Jace's condition. Jace was just as full of joy as Rateesh and felt a complete relief that God had them in His hands and was taking care of them. They were going to be alright.

When they reached the hospital emergency room, the staff tried to contact Jace's father, but his father was still out of town. Even though they could not reach his father, his injuries were serious enough that they administered treatment anyway. Rateesh's family was contacted immediately, and he was checked over completely from head to toe. His face was still terribly bruised from his attackers, but other than that, he looked to be OK. The doctors were concerned about some bruising on his ribs and ordered an X-ray. While he waited to be taken to the Radiology Department, the doctors treated Jace's head. He had a severe gash on the side of his forehead that required stitches. The doctors were also concerned about the amount of blood that Jace lost and ordered a blood transfusion. He was so weak and in so much pain, he had to close his eyes to rest.

It wasn't long before Rateesh's family arrived; all were concerned but thrilled to see that Rateesh was alright. The emergency room only allowed two visitors at a time to be back with Rateesh, so after his sister and brother saw that he was okay, his mother and father stayed with him.

While they were there, Hadley came into the emergency room in uniform. He introduced himself to Rateesh's family and told them that he had some questions to ask their son about their attack.

"How did you know we were attacked?" Rateesh asked quickly, knowing that neither he nor Jace had called anyone to report what happened.

"We received an anonymous call that there were two young men on Schnebly Hill Road who had been assaulted and robbed," Hadley said.

Rateesh stared at him in confusion, trying to remember who might have seen this to report it. They were in an isolated part of town on a stretch of road that went through the woods. No one drove by, and he could remember no one else being there.

Hadley studied the expression on Rateesh's face. "Are you alright, Rateesh?" he asked gently.

"Yes," Rateesh answered, "I'm sorry, I just…"

Hadley waited patiently for his answer.

"I just don't remember anyone else being there but…" he trailed off, looking at his parents.

Hadley looked over at his father and mother, who were shaken and distraught over their son's situation.

"You don't remember anyone else being there but who?" Hadley asked softly.

Rateesh looked back at Hadley, still searching his mind through the recent horrific events. "But our attackers," he finally answered. "There was no one else

there, no one else drove by--but I think one of them left."

"One of your attackers?" Hadley asked.

"Yes, he said something… I can't quite remember what it was, but I know he ran away," Rateesh said.

"Someone knew what had happened and contacted the police department. That was how the paramedics were able to find you and come to help," Hadley said. Just then, Rateesh was taken back for his X-ray. Hadley spoke momentarily with Rateesh's parents while he waited for him to return.

"I will need to talk to your son to get a full statement of what happened tonight, but we will wait until he has been treated to do so," Hadley said gently. Then he walked over to talk to Jace.

"How are you doing, Jace?" Hadley asked sweetly.

Jace slowly opened his eyes to see Hadley standing beside his bed. His left eye was now so swollen that it would barely open at all.

"I've been better," Jace said slowly with a slight smile.

"I won't bother you with any questions right now," Hadley said kindly, "You just rest, and I'll talk to you later."

"Thank you," Jace answered. Hadley turned to walk away, and then Jace said, "Officer?"

"Yes," Hadley said.

"My father and mother are currently out of the country, and the hospital can't reach my uncle, who is here. I was wondering if you might call Brielle and her family to let them know what happened?" he asked in a weak voice.

Hadley smiled, "Absolutely, I'll contact them right now. You just rest."

Back at the party, Brielle was outside with the others, serving and ministering to all the happy visitors in costume who had come to play at their Halloween event. She was just in the middle of playing another game when she saw Gideon come running toward her across the yard. When she saw his face, she knew from his expression that something was terribly wrong.

"Obadiah just got a call from Hadley," he said out of breath. "There was an attack on Jace and Rateesh; they are in the hospital."

Brielle instantly felt as if she had been transported out of her body and was experiencing something in a nightmare. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and her hands began to tremble.

"Are they alright?" she could barely whisper.

"I don't know everything, but Hadley said that Jace had a severe head injury and Rateesh was pretty bruised and banged up. Jace's parents are out of the country, and he asked Hadley to call you," Gideon said.

Obadiah and Genevieve headed for the hospital in Obadiah's truck while Keoni drove Gideon and Brielle. Alma, Magomu, and Asher were going to stay and take care of the guests for the rest of the evening. Brielle was a nervous wreck. She couldn't concentrate on anything, and she felt sick to her stomach.

Not only was it horrific news to know that Rateesh and Jace had been injured, but Jace was there alone without any family to be with him.

"I'm sure they are going to be alright," Keoni said encouragingly, "if not, Hadley would have told Obadiah."

Brielle didn't respond. All she could think about was getting to Jace. She needed to be with him. As Keoni drove to the hospital, the three Intercessors began to whisper their prayers for their two friends.

In the hospital, Jace closed his eyes and tried to rest. All he could think about was talking to Brielle. If he could just hear her voice or see her for just a moment, it would help him so much. His head was wrapped tightly in bandages, and it pulsated with pain. The nurse had come to set up his IV and begin his blood transfusion. She explained that he was going to have to be admitted to the hospital due to the severity of his injury and that they were trying to do everything they could to get in touch with his parents. Jace closed his eyes and slept.

After what seemed like only a few minutes, he was awakened by the sound of Rateesh's voice.

"Jace, Jace," he whispered, "are you alright?"

Jace slowly opened his eyes to see Rateesh sitting on the doctor's stool next to his bed.

Jace looked at him and smiled, "Seeing you sitting here next to me, alive and well, makes me feel pretty good-- no matter how I look," he whispered.

Rateesh smiled back, tears filling his eyes.

"I needed to come and talk to you, about… about what all happened tonight," he began.

"Okay," Jace listened.

"The doctors just came back and went over my X-rays. They said that everything looks perfect and that I only have a few bumps and bruises here and there," he paused.

Jace smiled slightly again.

"They just wanted to know…" he trailed off, trying not to cry as he spoke. "They just wanted to know if I had been attacked like this before or had some other sort of accident."

"Why did they ask that?" Jace asked curiously.

Rateesh could not hold back the tears. He sniffed as he spoke, "Because of the scar tissue they found on my lung and ribs. They said that it looked like my ribs had been severely broken at one time and had punctured my lung. They wanted to know how long ago that accident happened." he paused, completely overcome with emotion. "I have no idea how to tell them that it just happened a few hours ago."

Jace took in his words, and as he listened to what Rateesh said, a broad

smile began to spread across his face. “Because you are afraid, they won’t believe you, right?” he asked.

Rateesh nodded.

“I can’t help you with that, Rateesh. That miracle was a gift that Jesus gave to you. You are the one who needs to learn how to accept it and to tell it,” Jace said.

Rateesh nodded. “I need to know something. When you prayed for me, I heard you say something. I can’t remember everything, but I thought I heard you say something that ended like, *‘by His stripes we are healed.*’”

“Yes, that is a scripture from the Bible. It is found in the book of Isaiah, chapter 53, verse 5. It says, ‘*But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by His stripes we are healed,’”* Jace said slowly.

“Yes, what does that mean?” Rateesh asked sincerely.

Jace felt the gentleness of the Holy Spirit upon him, seizing the moment to be able to teach his friend about the love and sacrifice of Jesus. Although he was still weak, he spoke with perfect clarity.

“Jesus came to earth to die for our sins. He came here for every person who lived so that if they believed in Him and asked Him into their heart, they could receive everlasting life. There is a scripture that teaches this in the book of John, chapter 3, verse 16; ‘*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever would believe in Him would never die but have everlasting life.’* Jesus knew that He was coming to earth to die before He came. But He came anyway because He loves us that much.

“His death was… well, there aren’t words to describe it. It was the most horrible death that anyone could endure. But it had to happen to complete God’s plan of Salvation. Part of that plan of death included Jesus to be scourged, as the Bible says, or whipped severely. He was beaten with a whip called the cat of nine tails, which is a Roman whipping tool that had nine separate leather straps attached to one handle. On each strap, there were shards of metal and bone, things that would tear the flesh.

“As they beat him with the cat of nine tails, it cut open his skin, leaving torn, jagged stripes across his body. The Bible teaches us that because Jesus did this for us, we can now come to Him to ask for healing, for ourselves and others. You saw tonight that the miracles of Jesus are still happening and are not just stories of the past,” Jace finished.

“But why did Jesus heal me? He answered your prayer to heal me. He answered your prayer to send us help, but He didn’t answer your prayer for healing for yourself. You are the one who serves Him, but He chose to heal me instead. I don’t understand that,” Rateesh said.

Jace looked directly into Rateesh’s eyes, very focused now but still speaking softly. “You have heard the expression that God works in mysterious ways, and

this is one of them. Everything happens for a reason, Rateesh. He will still heal me; my healing might not be miraculous like yours, but He will still heal me. He's healing me now. I'm already in better shape than I was an hour ago. Perhaps Jesus healed you instantly instead of me because I already know Him. I know He is real and that His love and power are real too. I believe in Him… but you didn't."

Rateesh put his hand on Jace's bed and pulled himself closer. "I do now," he whispered sincerely, his eyes welling up with tears. "I know that what I experienced tonight was *real*. I knew I was *dying*. I could feel my life slowly draining out of me, and then…"

"And then Jesus came to you and healed you," Jace said.

"I've never heard of anything like that happening before, not ever," Rateesh said.

"Oba says many people don't," Jace said, "Because they've stopped believing in miracles."

Rateesh dried his eyes on his sleeve. "The hospital is going to send me home tonight, but they said you have to stay here."

"Yeah, I'm okay with that," Jace said softly, touching his head, "I think I need to."

"Before I go home, I…" Rateesh paused, searching for words.

Jace looked at him, waiting for him to finish.

Rateesh took a deep breath and sighed, "I want to do what you said. I want to ask Jesus into my heart."

Jace's battered face lit up, his heart overflowing with joy. He had been propped up in his bed to help prevent swelling, so he reached over his bed rail and took hold of Rateesh's hand.

"Would you like to pray with me now?" he asked him softly.

"Yes," Rateesh smiled, "Yes. I want to live for Jesus."

Jace began to pray the prayer for salvation, having Rateesh repeat after him as he did, and there in that corner of a hospital emergency room, a life was changed forever. Only God could do something like this. Take a horrible situation that walked through the valley of the shadow of death and turn it into something so beautiful, a soul being won for Christ Jesus. Through this tragedy, Jesus introduced Himself to Rateesh in a powerful--but loving way, always the perfect gentleman, and now, Rateesh was opening his heart to receive Him.

Though Jace and Rateesh couldn't hear them, the heavens expounded with the rejoicing of angels as another soul was won for the Kingdom of God.

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When Rateesh opened his eyes, it was as if the world had changed. Everything seemed new and wonderful. The truth was that the world was just the same as before, but the change had come inside his heart. Asking Jesus into his heart gave him a different perspective on things. He felt happiness like he had never felt, not ever in his entire life. He felt peace and comfort, even in this stressful and intense situation, but most of all, he felt hope. Hope for a new life that he had found with Jesus. Hope that Jesus could help him with this situation, which had brought him such fear and pain.

Rateesh now understood why Brielle talked about Him so much; he understood why she and Jace, Gideon, and Keoni seemed to shine from the inside out. He realized the moment he received his healing that Jesus was real and that Jesus loved *him.* He had experienced a miracle like he had never heard of before. He knew that it was because of the loving, healing power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Gently, Rateesh reached over, grabbed Jace, and hugged him close until he heard the nurse's voice behind him.

"Rateesh, the doctor would like to see you now," she said.

Rateesh looked at Jace, "Are you going to be alright?" he asked.

Jace smiled at his friend, "After everything that God has done for us tonight? Yeah, I'm going to be just fine."

"I'll try to come and see you tomorrow," Rateesh said, "Get some rest." He turned to walk out of the room but stopped, "Jace…"

"Yeah," Jace answered.

"Thank you. Thank you for believing in Jesus so much and for bringing me to Him," he said. As he left, he was smiling and seemed to shine from the inside out.

Jace was, too.

It wasn't long before Rateesh was sent home. The doctors found no cause to keep him as he only showed signs of bumps and bruises, nothing serious. But his small injuries were evidence that an attack had taken place and that something violent had happened to him. The x-rays of his lung and ribs, which showed the scar tissue from his injury, proved he was healed as well. Though Rateesh didn't know how to try and explain the miracle he received from the healing power of Jesus Christ to his doctor, his family, or anyone else, he knew what happened was real, and it changed him forever.

Rateesh didn't know if his family would ever believe what had happened to him, but he knew he had to find a way to tell them. His parents were already confused as to why the X-ray of his ribs and lungs showed the scars of having healed from such a severe injury. They would keep pressing him until he explained it.

Rateesh came from generations of strong believers in the Hindu religion, and his family members were very grounded in the traditions of their faith. To explain that he now believed differently was something that could cause him to be separated from his family. Of course, they would always love him, but their relationships might not be the same. After what he experienced in his physical healing and also in his spiritual heart, he understood and believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of the one true Living God, and he wanted to know everything he could about Him.

When Rateesh went home, Jace was left alone in the hospital. The doctors had told him that he would have to stay overnight to be observed after such a serious injury to his head. He had a severe concussion, and it took twelve stitches to close the gash. He also received a few stitches on his cheek to close another small gash he had from being struck in the face.

He tried to close his eyes and rest, but every time he did, he kept reliving the assault. Exhaustion was taking control of him along with the pain meds the doctor had given him, and his head was pounding. This time, as he closed his eyes, he thought of Brielle.

As he fell asleep, he began to dream of her. He dreamed they were walking along the beach. He was holding her hand, and the sun was setting. She ran into the water and playfully splashed him, running away from him as she did. He began to chase after her, and she tripped and tumbled to the ground. He ran over and picked her up in his arms, gently standing her on her feet again. He looked down into her brilliant green eyes and pulled the hair back from her face. Slowly bringing his face down to meet hers, he tenderly caressed his lips along her cheek. She looked up at him and placed her hands on his chest. They gazed into each other's eyes. Jace brought his lips to hers, kissing her delicately. Her lips were warm and sweet. Then suddenly, Brielle pulled her lips away from his and, burying her face in her hands, she began to cry very softly.

"Brielle," he whispered, "Brielle."

"Yes, Jace," she answered, "I'm here."

Jace felt the light touch of her hand upon his, and he realized that he wasn't dreaming anymore; Brielle was there with him. Slowly, he opened his eyes but found he could only open one as his other was now swollen shut. He tried to focus on the objects in the room. He looked over to his right, and there, sitting next to his bed holding his hand, was Brielle. Tears were streaming down her face as she looked at him. The sound he had heard of her crying was real as she sat next to his bedside. When he realized he wasn't dreaming and that she was there with him, holding his hand in hers, he tried to smile as much as he could without too much pain. He sighed in relief. This is what he asked God for; this is what he *always* asked for: to see her beautiful face again.

"There you are," he whispered. "I was just dreaming of you."

Brielle took his hand and held it in both of hers. "I came as soon as I heard

what happened," she said softly, trying to speak through her tears. "We all did; Gideon, Keoni, Mama, and Oba, they are all out in the waiting room," she comforted.

"Really?" Jace whispered.

"Yes. Asher, Magomu, and Alma wanted to come and send you their love and prayers. But they stayed to take care of the guests at the house."

With everything that had happened, Jace had forgotten completely about the party. Brielle's words reminded him that that is where he and Rateesh were headed when this all took place.

"Oh yeah," he said softly, "I couldn't wait to see Obadiah's pumpkin display."

Brielle smiled through her tears, "Don't worry, he will leave it up for you," she said meekly.

The sight of him like this was more than she could bear. His left eye was swollen shut, and the bandages the doctor had placed on him wrapped all around his head. His lips were cut and swollen on the left side, and there was a large bruise forming on his right cheekbone surrounding his stitches. As Brielle held his hand, she looked at his knuckles; they too were red, swollen, and bruised from all the punches he had landed on his assailants.

"The doctor says that you have to stay here tonight, maybe a little longer depending on how you do," she said, "But they reached your father, and he is making arrangements for you to stay with us until he comes home."

Once again, Jace smiled. The thought of being with Brielle constantly would be the best medicine he could get, but not just her alone, to be with her family in their lovely home as well.

"The nurses will only let a couple of us come back at a time," she said, "so I'm going to let some of the others come in to see you. But before I do, I'm going to pray for you."

Brielle took one of her hands and gently placed it on his bandaged head. Then she prayed. Jace felt the beautiful presence of the Lord there with them as she did. After seeing Rateesh's miraculous healing, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus would heal him too. It may not be an instant, miraculous healing like with Rateesh, but he knew his healing would come, it would be complete, and he would be fine. His faith was now completely unshakable.

When she was finished, Brielle dried her eyes and stood up to leave the room, but Jace held tightly to her hand.

"Will you come back?" he asked.

Brielle looked down at him, even in this condition, he was still beautiful. She nodded sweetly, "Yes, I'll come back."

One by one, Jace's friends came in to see him, each one taking their time to pray for him. The first one was Genevieve. When she saw him, she burst into

tears. She was heartbroken that anyone would hurt him, and because he had no mother or father there to help him through it.

She sat with him for a while and opened her heart to him. Telling him how much she appreciated him, how wonderful he was, and how much she had come to love him. Jace was overwhelmed by her words. For even though his parents had told him from time to time that they loved him, they had never spoken things like this to him before. He couldn't remember anyone speaking like this to him before, outside of his grandmother.

After she prayed for him, she kissed him on the cheek and assured him that he could come home with them and stay as long as he needed. She would be there to take care of him, they all would.

Jace felt the power of God surrounding him as he lay in the hospital bed. He embraced it. He remembered the scripture that Obadiah had taught him: "Psalm 46:10 *'Be still and know that I am God.'* This was easily done at the moment. He could do nothing else but be still, and after his experience tonight-- and all the other times he had witnessed God's power, he *knew* without doubt that God and His Son Jesus Christ were *real*.

As he lay there, he thought about something. Before he had these experiences with God and had seen for himself the evidence of God's power, he still believed. As he had grown older, he had fallen away from his relationship with Jesus-- but he always believed. That was important to remember and something that should be taught to others, that even if they never see a miracle of God, it doesn't mean He isn't real.

After Genevieve left, Keoni was next, then Gideon, and the last person to visit with him was Obadiah.

When Obadiah saw him, his reaction wasn't that much different than Genevieve's, only less crying. He was heartbroken for the boy and wanted to do everything he could to help him. Obadiah explained that he had been in touch with Jace's father and had received permission to take him to his home until he returned.

"Is my father coming home at all?" Jace asked.

"He said he is working on it and he will be here as soon as he can," Obadiah said. "But you are welcome to stay with us as long as you need. I know that Vivi is already learning from the nurses how to care for your injuries."

"He hasn't called me yet," Jace whispered.

"Your father did call to speak to you. The nurse told me that she came in to see if you were able to speak with him, but you were sleeping, and she didn't disturb you. He said he would call you back," Obadiah explained, making sure Jace knew that his father had tried to speak with him.

"He is deeply worried about you," Obadiah said, "and was very grateful that we were here to help you."

"Thank you," Jace whispered, overwhelmed at all the love and affection he

was receiving from everyone.

"You are more than welcome, son," Obadiah said. Then he, too, gently placed his hands on Jace and spent time in prayer for him to recover.

After Obadiah left, Brielle came back into the room. Although his head ached horribly, Jace's heart was bursting with love and joy. His heart was always filled with the love of Jesus, but he realized how important it is to have people around you to love you as well. This was something he hadn't had in his life for a long time.

Brielle sat down next to him and saw the look on his face. "Are you alright? Are you in pain?"

"Yes—no, I'm…" Jace stammered, trying to get hold of his thoughts and feelings. Then he took a slow, deep breath.

"Yes, my head hurts, but I'm not suffering with it," he said.

Brielle looked at him with a puzzled expression. "Do you think we need to have the doctor come in and check you? Because you're not making any sense."

Jace laughed softly, "I'm sure I'm not. It's hard for me to explain things."

Brielle took his hand back in hers, "Yes, I've noticed this already," she teased. "But what do you mean? Are you in pain? Can I get you anything?"

"I'm not sure I can tell you what I feel right now," he said. "I'm just a little… overwhelmed by everyone coming here to see me and everything."

Brielle nodded, "Well, if it was attention you were seeking, I could think of about a million other ways you could get it," she laughed lightly.

Jace grinned, "It's just incredible how, through something so bad…" he paused, thinking about the attack, "God can use it to do something so good."

"He works in mysterious ways," Brielle said.

Jace nodded. "I have so much to tell you about tonight, so many things happened, I just…"

"No, it's alright. You just rest right now, we can talk about it later," she said.

"I'm glad you're here," he whispered.

"I'm glad *you're* here," she said, then thinking about her statement, retracted, "I mean, I'm not glad that you're here in this hospital, but that you're alive and…"

"I know," Jace said, lightly squeezing her hand and closing his good eye to rest. "Me too."

The next day, everyone was anxious to go to the hospital to see Jace. Keoni remarked how she had never been to the hospital as much as she had in the past few months, first with visiting Lacy, then Dylan, and now Jace.

Asher couldn't wait to see Jace. He had been worried all night after hearing the news of what had happened. Genevieve and Brielle had prepared him that he didn't look good because he had been badly beaten. But when the family arrived at the hospital, they were pleasantly surprised to see that Jace had spent the night in his own room and was sitting up in his bed, alert and ready to leave.

The doctor explained to Obadiah that his father had arranged it with the hospital for Jace to be released into his custody. Then he explained that Jace still had a concussion and would need to take it easy for the next several days. As he was talking, a nurse came in to teach Genevieve and Brielle how to care for his wound. They listened closely to her instructions.

"Mr. O'Sullivan," the doctor said, "if you will come with me, there are some hospital forms I will need you to sign for his release."

Obadiah followed the doctor out the door while the rest of the group stayed and listened to the nurse.

"It's time right now to change his bandages," the nurse said, "Why don't you watch me, and I will show you what to do."

Keoni got up to excuse herself, "I'm just going to step outside for a moment," she said as she quickly headed for the door.

Jace looked over at Gideon, "Is she okay?"

"She will be if she leaves," he said, "otherwise we'll be picking her up off the floor."

"She can't take stuff like this," Brielle told him.

"Nope, not one bit. She stuck her finger with a needle the other day, and when she saw her own blood, I thought she was going to pass out," Gideon said.

"Really?" Jace asked.

"Really," Brielle confirmed. "She can't handle anything to do with blood, injuries, or broken bones. She can't take it."

"She needs healthy people in one piece," Gideon laughed.

"Then you want to make sure you don't have her around when you do this," the nurse said as she removed the last piece of bandage that covered Jace's head.

Everyone in the room, except the nurse, gasped when they saw the extent of Jace's injury. His eye was still swollen, but looked a bit better today, and the stitches on his cheekbone weren't quite as puffy either. But the large gash from being bludgeoned with the tree branch had done more severe damage. The cut on his head started from just above his left ear and extended up to just above his left eyebrow.

"Aww! *Man*!" Gideon exclaimed when he saw Jace's wound, "What'd they hit you with, a chainsaw?"

Brielle shot Gideon a look and then took Jace's hand in hers. "Don't worry," she said, "You will heal."

"Yes, you will," the nurse agreed, "I know you may not feel like it right now, but you will."

"I know I will," Jace said, "I have no doubts about that. Jesus will heal me."

"Good," the nurse said, stepping back to get some new bandages. She looked at him carefully as she worked. "You know, I think I saw you both here once before, didn't I?" she asked, looking at both Jace and Brielle. "You were

here one day, and I saw you in the lobby."

"Oh… yes," Brielle said, recognizing the nurse from the day they came to visit Lacy. "We were here to visit our friend who is also here in the ICU."

The nurse nodded and smiled, "You looked familiar to me."

"Well, that's a miracle," Gideon remarked, "especially since he looks like this. He's my best friend, and I hardly recognized him at all."

Brielle turned to give Gideon a polite glare. "Would you please hush?" she said softly with a smile.

Genevieve patted Jace's foot at the end of the bed, "He's still just as handsome as ever."

"Yes, he is…" Gideon agreed, "With those stitches across his head and face, all he needs are two little bolts sticking out of his neck and to be painted green. He'd make one hot Frankenstein."

Jace started laughing.

Brielle turned to Gideon again, "I'm about to give *you* a need for stitches if you don't hush."

"It's all good," Gideon joked, "Jace knows he's my man… I'm just keeping it real."

Just then, Keoni cracked open the door. "Is it safe to come back in?"

"No," they all answered together.

"He still has to be mummified in gauze," Gideon added.

Brielle rolled her eyes and looked at the nurse, "Ma'am, is there any chance you have enough gauze to wrap around his mouth?" she asked.

The nurse and Jace laughed again at his friend's teasing.

"They say that laughter is the best medicine," the nurse said, "I guess as long as Jace is okay with it, you should keep this guy around."

Gideon smiled childishly at Brielle. She half expected him to stick his tongue out at her.

"Great, just what he needs, validation," she said.

Finally, the nurse finished, "There, all set," she remarked, "You will need to keep the bandages on and change them at least once a day to keep the wound clean and dry. Head wounds tend to seep blood because it is an area rich in blood vessels. You will need to keep the sutures clean and protected until they are removed. The doctor will let you know for sure, but they usually must stay in for seven to ten days. Here are the prescriptions from the doctor for pain in case he needs them," she said, handing everything to Genevieve. "The doctor has requested that he see you again in a few days to evaluate how you are doing. I'm going to go see how your discharge papers are coming along, and then I will bring a wheelchair to take you downstairs," she paused before exiting the room. "I have to say that when I first saw you last night, I did not think you would be going home today. But you have done remarkably well."

"That's because of all the prayers I had said for myself," Jace answered.

“There’s power in prayer.”

The nurse smiled at him, gathered her things, and then went outside. She returned quickly, followed by Obadiah and the doctor, who again went over his care and instructions. Then the doctor personally helped Jace into the wheelchair to go home.

Genevieve, Brielle, and Asher rode with him in Genevieve’s car while Obadiah went to the pharmacy to get his prescriptions filled. Keoni and Gideon drove and followed them back to Brielle’s house, where Alma and Magomu were waiting for Jace to come home with a comfortable bed made up on the couch in the living room, as well as in the guest bedroom, and a lovely lunch waiting for everyone.

Jace was thrilled to see that Obadiah had left his pumpkin display in the front yard from the night before. He had looked forward to seeing it, and even though the pumpkins weren’t lit at the time, it still brought him a great feeling of joy. Genevieve told him that they would light them all again that evening just for him.

Brielle was careful to help Jace inside the house and was heading toward the bed on the couch, but Jace stopped her. He felt strong enough to sit with them at the table and wanted to join them for lunch. As they ate, they talked about the treatment and care Jace had received at the hospital.

“I have to say that if I ever have to go to the hospital,” Obadiah began, “I want to go to Devereaux Memorial. Did you see the personal attention that Jace received from the doctor? Usually, a doctor is in, out, and onto the next patient.”

“Yes,” Genevieve said, “and he deserves excellent care.” She smiled.

Jace smiled at Genevieve warmly. But after a few minutes of sitting up, he quickly lost his energy.

“If you will excuse me, I think I’ll lie down,” he said.

“Of course, sweetheart. Here, let me help you,” Genevieve said, following him.

Brielle watched her mother as she cared for Jace. Seeing her help him walk to the couch and get comfortable triggered a memory of her caring for her father when she was a little girl. Her father had been working out in the fields with the farmers of the village, and a cow had stepped on his foot, breaking all five of his toes. Her mother had helped him to walk around for days, allowing him to lean his weight on her to get him from place to place. She remembered how each time he needed her help, he would end up making some sort of a joke about how much that cow weighed, and they would end up laughing.

Brielle thought about how many times she or Asher had been ill and how their mother had constantly tended to them, caring and praying for them, and loving them in their time of suffering. She was so glad to know that her mother could give this gift of care to Jace, who may never have known such care from his own mother.

After lunch, Alma, Magomu, Asher, and Genevieve left Jace in Brielle's care and went to the town market to buy groceries for the upcoming week. Genevieve asked Jace what his favorite foods were; she intended to spoil him every minute she could while he was there with them. Once they had departed, Brielle, Gideon, and Keoni went into the living room to sit with Jace. They all needed to know exactly what happened to him on that night.

"Jace," Brielle said, "Hadley told us some of what happened to you and Rateesh, but… can you tell us?"

Jace lowered his eyes and sat quietly for a moment.

"If you're not up to it yet, we understand. I don't want you to--"

"No, no, it's alright. I want to tell you. I know it sounds crazy, but I can't wait to tell you," he said.

"Uh, yeah, that does sound crazy, then again, you did just have a major head injury," Gideon joked.

Jace smiled as he remembered how the evening unfolded.

"Rateesh and I were on the way to your house when we saw a person lying by the side of the road. My first thought was that it was a hit and run, and so I immediately pulled over to help the person. Rateesh got out with me. When we turned the person over… we saw that it was someone dressed in a skeleton's costume and they were not hurt, not at all," he paused.

"You mean… they lured you into a trap by acting like a hurt person on the side of the road?" Brielle asked in disbelief.

Jace nodded. Obadiah, who had been in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee, came in and sat down to listen to Jace's story.

"This is just awful!" Keoni exclaimed, "It's bad enough they did what they did, but to play on the kindness of another, that's just…"

"Sick," Gideon finished, "So then what happened?"

Brielle reached over and gently took Jace's hand in hers.

Jace began to explain how the others appeared, surrounding them, all wearing evil costumes and using voice modification devices to disguise how they talked as well. Although he didn't allow his friends to see, Jace's hands began to tremble as he told them of the beating that he and Rateesh received. Brielle lowered her head, her eyes filling with tears as she visualized the scene Jace was describing.

Jace paused, overcome with the emotions he felt as he retold the incident. He was so excited to tell of Rateesh's miracle healing that he hadn't realized how telling the rest of the story would affect him. The others sat quietly, waiting for him to continue.

"The person dressed as a skeleton told the clown to stop beating Rateesh because he was going to kill him. That it wasn't part of the plan. Then they started to fight, the clown and the skeleton. I started praying Philippians 4:13, *'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'* When I did, I was able to

escape from the two guys holding me down, and I tackled the clown."

"My man!" Gideon said proudly.

"When I did that, the skeleton got up and ran off," Jace said.

"Which way did he go?" Obadiah asked.

"He ran into the woods, I think, I'm not sure. It was right after that, while I was fighting with the clown, one of the others came up from behind me and hit me with a tree branch," Jace said. "Though it felt like a baseball bat."

"How did you know it was a tree branch?" Keoni asked.

"Because he dropped it in front of me," Jace answered. "I saw it."

"Then what happened?" Brielle asked.

"The clown went and stood over Rateesh. I'll never forget the way he just stood there watching him suffer. It was as if… he didn't care at all if he died," he said, taking a deep breath. "Then he came and stood by me. I couldn't look up, so I just laid there and stared at his feet. I didn't know what he was going to do, but I knew I wasn't in any shape to stop him from doing it."

"What did he do?" Brielle hesitated to ask for fear of what else she might hear.

"He left," Jace said, "They stole my father's SUV, which had my cell phone in it. I had laid it down on the console after checking a message from my father. I checked Rateesh to see if he had a phone, and he didn't. So, I prayed."

Jace stopped as he remembered looking up at the star-filled sky, knowing that if God hadn't intervened, what would have happened. His eyes began to sting with tears.

"I looked at Rateesh," he said, trying to speak through the tears. "He was coughing up blood, and his lungs sounded like there was fluid in them. His chest rattled like a paper bag as he struggled to breathe. He was on the road, not moving at all. I opened his shirt and saw… and saw that his ribs on the right side of his body were broken. There was a large crevice in his side where his ribs should be, and I knew that the ribs had punctured his lung." he stopped to wipe the tears away from his face.

Brielle gently squeezed his hand.

Jace inhaled slowly, trying to regain his composure. He looked over at Obadiah, "Your words came back to me, the night that you taught me about my gift of healing being more than just my desire to be a doctor. I remembered the scripture you taught me and how you said that Jesus told us to lay hands on people when we prayed for them. So, I did," he said. "I gently put my hands on his chest, and I began to pray, using the scripture of Isaiah 53:5 *'But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by His stripes we are healed.'"*

Everyone was sitting on the edge of their seat as he spoke, waiting to hear the rest of the story.

"And then, I… I don't know how to explain it in a way that could do it

justice… but… Rateesh… his ribs slowly came back into place. I *felt* them moving under my hands. I could feel them gritting together as they came back into position, and his chest filled out like normal," he said.

Everyone was silently stunned, awestruck in amazement.

"One by one, his other problems stopped. First, his coughing stopped, and gradually his breathing returned to normal; no more rattling sounds were coming from his lungs at all. He had been healed," he said.

There was not a dry eye in the room when he finished, and everyone was perfectly still.

Jace smiled, "Rateesh just sat up. He had some bruises here and there, but other than that, he was fine. I don't know how much time had passed by, but it didn't even seem like five minutes before we heard the sirens approaching," he stopped for a moment in thought, shaking his head slightly and laughing at himself. "There I was, worried about not having a cell phone and asking God to send us someone to help us. I was stupidly thinking that the only way Rateesh could be saved was by the hand of man. God answered my prayers and sent someone to help us. He sent Himself."

Obadiah had set his cup of coffee down on the table and leaned his elbows down onto his knees. He closed his eyes and began to worship the Lord for the miracle that He gave to Rateesh that night. The rest of the Intercessors, overwhelmed with their gratitude for the Lord's gift of healing, began to do the same, tears of joy streaming down each face as they did.

When the sounds of worship began to die down, Jace finished his story.

"I haven't even told you the best part," he said.

"What could be better than to receive a healing like that?" Gideon asked with all sincerity.

"Salvation," Jace answered, "Rateesh asked Jesus into his heart with me last night in the emergency room. I didn't tell you because I wanted to explain to you the whole story, and last night I…"

"You weren't up to it," Brielle finished for him.

"No, not at all," Jace said, resting his head back against the couch.

"God used this horrible situation to do something incredibly beautiful; to bring Rateesh to Him," Obadiah said, "Jesus healed him so that Rateesh would know His power is real and if His power is real, then so is His love and forgiveness."

"Yes, I told Rateesh that. I told him that was why there was proof of his healing still left inside his body in the form of scar tissue," he said as he explained that part of the story, "If there is ever any doubt again that Jesus isn't real in his mind, he can always look back on the evidence that x-ray provides and know the truth," Jace said.

"I just don't even know what to say," Gideon said softly.

"I do! God is GOOD, AMAZING, AWESOME God!" Keoni said, happily

throwing her hands up into the air in praise. “I know that I will never be the same again after hearing that story—and I wasn’t even there!”

“You have received an amazing gift, Jace, a true miracle from Jesus,” Obadiah said, “There have been three times now that you have witnessed the power of God in a magnificent and supernatural way—and all within two months. But you know what? You are not alone. People all over the world see miracles happening every day. Then there are some who either don’t recognize the hand of God completing the miracle, or they have just stopped believing in miracles altogether. They don’t expect them anymore. When you are well, you need to make sure that you write all these things down and never forget them. God has chosen you. He has chosen you all for a specific task, a great purpose. The more He reveals His power to you, the more your faith and trust grow in Him, and therefore *you* become more powerful as an Intercessor, a warrior of God, just like the disciples who were with Jesus.”

Jace nodded, taking Obadiah’s word to heart.

“I feel like just giving the Lord praise for all that He did for Rateesh and Jace,” Obadiah said.

The friends gathered around Jace on the couch to hold hands together and give thanks to the Lord for the astounding miracles He had given. He saved the lives of both Rateesh and Jace, and through Rateesh’s miraculous healing, Rateesh came to give his heart to Jesus--all because of the power of God.

Soon, Alma and Magomu came in from the market with loads of groceries.

“Wow, did you leave any food for the rest of Fairfield?” Gideon teased.

“I am going to make Jace the best meals that I possibly can while he is here with us, so he can heal and grow strong,” Genevieve said confidently as she thanked her friends for doing the shopping.

“I need to grow strong,” Gideon said, looking at all the food as they unpacked them, “Can I come to eat too?”

Genevieve smiled, “Of course, why do you think I had them buy so much. I figured you all would want to be together here this week.”

While everyone was busy in the kitchen, Jace asked Brielle if he could move to the porch to sit outside for a bit. She grabbed a couple of blankets and helped him to get comfortable in one of the deck chairs. It was a very brisk day, the first of November. Jace was happy to be able to sit outside and look at the brightly colored trees and watch the horses in the corral. He took in a deep breath of fresh air and relaxed back into his chair.

“How are you feeling?” Brielle asked, “Do you need any pain medication or anything?”

Jace smiled at her, “No, I’m fine, thank you.”

She sat down in the chair next to him and couldn’t stop staring at his face. He noticed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “It just really looks painful. I can’t believe it doesn’t

hurt you."

"It's not comfortable," he said, "but it's bearable. Being here with you makes it so much easier."

Brielle placed her hand on his, noticing again his cut and bruised knuckles.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you," she whispered.

"I was at first, but after talking with your grandfather, I am feeling better about it. I mean, it certainly wasn't a good time. But when I think about what good God brought out of it, I'm alright," he said.

Brielle was amazed, "That's an incredible attitude to have."

Jace smiled shyly at her compliment. "I don't think I will need to write it down, though. I'm sure I will remember it each time I look in the mirror," he said with a gentle smile, pointing to the stitches on his face.

Brielle gently took his hand in hers, "Can I tell you something honestly?" she asked.

Jace looked at her inquisitively, "Of course. I always want you to feel like you can be honest with me."

Brielle sighed, "I think you're beautiful inside and out, and nothing will ever change that. Not these bruises or stitches or any scars you may have after this. I've always thought you were beautiful, and you always will be."

Jace stared at her in silence.

"I just never told you that," Brielle continued, "But I am now."

Jace quickly looked out at the trees, not knowing what to say to her.

"Do you know what I think? I think that each time you see the scars on your face, you should not think about the pain you endured to get them. I think you should just remember the miracle of healing that Jesus gave to Rateesh and how you helped lead him to the Lord because of it," Brielle said.

Jace looked over at her. "That is a really good way to look at it," he said.

"That's what I will see. Each time I look at you and I see your scars, I am going to think of the healing power of Jesus and how He used you to help save Rateesh," she said with a warm smile.

Jace nodded slowly, "Thank you," he whispered, "I will do that too."

The next day, Jace was feeling even better than the day before. His father had called him to let him know that he was arranging to be home that night, but Jace convinced him not to rush. He would much rather be in the home of Obadiah under the care of Genevieve and Brielle than at home with just his father. He reassured him that he was doing very well, and since his father had not seen his injuries to understand their severity, he went by how Jace sounded. He told Jace that he would be home by Tuesday morning for sure and that he would come and pick him up.

Brielle reluctantly went to school that day, not wanting to leave Jace there.

She knew that her mother and Asher would take good care of him, and she would be able to see him as soon as school was over.

That afternoon, while Jace was resting and Genevieve and Asher were working on his schoolwork, a knock came to the door. It was Hadley; he had come to talk to Jace.

"It's good to see you again, Jace. You seem to be doing better," Hadley said happily, "I'm glad to see that."

"It's because of all the constant care I've had here," Jace said kindly, acknowledging Genevieve and Asher.

"I was wondering if you felt up to talking to me for a minute," Hadley said. "I would like to ask you some questions about the other night."

Jace nodded, "Yes. Is it alright if Genevieve stays?"

"Of course," Hadley said, sitting in the chair next to Jace.

"Can I get you anything to drink, Hadley?" Genevieve asked.

"Oh, no, I'm fine. Thank you," he said politely as he looked at her intently.

Jace looked over at Genevieve, who quickly lowered her eyes. The way Hadley looked at her easily conveyed his interest in her. He could see that Genevieve knew it too as she seemed to blush as she looked away.

Hadley cleared his throat. "Now, according to you and Rateesh, your attackers were all wearing costumes, masks, and gloves. Is that correct?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," Jace answered.

"And you said that there were four of them and then one ran away?" Hadley asked.

"Yes, that's right," Jace replied.

"Alright," Hadley said, checking his notes, "I wanted to ask you if there was anything at all that you could tell me which might help us identify who these people are?"

Jace sighed, "I think so," he said. Genevieve looked at him with a look of surprise as he had not mentioned this before.

"I'm not completely sure, but I think one of them might be Reed Radcliffe. He's a kid at my school," Jace answered.

Hadley looked at him curiously. "Why do you think that?" he asked.

"Reed and his friends, Morgan, Sean, and Ryan, have made threats to me, Rateesh, and Gideon," Jace said.

"Threats about what?" Hadley asked.

"They don't want Gideon and me to be friends with Rateesh," Jace explained.

"Okay, we'll come back to that in a minute, let's go to why you think one of the guys that night was Reed?" Hadley asked.

"After the fourth guy had run off, I tried to take down the guy dressed as the clown. He seemed to be the one in charge," Jace explained. "That was when

they hit me on the head. When I fell to the ground, I saw the clown go over and stand by Rateesh. He was just staring at him. Then he walked over and stood by me. I was trying so hard to keep my eyes open and stay alert, and I noticed while he stood there in front of me that his shoes looked familiar," Jace said, recalling the memory in his mind.

"What did they look like?" Hadley asked.

"They were a pair of white athletic shoes, and across the toe of his right shoe, there was a large black mark. At first, I couldn't remember where I had seen it, and then it came to me last night. There was a day at school when these four guys were harassing Rateesh, and we stopped them," he said.

"Who's we?" Hadley asked.

"Brielle, Keoni, Gideon, and me," he answered, "As they turned to leave, Reed stopped and kicked Rateesh's calculator to him on the ground. I noticed his shoes then and the black mark across the toe of his shoe."

Hadley wrote this all down. "Interesting, can you think of anything else? Did they say anything specific, or did you see their vehicle, anything else at all that could help us identify them?" Hadley asked.

Jace shook his head, "No, I can't. I've tried, but they were all disguised and using voice modification devices."

"Yes, Rateesh said the same thing," Hadley said.

"We have an investigation board we have been working on for you, so we could explain how all of this fits together," Jace said. "It's in Obadiah's office."

"Yes, I have been extremely interested in seeing that. Is Obadiah here? Could I see it now?" Hadley asked.

Genevieve spoke up, "No, I'm sorry, he isn't, he's out on business. Would you like me to call him for you?"

"How long do you think he will be? I have a little bit of time, perhaps I could wait?" he asked Genevieve.

"You are more than welcome to. I know that he just left about thirty minutes ago. He was going to meet with a contractor about a new project, so I think he could be a while. You are welcome to stay for dinner if you like," she replied.

Hadley looked down at his watch. "I would love to, but unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to stay that long. I have to meet Officer Stockton in an hour. We are going to sit down and lay this all out. I wish I could see the investigation board today, but perhaps I could come back another time?" Hadley asked.

"That would be great. Brielle has been dying to show you all the information we have collected. Most of it she pieced together. She thinks that it would help you in your investigation," Jace said.

"I am amazed at all the information you kids have collected so far. You have done an excellent job. I would like to call you, if that would be alright, to set up a time to come back over to meet with Brielle and the rest of you in person. Then

we could go over the information on your investigation board," he said.

"She would be thrilled," Genevieve replied.

"Please thank her for me," he said to Genevieve, standing up to leave, "And thanks to you all for your hard work. I will be in touch with you about this. In the meantime, you rest and get well," he said, shaking Jace's hand. He thanked Genevieve and Jace for their time and left.

After school, Keoni brought Brielle home so they could check on Jace and see how he was doing. Gideon had football practice after school and was happy to be back on the team. The girls were both very happy to see that Jace, once again, was doing better. Genevieve made them an after-school snack, and as they ate, Jace told them of his conversation with Hadley.

"I *knew* it!" Keoni exclaimed, "I knew it was them! I felt it! From the moment I learned what had happened to you and Rateesh, I felt it, but I didn't want to say anything. I had no proof, and I honestly hoped that I was wrong."

"There isn't exactly proof that it was them either," Jace said, "After all, I was having a hard time focusing on things last night."

"It's just too much of a coincidence," Brielle agreed with her friend, "Four guys jump you on a dark, isolated road. Everyone at school knew about our party because we invited so many people. We handed out flyers with maps on how to get here. Plus, let's think about how many threats Reed has made against you, Rateesh, Gideon… it all adds up to me. I think they just took your SUV so that you would think it was a car robbery, but really, it was them trying to shut you up," she said. "I just can't understand what their involvement in this is. I mean, when Gideon asked Dylan if he bought his drugs from any of them, he was completely shocked by his question and denied it. Of course, we can't ask Lacy right now, but if these guys aren't selling the drugs, why are they with Brian and Sidney? Why are they hurting people like this? What are they getting out of it? It doesn't make any sense."

"I have to say," Genevieve interjected from the kitchen counter, "as hard as it is to do this, we cannot speak as if they are already guilty. It's like Jace said, there is not a lot of proof that they are the ones who did this, so we cannot speak as if they did. It is just a theory right now. You wouldn't want to be the cause of a rumor starting at school, would you?"

Brielle sighed but didn't respond to her mother. Deep down, she knew she was right.

"Well, I think it's them," Keoni said. "I thought it then, and I think it now. But don't worry; I won't say anything about it to anyone else."

"How was school today?" Genevieve asked.

"Good," Brielle answered, "The prayer group was praying for you today," she said to Jace, "Especially your little groupies," she smiled, "They really miss you."

Jace blushed and shook his head at her remark.

"Was Rateesh at school?" Genevieve asked.

"No," Brielle said, "I didn't see him. Maybe he is still resting after everything that happened."

"Or maybe he's too scared to come back," Jace said.

"I think I'll call him right now and check on him," Brielle said, "I hope he's alright."

Brielle dug for her phone in her bag and called him, but didn't get an answer, so she left him a voice message and sent him a text that read:

Missed you at school.
Hope you are ok and
we can talk soon.

A few hours later, she received an answer:

I'm okay. I'll talk to you
tomorrow.

Brielle was a little troubled by his response. That did not sound like a person who had just received a miraculous lifesaving healing. She hoped that he was alright and looked forward to seeing him the next day.

The next morning, Brielle left the house with Obadiah. The fall season made it hard to get out of a nice warm bed and go out into the cold, dark morning. Jace was still sleeping when she left the house. Genevieve would be taking him to the doctor for a follow-up visit that afternoon, and she was hoping for a good report that he was mending well.

When she arrived at school, she saw Reed Radcliff, Morgan, Sean, and Taryn sitting outside the library. She had never seen them sitting there before and thought it was strange. She wondered where Ryan was. Then at lunch, she noticed that he wasn't sitting with them at their table. He was outside eating lunch by himself. She pointed it out to Keoni and Gideon, who also thought it was odd.

"Something's happened," Keoni said.

"You know, I noticed something different with him a few weeks ago," Brielle said. "The day after the egg attack, when they drove by, everyone else had a smug expression on their face. But he just looked sad, like he was miserable."

Then she picked up her slice of pizza and took a bite. As she did, she had a thought.

"Whoa… wow!" she whispered to Keoni, "What if it was Reed and those guys and Ryan was the one who ran off and called the police?"

Keoni thought about it and agreed, “Yeah! I bet you’re right!”

They watched Ryan out the window as he sat by himself at a picnic table under the tree. He looked so sad, so lost. While she watched him, her heart softened. She felt led to go talk to him. Quickly, she gathered up her food and threw it on her tray.

“Come on,” she said, “let’s go sit with him.”

“What?!” Keoni said, “Are you insane? Why on earth would you want to do that?”

“Because I feel like God is telling me to,” Brielle answered.

That was enough of an answer for Keoni. She quickly got up without a word, gathered her things, and followed Brielle to his table. When he looked up and saw them coming, his face drained, and he looked as pale as a ghost.

“Hey,” Brielle said, “it's Ryan, right?”

Ryan nodded, “Yeah, what do you want?”

“I was just wondering if we could join you for lunch,” Brielle asked sweetly.

“Why?” he asked sternly.

Brielle hesitated, trying to speak what the Lord laid on her heart, “We were just sitting inside and noticed that you were here all alone and thought you might like some company.”

Ryan’s face looked confused, but he nodded that they could join him.

“So,” she began, trying to make conversation. “Why aren’t you sitting with Reed and the rest of them?”

Ryan was very defensive, “What do you care?”

Keoni looked at Brielle, obviously not willing to engage in conversation with Ryan just yet.

“I don’t really,” Brielle said lightly, “I just noticed you weren’t.”

Ryan looked around aimlessly. “I just thought I’d eat outside today, that’s all.”

They sat in silence while Brielle worked at trying to find something to say.

“Are you going to the game Friday night?” she asked.

Ryan didn’t answer.

“You bet,” Keoni chimed in, “if we win, we go to the playoffs.”

“Really?” Brielle asked, “I didn’t know that.” Then she turned to Ryan, “Are you going to the game?”

Ryan nodded his head, disinterested in the conversation, “Yeah, I’m going.”

“Well then, it should be a nail-biter, huh?” Brielle said, “I hope that Jace will be up to going.”

“I don’t see why not,” Keoni said, “he’s doing great.”

Brielle noticed that at the mention of Jace’s name, Ryan’s eyes darted over to look at her.

“I’ll have to talk to Rateesh today and see if he’s going to go. Maybe we could pick him up?” she suggested.

“Yeah,” Keoni said happily, “I’m pretty sure the whole school will be there for this game.”

Brielle had noticed Ryan’s eyes when she mentioned Jace’s name, but when she mentioned Rateesh, his face went completely blank.

“Who did you say?” he asked nervously.

“What? Oh, Rateesh?” Brielle answered, trying to sound casual, “Do you know him? He’s a good friend of ours. We’re in Latin together.”

“Did you say that you were going to talk to him today?” he asked, growing more nervous by the moment.

“Yeah, I texted him last night and he said that he would see me today. I know he isn’t into football very much,” she said, acting as if she was speaking only to Keoni, “but I think he would have fun at the game anyway.”

“Rateesh is here at school today?” Ryan asked again, almost in a panic.

Brielle looked at him directly, “Yes, Rateesh is here at school today. Why wouldn’t he be?”

Ryan’s face was white as snow. His eyes began darting around nervously as if he didn’t know where he was. He gathered up his things and began to leave.

“Ryan, what’s wrong? Are you alright?” Brielle asked.

Ryan turned around and looked at her, “Yeah, yeah, there’s just something I have to do before I go to class. Uh, it was nice talking to you… see you later,” he said. He threw his lunch in the trash and disappeared down the hall.

Brielle looked at Keoni and nodded her head, “Oh yeah, he’s guilty alright.” Then she looked in through the window of the cafeteria. Reed, Morgan, and Sean were all staring right at her. “They’re the ones who did it.”

“What do we do now?” Keoni said.

Brielle shook her head, “Pray. We are going to pray that God will bring justice, and they will be stopped from hurting anyone again.”

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Brielle looked forward to Latin that day more than ever before. She could finally talk to Rateesh. Arriving early in the hopes that he would be there, she wanted to have time to talk before class began. When she saw him, she grabbed him tight and hugged him close, joy spreading all through her heart as she thought about all that Jesus had done for him.

"How are you? Your text didn't sound very happy," she said.

Rateesh put his head down. "I'm a little bittersweet right now," he said.

Brielle looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Most of me feels brand new, alive, full of joy, hope, and possibilities," he started, his eyes sparkling as he spoke. "I can feel the love of Jesus in me, and it has changed my life. When I think about how He healed me, I… I knew I was dying, Brielle. I could feel my life slipping away from me. It's hard to explain, but I knew the damage done to me was severe, and there was no one there to help us. Then Jace, well, he came and prayed for me. He told me that he knew I didn't believe in your God, but that God loved me anyway.

"Then, as my body began to heal, I just… I'm not sure I can find the words to tell you what an incredible miracle it was!" he said, his face lit up and brilliant. "I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is real and that His power is real. I couldn't wait to talk to Jace to ask him how I could know Jesus. When he prayed with me in the hospital room and I asked Jesus into my heart, I felt like a new person, like I had never felt before. All I want to do now is learn about Jesus and study the Bible. I want to know all that I can about Him and what I need to do as a Christian," he said.

"We can help you with that," she said, opening her bag. "Here, take this," she said, handing him her Bible.

Rateesh looked down at it, "But this is yours, I can't take that."

"Oh, please, do you know how many Bibles I have? I have one in almost every room of my house, one in the car, and then this one, so, yes, you can. Please take it," she said happily.

Rateesh took the Bible and held it in his hands as if it were a precious jewel. "Where do I start?" he asked.

Brielle laughed, "The beginning is always a good place."

Rateesh laughed, "Ah yes, our first word in this class, Exordium," he mused.

Brielle reflected on how that word had impacted her so many times since she heard it. "Yes, this is the Exordium of your new life with Jesus," she smiled. "I have a question for you if you don't mind my asking."

"Sure," he said.

"Why did you decide to come back to school today? I mean, I'm really glad you did. It's just after all that happened, I thought maybe— "

"I'd be too scared?" he asked.

She nodded, “Yeah.”

Rateesh smiled broadly, “Ever since that night, after I received my healing and asked Jesus into my heart, I’ve not been afraid, at least I’m not afraid of Brian, Sidney, Reed, or any of them.”

Brielle was so happy to hear and see the evidence of the power of God in him, giving him new strength and courage. “Can I ask you another question? Do you think that the guys that night---“?

“Were Reed and his gang? Yes, I do, and I’m going to do everything I can to prove it,” he said.

“May I make a suggestion about that?” Brielle asked.

Rateesh nodded.

“Start with prayer,” she said.

“I don’t know if I’m going to be very good at that,” he admitted, “I don’t know what I’m doing yet.”

“You’re talking to me, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yeah, but you’re not God,” he laughed.

“No, but prayer is just as easy as talking to a person. God is our Heavenly Father, and He wants us to come to Him and talk to Him just like you would in a relationship with someone. You don’t have to use fancy words or sound poetic. That’s not what He asks for. He just wants you to come to Him like a child would their father and talk,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said, “See? I’m learning already,”

“I am here for you for any help or to try and answer any questions you may have. Jace, Gideon, Keoni, we all are,” she said, taking his hand and squeezing it. “Okay, so then let’s go back to what you first said. Why are you bittersweet? So far, it all sounds sweet to me.”

Rateesh lowered his head again. “I don’t know what to do about my family,” he said. “I do not know how to tell them that I believe in Jesus and want to be a Christian and no longer a Hindu. I don’t feel free to speak about Jesus or read about Jesus, or anything at home. I don’t know what will happen when they find out. My family is very traditional in the Hindu faith, but I love them very, very much.”

Brielle’s eyes widened with concern when she heard this. She had been so excited about his miraculous healing and his asking Jesus into his heart that she had forgotten about this major area, which had to be dealt with.

She sighed, “Rateesh, I have never had to handle anything like that before or know anyone else who has. I can’t give you any words to say to them, but I do know what to do. I would like to pray with you about it now and then, if you don’t mind. I would like to talk to my grandfather about it and see if he has any suggestions. Would that be alright?”

Rateesh nodded.

“Alright then,” she said, taking both his hands in hers, “Let’s pray about this.

The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 5:7 to '*cast all your cares upon Jesus',* and God's Word is always true. So, you and I will come together to give this situation to Jesus, to cast it to Him, to agree together that God will handle this situation for you and give you guidance on what to do. In the meantime, you just keep loving your parents as you always have and praying for them, okay?"

"Okay," Rateesh replied with a smile.

Then right there in Latin class, for the first time, Brielle prayed with Rateesh.

After school, Keoni, Brielle, and Gideon went to their prayer group. After prayer group, Gideon went to football practice, and Keoni took Brielle home so she could see Jace. When they arrived, he was upstairs in the tower playing video games with Asher.

"I see you're feeling good enough to climb the stairs today," Brielle said happily as she and Keoni entered the room.

Jace slowly spun his chair around to see her bright and beautiful face; he had waited all day to see her.

"Yeah, Asher had to help me a little, huh buddy?" he said, smiling at Asher.

"Help? I had to practically carry him the whole way!" Asher teased.

"It's a good thing you're so strong, Ash," Brielle laughed at her dramatic little brother.

"That's the last thing he needs is to go tumbling down the stairs." Then she sat down.

"What did the doctor say today?" she asked.

"He said I'm doing great. Everything is healing nicely, and I will get my stitches out in about a week," Jace answered.

"Wow, that soon?" Keoni asked.

"How long do you think people should keep stitches?" Brielle asked.

"I don't know, long enough to make sure that nothing falls out… or off… or breaks open again," she said with a shudder, causing everyone to laugh.

"I'm glad to know that you are going to be okay," Brielle said softly, gazing into his dark brown eyes.

"Yes, yes, he's going to be fine," Asher said with an irritated tone, "Now can we get back to our game?"

Jace laughed and looked at Brielle, "I'll be just a second," he said, turning his chair around to finish his game. When the game was over, Brielle noticed that Asher was the victor by a huge margin.

"No pity for an invalid, huh?" Jace teased.

Asher patted his shoulder, "Actually, Jace, that was me taking it easy on you. What can I say? I've got skills."

Asher then excused himself and went downstairs to get something to eat, leaving Jace, Keoni, and Brielle alone to talk.

"You will never guess what happened today at school," Keoni started. She then began to fill Jace in on everything that took place with Ryan. Jace sat

quietly listening. “They are the ones who attacked you and Rateesh. I know it, I *feel* it.”

Jace looked out the window but didn’t say anything. Brielle watched him for a moment.

“Are you okay?” she asked him tenderly.

Jace just kept staring out the window, quietly thinking about that night.

“Jace,” she said, finally getting his attention, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” he said softly, “I was just thinking.”

“About what?” she asked.

“That night, all I saw were these crazy, evil masks, and all I heard were strange-sounding voices. It was like they weren’t human, just monsters. It almost seemed to make sense that these creatures would do something that evil. Even though I thought at the time it could be Reed and his guys, I didn’t visualize their faces. In that moment, it was like Rateesh and I were being attacked by monsters.

“But now that I can put faces to it, I don’t know. It changes things. It’s hard to know that there are people out there in this world who would hurt someone else intentionally,” he said, still staring out the window. “I think it was easier for me to just believe we were being attacked by monsters,” he laughed, trying to lighten his mood.

“You *were* being attacked by monsters,” Keoni said, “Cowardly monsters who wore masks to hide their true identity. Maybe they should wear them all the time, it might be an improvement to their appearance,” she joked.

Brielle thought about Jace’s words. She could see how this information impacted him. Reed and his friends had hurt Jace and Rateesh more deeply than just their physical bodies; their attack shook the cores of their very souls. She felt led to try and say something which might be encouraging to him.

“I know it may sound crazy,” Brielle said. “But I actually felt sorry for Ryan today.”

Jace slowly turned to look at her, “You what?” he asked in disbelief.

Brielle shook her head, “I’m sorry, that didn’t come out right. Let me start again. I hate what he did to you-- to you and Rateesh. It’s just after seeing him today that it got me thinking about all the stupid mistakes that I have made in my life. I have known the Bible ever since I can remember, and yet, I do and say stupid things that hurt other people.”

“You cannot compare yourself to them. You never have done to anyone what they did to us,” Jace said.

“But that’s my point. If I am going to make mistakes now and hurt people the way I have while knowing Jesus and trying to serve Him, I can’t imagine what life would be like without knowing Him. Ryan looked positively miserable today, almost like…” she paused.

“He hates himself,” Keoni finished.

"Yes, exactly, he looks like he hates himself, and I mean hate. That has got to be a horrible way to live," Brielle said. "I know how badly I feel when I hurt someone else, whether I care about them or not. Like with Taryn. I feel like such a jerk after I've said or done some of the things I did. But I know that I can come to Jesus and He will forgive me and still love me. I can ask others for forgiveness, too, and try to do better the next time. But Ryan, not only does he look like he hates himself, he looks like he has lost all hope."

Jace listened carefully, trying to look past his pain and see the pain of another.

Jace nodded gently, "I understand what you are saying. When you put it like that, I guess I would feel sorry for him too," he paused and smirked, "Maybe I'll feel more like it once I'm better."

Genevieve came into the tower with Jace's phone. "Jace, your phone keeps ringing. I didn't want to answer it," she said, handing him the phone, then she bent down to hug Brielle and Keoni. "Welcome home, girls. I have a snack for you in the kitchen if you're hungry."

Keoni mocked, "*If* she's hungry? You're funny," Keoni said to Genevieve, who giggled.

Brielle looked at Jace, "Is it your father? Is he coming to get you today?"

"Yeah, it's him," he said, looking at his message. "He's still out of town," he said, reading aloud, "He wants to know if it is alright if I stay until tomorrow?"

Genevieve's heart broke when she heard this. She could never understand how a father could leave his son so often, much less after he had been severely injured.

"You can stay here as long as you need to," Genevieve said, patting his shoulder. "We are here for you, sweetheart." Then she turned and started out of the room. "Why don't I bring your food up here, so Jace doesn't have to come downstairs?"

"That would be great, Mama, I'll help you," Brielle said. She knew her mother all too well. She could tell that she was upset with Jace's father but didn't want to show it.

When they were in the kitchen and out of Jace's hearing, Genevieve vented her feelings on the matter to Brielle.

"I do not understand these people," she said sharply, "They have this beautiful, smart, loving son, and they leave him on his own. How long has this gone on?" she asked, not giving Brielle a chance to answer. "It breaks my heart," she continued, "He loves God and is working so hard to become a good Intercessor for the Lord, it just blows my mind!" Then she took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

"When I think of your father and how much he loves you and Asher. He *never* wanted to be separated from you, not for one single day. And this father, and mother, wherever she is, has this beautiful son, and they are throwing all

their time together away-- and for what? What is it that his father does that is so important?" she asked Brielle, this time waiting for an answer.

"I… I'm not sure. I know he owns the Bonnie Jane fishing boat," Brielle said.

"His father had Jace's clothes, shoes, and a new cell phone brought over this morning, didn't I tell you that? Oliver brought them over here. He was a very nice man, English, with a sophisticated accent. He was very sweet, proper, and mannerly. But even he was in a hurry. When he came, Jace was resting and Oliver didn't want to wait to see him, can you believe that?" she said, starting up again. "It's just wrong and heartbreaking to see this young man have no one there for him."

Brielle put her hand on her mother's to calm her. "We are here," she said softly.

Genevieve took a slow, deep breath and calmed herself. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I don't mean to rant and rave at you about this. You're right. We can't change them, but we can help Jace."

Brielle hugged her mother, "Do you know how blessed I am to have a mother like you? And Jace is blessed to have you in his life, too," she whispered.

The two went back up into the tower with the snacks that Genevieve had made for the three friends. They spent time together laughing and telling funny stories, when suddenly, Keoni's phone rang. It was Gideon.

"Hey," she said, "what's going on?"

"Are you with Brielle and Jace?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?" she asked.

"I'm coming over. I'll have one of the guys drop me off," he said, "Just stay there."

"Are you alright?" she asked, concerned by his tone.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but I have something important to tell you," he said, "I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

Those twenty minutes seemed to drag on for ages until Gideon arrived. He came into the house and up to the tower, where he grabbed a soda and collapsed into one of the video chairs. His face was heavily distressed.

"Today after practice," he began, "I was in the shower when I heard all kinds of commotion coming from the locker room. It just got crazy, and I didn't know what was going on. I just heard a lot of yelling. Some of the other guys ran in and said that a fight had broken out, so I came out to see what was happening. Two guys were wrestling around on the floor, and we couldn't see who they were. But then at the back of the locker room, I saw Morgan and Sean take off out the door in a hurry. I got closer to the fight and saw that it was Ryan and Reed on the floor. The coaches came out, broke them up, and took them to their office. A little while later, the police came. They kept Ryan and Reed in the coaches' office for a while. A lot of the guys just hung out around the locker room to see what was going on. When they came out, the police took both of

them away."

"Were they handcuffed?" Keoni asked eagerly.

"Yeah, they both were. Some of the guys said they heard the police asking about Morgan and Sean, but they said they left during the fight. I think the police were going to go after them, too," Gideon said.

"Then Ryan and Reed were arrested?" Brielle asked for clarification again.

"It looked like it," Gideon answered.

"What started the fight?" Keoni asked.

"Some of the guys said that Ryan came into the locker room with Morgan. The two of them were already fighting by the time they started talking to Sean. Then Reed came over, and I guess it all just exploded," he said.

"You don't know what they were fighting about?" Jace asked.

"No, but it was bad enough for the cops to come," Gideon said.

Brielle sat back and looked over at Jace. "The cops didn't come because of the fight," she said, "Ryan came forward."

Gideon looked at Brielle with a puzzled expression. "What do you mean?"

The girls told him of their lunch with Ryan that day and all that was said.

"Gideon, I'm telling you when Ryan heard that Rateesh was fine and at school, it was like---" Brielle paused.

"Like he was being haunted by a ghost," Keoni said.

"He totally freaked out to learn that Rateesh was okay. He must have been part of it. It makes perfect sense, if he was there and he was the one who said to stop hurting Rateesh because it could kill him, then he must have known how badly Rateesh had been hurt," Brielle said. "His conscience was working on him then, and it's probably been pounding on him now."

"There was something in him that snapped," Gideon said, "I've known Ryan since freshman year, and he was always so cool about everything. He never complained, never got angry, rolled with the flow of things, but today, I've never seen him act like that. He was a maniac."

"It has to be them," Keoni whispered, "It has to be."

The group was still discussing the events that had taken place when Jace received a phone call. It was Hadley. Everyone was quiet and still while he listened to Hadley's information. He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. No one moved while he listened, as if their stillness would lessen the tension that Hadley's call was obviously bringing. When Jace hung up, his face looked drained of all energy.

"They arrested them. All of them," he said, looking at Brielle.

"Who?" Gideon asked anxiously.

"Reed, Morgan, Sean, and Ryan turned themselves in," he said, his voice sounding weak. Then he looked at Brielle, "You were right, Ryan admitted to the police that they did it. He also gave the police his skeleton costume, which had Rateesh's blood all over it. He was the one holding Rateesh while they beat him,"

he said.

"Oh my gosh… so… what happens now?" Brielle asked.

"Hadley said that it could go to trial. Rateesh and I would have to testify against them," he said.

"Will that count?" Keoni asked, "I mean, you can tell what happened to you, but you can't identify anyone, so how does that work?"

"I'm not sure. He said that the key witness is Ryan, and he is cooperating with the police. He has given them enough information to prosecute the group."

They were all silent, thinking about what Jace was explaining.

"Wow, those guys are all our age… could they go to prison for this?" Keoni asked.

"I think so," Brielle said, "I've been doing some research online for this particular crime. What happened to you and Rateesh is called Aggravated Assault, not to mention the fact that they also stole a car. If they are tried as adults, they could be looking at prison time of two to five years for a first-time offender."

"Man," Gideon whispered. "Why would they do something like that, knowing they could go to prison?"

"I don't know why anyone would do such a thing anyway," Brielle said.

"Yeah, but what I mean is, Reed's father is an attorney; he should know better," Gideon replied.

Everyone stared at him in surprise.

"Reed's father is an attorney?" Keoni asked slowly.

"Yeah, and a pretty good one too, from what Reed always said anyway," Gideon answered.

Keoni added, "That's just great!" She said, walking around in frustration. "What do you bet they get off easy now?"

"I doubt it," Brielle said, "it doesn't matter if his father is a lawyer or not, they will still have to answer for what they did. Reed's father can't change the laws."

Jace leaned forward and rested his head on his hands, the conversation draining him. "You know, I think I'd like to go sit outside for a while," he said.

Brielle got up to help him downstairs. Genevieve saw him coming and helped get him comfortable.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "My head is pounding."

"I'll go get your medicine," Genevieve said after he was comfortable on the porch.

Brielle took his hand in hers. "It's done now," she said, "it's going to be alright. Now that the police have them, they can't hurt you anymore."

Jace looked at her with a perplexed expression on his face, "Is that what you think I'm worried about?"

Brielle didn't know how to answer him.

"I'm not worried about myself," he said, "I know I will be fine, and I know that God will protect me. My worry is for Rateesh. Brielle, they almost killed him. I was right there and could do nothing to stop it. I haven't been able to stop thinking about what they might do to him if they find him alone. They showed no mercy or respect for his life. I've prayed constantly for God's protection, trusting Him completely after the miracles I have experienced, that He will take care of him. Sometimes it's hard. When you come through something like this and you see how real the evil is, it's hard *not* to worry."

Brielle understood his feelings. "Yes, but don't you see? You were right there, and although you couldn't stop them from beating Rateesh, through your prayers and faith in Jesus, God used you to keep him alive. They did *not* succeed," she said.

It was at that moment that Brielle realized that this was the way her mother had felt about her and Asher during the past ten years. The worry of Jabari finding them was always on her mind. She dealt with it daily and had always tried to give it to the Lord and leave it with him, but it was a constant struggle.

Jace looked at her with a very direct gaze, "We still need to pray every day. You're forgetting Reed, Morgan, Sean, and Ryan all worked with Brian and Sidney. They are still out there roaming free. Rateesh is still very much in danger."

Brielle smiled warmly at him, "Rateesh is under the protective hand of God, Adonai, now, and you have seen that there is nothing more powerful in this world than that. Remember, worry cancels faith and faith cancels worry; we have to keep our trust in the Lord."

Jace nodded, "You're right," he said, "I'm trying."

"I understand," she acknowledged, "Rateesh has no idea just how blessed he is to have you as a friend. Hopefully, you both can have more peace of mind soon."

She took both his hands in hers, "We have to get all our information to Hadley. As long as Brian and Sidney are still out there, the problems with drugs infesting our community will continue," she said.

"I talked to Hadley," Jace replied, "He came by to see the investigation board, but Obadiah was out on business, so I told him everything we knew—everything since we talked with him in the Prayer Sanctum."

"You did?" Brielle asked with excitement and a little disappointment, "That's great! I just wish I could have been here-- you didn't forget anything, did you?"

"I don't think so, but anything is possible. He said he would come by again and see the board," Jace answered.

"Good, I probably should spend a little time updating the new information we have collected. I'll do that tonight before I go to bed," she said, then she smiled, "I brought that up because I wanted to tell you that Rateesh is not afraid

anymore. I know he will talk to Hadley and give him his information too. You should have seen him today at school. He's amazing, he's transformed, and he is ready to learn all he can about Jesus and God's Word. Let's take it to the Lord in prayer. After what Jesus has done for Rateesh, He's not going to let these guys have more victories over his life. Let's agree right now, in the Name of Jesus, that Rateesh—and you will be kept safe from further harm."

Then she began to pray.

After their time of prayer together, Brielle let Jace rest. She was glad that her family was there to help him during this difficult and painful time. Then she realized Jace wasn't there as a guest; he was one of them. God had brought Jace to them to be his family - the family he never had.

The time passed slowly over the next several days. Though Brielle did not wish Jace to be suffering, she was glad to have this time together with him. His health and injuries continued to heal beautifully. The power of the Lord was upon him, and the doctors marveled at how well he had done.

Although Jace had missed an entire week of school, Brielle had gone to his classes each day and picked up his assignments so that he could keep up with his schoolwork. It wasn't long before he was well enough that he felt he needed to go home. He did not want to leave the warm, happy, loving home and family there, but Jace had been taught very solid and old-fashioned morals by his grandmother, which he guarded in his heart. He felt it more appropriate for him to stay in his house and for Brielle to stay in hers--though one day in the future, he hoped to change that.

Obadiah, Genevieve, and Brielle all found this to be a highly respectable decision-- though Asher was very unhappy about it. He was losing his school buddy during the day and his video game partner in the evening. He loved having Jace around and was upset when Jace left.

On Saturday morning, Oliver came for Jace. It had been one week since the attack took place.

The next Sunday, Jace came to church in his father's SUV. The police had located it after Sean and Morgan admitted stealing it. It was still in remarkably good shape. He could not ride his motorcycle or wear his helmet due to his still-healing head injury. It would be a few more days before he would have the stitches removed. Brielle was relieved that he was not able to ride the motorcycle.

After church, the friends went back to Brielle's home for lunch.

"Jace, you're looking great! How are you feeling?" Genevieve asked.

"I'm feeling pretty good," Jace answered happily. "I have headaches from time to time, but the doctor said that is normal. I have some news from Hadley," he said, changing the subject. "I didn't want to talk about it at church, but I wanted to share it with you now," he began. The table grew silent as everyone waited for his news.

"Hadley called me yesterday. He also called Rateesh's family. I guess there will not be a need for us to testify. There is not going to be a trial," he said.

Keoni slammed her hand down on the table, "I knew it! Reed's father got them off, huh?"

Jace looked at her, "No, not at all."

Keoni's expression changed from that of frustration to curiosity.

"The four of them accepted a plea bargain. Reed, Morgan, and Sean will all serve at least ninety days in jail for the assault. They will also be put on probation for five years. Plus, they have to serve two thousand hours of community service," he said.

Everyone at the table was quiet as they processed this information. The poor choices of these teens had led them down a path that would affect them for the rest of their lives.

"What about Ryan?" Brielle asked, "He didn't steal the car, and although he was part of the attack, he did leave. Will he receive the same punishment?"

"No," Jace answered, "Hadley told me that Ryan was the one who called for the paramedics that night and gave them our location. He will not go to jail or have to serve any community service, but he will be placed on probation for two years because he still took part in the assault."

Again, the table was silent.

"Wow," Gideon finally said, "I've known those guys for years. It's amazing to see how time changes things."

"This record will haunt them for the rest of their lives," Obadiah said. "One bad choice can change everything. That's why it is so important to make sure you follow the direction of God's Word and let Him lead you each day. You will have challenges and trials come, as you all have experienced. But if you yield yourself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, life will always be good."

"How do you feel about all of this, Jace?" Genevieve asked.

Jace looked down at his plate for a moment in thought. "I am feeling pretty good. I prayed about it and asked God to let them get what they deserved. I think they deserve this. What they did was— "

"Terribly terrible," Brielle interrupted.

"I still think they got off easy," Keoni said.

Gideon laughed, "Good thing she's not their judge."

"I guess I feel like I can move forward now," Jace said, "I hope Rateesh can feel the same."

Genevieve then served them lunch, which lightened the conversation.

"I didn't know if you were up to traveling to the Prayer Sanctum today or not," Obadiah said to Jace, "I was wondering if you would like to have our next training session here?"

Jace looked somewhat disappointed. "I've been looking forward to the Prayer Sanctum all week," he said. "If it's okay with you, I would like to go there.

I miss it."

Obadiah grinned, "Are you up for the ride?"

"No, that I'm not," he laughed, "but I'm fine to walk."

"Alright then, you just let me know when you all are ready and we will head out," Obadiah said happily.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'd like to go right after lunch," Jace said.

"Me too," Brielle agreed.

"Here, here," Gideon said with his mouth half full.

"I'm ready now," Keoni laughed.

After lunch, the group gathered up their things and headed out on foot to the Prayer Sanctum.

"I don't expect you all to walk for my sake. You can ride if you want to," Jace said.

"Nonsense," said Brielle, "We're a team and we do things together."

"Yes, and I could use the exercise," Keoni said.

When they arrived, Jace was thrilled. Being in this place was such a surreal experience and something that brought him so much joy. It was very healing for his spirit to come back after missing last week. As always, Obadiah had the Intercessors sit around the compass table. This time, instead of pulling out the chalkboard for his usual lesson, he opened the large red velvet drapes that led to the Cavern of History. The students looked puzzled as he pulled out one of the smaller trunks and carried it down the stairs, placing it on the table.

"Aha! Are we finally going to see what's inside the mysterious old boxes?" Gideon asked excitedly.

"Just this one to start," Obadiah chuckled - then a serious expression came over his face.

"Given the things that have happened to Jace and Rateesh," Obadiah began, "I would like to share with you some thoughts that the Lord has laid on my heart. I know that we have all been blessed to learn of the astonishing miracle that Jesus did for Rateesh, and how the Lord was able to use you, Jace, through a tragedy, to lead Rateesh to Jesus. This is something that we should never forget, and we should etch into our minds, on our hearts, and put in writing for others to learn from in the future."

Then he turned to look at Jace, placing his hand on Jace's shoulder, "I want you to know that I'm proud of you, son. For in the midst of great trial and tribulation, you stood strong on the Word of God. You called out to Him in your time of need and used His Word to battle the attack of the enemy, and it was a most deliberate attack on you both. But! God gave *you* victory," he said happily.

Jace nodded quietly.

Obadiah then went to the blackboard and wrote the words:

Ready for Battle

"I want you all to know that there is *no* weapon which is stronger or more powerful than God's Word. In this world, it is crucial for you all to remember that we are not battling people; we are battling evil spirits that affect people and the world we live in. Please turn with me in your Bibles to Ephesians 6:10-18. Let's read it together.

"*'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the* ***full armor of God****, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with <u>the belt of truth</u> buckled around your waist, with <u>the breastplate of righteousness</u> in place, and with your <u>feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.</u> In addition to all this, take <u>up the shield of faith</u>, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take <u>the helmet of salvation</u> and <u>the* ***sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God*****</u>,'"* he paused and repeated the section of the verse, "The Bible is described as the *Sword of the Spirit,"* then he looked back to his Bible to continue reading, "'*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.' Obadiah* paused to enjoy the looks of awe that were reflected on the students' faces from the powerful passage of scripture.

"You all, as Intercessors, are warriors. You are warriors fighting in spiritual warfare. I am trying to train and prepare you the best I possibly can so you can know how to stand and face evil when it approaches you using the most powerful tools you can acquire. First, it is through the power of prayer; and second, it is in knowing and *speaking* God's Word as your weapon. God refers to His Word as the *Sword* of the Spirit, for it is the most powerful weapon you will ever use. So, let's break down in more detail what the Sword of the Spirit tells us about the Armor of God so that you have a complete understanding of why it is so important to protect yourself with it every day."

He then walked to the board and wrote:

<u>Understanding the Armor of God</u>

"Alright, let's look at the first piece of armor, the
Belt of Truth.

*"*The Bible is full of verses that teach us satan is the great deceiver. For example, just look back at Ephesians 6:11, where it says, '*so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes'.* God knows that every day of our lives the devil is going try and lie to us, twist things to us, try to deceive us to hurt, confuse and destroy us—but… if we are wearing God's armor and have the Belt of Truth around our waist, that means we are prepared to step into this world

with the power, wisdom, and discernment of the Holy Spirit to know the truth so we will not be deceived or led astray.

"The other reason the Belt of Truth is important is because Proverbs 6:16-19 teaches us about the seven things that God hates, and one of them is a lying tongue. By wearing the belt of truth, you are also speaking truth, representing truth. People will know you are an honest and truthful person, but more importantly, by being truthful, you are pleasing God.

"Let's look at the second piece of armor listed in the verse, the Breastplate of Righteousness. Why is this important? Because it protects our heart. All of us have had struggles in our lives from time to time with questioning our self-worth. I know during my teen years, there were many times I struggled with self-esteem issues, and that doesn't stop in your teen years either. No, satan loves to try and convince us that we are not worthy of God's love at any age of our lives. He loves to try and make us believe that our sins are *too* bad, we are too horrible, and could never receive God's wonderful mercy and grace. He also loves to remind us of our past and the sins that are covered by the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, even those satan loves to throw up in our face," then he paused, lifted his eyes and hands up toward heaven and said, "But thank You, Jesus! Thank You, our good, Heavenly Father God, that You *do* love us unconditionally and want us to come to You *as we are*! Thank You for Your *amazing grace* that can penetrate the heart of the worst sinner and cleanse us of *all* unrighteousness! Thank You that Your mercies are new every morning and that Your hands of lovingkindness are always reaching out to the lost, knocking at the doors of our hearts, and waiting patiently for us to answer! Thank You for throwing our sins into the sea of forgetfulness and remembering them no more! Hallelujah!" he said as he looked at the Intercessors, his face beaming with joy.

"Even if we have served the Lord for years, we must protect our hearts with the Breastplate of Righteousness daily, because the devil will *always* try to come after our hearts, especially if we are dedicated servants to the Lord's work. Remember, satan *hates* those of us who do the most damage to his kingdom, so he is going to attack every chance he gets. But! If we have God's armor upon us and are protected with the Breastplate of Righteousness, he cannot get to our heart. We are so well protected by God, he cannot even *see* our heart!" he chuckled with joy.

"Alright, next are our Feet Being Fitted, some translations say 'Shod' with the Preparation or Readiness of Peace. This means that wherever we go, we are ready to speak the Gospel of Jesus Christ and take His message of love and forgiveness to the people of the world, just as He told us to do, and when we go, we are given the words to speak and that we are heard.

"Sometimes taking this message may mean to teach, or sing, sometimes it is through others, sometimes it is by giving our testimony of something God has done for us. However, it is God's wish to use us and wherever it is God wishes us

to go, He will make a way for us, He will prepare us for when we get there, and He will prepare the ears, eyes, hearts, and minds of those whom He wants us to minister to. Having our Feet Prepared with Peace makes us ready to go when He says go! Does this all make sense so far?" he asked his students, who all nodded that it did as they took notes on his lesson.

"Good! Let's move on to the "Shield of Faith". In this passage, Paul describes satan's attacks on us as flaming arrows, but when we are holding our faith before us as a shield, we are able to extinguish those flaming arrows of attack. The reason why Paul uses that descriptive is because the devil is going to constantly try to come and destroy you, your faith, your life, your family every chance he has, but it is our faith in our Mighty God, our faith in His Word that His Word is true, that he keeps His promises to us, He will never leave us nor abandon us but will fight our battles for us, will protect us, provide for us, and cover us with His Holy Spirit. It is our faith that will protect us from those attacks.

"Our faith begins when we confess that we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and our Father God--and believe *without* seeing, for Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Once we believe, our faith in God will be tested, but we can pray and ask God to strengthen our faith in Him, and He will answer us. That is His special gift to us, to strengthen our faith! By us taking up this piece of the Armor of God and carrying it with us as our shield every day, we will only become stronger in our relationship with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, which is very important because our faith in Who they are and our relationship with them will be tested.

"It is also important to carry the shield of faith to protect us from temptation. We will have times when we make mistakes and we will have times when we are discouraged, but if we keep our faith strong in the Lord, knowing He is always there for us and believe His Word is true, we can call out to Him for help. When we need it, we can ask for His forgiveness, and through those circumstances, we will draw closer to Him. So, carry that shield with you always and never let it go.

"Now we come to the Helmet of Salvation. Just as any helmet protects the head, the Helmet of Salvation is to protect our minds. The mind is affected by things which we see, hear, experience, and remember. The mind can be a place where fear and anxiety can dwell. It can also be a place where ideas that are not in alignment with God's Word can manifest. The devil loves to try and plant all kinds of wicked things into our minds, which can hurt us, cause doubts in our faith, and pull us away from God, so this is why placing the Helmet of Salvation upon our heads is so important.

"When we get up each day, we make time to start that day by spending time in God's Word and prayer to keep ourselves connected to Him, to seek His Will for our lives, His guidance for the day, and ask for His help and protection. But it is also to remind ourselves of Who He is, how much He loves us, how He

gave His One and only Son to die for our sins so that we could have forgiveness and receive everlasting life. We don't want to begin our day being distracted from that. We don't *ever* want to become distracted from God and *His* plan for our lives. Placing the Helmet of Salvation upon our head each day will protect us from the enemy, satan, attacking our minds so he can never pull us away from our Savior and our Heavenly Father. The devil can never plant doubts, fears, or ideas that are not of God into our minds when our minds are covered by the Helmet of Salvation because there is no power to be found that can come against that of Jesus Christ.

"Last, but certainly not in any possible way least, is the Sword of the Spirit, which is, as the verse says, the Word of God, the Bible. There is no other book in this world that you will ever own or read that is more powerful. In the world we live in, we can clearly see that people do not know the Word of God as in days passed, and some do not want to. It is not revered by most as it once was because there are many people in the world who have lost the Spirit of the fear of God. Do you know what that means? The Spirit of the fear of God?" he asked.

"Doesn't it mean to be afraid of not having God in your life?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, and it means to respect and revere God with all your heart, all your spirit. The fear of God means to love Him so much, to want Him present in your life so much, to want to please Him so much, that you would be afraid not to have Him in your life. It also means to be completely and totally in awe of Him, respectful of Him, and obedient of His Word," Obadiah explained, "The Sword of the Spirit is a weapon of spiritual warfare and there is nothing else like it in this world, below it, in this universe or any other universe, because there is no greater power in this world, below it, in this universe or any other universe that can compare to that of our God, Adonai, Eloheinu, Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and His only Son, Jesus Christ, Yeshua Hamashiach, our Lord, Savior, and Messiah, and the Holy Spirit, our Friend and Comforter.

"I want to make it very clear that knowing the Word of God, reading it, studying it, memorizing, and speaking it is the most important task in your Intercessor training, that and learning how to pray. For in Zechariah 4:6 it is written, *'"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord'.* It is so important for you to remember that everything we do in this life should be done by the Spirit to obey the Will of God. How is this accomplished? Submitting our will to the Will of the Spirit of God comes by studying His Word, obeying His Word, and spending time in prayer. I need to make sure that you understand this," he said.

The Intercessors all nodded in acknowledgement.

"This brings me to the last part of Paul's verse in talking about the Armor of God, which is about Prayer. I have always said that one must never underestimate the power of prayer because prayer is one of the key elements in developing our personal relationship with God. Studying God's Word is how we

learn who God is and how we are to obey Him in our daily lives. Prayer is our way of communicating with God directly.

"Prayer is a beautiful, intimate time to close our eyes, visualize just ourselves and God together, and open our hearts to Him. Prayer is a time of bonding with God to tell Him about all of our innermost thoughts, hopes, dreams, pains, sufferings, fears, everything inside of us that we need help with, everything that we want to improve, everything good that we want to ask for others. Absolutely anything and everything that is for the good of ourselves and others in this world can be spoken to the Lord in prayer.

"When we pray, we must bring righteous prayers to the Lord. By that I mean, we cannot bring prayers that are not in alignment with God's Word, are unkind or selfish, but when a righteous prayer is prayed, Jesus acts as our Intercessor. He takes our requests before His Heavenly Father, and the Bible tells us in Isaiah 65:24 *'Even before they call, I will answer.'* You see, God already knows everything you are thinking and feeling, but He wants us to come to Him and talk to Him so that we can form a *relationship* with Him. *It's all about our relationship with God*.

"Think about it like this, the Bible describes God as our Heavenly Father, and we are His children. Well, because He is such a wonderful, good, heavenly Father, He wants to get to know His children individually and form a beautiful relationship with them! That relationship is formed through spending time together, communicating, getting to know one another, and that comes through prayer. Prayer changes things—for the better!

"God listens and He answers. Sometimes instantly, sometimes over a shorter period of time, sometimes over a longer period of time. Look at Abraham, he had to wait twenty-five years for God's promise to be fulfilled, of him having a son with Sarah, but sure enough, after twenty-five long years, just as God promised, Isaac came!

"Then there are times when God's answers are not what we want or what we hope for, and these answers are hard to understand, but we have to *trust* Him that He knows what is best for us, always. Even when the answer seems to be painful, we must keep trusting in our good Father God.

"Never forget that prayer is *so powerful*, it is the very *first* thing you should think to do whenever you have a problem come--and it should be the very *first* thing you do when something wonderful happens to you! We never want to forget that our good God deserves praise and thanks every day for all His goodness, because He *is* a good, wonderful, amazing, incredible God, and we all need to remember to tell Him that every day!" he said with his charming smile.

"In addition to your Biblical training, there will be some other elements of Intercessor training you will receive. There will be times of service where I or others may teach you some new skills, and you are also going to be educated in self-defense skills so that if something like this ever were to happen again, like

what happened to you, Jace, the outcome may be more in your favor.

"I want you to understand these self-defense studies are not to take the place of your spiritual warfare training of studying God's Word and learning how to pray. Those things are *always* the most important elements of being an Intercessor to become a true warrior for Christ because they are connected to the supernatural power of God more than anything else you could ever learn.

"The reason I like to teach you self-defense techniques is because we do live in a dangerous world, and it is good to know how to physically defend yourself should the need arise," he said, emphasizing his point.

The Intercessors all again nodded in agreement, curious as to what this new training involved.

"What are you going to be teaching us?" Gideon asked.

"We will only begin today with one element of the training. I will show you two different self-defense techniques. The first one you will learn today, which you can practice each time you come here. You must wait for the second until Jace is completely recovered," Obadiah replied.

Obadiah looked at Jace and his bandages and bruises, "The Bible tells us in Matthew 5:39, *'But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.'*

*"*This verse is *not* describing what happened to you and Rateesh. Overall, Jesus wants us to be peacekeepers, to show love to those who would hurt us, as He did to those who hurt Him. But this is not the same situation that the Lord is speaking about. God is not expecting us to sit back while someone or a group beats us within an inch of our lives. No. That is not what Jesus is teaching us. In your studies, you will find that God raised up many mighty warriors in the Bible. Look at Saul, Samson, Joshua, and David, just to name a few," he said.

"Oh, uh, and don't forget Gideon," Gideon interjected.

Obadiah chuckled, "Yes, of course, Gideon. These were all men who were empowered by God to succeed in battle. Although I am praying you will never have to use it, I want to give you the knowledge and skills I have to be able to defend yourself should the need ever arise. My prayer is that the need will never arise."

Obadiah asked Gideon to help him carry the trunk. "Brielle, bring your Bible along and everyone follow me, please."

Obadiah and Gideon carried the small trunk and exited the Study Chamber toward a new passage. The Intercessors had never been down this tunnel of the Prayer Sanctum, and they had that old familiar feeling of anticipation and excitement. After walking a while down the passageway, Obadiah stopped in front of a large opening.

"Please wait here," Obadiah said.

He took a small flashlight from his pocket and stepped inside the cave and out of sight. Within seconds, the Intercessors heard the echoing sound of some

kind of mechanisms being switched, like those inside a breaker box. With each click of a switch, there came illumination to the cave. They all gasped in amazement. There, inside this rounded opening, was a cavern at least twice the size of the Study Chamber. The top of the cave was not as high as the caverns, but it was long and wide; nothing but open space.

"I can't *believe* this!" Keoni exclaimed, "Every time I think we've seen it all, you go and show us something even more incredible!"

Obadiah came back to retrieve the trunk with Gideon. "I have heard that there are some natural caves that are as big as a football field," he said.

"Amazing," Gideon whispered as they entered the cave.

"With God *all* things are possible. This is all God's magnificent creation. He is the Master Designer, Constructor, Engineer, you name it, He can do it," Obadiah added.

"Are there any other places in here you haven't taken us?" Brielle asked.

Obadiah winked at her, "All things in good time."

"That means yes," she whispered to the others.

"I like to call this room The Hippo," Obadiah said.

The students were puzzled.

"Um, okay, it's your cave and you can call it whatever you want… but why on earth would you want to call it The Hippo?" Gideon joked.

"The word Hippodrome is an ancient word that means a building or enclosure for entertainment or sports. Plus, when my wife and I first found this place, she thought this area looked like the shape of a hippo," he said, pointing to a strange shape in the rock on the wall.

"It does look like a hippo!" Keoni laughed, "How funny is that?"

"We called it The Hippodrome and through time shortened it to The Hippo for short," he explained.

"Okay, so if I come in and say, 'Hey Brielle, where's Jace? She could say, 'Yeah, I think he's in The Hippo,'" Gideon said, making everyone laugh.

"Pretty much," Obadiah chuckled, then turned to Brielle,

"Please take out your Bible, sweetheart, and turn to 1 Samuel 17," he said. Brielle opened to the story in the Bible. Then Obadiah turned to the others, "Please, sit down and make yourselves comfortable," he said, gesturing to some of the large stones which surrounded the arena. "Let us sit together and listen to this story in God's Word," he said, taking a seat on the large stone. "Brielle, please start at the beginning of Chapter 17."

Brielle nodded and began to read, "The story of David and Goliath. *'Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.*

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels, on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him.

Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah. Jesse had eight sons, and in Saul's time he was very old. Jesse's three oldest sons had followed Saul to the war: The firstborn was Eliab; the second, Abinadab; and the third, Shammah. David was the youngest. The three oldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep at Bethlehem.

For forty days the Philistine came forward every morning and evening and took his stand.

Now Jesse said to his son David, "Take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines."

Early in the morning David left the flock in the care of a shepherd, loaded up and set out, as Jesse had directed. He reached the camp as the army was going out to its battle positions, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines were drawing up their lines facing each other. David left his things with the keeper of supplies, ran to the battle lines and asked his brothers how they were. As he was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it. Whenever the Israelites saw the man, they all fled from him in great fear.

Now the Israelites had been saying, "Do you see how this man keeps coming out? He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his family from taxes in Israel."

David asked the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

They repeated to him what they had been saying and told him, "This is what

will be done for the man who kills him."

When Eliab, David's oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, "Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle."

"Now what have I done?" said David. "Can't I even speak?" He then turned away to someone else and brought up the same matter, and the men answered him as before. What David said was overheard and reported to Saul, and Saul sent for him.

David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth."

But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine."

Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you."

Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.

"I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them." So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him. He said to David, "Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!"

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him,'" she said.

"Can you read that last verse again, please?" Obadiah asked.

"*So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and stone,"* she repeated.

"That's it," Obadiah said, standing up, turning to the group, "he *triumphed* with a sling and stone… and the *power of God Almighty* which was upon him."

Obadiah removed an ancient key from his pocket to unlock the trunk. He unlatched the locks and slowly raised the dusty lid, turning it around for the students to see. What lay inside were several bunches of long, woven ropes with tapestry oval-shaped objects attached to them. In the corner of the box was a pile of very smooth, round rocks about the size of golf balls.

Obadiah took one of the rope objects from the box. The oval-shaped tapestry was in the colors of cream and brown, and there were two ropes, each about two feet in length, which were attached to its sides. Obadiah dropped the oval piece down and held the two ropes by their ends. Then he took one of the round stones and placed it in the center of the woven oval.

"It's a sling," Brielle said.

Obadiah smiled and began to pass the items out to the Intercessors, giving them each a sling along with several stones.

"Hold on one moment," he said, jogging over to the far side of the cave to turn around two targets that stood against the opposite wall.

"Okay," he said, returning and picking up his sling, "there are some important rules which must be learned. First, you cannot all practice at the same time. In the beginning, when you are learning to control your sling, you need to come in one at a time," he said, chuckling, "As you gain more control, you can come in two at a time to practice. Jace, I would feel better if you waited until the doctor releases you before you begin to train."

Jace nodded, though he was ready to begin that day.

"Next, when you are able to practice with another, never go and collect your stones unless you have both finished throwing. We don't need a David and Goliath demonstration here," he said with his charming smile and a chuckle.

"Last, you must all start from this point here," he said, lining himself up with a marker on the wall that was the closest to the target. You must hit the target accurately at least twenty-five times before you can move back to the next marker. Then, once you reach the last marker, you need to return to the beginning and start again. You will find that your accuracy will grow in all distances, it comes with constant repetition, and you need to learn how to

control the sling depending on how far—or how close you are to your target," he said, taking out a sling and placing a rock in it. "If you are to use this weapon in the future, you must be able to quickly judge your distance and how to adjust your speed and force of the sling."

Then he took the two ropes in one hand, holding them together.

"Now, this is how you hold the sling. Take one rope and hold it between the second and third finger, laying it in the palm of your hand. This is your anchoring rope. Then take the other rope and hold it between your second finger and your thumb," he demonstrated, "This is your release rope. Now, this is how you load it," he said, taking one of the stones and placing it in the woven oval piece. When he did, the weight of the stone pulled on the ropes until they were taut and the oval piece wrapped around the stone, cradling it in its center.

"To activate the sling, you circle it with one hand in a backward motion, so you are spinning the rock back behind you. Like a fast-pitch softball pitcher winds up for the pitch. Now the faster you go, the harder your stone will fly. But to begin, just do one short rotation. Right now, you are only practicing the release. To release the rock, you must learn how to lift your thumb and drop that rope while hanging on tightly to the other. Once you release that rope, the sling will be opened and the stone will be free to fly out and… hopefully will go straight in front of you.

"Okay, so I always say the best way to teach is by example, so please stand back," he said as he waited for the students to move. "Farther," he said, waving them backward, "farther… little more… okay there. It's been a while since I've done this and I don't want to take any chances," he chuckled.

Obadiah took the sling in his hand, holding the rock in place with the other, and held it over his head. Then he quickly began to swing the rock, winding it behind him in a backward circle. He continued to swing the stone, gaining speed with every rotation. He snapped open the release rope, and the stone flew from the sling. It went flying straight in front of him at the target, which was well over thirty feet away. It smashed into the target so hard that it embedded deep into its face.

The Intercessors stood staring for a moment, stunned at the incredible feat they had witnessed. They were amazed by the skill Obadiah possessed. Then, simultaneously, they erupted in cheers of praise for his incredible demonstration.

Obadiah turned around and laughed, "I guess I haven't lost my touch," he said happily, "Now, with the exception of Jace, who wants to be first?"

They spent the rest of their training time taking turns, trying to learn the skill of David, which God used to take down a mighty giant.

Every day that week, the girls went to The Hippo cave in the Prayer Sanctum. Jace went along, though he could not participate until the doctor had released him. Gideon only made it after football practice and didn't get to try the

sling as much as he wanted.

The students would take turns trying to learn the technique of how to spin the sling and the timing of how to release the stone. They worked out a schedule for each one to enter The Hippo, one at a time, and spent half an hour practicing. Then they would rotate.

In the beginning, the practice time was comical with stones flying every which way, but nowhere near the target. When Gideon had time to practice and threw an inaccurate stone, he took to calling out "Fore!" as a golfer who hit a wild ball would do—even though he was alone.

The students loved working on their sling skills and were showing signs of improvement every day, even though their arms were sore from the repeated muscle use. They found that this was not a skill they would quickly master. It was something that would take many hours of hard work and dedicated practice.

Gideon was frustrated. Even though he loved playing on his football team and was happy to be at practice, when he heard the girls talking about how they were improving their skills, he felt like he was falling behind. Because he was so competitive, he made use of all his time in The Hippo wisely – he expended maximum concentration on how to effectively use the sling.

Jace finally had his stitches out on Wednesday, and the doctor said he was doing well. He eagerly went straight to the Prayer Sanctum with Brielle and Keoni to begin his work on his sling training. Because of his understanding of the timing of pitching a baseball, he quickly gained control over the release of his sling and by Thursday was already making progress at hitting the target.

At the end of the week, the girls were able to at least release their slings so that the stones were flying out in front of them and not behind… to the sides… or straight up in the air.

It was hard to believe another week had passed. Jace was feeling much better. Not only had his stitches been removed, but most of the bruises on his face and hands were gone. Rateesh was also doing well, still unsure of how to handle his family, but spending more time reading his Bible, attending the prayer group meetings after school, and growing stronger in the Lord every day.

Finally, it was Friday night. It was the second weekend of November, and football season was quickly coming to an end. The Fairfield Falcons had to win this game against the Bridgeport Bulls to advance to the playoffs. The entire school was excited about the big game, as was much of the town. The team had a new energy, a new life to it since Reed and Morgan had been arrested. Although none of the students celebrated their situation, still, they realized the two players had brought an oppressive spirit to the team. They had manipulated other team members with intimidation and brought the esteem of other teammates down. Now that they were gone, it was like a burden had been lifted. There was a great spirit of encouragement and uplifting that quickly began to

spread, and it was started by Gideon.

That night, the Falcon's second-string quarterback, Terrell Scott, would start. He took Reed's place. Gideon immediately got behind the new team captain, Andrew Warner, who replaced Morgan, and led by example for the other team members to follow. The Falcons knew they were still a strong team and could win this game-- as long as they worked together.

When Brielle, Jace, and Keoni arrived, they found no room to sit in the bleachers. Alma, Obadiah, Genevieve, Magomu, and Asher had all come early to get good seats. But the three Intercessors had taken a quick trip to the Prayer Sanctum for some sling practice before coming.

"Wow! I think the whole school and half the town of Fairfield are here tonight!" Keoni said.

"Half?" Brielle teased, "I think I just saw the mayor over there."

Some of the students were taking matters into their own hands and were bringing the outside picnic tables on campus to sit along the chain link fence that surrounded the field, creating their seating section outside the end zones.

"Keoni!" Someone yelled her name; she looked to see Terri and Carlos sitting together on a picnic table. No one else was with them, and there was plenty of room for them all to sit together.

"Hey, look, Terri's got a table over there, let's go," she said.

The three joined Terri and Carlos and began having a great time watching the game. As they sat there, other students brought out more tables until soon the entire area around both end zones were completely surrounded by cheering students perched on picnic tables. Jace enjoyed talking with Carlos as he was really into sports and was quite knowledgeable about the game of football.

"Why didn't you go out for the team?" Jace said.

"I prefer baseball," Carlos answered, "and I didn't want to risk getting hurt."

Jace nodded, "Understood," he said.

Brielle was listening to their conversation and added, "Are you going to go out for baseball this season, Jace?"

Jace looked at her, a little surprised by her question, "I'm not sure yet. I haven't quite decided."

"What position do you play?" Carlos asked.

"I pitch," Jace said, "but I also like center field."

The game was intense, with both teams fighting hard for the victory. Soon, it was halftime. The score was 21 to 14 with Fairfield on top, and all the Falcon fans were hopeful. The cheerleaders and band had a special production planned to perform and came out onto the field.

"Wow," Brielle said, "they're good, much better than we are in orchestra," she laughed.

"I can't watch," Keoni said with an irritated tone.

"Why not?" Terri asked, "It's a good song."

"No, it's not that," Keoni explained, "I just don't enjoy watching Taryn—God forgive me, I know I'm wrong and I need to work on this… It's just that, honestly, right now I can't do it."

Brielle understood her friend's struggle with Taryn. Although she knew that it was something that they both needed to work on, she decided to help her friend.

"Okay then, I'll do the dance for you instead," she said, jumping up onto the opposite side of the picnic table to stand in front of her friends and dance around. Everyone was laughing at her moves as she tried to look over her shoulder and keep up with the girls dancing on the field, filing in with her silliness as she went along. It was quite entertaining and immediately took Keoni's mind off Taryn.

Brielle looked over to see the cheerleaders jump up in the air doing a hitch kick, and she did the same, but when she came down, she landed on the edge of the bench. The bench made a loud cracking sound and broke. Brielle lost her balance - she tried to regain it but couldn't and started to fall backward into the railing of the chain link fence. Jace and the rest of the group were sitting on the opposite bench and couldn't get up fast enough to help her. Then, just as she began to fall, from out of nowhere, Zach Thompson came running up and caught her in mid-air.

Everything happened so fast that Brielle hardly knew what was going on. First, she felt herself falling and then suddenly looked up to find herself safely cradled in the arms of Zach. She looked at him, startled by her fall and surprised to see him there.

He held her tightly, looking down into her eyes, "Are you okay?" he asked gently.

Brielle stared up at him. She was out of breath, and her heart was pounding from the adrenaline of her fall. She slowly nodded and said, "Yes, thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, smiling down at her.

Jace had gotten up from the picnic table and came over to where they were. "Brielle, are you alright?" he asked.

Hearing Jace's voice snapped Brielle's attention from gazing up at Zach, and she looked over at him, "Oh, yes, I'm fine. A big, clumsy clown, but just fine," she joked.

Zach helped her to stand. "You scared me. How about next time you dance on the ground?" he said with a laugh.

"I'll try to remember that," she said.

Keoni, Terri, and Carlos watched as the scene took place. "Awkward," Keoni whispered to them.

"Well," Zach said, "Enjoy the game." Then he turned to the rest of the group and gave a little wave, "See ya," he said, then he walked away.

Jace stood there watching him for a moment and then said, "Zach."

Zach stopped and turned around to look at him.

"Thanks," Jace said.

Zach didn't respond but turned and walked back to his table of friends. Brielle stood there for a moment and watched him go. Then she looked over at Keoni, who waved her hand in front of her face as if to fan herself. Brielle smiled and rolled her eyes at her friend and went back to sit down at the table.

Halftime was over, and the players were coming back out onto the field to resume the game. When Brielle sat back down with Jace, he was very quiet. Keoni noticed it too. Brielle couldn't think of anything to say to try and lighten the atmosphere, which was thick with the tension from Jace.

The game began again, and soon the air was full of cheering from the students surrounding them. Brielle looked at Jace, who was still quiet---quieter than usual. It made her nervous.

"Are you okay?" she asked him.

Jace didn't look at her, but kept his eyes on the game, "Yeah, I'm fine."

Brielle didn't like his response, "You don't act fine," she said dryly.

Jace looked over at her, "What? How am I supposed to act?"

"I don't know," she replied, unsure of what to say, "You're just acting like you're mad or something."

Jace looked back at the game and took a deep breath. "I'm not mad," he said softly.

"Then what's the matter with you?" she asked directly, loud enough for Keoni to hear her.

Jace made eye contact with Keoni, who quickly turned away.

"Listen," he whispered to Brielle, "Can we talk about this later?"

"Okay," Brielle said, confused by the situation.

Just then, the other team scored a touchdown. The score was now 21 to 21. Brielle was having a hard time sitting there beside Jace, pretending like everything was alright. After all, she hadn't done anything wrong; she was just playing around and *accidentally* fell. It wasn't her fault that Zach came racing to her rescue. Then her mind went off on this tangent of thought.

"Zach came *racing* to my rescue," she thought to herself, "Where did he come from anyway?"

He must have been close by, but more than that, he must have been watching her to see that she was falling and started moving in time to catch her when she did.

She thought about how she felt when Zach caught her. It wasn't her fault that he came to catch her. It wasn't like she asked him to; she didn't even know he was there. So why was Jace acting so strangely? She thought about how she looked up at Zach. She was shocked at how fast she fell. Then once she landed, she was trying to figure out what had happened and whose arms had caught her. When she looked up and saw Zach, she was surprised.

She had to admit, though, and be honest… she kind of liked it.

Zach was an attractive guy. Not like Jace, but still very attractive. Maybe Jace noticed this; maybe he saw on her face that she liked being caught by him. She couldn't concentrate on the game and decided to go to the snack bar to get something to eat.

"I'm going to go grab something to munch on," she said, standing up from the picnic table. "Anybody want anything?"

Terri and Carlos both politely declined.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Keoni said, digging around in her purse, "I want some hot tamales."

Everyone at the table looked over at her with surprise.

"I don't think I've ever seen you eat anything but leafy greens and veggies since I've known you," Terri teased.

"I can't help it. Sometimes I eat junk food when I'm nervous for my brother," she said, looking for money.

"Keoni, I'll get it," Brielle laughed, "Don't worry about it."

Just then, Gideon caught a high deep pass down the middle of the field for a touchdown, making the score 27-21, Fairfield. The Falcon crowd went wild. Brielle took a moment to celebrate the touchdown. She was amused by Gideon's little victory dance he did in the end zone, which he ended by pointing over to his sister, who was standing on the bench cheering wildly for him. Once the celebration dance was over, Brielle turned and headed for the snack bar. There were people everywhere, and they were still cheering, anxiously awaiting the extra point try.

As she made her way through the crowd of people, the extra point was kicked and was good, taking the Falcons' lead to 28 to 21. The crowd exploded again in celebration, everyone was jumping, clapping, and yelling-- everyone except one person. That person caught her eye. Through the lively, loud crowd, she saw him; he wasn't facing the football field like everyone else. He was facing her, staring directly at her with a slight smile. It was the mysterious man whom she had seen on the school field trip. The same one that Jace had chased. The same one that she had seen months ago at another football game and thought she saw at her church one Sunday morning. Brielle froze and stared back at him. She felt her hands begin to tremble and didn't know what to do. She noticed his face. It wasn't threatening, it wasn't even creepy. It was a genuine, pleasant smile. But it was still strange to her. Why would this man keep appearing, and why was he always smiling at her? Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder – it gave her a jolt.

It was Jace.

Quickly, she turned to look at him, and when he saw the look on her face, he knew there was something wrong.

"What is it?" he asked, concerned.

Brielle turned back around to look at the man, but he was gone. She stood on the balls of her feet, searching through the crowd, but she was too short to see over most of the people surrounding her.

Jace grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the mass of people so they could talk and be heard. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“I thought I saw that man, the man from the field trip,” she said.

Jace immediately began looking at the crowd to find him. “What was he wearing?” he asked.

“I… I don’t even know for sure. I just saw him through the crowd. I only noticed his face staring at me,” she said.

“Do you want to call Hadley?” he asked.

She shook her head, “No, it will be just like the last time. He didn’t do anything to me. They can’t do anything about it. He just makes me nervous, it’s very strange.”

“Did he come up to you? Talk to you, what?” he asked nervously.

“No, he is always at a distance. He just watches me and is always smiling at me,” Brielle said thinking about it, “In fact, I wouldn’t even say he looks at me in a creepy way. He seems like he is trying to be nice. It’s just bizarre and strange, I mean why does he do that? And then why does he run away?” she asked.

Jace grabbed her and pulled her close in his arms, protectively holding her. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Brielle stood silently, held tightly in his embrace, enjoying being in his arms. After being held in Zach’s arms and now being held in Jace’s, she knew—there was no comparison. There was nothing that felt like being held in the embrace of Jace.

She looked up into his beautiful brown eyes, which never ceased to mesmerize her. “Why were you so upset earlier?” she asked him.

Jace pulled her back into his arms, placing his hand on her head to hold her close.

“I just… I didn’t like seeing you in the arms of another guy,” he said.

“Especially Zach, right?” she asked.

Jace laughed, “That didn’t make it any better, but I wouldn’t like it if it were any guy… and the way you…” he hesitated.

“The way I what?” she asked.

“Well, you kind of looked like you were enjoying…”

“Enjoying?” she asked.

“Being in his arms,” he said.

The crowd erupted again, but this time not in cheers of joy. The opposing team had just scored a touchdown. They were closing in on the Falcons. If their extra point try was good, it would have been a tie game.

Brielle felt her face flush, “What do you mean?” she asked, pulling back from his arms.

"I mean, when he caught you and you looked up at him, there was a look on your face… it looked like you enjoyed being held by him," Jace said.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said.

"Why am I being ridiculous? You got upset at me one day when I was talking to Taryn in the lunchroom," he said.

"That's a different situation," she snapped back.

The crowd erupted again, the opposing team's kick was good, and the game was now tied: 28 to 28.

"How is that different?" he asked her.

"Because Taryn *likes* you," she said.

"Taryn doesn't truly like any guy. She just likes attention," Jace said.

"Taryn flirts with you every chance she gets," Brielle said.

"And you don't like it," Jace said directly.

"No, I don't like it. But this is not the same thing. I fell. I was dancing around like an idiot, and I fell, and Zach was just there. He came flying out of nowhere and caught me," she said.

"I understand that," Jace said.

"You just said that you didn't like seeing me in another guy's arms, especially Zach's," she retorted.

"I don't like seeing you in another guy's arms, but what upset me was how you looked at him," he said.

"How did I look? I was falling, which scared me, and then when I landed, I was surprised to see who had caught me," she replied.

Jace just looked at her and shook his head.

"You didn't like the look of surprise on my face?" she asked.

Jace took a deep breath and looked at the ground.

"How did I look?" she pressed.

"Like you *enjoyed* being in his arms," he answered.

Brielle looked away at the game. She was upset for two reasons: one, that he did notice her looking at Zach in that way, and two, because she knew she wasn't being honest with him.

Jace came closer to her, "Brielle, listen, I'm sorry if what I said upset you. You asked me if I was okay, and I wanted to tell you the truth about what I was feeling," he said, taking her hand in his.

Brielle pulled her hand away from him, "This is just because it was Zach who caught me, and you have a crazy rivalry with him. If Rateesh, Terri, or Carlos had caught me, it wouldn't have bothered you in the least."

"Uh, yeah, bad comparison, okay? Those guys don't like you like that. Zach *does,* and you know it," Jace said.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Come on, Brielle, you know he likes you. I know he likes you. Gideon and Keoni know he likes you. But what I want to know is, do you like him?" he asked.

Brielle stared at him for a moment. She didn't feel for anyone the way she felt about Jace. Yes, she enjoyed that moment in Zach's arms, but it didn't change the way she felt about Jace. She was angry at her own actions. But instead of taking responsibility and owning up to her thoughts and feelings, she was upset that she was being confronted about it—and she was taking her frustration out on Jace.

"Your silence tells me a lot," he said.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" she said hastily, "You know what? I came over here to get something to eat and that's what I'm going to do," she said as she started walking through the crowd to the concession stand.

"Brielle!" Jace called after her, but she did not stop. She walked deeper into the crowd with the hope that he wouldn't find her. She knew that if she went and stood in line at the snack bar, he would try to talk to her. But she just wanted to be alone, something not easily done while surrounded by hundreds of people. Jace stayed right with her. When she came out of the crowd, she headed back to the picnic table. Her thought was that if she went there with her friends, she could end this conversation, at least for now.

"Brielle!" she heard Jace's voice call to her over the noise.

She turned around sharply and glared at him, "What?" she demanded, her temper beginning to flare.

"Please don't walk away from me, we need to talk about this," Jace said.

"Talk about what?" she yelled, "Do you want to talk about the fact that I have not been able to take my eyes off you since the day we first met, but you haven't seemed to notice? How about the fact that every time I'm away from you, *you* are all I can think about? Or when I am with you, the hours pass by like minutes, and I can't wait until I'm with you again. You want to ask me all these questions because I looked at Zach as if I liked him, well, okay, YES! Yes, I think that he is a good-looking guy! Alright? Yes, I liked that he caught me! It was nice! So now, how does that make you feel? Good? Better? Is that what you wanted to hear? Because what I find amazing, Jace, is how you can notice a look on my face for one *fraction* of a moment with Zach, which was something pretty ridiculous, but you *never* seem to notice the *hundreds* of times I have looked like that at *you*!"

Brielle stared at him for a moment, out of breath, part of her stunned that she had just blurted her feelings out to Jace, and part of her relieved to have done so. Jace stood there in silence, staring at her, completely taken off guard by her response. Still fuming with frustration, she spun around sharply and began to walk away from him, furious in her mind and heart that he could be so blind to her feelings for him after all this time. She headed toward the picnic table where Keoni, Terri, and Carlos were all pretending to watch the game, but were watching their argument.

Then she heard his voice come up behind her, "Brielle! I wasn't finished!"

Jace yelled over the crowd.

"There is nothing you have to say that I want to listen to right now, Jace!" she shouted over her shoulder at him.

Then she heard his voice directly behind her, "Okay, well maybe you'll listen to this," he said, spinning her around and pulling her tight into his arms. He took her head in his hand and brought his lips to hers in a surprising and completely passionate kiss.

Keoni, Terri, and Carlos, along with most of the other teens sitting in that area, burst out cheering for the kiss on display before them. The kiss they were thrilled had finally come!

At first, Brielle's anger and stubbornness wanted to resist him as she placed her hands on his chest, trying to push him back. But she couldn't. From the moment she had kissed him that day in the lunchroom in front of Taryn, she had dreamt of the moment when she would kiss him again. Although she hadn't imagined that it would be quite like this-- on display for most of the student body-- still, this kiss is what she longed for deep within her heart.

Brielle allowed herself to get lost in the extraordinary moment, falling deep into enjoying it to its fullest. She forgot that she was standing in front of a crowd of students at a football game, and the sights and sounds that surrounded her quickly melted away. It was just she and Jace standing there on the side of the football field, and nothing else seemed to exist.

Jace finally, slowly, released her lips from his and pulled back to look at her. He had clearly and beautifully communicated with that one lovely kiss *exactly* how he felt about her, and he took his time to do so. Brielle's eyes were still closed. Dazed and in a state of complete joy, she savored every aspect of how she felt in this moment so she would remember this kiss for the rest of her life.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"For what?" she asked dreamily, her eyes still closed.

Jace laughed gently, "For everything; being jealous of Zach, for getting upset with you, and… for taking such a long time to kiss you."

Brielle opened her eyes and looked up at him, "You're forgiven," she said with a broad, dreamy smile. Her knees were weak, and she was convinced that if he wasn't holding onto her so tightly, she would melt and be absorbed into the ground.

"I'm sorry too," she whispered.

Just at that moment, they heard the stadium break out into a sound of sorrow. The Falcons quarterback had thrown a pass to Gideon, but the ball was intercepted by the opposing team. There were only fifty-three seconds left on the clock, but now the ball belonged to the Broncos. At that point, the Broncos were at the Falcons' twenty-yard line with the end zone in sight.

The Falcon defense, which had just come off the field two plays earlier, was now back out and into place. The exhausted Falcon players were no match for

the Broncos' offense, which ran the ball three times down to the five-yard line to drain the clock. With two seconds left, a timeout was called so a field goal try could be attempted. The kicker lined up and drilled the game-winning kick right down the middle, ending the Falcons' season and sending the crowd home disappointed.

Fairfield had played an excellent game, but it wasn't meant to be. The Fairfield Falcons knew their time together as a team was over for the season. For Jace and Brielle, their time together was just beginning.

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Gideon was still in bed the next morning when he received a phone call. Normally, he would have been up early, ready for a new day, but not only was he exhausted from the previous night's game, he was completely deflated from the loss. Keoni brought him the phone; it was Coach Barnes.

"I wanted to call and ask you and your prayer group to remember a student from the Bridgeport team," he began. "His name is Conner Sands. Last night, after the game, he went out partying with some of his friends. He was in a car accident on his way home and will be arrested for driving while under the Influence. He injured a couple who were driving home from visiting relatives; they both were severely injured."

"Wow," Gideon whispered, "I'm sorry to hear this." He remembered the guy from their playoff game; he was an awesome athlete. Now, he had greatly altered his life due to drugs. Gideon thought for a moment about what Coach Barnes said, "What do you mean he *will be* arrested?" Gideon asked hesitantly, afraid of what the answer would be.

"He was not drunk. He was under the influence," Coach Barnes explained, "Apparently the same kind of drugs that Lacy and Dylan were taking. I'm sorry to say that he is in the hospital… in a coma."

Gideon was speechless. The thought of a third person having the same horrific thing happen was overwhelming. He thanked Coach Barnes for calling and assured him that he and his friends would pray for Conner and the injured couple immediately. Next, he called both Jace and Brielle to meet him and Keoni in the Prayer Sanctum.

Once they were together, he told them about his conversation with Coach Barnes. They gathered and lifted the young man and the injured couple up in prayer. When they were finished, Gideon shared something the Lord had laid on his heart.

"I think we need to stake a bigger claim--bigger than just our high school," he began, "When we learned about Lacy and then Dylan, we took it upon ourselves to try and make a difference for Jesus at our school, but I think we need to add on to that."

"What do you suggest we do?" Keoni asked.

"The evils of these drugs are obviously affecting more than just our high school; they are affecting our entire town. We know these same drugs are being used by students in our community, and look at how many lives they are affecting? Look at the families of these students and how they are suffering, including the lives of the injured couple and their family. They will never be the same," he said.

"I can't imagine why anyone would knowingly get behind the wheel after drinking or using drugs," Brielle said. "Why do they believe they have control… I will never understand that."

"I can't understand why they get high in the first place," Keoni said, "I always have a great time with my friends, and I've always been one hundred percent sober when I did."

"I agree with you, Gideon, we need to make this a top priority in our prayer time when we are together, and personally," Jace said. "I also think that Max from our prayer group is dealing with a drug problem at home. He has talked to me a few times about his mother. From what he has told me, I think she is using drugs too." Jace said.

"Now that you say that, he has talked to me about his mother being sick and that she won't go to a doctor. He said his father has no idea of what to do," Brielle added.

Jace lowered his eyes and sighed, "My mother has been an addict for years," he said softly, "I can read between the lines when my father talks to me about my mom. I hear Max saying the same things about his mother that I used to say about mine."

Everyone stared at him silently, not knowing what to say. Brielle gently reached her hand out to take his. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

Jace shook his head, "It's hard. It's embarrassing, and it hurts. It's easier for me to deal with because my mother hasn't lived with me for years. But everything Max is telling me I can relate to. This drug problem doesn't lie with just students. It lies with anyone who is lost and looking for something to make them feel better. God only knows how many people in Fairfield may feel that way."

"That brings me to what God spoke to me today. We need to stake a claim for our whole town," Gideon said. "I think we need to let the devil know who is in charge here--and that it *isn't* him. We need to rebuke him and let him know he is going to take his hands off our town, because we are going to take it back for God."

"How do we do that?" Keoni asked, "It would take a lot more than my little cross stakes to claim all of Fairfield."

"Yes, but it's still a good idea. We don't have to do the whole perimeter, but why don't we make some cross stakes and place them at different property lines for our town?" Jace suggested.

"I love that! Then we do like we did for our school, but instead of just a small prayer group, we could plan a prayer meeting for the whole town," Brielle said.

"For the whole town?" Keoni asked.

"Why not, even if we just have a hundred people to come and stand in agreement with us, that would be something, right?" Brielle replied.

"Absolutely, we wouldn't do it every day like we do after school. It could just be one night where we all come together and agree that we want the blessings and protection of God on Fairfield," Gideon explained.

"That's a great idea," Keoni answered, "but how do we do it? Where do we begin?"

"Jace and I can start making crosses and place them at all the major town roads along the boundary lines that mark the territory of Fairfield," Gideon said. "Keoni, why don't you design a flyer that you and Brielle could take to all the town merchants and hand out? Maybe they will help us by putting them up in their business or something."

"Excellent!" Brielle exclaimed, "We could get students from our prayer group to help us, too!"

The Intercessors were becoming very excited about their new claim for the Lord. As they discussed it, they heard the door to the Prayer Sanctum open. It was Obadiah.

"Hello there," he said happily, "I'm thrilled to find you all here. I just came by to get a book to prepare for your lesson for tomorrow."

The students began explaining the phone call from Coach Barnes and how they planned to stake a claim for the entire town of Fairfield. Obadiah sat quietly listening to their plans. He was blessed and inspired by their idea, promising to help them in whatever way he could.

"We need to have a location where the people can come to pray together," Gideon said.

"How about our church?" Brielle suggested.

"Yes! You should talk to Pastor Diffie about it tomorrow at church. I'm sure he will be just as moved by your suggestion as I am. I think this is one of the best ideas I have ever heard from a group of young people. To claim your town for the Lord is a beautiful and powerful act for God. I'm proud of you all," Obadiah said.

The group sat and discussed the event together in detail and made their plans.

"There are some people who may not come, who may not believe, or who may think we're crazy. That's okay. God loves them and we won't let those who oppose us slow us down," Gideon added.

"Let's pray about it right now," Jace suggested, "Obviously, this is something God laid on Gideon's heart and wants to see accomplished. So, let's ask His direction on how this can be a peaceful time together for our entire town."

Again, the four joined hands and prayed over their new venture, asking God's blessing to be upon them and for His divine direction. What they were planning would not only bring peace and protection from the evils of these drug dealers, but also from any other evils that might try to overcome the good people who lived there. They wanted to take the love of Jesus to their community and hopefully reach those who were just like Lacy, Dylan, Conner, and Max's mother, searching for something that would bring joy to their life.

The town of Fairfield was one of the oldest towns in the country, rich in history, culture, and the love of a good, simple life. It was a town where people loved baseball, town parades and gatherings, where there was a great feeling of community and brotherhood among all who dwelled there. The town had been rated one of the top ten places to live in America, and it was easy to see why. The people who lived there took much pride in caring for and preserving their town because they loved it. This attack from the enemy was not acceptable and would not be tolerated. They believed that because Fairfield harbored such innocence and kindness, safety, and a spirit of community from neighbor to neighbor, satan hated it and wanted to see it destroyed. The Intercessors knew they had been called to intercede for others, and that is exactly what they planned to do for the good people of their town.

"I just had an idea come to me," Brielle said, "How about if we plan the prayer service for a Friday night so that we do not interfere with any other church meeting times. We will ask everyone who comes to bring a lit candle as a symbol of their unity and stance with us before God."

The group stared at her for a moment, taking in her idea.

"I think that would be *awesome*," Gideon said.

"Yes, bringing a candle already lit would show others who see it that they are standing in agreement with us in taking His light into the darkness. Jesus tells us in John 8:12, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* Keoni added.

Gideon looked at his sister with great approval, "Well done, Sis, I'm impressed."

"I'm trying," she said sweetly, as memorizing scripture had not been one of her greatest strengths-- something she was working hard to change.

"This is excellent," Jace said, "Maybe we could think of something cool to call it, you know, give it some sort of a name or something?"

Brielle had an idea and said, "What about 'Inviting His Light' prayer vigil?" she asked.

"I like that," Jace said.

"Very cool, and it perfectly speaks the message we are trying to bring. We want to invite the light of Christ into Fairfield and welcome the Holy Spirit here," Gideon agreed.

"That gives me a great idea for the flyer!" Keoni said, taking out her sketch book and beginning to work, putting her ideas on paper.

The Intercessors spent the rest of their Saturday afternoon together in the Prayer Sanctum planning their ideas for the 'Inviting His Light' Prayer Vigil. They believed that through this time of unification in prayer, God would answer them. He would answer their prayers and remove these evil drugs from their town and protect them from ever coming back.

The next day after church, the Intercessors met with Pastor Diffie to tell him

of their idea. He *loved* it. He immediately took out the church calendar to help them set a date for their night of prayer.

"You will need some time to plan, prepare, and spread the word to the community," he said, looking through the dates on the calendar. "Since Thanksgiving is just around the corner, how about if we look at the month of December?"

The students all agreed that it would be best to wait until after Thanksgiving and to schedule it the week before Christmas.

"You say you would like a Friday night?" Pastor Diffie asked.

"Yes, Sir," Gideon answered, "so that people from other churches would be able to come and not have to miss any of their services on Saturday or Sunday."

"That's very sensible," Pastor Diffie said, "and very respectful." he paused to study the Fridays in December. "We have the children's Christmas pageant on the first Friday night of December, and Pastor Nathan is planning to have a youth Christmas party on the 16th. If you would like to hold this before Christmas, the only Friday night available is the ninth of December. How does that sound?" he asked.

"Perfect!" Brielle said.

"We'll take it," Keoni agreed.

"We're calling it 'Inviting His Light' Prayer Vigil," Jace said.

Pastor Diffie looked up at them with a pleased expression, touched by the name they had selected, "That's beautiful!"

"Brielle thought of it," Keoni replied.

"Oh, and look, Keoni made a flyer," Brielle said, pulling it out of Keoni's bag and handing it to the pastor. "We only needed the time and date to add to it," she said happily.

"We have the date, so what time would you like to start?" Pastor Diffie asked.

"How about seven o'clock?" Gideon said.

"Wonderful!" Pastor Diffie said, writing everything down. Then he looked up at the four youth and commended them, "I am *very* proud that you kids are doing such a remarkable thing for your Lord and your town. I am honored to be your pastor and will be happy to help you in whatever way I possibly can, starting with my part in prayer for the evening. Oh, yes, feel free to use the church copier and paper to create your flyers," he added with a smile, "Hopefully that can give you a bit of a start."

The Intercessors all thanked him for his support and assistance. As they left, they felt much anticipation for the prayer night, greater than anything they had ever participated in before. They knew that this was something truly guided by the hand of God, and they were blessed that He chose them to do it.

That afternoon, they met back in the Prayer Sanctum for another lesson with Obadiah. He took them once again into The Hippo. They expected there to

be more sling practice, but to their surprise, Obadiah was standing in the center of The Hippo with Magomu, and each of them was holding a stick. Obadiah's was longer and crooked at the end; it looked like a shepherd's staff. Magomu's stick was just a shorter, somewhat thicker rod without a crook, and on the ground was a black folded umbrella.

Obadiah greeted them warmly and invited them to sit down on the surrounding rocks as they had done before.

"I wanted to give you one more lesson in self-defense this week to go along with the lesson of the sling," he began. "The other night, when we were out on the sea being chased by the men in the boat, I heard Brielle speaking from the written words of Exodus. When God moved the seas to come forth and save us from the hand of our enemies, it reminded me of how God saved the Israelites, delivering them from the hand of Pharaoh and his army.

"Moses carried with him a rod," he said, directing their attention to the large stick in Magomu's hand. "Sometimes a shepherd, as Moses and David, who both were shepherds at one time in their lives, carried a rod or a staff while tending their flock of sheep. This would be called a shepherd's staff," he said, referring to the longer stick with the crook he was holding.

"A shepherd would use the staff for many things," he said turning it upside down in his hands, "If a sheep happened to get stuck in mud or fall into a hole or a bush, the shepherd could use the crook of the staff to wrap around the sheep and pull it out," he said as he demonstrated the action of lifting a sheep with the staff.

"When a shepherd was counting his sheep, he would hold the staff or rod up for them to pass under," he said, once again demonstrating how a shepherd might handle the staff.

"The staff or rod was also used to help the shepherd walk long distances and climb up the Rocky Mountains where his sheep may dwell," he said taking the staff into both of his hands and holding it in front of him, "But the staff and rod were also weapons for the shepherd to use against predators which came to harm his sheep. The shepherds would have to know how to use the staff or rod properly to defend their flock-- and they did. So will you," he said with a smile.

"In the country of Japan, they use the martial art of Jujutsu, which is often called 'the way of the stick'. They are trained to use what they call a Jo Staff, which is four feet in length, or a
Bo Staff, which is six feet in length. The art of Jujutsu was to train a person to defend themselves against an attacker with a Samurai Sword. There are sixty-four specific movements of defense. These movements are based on twelve basic blocking and counter-strike techniques.

"Before we begin, I want to reiterate to you that your most powerful weapon is the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. I am teaching you these skills in self-defense as another means to protect yourselves. I know all of you

well and trust that you would never use these skills against another in a malicious way. They are only for your protection and the protection of each other.

"We are going to start by teaching you the twelve basic methods of those movements," he said, "Jace, my boy, if you are not up to this yet— "

"I'm quite ready," Jace said, certainly.

Obadiah smiled, "Good, then let's begin."

Obadiah and Magomu then began teaching the students the twelve main movements of the Jujutsu technique by demonstration. When they had finished, he looked at the Intercessors.

"You may be wondering where I learned to do this," Obadiah began.

"Nah," Gideon said, "we've learned that you are actually a Superhero in disguise."

Everyone laughed, including Obadiah.

"No, your true Superhero is Jesus Christ – and he's *real*, not a comic book character," Obadiah smiled. "I learned this form of martial arts while working on a bridge on the island of Kyushu. I met a young man there named Emi, which means blessing or favor in the Japanese language, and he was a blessing to me. I apprenticed him on the bridge and in exchange, he taught me the skill of Jujutsu—not that I am skilled in it by any means," he laughed, "Not like Emi was anyway, but it is a blessing to have this knowledge because you never know when you might use it."

"Yeah, plus it's very cool," Gideon said.

"I have a question, Oba," Brielle said. "This is fun, and I love learning it, but we can't really carry a staff or a rod around with us. I mean, a sling, I could stick that in my bag if I wanted to, but a staff?"

Obadiah nodded, "This is true, you're not likely to carry around something like this, and people would probably think you're a little touched in the head if you did. But you never know where you might be and what you might find in a situation that could help you. Even if you had an umbrella." he paused to pick up the umbrella he had brought, "True, it's much shorter than a Jo staff, Bo staff, or rod, but there could be some helpful movements of protection that a simple crook in an umbrella could provide—if you knew how to use it."

Obadiah then gave Magomu the umbrella and asked him to defend himself. Magomu put his hands on his hips and smiled, shaking his head. He knew what was coming. Obadiah came at him with full force, but he didn't get very far. At lightning speed, before the students knew what was happening, Magomu began using the same movements of Jujutsu to block Obadiah's advances, adding in some of his own movements. Using the crook of the handle, he quickly wrapped it around Obadiah's wrist and, with a fast-twisting move, pulled his arm behind his back, causing him to be helplessly immobilized.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" Magomu asked.

"Not much--," Obadiah said happily, "…now it's my turn."

Obadiah took the umbrella in his hand, spinning it a few times as he and Magomu walked around each other.

"Come on, don't be afraid," Obadiah egged him on with his charming, broad smile.

Magomu attacked, but his attempt was even less successful than Obadiah's. As he lurched forward, Obadiah used some of the blocking and striking techniques. Then he quickly reached down and grabbed Magomu's ankle with the crook of the umbrella and pulled his leg out from under him, bringing Magomu to the dirt with a thump.

Obadiah then helped Magomu off the floor in one quick motion and dusted him off, "I didn't hurt *you,* did I?" he asked him with a laugh.

Magomu was fine. He laughed at Obadiah as they had sparred like this many a time before. He shook his finger at him and laughed, "I knew you were going to do that," he said.

"Really? Why didn't you do that to me first?" Obadiah replied with a chuckle.

"Because you are an older man and it's not good for you to fall," Magomu teased, causing everyone to laugh and clap for their performance.

"That's very true… and for that I do thank you, my friend," Obadiah said, shaking Magomu's hand.

The rest of the afternoon, the students rotated from studying their scriptures, to practicing with their slings, to being trained with Obadiah or Magomu in using the rod and staff. Before they knew it, the time was approaching eight o'clock. They sadly packed up and headed for home, not ready to leave the Prayer Sanctum and return to reality.

The next day after school, the Intercessors told their prayer group about their idea to stake a claim for their town. The students were thrilled, and all took flyers, promising to help spread the word of the upcoming event. Keoni and Brielle invited Rateesh to come with them to some of the shops in town and see if the owners would support their "Inviting His Light" Prayer Vigil. He was happy to go. Jace and Gideon were going to Brielle's home to work with Obadiah on making the crosses for the markers to place along the Fairfield borders.

Once they reached the heart of town, Keoni parked the car, and they began to walk around the main square to visit all the shops and restaurants they could. Their first visit was to a small dress shop owned by a little woman who was originally from New York and very hard of hearing. Her name was Odelia Trimboli. It took a while for them to explain exactly what it was they were doing, but once she understood, she was very happy to help and took a flyer to place in her shop window. She told them how much she loved Jesus and how she attended the Fairfield First Baptist church on the other side of town. They

thanked her for her assistance and happily moved on to the next shop.

The next place was the Barber shop run by an older man whose father had owned and run the shop before him. His name was Franklin Bench Jr., and he was known around town as Barber Bench. When the three friends entered the shop, Brielle introduced herself, Keoni, and Rateesh. At first, Franklin was kind and friendly, but once she explained what they were doing, Franklin was not the least bit interested in participating in such an event. He refused to take a flyer or even listen to anything else Brielle had to say. Once he heard the word prayer, he was done listening. Brielle was very sweet and thanked him for his time. They pressed on.

As they went, they met several people like Franklin and others who were like Odelia. Some people acted in between; they took a flyer but didn't commit either way to supporting their event. Still, most people seemed to be truly grateful that these young people were showing so much interest and concern for their hometown; they thought it was a respectable gesture on their behalf.

Once they were finished with most of the shops around the main square, Rateesh said he needed to get home.

"How are things going with your family?" Brielle asked.

Rateesh sighed, "I tried talking to my parents the other day about what happened with my healing," he explained. "My mother she listened closely to everything I had to say, but my father… he won't listen. Not yet anyway. I tried explaining that was why I had those scars show up on my x-ray, because I had been severely injured and Jesus healed me, but… my father says he doesn't want me talking about it again."

"Did they see the X-ray?" Keoni asked.

"Yeah, the doctor showed them the scar tissue and even asked what the accident or situation was that caused it," Rateesh said. "They told him they honestly did not know of anything that would cause such an injury to me, but even seeing that X-ray that didn't make them want to listen to the truth."

"I'm so sorry," Brielle said, "but don't give up, okay? Matthew 19:26 says, *'With God all things are possible.'* We'll keep them all in prayer, and you just keep believing that Jesus loves you and them because He does. Sometimes these things take a lot of patience and time. I mean, if this hadn't happened to you, would you believe in Jesus?"

"I don't know--probably not. Not after being raised in another religion," he said.

"You see? Sometimes people come to Jesus immediately because they are searching for something, they feel lost and when they find Jesus, they feel complete. They are found. Others need more time to learn about Him, and then some…well, some never come to Him at all. God loves us and doesn't demand our hearts. He gives us all free will to choose-- but He hopes we will all choose Him," Brielle explained. "Jesus meets people where they are with tenderness.

When He was here on earth, He did not force people to believe in Him, and He still doesn't do that now. He is the perfect gentleman and stands quietly at the door of a person's heart, gently knocking, patiently waiting to see if they will let Him in."

"I'm so thankful I had that experience with Jesus. Having Him in my life has changed everything for me in such an awesome way. It's kind of hard to explain," Rateesh said.

Brielle smiled and hugged him, "Trust me, we understand what it's like," she laughed.

"We are all praying for you and your family," Keoni said, giving him a hug as well.

"Thank you," Rateesh said, "I need it. But you are right, I won't give up. I know that Jesus is real, and I will keep asking God to help me find a way to show that to my family."

Later that evening, after dropping Rateesh at home, the girls headed for Brielle's house. When they arrived, Jace, Gideon, and Asher were all out with Obadiah in his workshop building the little cross stakes. They had several of them already built, and Asher was happily painting them white.

"These are so beautiful!" Brielle exclaimed, "I just thought it would look like a basic cross, but these are works of art."

The crosses were beautiful to behold. They had a scalloped shape at the end of the cross, and in the center was a cut-out in the shape of a smaller, straight-edged cross. They had put time and effort into making them.

"Obadiah's been teaching us how to use some of his tools," Jace said happily, "I've never made anything like this before."

Gideon picked up a power drill and squeezed the lever to activate it. "I feel more like a man now, like I can build and conquer."

Keoni rolled her eyes, "What's that joke about power tools being like a man? They make a lot of noise, but it's not always easy to get them to work."

The girls and Obadiah laughed.

"Oh yeah, okay, I see how you are," Gideon said, "Hey Jace, ever see Keoni run at high speed in heels? Watch this, Keoni, your car is out of gas, and there is a seventy percent off sale at Macy's!"

Keoni scowled at her brother, trying to hide her laughter, "Ha, ha, very funny."

The lovely sound of Genevieve's voice calling to them from the front porch quickly got their attention. It was time for dinner. They all made their way into the house, washed up, and gathered around the table where Genevieve had their dinner waiting. Obadiah blessed the food, and they all dove in to eat, especially Brielle, who was not accustomed to going from lunch to dinner without a snack in between.

As they sat and talked about their upcoming event and the new skills they were learning in their Intercessor training, Genevieve asked Jace how he was feeling.

"Are you up to doing all of this physical exertion so soon?" she asked in a typical motherly fashion.

"I feel great," Jace said, "and I love all that Obadiah is teaching us."

"How are your headaches doing?" she continued.

"I have them from time to time," he admitted, "but mainly in the morning when I first wake up."

"What does the doctor say about that?" she asked.

"He said they should go away soon. He thinks it's still part of the healing process," Jace answered.

The conversation quieted for a moment, and Brielle took the opportunity to talk about something that was in her heart.

"Jace," she began a little hesitant as to what to say, "I was just wondering, ever since Halloween night and everything that happened to you and Rateesh, well… have you felt led to go and pray for Lacy? I know that you have been there and prayed with us before, but I was pretty much the one who always led the prayer. What if you went and laid hands on her and prayed for her like you did for Rateesh?"

Everyone at the table was quiet as they looked to Jace for his reply.

"I've thought about it," Jace said. "I just… I don't know. It makes me nervous. I know that I wasn't the one who healed Rateesh; it was God."

"Yes, that's true," Obadiah said, "It is always important that we all remember that. We in ourselves have no supernatural power; it is only by the miraculous hand of God and the power of the Holy Spirit that the impossible can be accomplished through us. God can use us to do His work—He doesn't have to, but if He does, always remember to give Him the glory for it. You, Jace, were obedient to God. He used you as the vessel for His Holy Spirit to accomplish something great, and look what it did for Rateesh's soul! It changed his whole life and eternity!"

"I know," Jace said, "but what if God chooses not to heal Lacy like that?"

"The best we can do for Lacy is to pray and ask God what His perfect Will for her life is," Obadiah said, "and we do know what God has gifted you to do."

"We have asked Jesus to heal Lacy," Jace said gently, "every day. We all pray for Lacy. Still, nothing changes. It just makes me nervous that if I pray for her and nothing happens, it will be too much disappointment."

"We can never let our fears or our worries about what might happen affect how we serve the Lord or what we do for Him," Genevieve said gently. "We have to do what He has empowered and gifted us to do, believing that He will answer us. If not, we need to trust that He knows best and has another plan. Still, we can't know what will happen unless we ask Him."

Jace nodded, “You’re right. I’ve been letting my fears overshadow my faith.”

“It happens to all of us,” Obadiah said, “Unfortunately, it’s part of being human. Our faith is not something that comes to us all at once, like other things we can receive. It is something that grows, builds, and strengthens as time goes on. God knows that which is why He is such an awesome, loving Heavenly Father. He is patient with His children.”

“Would you all come with me?” Jace asked.

“Of course, we will,” Genevieve said, “I believe there is power in prayer and in numbers,” she smiled. *‘Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours,’*” she said, quoting the verse.

Gideon finished the location for her, “Oh, I know that one, uh, Mark,” he said, snapping his fingers, “Mark 11:24.”

“Good job, little brother,” Keoni said.

Genevieve nodded with approval.

“Thanks,” Gideon answered, “I love to read that book, I love the way Mark says things.”

Brielle watched her mother’s face as she lowered her eyes to her plate. She took a slow, deep breath and then gently laid her fork down on the table. Quietly, she stood up, excusing herself from the meal.

“I’m just going to run to the restroom,” she said sweetly, “I’ll be right back.”

Brielle watched her mother as she walked through the living room and out of sight. She knew she was hurting. It didn’t take much to bring the hurt of her lost love to the surface; in this case, just hearing the name Mark did it.

Gideon felt horrible, “I’m so sorry, Bri. I didn’t mean…”

“Please don’t worry, Giddy,” Brielle said reassuringly, “it happens sometimes. She’s not upset with you. You said nothing wrong. It’s just that…” she sighed.

“She loved him so very, very much,” Obadiah finished.

“Our mom used to have moments like that,” Keoni said. “She had them all the time until recently, now that she has been spending time with Magomu. I’m glad about it too. It was hard to see her grieve for my dad like that. I know she will always love him, but at least she isn’t struggling so much.”

Brielle nodded, “Your mom does seem much happier,” she said, “I’ve often wondered if Mama will ever feel like that about another man. Not that anyone could replace daddy, but that she, too, could be happy again.”

“Your mother does have happiness,” Obadiah said, “Make no mistake about that. She finds her joy in the Lord, in her children, and in all of you. She and Mark had something very rare, very special. I don’t even feel that I can relate to her loss, as I was able to spend almost thirty wonderful years with my Elise. Your mother and father didn’t have nearly that much time together.”

“Do you think she will ever marry again?” Jace asked.

"I don't think she will ever *date* again," Brielle said, "She is still so in love with daddy; she keeps him so close to her heart. It's like death couldn't even separate them."

It wasn't too long before Genevieve returned to the table to join them. Her eyes were red from crying, but she seemed to be calm, relaxed, and enjoyed the rest of her evening. The kids all cleaned up the kitchen for her after dinner. Brielle walked Jace outside to his father's SUV.

"How much longer do you think it will be until you have your truck?" Brielle asked.

"I hope to have enough money to get it in the summer," Jace said.

"Oh," Brielle said, sounding disappointed.

"Why?" Jace asked.

"I hate you riding a motorcycle," she said bluntly, causing Jace to laugh, "It makes me nervous!"

He laughed again.

"Seriously! How come it is the law that you have to wear a seat belt in a *car,* which is good and safe and all, yet you can ride around on a motorcycle? It doesn't make sense. The police will give you a ticket for not wearing a seat belt, but it's fine to just jump on a motorcycle and take off. It doesn't make any sense!" she protested.

Jace nodded, "You have a very good point."

"Thank you," she said with a smile.

"I am very careful when I ride my bike, though," he said, "I never take chances and I always do the speed limit—or under."

"Yeah, but you can't be in control of what anyone else is doing on the road," she replied.

"Another good point," he said. "I guess I will just have to work even harder to get that truck, won't I?"

"Yes, you will," she smiled.

Jace laughed, "Yeah? So, you can know I'm not riding my bike around town?"

"Yes, that and the fact that my mother will not let me ride on one either--and I agree with her," she said.

"When were you planning on riding anywhere with me?" he asked.

"When you take me on my first date," she answered directly.

Jace's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Your first date? I thought you couldn't date until you were seventeen?" she said.

Brielle's eyes narrowed. "You have forgotten my birthday?" she asked with a sly tone.

Jace thought for a moment, "Oh yeah! Wow! That came up fast!"

Brielle put her hands on her hips. "I can't believe you forgot my birthday!" she said.

Jace came up close to her, looking down into her eyes, “It hasn’t come yet, you know, so I didn’t actually forget. There’s just been so much going on and…”

“And that blow to your head knocked it clean out of your mind,” she said.

He took her hands in his and held them gently, bringing one up to his lips to kiss it, “What would you like to do for your first date?” he asked, bringing the other hand up to kiss it as well. Brielle was momentarily distracted.

“I want to go to the Fairfield Festival of Lights,” she finally said, dazed by his touch.

“The Festival of Lights?” Jace asked, “You mean the Christmas light display in the town square?”

“Yes! I want to go there and see all the lights, walk around the shops, try all the different foods, and dance to the music,” she said happily. “Oh yes, and I want to ride in a horse-drawn carriage,” she giggled.

“Whatever you wish, my lady, it is yours,” he said, coming closer to wrap his arms around her waist.

Brielle shivered in the cold night air, and he drew her in close, holding and warming her. She looked up into his eyes, which in the dim moonlight seemed to be as black as the sky above. Slowly, he brought his face down to hers… “Good night!” they heard Gideon and Keoni yelling to Genevieve and Obadiah as they came out onto the porch. Jace pulled back when he saw them, only holding onto her hands.

Gideon and Keoni had seen them in their embrace. Keoni was kind enough not to say anything, but Gideon had to jump on the moment.

“Man, its cold out here,” he said pulling his coat around him, “but wait! I feel some warmth coming from this direction,” he said as he started walking toward the couple, “Wai! Wait! Yeah! I feel it! It’s warm-- no, no it’s hot! It’s scorching hot, with the flames of burning passion!” he teased.

Jace and Brielle couldn’t help but laugh at their ridiculous friend.

When he was close to them, he sighed, “Ah, yes, now this is much better!”

“Come on, Pest, and get in the car!” Keoni yelled at him across the driveway.

“Pest! I’m no pest, why do you say that?” he called back.

“Can’t you see they would like a moment alone?” Keoni said as she loaded her things in the car.

“Alone? They don’t need to be alone,” he said walking toward Keoni’s car, “From what I heard Jace planted one on her in front of most the student body and half the faculty at the game the other night!” he laughed as he walked to get in the car, which was parked in front of Jace’s.

“Thanks, man,” Jace said, acknowledging his friend's teasing.

“Hey, it’s all good. I’m proud of you, man, PROUD!” Gideon said, pointing at Jace happily.

“Hey,” Keoni said, “Genevieve and Obadiah said they would go to the

hospital to pray for Lacy after prayer group tomorrow."

"Sounds good to me," Brielle said, looking up at Jace, who nodded in agreement.

"Okay, we'll plan on that," he said. Then he looked down at her with a grin, "I'm sorry," he laughed, knowing he was blocking them from leaving as he was parked behind them, "I guess I'll see you tomorrow?"

Brielle smiled at him, "Of course," she said softly, "I'll be thinking of you until then."

Jace stared at her for a moment, trying to find his words, "I'll be thinking of you, too."

Then he bent down and quickly gave her a gentle kiss on her cheek. Brielle sighed, knowing that was the only kiss she would receive that night. Jace then got into his father's SUV and drove away. Keoni backed her car down the drive and rolled her window down to talk to Brielle, "I'm sorry," she said, "Our timing wasn't the greatest just now."

Brielle patted her arm, "No worries, it's okay."

"Yeah, Bri's birthday is this Saturday, and then she'll be free to single date. There will be plenty of smooch time later," Gideon teased.

"If I could reach you, I would punch you," Brielle said, joking with her friend. "You guys drive safe, and I'll see you tomorrow."

The next day, after school and prayer group, the Intercessors headed to the Devereaux Memorial Hospital to pray for Lacy. When they arrived, Jim and Laura were both there. The months of their daughter's condition had taken such a toll on them - the Intercessors could see the exhaustion in their faces and hear it in their voices.

After visiting with Jim and Laura for a while, and Nurse Carrie, who had come to see her new friends, Jace asked if he could pray for Lacy. Jim and Laura both happily accepted his offer. Everyone gathered around Lacy's bed, and Jace opened his Bible to read a passage of scripture that the Lord had led Him to from his Bible studies.

"I am reading from the book of Jeremiah 30:17," he began, *"'…I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,' declares the Lord,"* he read, then he looked at Jim, "I believe God's Word to be true and Lacy's healing can be received as easily as that verse was spoken."

He then closed his Bible and gently placed his hands on Lacy's arm. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth to pray when something stopped him. He opened his eyes and looked around. Everyone was gathered there with him and had their eyes closed and their heads bowed. He took a deep breath and began to pray again… but again, something stopped him. It was the Holy Spirit.

God spoke to Jace's heart and told him to open his eyes and look at Jim. Jace again looked around the room. Everyone was gathered around Lacy's bed,

all but one, her father. Jace was looking for Jim and found him quietly standing behind Gideon. He had his head down and his eyes closed for prayer, but he was completely disconnected physically from his daughter. Brielle looked at Jace.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The Holy Spirit directed Jace as to what to say.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not the one who Jesus wants to do this," he said, looking past the others to Jim, "Her father is."

The look on Jim's face was one of surprise… and fear. Jace made his way around the others to speak to him.

"It's not me who God wants to use to pray for Lacy's healing," he said, "It's you."

Jim looked terrified, "Um, well, I" he stammered, "I'm not very good at praying. I don't know what to say."

"It's okay," Jace said, putting his hand on Jim's shoulder, "we'll help you."

Jim walked over to where Jace had been standing and stood looking down at his little girl. She had been silently sleeping for weeks now with no sign of waking up. He was struggling to keep the faith that she ever would.

"I know that you have just recently come back to Jesus," Jace said, "but just because you may not know Him very well, it doesn't mean that He doesn't know you. Trust me, I know from personal experience. God wouldn't have told me to do this unless there was a reason."

Jim looked up at Jace, tears welling up in his eyes. "What do I do?" he asked sincerely.

"The Bible tells us that we should lay our hands on those we want to pray for," Jace said, remembering all the scriptures that Obadiah had taught him on the subject. "We need to think of ourselves being the hand of Jesus - extended," he said.

Jim reached his trembling hands up to place them on his daughter. Only he did not place them on her arm as Jace did. As her father, who once cradled her little head in his hands as a baby, he placed them there, gently taking her head in his loving hands.

"Do you believe that the stripes which Jesus received from His beating and the blood that He shed can heal Lacy?" Jace whispered.

Jim nodded, the tears flowing down his cheeks now, "Yes, I do."

"Do you believe that God's Word and His promises are true?" Jace asked.

Again, Jim nodded and whispered, "Yes."

"Then all you need to do is ask God for what you want. The Bible tells us to ask in the Name of Jesus, and we shall receive. Ask Him to please heal Lacy, to wake her up, to restore her and deliver her from these drugs ever hurting her again," Jace said, the power of the Holy Spirit leading every word he spoke.

"What do I say?" Jim asked.

"Whatever you want, whatever is in your heart; prayer is just talking to God.

What would you ask Him to do if He were standing here in the room with us?" Jace asked, "Because He is, you know, He is here in this room with us."

Jim looked around the room at the faces that surrounded him. He thought for a moment, then closed his eyes and began to pray aloud.

"Jesus, I would like to talk to you about my daughter Lacy, my beautiful little girl. I want her back. I want her back so that she can live a good and happy life. So she can play the piano and do all the things she used to do. She's my baby, and I can't take seeing her like this. It's more than her mother and I can bear. So… I want to ask You, Jesus… would you please heal her? Please heal her in the Name of Jesus.

"I believe that You are able to. I know the stripes on your back were so that we could be healed. I believe that. I want to ask if You would please make her body just like it used to be before she took those horrible drugs. Please keep her protected from ever using drugs or anything like this ever again, so that these kinds of things will never come back into her life.

"She is such a good girl; she just went down the wrong path, and she doesn't deserve to be here in this bed. I do. I haven't been the best father to her. I know that I haven't been very good at much of anything. I'm so sorry for everything I've done that has hurt my family, for not keeping them in church, not teaching them Your Word, and not being a good leader for You in my home. I'm sorry for everything I've done that has hurt You and everything that has hurt Lacy. Please forgive me, God, and help me to be a better man and a better father to Lacy when You wake her up. Please wake her up. Thank You, Jesus… Amen," he whispered.

When he finished, he looked at Lacy sleeping on the bed. Then he leaned down and kissed her on her head and whispered in her ear, "Daddy loves you."

He turned around to see that no one in the room had a dry eye. Everyone had been deeply touched by the heartfelt prayer of a father for his child, and even Gideon's eyes were full of tears. They all stayed there for a while, having dinner with the Weavers in the hospital cafeteria. They left that place uplifted. They were not discouraged that Lacy hadn't miraculously awakened, because they knew that God heard Jim's touching prayer and that whatever His will was, it would be good.

When they left, Obadiah and Genevieve both told Jace how proud they were of him for allowing the Holy Spirit to take control and use him. Jace didn't feel like he did anything special, but was hoping with all his might that God would answer Jim and let Lacy be healed once and for all, totally and completely.

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As the days passed and Thanksgiving was approaching, Brielle and her family prepared for their traditional dinner. They did lots of shopping as Obadiah always provided Genevieve the funds to prepare their family, Magomu and Alma's family a wonderful meal, but they also made sure they provided for some families in their community who needed a wonderful meal as well.

The day before Thanksgiving was one of Asher and Brielle's favorite days of the year. As Genevieve worked for their church, she kept up to date on identifying the struggling families of Fairfield. They would shop in the days before, buying over a dozen turkeys complete with all the side dishes, so that these struggling families could enjoy their Thanksgiving dinner. Once they had the items, they would bundle them together in large baskets and anonymously deliver them to the doorsteps of the families in need. Each dinner basket was accompanied by a letter stating that this dinner was given to them through the love of Jesus Christ, who loved them dearly.

Planning for the delivery was tricky and had to be precise. First, they had to make sure that at least one of the family members was home to receive the basket. Then they had to be able to quickly place the heavy basket on the doorstep, ring the doorbell, and run away before the door was answered. Asher had joked one day, calling himself a "Turkey Phantom". The nickname stuck. So, for everyone who helped Brielle's family, the day before Thanksgiving became known as Turkey Phantom Day.

Their favorite part about the deliveries was being able to watch the expression on the faces of the recipients. The joy they felt when they saw the looks of surprise and gratitude was immeasurable. It made them wish they could deliver dozens of baskets all over town all day long.

This was Jace's first year helping with the turkey dinners. He was overwhelmed by it all. He told Brielle that doing this was one of the greatest experiences of his life. The happiness he felt made him want to keep giving more. As Brielle listened to Jace talk about his feelings, she thought about all the changes in him since they had first met. He was still shy and seemed to lack confidence in himself from time to time, but his faith had grown in leaps and bounds. His love for the Lord had grown in the same way, and she could see the strength of God shining in him.

In the past, when she looked at him, she was always awestruck at his beauty. He was one of the most handsome guys she had ever known. Then, as she got to know him and saw his sweet and gentle nature, she grew fond of him, developing a special place in her heart for his thoughts and words. As time went by and she saw the power of God slowly coming into his life, becoming part of his being, she was more drawn to him than ever before. To know that He loved God and His Son Jesus, tried to follow His commands and perfect will, and was

obedient to the Holy Spirit, was the most attractive quality he could ever possess.

Brielle realized that she was completely, unapologetically, and helplessly in love with him. She loved Jace, truly and deeply. The feeling inside her heart wasn't like anything she had ever felt before for any other person. Yes, she loved her family and friends, but this was… different. It was beautiful, innocent, and pure. Something that made her feel like she wasn't connected to the ground, yet, at the same time, something that kept her grounded and real.

Loving Jace like she did was not something she had expected to do so soon. She had always thought that someday she would fall in love with someone, but she had so many doubts about Jace, so many feelings that he was hiding things from her. All of that frustrated her and kept her in a state of curiosity and perplexity. But now, things were different. Even though there were still questions that she wanted answered about him, they didn't seem to frustrate her as much… because she loved him.

As soon as she realized she was in love with Jace, the enemy tried to attack her by making her feel nervous and vulnerable… what if he didn't love her back? Yes, he seemed to care for her deeply, but that wasn't the same thing. What if she were in a place with her feelings that he had not yet come to? How sick would she feel if she declared her love to him and nothing was declared in return? She decided to pray about it and give the matter to the Lord. After all, God had brought Jace into her life and the lives of her family and friends for a reason. So, she was going to trust that the reason would be good, wonderful, and not something that would bring her sadness or pain.

The next day was Thanksgiving Day. The O'Sullivan-St. Claire's home was beautifully decorated for the special holiday, welcoming all guests who would attend their dinner of thanks. As soon as every person walked into the home, the sweet aromas of turkey, ham, pies, and other tasty dishes washed over them, making their stomachs growl and their mouths water.

Obadiah had invited his friends Ken and Rhona Mullins, whose children were grown and living in other states. Ken and Obadiah were good fishing buddies, and Obadiah always invited them to come for Thanksgiving. Magomu, of course, was there as he was part of the family along with Alma, Keoni, and Gideon. Genevieve had invited a few choir members who were separated from their families as well. Brielle invited Jace, who was alone, as usual. His father had gone to New York for business and was to fly out from there back to London in hopes of meeting up with Jace's mother. His father always tried to catch up to whatever show she was traveling with to convince her to come home for the holidays. Sometimes he was successful in his efforts… sometimes he wasn't. Jace had not seen his mother for many months, but had found such welcoming love in the home of Brielle and her family that he didn't even seem to mind.

Their dinner together was a lovely time of giving thanks. As it was a

tradition in their family, Obadiah had everyone talk about the things they were most thankful for in their lives. It was truly a wonderful day to celebrate together all the blessings of God.

After dinner, there was some time for digestion, followed by dessert: Genevieve's famous pies. Genevieve loved to cook all kinds of dishes, but one of her specialties was making pie. This was something she had learned from her grandmother when she was a little girl, and through the years, she became a pie master. She presented several different pies for her guests to choose from: pumpkin, pecan, apple, and cream cheese. Jace had never tasted a cream cheese pie, but after one bite, he was smitten.

"That has to be the best pie I have ever had!" Jace said.

"Just wait until you try the others," Gideon said.

"You eat them all?" Jace asked in surprise.

"Without question," Gideon said confidently, "but I pace myself so I can make sure I get a slice of each."

Jace laughed, "I'll follow your pace then. Miss Genevieve, do you make pies for Christmas, too?

"Ohhh yes!" Genevieve answered happily.

"Fantastic!" Jace said with delight, "I'm glad that's the next holiday coming!"

Everyone laughed.

"Actually, the next holiday we will be celebrating will be Hanukkah," Obadiah said, "It falls right before Christmas this year."

Jace looked confused, "Wait, you guys celebrate Hanukkah?" he asked curiously.

"Yeah, it's awesome!" Asher said, "We get presents for Hanukkah *and* Christmas!"

Everyone laughed again.

"Ash, you know it's not all about the presents," Genevieve said softly with a smile.

"I know… but I still *like* the presents!" Asher said, happily taking a bite of pie.

"The boy is honest; you gotta give it to him honesty," Gideon said.

Jace was still curious, "I just didn't know that Christians could celebrate Hanukkah. I thought that was a Jewish holiday."

"It's a holiday for all those who believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," Obadiah said as he finished his slice of pie and set his plate down on the table.

"Really? So then, it's okay for Christians to celebrate Hanukkah too?" Jace asked.

"Absolutely," Obadiah replied, "Jesus celebrated Hanukkah. Remember, Jesus was Jewish, born to Jewish parents, and raised in the Jewish teachings and

traditions. He celebrated all the holidays that God commanded, and we can too," Obadiah said, reaching for his cup of coffee to take a sip. "Do you know that the only place Hanukkah is mentioned in the Bible is in the New Testament?" he asked, then waited for Jace's reaction.

"You're kidding? The New Testament?" Jace asked, puzzled.

"That's right. I have a good friend named Larry who is a pastor in Texas. He taught me years ago that the only place Hanukkah can be found in the entire Bible is in the New Testament. then he placed his cup of coffee on the table and pulled out his pocket Bible. It was small, bound in brown leather, and had the look of many years upon it, being quite tattered and worn.

"Look here, it is found in John 10:22-23. It says, "*Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch*." The reason why we miss that Jesus is celebrating Hanukkah is because of the English translation, but the meaning of Hanukkah is the Feast of Dedication. Now, I don't have my Jewish Christian Bible with me, but I do have this verse memorized, and it reads, *'Then came Hanukkah, in Yerushalayim, it was winter, and Yeshua, was walking inside the Temple area in Shlomo's Colonnade.'"*

"Wow, that's fascinating," Jace said, "I never knew that. But, what is the Feast of Dedication all about?"

"He is so glad that you asked that question," Brielle giggled, as she finished her slice of pie and stood up to gather some of the other dishes that were on the table and take them to the kitchen, then upon noticing that Jace was done with his slice of pie said, "Oba, before you begin, Jace can I get you or anyone else anymore pie?"

"That would be a big yes from me," Jace said happily, handing her his plate, "I will take anything you bring me, and thank you very much."

I would love a slice of the cream cheese, please, if you don't mind, Bri," Gideon said kindly.

"I'd be happy to," Brielle said sweetly.

"Yeah, get nice and comfy," Asher said to Jace, "'cause this is a great story!"

After Brielle returned with their slices of pie and everyone was settled, Obadiah began telling the story of Hanukkah.

"Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday that celebrates a military victory of the Jews over a foreign ruler," Obadiah began, "Thousands of years ago, a very powerful king, named Antiochus the 4th, who ruled the land of Syria, invaded God's Holy land of Israel and took over His Holy Temple, the Temple of Solomon. Antiochus declared it illegal for the Jewish people to worship their God, Adonai, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He wanted them to worship his Greek gods instead, and he placed statues of those gods inside the Temple of Solomon."

"Uh-oh," Jace said softly.

Obadiah smiled, "Yeah, uh-oh is right. And to make things even worse,

Antiochus desecrated the Temple's altar by sacrificing a pig on it."

"Yikes," Jace said.

"Right," Obadiah went on, "But there was a Jewish man named Judah Maccabee, and he and his family decided that they were going to take a stand against Antiochus and stop him from trying to remove God from their land and from removing God from His own Temple. Judah and his incredibly brave family declared war against the entire army of Antiochus, and even though they were incredibly outnumbered, God was with them."

"Yeah, so look out, Antiochus!" Asher said, "You messed with the wrong people!"

Everyone laughed.

"He sure did!" Obadiah said with a chuckle, "God's favor and might was with the Maccabee's and they fought diligently for Him. They fought for their right to worship Him throughout their land and to have His Holy Temple restored, and God gave them a miraculous victory over the army of Antiochus. The Maccabee family won back the city of Jerusalem with great triumph.

"When the Maccabees returned to their Temple, they found the desecration that had been done to it. They wanted to cleanse and restore the Holy Temple of God, Adonai. So, they removed and destroyed all the other gods that Antiochus had brought inside, and they destroyed the altar on which a pig had been sacrificed. They built a new altar to sacrifice to God in the exact same way that God had instructed them to build the first altar, and then they dedicated the Temple to the worship of God, Adonai, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, once again.

"The army of Antiochus had stolen the lampstand, or menorah, of the Temple, so the Maccaebees also made a new one. They found only enough oil to light the new menorah for one night, but God performed a miracle, and the menorah stayed lit for eight nights! This gave them time to create more oil so they could always keep the menorah lit.

"The holiday of Hanukkah celebrates this miracle of eight nights of light given by God, Adonai. Without the Maccabees fighting to keep the name of God, Adonai, alive in Israel, His name might have been removed from Israel completely, and since during these days the only people who worshipped God, Adonai, were the Jewish people in Israel, that meant that the name of God would have been lost from upon the earth. Of course, Jesus understood the importance of this celebration, which is why He celebrated it, and which is why all of us who believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob should come together to celebrate it every year as well," Obadiah explained.

"Wow. I never knew any of this," Jace said, "I totally understand why Jesus would celebrate Hanukkah, and I understand why all Christians should embrace celebrating it too."

"Yes! It is a beautiful and powerful holiday to celebrate, and we love it! As I

said before, the meaning of Hanukkah is the Feast of Dedication; it is also called the Festival of Lights because it celebrates God's miraculous light that lit His Temple for those eight nights. But because God's calendar goes by the moon and not by the sun like our Western calendar does, the dates for Hanukkah can move. It lands between the weeks of the end of November and the end of December. Now it is important to know that with God, the number seven means completion and the number eight means new beginnings. The celebration of Hanukkah was a rededication and new beginning for God's Holy Temple, so it makes sense that there are eight nights of light and there are eight traditions of Hanukkah," Obadiah explained.

"Oh, oh! Can I help teach this part?" Asher asked excitedly.

"Certainly, we would love that," Obadiah said happily, picking up his cup of coffee and sitting back in his chair with a pleasant look upon his face.

Asher stood up tall and proud as if he were a teacher before a class and cleared his throat, "Okay, the first tradition is the lighting of the candles of the menorah. And the menorah of Hanukkah is different than the menorah that is in the Temple of God because that menorah only has seven lamps, and the Hanukkah menorah has eight lamps… is that right?" he asked his grandfather, who nodded proudly.

"Okay, good, and also, um, most people think that the Star of David is the symbol of Israel, but it's not, it's the menorah, the one from the Temple. That's what they have up on the wall in their Supreme Court," Asher said.

"Really? Didn't know that." Jace said.

"This kid is a plethora of knowledge," Gideon said, "It's scary," he teased.

"Ha, ha," Asher goaded, "Okay, um so when you light the candles of the menorah, if you have one in a room of your house, that's fine, but you are also supposed to keep one in the window so that it is a testimony to others who see it."

"Very good," Genevieve said softly.

"And Mama once showed me a photo during a history lesson of a menorah that was burning brightly in a window during World War Two, and hanging right outside the window was a Nazi flag," Brielle said.

"Oh my gosh," Jace said, "talk about courage."

"Yeah, no kidding," Keoni said, "I mean that's really living. '*Be strong and courageous, do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go, Joshua 1:9.*'"

"No doubt," Gideon agreed.

"Okay, so then you are supposed to sing the blessings of Hanukkah while the menorah is being lit and you say, *'Blessed are You, Lord our God, ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments, and has commanded us to kindle the lights of Hanukkah*'," Asher said.

"Very good," Genevieve said, "Can you sing it for us in Hebrew?"

Asher looked down at the floor for a moment in deep thought and took a breath, "I'll try… *'Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-ola masher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah."*

Upon finishing, everyone burst out in cheers and applause.

"Well done, Ash!" Brielle said.

"Excellent job," Obadiah praised.

"Your pronunciation was perfect, Buddy," Genevieve said proudly.

Asher acted as if he were bowing to a crowd, "Thank you, thank you," he said, "Okay, so then the third tradition is to eat fried foods… for eight nights! You know, because of the miracle of the oil they had for eight nights. Two of the most traditional foods are latkes, which are like potato pancakes, and Mama's are the *best*. Jace, you will love them, they're the *best*! And then there are the doughnuts, which traditionally have jelly in them, and they are called Sufganiyot, but… I just like them plain without any jelly inside.

"Okay, then the fourth tradition is playing dreidel games, which are totally fun. Dreidels are like little tops made of clay or wood, but all of ours are made of wood. We tried making some out of clay one year, but… they didn't spin very well," he laughed. "The fifth tradition is my personal favorite, the giving of gifts! We give one gift each night, and it doesn't have to be a big gift, sometimes mama just wraps up a treat or something, but hey, I love opening presents and being surprised, so it's still fun."

Everyone laughed.

"Um, now let's see, the sixth tradition is in giving Gelt, which are little chocolate coins, and we also use can these when we play our dreidel game, the seventh tradition is in spending time with family and friends, which is the best part of it all, having Hanukkah parties and having fun together, and then the eighth tradition is, um, oh yeah! Singing Hanukkah songs and doing the Hanukkah dances, and I think… that's it! Those are the eight traditions of Hanukkah!" Asher said happily.

Again, everyone clapped and gave him praise for a job well done.

"You should come and join us for Hanukkah this year," Brielle said to Jace.

"I can't wait! I've always wondered what it was about and what people did, and now I know. Thank you, Oba and Asher, for teaching me. I'm so excited to have learned all that," Jace said happily.

"And we will be excited to celebrate with you this year," Obadiah said happily.

"Absolutely," Genevieve said, "And although I don't make pie for Hanukkah, there are lots of other tasty foods you can enjoy."

"And I will look forward to all of them!" Jace said happily, "But until then, I'm going to get another slice of pie."

"I'm right behind you," Gideon said.

After everyone had enjoyed their pie, Ken and Rhona decided to go home

for the afternoon.

"Nothing like a good nap after a good dinner," Rhona said.

"Nothing like a good football game after a good dinner," Ken said.

A few of Genevieve's friends left, but one couple stayed, along with Alma and Magomu, to enjoy a nice hot pot of tea.

The couple who stayed had a little boy named Ronan, who was friends with Asher. The two boys quickly headed up to the tower for a video game competition, while Genevieve and her guests settled down in the living room for good conversation and laughter. Obadiah did not join his daughter and friends as he had special plans for the Intercessors that day.

"I thought we would do some training today," he said to them, "There is something very important I need to show you."

The Intercessors were surprised. They didn't think they would be doing any kind of study or practice on Thanksgiving Day.

"Oba, wouldn't it be okay with the Lord if we just took a day to have fun together?" Brielle asked meekly.

Obadiah tried not to smile, "I think He would be okay with it. But I'm not, so go upstairs and get Keoni into some casual clothes and boots. We are going to be outside the rest of the day while we learn."

Brielle shrugged her shoulders and took Keoni up to her room to change. Once they were ready, Obadiah took them into his study and opened a closet door. Inside were four midnight blue coats hanging on the rack. Each coat looked exactly like the other, but in different sizes. They were thick, fleece-lined coats with high collars and detachable hoods. Each coat had a customized insignia on the left side of an Intercessor cross, and next to it the scripture of Matthew 19:26, '*With God all things are possible'.*

"You will need these," he said, passing out the coats.

"Sweet!" Gideon exclaimed, "This is an awesome coat! Where did you get this?" he asked.

"That my son is top secret, nevertheless, they are yours to keep," Obadiah said, patting Gideon's shoulder. Each of the Intercessors thanked Obadiah once again for his generosity, and Keoni complimented his excellent taste.

"You are all more than welcome. Now, are you ready to get started?" he asked.

The four Intercessors followed Obadiah outside and up the mountain, but they were not headed in the direction of the Prayer Sanctum.

"Oba, where are we going? The Prayer Sanctum's that way," Brielle said.

"Yes, I know," Obadiah replied, "I told you; we are going to learn something extremely important and will be outside all day, which is why I gave you the coats. Now come along, we have much to do."

"He's acting funny," Keoni said, "He never acts bossy like that."

"I think he's up to something," Brielle said.

"I'm okay with that," Gideon said, "Everything he teaches us and every place he takes us is *awesome!*"

Obadiah walked for another fifteen minutes through the cold woods, all the while pointing out different rock formations. Crossing over a stream, he pointed out a huge, ugly, dead tree that had been struck by lightning.

"Ooh", Keoni shuddered, "that tree freaks me out."

Finally, he came to a larger tree that was surrounded by bushes and stopped in front of it.

"I know I have been teaching you some pretty intense defense skills lately with the sling and the staff--and this lesson certainly doesn't lack intensity," he said, walking around behind the tree, "But it's *definitely* more fun!"

Obadiah grabbed at the bushes and began to pull them toward the students who were standing on the other side of the tree. The bushes began to peel off as if Obadiah were unwrapping a giant present. The Intercessors looked to see that the bushes had concealed some sort of strange mechanism with ropes attached. They looked up but could only see tree branches.

"What is this?" Brielle asked, "Where do those ropes go?"

"This is a vertical zip line," Obadiah said, pulling to release a rope that was anchored on the side of the tree. When he did, the Intercessors heard a large sound coming from above them. They looked up to see what appeared to be a long rectangular shape through the branches of the trees, allowing them to see the clear sky.

"Is that a trap door?" Gideon asked.

"Yes, and you cannot operate the lines until you have released that rope and opened the door. It's a safety feature I added so nobody crashes headfirst into the platform.

"This is a system I designed for all of the Intercessors to use and have fun," he explained, "It is important for you to understand exactly how it all works and that you can operate it safely so there are no accidents or injuries. It is an important part of your training as an Intercessor and one that you must learn to master, but as I said before… It's also for great fun!"

Obadiah explained how the vertical zip line worked. It was created as a counterweight system, operated by pulleys. He showed the difference between the two seats where people would sit. The left seat was smaller and was intended for a person of lighter weight, under 140 pounds, like Brielle or Keoni. He then explained how the other seat, which was larger and on the right side, was for a heavier person over 140 pounds, like Jace or Gideon. He explained that it was important to be careful when boarding the zip line. If the wrong person got in the wrong seat, it could be dangerous.

For example, if Brielle sat on the seat, weighed up for a person of Gideon's size, she would shoot up into the air at a much faster rate of speed. If the person was not prepared for such speed, it could easily throw them off the seat, which

could be deadly. If Jace or Gideon sat on the lighter seat, it would not move at all because the counterweight wouldn't be heavy enough to pull them up off the ground.

Obadiah then sat down, held on to the rope in front of him, and strapped himself onto the right seat; a process that took about thirty seconds. Then he showed them how to secure themselves onto the seat before releasing the counterweight for their ascent upwards. Reiterating to make sure they were securely fastened into their seats before their launch.

Next, he showed them how to sit with their legs crossed together so they wouldn't get caught on anything while riding upwards. He demonstrated how to hold onto the rope and explained that when they reached the top, there was an automatic lever that would trigger the trap door on the platform to close it. Once they passed through the platform, the door would slowly shut, leaving no way for them to fall through it and giving them a safe place to land.

"Okay, once we are up there, how do our seats get back down to the platform?" Gideon asked.

"Excellent question," Obadiah said, "Once you reach the top, the pulley system mechanism which closes the trap door will also assist the counterweight to lower you down onto the platform where you can easily dismount the zip line. All you need to remember is which seat to sit in for your weight, the larger seat for more weight and the smaller seat for less weight, how to strap yourself in, and how to release the counterweight. The rest of the work will be done for you."

"You are amazing," Keoni said in awe. "How your mind works is just… *amazing*!"

Obadiah laughed, "Thank you, sweetheart, I give all the credit to God, my Creator. Now, one more thing I must emphasize to you: although this is great fun, you must be responsible and take your time. I don't want you to have any accidents. As long as you pay attention to what I have instructed you, there should never be any complications," he said, stepping off the mechanism. Then he smiled broadly, "Anyone ready to try it?"

"I am!" Jace and Gideon both announced at the same time.

Obadiah laughed, "You will have to take turns as this station only has two seats."

"What do you mean station?" Brielle asked curiously.

"I have a few locations where these vertical zip lines are set up," Obadiah explained. "I will show you where all the others are as well and teach you the landmarks which surround them. Don't worry, we'll come and ride the zip lines frequently enough that you will learn where everything is."

"Where do the zip lines lead?" Jace asked.

"They make their way to one of my favorite places… the Prayer Sanctum," Obadiah replied, "Alright! Who wants to go first? Gideon? Jace?"

"Let's flip a coin for it," Gideon suggested.

"Wait a minute," Keoni said nervously, "Once we're up there, how do we get down?"

"That's another excellent question," Obadiah answered, "But one I can't show you until we are up on the platform."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. "Call it," he said, flipping it into the air.

"Heads," Gideon called first.

It was tails. Jace looked at Brielle and asked if she was going to ride.

"Are you kidding? Of course, I am!" she said, getting herself seated and strapped in. "I'm still just wondering why I had to wait all these years to learn about this," she said to her grandfather.

"Because your mother wouldn't let me bring you—she almost didn't let me bring you today. Oh-- by the way, we can't tell Asher yet. Vivi will not let him come up here until he is older," Obadiah answered.

"Now, when you get up there, you will see a large lever on the far-right edge of the platform railing. I want you to stand back away from the trap door, then pull that lever. It's a pretty heavy lever to adjust. Once the lever is locked into position, it will reset the system and lower the seats back down to us. Remember, the platform door will open back up, so stay back from it, okay?" he said.

The two nodded their heads in understanding. Once they were properly fastened into their seat and ready to go, Obadiah showed them how to hang on and then pull the release for the counterweight. Brielle was nervous as she reached for the release lever on her zip line.

She looked over at Jace, "Let's go on three."

Jace smiled happily, anxious for the thrill of this new adventure.

"Okay then," Brielle counted, "One… two…THREE!"

They both pulled their release levers at the same time and immediately shot up into the air, gliding quickly in one swift motion. Brielle screamed with exhilaration mixed with a little fright as she ascended through the forest trees. They passed through the platform and were lifted high above it into the treetop. Once they climbed as high as they could, they heard what sounded like metal gears shifting and then turning in motion. They watched as the platform door began to lower exactly as Obadiah said it would. As it did, they were slowly brought down to rest on top of it.

Brielle looked at Jace with wide eyes, "THAT was *awesome*!" she said, trying to catch her breath. She felt as if her heart was going to pound right through her chest at any moment.

"Your grandfather is the coolest man I have ever known!" Jace said, laughing. The two were facing the tree when they came up through the platform. Once they had landed and unstrapped themselves from their seats,

they turned around. Brielle gasped. They were up in one of the tallest trees in the forest, and from where they stood, they could see for miles around them. It was a breathtaking view.

"I will never forget this moment," Brielle said, "I feel as though I could almost touch heaven."

Jace was silent as he took in the beauty of God's nature before him. He, too, had never seen anything like this before. Just then, they remembered they had to pull the lever, which would send the seats back down and reset the counterweights.

"Gideon will be going crazy to ride this thing," Brielle said, stepping back against the railing that surrounded the platform.

"I don't blame him," Jace said, finding the large metal lever and pulling it back into its original position.

The gears began to grind again, and the platform door began to slowly open. They watched as the seats lowered back down to the ground and the counterweights slowly came back up.

"I wonder how that works," Jace said.

"What do you mean?" Brielle asked.

"Well, it's a counter-weight system. The weights pulled us up here. But now the seats are empty, and there is nothing to pull the weights back up. I wonder how that works?" he asked.

"Knowing Oba, I'm sure he has some sort of mechanism that takes care of it. I just think about all these years, I have been so impressed when I just thought he could build a bridge! Not that building a bridge is any easy task, but I had no idea he was also out building stuff like this! It's *incredible*!" she marveled.

Finally, the grinding of the gears stopped. They stayed back on the other side of the open platform door to make sure they didn't fall through and waited for Gideon and Keoni to arrive. Several minutes passed, and then they heard the release of the lever. The next sound they heard was the delightful sounds of Gideon as he quickly ascended to the platform to join them-- but he was alone.

"Where's Keoni?" Brielle asked when he reached the top.

"She wouldn't come," Gideon said, "and I got tired of waiting for her to make up her mind."

"She's not coming at all?" Brielle said, watching him land on the platform door.

"I don't know. Obadiah said he would ride up with her if that would help," he answered while unstrapping himself from the seat. "But Man! That was AWESOME!" he shouted, turning around, "Look at this view! I can't believe I'm doing this!"

Jace had him stand back so that he could reset the counterweight lever. He pulled it hard until it locked into place. Again, they heard the sound of grinding gears as the platform door opened and the counterweight traveled back up

through its own passageway into the treetop.

They waited several minutes for Keoni and Obadiah to come, but they didn't.

"She's afraid of falling," Brielle said.

"Oh, she's afraid of heights," Jace replied.

"No, she's afraid of falling," she answered.

"What's the difference?" he asked.

"When Keoni is in a secure place that is up high, like a building or something, she's okay," Gideon said.

"But when she does not feel safe or secure, she is afraid she will fall," Brielle finished. "She can feel afraid of falling even if she is closer to the ground. She's always been that way."

"Yeah, it's from our mom dropping her so many times as a child," Gideon teased.

Brielle punched his arm, "Giddy! I can't believe you would say such a thing about your mother!"

Jace laughed.

"Ow! I'm just kidding! Calm down, Rocky," he said pitifully rubbing his arm, "Girl, for being as little as you are, you can pack a punch."

"Then she probably won't make it up here," Jace said.

"I don't know," Gideon replied, "She was pretty nervous when I took off."

"I guess we will just have to wait for Obadiah then," Brielle said. "I wish she would try, if for no other reason but to see this view," she said, staring out at the vast land before her.

Just then they heard the release of the counterweight lever and again within seconds up through the platform came both Obadiah and Keoni, who was frozen stiff, clinging hard to the rope in front of her. They climbed up to the top of the tree, which released the platform mechanism to close, and then they were slowly lowered to the platform.

"You did it!" Brielle said happily, "I'm so proud of you!"

Keoni could hardly speak; she was so nervous from the ride up. Her heart, like Brielle's, was pounding hard against her chest.

Once she turned around, though, and knew she was in a safe place, she relaxed and enjoyed the view.

"It's gorgeous," she whispered. "God is the Ultimate Artist."

"Yes, He is," Gideon agreed, "No one compares to Him."

Once everyone had enjoyed the view, Obadiah showed them the horizontal zip lines. Two lines were stretching out across the horizon.

Gideon, Jace, and Brielle were ecstatic and couldn't wait to try it. Keoni, again, was very nervous and felt apprehensive. Obadiah opened a small box built into the platform where he kept the harnesses and accessories, including safety helmets, which he instructed them to put on.

He once again gave them a full explanation of how the system worked, how to wear and fasten the harness, and how to double-check that everything was locked and in position as it should be.

"I designed these lines with 5/8 inch cables and hammerhead pulleys with double ball bearing wheels," he said happily.

"English, Obadiah, in English, please," Gideon said.

"Translation, you technically can get up to speeds of 150 miles per hour," he answered with a twinkle in his eye. "But don't worry, you won't, the cable isn't long enough for you to reach that speed, nor is it in enough of an angle."

"Where exactly do these lines lead to?" Gideon asked.

"About a few hundred feet away," Obadiah pointed in the direction of the line, "to the next platform. But once you reach that one, you have two options of where to go," he said. "It will take quite a bit of practice before you learn all the routes I have laid out through the trees. But just as you learn the streets in town, you will start to get an idea of where these lines all go. I designed the zip line course so that it works harmoniously with the nature that surrounds it. The trees should be able to grow and thrive, and should not affect the course in any way. I do keep track of that myself just to make sure. I wouldn't want any one of you to suddenly collide with an unexpected branch. I also use special suspension systems that do not require the trees to be drilled, so we are not harming God's beautiful forest in any way—just enjoying it."

"Yes, and what a ride!" Brielle exclaimed, "It's the perfect time of year to do this while everything is in the bright colors of fall!"

"I could do this every day!" Gideon declared.

"Me too!" Jace agreed happily.

"Just wait until you try it in the winter! When everything is beautiful, clean, and white, it's quite an experience to come out here and fly around amidst the snow," Obadiah chuckled.

"Just like a snowflake," Brielle said, looking out into the vast expansion of land.

"You can be a snowflake," Keoni said, "I'll be a person who lives and moves on the ground."

After Obadiah had gone over everything again on how the zip line worked, where they would land, and how they should dismount from it, he asked who would like to go first.

"How about if you two guys go down together and then Keoni and I come together," Brielle said, taking her friend's arm in hers.

Keoni smiled, "Okay, I'll try that," she said, still timid.

Jace and Gideon didn't have to be told twice; they immediately straddled the seat, and Obadiah helped them get securely into the harness. This seat, unlike the vertical line, which had a rope for a handle, had a twelve-inch straight handlebar across the top. Obadiah then showed them a special feature that he

had added to this zip line that the other line did not have: a bungee braking system.

"As you get closer to the other side, this braking system will help slow you down. The break will help you approach the other platform so that you don't enter it too aggressively. Although you can't see where you are landing, we will still hear you if you call us. When you land and are unharnessed, call to me so I can send someone else down," Obadiah said.

Once the boys were set and ready to go, they both took a deep breath and looked ahead. The zip line traveled so far in front into the woods that they couldn't see where it stopped; it just disappeared into the trees.

"This is a ride of faith, Intercessors," Obadiah said, "It is a perfect lesson for how we walk with the Lord. We can't always see where we are going or where our journey leads. We must trust in Him that He will lead us to a good and safe place. Getting started can be the hardest part, but the journey ahead can be one thrilling and adventurous ride once we do," he winked at them and then began the countdown to launch.

"5… 4… 3… 2… 1!" he shouted and then released them both to freely fly down the line, sailing through the trees and across the forest. Jace and Gideon shouted with joy as they took off, soaring through the pines and trees covered with red, orange, and yellow leaves. Then they disappeared into the forest. A few moments later, they heard Jace whistle, which easily echoed through the trees. They knew they had landed, and it was now time for the girls to go.

Obadiah got them ready and went over everything with them again just as he had with the guys. Keoni reached over and took Brielle's hand; she was trembling.

"You can do this," Brielle said, '*You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you*,' Philippians 4:13."

"Yes!" Keoni said with great anticipation, "You're right!"

Obadiah counted them down, "5…4…3…2…1!"

The two girls flew down the zip line screaming with joy and adrenaline as they started, but after a few seconds of sailing through the gorgeous fall forest, they both just felt complete exhilaration and joy. When they reached the other side, they were both laughing, very excited over their adventure.

"Oh, my gosh!" Keoni exclaimed, "THAT WAS AMAZING!"

"See? Aren't you glad you tried it?" Brielle said. "This is so cool! I can't believe I am doing this!"

When the teens signaled to Obadiah, the girls had landed and were unharnessed so that he could come down and join them. A few moments later, he came zipping through the treetops, his face just as excited and thrilled as the others had been when they landed. Once he was unharnessed and standing on the platform with them, he showed them their two options.

"On one side, there is a zip line that leads farther away and then another

line that will lead you quite close to the cleft in the rock of the Prayer Sanctum entrance. On the other side, you have this," he pointed to show them a sky bridge he had built where they could walk through the tops of the trees. It was a narrow bridge made with cables, rope, and wooden planks.

"This is a little suspension bridge that Magomu and I built. They're known as skywalks, but Magomu calls it a tree bridge. It's secure, but you will feel it shake and sway a bit when you are on it. Make sure you walk steadily, no jumping around or being silly. Even though our work is strong, still, accidents can always happen, and we are well over forty feet in the air.

When Keoni heard that, she became nauseous. "I don't think I want to walk on that," she whispered to Brielle.

"What? You're kidding? You just flew down a zip line hundreds of feet long, but you don't want to walk on the tree bridge?" Brielle asked.

"I know, I know, but I don't know if I can do this one," Keoni said.

"You can do all things," Brielle reminded.

"Okay, I'll try," she said meekly.

They all decided to walk over the tree bridge to the next platform. The bridge was over thirty feet long, and Obadiah was right; when they stepped up onto it, the movement of their feet caused them to sway and move around.

Gideon had gone first, then Jace, then Keoni, Brielle, and Obadiah. As Keoni began to walk, she instantly felt insecure on the bridge. She looked down, and the height began to overwhelm her. Her vision began to get blurry, and she became dizzy and weak in the knees.

"I can't do this!" she said, stopping where she was and gripping onto the sides of the bridge with a grip of iron.

Gideon turned around, "Kee, what's wrong?" he asked.

Keoni was paralyzed with fear; she couldn't move one inch and looked like she was about to have a panic attack.

When she didn't answer him, he asked again, "Keoni? Are you okay? What's going on?"

Keoni was locked in place. She couldn't move, and she couldn't speak. Brielle slowly came up behind her and placed her hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay, I'm right behind you," she said, "You're alright."

Keoni shook her head; every motion the bridge made terrified her even more. Then she heard Obadiah's voice.

"Keoni, I'm coming to help you," he said gently. "Let's begin by getting your eyes up in front of you," Obadiah said calmly, "Can you do that for me? Can you look up at Gideon?"

Keoni didn't move.

"Keoni, look at me," Gideon said, "don't look down."

Keoni shook her head.

"Okay then, can you look up to the place where you want to be?" Obadiah

asked. “You want to be off this bridge and be where you feel safe, right? So, can you look over to the place where you want to be?”

Keoni listened and lifted her eyes to the other side of the platform. It was still a good distance away.

“Now, let’s do this,” Obadiah said, “Let’s talk about the story of Jesus and Peter when they walked on the water,” he began. “I want you to listen to my story and keep your eyes focused on the platform where you want to go, alright?”

Keoni nodded again.

“Do you remember how Jesus’ disciples were out in their boat when the storm came?” he asked.

She nodded again.

“Good, and do you remember while they were in the midst of the storm, they saw a figure walking out to their boat upon the water?” Obadiah asked.

She nodded. “Can you say yes, or no?” Obadiah asked.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Alright, good, you’re doing great. The disciples thought that it was a ghost until they saw that it was Jesus coming to them. When Peter saw Him, he asked if he could join Him out on the water, right?” Obadiah said.

“Yes,” Keoni said.

“And Jesus told him to come to Him,” Obadiah said. “Then Peter got out of the boat and began walking to Jesus. He took that first step of faith and moved himself forward to where he wanted to go, and he wanted to go to Jesus.”

Keoni remembered the story and shook her head again. “Yes, I remember.”

“So, we are going to do that now,” Obadiah said. “You are going to take that step of faith to the place where you want to go. I want you to imagine that you are Peter, and the platform is where Jesus is, alright?”

Keoni nodded. She closed her eyes for a moment and imagined Jesus was standing on the platform. He was so beautiful waiting there. He looked so happy, and He reached His nail-scarred hands toward her. Immediately, she felt the peace of the Holy Spirit come over her, and she relaxed her grip on the bridge. She opened her eyes but kept the image of Jesus in her mind. Slowly, she lifted one foot to walk forward and then the other, again and again, until she was halfway across the bridge.

Then she looked down, and fear came rushing over her again. She froze, terrorized.

“Don’t look down,” Obadiah said, “Don’t be like Peter. When he looked at the raging waves from the storm surrounding him and took his eyes off Jesus, he began to sink. Keep your eyes on Jesus, think of nothing but getting to Him,” Obadiah said.

Keoni nodded, took a deep breath, and once again began to move slowly forward, step by step, until finally, she had done it. She had crossed the bridge.

Obadiah hugged her tight, “I’m proud of you,” he said, “You faced your fear, and you persevered. Well done, sweetheart. Well done indeed.”

“I don’t know what happened to me. I just completely froze,” she said. “With the zip line, things happened too fast for me to think about it. But there on that bridge where I was moving slowly and everything was swaying and rocking, I was terrified,” Keoni said.

“It’s alright,” Brielle hugged her, “You’re safe now, and we are so proud of you!”

“I think I’m proud of myself too,” she said, “Not that I want to do that again anytime soon,” she laughed, “But I’m glad to have had that experience. Thank you, Oba, for helping me. What you said was perfect.”

Just then, Obadiah’s phone rang. He dug it out of his coat and answered. Then his face went to an expression of joy, amazement, and shock all in one. He hung up the phone and looked at the Intercessors.

“Lacy just woke up,” he said.

When the family reached the hospital, there were dozens of people there. Some from the school, some from the church, some extended family members, and some who worked in the hospital. All had come to rejoice in the miracle of Lacy’s awakening.

When Jim and Laura saw the Intercessors and their families, they hugged them with the strength of twenty men. Not only had Lacy suddenly awakened, but she was able to talk with no speech complications at all. The doctors knew that it might take her several weeks of rehabilitation to be able to walk and become self-sufficient, but they were confident that she would make a complete recovery. It was nothing but a miracle of God!

Lacy was also now completely detoxified from the drugs she had been taking. There was nothing left in her system of the evil substance that had brought her there. She was clean.

Laura took Brielle by the hand, “Come on,” she said, “I want you to see her.”

Brielle was hesitant; although she was full of joy for the answer to their prayers, she remembered how much Lacy did *not* like her.

“What if… what if she still doesn’t like me?” Brielle said.

Laura shook her head, “She was under the control of the drugs back then. That is gone now, come with me. I want you to see her.”

Brielle, holding Laura’s hand, was led into Lacy’s room. The Intercessors followed. As Brielle approached her bed, she saw her. She was slightly propped up and her eyes were closed but when she heard her mother’s voice, she opened them. Brielle almost gasped when she looked into her eyes. There was a clarity and sweetness reflected in her eyes that Brielle had never seen before. She didn’t look like the lost, depressed, angry girl who trudged around the school

campus. She looked peaceful, content, and happy.

Brielle could see that she was still very weak, but it was great to see her like this and not flat on the bed with tubes and wires sticking out of her. She was able to breathe on her own, she was able to open her eyes, and she was able to talk. But best of all, she was able to smile. Once again, the overwhelming evidence of the mighty hand of God and the healing power of Jesus Christ was shown in Lacy's miracle. The doctors couldn't understand how this young girl could have endured what she had with the drug overdose, survived having a stroke, woke up from a coma, and be in such good condition. But for those who trusted the Lord, they knew how all these things could be. The answer was in one beautiful word: *Jesus.*

"Lacy, there is someone here to see you, baby," Laura said happily, her face radiant with joy.

Lacy looked at Brielle curiously for a moment, trying to place her in her memory.

"I remember you," Lacy whispered.

Brielle smiled and nodded, not knowing what to say.

"You're my angel," she whispered, giving Brielle a weak smile, then lowered her eyes again momentarily.

Brielle was stunned by Lacy's words. After her previous experience with the girl, she never thought that Lacy would consider her to be her angel. Brielle was humbled by her remark and, still not knowing what to say, took Lacy's hand in hers, tears welling up in her eyes.

God took one girl who loved Him, served Him, and tried to be obedient to His commands, and placed another girl on her heart who needed Him. Now, He had brought them together and blessed them both richly: Lacy with healing and Brielle with reward.

"This is Brielle from your school," Laura said, "She and her friends have been coming by to pray for you every week, along with their families."

Lacy opened her eyes again, her eyelids still heavy, but when they did, her eyes seemed to have a sparkle to them.

"It worked," she whispered.

"What?" Laura asked, leaning down to listen more closely.

"Their prayers," she whispered, "they worked."

Then she looked around the room at all the faces that surrounded her. "Thank you," she whispered.

When Lacy came into this hospital, Brielle, Gideon, Jace, and Keoni were not the same kids they once were. They were transformed.

Lacy's parents, Jim and Laura, were not the same people they once were, and Nurse Carrie wasn't the same person she once was.

Through this terrible tragedy of one girl's overdose and coma, God did something *magnificent*. He brought four teenagers together to serve Him as

Intercessors, warriors of the Lord. He brought a couple back to each other, and their faith and relationship with Him were also restored, and through the prayers and lives of those who ministered to her, the soul of a hospital worker was also won for Jesus.

The process was long, the journey was difficult, but the result was a new beginning for all!

That day, everyone who was touched by Lacy and the miracle of her healing agreed that God had blessed them with a gift of one of the best Thanksgiving Days of their lives. It truly was a day that none of them would ever forget, and they would *always* be thankful for it.

Brielle lightly squeezed Lacy's hand in hers, finally knowing what to say to her, "Jesus loves you, Lacy."

Lacy looked up at her with a weak, tired smile, "Yes… I believe He does."

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Soon it was time for them to go. The doctors didn't want Lacy to be overwhelmed by her visitors and extended family. It was recommended that people give her a day or two before coming to visit again. Brielle felt as if she were floating on a cloud all evening. Alma, Keoni, Gideon, and Jace all came back to Brielle's house for hot chocolate, pie, and lots of rejoicing.

All evening, everyone was full of the joy of the Lord. They were giddy, celebrating the magnificent healing work of Jesus. They felt the exhilaration of the pure joy that can only come from Jesus Christ. It wasn't a high from a drug or a drink or any other substance; it was from the amazing power of God. Once again, He had shown them the work of His awesome and mighty Hand. They talked about all the different miracles and experiences they had witnessed, starting back to the day when the two robbers entered the mini-mart.

Though they couldn't explain it, they knew God had assembled them and was allowing them to have these experiences for a reason. They agreed they wanted to be used by God in this world to do a great work for Him. If going through trials and tribulations like this was part of the process, as hard as it was, they wanted to be obedient to His will, knowing God was always there to help them.

Jace was so excited that he almost ate two pies by himself. Each time he finished a plate, he went back for another. Everyone would laugh when they saw him come back into the room with another slice of pie.

"I can stop!" Jace said. "I have too much energy in me!"

"Yeah, it's called *sugar,"* Gideon teased.

"Jace, my dear, I'm flattered that you love our pies, but I fear you are going to explode!" Genevieve laughed.

"I *love* these pies! I can't get enough of them!" he replied as he started cutting his third slice of pie.

"Which one is your favorite?" Brielle asked.

"I love them all," then he retracted, "but if I had to choose just one, I think I would choose the cream cheese. It's *awesome!* This hot chocolate is incredible, too. I've never had anything like it!"

"That is an old family recipe," Genevieve said, "it's something my mother used to make for me. She would start making it around Halloween and then make it all through the holiday season."

"I'll be happy to partake," he said with a grin, "and I hope you make pie through the holiday season as well."

Again, everyone laughed as they watched him devour his slice and waited to see if he would sneak back for another. He sat down next to Brielle, taking a break from his pie consumption.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" she asked him.

"My father is coming home. He asked if I could have a belated Thanksgiving dinner with him," he said.

"That's great!" Brielle said encouragingly.

"Yeah, I guess. But it certainly won't be the same without your mother's pies, that's for sure," he laughed.

"What time is he coming home?"

"He wasn't sure. He has a meeting and then, depending on when he gets through, he is going to come back," he answered.

"Where is he anyway?" she asked.

"He has been in Europe. He always tries to catch up with my mother and tries to get her to come home for the holidays," he began.

His words brought a stabbing pain to her heart. Her mother had always made the holiday season so festive and special; she couldn't imagine having to convince her own mother to come and spend time at home with her.

"He is supposed to be back in New York by tomorrow afternoon for his meeting," he continues, "So I kind of have to hang around the house and wait for him to come home."

"I see, well… would you like some company while you wait?" she asked sweetly.

"I have a lot of chores that I need to get done before he comes home. I admit, I've been slacking on my household duties," he laughed.

"I could come and help you, if you like," she suggested.

Jace smiled at her charmingly, "Absolutely not. I will not have you cleaning my room and doing my laundry."

"You do your own laundry, huh?" she asked.

"Yeah, I have for years. My father has a list of household chores I have to do. He says it builds character," he said.

"I agree with him," Obadiah interjected, "*All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty,' Proverbs 14:23.'* The Lord blesses those who work hard and with integrity."

"My father would agree with that," Jace nodded at Obadiah.

The hours passed as the friends enjoyed their time together, and Jace enjoyed a little more of the third pie-- not quite finishing it. Soon, the hour grew late, and it was time to go home. They parted each other's company with hugs, kisses, and blessings for one another. It had been a wonderful day full of fun, laughter, good friends, good food, and most of all, miraculous blessings. It was a most memorable, blessed Thanksgiving Day; one they would never forget.

The next morning, Brielle woke up with a wonderful idea. She quickly jumped out of bed to talk to her mother about it.

"Mama, I had a great idea," she said, coming into the kitchen to find her

mother and grandfather having breakfast. “Where’s Ash?” she asked.

“He’s still sleeping,” Genevieve said. “What’s your idea?”

“Last night, Jace said that he was supposed to have a belated Thanksgiving dinner with his father sometime today,” she began, “but he said it wouldn’t be the same without your pies.”

“I’ve never seen anyone eat pie like that boy did last night,” Obadiah chuckled, “Where did he put it all?”

Brielle smiled, “I was thinking that I could surprise him and take him a couple of your pies for their dinner… that is, if you have any ingredients left to make some?” she asked.

“I do,” Genevieve said, “I would have to make more pie crusts…”

“I could help you,” Brielle said excitedly.

“I would be happy to do that, sweetheart, especially since he loves them so much! If making pies will make Jace happy, then I will be happy to make them,” she said.

“Wonderful!” Brielle said, “I’ll go get dressed, and after breakfast, we can get started!” she yelled as she ran.

Brielle and her mother spent a wonderful day together in the kitchen laughing, talking, making pie, and making plans for her birthday the next day.

“Keoni wants to take me shopping,” Brielle said.

“And so do I,” her mother replied.

“Okay, then we can all go together,” Brielle said. “She wanted to go today, but she had to work.”

“Ah, yes, Black Friday,” Genevieve said, “Lots of sales!”

Brielle laughed, “She will be going insane having to work and not being able to shop!”

“Oba would like to take you to North Shore for dinner tomorrow night, along with the rest of the gang,” she smiled, “If you would like that.”

“Really? Cool!” Brielle said, “That sounds great to me! Do I need to invite everyone?”

“No, he already took care of it for you,” Genevieve said, “He was going to try and surprise you, but figured it might be too hard of a secret for Asher to keep.”

Asher came staggering into the kitchen, it was well past Noon.

“Well, good morning, sleepy head,” his mother greeted.

“Good morning,” he said with a wide yawn, then he looked at his sister, “Hey Brielle, Oba’s taking us to North Shore tomorrow night for your birthday!” he said happily, waking from his drowsiness.

Genevieve burst out laughing, “See?” she said over her shoulder to Brielle, who was also laughing.

By that afternoon, Genevieve and Brielle had made a pumpkin pie, a pecan pie, and a cream cheese pie. Then Genevieve took a jar and filled it with all the

ingredients for her mother's famous hot chocolate.

"Tell Jace he will need to mix in about six cups of milk to the contents in this jar and cook it slowly on the stove," she said. "Or if they invite you in, you can do it for him," she winked.

Brielle kissed and hugged her mother, "Thank you, Mama," she said, "I'm going to go get dressed."

"You already are dressed," Genevieve said.

Brielle looked down at her clothes, "Seriously? Like, I would wear this to Jace's house?" Then she turned and ran up the stairs to get ready.

Asher, eating his breakfast, rolled his eyes. "She's turning into Keoni," he said.

Genevieve laughed at her boy and began packing the pies and hot chocolate mix for Brielle to deliver to Jace.

Once Brielle was dressed and ready, she logged onto her computer to look up Jace's address. He had never invited her to his house before, so she didn't know where he lived. She remembered him saying that he lived just outside of town, so she decided to look up all the residents named Roberts and see where their houses were located. After several minutes of searching, she was confused. She couldn't find his parents' names anywhere.

Then she remembered the first night they went to the Prayer Sanctum. Obadiah had told them that he had spoken with all their parents and had received their permission to take them there. She decided to talk to him to get his contact information. If he had a phone number, maybe he also had an address. She found him working on bridge plans in his office.

"Oba, when you first took us to the Prayer Sanctum, you told us that you had personally spoken to each of our parents to get permission to take us inside, right?" Brielle asked.

Obadiah turned around and looked at her inquisitively, "Yes, of course. Why?"

"Did you talk to Jace's parents too?" she asked.

"Yes, I spoke to his mother," Obadiah answered.

"His mother? Really?" Brielle asked, surprised.

"Yes, I called and introduced myself to her and explained all about the Intercessors training and the Prayer Sanctum. I asked if she would be comfortable with Jace going to it," he said.

You spoke with his mother?" she asked again.

Obadiah thought for a moment, "I think so, what is her name again?" he asked.

"Serena," Brielle answered.

"Hmmm, you know to be honest, sweetheart," Obadiah began, "I'm not sure what her first name was. Now that I think about it, I just asked if I could speak to Mrs. Roberts. She told me she was Mrs. Roberts. When I asked her if

she had a son named Jace, she said yes, and I carried on with my conversation. She was very sweet and happily gave permission for Jace to go with me to the Prayer Sanctum. Then she thanked me for calling, told me that she would like to meet me sometime, and I said the same," he replied.

"I'm having a hard time figuring this out. When I search for Serena or Holbrook Roberts, I can't find any listing for a phone number or address in all of Fairfield County. How did you get their phone number?" she asked.

"Come over here and I'll show you," he said.

He turned to his computer, opened the search engine he used, and showed her how he did it. There were three listings for Roberts in Fairfield. Two were men, and one said V. Roberts.

"What I did first was look at the ages of these people. This man is seventy-two years old, so I ruled him out as being Jace's father, though that could be possible," he chuckled. "This man is listed as being only twenty-three years old, so I ruled him out, too. Which left V. Roberts on the list. I looked at the address and saw that it was a home on the outskirts of town, as Jace said he lived just outside of Fairfield," Obadiah explained.

"I can see how you reasoned that," she said, "But he told me that his father's name is Holbrook and his mother's name is Serena, so I wonder where the 'V' comes from," she pondered.

"Perhaps, since his mother is a theater actress, Serena is her stage name," Obadiah suggested.

Brielle nodded, "You know, I didn't think of that. Jace said that she loves the theater more than anything-- even more than him," she mumbled under her breath. "Okay, this is good. Is the number that you called?" she asked.

"Yes, right here, that number should get you Jace's mom," he confirmed.

"What is the address listed?" she asked, grabbing a paper to write it down. Once she looked at it, she said, "I'm not sure where that would be."

Obadiah wrote her out directions on how to drive to the address. She gave her grandfather a kiss and a hug of thanks for his help.

"We've got the address, Mama!" she said excitedly as she gathered up her purse and put on her coat.

"You know you can drive my car too, Kawala," Genevieve said.

"Yeah, I know, but I feel safer in Oba's big tank," Brielle giggled.

"I agree with that," Genevieve laughed, "I want you safe too. Here you go," she said, handing Brielle a large paper bag with the pies and hot chocolate mix wrapped inside. "Tell Jace hello and have fun!" she said, kissing her daughter on the top of her head, "Jesus keep her safe," she added as her usual quick send-off prayer.

As Brielle drove, she became more excited. Jace would be so surprised-- on many accounts. First, that she found his house. Second, that she was bringing pie, and third, that she was *driving herself*. As she made her way through town,

she turned on the radio and listened to the Christmas music that a local station traditionally began to play the day after Thanksgiving. It was a beautiful, crisp autumn day, and she looked forward to spending time with Jace. They could sit and talk together over a slice of pie about all the things to come this holiday season, especially their upcoming date at the Festival of Lights. Perhaps she could even meet his father. She had butterflies in her stomach just thinking about all of it.

Soon she found herself on the street where Jace lived. She slowly drove by each house, checking for the correct address number; finally, she found it. It was a darling little house, white with blue trim. There were stairs that led to a small porch and the front door, which was enclosed behind a screen door. She pulled up in front of the house and took out her bag of goodies. She took a slow, deep breath to calm the butterflies that were raging through her body. She noticed the mailbox out by the end of the yard. It had the name Roberts painted on the side and an American flag across the front.

As she walked up to the house, she noticed a military banner in the right window. It was a white banner with a thick red trim around the edge and a blue star directly in the center. Yellow fringe hung all around from the edge of the red trim. Brielle remembered seeing a banner like that when she was a child. Her mother told her it meant an immediate family member was serving in the military or away at war. She wondered who Jace knew or was related to that might be in the military.

Slowly, she climbed the stairs and heard a dog barking inside the house. She pushed on the bell but didn't hear anything, so she lightly knocked on the door.

The door was opened by a kind lady in her early twenties who looked at Brielle with just as much surprise as Brielle looked at her.

"Hello. May I help you?" the lady asked.

Brielle didn't know what to say, "Hello, I, um, I was…" she stammered.

The lady opened the screen door to see Brielle more clearly, noticing the paper bag tucked under her arm. "Are you selling something?" the lady asked patiently.

"Um, no, I'm sorry. I'm here to see Jace," she said, "Is he here?"

The lady looked behind her and gently pulled the door closed. Quietly, she stepped out onto the porch.

"I'm sorry, who did you say you were here to see?" she asked softly, almost at a whisper.

"Well, um, my name is Brielle St. Claire, and I thought this was where my friend Jace Roberts lived," she said.

The lady's expression changed; she was still friendly and kind, but seemed to be saddened by Brielle's words.

"My name is Lydia. It's nice to meet you," she said, extending her hand to shake Brielle's. "Are you asking about my brother Jason Roberts?"

Brielle shook her head slowly, “No, just Jace, Jace Roberts.”

“Oh,” Lydia said, “I think you may have the wrong address,” she said, “There was only a Jason Roberts who used to live here.”

Brielle looked at Lydia with confused eyes, then she glanced at the house. “Used to live here?” she asked.

“Yes. He was killed last year in the war in Afghanistan,” she said, lowering her eyes to the ground.

Brielle placed her hand on the lady’s arm. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I guess I do have the wrong house. I just thought…” She stopped herself from going on.

“What is it?” Lydia asked.

Brielle took a deep breath. “I just thought for sure this is where my friend lived because my grandfather said he called the phone number listed for this house and spoke with Jace’s mother,” she said, pulling the address and phone number from her coat pocket.

Lydia looked at the number and began to rub her forehead, closing her eyes as if in pain. “Your grandfather called this number and spoke to Jace’s mother?” she asked softly, her voice full of emotion.

“Yes, back in September. He called to get her permission to take Jace somewhere. He said she was very sweet and happy to gave permission for her son to go with him,” Brielle said.

Lydia raised her head, and Brielle could see that her eyes were full of tears.

“Are you alright?” she asked Lydia gently.

Lydia tried to compose herself, drying the tears from her eyes. “Yes… well… I don’t know,” she said.

Brielle waited patiently for her to speak. She needed to know what was going on.

“When my mother received the news about my brother, she completely lost it,” she said, trying not to cry. “She had a total mental breakdown. She has never recovered from it and hasn’t been the same since.”

“I know that most people usually aren’t the same after they lose someone they love,” Brielle said, feeling the pain of losing her father while she was speaking.

“I know what you mean. But my mother,” she shook her head silently, “she can’t accept it. She keeps acting like Jason is still alive.”

“What do you mean?” Brielle asked in confusion.

“Like he is still just away in the war, and that someday he will be coming home. She talks about it all the time. She watches the mail for letters, she waits for phone calls, she sews his socks, and cleans his room. We don’t know what to do for her. She won’t go to counseling,” she sighed, “Because she doesn’t think anything is wrong with her behavior.

“I don’t know what to do for her. She was there for the funeral, she saw his

casket, his grave… she just can't…" She trailed off, overcome with emotion.

Brielle grabbed Lydia's hand, "I'm so sorry," she said, "I didn't mean for all of this to happen, to come here today and make you feel all this pain. I'm so sorry."

"No, please, this is not your fault," Lydia sniffed, trying to lighten up, "Look at me, falling apart here on the porch in front of a total stranger. I should be the one apologizing."

"Not at all, I know this must be very hard for you," she said, thinking about how her mother handled her father's death. She couldn't imagine how hard it must be for Lydia to lose her brother and part of her mother at the same time.

"When your grandfather called that day, he thought he was talking to the mother of your friend Jace Roberts?" Lydia asked.

"Yes," Brielle answered.

"My father always called my brother 'Jase' as a nickname," Lydia said softly. "So did I."

Brielle nodded her head slowly, "I understand. So, your mother thought my grandfather was calling to take her son somewhere. I guess that just makes it more difficult for you now. That phone call probably gave her more validation that Jason is still alive."

"Please don't worry; she would think that no matter what. If your grandfather hadn't called, nothing would be different," Lydia said reassuringly.

Brielle sighed, "I am just so sorry to have brought you all this pain the day after Thanksgiving."

"Trust me," Lydia answered, "yesterday was much worse. It was our first Thanksgiving without Jason. He was killed last December, right after Christmas."

Brielle's eyes filled with tears, and without thinking, she reached out and hugged the lady whom she had only known for a few minutes. "I don't know if you believe in God," she whispered, "but I want to tell you that He loves you and He is with you and your mother."

At these words, Lydia held Brielle, hugging her hard and letting her emotions go.

Just then, the door to the house opened, and Lydia stepped back quickly from Brielle, turning around to dry her eyes. Lydia's mother was standing in the doorway behind the screen door.

"Hello," she said sweetly, "Who are you?"

Brielle looked at the woman and wiped her eyes quickly as well, "Hello ma'am," she said with a cheery smile, "My name is Brielle St. Claire."

"Hello, Brielle," the woman said, opening the screen door to step out onto the porch, "I'm Virginia."

V. Roberts, Brielle thought.

"Ah, yes, Virginia, it's very nice to meet you," she said sweetly.

Lydia had regained her composure and had turned back around.

"Are you a friend of Lydia's?" Virginia asked.

Brielle looked at Lydia sweetly, "We haven't known each other for very long, but I feel quite close to her already," she replied with a smile.

Lydia smiled softly back at Brielle.

"How nice," Virginia said, "Would you like to come in?"

"You know, I would love to, but today I can't. I have to go," Brielle said sweetly.

"Oh… alright," Virginia said with a confused tone.

"I wanted to bring you over some of my mother's pies and hot chocolate," Brielle said kindly.

"Really?" Virginia asked, "What kind of pies?"

"Pecan, pumpkin, and cream cheese," Brielle said cheerfully.

"How wonderful!" Virginia exclaimed, "Pecan pie is my son Jason's favorite. He is away in the war in Afghanistan right now, but he will be home soon."

Brielle looked over at Lydia, who looked at her mother with a loving expression.

"I know you will enjoy them, my mother is a wonderful cook," Brielle said, handing her the bag of pies and chocolate mix.

"You're an angel, my dear," Virginia said, "I hope you and your family had a good Thanksgiving?"

"Yes, it was wonderful. One of the best we've had in a long time," she answered.

"Well, I'll leave you two alone," Virginia said. "Thank you again for the pies, Brielle. Please come and visit us again soon when you can stay a while," Virginia said happily. Then she stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

"I'm so sorry about that," Lydia said, "Now you have no pies for your friend."

"Those pies made it to the place God wanted them to be, with my new friends," Brielle replied.

"Thank you for being so kind to my mother," Lydia said, "Most people around here just ignore her now because they think she's crazy," she shook her head, "As much as I hate to say it, they would be right. They just don't know what to say or how to treat her, so they just stay away."

Brielle listened to Lydia and had an idea.

"I'll be right back," she said excitedly.

Brielle turned and ran out to Obadiah's truck for her purse. She kept a small stash of flyers for the 'Inviting His Light' Prayer Vigil service so she could hand them out whenever she had an opportunity. This was the perfect opportunity.

"Here," Brielle said when she returned. "My friends and I are having a special event at our church. We would love it if you and your mother came. My mother is the music director there, and my grandfather is a Sunday school teacher. You don't have to wait for this event, though; you can come anytime

you like. I know the people of our church would be kind to you and your mother. If you would like to come, we would love to have you."

Lydia looked down at the flyer. "Thank you so much," she whispered, "You have no idea how much this means to me. We would love to come."

Brielle also had written down her name, address, and phone number on the paper, "If you ever need to talk or pray, whatever; please call us, okay?"

"Okay," Lydia smiled, "Thank you, Brielle. This is just incredible, such a coincidence about all of this, huh?"

Brielle shook her head, "I don't believe in coincidences. God has this all planned out. He wanted me to come here today," she smiled.

Brielle hugged Lydia again and told her good-bye. As she drove away, she felt a mixture of emotions. She felt the pain and sorrow of the loss this family endured from losing their son and brother in the Afghanistan War. She felt the despair of Lydia as she watched her mother's denial overtake her reality, and last… she felt the pain of not knowing where Jace really lived.

Once again, she began to wonder about Jace and what he was keeping from her. Why was it so hard to let her know where he lived? It couldn't possibly be that bad. If it was, hadn't he spent enough time with her to know that she was not a materialistic person? It didn't matter to her if he lived in a small, old, or poor house. Suddenly, a thought came to her, a memory from weeks ago. Maybe he didn't live in a small, old, poor house.

Her mind whirled back to the day when Obadiah had asked her and Keoni to deliver some plans to a mansion on the Gold Coast. They had seen Jace ride out of the gates of the largest estate they had ever seen, the house which she had described as being like a palace. The mansion her mother called 'Le Chateau Devereaux'.

Could it be? Could it be that Jace lived *there?* But if he did, why would he keep that from her?

Brielle wasn't going to answer any of the questions in her mind just yet. First, she had to know. She had to find out. Turning the truck around, she headed in the direction of the Gold Coast to try and locate that house again. She drove and drove until it was close to six o'clock in the evening. She made some traveling errors, forcing herself to remember the directions that had taken them to the mansion for Obadiah's delivery. Once she found that house, she easily remembered how to find the one where they had seen Jace.

Brielle turned down the road that led to the incredible mansion. As she drove upon it slowly, taking in all that she could see of it through the large oak trees which surrounded the outer gate. The sun was setting, and the house was all lit up, glowing majestically against the evening sky. Finally, she reached the massive black gates and stopped the truck outside the guard's gatehouse.

An elderly guard dressed in a gray uniform came out to greet her. "May I help you, please?" the man asked politely.

"Yes, um, I'm here to see Jace Rob--, uh, I'm here to see Jace. I'm a friend of his. My name is Brielle St. Claire. I go to school with him. I don't have an appointment or anything, I was
just--," she was interrupted.

The guard nodded, "Please wait here, ma'am," he said, then he turned and went back into the gate house. Brielle could see him talking on the phone, but could not hear what he was saying. When he was done, he came back to talk to her, a pleasant smile across his face.

"Welcome, Miss St. Claire," the guard said, "Wait for the gate to open and then please park your vehicle by the fountain in the courtyard."

"Thank you," Brielle said politely to the guard. She understood that whoever it was on the other end of that phone gave the approval for her to enter… so they must have known who she was.

Brielle's hands started trembling as she gripped the steering wheel, harder now with a mixture of confusion and frustration. Jace *must* live there.

The gate gave a sudden loud jolt and then opened automatically on both sides so she could drive through. Slowly, she drove down the road that led to the house's courtyard. It was a long stretch of land that seemed to take forever. As she approached the magnificent home, driving through the lush trees, her nervousness grew.

Finally, she reached the courtyard and parked the truck as the guard instructed in front of the elegant fountain that stood before the home. She sat still in the truck for a moment, staring at the structure before her. The home was even more incredible when not looking through the trees or the bars of the outside gate. She began to feel uneasiness now, moving through her, and tried to compose herself and not rush to conclusions. In this moment, she just needed to know the truth.

When she stepped out of the truck, her legs were weak. She tried to collect herself as much as possible, taking several deep breaths to calm her nerves. Slowly, she walked up the steps toward the majestic doors. The home had a strong influence of European architecture. Now that she was standing before it, she was right, it did resemble a small palace rather than a house. There were hidden fixtures that lit the walls and surrounding landscaping with brilliant white lights, giving it a radiant appearance. The walls were constructed of large cream-colored bricks. Many of the windows were tall, some were paned, and some were exquisite stained-glass scenes of nature. She looked to her left, then to her right. From where she stood, she could not see where this home began or ended; it seemed to go on and on. Looking up, she paused to take it all in. It was overwhelming.

Suddenly, she realized she was holding her breath. Taking a slow, deep breath, trying to calm herself and steady her trembling hands, she rang the bell.

"Even the doorbell is impressive," she thought to herself as she listened to

the chimes that announced her arrival.

It took a moment before someone came to answer, but she could see through the stained-glass windows that surrounded the doors that the person answering was not tall enough to be Jace. Quickly, she took another deep breath and smiled. The grand door opened, and there, standing before her, was a man in his fifties. His gray, streaked, combed-back hair alluded to his age. He was dressed in a very nice white button-down shirt and black pants, no tie or jacket, but was still quite distinguished looking.

For crying out loud, Brielle thought to herself, *he's even got a butler?*

The man smiled and welcomed her warmly. His voice was very rich, and he spoke with a sophisticated English accent.

"Good evening, Miss St. Claire," he said, "It is such a pleasure to finally meet you. My name is Oliver," he said, bowing gently toward her.

Brielle stood and stared for a moment, mystified. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know if she should reach out her hand to shake his or to bow to him. But there he was, Oliver, the business associate Jace told her about, who worked for his father. *At least he was honest about that*, she thought to herself.

"Oh, thank you…" she said, nodding to the man, "it's nice to meet you too, Oliver," she said, somewhat stammering.

"Please come in," Oliver said, stepping back so she could enter.

Meeting Oliver should have been enough proof that Jace lived here, but still, she wanted to see it for herself.

Brielle walked into the entranceway, stepping onto a floor of white polished marble. The entrance area was enormous, and she felt as if she had entered a palace instead of a home. There were two large, closed doors to the right and left of where she stood. Outside each set of doors, on the walls, stood two matching antique entrance tables that held beautiful and artistic floral arrangements. Hanging over the table and flowers were very large and majestic paintings. What completely took her breath away were the dual staircases before her. It was like nothing she had ever seen, even in a movie.

There was a large balcony in the center of the staircase, which extended from the second level of the house in a roundabout fashion. Each staircase curved gracefully down from the balcony in a winding fashion to face the houseguest when they entered. The staircases were made from the most refined and polished walnut, and their banisters flowed downward, rounding and twisting themselves around the newel posts like wooden ribbons. Perched on top of each newel post were two carvings of large and studious barred owls. It was magnificent and again, overwhelming.

Brielle heard Oliver close the door behind her. "I believe Master Jace is in the music room working on his compositions. Normally, I am not to interrupt him, but I am quite sure you would be an interruption worth having," he said charmingly.

Brielle smiled nervously at his kindness.

"Please, follow me," he said, turning to lead her between the owl staircases and into the main hallway.

The hallway was long and full of elegant paintings on the walls and the ceiling, but Brielle couldn't concentrate on them. Her mind was a whirlwind of questions, and her heart was overloaded with emotion. She followed Oliver through the lovely home until finally, he stopped outside two grand doors, which were closed. Inside, Brielle could faintly hear the strings of a guitar playing. When she did, her heart began to pound in her chest. She knew the music was coming from Jace.

"Please, wait here a moment," Oliver said as he opened the door to enter the room, closing it behind him. Brielle pressed her ear to the door silently. She could hear the music had stopped, and she could hear Oliver speaking.

"You have a visitor, Sir," Oliver said.

"Who is it?" she heard Jace's voice ask. Now, the sound of her heartbeat was pounding all through her body, her chest, her head, and her stomach. She tried to take deep breaths to calm herself, "Help me, Jesus," she whispered.

"It's Miss. St. Claire, Sir," Oliver answered.

Brielle's pulse was beating so hard in her temples and her ears that she could barely hear Jace's reply. Then she heard Oliver's reply.

"The young lady has discovered you, Sir, and it is far time that you told her the truth about yourself," Oliver said.

Inside the room, Jace took off his guitar, his hands trembling uncontrollably. He stood up and began to nervously pace the floor.

"Why did you let her in here?" he asked Oliver angrily, "*I don't want* her here. Why didn't you send her away?"

"You can't hide who you are forever, Sir," Oliver said gently.

Jace looked up to see that Brielle had opened the door and was standing in the doorway of the grand ballroom. His face lost all color, and he felt as if his knees were going to buckle beneath him. Brielle quietly stood, waiting patiently. On the outside, she appeared calm and collected, but on the inside, she was a tumult of confused emotions.

"Excuse me," Oliver said, quietly removing himself from the room, walking past Brielle, who stood silently, staring at Jace. She didn't know what to say to him or where to begin, so she waited for him to speak first.

Jace looked around the room nervously. "So," he began with a gentle tone, "how did you find me?"

"I take it you did not want to be found?" she asked, trying to keep her voice under control.

Jace didn't know how to answer her.

Brielle was searching through her anger, desperately trying to utilize the Fruits of the Spirit, starting with kindness and gentleness--and most of all self-

control.

"I went to the home of Virginia Roberts just outside of town. I thought it was your home because you said you lived *just outside of town*," she chided, trying hard to keep her composure.

Jace's eyes dropped in shame.

"Turns out, that's just a very sweet and confused woman who lost her son, 'Jase', short for Jason, last year in Afghanistan and still thinks he's alive and coming home soon," she said, her voice starting to quiver. She clinched her hands into fists and then stretched them out again, trying to force herself to remain calm.

"Brielle, I'm sorry, I…" Jace began walking across the room toward her.

"You lied to me," she said.

"Brielle, I— "

"You *lied* to me," she said again, "You lied to us all."

"If you will just listen, I can explain," he tried again.

"Okay, explain," she said, trying to keep her self-control, but feeling it quickly slipping away.

Jace took a deep breath, "All my life, wherever I would go and whatever I did, no one saw anything in me except my father's money. It didn't matter about my ambitions, my abilities, my thoughts; the only thing people heard was the name Devereaux, and that was it. Nothing else about me mattered.

"I got to a place where I couldn't take it anymore. I wanted people to listen to *me* because they wanted to hear what *I* had to say based on my *own* thoughts. I wanted people to see what I could do based on my own abilities…" he paused, slowing down. "I wanted to know that people liked me for *me* and *not* my father's money," he stopped and looked at her. "I started going by my mother's maiden name, Roberts. When people hear the name Devereaux, they only think of one thing: *billionaire.*

*"*My father, as difficult as he can be sometimes, understood this and thought my desire to stand on my own was a very respectable quality. So, he allowed me to do that—temporarily anyway, as he too wants me to carry on the Devereaux name… and company someday."

Brielle listened intently but did not change her stance.

"That's all very interesting," she said, "I'm still waiting for you to explain why you felt you had to keep lying to me… to Gideon… to Keoni, to my whole family about who you really are."

"I'm sorry, I should have told you a long time ago," he said.

"Yes, but if I hadn't seen you coming out of the gates here the other day, I still wouldn't know the truth. If I hadn't gone to Virginia Robert's house today, I still would have kept on believing you," she said.

Jace shook his head slightly, not knowing what to say, "You're right. I thought about telling you… I just… didn't…" he stammered.

"You just didn't *what?* How hard is it to tell someone you care for the truth about who you are?*"* she demanded, then she backtracked, "Actually… I can see how much you care. It was easier for you to lie to me than to be honest."

"No, it wasn't. I didn't…"

"You didn't what?" she demanded.

"I just didn't want to let go of it," he said.

"Of a *lie?* You didn't want to let go of lying to us?" she pressed.

"No, not that, I just didn't want to let go of the way it was when we were together, with your family, our friends… with you. I believed that you valued me for me and not all of this," he said, throwing his hands up in the air and looking around him.

"And you think that we would have felt about you differently because you are wealthy?" she asked with true confusion.

Jace sighed, "It's happened to me before. Money does strange things to people, and lots of money does even stranger things."

This statement hurt Brielle almost as much as his betrayal.

"You told me that we were different; my family, Keoni, Gideon… me. You said you never knew anyone like us before," she said, the emotion coming up into her throat.

"Yes, that's true, you are different; all of you are," he replied.

"It's pretty clear you didn't think we were different enough, because you didn't trust us," she said.

"Yes, of course I did, I always trusted you," he said.

"No, you didn't!" she said strongly, "Because you didn't give us the chance to accept you for who you are. You just lumped us in with all the other people who have placed your value on your wealth. You didn't give us the chance to even know who you really are. Yet, you prejudged us and thought that once we saw where you lived, what you had, we would change how we felt about you. We have all opened our hearts and lives to you, you know us, do you think that is who we are?"

"No… I didn't think about it that way," he replied sorrowfully.

"I don't think you *thought* about it at all," she paused, tears welling up in her eyes. "I trusted you," she said softly, the pain starting to spill over the anger, "I told you everything personal of my past. I let you into my most private, guarded parts of my heart. I told you my feelings, my dreams… about my father, everything," she paused trying to gain her composure. "I let you into my world like I never let *anyone* before… and this is what I get in return," she said, "one steady stream of lies and deceit."

"It wasn't a steady stream of lies," Jace said, reaching out to hold her arm. "You only asked me a few times about where I lived and about my father. I never really lied to you when you asked those questions; I just didn't tell you the whole truth."

The tears in her eyes began to sting, she tried to fight them from coming but it was to no avail.

"You don't get it. The ninth Commandment says 'Thou shalt not bear false witness. It doesn't say anything about partial truths. You purposely misled me, Jace, you misled all of us. One lie led to another and that to another and now… here we are."

Jace stared at her in silence.

"How did you think this would end, Jace? Did you think that you would be able to hide this forever? What about your future? You said you wanted to get married someday and have a family, but just how did you think that was going to work out? I mean, I can't believe you thought you could hide who you are from the world, and none of us would ever find out the truth. I cannot for the life of me understand how you thought keeping this huge secret was the solution," she said, wiping the tears away.

Jace stood there staring at her, completely speechless.

"I heard you talking to Oliver just now. I heard you ask him why he didn't send me away. I heard you say you didn't want me here. You were never planning on telling me the truth. Just admit it to me; you don't care about me like I do you. Obviously, you must think I won't fit in *your* world," she said, looking around the massive room. "You don't feel the same way for me as I do for you, just *say it!"* she yelled, her heart breaking.

"Brielle, you have no idea how much I care about you, how much you mean to me," Jace said desperately. "I don't want to be without you."

Brielle closed her eyes, lowering her head. "And where would that be, Jace? How were we going to always be together? Did you ever plan on introducing me to your parents? You can't bring a girl home to your family if you *aren't honest* about your home and your family," she whispered.

"Everything else you know about me is true," Jace said, "This is the only difference."

"No, the truth is… I've felt all along that you were hiding something from me. Turns out I was right. I have been spending day after day asking God to help me figure out what it was. Looks like He answered another prayer for me," Brielle said softly.

She turned and started to walk out the door as more tears began to fall down her cheeks. Jace stepped in front of her to block her exit.

"Please, please don't go," he begged, "We can work this out. I know we can. I'll sit down with you right now and tell you everything, anything you want to know, okay?"

Brielle shook her head, "Jace, you have had all this time to tell the truth about who you are, and you chose not to. If I had not figured this out tonight and if Oliver hadn't let me in, you would have chosen to keep this whole charade going. I know that because I literally just heard you say it. You broke my heart,

Jace, and this all hurts far too much. I just need to go," she said, reaching for the door. She opened it and walked out, but Jace followed her.

"Brielle, I know what I did was wrong, but as a Christian, you *have* to forgive me," he said.

Brielle stopped walking and turned to him in fury, "So that's it, huh? You thought you could just keep this double life going and when I found out the truth you knew as a Christian, I would have to forgive you? Then all would be well, is that it?" she demanded, not giving him time to answer, "That's not how you treat the gift of forgiveness, Jace! You don't intentionally hurt people thinking you can get away with it because they believe in grace! That's *not* how forgiveness works," she started to walk away from him again and he cut her off, gently grabbing her arms, tears filling his eyes.

"Brielle, I am begging you, don't do this. I need you. You have no idea how much you mean to me. I'm sorry I hurt you, please don't go," he pleaded.

Brielle needed to leave and pulled her arms out of his grasp.

"You're right, Jace, I do have to forgive you. If I claim to represent Christ and follow His commands as a Christian, and I certainly do, I have to forgive you. Someday, I'm sure I will, but it will only come with the help and healing of Jesus. But even after I do…" she said, lowering her voice and coming closer to him to whisper her fury, "I don't trust you anymore."

The impact of her words struck Jace like a fist, sending him into a frozen silence. He just stood, staring at her. He was speechless. He was unable to move a muscle as if she had just removed every ounce of energy in him. She turned and walked back through the house as fast as she could, gaining speed with every step. She didn't want to say anything else or listen to anything else; she just needed to get out. She couldn't believe that such a magnificent and beautiful home could make her feel sad and broken. The sight of the splendors surrounding her were loud symbols of all the lies Jace had told her to hide his identity.

Jumping into Oba's truck, she headed down the driveway toward the gate. She looked in her review mirror and saw Jace running into the courtyard after her, calling her name. She paused only for a moment as she approached the gates, waiting for them to open enough for her to exit. She sped out of the driveway and headed down the road, leaving the desperate image of Jace running after her. She could feel her heart ripping into pieces, and the pain was too much to bear.

She cried all the way home.

Obadiah and Genevieve were sitting outside on the back patio around a warm fire when Asher came out to them.

"Brielle just came home," he said softly, "She was crying."

Genevieve got up and went upstairs. She gently knocked on her door, "Kawala? Can I come in?"

Brielle didn't answer at first. She didn't want her mother to see her so upset. She went into the bathroom to try and clean her mascara-streaked face.

Genevieve knocked again, "Brielle, I need to know that you're okay?" she said.

Brielle sniffed, "Come in, Mama."

Genevieve came in and closed the door behind her. "What happened, honey?" she asked, puzzled.

Brielle began to tell her mother everything that happened, her emotions changing from sorrow to anger as she talked, going back to the day that she and Keoni saw Jace at the mansion on the Gold Coast and even before then. She told her mother of her feelings, that Jace had been hiding something from her all along. When she finished, she was sobbing again.

Genevieve sat down and cradled her daughter in her arms. "Oh… oh, my goodness, my girl," she whispered, "I'm sorry this hurts you so badly."

Brielle slowly rose and looked at her mother, "What do you mean?" she asked, pulling out another tissue to dry her eyes.

"I mean, well… I know that you don't like it that Jace hid this from you. But I seriously thought you were going to tell me something much worse, like he broke up with you or something like that," Genevieve said.

"Mama, how can you say that?" Brielle demanded, "This *is* horrible! He lied to me; he lied to all of us! He completely deceived everyone about who he is and wanted to keep doing it! How can you think that is not bad?"

Genevieve reached up to pull Brielle's hair from her eyes, "I know that this has hurt you, and I'm sorry that it has. I just think Jace is confused about how to handle who he is. He hasn't had anyone there for him, except his grandmother, but after she died, he's been on his own. There hasn't been anyone to guide him or teach him how to make good decisions."

Brielle stood up from the bed, "I can't believe you are defending him!" she exclaimed. "He did not trust any of us, including *you*! He kept us out of his real life and planned to keep doing that as long as he could, don't you see how incredibly wrong that is?"

"Brielle, I know it's wrong and that it is hurting you, but it's just different for me than it is for you. You see this from a girlfriend's point of view, but I see it from a mother's point of view. I see a lost, insecure, sweet young man who tries very hard, but he makes mistakes just like you and me. He has never had a mother's love or proper attention from his father. He doesn't really have a family at all." Genevieve replied.

Brielle threw her hands up in the air, "I can't believe this!" she said with great frustration, "I'm your daughter, I'm the one hurting, and you are sitting here defending Jace!" she said, storming out on her balcony.

Genevieve took a deep breath and went out to join her, "I'm sorry if it feels as though I am defending him and not acting concerned about your feelings,"

she said, hugging her gently. “I just think Jace is a… very, *very* special guy, who needs a lot of love and care and guidance and who will become a very special man someday; one that you wouldn’t want to let go of easily.”

Brielle was very angry and defensive; she pulled out of her mother’s arms to turn and face her.

“You would be the expert on that subject,” she said smartly.

Genevieve was taken aback, “What are you talking about?” she asked her calmly.

“Letting go of a special man,” Brielle spouted.

Genevieve’s facial expression changed.

“Are you talking about your father?” Genevieve asked softly, almost in a whisper.

“Yes. Yes, I am talking about Daddy. You haven’t let go of him and moved forward. Why can’t you do that?” Brielle asked.

“I don’t know how we suddenly got from Jace to your father,” Genevieve said, overwhelmed by the sudden change of topics.

“I need to know why…” Brielle paused.

“Why what?” Genevieve asked directly.

“Why can’t you accept that Daddy is dead?” Brielle shouted.

The look on Genevieve’s face was as if Brielle had stabbed her in the heart. She turned and started to walk back into the bedroom, her hands trembling. She took a deep breath.

“Brielle, I know you are angry about Jace, but you are not going to take your anger for him out on me,” she retorted.

“Mama, I need to talk to you about this. I’ve needed to talk to you about this for years,” Brielle said, trying to calm her tone down.

“I’m not ready… You won’t--” Genevieve paused and sighed, “I just don’t think you would understand,” she said, raising her hands in front of her defensively.

“Then make me understand! I can’t go on like this anymore!” Brielle shouted, her voice quivering.

“Go on, like what?” Genevieve asked.

“I need to understand why you can’t let daddy go! It’s been over ten years, Mama; he’s not coming back! He’s gone! When are you going to finally realize that?” she asked, tears beginning to stream down her face.

Genevieve took another deep breath and looked into her daughter’s tear-soaked eyes. She moved to the bed and sat down. Calmly, she reached her hand for Brielle’s. Brielle wiped her eyes on her sleeve and slowly went to sit beside her mother.

“I’m sorry this has been hurting you so badly all these years. I wish you would have talked to me about your feelings sooner. I had no idea how my feelings were impacting you and I’m so very sorry,” she began, wrapping her

arms around her daughter and holding her close. “Can you forgive me?” she asked.

Brielle snuffed and nodded, “Yes, of course I can. But I still need to understand why you can’t let go.”

Genevieve thought carefully for a moment, searching for the right words. “I will try to explain this to you, the best that I can,” she said.

Brielle sat patiently, waiting to hear her mother’s words.

“I know I have told you many times about the first time I saw your father. From the moment our eyes met, there was this…” She paused, searching for the right word.

“Connection?” Brielle said.

“Not just a connection, it was much stronger than that. It was a spiritual bond; something I can hardly explain to you. All I know is that at that moment, my life changed. Everything was different, and somehow, I knew that we were going to be together for the rest of our lives. I didn’t even know who he was. I didn’t even know his name. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true. We were meant to be together; your father knew it, too. He also felt the bond immediately,” she explained.

“You always said, love at first sight,” Brielle said.

“Yes, it was, but still, much more than that; more powerful. New love can be uncertain at first and very vulnerable. The feelings we had were not like that. From the moment I saw your father, he was the only one for me.” Genevieve said. “As time went on and we were married and began to work together for the Lord, that bond only grew stronger. There were times I’d think I could hear his thoughts, even from miles away. It was as if the bond had fused our spirits together,” she paused and looked down into her daughter’s eyes, wiping away the tear streaks on her cheek.

“I also had this kind of love bond with my mother. Of course, it was a different kind of love, but just as powerful a bond. Oba always said we were connected by our souls. I loved her very much, and when I learned she had died, I knew my life would never be the same without her. I can feel her presence with me in the things we used to do, the places we would go, and the things she taught me. I see the evidence of her life around me every day. But that bond with her was broken because she was taken from me,” she said, the tears were now welling up in her eyes.

“I know that I will see her again someday when I reach heaven. But until then, I feel a great void without having her here with me,” she gently cradled Brielle’s face in her hands to look her straight in her eyes, “She would have been so proud of you and Asher. But you… you are so much like her in so many ways. You are both so strong in your spirit and the anointing of God is *powerfully* upon you,” she said, reaching for a tissue to dry her tear-streaked face.

“I know that people want me to move on, they feel I am wasting my life,

and I need to get back into a relationship. I know what people say about all of it. I don't like being alone and watching the years pass me by while I'm young and… somewhat appealing," she laughed lightly. "But I'm still so deeply in love with your father. I can't stop loving him. I don't know how to stop… and I don't want to. He was everything to me, and I don't want to let go of that.

"The night we lost him, I saw and heard everything you did, and I felt everything you felt, even more. The memory of it is firmly implanted in my mind, and it is something that haunts me every single day. I am not in denial of it," she sighed, "but it wouldn't be fair to another man for me to try and pretend I had feelings for him. I could never give someone else all my heart because my heart still belongs to Mark," she said.

Brielle couldn't remember her calling him by his name since the night he died; she always referred to him as daddy or your father. There was something powerful in hearing her say his name, and it struck Brielle's heart.

"There are nights," Genevieve continued, "when I dream of him so vividly. Sometimes I can hear him calling to me, singing, or sometimes teaching the way he used to. I know I'm probably not explaining it to you very well. What I can tell you is, I have experienced loss in my life, and I have had to learn to let go. I am dealing with reality. I just can't let him go because… I still love him with all my heart, and love… well, it's quite a powerful thing."

Brielle sat quietly for a moment, taking in her mother's words and processing them.

"So… will you ever be happy again? Brielle asked meekly.

Genevieve smiled, "Yes, my Kawala," she said, hugging her close, "I find my happiness every day; in the Lord, in you and Asher, in Oba and our friends, and lives together. I have so much to be grateful for, and I know that I am still a *very* blessed woman. I'm sorry that my pain has hurt you, though, and I will try to make sure that doesn't happen anymore."

Brielle grabbed her mother tightly, "I want you to be able to talk to me when you need to."

Genevieve smiled, "Thank you, baby. I know that you may not completely understand my feelings about your father, at least not right now. All I ask is that you try to respect them and know that I don't mean to hurt you, Asher, or anyone else. This is just something that Jesus and I are going to have to work out together."

Brielle hugged her mother again.

"I love you so much, Mama, and I don't know what I would do without you," she said. "I'm sorry for yelling at you. You didn't deserve that."

"I love you too, Kawala, more than you will ever know, and I'm glad we had this talk; it was long overdue. But don't you think that you might need to spend some time praying and thinking about this situation with Jace?" Genevieve asked.

Brielle sighed. She felt a great release from the burden she had carried about her mother, now lifted after their talk, but she was completely drained, emotionally and physically.

"Yes, I will," she said, "Right now, I think I just want to go to bed."

"Okay," Genevieve said, "Let me pray for you before you go to sleep."

After Genevieve prayed for her daughter, she said, "Remember, I'm here to pray with you or talk or whatever, whenever you need me." She smiled at her daughter and kissed her good night. "Try and get some sleep, my girl, I love you."

Brielle tried to sleep. The exhaustion from her emotions had drained her of all energy. But she couldn't shut her mind off. She kept finding memories of instances or conversations with Jace from the past, which now made sense; his father being away on business all the time, why he always had plenty of money to pay for dinners and food for everyone, and why that nurse remembered him that day in the Devereaux hospital. The list went on and on in her head.

All this time, she had thought he was hiding something… and she was right. He had been hiding his real life, his true identity. The more she thought about it, the more hurt she was by him. She was totally and completely brokenhearted and humiliated.

If Jace had asked her, she would have given him her whole heart, forever. But he never asked her, and now she knew why. She didn't fit in his world. She would not be considered a lady of high society or social status. Her grandfather did well for himself and his family, but without him, she, her mother, and her brother would still be stranded in Kenya, living who knows where. Perhaps Jace thought her beneath him. All these thoughts were in her mind. She could not shut her brain down.

If Jace wanted her to be in his life now and forever, he would have told her the truth. But he didn't. He chose to keep her at bay, never revealing who he really was or who his father really was. Why? Because he didn't plan to keep her in his life forever. In her mind, this was the only possible answer.

"Holbrook," she said to herself, sitting up in bed, "he told me his father's name was Holbrook."

Brielle remembered her grandfather talking about H.R. Devereaux in the past. The 'H' stood for Holbrook.

Then she remembered the day when she gazed at the portrait of the old gentleman in the Devereaux Memorial Hospital. She remembered Jace saying they didn't always name hospitals after people for what they did, but sometimes for what they had. She also remembered there being something familiar about the man in the painting; now she knew why. He was Jace's grandfather.

These memories infuriated her even more. There were so many opportunities for him to tell her the truth! Why didn't he? If he had cared for her as he said he did, he would have told her the truth, he would have shown her who he really was, and welcomed her into his world as she had welcomed him

into hers. Then again, could she believe him at all anymore? Could she believe that he even cared for her? If he wasn't honest about who he was, what else was there that he might have lied about?

The truth for Brielle was more than just caring for him. She was in love with him. She loved him deeply, more than words could express-- which made this betrayal even more painful. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, she drifted off to sleep; her eyes swollen from crying and her pillow damp with the tears of a broken heart.

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Brielle was gently awakened by the soft touch of her mother's hand upon her face and the lovely sound of her voice singing to her.

"*Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, Kawala, happy birthday to you*," she sang, "I can't believe my baby is seventeen years old," she said with her tender motherly voice.

Brielle forced her puffy eyes open; they were almost sealed shut from the tears that had dried around her lashes in the night. As soon as she woke up, the pain of Jace hit her heart. This was not the way she had planned to spend her seventeenth birthday.

Genevieve had placed a single candle into a powdered sugar doughnut and placed it on a small plate. When she saw her mother's gift, she smiled.

"Thank you, Mama," she said sweetly.

Genevieve sat down on her bed and brushed her hair back from her face.

"Has your joy come in the morning?" she asked.

Brielle shook her head slightly, "Not quite."

"Well, I hope we can give you a lovely day that will take your mind off of things-- for a while anyway," Genevieve said.

"This is lovely! Thank you, Mama," she said, slowly sitting up to eat her doughnut.

"Those are for you too," Genevieve said, pointing to a glass of chocolate milk and her cell phone on her bed stand. "I brought your phone in from your bag downstairs. I'm sorry that I woke you, but Keoni is on her way over and I knew you would want to have a chance to wake up a little bit before you see her."

"She's on her way here?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, we're going shopping today for your birthday, remember?" Genevieve asked. "I thought it might help cheer you up a bit. Besides, I didn't tell Keoni anything that happened with Jace. She was excited about taking you shopping today. I didn't want to tell her not to come."

"What time is it?" Brielle asked.

"It's a little after noon," her mother said.

"What? You're kidding?" Brielle exclaimed, reaching for her clock. She looked to see that it was twelve-ten in the afternoon. She shook her head dazed, "Wow, I had no idea I slept so long."

"You needed it," Genevieve said, opening her curtains to let the sunshine in.

Brielle sat quietly on her bed as she slowly bit into her doughnut, remembering that was how she met Jace, over a box of powdered doughnuts and chocolate milk.

Genevieve sat back down on her bed. "How are you feeling about things today?"

Brielle hardly wanted to think about it. “I’m still so hurt by him,” she said. “He broke my heart.”

Genevieve lowered her eyes and looked down for a moment. “I understand. What do you plan to do?”

“Nothing,” Brielle said, “it’s done,” then she laughed at her comment, “What am I saying? Jace and I were nothing more than friends. I don’t know what there was to begin with. Jace and I were never officially a couple or anything like that. Right now, I just don’t want to even think about him.”

Genevieve rubbed her daughter’s hand. “I know it seems like that right now, but after you have had a few days to calm down and process everything, you might feel differently.”

Brielle shook her head, “No, I won’t. I can’t trust him. He proved that to me.”

“Yes, in this life, you will find that people will always let you down. There is no perfection in anyone, only in Christ. Jesus is the only One who will never fail you. Unfortunately, you will find from time to time, man will,” Genevieve said.

“I just don’t see how it can ever be the same,” Brielle said.

Genevieve nodded, not wanting to push her thoughts on her daughter but lead her gently instead.

“What do you plan to do about your Intercessor training, the prayer group, the Cross Café, and the school? Jace is involved just as much as you are in all those things,” she said.

Brielle took a deep breath, “I’ll just have to work through it,” she said confidently, “I won’t let my feelings interfere with any of our work for the Lord.”

Genevieve lifted her eyebrows in surprise, “That is a very brave and selfless answer. I’m glad that you plan to put your personal differences aside for your service to the Lord. Still, you have to be careful. Even though you may try not to, unresolved feelings could still creep in and affect your ministry in a negative way. Do you think you can prevent that from happening?”

“Of course, I can,” Brielle said, “I mean, it’s not like we were exclusively together or declared love for one another or anything. I know that I have to come to forgive him, so until then, I will just work with him and try my best to be his friend. But other than that…”

“What about your party tonight?” her mother asked.

“What about it?” Brielle asked.

“He was invited to come,” she answered.

“He’s not now,” Brielle said, “I will still work with him for the Lord, but he doesn’t have to be part of my personal life.”

“Are you going to tell him that?” Genevieve said.

Brielle looked at her mother, perplexed; she hadn’t thought this far in advance. “Well… yes. Yes, I will tell him not to come tonight, that he isn’t welcome.”

"No, don't say that," her mother said, "This is between you and Jace. I don't care whether he hid this from me or not. I see this differently than you do; I see it from a mother's point of view. Everything I know about his situation breaks my heart. Jace is still welcome with me, just not with you."

Brielle rolled her eyes. "Here we go again," she said, throwing the covers off and getting out of bed.

"With what?" Genevieve asked.

"With you defending Jace," she said.

Genevieve stood up and quietly began to leave the room. "Someday, when you are a mother and you see someone like Jace, you will understand why I feel the way I do." She turned to leave and then said, "The next time he calls, you can handle it on your own."

Brielle turned quickly to look at her mother, "He's called?"

"Only four times," Genevieve said, walking out of Brielle's room and shutting the door.

Just then, the phone rang. Genevieve opened the door quickly and stuck her head in, "Make that five times," she said. "I'm not answering for you anymore. You're so angry because he hid things from you, so you can't hide from him either."

Brielle looked at her phone on the bedside stand as it rang. She saw his picture on her screen and knew her mother was right. She picked it up.

"Hello," she answered casually.

"Brielle, I need to talk to you," Jace said. he sounded horrible, like he hadn't slept all night.

"I don't have time right now, Jace," she said, "Keoni is coming to pick me up and we are going shopping for my birthday."

"Yes, I know, happy birthday," he said.

"Thank you," she said politely, "but I need to go get ready."

"Can I talk to you later?" he asked, pleading.

"I am having dinner with my family tonight," she said.

Jace was quiet for a moment, trying to figure things out. "Obadiah invited me to come to dinner too," he said.

"I know he did, but I would rather you not," she said directly.

"Are you serious? I can't come and see you for your birthday?" he asked.

"I am serious. Jace, I will be kind to you at our Intercessor training and for the prayer group and Cross Café, but you revealed to me so much truth last night, and I'm going to take time to process it and try to move forward," she said.

"I can't believe you are doing this," he said.

"I am not the one who did *any* of this; *you* are. You are where you are because of *your* choices. Now, I am making some choices of my own to take care of my heart, and you are going to have to handle it," she said, the pain starting

to infiltrate her system.

There came a light knock on her door. “Come in,” she said sweetly, happy for the interruption. it was Keoni. The look on her face told Brielle that she had heard her speaking on the phone so harshly. Brielle turned around to finish her call.

“I’m sorry, I have to go now, Keoni is here. Goodbye, Jace,” she said. Then, without giving him a chance to speak, she hung up and set the phone back down on the bedstand, her hands trembling.

Keoni looked at her, a bewildered expression upon her face. “What’s going on?” she asked softly.

Over the next several hours, Brielle talked to Keoni about the situation with Jace. She talked about him while she got ready to go shopping and while she got something to eat. She talked about him on the way to the mall, she talked about him while at the mall, and then while on the way home. Keoni and Genevieve did their best to listen and let her vent her feelings. By the time they came home, they needed to get dressed for dinner.

Brielle was exhausted and lay down on her bed to rest before getting dressed for dinner.

“Do you think I’m making a mistake?” she asked Keoni.

Keoni sat down on the bed next to her and sighed, “I don’t know. I mean, I do understand why you are hurt. It hurts me, too, that he couldn’t trust us with who he is. I think it’s cool that he’s rich, but it doesn’t change how I feel about him whatsoever—and it wouldn’t have impacted how I felt about him from the start.

“I think it is very sad that Jace was never able to find people to accept him for who he was, and at the same time, it makes me sad that after all this time, Jace couldn’t see that he could trust us to love him for who he is with or without his money…

“Why do I feel that there is a ‘however’ coming next?” Brielle asked.

Keoni laughed, “You know me so well,” she said, nudging her friend. “Let’s be real, it’s impossible to have an open, honest, healthy relationship with someone who chooses not to be open and honest with you about who they are-- I can say that too because he wasn’t honest with any of us about who he is. That is a real problem, and it has hurt us-- I know Gideon will feel the same way I do… I’m just thinking that at least this lie has a nice truth to it. I mean, it’s not like he is a criminal or a bad person or something, he’s just… lavishly wealthy,” she said.

“He’s grandiose with billions--and deceit,” Brille replied softly.

“Seriously, Bri, we never actually asked him some of these things outright either. You have been telling me for weeks that you thought he was hiding something, but did you ever confront him with it?” Keoni asked.

“What do you mean? Are you saying this is my fault because I didn’t interrogate him properly? Why would I even think to ask him something like

this?" Brielle replied.

"No, I'm not saying that, I'm saying…" Then she took a deep breath, "I'm just saying that Jace is our friend. He has been a good friend, and we can't just write him off because he made this mistake," Keoni said softly. Then she hugged her friend. "I know he hurt you, and I understand why it hurts you so much. We just have to remember what Oba has trained us to do. Remember what he said? It's not enough to ask what Jesus would do; we have to *do* what Jesus did. Jesus forgave and loved *everyone.* He shows us grace and forgiveness.*"*

Brielle hugged her friend tightly. She didn't know what she would do without Keoni in her life. She thought about her words, then as she did, she pulled back to look at her.

"Why did you say, you know why it hurts me so much?" she asked with a puzzled tone.

Keoni smiled gently, "Because… I know that you're in love with him."

Brielle felt the tears begin to well up in her eyes. She shook her head, "No, I'm not."

Keoni put her hands on her friend's shoulder and looked her square in the eyes, "Bri, I have known you since you were six years old. Sometimes, I think I know you better than you know yourself. You have been head over heels, crazy deep in love with that boy for quite some time now," she giggled. "I think since the day you first saw him."

Brielle lowered her eyes, nodded, and sighed, knowing once again her friend was right.

"I didn't realize I was in love with him until recently. That's why this hurts so much. It's *killing* me. But I can't let it anymore. I can't love someone who clearly does not love me back. Who cares so little about my heart?

"Today is the first day of my seventeenth year. I am going to start fresh. I have to. Everything is going to be new and different. I am going to make new friends and spend time with people who value me enough to be honest with me and want me to get to know them, all of them. People who want to share their lives with me—their *real* life," she said, turning toward her closet to undress and get ready for dinner, "Off with the old and in with the new."

Keoni shook her head and sighed, "You know I love you, in spite of the fact that you are a complete and total mule."

"What in the world is that supposed to mean?" Brielle spouted.

"I mean that guys like Jace come once in a lifetime—*if* they come around at all, and you need to remember that no one on earth is perfect and never will be. You know there is only perfection in Christ. Your stubbornness to be right in this situation just may drive you right passed the love of your life," Keoni said directly.

Brielle stood again, thinking about her friend's words. Then she shook her head.

"The love of my life? You're funny! How could I possibly even think that I was going to spend the rest of my life with Jace when he didn't even tell me who he was? I heard him talking to Oliver, trying to get him to get rid of me, saying he didn't want me there when I was standing right outside the door, for crying out loud. No, this isn't about me being right, this is about me watching out for myself and taking care of my heart… and that is something Jace didn't try to do," she said softly.

Brielle spent her seventeenth birthday with her family and Keoni's family. They had a lovely dinner at North Shore, and everyone did their best not to bring up Jace. Not that they were upset with him, but they wanted to give Brielle a nice night and not bring her any pain. It didn't matter, though; Brielle felt the heartache of Jace constantly.

The next morning at church, Jace did not make it to the Cross Café. Though deep down inside, Brielle kept wondering where he was, she didn't talk about it.

Gideon called Jace to check on him and learned that he had gone to work with Capt. Espindola, the day before and just had a very late night. He would come to the Prayer Sanctum that afternoon for training.

When they all arrived for their Intercessor training, Brielle acted like nothing was wrong. She was not overly friendly with Jace, but she was not her usual self with him either. When they reached the Prayer Sanctum, they took turns rotating between sling practice in The Hippo, staff training with Obadiah, and studying their scriptures and Bible history.

Brielle worked very hard not to make things uncomfortable for the others when she was with Jace, but Jace looked like he was suffering terribly. He took out his aggression in his sling and staff training, throwing himself into learning all he possibly could about the two skills. Obadiah was impressed with the two guys on their amazing improvement in both areas. The girls were coming along in their sling training, but their staff work was taking longer to master. Obadiah kept encouraging them to practice, stating that nothing you learn is an event, but rather a process that takes time, patience, and determination.

"When can we go back to the zip lines?" Gideon asked excitedly.

"I have some meetings this week, but perhaps we can arrange to go over the weekend," Obadiah said. "Once you all learn to master the mechanisms, you can go whenever you like."

"Sounds good to me," Gideon said.

Jace looked at Brielle. This weekend was to be their first date. It was the first weekend of December, and the Festival of Lights in the town square would be starting. Brielle remembered her plans and lowered her gaze. She took a deep breath. This was harder to do than she thought. She felt as if she was split down the middle. One part of her was still so crushed by him, didn't trust him, and didn't want to try again. Yet, the other part of her still loved him and was longing for him. It was a terrible predicament.

Brielle pondered her pledge to Keoni about starting a new year with new possibilities. She would not allow herself to love someone who so clearly was not capable of really loving her back and sharing his life with her.

The next day after school, Brielle wanted to sit with Terri and Carlos for lunch. In her mind, she thought that if there were more people at their table, it would be easier to ignore Jace. Besides, she did enjoy their company and conversation.

Keoni and Gideon were having a hard time trying to keep balance and peace with the whole rift between Jace and Brielle. Jace had spoken with both of them after their Intercessor training session and sincerely apologized to them. He told them how sorry he was for not being honest with them about who he was, that he knew what he did was wrong, and he hoped they could forgive him. He also invited them both over to his house so that he could open up to them completely and let them see who he was and where he came from.

Keoni and Gideon shared with him how hurt they had been personally because they felt he didn't give them a chance to love him for who he was. They explained how it hurt them that he didn't trust them, especially after they had spent so much time together and he had learned who they were, that he couldn't be honest with them about his life. Then they told him that they loved him, that they forgave him, and wanted to reconcile their relationship with him and work toward making things right again. Jace was relieved to have his friendship with them restored, but he wasn't so sure that he would have the same response from Brielle anytime soon. He knew he had hurt her deeply.

Gideon planned to have lunch with Jace, while Keoni planned to have lunch with Brielle until things had calmed down.

Keoni noticed as Brielle went through the lunch line that she was still struggling hard emotionally over the situation with Jace, no matter how hard she tried to act like she was fine. Even the lunch lady who checked them out noticed that Brielle only had chocolate milk and a banana. Her appetite just wasn't the same… nothing was the same.

Brielle and Keoni came into the lunchroom and joined Terri and Carlos at their table. As she sat down, she saw Gideon and Jace come into the lunchroom from the food line. She watched as the entire room of students turned and stared, whispering to each other when they saw Jace enter. The word had spread about Jace's identity. Brielle felt bad about that as she knew it was partially her fault—she had told Gideon, who told one of the guys on the team, and the word spread like wildfire.

If the fact that Jace was completely gorgeous hadn't captivated most of the girls in the school, now that they had the knowledge of his extreme wealth, it added fuel to their attraction. Some of the guys were intrigued by Jace's wealth, making plans to become his best friend so they could profit from it. Other guys

clearly resented his circumstances and were already showing him different actions, mostly that of envy.

Brielle felt a great sadness come over her. She could clearly see that no matter how wrong it had been for him to keep his true identity from her, the evidence before her was overwhelming; people did treat him differently because of his money.

Terri and Carlos were kind; they were a good distraction for her from the situation with Jace. They began discussing some of the new clothes that Brielle was wearing, which were birthday presents from her shopping trip with Keoni and her mother.

"I love your boots," Terri said, "Those look exactly like a pair I saw in a magazine the other day. "They are totally in right now, especially in Italy."

"You're the only guy on this campus who probably knows that," Carlos said.

"It's one of the blessings of being gay," Terri said.

Keoni, who had been laughing, just smiled and looked down at her salad.

"I'm sorry," Terri said lightly, "I forgot, Keoni doesn't believe that being gay is a blessing."

The table became very quiet. Brielle didn't know what to say and was so drained by her situation with Jace that she didn't want to speak.

"You are blessed, Terri, because God loves you," Keoni said.

"I know He does, and He loves me just the way I am," he said.

Keoni took a slow, deep breath. She had prayed for divine appointments where she could minister the love and Word of God to Terri, and now, she was upon one. She thought a prayer in her head, "*God give me Your words and direct me by the power of Your Holy Spirit.*"

"Terri, God loves you so much. He does. So much that He sent His only Son Jesus to die for you," she began, waiting on the Lord to guide her. "The Bible says that nothing can separate you from the love of God, that's in um…" she paused, trying to remember the location.

"Romans 8:38 and 39," Brielle whispered, keeping her eyes on her chips.

"Yes, thank you, it's in… what she said," Keoni replied.

"Here it comes," Terri said to Carlos, "The part where she says the Bible says it's a sin to be gay."

Keoni looked at him directly, but spoke gently as Jesus would, "The Bible does say it is not God's will for us."

"Well, you never once have shown me exactly where it says that," Terri said, frustration evident in his tone.

"Okay," she said softly, "Can I show you now?"

Before Terri replied, Keoni took out her Bible from her backpack and opened it to one of the scriptures that Obadiah had given her.

"Here's one," she said gently, "would you like to read it, or would you like me to?"

Terri crossed his arms and shook his head, laughing, “Go on, girl, let’s hear it.”

Keoni took another deep breath, “It says in 1 Corinthians 6:9, ‘*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners, and practicing homosexuals.’*”

Terri just stared straight ahead, not acknowledging her, but Carlos did. “I’ll take it,” he said, taking the small paper with the scriptures written on it. Keoni tried talking to Terri.

“I am not judging you, Terri… that is not my job. My sins need the forgiveness and grace of Jesus, just like anyone else’s in this room. All sin needs forgiveness, and the blood of Jesus Christ can cover it all. I just want to share with you God’s truth, as a servant of Jesus, to tell those I love and care about-- and even those I don’t-- about God’s Word and how to receive forgiveness for their sins. Jesus commands us to do this. I am not telling you this because I feel like I am better than you. I know I’m not. I struggle with sin every day, and I have to ask for forgiveness each time I mess up. I tell you this because I do *love* you. You are and have always been my friend, and I just want to share with you what God’s Word says. Now that I have done that, the rest is up to you. We have talked about Jesus, how you can ask Him into your heart and have a new life, but that is a choice you make for yourself. That’s why God gives us free will, because He hopes we will choose Him. I can pray for you, and I always will, but I can’t make the decision for you, only you can do that,” she said, placing her hand on his shoulder. “I want to thank you for listening to me, and I promise that I won’t keep pestering you about this. I know you heard me today, and you know that I am here if you ever want to come and talk to me about it.”

Terri was still staunch in his stand, “I’m not going to change, Keoni. I love the way I am. I love the way I live, and I love the way I love. I believe that God made me this way on purpose and that He loves me just the way I am. I’m just sorry that you can’t see that.”

“I just don’t understand why God would list so many scriptures in His Word, which I believe to be true, and then purposely and intentionally create people to defy it. I believe He loves us too much to do something like that,” she said, her tone filled with love and kindness.

“Then how do you explain me being this way? Am I not made by the same God? You told me once that he knows my every thought. If that’s true, then how can He love me knowing the thoughts I have for other guys?”

“Because you are his child, He loves you. He loves me, and I have thoughts that sometimes go against His Word, too. Like I said before, all sins are covered by the blood of Jesus. That’s why God’s grace is so amazing, He still loves us despite our sins,” she said.

“Then God will love me as a gay person,” Terri protested.

"God will always love you," she paused.

"But..." he coaxed her.

"No, but. He will always love you, period. There is nothing that will separate you from His love. Having said that, there are things we all must do if we are to receive His gift of eternal life and be with Him in heaven. One of those things is to ask Jesus into your heart, to confess Him as your Savior, and to ask for forgiveness of your sins. Another is to strive daily to follow His Word and commandments. That would mean you would get up each morning and work to follow the instructions of the Bible each day. Everyone makes mistakes, but if we want God's rewards in heaven, we need to make a conscious effort to try and walk in His ways and not choose to deliberately live in sin," she explained.

At this, Terri started cleaning up his lunch, placing things back on his tray, "You know what? I will follow the parts of the Bible that I believe, and you follow what you want to believe."

"But… Terri, that's not what God tells us to do," she began gently.

Terri stood up with his tray, "Like I said, you believe how you want to believe, and I'll believe how I want. I think maybe you and I just believe in different gods."

He started to walk away, and Keoni stood up and placed her hand on his arm. "Please don't go away angry, Terri. You are my friend, and I love you."

But Terri was already in motion and didn't look back.

Carlos, still sitting at the table, took the scripture Keoni had read, wrote it down on a scrap of paper, and placed it in his pocket. "Don't worry about it," he said sweetly, "He'll get over it in a few days."

Keoni sat down. She felt a mixture of sadness and, at the same time, peace. Although she knew Terri didn't want to hear what the Bible had to say about his lifestyle and was hurt by her words, still, she was thankful that she finally had the opportunity to share with him the truth of God's Word-- even if it was just one verse.

"We'll keep praying for him," Brielle said.

Keoni nodded.

"And you really did great," Brielle encouraged, "You explained everything so well, and I could hear how much you loved him in all you said. I'm so proud of you," she said, hugging her friend.

After school, Keoni and Brielle went to visit Lacy. They were so excited to see her and talk with her, but when they arrived, she was sleeping. Seeing her like this made them nervous. Jim and Laura explained to them that she had been awake and going through much more physical therapy. It wore her out. The nurses were letting her have a time of rest as her body was still very weak and had to recuperate slowly. This made the girls feel better, as did seeing Jim. He was like a new man. He was bright, vibrant, and full of joy and enthusiasm. The

healing of his daughter had completely restored his faith in God and had given him a new direction for living. He shared with them that he felt like he might even volunteer with the youth group on Wednesday nights at the church; he was hoping that Lacy would become involved in the group as well.

This was the kind of blessing that both Brielle and Keoni needed. While each of the girls was dealing with heavy hearts from situations with their friends, seeing Jim and how God had turned his life around was truly inspiring and uplifting. They left the hospital without talking to Lacy, but happy in knowing that with God, *all* things were still possible.

The next day at school, Brielle was changing some of her books from her locker when she heard her name being called from down the hallway.

"Brielle!" the voice called. It was familiar-sounding like Jace, but with a tone she had not heard before. She turned to see him coming quickly down the hallway toward her, a very serious look on his face.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

"Not right now, Jace," she started.

"Gideon said Zach told some guys at lunch today that he is taking you out Friday night?" he pressed, ignoring her statement.

Brielle stared at him but didn't respond. Zach had noticed the separation between Brielle and Jace the day before at school. Many people noticed it, especially at the prayer group. Zach had called her to ask her if he could take her to the Festival of Lights. Brielle knew that she had made plans to go with Jace, but now things had changed, and she was moving on. There was no reason why she shouldn't go with Zach; she had no commitment of any kind to Jace, so she accepted Zach's invitation.

"Is it true?" Jace demanded.

"Because I believe in being *honest* with people, yes, it's true," she replied.

Jace's face fell from a look of serious sternness to one of heartfelt pain.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked sadly.

"He asked me out and I said yes. I'm not stepping out on you, Jace. If this were any other guy, you probably wouldn't care, you just hate that I'm going out with Zach," she started.

"No, that's not it," he interrupted, trying to keep his composure, "I mean, yes, of course I hate that you are going out with him! But… I mean, this is all so fast. Why do this now? We just broke up a few days ago!"

"Broke up?" she asked, "I don't know what planet you've been living on, Jace, but from what I have seen on this one, you have to have a *commitment* with someone in order to break up with them. We never had that. We have just been friends. I wanted more than that, but you obviously didn't, or else you wouldn't have kept your entire existence a secret from me all this time. I will still be your friend, Jace, it's just different now. So, how could you possibly say that we *broke up*?"

"I know I never formally asked you or anything. I just thought that--"

"Thought what? You rarely even told me that you liked me, much less ask me to be your girlfriend. Just because we kissed a couple of times didn't mean that we had an understanding of us being committed to a relationship," Brielle cut him off, trying to step around him and be on her way; "I have no idea who you really are or what you really want."

"Why do you have to do this right now? Before we have had a chance to work this out?" he asked.

"Because I want to go to the Festival of Lights and I don't want to miss out again," she said.

Jace looked confused.

"I wanted to go to the Homecoming dance so much. You knew that I did," she said. Jace dropped his head down and ran his hands through his hair in frustration.

"Zach asked me to go to that dance with him," she continued. Jace's head shot up to look at her, his face full of surprise.

"I never told you that. He asked me weeks before the dance, and I said no because I wanted to go with you. But you couldn't ask me to go, and so I didn't go," she said, softening her tone.

Jace closed his eyes tightly as if in deep pain, "I know I should have asked you, I wanted to, I did, but…"

"You had to go on a trip with your father," she said, "I know, and I understood that. Last time Zach asked me, I said no because of my feelings for you, and I didn't do something I really wanted to do. This time, he asked me, and since you have shown me your true feelings for me, I told Zach yes."

She started to walk away again, and he stopped her, "Brielle, please, I'm begging you, please talk to me. Let's go somewhere and spend some time to work this out, please don't do this to me."

Brielle's eyes grew wide. "Do this to *you?* I can't believe that you just said that. This is not about *you*!"

"Yes, it is, because you should not be going to see the lights with Zach, you should be going to see them with me! It was going to be our first date together! I was supposed to take you!" he said.

"I don't belong to you, Jace!" she replied.

"Yes, you do!" he paused and sighed, looking down into her eyes, shaking his head, "No.. no.. what I mean is… we belong together, I believe that. I believe God made us for each other."

His words pulled at Brielle's heart, but her frustration was far too strong. She looked away from his dark brown eyes quickly and held her ground, trying to resist him from softening her.

"I've known it ever since the day I first saw you. I can't explain it to you, there was just… something. I didn't know your name. I didn't know anything

about you, but somehow, I knew you were the one for me," he said, gently taking hold of her hand. "Please, Brielle, please forgive me. We've been through so much together, we're good together. I'm so sorry and I want to be totally and completely honest with you now," he said, letting go of her hand to reach inside his pocket.

He then produced a small, flat black box in his hand and gently opened it to reveal a lovely antique broach. It was a tarnished gold heart, and lying diagonally across it was a red rose on a gold stem. The stem was lined with tiny diamonds that ran up to the petals, and the petals were delicately painted red. Some of the paint was chipping from the petals due to age. In the center of the rose was a small red ruby, which reminded Brielle of the ruby in her Intercessor cross. Though the pin was faded, even in its distressed state, it possessed an ancient loveliness.

"Remember the night you told me about the teenagers in the fifties and how romantic you thought it was when the girl wore a guy's pin? I know this isn't the same thing, but this was my grandmother's. I want to give it to you and ask you to please be mine," he said softly.

Brielle looked at the gift. It was beautiful and made her pulse quicken… but it wasn't going to change her mind.

"How long have you had this?" she asked calmly.

"Ever since my grandmother passed away, she gave it to me," he answered.

"How long have you thought about giving it to me?" she asked.

"Every day since we had that conversation over chicken parmesan," he answered.

"Then why did you wait until right now?" she asked, looking him directly in the eye. "Why did it take this incident for you to finally want to ask me to be yours?"

Jace stood looking down at her, but he found no words to answer her.

"This is lovely, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness," she paused, speaking gently but directly. "It's just that you can't fix things this way. You can't hurt someone deeply and just give them a sentimental gift and expect it to make everything alright. Do you know what I think the real problem is?" she asked, not waiting for him to answer, "The real problem is that you have no idea who you really are or who you want to be, so how could you possibly know who it is you really want?"

"I know I want you, Brielle. I know I do," he said desperately.

"How long have you known that?" she demanded.

"Ever since the day I met you," he said.

"Then I'll ask you again, why did you wait, after all this time, to just now ask me to be yours?" she said.

Jace struggled, searching for words that never came. His silence gave Brielle clarity.

“You’re lack of ability to answer that question tells me all I need to know,” she said softly, placing her bag over her shoulder. “I need some time, Jace, and I think you need some time too, so you can figure out who you are. Keoni said that I can’t have an open, honest relationship with a person who isn’t open and honest about who they are. And she’s right, I mean, that’s just common sense. So, I am going to go out with Zach on Friday night, don’t worry, I’m not going to fall in love with him. We’re just going to look at Christmas lights.”

With that, she turned and walked down the hallway. She didn’t want to look back and let him see the tears that were filling her eyes.

The rest of the week, the Intercessors still pressed on with their prayer group. The weather is becoming a serious factor as the temperatures began dropping. Henrietta had eagerly opened her home to the kids of the prayer group for shelter and warmth on really cold days. But on rainy days, the group held to their original agreement and did not have the meeting. They had too much respect for an older lady than to bring that much mess into her lovely little house.

How wonderful it would be, Brielle thought, to have a chapel on campus or close by where they could always meet no matter what the weather conditions.

Though Brielle interacted well with Jace for the prayer group and did not let her personal feelings interfere with their work for the Lord, it was evident that Jace was struggling, more now than ever before. His sorrow was consistently revealed in his dark brown eyes and heard in the lifeless tone of his voice. He tried to keep his focus on the Lord so as not to bring personal attention to himself, but deep down inside, his heart was breaking.

After their prayer group, Brielle and Keoni resumed their work in spreading their flyers around town to invite other townsfolk and merchants to the “Inviting His Light” Prayer Vigil. Their previous experiences of doing this had toughened them a bit, and they were not so shocked when some of their invitations were quickly rejected. Still, their hopes remained high that at least some of the people in the town, outside of the regular Maple Grove Church members, would come to the event and ask God through prayer for His blessings and protection upon Fairfield.

On Thursday afternoon, while out walking around town, Brielle and Keoni came upon Officer Stockton. He had been called out to handle a small dispute that had taken place between a tourist dining in a small café and its owner. He was just finishing when Brielle and Keoni met him.

“Hello, Officer Stockton!” Brielle called out.

He turned to see the girls coming up on the sidewalk. “Hey there, how are you girls today?” he asked.

“We’re good, how are you? Busy?” Keoni asked.

“Just dealing with day-to-day things,” he laughed. “What are you up to?” he

asked.

"We are out distributing these," Keoni said, handing him a flyer. Then the girls began to explain their reasoning behind the night of prayer for their town.

"We would love it if you could come," Brielle said.

Officer Stockton read over the flyer, "If I am not working that night, I will be happy to. I'll bring my wife," he smiled.

"Excellent! Maybe you can drag Hadley along with you," Keoni teased, "We never can get him to come to church with us."

Officer Stockton laughed, "If you can't, I don't think I stand a chance."

Brielle had an idea. "Hey, um, would you happen to have any free time soon?"

The officer looked up as if to page through his schedule in his mind, "I am off on Saturday and free in the afternoon, why?" he asked curiously.

"We have been putting together an investigation board. It has all the information we have gathered about how the drugs might be coming to Fairfield and how they are being sold," she said.

Officer Stockton raised his eyebrows in surprise, "Really? How long have you been doing this?"

"The past several weeks," Keoni replied.

"We have tried to get together with Hadley to show him everything we have discovered, but when he was available, we weren't, and when we were, he wasn't, you know how it can be sometimes," Brielle said. "I was wondering if you might like to come over tomorrow so we could show everything to you."

Officer Stockton nodded immediately, "I would be happy to. I could be there at
one o'clock, would that work?" he asked.

Brielle was pleasantly surprised by his response, "That would be perfect!" she said excitedly. "Here is how you get to my house," she said, taking a pen and drawing a map on the back of his flyer. Then she handed it to him.

"Thank you so much, we appreciate you giving us some time. I know that we are not police officers or anything like that, but God has revealed so much information to us. I feel like it will be valuable to you for stopping these drugs from being brought to our town," Brielle said happily.

Just then, Officer Stockton's radio beeped, "Excuse me, girls, I've got to go. Thanks for the help. I will see you Saturday," he said, turning toward his patrol car.

Brielle grabbed Keoni and jumped up and down, "This is so great! I'm so excited! We're finally going to be able to give him our information!"

Keoni was more puzzled than joyful.

"Bri, we already told Hadley everything we knew. Why do we need to go over it again with Officer Stockton?" Keoni asked softly.

"I'm sorry. I hope I didn't hurt your feelings. You know I love Hadley and I'm

not trying to go over his head," Brielle said, "I just really felt led to say that just now. I think it is important that someone from the police department *sees* our investigation board and all the photographs we have collected and how everyone is connected. It may help them to see it all, you know? We just haven't been able to do that with Hadley yet," Brielle explained.

"That's true. Getting it all up on the investigation board helped us a lot when we could really see how all the pieces fit together. I know Hadley is overprotective of us and doesn't want us hurt, but you're right, God gave us that information for a reason. We need to give them everything we can so they can stop all this from going on in our town," Keoni replied.

"We had better get to the Vault and make sure we have everything ready before Saturday," Brielle said excitedly.

Later that evening, Keoni told Gideon and Jace about the meeting for Saturday, and Brielle told her family. Everyone was thrilled that Officer Stockton was coming to see their investigation board.
Brielle could hardly wait.

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Jace hardly slept the night before, dreading this day to come. Today was Friday, the day of Brielle and Zach's first date. Jace couldn't stop thinking negative thoughts that could come from their evening together. Would Zach begin to win over Brielle's heart? Would she start to have serious feelings for him that would take her away forever? He could barely stand the thought of Zach putting his arm around Brielle or trying to hold her hand, and the thought of him kissing her… it was more than he could bear.

Throughout the day at school, he tried to think of anything he could possibly do to stop this date from taking place, but he couldn't. He knew that it was not only wrong for him to do something like that, but if he really cared about her, he would want her to be happy.

Jace had done a lot of soul searching during their days apart, as she had suggested. Though he still hadn't figured out all the answers to the questions he had about himself, he had one thing completely figured out. He needed to keep his daily relationship with the Lord intact. To serve God as diligently as possible, using all his gifts, talents, and abilities to help build the Kingdom of God. In addition to needing God, he needed Brielle as well as her entire family. He had longed to be part of a family for so many years, never really knowing what it was like to belong to one until he met Brielle. He missed her terribly. He missed her family, too. He just had to try and do whatever it took to get them to forgive him. He needed them and wanted them in his life.

He had spent days praying for God's guidance and help. He knew that God would lead him in the right direction, as he believed it was not a coincidence that Brielle and her family were brought to him. It was a divine gift from God. He knew God would help him keep that family. There had to be a way; God didn't bring them into his life just to take them away. He would be patient, obedient, and wait on God.

His biggest struggle was with Brielle's date with Zach. He had prayed for strength and direction on how to handle it, feeling crazy with jealousy and worry. He kept trying to remember scriptures that he could recite and pray to help him, but the thoughts of Brielle with Zach kept consuming his mind.

After school, he went home, trying to keep busy, but he could concentrate on nothing. Not knowing what to do with himself, he decided to get dressed and go out for the night. He knew he could never get Brielle off his mind, sitting at home, not that going out would change it, but he thought he might find something else to distract him.

He called Gideon to see if he wanted to go and hang out, but Gideon didn't answer. Once he was ready, he headed toward town, not knowing where he was going. He stopped by Dilli Rasoi to visit with Rateesh, but he was working

tonight and couldn't go out. Jace had dinner there anyway, thinking about the times he had been there with Brielle. Both Priyanka and Rateesh noticed his incredibly depressed disposition and tried to cheer him up, but it was to no avail. He was miserable.

When he had finished his dinner, he decided to walk for a while. He headed down to the old movie theater in town and checked the show times, but he had missed the first showings. The next movie wouldn't start until after 9 p.m.

Slowly, he walked down the street, enjoying the Christmas window displays in some of the shop fronts. When he reached the end of the block, he could see the glistening lights of the town festival down the street and headed in that direction. He had been so excited about seeing the lights, so why shouldn't he go anyway?

As he walked in the direction of the town square, a deep sadness came over him. He began to reflect upon the poor decisions that he made, all the secrets that he kept, and all the things that he hid about himself. Brielle was right. How did he expect anyone to be part of his life if he kept his true life from them? He knew that he was alone tonight, and Brielle was with Zach because of his ridiculous decisions. He should have trusted them and given them the chance to get to know who he was.

As he approached the town square, he could hear festive Christmas music playing. When he finally reached the lights and saw them sparkling across the square, his heart grew heavy. Even amidst such celebration and joy, he felt nothing but despair and pain.

He walked through some of the art exhibits and then over to a cart that was selling cinnamon-roasted pecans. He got a bag and sat down at a little table to enjoy the band playing in the white gazebo of the town square. He watched happy couples who were dancing under the shimmering glow of the lights, and his spirit cringed; he should be there right now, dancing with Brielle.

He was trying to relax a bit and enjoy his surroundings of music and illumination when suddenly, he saw her. He wasn't sure if he would see her; he had hoped so, but he didn't think he would see her this quickly. He was taken aback by it when he did. She did not see him, and he did not want her to. He knew she would not be happy to see that he was there. As always, he was captivated by her beauty. She was wearing a pair of jeans with brown suede boots, a cream-colored coat, and a pink scarf with a soft pink beret. She looked radiant.

"Thanks a lot, Keoni," he whispered sarcastically to himself, thinking that Brielle was probably dressed for her date by her best friend.

Although she was strikingly beautiful, Jace noticed she didn't look happy. She didn't have her radiant, beaming smile and bright sparkling eyes. She looked pleasant but subdued.

The town was a bright and glittering display of breathtaking illumination.

Every tree that surrounded the square was completely covered with Christmas lights in all different patterns and colors. There were dozens of street vendors selling a variety of specialty foods that created not only a fine variety of tastes to choose from but also filled the air with a mixture of delicious aromas, enticing guests to come and eat. The band, underneath the town gazebo, also sparkling with Christmas lights and wreaths, was playing big-band-style Christmas music. Jace sighed as he thought about how much Brielle loved the era of the 1940's and knew she would love hearing this music. He looked again at the happy people dancing on the cold winter's night, keeping warm by their movement and close embrace.

Jace shook his head in frustration, "She should have been here with me," he thought to himself.

Not only were there lovely lights and Christmas decorations, but there were also some beautiful Hanukkah displays, as this was also the time for celebrating the eight nights of light.

Jace smiled to himself as he looked upon the displays, thankful that Obadiah had taught them the history of the holiday. He was so thankful that he understood the significance of it, how Jesus celebrated it, and that he was able to celebrate it along with the people of the Jewish community.

In addition to the holiday decorations the town of Fairfield had made, many local decorators and artists had come to create small displays within different areas of the square, each with their own unique design and theme. The townspeople could buy a ballot for these displays and vote for their favorite. All the money from the ballots would then go to charity.

There was a small children's choir singing songs and occasionally playing handbells on the opposite side of the square from the band. Jace watched as Zach and Brielle stopped to listen to their angelic voices sing. Brielle's face was aglow from hearing the children as they sang of the Savior's birth.

Jace saw Zach put his arm around Brielle. He looked at Zach, who was well dressed for their date. He knew Zach was a good-looking guy, smart, talented, funny-- everything a girl could want. Jace's stomach was in knots until he saw the expression on Brielle's face.

Although she did not remove Zach's arm from around her shoulder, the joyful look of delight on her face faded. Jace wondered if he was just over hopeful or did she suddenly look uncomfortable. If he was unsure, his suspicions were justified when she gently turned and pointed to something else across the square, which caused Zach's arm to come off her shoulder.

Then Jace remembered the comment she made to him in the hallway when she said, "Don't worry, I won't fall in love with him." Why did she say that? Why would anyone go out on a date with someone if they weren't interested in falling in love with them?

Jace's heart began to speed up with excitement. Maybe she wasn't so

interested in Zach after all. Maybe she was just here with Zach because he asked her, she wanted to see the lights, and she was too upset with Jace to come with here with him—and rightfully so. He had lied to her. He had kept his true identity from her, from all of his friends, and would still be hiding who he was if she hadn't discovered the truth about him.

He watched as she and Zach traveled around the square to the area where the craft vendors were located. In this area, there were dozens of little white tents that had people selling their most original Christmas creations. He noticed her face as she approached one object in particular. From where he was sitting, he couldn't make out what was in her hand as she looked at it. But the look on her face as she gazed upon it expressed that she found it to be something special.

After she left, he made his way to the tent and tried to figure out what object she had been holding. The tent was full of items exquisitely made from blown glass. He stood in the same place where she had been to try and see if he could find the item. It was no use; there were too many beautiful objects to choose from, and he had been too far away to see them.

"Can I help you find something, dear?" asked a sweet elderly woman's voice.

Jace turned around to see a short, rather plump little woman, all bundled up in a warm scarf and hat, smiling at him.

"Um, yes, Ma'am. Just a moment ago, there was a beautiful girl in here in a pink hat, and she was looking at one of your items," he said, looking around the tent, "but I have no idea which one it was. Did you happen to see it?" he asked politely.

The lady beamed, "Yes, dear, she was looking at the angel," she said, moving over to the item Brielle held just moments before. She picked it up and handed it to him.

"Here it is," she smiled.

Jace looked at it and saw immediately why it caught Brielle's attention. It was incredibly beautiful, a fine glass sculpture of a glorious angel with a soft pink glass gown, trimmed with gold hair and wings.

"How much is this?" he asked.

"Well, that's twenty-four-carat gold on her hair and wings, so she's pretty expensive," she said softly.

Jace smiled at her warmly, "I'll take it," he said.

The woman's face lit up with just as much surprise as it did joy. "What a lovely young man you are to come and buy a gift for that girl. She seemed like an angel. Are you two friends?" she asked curiously.

Jace sighed softly, "Yes-- well, we were. I'm hoping we will be again," he said.

The elderly woman placed her hand on his. "It will all turn out well," she

said. “Trust in God, that’s what I always say. He works all things for our good.”

Jace stared at the sweet woman, gratitude for her kind words of encouragement in his eyes and smile. She carefully wrapped the angel and placed it in a small box. Jace paid cash for the angel and then put it in his coat pocket.

“Thank you so much,” he said, “I hope you have a Merry Christmas.”

“Thank you, dear,” she said happily, “and you as well— just remember, trust God, He’ll take care of things.”

Jace smiled and thanked her again. But the joy he felt momentarily from his short conversation with the elderly woman melted away when the thought returned to his mind that Brielle was still not speaking to him. How would he even have the chance to give this gift to her? He decided it wasn’t something that he needed to figure out at that moment. The lady was right; God would help him work it out.

He walked for a while through more of the craft tents, taking in all the items on display. Although deep down he had hoped to see Brielle here tonight, the sight of her with Zach was too much. He picked up the phone to try Gideon again. There was no answer. Then he remembered that Gideon had asked the waitress from the Blue Moon restaurant on a date. He was taking her to dinner and a movie. He wasn’t answering because he was probably in a theater at that very moment.

Jace stood still for a while thinking, then turned toward the street and leaned on a tree near the corner. He took out the little glass angel to admire it in the lights. As he was looking at it, he heard the clip-clop sound of a horse walking on the road coming from his left. He looked up to see that behind the horse was an elegantly decorated white carriage also embellished with Christmas lights. As the carriage approached, he could see a couple inside. The girl was wearing a pink beret. It was Brielle.

Quickly, he turned to conceal his identity as the carriage slowly passed. He remembered her saying how she wanted to ride in a horse-drawn carriage. She was…but not with him. Again, it was too much for him to bear. He needed to find something to do, some other place to go, but where?

He looked around the area and thought he would grab a nice cup of hot chocolate. He wanted to warm up, but he also needed the distraction. The sight of Brielle sitting that close to Zach in such a romantic setting was tearing him apart. He kept telling himself that God was going to help him work this out with her, and he, too would have the chance to take her on a carriage ride someday.

Then he spied a coffee shop across the street from where he was standing and immediately headed for it. Once he had his hot chocolate, he stepped outside to pray and ask for God’s help. Once again, he heard the faint sound of the horse's hooves approaching on the pavement. He turned to leave, not wanting to see Brielle with Zach for another moment… but something held him

there. He didn't know why; he just felt led to stay.

As he watched from outside the coffee shop, he saw them step out of the carriage and walk over to a park bench underneath a tree on the corner of the square. The bench wasn't close to the main crowd of the festival; it was more secluded and quieter. He took a deep breath and rubbed his forehead.

"I'm a stalker," he thought to himself, "I have totally lost it and now I've become a stalker." Then he whispered another prayer. "God help me, what am I doing? I can't think straight; I don't know what I am doing here. I want to leave, but feel like I should stay. Please help me, am I supposed to be here, or am I just a total jerk, crazed with jealousy?"

He opened his eyes from his prayer to see Brielle sit down on the bench while Zach stood talking to her. She was sipping something from a cup.

"Probably hot chocolate," he thought to himself.

Again, he thought he would leave. He needed to let go and quit all this craziness. But just as he started to walk away, he saw Zach head toward the food vendors, apparently going to get something for them to eat. Jace stood staring at her, thinking of all the foods she would enjoy in such a place as this. All the varieties of things she could try, and she would want to try them all. He stood quietly, sipping his hot chocolate, unsure of what he was still doing there, yet he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her.

As painful as it was, he still loved to see her. How much he missed her, missed talking to her, hearing her laugh, and spending time together like they used to. He was intently thinking about this when he had a loud thought in his head, like a voice, not audible to anyone else, speaking firmly.

"Go to her," the voice said.

Jace shook his head, trying to lose the thought, knowing she would certainly be upset if she knew he was there.

"Go to her now," the voice said again.

Jace looked away and kept sipping his hot chocolate. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves and clear his mind. He turned back to look at her again, but a town trolleybus had pulled up in front of him to bring a group of people to the square. The trolley and its passengers were blocking his view.

While the trolley was temporarily parked there, he had a horrific feeling inside his body, much more than the nervousness he felt before. He tried to position himself where he could see around the trolley, but he couldn't. Just then, the trolley finished unloading its passengers and pulled away. His eyes darted to the bench where Brielle was sitting.

She was gone.

Jace looked at the bench and saw that her bag was there but had fallen over, and items from it were on the ground, including her cell phone. Her cup had also fallen to the ground and spilled all over the sidewalk.

His heart was racing. He dropped his cup and ran across the street,

searching for her... but she was gone.

"Brielle!" he shouted as he ran into the surrounding street. When he didn't see her anywhere in the street or along the sidewalks, he ran back toward the bench searching desperately to spot her pink hat somewhere in the crowd of the square.

"Brielle!" he shouted again as he ran around the area.

Every second that passed seemed like an eternity.

"Brielle!" he shouted again, intensely.

"What the heck are you doing here, Roberts? Or should I say, Devereaux?" Zach's highly irritated voice came up behind Jace.

"She's gone," Jace said in a panic, pulling out his cell phone.

"What?" Zach said, looking around quickly, "She was right here, I just went to get us some food," he said, putting down the box of food and drinks on the bench. Then he saw Brielle's purse.

"Her bag is still here," he said.

"Yes, but it's spilled out, see even her phone is there-- and look at the cup she was drinking from! Something happened to her, and she's gone! Someone took her!" Jace shouted.

"Did you see them?" Zach asked.

"No, one second she was there and the next she was gone," he said, dialing his phone.

"How do you know?" Zach asked.

"Because I was watching her!" Jace said, "I saw you guys when I came out of that coffee shop. I was standing right over there on that corner. I should have gone to her when I was told to," he muttered to himself as he quickly dialed his phone, receiving no answer.

"What?" Zach asked, angry and confused.

"Call 911 and tell them what happened," Jace said, "Stay here and wait for the police, I'll be back!" he yelled as he took off into the crowd.

"Where are you going?" Zach yelled back, dialing his phone to call the police.

"I'm going to look for her," he said, mostly to himself as he quickly ran through the town square, asking people if they had seen her and praying in between. He dialed his phone again, and this time he got an answer.

"Obadiah!" he said, "Someone took her! They took Brielle!"

"What? Who took her?" Obadiah asked.

Jace explained everything that had happened, where they were, and that Zach was calling the police to come.

"I'm going to keep looking for her," Jace said.

"I'm on my way," Obadiah answered quickly, "I'm not far from town. I'll be there in a few minutes. Stay there until I get there."

Jace ran up and down the surrounding streets. He noticed that the only

vehicles that were allowed to park around the town square were those of local merchants and the square vendors. He remembered that all the other traffic had been blocked from driving into the square. Only the trolley cars and horse-drawn carriages were allowed to travel the streets surrounding the festival. He stopped and tried to force himself to remember if there was a vehicle parked behind her when she sat down on the bench beside the street. He couldn't; all he could see in his memory was Brielle, beautiful Brielle in her pink beret.

He felt sick. Why hadn't he gone to her? The voice he heard in his head was that of the Holy Spirit speaking to him to go to her --but he didn't listen. If he had listened, if he had obeyed immediately, she wouldn't have been alone, and her abductors might not have tried to take her… but he didn't listen; he just stood there arguing with the voice of God.

Jace saw the police cars approaching the corner where Zach was standing. Zach had called the police as Jace instructed. Officer Stockton was the first on the scene, and he spoke with Zach. Then he spoke with Jace.

"I remember you, it's Jace, right?" Officer Stockton said, "You were with Capt. Espindola and Obadiah on the Bonnie Jane the other night."

Jace nodded, irritated at the time being wasted on past incidents, "Yes, yes, Sir. That was me, let me tell you what happened," he said. Then he quickly went over all the details of everything that he saw and how Brielle suddenly vanished.

"So… you were watching her?" Officer Stockton asked curiously.

Jace sighed, "Yes, I was. She was supposed to be here with me tonight. I was the one who was going to take her, but she came with him instead," he said, nodding over to where Zach was standing. Zach was busy talking to another officer and didn't notice.

"Then you were watching her because you were jealous?" Officer Stockton said.

"Yeah, I guess. I can't explain it really," Jace answered.

"Hmm, okay," Officer Stockton said.

"Look, Officer, I'm sure it sounds strange. But this girl, she means more to me than anyone else in the world," Jace said.

Officer Stockton stared at him, studying him, and could see how sincere he was.

"I was wondering if one of the vehicles that were parked around here could have been used to take her away. There wouldn't have been time for much else. She was there, then the trolley came and left, and she was gone," Jace said, looking around, eager to start searching for Brielle.

Officer Stockton looked around at the vehicles parked on the streets surrounding the square. Most of them were SUVs, vans, or small utility trucks. He wrote something in his notepad and then asked, "How many people knew about Zach and Brielle's date tonight?"

"I'm not sure, quite a few, I guess. Zach told some guys on the football

team, that's how I learned about it. Brielle told her best friend Keoni and her family. Other than that, I don't honestly know," Jace answered.

Jace continued to provide Officer Stockton with all the information he knew. The police officer wrote everything down and, after asking Jace a few more questions, went to his patrol car.

Jace felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around to see a misty-eyed Obadiah standing there. Jace, overwhelmed by his emotions, grabbed Obadiah tightly and hugged him.

"We're going to find her," Obadiah whispered confidently, "We serve a Mighty God and His hand is on her. He will lead us to her."

Jace couldn't speak for the lump that was in his throat, so he nodded silently in agreement.

Officer Stockton spent several minutes on the radio as he reported all the information he was given. By now, a crowd of bystanders had begun to form, curious as to what was going on. The word began to spread fast of Brielle's abduction, reaching those participating in the festival and those who had businesses surrounding the square. These were the same shops and establishments that Brielle and Keoni had just visited in the days before, taking flyers to invite them and their customers to the "Inviting His Light" prayer vigil.

When Officer Stockton returned, he explained the process for their search for Brielle. Obadiah, Jace, and Zach listened carefully.

"We cannot track her cell phone because it is still here with her bag, but let me explain everything that is happening as we speak. A police helicopter has been dispatched and will be searching the surrounding areas with a special camera designed to detect body heat. We have a K-9 officer en route, and he will use his police dog to attempt to pick up any scent of Brielle leaving the area. We will be using her bag for this purpose.

"A team of Missing Persons Detectives will be arriving here shortly. These officers specialize in finding people. They will take control of Brielle's case upon arrival. Patrol officers are currently setting up roadblocks on the major roads and highways leading from Fairfield. I have requested additional police units to respond to the town square to begin a search on foot in the area.

"Finally, I will contact the local media and ask them to broadcast the physical description of Brielle and the clothing she was wearing. If you have any recent photographs of her, that would be very helpful," he said.

Obadiah began looking in his wallet, but he only had photos of her when she was a little girl.

"I have several on my phone," Jace said, taking out his phone and pulling up the photos for Officer Stockton. "Do you want me to send them to you?"

"That would be great," Officer Stockton said, taking the photo and looking at it. "Here is my contact information," he said as he handed Jace a card. "Thank you for all of your information," he said to both Zach and Jace, "We may need to

contact both of you again for more questions."

"Whatever you need of me, at any time," Jace said.

"Yeah, me too," Zach agreed.

Then he looked up at Jace and Obadiah, "I want you to know that we are going to do everything we can to find Brielle," he told them.

"What can we do to help?" Obadiah asked eagerly.

Officer Stockton put his hand on Obadiah's shoulder and said, "I know you are a man of God, Obadiah, and my best suggestion to you right now is to pray. I know the power in it and the miracles that can come from it."

Obadiah nodded at Officer Stockton and shook his hand, "Thank you," he whispered. Officer Stockton looked at Jace and said, "You moved quickly on this, Jace, and in a kidnapping, every second matters." he patted him on the shoulder and then walked back to his patrol car.

"I'm going to call Hadley," Obadiah said, "I need you to call Gideon and Keoni and have them go to prayer immediately."

"What about… what about… Genevieve?" Jace asked softly.

"I called Alma, and she and Magomu were going to tell her in person. I couldn't give her such news over the phone, but she needed to know right away. If I know my daughter, she's already at prayer and out looking for her Kawala," Obadiah said sorrowfully.

Jace put his head down. With all the pain and worry he felt inside, he couldn't imagine what Genevieve was feeling for her daughter.

Obadiah then turned to Zach, whose eyes were full of fear and worry.

"How are you doing, Zach?" Obadiah asked, extending his hand out to the young man.

Zach took hold of Obadiah's grip with a cold and trembling hand. He looked at Obadiah with terrified eyes.

"This is not your fault, son. There was no way you could have known this was coming. None of us did," Obadiah said to try and comfort him.

Zach did not speak but nodded his head.

Jace listened closely to the conversation between Obadiah and Zach. He didn't blame Zach for this happening; he blamed himself. He felt it was his fault that Brielle was on a date with Zach in the first place. He was the one who had not been honest and drove her away. But worst of all, he did not listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. He argued with God when God tried to use him to protect Brielle. Now…she was gone.

The guilt was too much to bear, and he took off down the street, crazed with despair.

His thoughts were out of control. He had an idea of who had taken her, but where? And the worst question of all: what were they going to do to her? His thoughts made him crazy with sorrow and fear, and he ran to his father's SUV and climbed inside. He dialed the phone to call his father and explained

everything to him as quickly as possible while his father listened. H.R. could hear the excruciating despair in his son's voice and told him he would do everything possible to assist in the search.

Jace knew that his father's help would only bring Brielle's odds more in her favor, but the pain of knowing she was gone was overwhelming. His phone rang; it was Gideon.

"Hey man, how are you doing?" Gideon asked.

Jace couldn't find the words to speak, or his voice for that matter, as it was buried in sorrow.

"I don't know," he finally whispered.

"I'm here for you," Gideon said.

"Thanks," Jace replied, "I don't know what to do."

"Why don't you start by letting me in your car so we can talk?" Gideon said.

Jace lifted his head and turned to see Gideon standing on the sidewalk by the passenger side door. He was glad to see him there. Gideon had become Jace's best friend and, as part of the Intercessor team, had also become his brother in the Lord. He quickly unlocked the door, and Gideon got in.

"Sorry, I didn't want to knock on the window. I thought I might freak you out," Gideon said.

Jace nodded, quickly drying his eyes. "How did you get here?"

"Keoni dropped me off at the square. She went out to search with Magomu. Mom is with Genevieve and Asher," Gideon answered.

"She took Asher?" Jace asked.

"Yeah, he wanted to go look for Brielle, and Genevieve won't let him out of her sight," he said, rubbing his forehead. "She's a wreck. Mom said she can't stop wondering if this is the hand of Jabari coming to seek his revenge after all these years."

"You know that's not who did this," Jace said.

"Yeah, I know it, but who took her isn't what matters the most to her. Genevieve isn't going to be right until Brielle is safe at home… none of us are," Gideon said.

Jace didn't answer but stared straight ahead.

"You know what the Bible says," Gideon started extending his hand open toward Jace.

Jace nodded, "Matthew 18:20 '*For where two or three come together in My Name, there am I with them*,'" he whispered, taking Gideon's hand to pray.

They both began to pray together aloud for Brielle, begging God for His mighty hand of protection to be upon her, for Him to reveal her location, and for her safe return home to her family and friends.

"We cancel the agenda that satan has for Brielle in the Name of Jesus," Gideon began, "Your Word tells us in Matthew 18:18 *'Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will*

be loosed in heaven', so Father God we come to You right now and bind the hands of these evil people who have taken Brielle. We ask in the Name of Jesus that all their plans and actions be bound," he prayed.

Then Jace interjected, "Brielle once commanded the scripture of Isaiah 54:17 that *'No weapon formed against her should prosper,'* and You saved her from being shot. God, I ask You for that same protection right now, that *no* weapon formed against her shall prosper. That she will remain protected by Your angels and that we will find her. Help us, God… help us to find her alive and well quickly," he whispered.

They sat together in the truck, praying for several minutes before they decided to drive around town and search for her.

"I called my father to help us," Jace said.

Gideon looked over at him, surprised. "Is he in town?"

"Yeah, he just got back tonight, but he is going to help us find her. He said he is going to coordinate with Officer Stockton so that he can put up our helicopters to search for her and cover more territory. He has a team of private investigators he is going to send out immediately, and he has several friends who are FBI agents; he's contacting them for help as well. He said he would do whatever he could to help find her. Then he is going to contact the media and put out a reward for her safe return," Jace told Gideon, who stared at him silently for a moment.

"A reward?" Gideon asked.

Jace nodded.

"How much of a reward?" he asked.

"Two million dollars," Jace said.

Gideon's eyes opened wide, and his mouth flew open. "That's… *incredible*," he finally said, "It will totally improve Brielle's odds. Hopefully, if there are several people involved, they will want the reward more than Brielle."

"Yeah," Jace said softly, "but there is no amount of money that could ever measure her worth."

Jace started the SUV, and they began driving around, not knowing where they were going, but knowing that they couldn't sit still any longer; they had to be on the move to search for Brielle.

They drove along in silence, whispering prayers as they went along when suddenly, something snapped inside of Jace. He had been so devastated by the event of Brielle being taken and everything that happened afterward, he hadn't been thinking clearly-- but in this moment, the Holy Spirit was giving his mind a surge of clarity.

Jace quickly turned his car around and headed for Rateesh's restaurant. His rapid speed indicated he was in a terrible hurry.

"What are you doing?" Gideon asked, hanging on to the dashboard.

"Brian, he knows where Brielle is. Brian and Sidney have something to do

with this," he said, racing to get to the Dilli Rasoi restaurant as fast as he could.

"Okay, well, just remember that there are laws here in town about how we drive, all of which you are breaking right now!" Gideon chided as he clung to the dashboard, "I know you're right, Jace, I know you're right! But we can't help Brielle if you kill us!"

Gideon didn't question Jace as God immediately began speaking to him, the same thing.

As they approached the restaurant, Jace slowed down, and as he parked the SUV, God gave Gideon a plan that he tried to explain to Jace, but Jace didn't hear a word he said. As soon as his car was parked, he jumped out and headed for the door of the restaurant. Gideon was still getting out of his seatbelt as Jace ran through the restaurant door.

When Jace entered, he was greeted warmly by Priyanka and Rateesh, "Jace! Welcome back, my friend," Rateesh began, then he saw the look on Jace's face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Priyanka also noticed Jace's unusual temperament and asked, "Jace, are you alright?"

Gideon ran into the restaurant behind Jace. Priyanka looked at him with a worried expression, and many of the customers turned to see what was going on.

"Where's your boss?" Jace asked Rateesh directly.

"Brian?" Rateesh said, "I think he's in the kitchen—"

Rateesh hadn't finished his statement when Jace took off through the dining room for the kitchen. Just before he reached the swinging doors, Brian stepped out. Jace was delirious with anger. As soon as he saw Brian, Jace slammed him against the wall.

"Where is she?" Jace demanded, "What have you done to her?"

Gideon jumped on Jace to pull him off Brian while the entire dining room was full of stunned guests who watched the scene unfold.

Brian smirked at Jace. "Where is who?" he asked with a sinister tone.

"I know you have something to do with this. Tell me where she is!" Jace demanded.

Gideon finally got Jace to let go of Brian while Rateesh and Priyanka looked on, bewildered.

"Gideon! Jace! What's going on?" Rateesh asked, "Who's gone?"

"Brielle," Jace answered, not taking his eyes off Brian, "She was kidnapped from the town square tonight!"

Rateesh's face dropped from an expression of confusion to one of horror.

"Kidnapped?" Priyanka asked, "Why do you think Brian knows where she is?"

Jace still didn't take his eyes off Brian, whose expression convinced him he was guilty.

"Because he's a dealer, that's why. He's been selling drugs right here in your father's restaurant. Brielle figured out how their system worked, so they kidnapped her," Jace answered furiously.

Priyanka looked at Brian and then Rateesh. Rateesh lowered his eyes in fear.

"Is this true?" she asked Brian.

"Of course not, he's out of his mind. I would never do such a thing to your father or your family," Brian said to Priyanka with the tone of an innocent victim.

"Oh yeah? Let's just see about that," Jace said as he turned loose of Brian and stormed into the lounge area where the large hollow elephant stood between the two restrooms. Rateesh, Priyanka, and Gideon followed him. In a surge of rage, Jace smashed the elephant to the floor, causing it to shatter into a hundred pieces. He dug through the pieces of broken plaster, but there was nothing.

No drugs were to be found.

He turned around to see Brian standing in the lounge doorway, a wicked smile across his face.

"You have some incredibly insane friends, Rateesh," Brian said with a wicked tone, "And now, because of your destruction and my personal assault, I'm going to call the police and have you arrested," Brian said calmly.

Jace was over the edge. He grabbed Brian by the shirt and pinned him against the wall again. Then he leaned down in Brian's face and said, "You're not very bright, are you? Your buddies took the wrong person, and you made a big mistake by doing that. You see, *I* know everything too. I know about the lighthouse signal every other Saturday, the cemetery deliveries in the oak tree, and how you transfer the drugs right here in the restaurant in take-home bags. I know *it all,* Brian, and I'm not afraid of you either. But you should be afraid of me because I'm coming after you now. So, you go ahead and call the cops - it will save me the trouble."

The sinister expression that Brian once held melted away at Jace's words, and fear filled his eyes. Gideon pried Jace's hands off Brian's shirt and pulled him away. Brian stood for a moment, silently staring at them. Then he turned and bolted out the back door of the restaurant before Jace could catch him.

"What do we do?" Rateesh asked in a panic, "He's getting away!"

Gideon shook his head, "No, he's got nowhere to go. I got a text from Kenoi before we got here. The police have all the main roads blocked off. He's trapped in Fairfield."

"I'll call the police," Priyanka said.

"Yes, Rateesh, it's time you came forward. You call the police and tell them all you know. Have courage, now is the time, Brian's unhinged and Brielle needs you," Gideon said, convincing Rateesh, who nodded in agreement. Then Gideon turned to Jace, "Come on, man. I'll take you home."

"No," Jace demanded, "all that matters right now is Brielle. Time is not on our side. we have to keep looking for her."

"Jace, the police are doing everything they can to find her, but you need to calm down. Let's go to my house so you can get your head straight and---"

"Please, Gideon," Jace said, "I know I just lost it, but please, let's just keep looking for her. I promise I won't have any more meltdowns. But she's out there somewhere, and we've got to find her," he pleaded.

Gideon could hear the desperation in his voice, and deep down, he wanted to be out searching for his friend that he loved so much, too. "Okay," he said, "but no more attacking people. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Jace said, "thank you. I have a place I'd like to go. Let's try going down by the old Lighthouse on Montier's Point, who knows, maybe they took her away by boat. Perhaps someone down there saw something."

Jace took out his wallet and handed Rateesh several bills. "This should cover the damages here. If not, just let me know, okay? I'm very sorry," he said.

Rateesh smiled, "Don't be-- that was awesome! I will call the police and then get online and help spread the word about Brielle. Let me know what else I can do."

"Pray. You can pray," Jace said. Then he and Gideon left.

Gideon stuck his hand out, "I'll be driving for the rest of the night if you don't mind," he said with a smile.

Jace grinned and willingly handed Gideon the keys to his SUV.

Gideon drove to the old lighthouse. They searched the building, then traveled down to the docks, talked to people there, and showed them Brielle's photos on Jace's phone. But no one had seen her.

They drove for hours, searching every place they could think of, but to no avail. They prayed that God would lead them to Brielle just as He had led them to many other places or things in the past.

Gideon had kept in touch with Keoni as she and Magomu searched. She told them that Alma had called on Genevieve's phone to let her know they were headed to the church to pray. Gideon and Jace decided to quit searching for the night and join them in prayer.

It was close to six o'clock in the morning when Jace and Gideon finally pulled into the church parking lot. Obadiah's truck, Keoni's car, and Genevieve's SUV were there already. When they entered, they found Pastor Diffie and his wife, Hazel, Pastor Nathan, Alma, Magomu, Asher, Keoni, and many other church members all on their knees surrounding Genevieve at the altar. They were not wailing out loud, but the sound of sobbing could be heard the moment they entered the sanctuary.

They quietly walked down the aisle, tears beginning to stream down their faces as they approached the group. They knelt with the group and joined them in prayer for their lost friend.

They prayed for hours until they were exhausted. Asher had fallen asleep on the front pew, and Magomu was going to take him home. Alma suggested that Keoni, Gideon, and Jace all go to Brielle's home so they could rest and eat. Genevieve did not budge from her place on the floor at the altar, and Alma knew she would not get her to leave unless she was going to search for Brielle. Alma assured them she would stay with Genevieve and take her home when she was ready to go.

They all slowly stood and made their way down the aisle to leave. As they did, they were met by more people from the church who had heard the news and were coming to join Genevieve in prayer for Brielle.

Jace drove, taking Keoni and Gideon with him and leaving Keoni's car in the church parking lot. Jace couldn't settle his mind down the night before Brielle's date with Zach, and was going on with very little sleep, yet he could not rest. He could not stop thinking about every detail of the kidnapping. He was desperately searching for something that would lead him to Brielle.

They pulled into the driveway of Obadiah's home and quietly entered the house. Magomu took Asher upstairs and put him in his bed. Although he came across as a tough little boy, Asher was so emotionally distraught over the disappearance of his sister that he had cried almost all night long. He prayed just as hard as the rest of them, but his young body was exhausted from the emotional impact and stress. Gideon and Keoni both found places to sleep on the couches in the living room and lay down to rest. Jace stood, looking out the window.

"Jace," Keoni said, "You have to rest."

"I can't," Jace whispered.

"You won't be able to continue searching for Brielle if you don't," Keoni said. "Your body will shut down on you at some point. Please, just rest for a little while so you can be more of a help to her," she pleaded.

Jace nodded and stretched out in Obadiah's chair. Their bodies succumbed to their exhaustion, and in just a few minutes, they were all sleeping peacefully. Several hours passed, and Jace jolted out of his chair, frightened from a nightmare. Only it wasn't a nightmare, it was actually happening-- Brielle was gone.

Jace looked at his phone. It was now a little after four o'clock in the afternoon. He quickly jumped up out of his chair and dialed his phone to call Obadiah. He needed to know if there was any word, any leads, any clues at all as to where Brielle might be. But there was nothing. His conversation woke Gideon and Keoni. They stretched and realized that their dreams were more peaceful than their present reality.

"I can't believe we slept this long," Keoni said.

"I need to eat something," Gideon said, going into the kitchen.

Jace sat down, his head in his hands. Keoni sat down next to him and put

her hand on his shoulders.

"Do you want something to eat?" Keoni asked him gently.

Jace shook his head, "No, thank you," he whispered politely.

"You should try to eat something," she tried again.

Jace looked up at her with swollen red eyes, "I can't. I can't think straight. I can't function. I just need to… do… *something*. Something productive to help find her," he said, putting his head back into his hands.

"I know what we should do," Gideon said, coming in from the kitchen. "We should go to the Prayer Sanctum."

Jace looked up. He knew the best thing that he could do for Brielle at this moment was to pray. Quickly, he stood up, "Let's go," he said, "let's go now."

Keoni and Gideon gathered up their things and headed outside. When they reached the stables, they found Moon Dancer, Apache, and Kissa all saddled and ready to go. Magomu was there too, waiting for them.

"I thought this might make your journey a little faster," he said.

The three Intercessors stood, staring at Magomu.

"How did you know we were going to the Prayer Sanctum?" Keoni asked.

"Because this is a time of trouble and you are Intercessors… and Intercessors pray in times of trouble," Magomu replied sweetly as he walked the horses out of the corral.

All three thanked him kindly for his thoughtfulness, mounted their horses, and headed off to the place where they had spent so much time in training, studying, and prayer. This was a place where they felt empowered - a place where they could find wisdom, where everything else in the world was closed out. It was just them and God.

God knew where Brielle was at that very moment. He knew who had taken her and if she was alright. They would do as an Intercessor does and stand before the Lord for their friend, praying for the protection of God, for His strength to be within her, and His peace to be upon her. They would trust in God that He would lead them to Brielle.

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When they reached the Prayer Sanctum, they all went directly to the Pools of Peace cavern to pray for their lost friend. Keoni went to kneel by the largest pool in the cave. Gideon knelt on the right side, and Jace knelt at the rock slab in the middle of the cavern. They had been praying for an hour at least, maybe longer, when Keoni rose to stretch her legs.

She opened her eyes and took in a long, deep breath, stretching her arms above her head. Suddenly, there was a brilliant light that flashed across all the pools in the entire cave. It startled her, and she jumped back. She looked to her right at Gideon, but he was still kneeling in prayer with his eyes closed. She turned around to look at Jace behind her, but he had his head completely buried in his arm as he knelt by the large rock. Quickly, she turned around and looked at the pools again. Her eyes were wet with tears, so she dug in her pocket to find a tissue. After she dried her eyes, she waited, but nothing happened. She shook her head, telling herself that she didn't see anything and to get back to prayer for Brielle.

Keoni placed her hands on the rocky edge of the pool to lower herself back down on her knees when suddenly, it happened again. A bright flash of light crossed all the pools instantly, but this time, there was an image in the light. The sight of the bright illumination reflected from the pools startled her so much that she gasped and fell backward to the ground.

"Oh!" she gasped as she fell back. Jace and Gideon both snapped their heads up to look over at her.

"Are you alright?" Gideon said, jumping up to help her. Jace slowly brought himself up to one knee, his body exhausted and stiff.

"Did you see that?" Keoni asked.

"See what?" Gideon asked.

She quickly looked over at Jace, "What about you?"

Jace didn't speak but shook his head with a puzzled expression on his face.

"What was it?" Gideon asked.

"I… I don't know," Keoni said lightly, "I think I may be seeing things. Maybe I just need to eat something. I can't remember the last time we ate anything."

"Do you want me to go get you something?" Gideon asked.

"Yeah, if you don't mind; I think that would help me," she said, looking over at Jace, who had lost interest in the conversation and was going back to his praying.

"Jace," she said, "why don't you go with Gideon and get something to eat?"

Jace looked over at her as if in a daze, "No, I'm alright," he said.

Keoni sighed and got up to move over to him. She knelt and placed her hand on his arm, "Jace," she began gently, "I know you're hurting terribly; I can see what this is doing to you. We all are hurting, and we all want to find Brielle,

but we can't help her if we aren't strong," she said looking deep into his dark brown eyes, which were heavy with exhaustion. She thought he looked better after the attack from Reed and his gang. In that circumstance, his face was injured, but his spirit was strong. Now, he was a completely broken person on the inside.

"I can't eat," Jace said.

"Okay, well, you should at least go get some juice or something," Keoni said.

Jace shook his head, and then he lowered it to pray again.

"Jace," she said, placing her hand on his shoulder to stop him, "I know how you feel about Brielle. You're crazy deep in love with her. I've known it for a long time," she said with a grin, "So you have to believe that we *are* going to find her. And when we do, you *will* have a chance to make things right with her so you can be together."

Jace stared at her, a small glimmer of hope beginning to grow in his eyes as she spoke.

Keoni took a deep breath and sighed, "If you want to find Brielle, if you want to help her and have that chance to tell her how much you love her, then you need to keep yourself strong in spirit, mind and *body,"* she said placing her hand gently on his face, "Because I know without a shadow of doubt that… she's in love with you too."

"What?" Jace asked, dismayed, "How do you know that?"

"Because she *told* me she was. She's very stubborn and hardheaded—something you are learning the hard way," she laughed lightly, "But she won't be angry at you forever. Trust me, I've known her most of her life. You will get her back," she smiled.

Keoni's words gave Jace a newfound energy; the glimmer of hope now became more radiant in his eyes. He grabbed her and hugged her tightly.

"Thank you, Keoni. Thank you for always being such a good friend," he whispered.

Gideon reached down to pull Jace up, and the two of them went out of the Pools of Peace and headed down the tunnel toward the kitchen.

Once they were gone, Keoni stood up, closed her eyes, and slowly stretched her arms out to her sides with her palms open wide toward heaven.

"Father God," she prayed, "I believe that You are trying to show me something. I am here. I am ready and I am waiting for You, Lord. Please show me, Heavenly Father God, what it is You want me to see."

Keoni stood silently for a moment, quietly waiting upon the Lord. Then, like a gentle breeze blowing, she felt the power of the Holy Spirit come upon her. The anointing of God washed down upon her from head to toe like thick warm oil being poured all over her. She felt led to slowly open her eyes. When she did, the same flash of light began to spread across the pools, causing the water to sparkle more brilliantly, casting the shimmering reflection across the cave walls.

She did not startle, she did not waver, but stood still, remained silent, and stayed focused on what the Holy Spirit wanted to show her.

What she saw in the light were images. First, she saw a city street. She was standing on a street corner, and across the street was a building, a tall brick building that appeared to be vacant. To her left and far back in the distance stood the Chrysler Building, glowing brilliantly in the New York skyline. The building in front of her was several stories high and built of bricks. The bricks were dirty and worn with age. She saw the front doors, which seemed to be made of brass. She saw that there were pigeons that lived overhead.

Next, she saw a metal side door that had an old, faded painting of two white faces. Her heart was racing as she looked from pool to pool, each filled with the same image as if she were watching several televisions all at the same time. The next image that came was of a small wooden table, and on it was a solitary candle burning brightly. The candle was more than halfway burned down, and the wax was melting off the table and dripping onto a solid black floor.

Keoni's heart then felt as if it had stopped altogether, for the next image that flashed before her was that of a girl. It was Brielle. She was alive, but her head hung down from weakness, and she was shivering violently in the bitter cold. She had a large black blindfold tied around her eyes, duct tape across her mouth, and she was bound to a chair with a heavy chain that wound around her wrists and legs. Big locks held her there, and she could not move. Keoni tried to take in every detail of the image before her. Behind Brielle and to her left side was what appeared to be a large, dark green drape of thick, velvet-like material. On her right side were some strange-looking ropes that ran up and down vertically; the ropes were taut, but she couldn't see what they were connected to.

Keoni began to cry when she saw her friend in the vision, for it seemed so real she could touch her. She reached out for Brielle instinctively. But the vision vanished, and Keoni collapsed to her knees, sobbing for her friend.

Gideon and Jace heard her cries through the Prayer Sanctum and came running to her side.

"What is it?" Gideon asked nervously, "What happened?"

"Brielle," she sobbed, "I saw her."

Jace dropped to his knees and grabbed hold of her arms, turning her to face him. "Where? Where is she?" he asked quickly.

Keoni couldn't speak because of her sobbing.

"Keoni, tell me," Jace pleaded, "Where is she? Is she alive?"

Keoni nodded.

"Where did you see her?" he pressed.

"They have her somewhere in an old brick building," she began, "She was blindfolded, her mouth was taped, and she was bound to a chair with chains and

locks. They left a candle lit and she's cold, she's so cold," she said, sobbing again.

Gideon knelt and pulled his sister into his chest, trying to soothe her, speaking very gently, "Okay, okay, calm down. Listen to me, what else can you tell us? Did you see anything else about this building, any other details at all?"

Keoni tried to calm down and dried her eyes, "Yes, there were beautiful old doors made of brass and glass in the front. They looked like they were boarded up from the inside. But then there was a second door on the side of the building that had a faded painting of two white faces on it," she began.

Jace looked at Gideon, who was making mental notes of the details she was giving.

"I saw hanging down behind her a large green curtain of some sort, it was huge and looked like it hung behind her on her left. On her other side were these ropes… they were drawn tight and seemed to be coming down from the ceiling to the floor," she said, trying to remember all the details she could from the vision.

"Do you remember anything else?" Gideon asked.

Keoni stared back at the pools, remembering the images she saw there, "Yes, there was a table next to her with a candle burning on it, and the wax was dripping down onto a solid black floor. It's freezing outside, and she is in this building with nothing more than a candle," she said crying again.

Jace was adding up the details in his mind quickly, "I know where she is!" he exclaimed, "She's in a theater, she's in an old theater!"

Gideon lifted his eyes from his sister, "What? How do you know that?"

"My mother is a professional stage actress, remember? I spent many days of my childhood standing in the stage wings waiting for my mother. Every stage she ever worked on had a solid black floor. You said there was a large green drape of material on one side and vertical ropes on the other side? The material is a curtain and has to be opened and closed by ropes, ropes which run up and down vertically. I'm telling you they have her in an old theater!" he said, jumping up to his feet and pulling Keoni up with him. "Do you know where the building is? Did you see a street name or anything that can help us find her?" he asked.

Keoni shook her head, "No, I just saw the building and the door, but I know it's in New York."

"How do you know that?" Gideon asked.

"Because the Chrysler Building was in the distance behind it," she said.

"I'm going," Jace said as he quickly ran out of the Pools of Peace cavern.

"Going where?" Keoni called after him.

"I'm going to go get her," he replied without breaking his stride as he ran into the Study Chamber to gather up his things.

"I'm going with you," Gideon said.

"Wait a minute," Keoni said, raising her hands to stop the two of them for a moment. "This could be dangerous. We can't just go into New York City at night

to a deserted building *alone*."

"Okay, then we'll call Obadiah," Gideon said.

"I'm not waiting," Jace said. "Besides, he might try to stop us from going."

"Because it's dangerous," Keoni said, "Let me call Hadley and tell him what I saw."

"Do you think he will believe you? God gave that information to you, Keoni, you, not the police-- and He did so for a reason. We can't risk losing Brielle. I don't have time to waste, I'm going and I'm leaving now. I'm not waiting for others who may or may not believe us and leave her in that condition. God only knows how much time she has left," Jace said.

"But Jace—" Keoni pressed.

"But what?" Jace said impatiently, "The dealers took Brielle because she figured out what they were doing and was trying to stop them. Doesn't that sound familiar to you? They are going to *kill* her, Keoni, just like they killed your father when he tried to stop them," he said, staring her down.

Keoni's lip began to quiver, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Jace immediately regretted his harshness as soon as the words left his mouth. He ran his hands through his hair, "Keoni, I'm… I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have…"

"No. No, you're right. I know you are, but we can't do this—" she began.

"Keoni, it's okay. I'm not asking you to do this," Jace said softly, "But I have to. I love her. I love Brielle more than anything in this world and I want the chance to get to love her and have her in my life," he paused, listening to himself say that he loved Brielle out loud and to another person, surprised him. He liked hearing himself say the words; it empowered him.

"I know you love her, and you want to help her, but you could end up getting yourself hurt as well," Keoni said.

"You don't understand. I have to go. This is my fault," he muttered as he packed up his bag.

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, what?" Gideon interjected, "How is any of this your fault?" he questioned.

"Because…" Jace paused, "…if I had been honest with Brielle in the first place she never would have been out with Zach. She would have been with me," he said. "But even more than that, it's my fault because…" he paused again.

"Because what?" Keoni asked gently.

"Because I disobeyed the voice of the Holy Spirit," he said his voice breaking.

Gideon and Keoni stared blankly at him in confusion.

"Last night before she was kidnapped, I was praying and asked God to help me with my pain of seeing Brielle with someone else. Then, when I saw her alone sitting on the bench, I heard a voice telling me to go to her. I argued with the voice and again it said to 'Go to her *now*,'" he paused, almost unable to speak

through his emotion, “I know it was the Holy Spirit telling me to go… and I didn’t listen. God knew what was going to happen. He allowed me to see her that night so I could keep her safe, and when He told me to go to her, I didn’t obey Him. If I had listened, I would have been there with her, and she would have been safe. This is my second chance. God has given you this vision, Keoni, to give you the information of where she is so I can go and get her. I am going now, and don’t you dare try to stop me,” he said, turning to head out the main Prayer Sanctum door.

“Wait,” Keoni said. She looked at Gideon and then at Jace, “You won’t be able to find the building without me.”

Jace walked over and hugged Keoni, “Thank you,” he whispered, “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I hope you both know I’m not upset with either of you. I love you both and thank you for being the incredible friends that you are, I know I’m a wreck; it’s just without her, I’m just… anyway, I can’t lose her.”

“Neither can I,” Keoni agreed.

“Okay then, we’re in this together,” Gideon said. “But first we have to pack up everything we need, including things to help Brielle.”

They quickly ran around the Prayer Sanctum, gathering the things they had been trained with and placing them all inside their haversacks. Keoni and Jace went into the kitchen and packed things to help take care of Brielle. Keoni grabbed Brielle’s haversack, too.

“Why are you taking that?” Jace asked.

“She may want it,” Keoni said.

“If she is so weak and cold, she won’t be able to do much,” he replied.

Keoni smiled and patted his shoulder, “You may love her, but you still have a lot to learn about her.”

After the three Intercessors were packed and ready to go, they ran quickly through the tunnels out of the Prayer Sanctum. They mounted their horses and headed down the hill through the dark woods to Jace’s SUV.

“How are we going to find the building?” Keoni asked.

“I have a plan about that,” Gideon said, “Jace, give me your phone, you drive, and I’ll Google Earth.”

Jace headed out to the highway to make the forty-minute drive to New York City. First, Gideon got the address for the Chrysler building. Then he took that zip code and used a website called hellonewyorkcity.com to find old theaters in that area. There were dozens of them. He kept asking Keoni different questions about her vision to get a better understanding of which direction she was facing when she saw the Chrysler building. After the process of elimination, he was confident he had found the right area.

“There are three theaters I want you to look at,” he said handing Keoni the phone, “Click on each of them and it will give you a street view of the building so you can see which one it is.”

Keoni took the phone and did as Gideon instructed. It wasn't the first or the second. She held her breath as the third photo uploaded and when she saw it, she exploded, "That's it!" she yelled, "It's *exactly* the way I saw it in the Pools of Peace!"

Gideon took the phone and wrote down the address. Jace used the GPS system in the SUV to navigate his way there. Then he told Gideon to call Obadiah and let them know what had happened and where they were headed. Gideon tried calling him again and again but couldn't get through.

"I'll have to leave him a message," he said. Obadiah's voicemail answered, and he quickly left him a detailed message.

"What about Genevieve?" he asked.

"I'm sure she's still at the church praying," Keoni answered, "and I'm sure our mom is with her. Mom said the last time I talked to her that Genevieve had only left that altar to go out and search for Brielle," she said softly, "Even most of her talks with the police have taken place at the church altar."

"Can you call your mother?" Jace asked.

"I'll call her now," Gideon said as he dialed the phone.

Just then, they heard the sound of their mother's cell phone ringing in Jace's vehicle. Keoni dropped her head in shame.

"I forgot," she said, "I was supposed to charge mom's phone in the car while she was praying with Genevieve. With everything that's happened, I forgot to give it back to her."

"It might be best she doesn't know what we're about to do," Gideon said, "It would freak her out."

"Yeah, I bet," Jace said.

"Call Hadley again, Giddy," Keoni said.

Gideon dialed and once again he could not reach him.

"Try Officer Stockton," Jace said, "I put his number in my phone tonight."

Gideon tried Officer Stockton but couldn't reach him either.

"Where is everyone?" Gideon said.

"Out looking for Brielle," Keoni whispered, "just like we are."

"Yeah, but we have our phones with us!" Gideon said.

"Giddy, it's going to be okay. They may be on other calls and may call us back. I know that in the beginning of this whole thing I thought it was too dangerous," Keoni began, "but Jace is right, there is a reason God showed that vision to me. There is no coincidence with God.

"There is also a reason why this is happening right now and why we are the ones going to Brielle. We need to spend time in prayer together about this, the police might not do that. We need to ask God for His divine protection, His guidance, and His power to be with us. God is with us. He will lead us to her," she said.

"You're right," Gideon agreed, "Let's pray… uh, you drive Jace, we'll pray,"

he said as he placed his hand on Jace's shoulder and reached back to take Keoni's hand in his.

"Father God," Gideon began, "We know that You showed Keoni where Brielle is for a reason. We know, God that You have chosen us to act as Intercessors for those who are in great need. Even though Brielle is one of us and Your Intercessor too. You know she is in danger right now and in dire need of Your divine help.

"You know *exactly* where she is, who has her, and what we will be up against. I as you, Father God, that You please will grant us Your guidance and wisdom to know exactly what You want us to do. Protect us with Your mighty hand, please go before us, and give us victory in this battle.

"We don't know where we are going or who we will face, but You do. Please hand them over to us, Lord, and keep us safe from any kind of harm. Most of all, God, let us find Brielle, let her be alright, and let us bring her home safely. In Jesus' Name, Amen," he finished.

"Amen," Jace and Keoni said.

"Now," Gideon said, "Let me tell you what God has shown me. Even though we don't know all that lies ahead… He has given me a plan."

Deep amidst the darkened streets of New York City stood a cold brick building. Once upon a time, this building was one of the hot spots of the Big Apple. It hosted fantastic musical productions and drew in New York's elite, dressed in their tuxedos and gowns to enjoy a night of theatrical entertainment. But not anymore; now it was a dingy, broken shell of a place that only had its memories. No more music rang through its rafters. No more applause and shouts of encore echoing in the hall. Now, the only sounds were of wind occasionally blowing through the cracked windows and the scurrying of rats that had made the old stage their home. And tucked away in the right stage wing of the theater, chained to a chair with only the warmth of a small candle, was a girl.

Brielle tried to stretch her back as much as she could; her muscles were cramping from sitting in the same position for so many hours. She knew there was some sort of warmth to her left side, and she wanted so badly to get closer to it. The forecast for New York City that night was supposed to be 35 degrees with a chance of rain. But it wasn't--it was 29 degrees. Brielle was still wearing what she had put on for her date with Zach: a pair of jeans, boots, a sweater, and a coat. Her kidnappers had taken her scarf and hat when they blindfolded her. But what she had on wasn't enough to protect her from the bitter cold. Her body shivered constantly, and she kept drifting in and out of sleep. She was suffering from hypothermia, and with no food or drink, her body was growing weaker by the minute.

With nothing to see and nothing to hear, she kept her mind deep in thoughts of prayer. Each time she awakened from sleep, she thanked God for

keeping her alive and asked Him to save her from this circumstance. She thought about her mother and how terrified she must be. She knew that her mother's greatest fear was losing one of her children. If she could only call her, send a text, all the usual things she could do to let her mother know she was alive. But she couldn't do that. The thought of what her mother, Asher, and Oba were going through brought tears to her eyes, and she began to pray for them.

Then she thought of Keoni, Gideon… and Jace and what they were feeling right now. Her thoughts of Jace began to race through her head, all the things she had said and how she had treated him. Why had she been so stubborn? Why had she let her pride and anger completely take control? So, what if he was rich? He obviously had not let it define who he was. And yes, he did lie to her about it, but how many times had she diverted talking about things in her past to avoid discussing them, yet she couldn't forgive him for doing the same thing?

Of course, sitting chained to a chair in an abandoned building greatly changed her perspective on things. Yet, she knew deep in her heart that if she were not in this place, she would still be punishing Jace for his mistake. It made her sick to come to that realization about herself and her actions.

"Forgive me, Father God, for not showing the forgiveness you show me. Change me, please, Jesus, change my heart so that when I get out of here, I can be a better Christian and show others the grace you freely give. I'm sorry I have not given others the forgiveness and mercy You give daily to me," she prayed.

Brielle's lips ached from the duct tape that her abductors had placed over her mouth. And her head throbbed from the tight blindfold stretched around her head. She thought about the moment she was captured and everything that happened… it all took place in the blink of an eye.

She remembered talking with Zach about what she wanted to eat and sitting on the bench to look at all the lights in the town square; they were so beautiful, so dazzling. As she sat there, she felt a familiar presence close by. She looked to her left but saw no one she knew. She looked to her right, but just as she did, a town Trolley pulled up beside her to unload its passengers. She wondered who might have been on the other side of the Trolley.

She remembered holding her purse in her lap. She was checking to see if she had any messages on her cell phone when she heard a friendly voice speaking to her. When she looked up, she didn't know the man who asked her for directions to the movie theater, but he seemed so kind and friendly that she was happy to help him find his way. She stood up to talk to him, and before she knew what was happening, two other men grabbed her from behind, causing her to drop her drink and purse on the ground as they seized her arms. With one swift motion, they threw her into a van. The whole thing took only seconds.

Once she was inside the van, her captors quickly bound her wrists and ankles with zip-ties and slapped a piece of duct tape on her mouth. As they drove away and down the street, the last thing she remembered seeing out the

back window was Jace. He was the one she felt watching her; he must have been following her on her date with Zach.

The sight of him standing there on the corner, looking terrified as he desperately searched for her, was more than she could bear. She tried reaching for him from inside the van, only to be subdued by her captors. She remembered seeing how panic-stricken he was, so he knew she must have been taken, but couldn't see what happened because of the Trolley. She doubted anyone else saw her abduction; there was far too much going on in the middle of the square. And besides, she had been sitting isolated from all the commotion. But she knew Jace saw it, and he would come for her. How her heart ached to see him again to tell him how sorry she was, how wrong she had been… and how much she loved him.

Brielle had fought her feelings for so long because she wasn't sure of how he felt about her. When she realized she was in love with him, she wanted to try and find a way to express it and see if he felt the same way about her. But when she learned about who he really was and how he hid it from her, she felt deceived. She believed that he did not love her or would ever love her, especially if he couldn't be honest with her about his life. So, she pushed him away. She didn't want to let herself get hurt; she didn't want her heart to be broken. She told herself she would just get over it and move on… but she couldn't. She loved him with everything inside her, every fiber of her being. From the first time she saw him in the mini-mart that day, and they both grabbed the package of powdered doughnuts, there was a powerful connection. It was the same kind of bond that her mother described having with her father.

Brielle St. Claire loved Jace Roberts, Devereaux, his name didn't matter. She truly and deeply loved him and wanted the chance to tell him that.

Knowing that Jace saw her and would be looking for her gave immense hope that she would be found. But when? How long would it take them to figure out where she was? And even if they did, would it be too late? She didn't know how much longer she could hold on in this weather and had lost all track of time in her dim little candle-lit corner. As hard as she was trying to fight, the elements of nature would eventually take over. She felt herself slowly drifting off to sleep, her thoughts trying to take her to places of warmth and laughter. She dreamt of her father.

In her dream, she was six years old again, running with her daddy across the brushlands of Uganda just outside their village. It was a hot day, and Mark had made a crude kite for Brielle out of some old string, sticks, and paper from a package they had received in the mail. The sun was shining brightly, and the warm wind blew across her face. She could see her daddy laughing as he tried to get the kite up into the wind current, and she was laughing right along with him. She turned and covered her eyes to gaze up into the sky as he finally got the kite to take flight. She jumped for joy and clapped her hands as she watched it sail

above her.

Suddenly, she was jolted awake as she heard footsteps clanging down the hall, getting closer with every step. Trying to relax her breathing, she remembered a prayer her father always spoke over her, "Protect me, Father God, send angels with flaming swords around me."

Brielle tried to remain calm as the footsteps grew closer. With her eyes bound, her ears were isolated and accurate. She could detect the footsteps coming to her from her far-right side. She could feel her heart rate increasing, beating hard against the chain that held her there; the pain of it throbbed in her chest. She took a deep breath and focused her mind on the Lord and the scriptures she had memorized, searching for a verse of protection. Once she relaxed, the verse came quickly to her mind. Though she couldn't speak it out loud, she recited it in her head over and over again: '*The Lord will keep you from all harm--he will watch over your life. Psalm 121:7.'*

The footsteps drew nearer, slowly crossing the floor until she knew the person was standing next to her. Her hands were trembling even more violently from fear than from the cold.

"There you are," the voice said.

It was a man, but Brielle had never heard this voice before. It was high-pitched and had a slight southern drawl.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," he said. Then she heard him walk a few steps in front of her, and it sounded as if he had set something heavy down close by.

"I'm going to take this blindfold off, okay?" the man asked.

Brielle did not respond but sat silently, shivering.

She felt the man tug at the blindfold, and then the pressure around her head was released as he removed it. Her eyes had been closed for so long that she had to work to open them. Even the dim light from the candle beside her was too much at first, and she had to let her eyes adjust slowly.

When she finally had her eyes open, she saw in front of her a man standing at a table along the wall. He was opening something, and it sounded like he was taking out some sort of tools. She began to get sick to her stomach with the thought of what was going to happen. The man turned around to speak to her. When she saw his face in the dim candlelight, her whole body began to shake with fear.

"Protect me, Father God, protect me in this moment, in this place right now in the Name of Jesus Christ," she thought to herself.

The man came and knelt in front of her. Even though she did not know his name, his face was burned in her memory. It was the man who had been following her; the mysterious man from the football games, the same man who Jace chased during the school field trip, and who she thought she saw at church one Sunday morning. This man was now kneeling before her, and he was

holding some sort of tool in his hand. Brielle took in a deep breath and tried to allow the peace of God to take control of her.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, "I'm here to help you."

Brielle stared at the man in confusion. If he knew where she was, he must have helped to abduct her, so why was he coming to her aid now?

"I'm going to take this tape off your mouth," he said, slowly reaching for the edge, "but we have to go quickly, or it'll be much worse. Try to tighten your lips if you can; that will help a bit."

Then, with one quick and smooth motion, he ripped the tape off. Brielle's dry, parched lips burned as she felt the tape rip off them and the surrounding skin.

"I'm sorry," the man said, looking at her with great compassion, "I know that hurts. Now you just sit still and I'm going to pick these locks open," he said, reaching for the first lock around her right wrist.

The chains had been wrapped around her chest, then around and through the back of the chair, then to the arms of the chair, where they held her wrists tight and secure. She had separate chains on her legs and ankles as well, anchoring her down completely.

"If I get these off your arms first, you might breathe a little bit better," he said.

"Thank you," Brielle tried to speak, her voice barely even a whisper as she was dehydrated and her vocal cords were cold, dry, and scratchy.

"You're welcome," he said, "I'm sorry they did this to you, but I think I have just enough time to get you out of here," he said, picking at the lock.

"Did you kidnap me?" Brielle asked slowly.

The man looked over at her, "No ma'am, I did not. I knew they were going to do it, and I couldn't stop it. But I can help you now," he said.

Brielle took a deep breath. "Who are they?" she asked, her voice still barely audible.

"*They* are the ones who work for Joseph Frattianno, not Joe Senior, but his son, Joey. They call him Joey the Snake. If you've ever seen his temper, you'd know why," he said, "Anyway, you've found out too much about their business down there in Fairfield, so they wanted to… take care of you."

"You mean they want to kill me," she said meekly.

He didn't answer but looked up at her briefly with a solemn expression.

"So… you work for Joseph Frattianno too?"

The man sighed, "Yes, I'm sorry to say I do--I mean I did. I've worked for Joey for many years… but after I get you out of here, I'm leaving. This is not the life I want. Not anymore, I'm done. I want to live a clean life according to God's Word."

Brielle listened carefully and believed the man, but was still confused.

"I don't understand why you're helping me," Brielle said.

The man stopped his work on the lock and looked up at her. “My name is T.J.,” he said, then waited for her response.

Brielle just looked at him blankly for a moment, and then innocently said, “Thank you, T.J., my name is Brielle.”

T.J. smiled broadly at her, “You are one amazing little lady, you know that?”

Brielle looked at him, confused, and tried to lick her lips, her face still stinging from the tape being ripped off.

“I wasn’t telling you my name to introduce myself to you. I know who you are,” he said, resuming his work on the lock, “I was telling you my name because I thought you might remember it.”

Brielle searched through her mind, but she was too weak, too tired, and couldn’t remember.

“I met you one day back a few months ago,” T.J. explained, “You may not remember meeting me, but I will *always* remember the day I first saw you. Yes, ma’am, that is one day I will *never* forget.”

Brielle furrowed her brow, deep in thought. She looked closely at the man, but the only memories she had were of the times she had seen him at the football game and the field trip.

“I’m sorry… but I don’t remember you,” she said.

“That’s okay,” he replied, “Not too many people remember me. That’s the story of my life,” he laughed. “But you, well, you are one unforgettable person. You helped change my life forever, and I will never forget it. You see… You helped bring me back to Jesus.”

Brielle looked at him and could tell from the look on his face and the tone in his voice that he was sincere, but she was completely confused by his response.

“I’m sorry this is taking me so long,” he said, “Locks were never my specialty.”

“What do you mean, I helped bring you back to Jesus?” she asked softly.

T.J. sighed, “Well, it’s kind of a long story,” he said.

“I’m not exactly going anywhere,” Brielle said weakly with a slight grin.

T.J. laughed, “That’s very true.” He paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and then began his story. “Well, I grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia. My folks were very poor-- heck, everyone I knew was very poor. We didn’t have much of anything. Not much of a home, clothes, food—in fact, I only had one toy car that I played with most of my childhood. It was a very rough life,” he said, his eyes lighting up as the first lock clicked open.

“Hey! I got one!” he said proudly, tugging on the chain to relieve the pressure around her chest. Brielle breathed deeply and stretched her arm out slowly.

“Oh, thank you,” she said gratefully.

T.J. then moved over to her other wrist lock. “Anyway, my folks, well, we never did much. We never went anywhere either. I walked to school, and

occasionally we would go to the store. But outside of fishing and swimming in the summertime, there wasn't much else to do.

"Then one day a little old man came driving an old broken-down school bus, not a very big one, it only carried about twenty-five people or so. The bus had been painted white, and it had a big brown cross on the back. He came to our door and introduced himself to my family. 'My name is Buddy Hall,' he told us, 'I am here from the Mountain Creek Church of God, and I'd like to come and pick you up for church each Sunday.'

"Now you gotta understand my daddy. He *never* went to church. He didn't like being told that he couldn't drink as much as he wanted to, talk the way he wanted to-- or hurt people the way he wanted to. So, he had no interest in going to church. My mother wanted to go but never did. She said it was because she didn't have nice enough clothes to wear-- but I knew better.

"Buddy told us that we should just come as we are; that Jesus didn't care about the packaging, only the heart inside. But Mama never did go. I don't know who she was more afraid of, the people of the church-- or my daddy. I went though. I didn't have any idea what church was like, and I didn't care. I was just excited to go somewhere-- anywhere," he laughed as he worked.

"Yes, ma'am, I got on that bus, and I went to church. My first day there, the teachers were real nice to me and the kids pretty much were too," he paused and put his hands on his legs in thought.

"Boy, I loved going there," he said, "I really did. The church was so beautiful, so clean and bright. It smelled good inside, and all the people were so nice and dressed so well. There was somethin' 'bout that place. Even as an eight-year-old little boy, I could feel it was different there, there was somethin' different 'bout that place. It was peaceful and good.

"My teacher, her name was Miss Ruthie White; she was tall, had long blonde hair, and oh my, was so pretty. She gave me a Bible of my very own. It was brand new. I never had anything like it before in my life. It was dark blue with a leather cover and gold letters printed on the front. I was so proud of my Bible, and I would read it as much as I could." he stopped his work on the locks and reached inside his back pocket.

Slowly, he pulled out a small dark blue Bible, worn through the years, but still had the gold writing across the front that he described. When he showed it to Brielle, something stirred inside her heart, and tears began to well up in her eyes. Not only was she moved by the man's story, but she was also thrilled to see a Bible, the Sword of the Spirit, a mighty weapon against her enemy. It was a bold reminder that even amidst her darkest times of trouble, God was there.

T.J. opened the inside cover to show where his teacher had inscribed the Bible for him. It read, *Dear T.J., Always follow the commands of God and hide His Word deep in your heart.*
Love, Miss Ruthie.

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Ruthie sure did like me. She would help me with my readin' and such, and soon I began to learn my memory verses and scriptures. I learned all the stories I could in the Bible, too. My favorite was David and Goliath, and how even though he was a little boy, God used him to defeat a giant. Made me think that even though I was a little boy, God could use me," he said as he put the Bible back in his pocket and resumed his work on the lock.

"I learned how to pray, and I remember the Sunday I asked Jesus into my heart. Miss Ruthie led me in the prayer. I never felt anything like that in my entire life. I was so happy. I felt like a brand-new person, like *anything* was possible. I went home and told Mama all about it, and even though my daddy didn't want to hear anything about Jesus—I was still happy. Looking back now, I realized that what I found was hope," he said, "Hope for a better life, a better future."

Then he sat silently for a moment as he worked on the lock.

"What happened then?" Brielle asked softly through chattering teeth.

T.J. hesitated, "Well, then one Sunday morning, Buddy and his little white bus with the brown cross on the back just stopped comin' to my house," he said slowly. "I imagine he got sick or died or something… but no one told us. I would go out every Sunday morning with my Bible and wait for him though. I did that for two months straight, every Sunday… but no one ever came."

At that moment, the second lock clicked open, and T.J.'s face brightened, "Hey, I got another one! I guess I'm getting' better at this!" he laughed. He moved to the locks on her ankles and stopped to take a moment and study them. The light from the candle on the table beside them wasn't enough, so he dug around in his bag and finally produced a small flashlight so he could examine them more closely.

"Wow," he said, "They sure broke out the heavy stuff here. They have you in some sort of shackles. Even if I broke the chair and removed the chain, you still wouldn't be able to walk anywhere," he said as he inspected the shackle. He pulled on the lock a little bit to look at it closely, and Brielle cringed in pain.

"I'm sure sorry," he said gently, "They've really have these clamped on ya, huh? I'll be as careful as I can so as not to hurt you anymore."

"Thank you," Brielle said.

She looked at T.J. in amazement. All this time, he was someone she feared, but now to see him here, he was so kind, so gentle. It was strange to think she ever was afraid of him.

"I need some more light in here if I'm going to get you out of those," he said, taking his flashlight and shining it on the walls around her. After a moment, he exclaimed, "Aha! That's what I'm looking for!"

T.J. stepped behind Brielle, and she watched as he opened a box on the wall and flipped several switches. He had gone through three switches with no response, but the fourth one produced a large light out to her far-right side.

Then came another, and another. It was only then that Brielle could see she had been sitting in the wings of a theatrical stage. She could look out onto the large stage, and because the curtains were open, she saw a mezzanine full of green-colored seats. She could only see the first few rows of the mezzanine, but could tell that at one time, it must have been a grand place.

"We're in a theater?" she asked with her grating voice.

"Yes. It was called *The Proscenium*, whatever that means," he said.

"It means front," Brielle answered slowly, "it's a Latin word that describes what kind of stage it is. Like a frame for the audience to look through," she blurted out absentmindedly.

T.J. looked at her with a bewildered expression.

"I study Latin in school," she said.

T.J. shook his head and laughed softly, "You are one remarkable girl, no doubt of that! All I know is that it used to be one of the finest theaters in New York City," he said, walking over to his tools.

"Frattianno owns it, and this is where most of the drugs are prepared and packaged. It works out great. Everyone thinks it's just an old, abandoned building. But if they only knew what all was going on in this place…" he said, turning to kneel at her feet, "Okay, let's give this a try. Just tell me if I hurt you," he said, starting to work on the large lock around her left ankle.

"Wait… what?" Brielle asked, "This is where the drugs are?"

"Yep. This is his daddy's building and where he operates from," T.J. answered.

"Here? In this theater?" Brielle asked.

"Well, not here in this room exactly," he said, "The building is several stories high. He has a secret room on the third floor upstairs."

Brielle looked up above her as if to imagine the room he was talking about.

"Do you help him sell drugs?" Brielle asked.

T.J. sighed, "Yes," he said in shame, "I did."

"And you're just going to leave and not try to do anything to stop it?" she questioned.

"What can I do?" he asked.

"Go to the police," she said.

T.J. laughed, "Yeah, I'm not sure that's an option for me."

"There are people out there suffering because of those drugs," she said in a raspy deep voice, "Like my friend Lacy and her parents. Like, like… Dylan, Rateesh, and all the others in our town-- who knows how many more are out there suffering."

"I know," he whispered, the emotion coming over him, "I know, and I'm part of the reason for that. But I'm done with it, I am. I want to go and find a real job and earn an honest pay. I want to turn my life around and make up for all the wrong that I've done."

Brielle listened to the honesty in his voice. She thought about Jesus and how He looked upon a sinner who comes asking for mercy and forgiveness. This is what she had just moments ago asked God to change in her. Not to judge others, but to love like Jesus does. Jesus does not turn sinners away; He embraces and loves them. T.J. was one of them. She sat quietly, thinking as he kept working on freeing her ankle from the shackle.

"I'm sorry the church forgot you, T.J. I know that had to hurt your heart," Brielle said, "Our church wouldn't have done that."

"Oh, they didn't forget about me, I just thought they did. Years later, I learned that Miss Ruthie White had been sending me postcards and letters, but my daddy took them and hid them. He didn't like me spending so much time at church, so he let me think they forgot about me," he said as he worked gently on the lock. "Miss Ruthie even drove all the way out to my house just to see me, but my daddy sent her away and told her never to come back. I wasn't home that day. I was out fishin'. I sure wish I'd been home instead. I would have loved to see Miss Ruthie just one more time," he sighed regretfully.

"How did you find out about her visit?" Brielle asked.

"Mama told me," he said. "She told me years later, after Daddy died. She was too scared to tell me the truth while Daddy was alive, but then I guess she was hoping I might go back to church if I knew the truth."

"Then what happened?" Brielle asked quietly.

"After I stopped going to church, I didn't know what to do with myself. I wasn't surrounded by the greatest of supporters for Jesus, if you know what I mean. None of my family, friends, or neighbors ever went to church, and although I loved Jesus… I just started to slip away from Him," he said with a tone that reflected his shame.

"Unfortunately, that can happen to anyone," Brielle said softly, thinking about what Jace had told her. He, too, had slipped away from attending church and serving the Lord. "That's one of the reasons God created the church, so we can have people around us to love us, encourage us, and help keep us going on the right path when times get rough. Everyone makes mistakes and can fall, but being part of a good church, well, that can be a blessing in a person's life. It helps to have good people around who love you and will help pick you back up again. God knows we're all human and we all need to answer for our actions… um, accountability. Yeah, we all need accountability and helping hands from time to time."

"Yeah, it's true, and that's what happened. I fell and slipped away from the Lord. Far away. I'm not sure how it all happened, gradually, I guess. I started making friends with the wrong crowd. When you don't have nothin' and you don't have nothin' to do, it's real easy to get into trouble.

"Half the people in my area were high school dropouts, some of my friends didn't make it past the seventh grade. We hung out a lot looking for things to

do—and most of what we ended up doin' was nothin' but trouble.

"My friends and I started stealin' from the local store. Small things at first; a candy bar here, a pack of baseball cards, maybe a fishing lure or two; then before you know it, you're stealin' your first car," he paused to look up at her as he spoke, "I wasn't very good at stealin' cars. My first car was my last. I got a two-year bit in the blocks for trying to lift a pretty little GTO when I was nineteen," he shook his head and sighed, "Prison for me was like going to college for crime. All I learned while I was in there was how to do bigger and better jobs. That's where I learned about drug dealin'."

T.J. put his tool down and stared at the floor for a moment, "But you know…I never forgot those Bible lessons I learned at church. I wasn't living a life for God or following His commands, but I never forgot those stories. Stories about David who battled Goliath, or the three friends who were thrown in the fiery furnace, or the man Moses who split the sea, and his people walked on dry land. But most of all, I never forgot the story of Jesus. The baby who came to earth on Christmas day to die for my sins," he said, shaking his head, "Nope, I never forgot that story."

He started to work again, pulling on the lock and causing Brielle to cry out.

"Oh, gosh, I'm sure sorry," he said sincerely, "I'll go more slowly so as not to hurt ya."

Brielle nodded, "Thank you. So then what happened to you?" she asked.

"Huh, well, for one thing, I came out of prison a much better criminal than when I went in. I had more knowledge, more contacts, and more skills. All of which I learned from other inmates who were not interested in turning over a new leaf either," he laughed. "They weren't all like that, mind you, but most of the guys I knew were using their time to plan their next crime. So, when I got out, I took my new contacts and came to New York City to work for Joey. He got me started as a deliveryman. I found out real quick that I could make almost ten times what I could make at an honest job-- and there wasn't anything to uh, break into," he laughed again, "As you can see, it's *not* my specialty.

"Joey first used me to work in Fairfield, and after about a year or so, I was in charge of all the deliveries there. My partner, Buck, and I, would deliver the drugs every two weeks. We had a good system going, smooth and simple," he said. "But you already know how it worked—otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here."

"I only *thought* I knew how it worked," Brielle said, "But… would you tell me. I'd like to know."

"Yeah, sure, since I'm getting' out, this can be my good deed, to pass on this information to you and maybe you can pass it on to the good guys," he said with a grin, "Well… we would meet Joey's guys on the pier every other Saturday night to pick up the delivery. We made pretty consistent sales in Fairfield and on the Gold Coast, enough that we had to get a new shipment every other week.

"Joey's guys would come down from the city by boat. It was my job to take the new product and drop it at the designated location for pickup. Buck's job was to go and draw the location symbol on the lighthouse wall so the local guys would know where to pick up the package.

"As Joey's guys left the pier, they would flash the signal into the lighthouse tower from their boat to let the locals know the goods were there and ready to be picked up. This was the system we had worked out so that everything could be done secretly and quietly.

"Two if by land, one if by sea," Brielle whispered.

T.J. looked up, "Yep, that was it! Brian and Sidney, the local guys, knew to be watching the lighthouse at that time on those days. Then, after they saw the light, they were instructed to wait until the next morning before they went to check the lighthouse and look for the location symbol."

"Buck would draw a picture on the lighthouse wall with charcoal," Brielle said.

T.J. smiled, "You got it again! That place was so eaten up with graffiti it was the perfect place to leave a message without being noticed. The local guys would wash it off the wall once they knew the location, easy as pie. Then they would wait until the next night to go and pick them up."

"At the old cemetery," Brielle said.

"That was one of the locations, on land anyway. We had a few pre-picked locations we would use so that we weren't going to the same place more than once every few months," T.J. explained.

"Why did they have to wait until the next morning to check the lighthouse? Why not go that night?" she asked.

"Just so that they could get up there and make sure they were alone. It gets pretty dark up there at night without a full moon; lots of kids like to party up there, too. There were several times when Buck went up there to draw the location symbol and had to wait until a group of partiers left--or passed out. But Joey said it would look better if they went up there during the day. It wouldn't be so con... con..."

"Conspicuous?" Brielle asked.

"Yeah, that's what he said, not so conspicuous. People go to visit lighthouses during the day to enjoy the view. Besides, with the symbol being drawn on a wall with all that graffiti surrounding it, no one would know it was there. So, there was no need to hurry," he said.

Brielle thought about all these things for a moment. She thought about how Jace had been inside that lighthouse and must have just missed Brian and Sidney going up there. Her body shivered, partially from the cold and partially from the thought.

"I still don't understand how I helped bring you back to Jesus," Brielle said.

T.J. paused and took a deep breath. "Last September, I was running late for

the drop-off, so Buck went ahead and did it without me. A *big* mistake, and one I should have seen coming. Buck was usually my first customer. Sometimes he bought as many drugs as he sold. This one night, when we were in Fairfield, he took more than he could afford and had a party.

"I found him in a hotel room. When he realized what he had done, he panicked. When we dropped off the drugs, we also picked up the sales money. We had to bring the sales money back here to Joey as we always did by Saturday night. Only this time he didn't have enough money to cover what he took."

As he finished this sentence, Brielle heard the shackle lock click, and the immense pressure that surrounded her ankle was relieved.

"Hey! Not bad," T.J. praised himself, "Now that I know what to do, maybe the next one won't take me so long," he said, moving over to her right ankle to begin his work again.

"So, Buck knew that the money for Joey would be short?" Brielle asked as she stretched out her leg.

"Exactly, and you don't *ever* shortchange Joey the Snake, not *ever,*" he emphasized the word strongly. "Buck was scared out of his mind and asked if I had the money to cover it. I had half of it, but not all of it; he was still about four hundred dollars short."

Then he paused and looked up at her, "We decided to hit a local store on the way here to see if we could make up the difference," he said, staring at her, waiting for her response.

Brielle looked at him for a moment, processing the information that he told her.

Then it clicked.

T.J. and Buck were the two robbers in the mini-mart that day, the day she went fishing with Oba, the day she met Jace. Suddenly, every detail of that experience came washing over her, and her hands began to tremble again.

"Look here," T.J. said pointing to a small burn scar by his right eye, "I can prove it. This is the scar from the coffee your grandfather threw on me." then seeing the fear that was spreading over her quickly, said, "I'm so sorry, I sincerely am. You have no idea how much I regret what I did that day," he assured her, putting his hand on her hand.

"I remember you left, and Buck kept yelling for you. 'T.J.,' he shouted, 'T.J.'," she said as she filtered through her memory.

"I know. I felt horrible about leaving him like that," he said.

"Do you know what happened to him?" Brielle asked.

"The last I heard, he was taken to the hospital, treated, and once he was better… they took him straight to jail. I imagine he's back in the state pen now," he replied.

"How could you leave your friend like that?" Brielle asked.

"I had to get out of there. You have no idea how scared I was," he replied.

"You? Scared? As I remember it, you and Buck were doing all the scaring," she said, "What were you scared of, going to prison again?"

T. J. stared at the floor and shook his head, "No," he said, looking up at her, "I was scared of you."

Brielle stared at him with a confused expression. "What? Of *me*?"

"Yes, I had never seen anything like that before. I had never seen God use someone like that. I knew it was God Who was helping you. In that moment when I saw you standing there shouting the scripture at us, I remembered the stories I learned in Sunday school with Miss Ruthie. I knew that God was in that place-- and He was with you.

"Every story I ever heard where God helped someone, they always had a triumphant victory over evil. I knew you were the good-- and I was the evil. I was scared of what God was going to do to me," he said softly.

Brielle sat quietly listening, stunned at this revelation.

"After that day, I couldn't stop thinking about you. It wasn't that I was drawn to you personally-- I mean, you're a beautiful girl, but it was God that I wanted to see. I could see Him in you. It was like He began calling to me from that moment on. I couldn't stop thinking about Him, but I didn't believe I was worthy of Him anymore because of the life I was leading. I knew I needed to make a change in my life, so I went to your church one Sunday and talked to your minister," he said.

"I knew I saw you there," Brielle replied. "I thought it was you I saw in the back of the church."

"Yeah, it was. I waited until after everyone had gone, and then I talked with Reverand Diffie. He prayed with me and I… well… I gave my heart back to Jesus that day," he said with a broad smile, "and I've been trying hard to serve Him ever since. I began to pray again and read my Bible like I did when I was a little boy. I haven't felt this good… well, ever since I went to church with Buddy and Miss Ruthie. I'm so happy now and I don't ever want to live without Jesus again," he said, his eyes sparkling with joy.

Brielle's heart was overwhelmed by T.J.'s story.

"It's all because of you," T.J. said, working diligently on the locks again. "I might not ever have come back to Jesus if I hadn't seen you in the store that day. You were so bold, so confident in God, and I could see, God was with you. I want to tell you how sorry I am for what I did to you all that day in the store. For all that I've done that has brought so much pain upon the good town of Fairfield. I know that I should have gone to jail with Buck, too, but… I kind of think God gave me this chance so I could help you right now and so I could tell you how sorry I am and ask you to please forgive me for all I did," he said softly.

Brielle sat quietly, processing all that T.J. said. She thought about these instances where God Almighty had powerfully intervened, saving them from the destruction of the enemy. Then she looked at T.J., and her heart was full of joy.

"I'm so happy for you, T.J.," she said softly. "I'm so glad you came back to God. Jesus loves you so much, and my grandpa always says, 'Living your life for Jesus is the best life you can live.' I know Jesus forgives you of any sins that you have confessed to Him because God's Word says so and… I forgive you, too."

T.J. broke into a soft laughter that was partially joy and partially sorrow, "Oh, thank you! Thank you so much for your forgiveness and for reminding me that Jesus loves me! It's hard to believe He could love someone like me, but I know He does because my Bible tells me so."

He then got back to work on the last lock, and Brielle sat quietly as he worked.

"I know what all those drugs have done to the people in your town. But I need to tell you, although I know what I did was wrong by selling the drugs, those cuts weren't made by us," he said.

"Cuts?" Brielle asked, confused.

"Yeah, those drugs were pure when we delivered them, and they had been tested and weighed. They were pure," he answered. "Our drugs never had reports of causing comas and crazy things like that. Whatever was in those drugs when they were taken-- we didn't add it."

Brielle remembered Laura telling her that the drugs Lacy took were mixed with a strange combination of baking soda and some sort of mixture of barbiturates.

"You mean the drugs were mixed with something else *after* you delivered them?" she asked.

"Without a doubt. Joey prides himself on his business producing a top-quality product, none of the watered-down junk that most dealers give on the street. He made more money that way because people knew his drugs were pure. He drew in more top-dollar clients. When I learned about all those kids and what was happening… well, all I can tell you is-- it wasn't me. Joey would never have stood for that kind of stuff. Not that it makes us good or anything. We shouldn't have been selling drugs to begin with, but I just want you to know, I *didn't* do that."

"Then who did?" she asked.

"I don't know for certain. Buck and I heard that Brian and Sidney were working with some high school kids. Sidney met them through a girl who went to their school," he said.

"Lacy," Brielle whispered in astonishment.

"I don't know. Buck and I just thought they were selling on the street, but I think maybe they are the ones who cut the drugs down," he said. "I remember Brian telling Sidney something about their 'scientists', but I didn't know what he meant at the time."

"Yes," Brielle whispered, deep in thought, "They were all excellent in chemistry."

Her mind began to weave the pieces together. Dylan told Gideon he did not buy his drugs from Reed or any of his guys. This is why they were involved; they weren't selling them; they were cutting them.

"Why do they do that?" Brielle asked innocently. "Why do they cut drugs with other things?"

"To make more *money,*" T.J. replied, "If the seller has more of a product to sell, then he makes more money. Sometimes dealers water the drugs down to be able to make more sales. Plus, the clients want more of the drug because they aren't gettin' enough high from it, so they keep using it more often, which means they run out quickly and buy more. It's nothin' but a win-win situation for the seller and a horrific loss—and a dangerous situation for the buyer."

"More money," Brielle whispered. It all made sense now. Joey's gang brought the drugs into Fairfield from New York City. T.J. and Buck got them to Brian and Sidney through their system of the Lighthouse codes. Then Sidney and Brian would take the drugs and give them to Reed, Morgan, Sean, and Ryan to cut them with other substances, which would weaken the drug and make it less pure. Then they sold it to whoever they could by means of Rateesh's parents' restaurant and any other methods that had yet to be discovered. All the while, the only thing that mattered to them was *money*.

"Why would they add another drug to it?" she asked.

"I'm not sure I'm following you," T.J. said.

"The doctors said my friend Lacy had taken meth that was mixed with baking soda and barbiturates. Why would they add barbiturates? Why wouldn't they just add baking soda, which is cheap?" she asked, perplexed.

"I don't know, maybe they were trying to experiment with creating a drug of their own. Something new is always sold hot and fast. There are millions of people out there who will try anything; lots of guinea pigs to test it on," T.J. answered.

Brielle shook her head, "But they aren't guinea pigs, they're *people;* mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters who have loved ones in their lives."

T.J. shook his head, "That stuff doesn't matter to a drug boss, they only see customers and dollar signs, nothin' else."

Brielle sighed, overwhelmed by the lack of respect for humanity.

"How did you know I was here? How did you find me?" she asked.

"I heard them talking upstairs about what they were going to do to you. They said you were figuring out too much and needed to be stopped. I acted like I didn't know who you were, that way I could still find out all the information I needed to help you," he said.

"How long ago was that?" Brielle asked.

"A few weeks ago, I guess," he said, concentrating heavily on the last lock.

"I still didn't know everything until you just explained it to me tonight. I only had bits and pieces of information," she said, puzzled, "How did they know that I

knew anything at all?"

Just as she finished her question, the last lock clicked and fell open, and Brielle felt the pressure release from her right ankle. Relieved to be free from the binding and painful locks, she slowly reached down to gently rub it.

"I don't know how to thank you, T.J.," she said.

"It's me who needs to thank you. Thank you for being obedient to Jesus. If you hadn't done what you did in that store that day, the good Lord only knows what Buck might have done to those people. And me? Well, I might not have ever made it back into the arms of Jesus," he said sweetly. "Seeing God in you changed my life, and I'm just happy I can come and do something to help you now."

"Thank you. God only knows what would have happened to *me* if you hadn't come along," she whispered sincerely. "What's your plan to get out of here?"

"First, we need to see if you can walk," he said as he tucked his tool into his hand and reached down to help her up out of the chair. "Okay, easy does it now," he said as he gently took both her hands to help her up.

Brielle's body was aching from the terrible cold she had endured, and because she was dehydrated, her stiff muscles throbbed with every movement. The pain of just moving was almost unbearable. She thought that if she distracted herself with conversation, it might help take her mind off the pain.

"You didn't answer my question before. How did Joey find out that I knew anything at all?" she asked.

The second, Brielle finished her question, they heard a loud voice shout at them from across the stage.

"FREEZE!" shouted the voice.

Brielle and T.J. both jumped, startled by the sudden command. Brielle looked but couldn't quite see where the voice was coming from. T.J. took her hands to try and gently pull her up, looking across the stage as he did.

"I said FREEZE!" came the voice again, stronger this time. Brielle's legs were weak and shaky; her bones ached from the bitter cold. She could hardly stand without the help of T.J. She looked across the stage and saw Hadley step out from the opposite wing and into the light. He was dressed in regular clothes and had his gun drawn and pointed at them.

"Hadley, thank God," she said as strongly as she could, relieved to see that he was there.

T.J. stared across the stage at the officer who had his gun aimed at him.

"Step away from the girl and put your hands in the air!" Hadley commanded.

"If I let her go, she'll fall down," T.J. said calmly.

"I said step away from the girl!" Hadley shouted, taking another step onto the stage.

“Brielle, if you have any strength in you at all, you need to try and run, run right now,” T.J. said.

Brielle still held her confused look but yelled out to Hadley as loud as she could, “It’s okay, Hadley. I’m okay. This man came to help me. He got me free and I’m alright,” she said with her crackly voice.

Hadley took another step closer, his gun still drawn, and pointed directly at T.J.

“I said, step away from the girl and put your hands in the air!” Hadley shouted again.

“Okay, okay, whatever you say,” T.J. said as he stepped away from Brielle, who now teetered without his help, and raised both his hands above his head.

“Keep your hands up! Turn around and face me!” Hadley shouted.

T.J. turned around to face Hadley on the other side of the stage, but kept speaking to Brielle. “Brielle, you need to run. Get out of here, right now.”

“You are under arrest for kidnapping!” Hadley said sternly.

“You and I both know that didn’t happen!” T.J. answered defiantly. Brielle looked at T.J., then back at Hadley again in bewilderment.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Hadley shouted, “Anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law, so I suggest you shut your mouth!”

“Brielle, he’s not who you think he is,” T.J. said over his shoulder, “He works for Joey the Snake.”

“I’m warning you, boy, you better shut up!” Hadley shouted, taking another step closer on the stage.

Brielle listened to T.J. while watching Hadley, her heart was racing, and her legs were shaking, trying to find the strength to move.

“He’s the reason you were kidnapped. All the information you and your friends told him, *he* told Joey. He knew you had to be stopped before you ruined their system in Fairfield, before you went to any other police officers,” T.J. pressed on, his tone growing louder.

“I’m going to tell you one more time, remain silent!” Hadley shouted.

Brielle could hardly believe what she was hearing. She couldn’t breathe. Could this be true? Could Hadley really be part of the drugs being sold in their town?

“Search your heart, Brielle, I’m telling the truth. Remember? I have Jesus in my heart now. I am not lying to you. He’s the one behind your kidnapping. If I’m telling the truth, he’s the reason your friends lost their daddy. He shot him too when your friends’ daddy found out the truth!” T.J. shouted to her over his shoulder.

The sound of the gunshots rang out from Hadley’s gun and echoed through the theater, magnifying the sound ten times. The force from the sound knocked Brielle onto her knees, and it was there that she watched as T.J. fell backward

and onto the floor in front of her. Her body was violently shaking in shock as she realized what had just happened.

She leaned around the dividing curtain to look at Hadley, who stood across the stage with his gun still in hand. Then she looked over at T.J. He was shot in the chest but was still alive. He reached his hand out for her, and she crawled over by his side as quickly as she could.

T.J. was gasping for breath as the bullets had pierced his lungs. Brielle took his hand in hers, her eyes filling with tears. She saw him struggle to reach behind his back. “I want to thank you again,” he whispered through his heavy gasps for air, “If you hadn’t listened to God, I wouldn’t have come back to Jesus.”

Brielle watched as he coughed up blood. She gripped his hand tightly, not knowing what to say. “Help him, Jesus,” she whispered, “Please help him.”

She was so grateful to this man. Even though he had once terrorized her in a small town mini-mart, now, through the powerful love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, he had been transformed into her rescuer.

“Jesus is with us right now,” she said.

“Yes,” T.J. smiled and whispered, “I feel Him.” Then he slowly brought his other hand to hers and in it, he placed his Bible. “Please take this and remember me. You may be the only one who ever will.”

“Thank you for helping me, T.J. I’ll never forget you and I’ll tell people your amazing testimony as long as I live,” she whispered, her voice choked with emotion.

“Thanks to you… I can go to be with Jesus now… and forever,” he coughed again, blood flowing down his chin and neck, and his smile growing faint.

Brielle felt his hand go limp in hers.

He was gone.

But she knew he was with Jesus.

She began to sob, her body trembling violently. But her attention quickly shifted as she heard more voices coming from across the stage. She took T.J.’s little Bible and held it tightly in her hands.

“Please help me, Jesus, please deliver me from this evil,” she whispered.

Brielle looked up and leaned around the curtain to see three men standing with Hadley; it was Brian, Sidney, and a man she had never seen before. From the way he dressed and walked, he fit the perfect description of an Italian mobster. She guessed he was Joey the Snake.

“What in the world are you doing?” Joey yelled at Hadley.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hadley said, putting his gun into his holster, “I’ll take care of it.”

“Really? Well, you better take care of it. T.J. was one of my best guys!” Joey said angrily.

“He turned on you, Joe,” Hadley said, “He was telling the girl everything, said he found Jesus or something like that.”

Joey rolled his eyes and yelled, “That’s just what I need. So where is she?”

Brielle heard the footsteps coming closer to her from across the stage. She wanted to get up and run, but her body was too weak, too stiff, and in shock. She shoved T.J.’s Bible inside her coat pocket and was still kneeling by him when Hadley came up from behind the dividing curtain and grabbed her.

“Come on, Brielle,” he said roughly, “let’s go.”

Hadley pulled her up and had to practically drag her across the stage because she could not keep up with him. Joey the Snake slowly walked out to center stage. Brian and Sidney stood back while Joey came closer to look at her. He was younger than she expected and had jet black hair, which was neatly combed and styled. He had on a sleek black shirt, unbuttoned down to his chest, with his sleeves rolled up to his elbow. He wore a fine pair of shiny gray dress pants, expensive black patent shoes, and had several large gold rings on his fingers that were covered with glittering diamonds and jewels. He had narrow brown eyes framed by defined black eyebrows, and he had a strong, chiseled jawline. Brielle thought to herself that his name suited him. He looked sleek, smooth, and malicious, just like a snake.

“So,” Joey said puffing on a lit cigarette, “You’re the one who’s been trying to destroy my business in Fairfield?” he asked; his voice low, smooth, and wicked.

Brielle did not answer. She noticed the long tattoo of a snake wound around his forearm - the head of the serpent sitting on the top of his hand and its tongue extending down his index finger.

“Lovely town, Fairfield, you know it was rated one of the top ten places to live in America? Quaint folks who like to live a simple, good life, enjoy baseball games, and town parades. Virtually no crime there at all,” he said, taking a long drag on his cigarette. Slowly, he bent down and blew the smoke in her face, “That is… until I came along,” he said with a sinister snicker. Brian and Sidney laughed softly behind him.

“And then there’s the Gold Coast,” he said with a sly tone, “Any criminal in their right mind would be drawn to a place with such a name. Like a moth to a flame,” he said as he slowly began to walk in a circle around Brielle, sizing her up. “I have a beautiful system in place there, started it years ago, and it was working perfectly until Hadley’s partner figured out what was going on. We had to shut it down temporarily… restructure things a bit and then resume business,” he said, stopping in front of her.

“But you… Well, you had all the answers about how it worked, didn’t you? Hadley told us how you and your friends figured out all the pieces of the puzzle, but *you* were the one determined to put them all together.

“He said you wouldn’t leave it alone and that you were smart enough to figure it all out,” he smiled sinisterly at her, “I guess you’re quite the little detective, huh? And I see you have beauty along with brains. Normally a good

combination, but *that* kind of intelligence does not bode well for my business," he paused to take another drag on his cigarette, blowing the smoke in her face in one long steady stream causing her to cough.

"We took care of Officer Toussaint… and we will take care of you. It's nothing personal," he said, casually flicking the ashes of his cigarette onto the stage. "It's just business," he smiled with a broad, sinister grin. "It is a shame, though," he said, looking her up and down, "You are one lovely young lady."

Brielle shivered at his words, and they angered her. "I see. So, you're going to take care of me? Well, what about them?" she asked, motioning over toward Brian and Sidney.

Joey looked back over his shoulder at the men and then back at her with a confused but amused expression. "They work for me. Why would I do that?" he asked curiously.

Brielle watched as Sidney took something out of his pocket. It was a piece of gum. He unwrapped it, popped it into his mouth, and threw the wrapper on the floor. It caught her attention, and she stared at it for a moment and recognized it as being the same kind of gum wrapper as the one Jace found in the old oak tree at the cemetery.

Joey looked at her as she stared at the floor. He mockingly snapped his fingers in front of her face, "Hey, yo, right here, sweetheart," he said, attracting her attention back to him, "I asked you a question. Why would I get rid of my guys?"

"Because they have been stealing from you," she said strongly, "and from what I understand, no one steals from Joey the Snake."

Joey's amused expression slowly changed into one of seriousness. "What are you talking about?"

"T.J. just told me you pride yourself on selling a pure product, one that is not cut or watered down with anything else," she said.

"I've built my reputation on doing just that," Joey replied.

"Your drugs being sold in Fairfield are *not* pure. There were three different teenagers who all went into comas using the drugs they bought from Brian and Sidney, one of them was Sidney's ex-girlfriend. The doctors said the drugs they were taking were a combination of meth, some sort of barbiturates, and baking soda. T.J. said these guys were the ones cutting the drugs to weaken the product and make more money. Since you pride yourself on a pure product, it kind of sounds to me like they have been *stealing* from you," she said with all the control and energy she had.

Joey listened to her carefully and turned around to look at Brian and Sidney, who had lost their arrogant faces and now had fear in their eyes.

"Joe, she's lying, we would never steal from you," Brian said.

"I'm not lying. You just told me you're going to kill me, so what do I have to gain by making this up?" she snapped back defiantly. "It's true. Why do you

think I'm here? Why do you think they want me dead? I figured out their game. They've been working with some other guys who are good at chemistry. Every other Thursday, they would meet at the Dilli Rasoi restaurant where Brian works and smuggles the pure drugs in a take-home food bag, then the chemistry guys would cut the drugs with the other stuff to thin it out, why? So, they could make more money. Money, I bet they kept on the side. Money, I bet *you* knew nothing about."

At this, Joey slowly smiled at Hadley, "You know… I think I like this little girl, she's got moxy, right? Moxy!" Then he quickly drew out his gun and spun around to point it at Brian and Sidney. "And she certainly does have a lot of detailed information about this process, doesn't she? Too much information to come up with off the cuff. It sounds like a lot of *truth* to me!" he said, growing angrier as he spoke.

"Wait! Joey, I can explain!" Brian began.

Joey was furious at his statement, which proved Brielle was telling the truth, and he backhanded Brian across the face with his gun. He fell hard to the floor while Sidney just stood immobile, terrified of Joey turning his wrath upon him.

"Joe!" Hadley yelled, "Joe! Listen to me! They were working under my orders!"

Joey turned angrily to look at Hadley.

"I wanted to try and come up with something new, something that no one else out there has. I instructed them to experiment with the drugs. I promise, no one has stolen anything from you. Every cent is accounted for, and I can prove it," Hadley said.

"You don't make the decisions for this business, Jenkins! *I* make the decisions for this business!" Joey shouted.

Hadley, still clinging to Brielle's arm with one hand, lifted the other in an attempt to calm Joey. "Yeah, and I provide you the green light for that business to operate in my hometown, don't I?"

"You've been in charge down there too long, I think," Joey began, "The power has gone to your head," he said, turning his gun to point at Hadley, "If you need a reminder about who is in charge here, I'll be happy to refresh your memory."

Brielle felt Hadley's hand begin to tremble as he held her arm.

"I don't need a reminder of anything, but I wasn't sure if you would agree to it. I told them to work on finding a new product, and then as soon as they did, I was going to tell you. I was just trying to help you dominate over your competitors with something original," Hadley replied.

Brielle was sickened to hear all of this, "You hired high school kids to create a new drug?" she asked Hadley.

"No, they did," Hadley answered sharply, motioning toward Brian and Sidney. "I just didn't know they were going to keep selling the tainted drugs after

they experimented with them," then he looked back at Joey, "But don't worry, I have everything accounted for, no one has cheated you."

Joey stood for a moment, staring at Hadley, then he looked back at Brian and Sidney.

"You know what ticks me off? It's when I have to hear from a little girl what's going on behind my back in my own business," then he slowly walked over to Hadley. He reached up around his neck and brought Hadley's face close to his.

"You and I will discuss this later, but I can tell you right now, this is the *last* time you will ever do anything without my knowledge."

Brielle could feel Hadley's hand trembling as he held onto her arm. Joey stared deep into Hadley's eyes to further convey his message, then released his neck forcefully.

"Thank you for your help with that bit of information, Miss Brielle," he said with his low sinister tone, "I sincerely appreciate it… unfortunately it just gives me another reason why I have to kill you," he smiled wickedly, "As I said, it's nothing personal, it's just business."

Joey finished his remark and took one last drag on his cigarette, dropping it on the floor and stepping on it. Suddenly, all the lights went out, leaving the group on the stage in total darkness. The four men were stunned and unprepared for what was happening. They knew that someone else was in the building. Brielle felt Hadley's grip around her arm tighten.

"Don't try anything," he said sternly.

Joey was yelling for Brian and Sidney to find a light. Brielle heard some shuffling around her, and Hadley's hand, which was so firmly bound around her arm, suddenly released. It sounded as if someone had fallen to the floor. She was trying to keep her balance when she felt another hand come from behind her and cover her mouth.

"Don't scream, it's me," she heard a voice whisper in her ear. Her heart began to pound against her chest.

It was Jace.

In one swift motion, he took his hand from her mouth, scooped her up into his arms, and began to run off the stage. She had no idea where they were going, but she didn't care. Jace was there, he had her, and she was going to make it out of there alive. God was with them.

It felt as if they were running through a maze as Jace navigated his way through the dark building. She knew he had to be wearing his night shades to maneuver so fast. Since she could see nothing, she lay her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, breathing in slowly, trusting him completely to take care of her. She felt safe.

"Thank You, Jesus, for sending Jace to save me," she whispered, resting in Jace's strong arms. She was more than grateful for the answer to her prayer.

Brielle felt him push in a door with his foot, but she still couldn't see where they were; it was still too dark to tell for sure. Slowly, he walked over and placed her gently on an old couch. Then, once she was sitting down, he took her into his arms and held her tight against his chest. She could feel the pounding of his heart against her skin, and he was still breathing hard from his quick escape. She relaxed in his arms, letting his silent embrace warm her heart and body. Then he took his hands and placed them on the sides of her face.

"I thought I lost you forever," he said, his voice full of emotion, "I'm sorry I hurt you, Brielle, I'm so sorry and I ask you again to please forgive me. I will never keep you out of my life, not ever. I need you. I need you in my life and I'm so sorry," he whispered.

"I'm sorry too." she whispered, the emotion building in her voice, "Thank you for coming for me."

In an instant, he had his arms wrapped around her again. His hand gently placed on the back of her head to hold her closer. Then he whispered in her ear ever so softly, "I love you, Brielle. I love you more than I can say."

How she wished she could see his face in this moment. She closed her eyes and imagined his beautiful face before her, his dark brown eyes gazing into hers.

"I love you too, Jace," she whispered, a tear of joy trickling down her cheek, "With all my heart."

Jace released his hold on her, and then with her face gently held in his hands, she felt the light touch of his lips on hers. Even though her lips and skin had been burning from the injury of the tape and dehydration, she felt no pain. Only the warmth of his love was expressed to her in that one solitary act of a sweet kiss.

Just then, she heard the door to the room open, and it startled her. She jumped nervously, but Jace calmed her.

"It's okay," he whispered.

Brielle felt him pull away from her for a moment, but then instantly she was in the strong embrace of someone else's arms, hugging her close. It was Keoni, she could tell by the smell of her perfume and the feel of her thin body in her arms. Her body sagged in pain, but she didn't express it, she hugged Keoni back as tightly as her strength allowed her to and took in all the warmth of her friend's embrace.

Keoni was overwhelmed with joy, 'I knew we would find you," she whispered, "God showed me where you were."

Brielle smiled, holding her friend close, and whispered back, "Thank you for coming for me. Thank You, Jesus, for showing them the way."

Brielle heard the door open ever so quietly, but this time it didn't startle her. She knew who had come into the room.

"Bri!" She heard Gideon whisper, and then she was pulled from Keoni's embrace directly into his big, strong arms. He held her even harder than Keoni,

causing Brielle to cry out in pain involuntarily.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Gideon said nervously.

"I'm okay, I'm just…"

"Freezing," Jace answered for her. "You have hypothermia and are dehydrated."

"Here, let me put these on you," she heard Keoni's voice say. She then put on her night shades so Brielle could see them in the pitch-black room.

When she saw the three of them before, she was overcome with emotion and didn't know what to say. To know her three friends loved her enough to risk their own lives to save her brought a powerful surge of love to her heart. She reached out her hands to embrace her friends, who all knelt together on the floor to hug her.

"We don't have much time," Gideon whispered, "We have to move fast."

"Here," Jace whispered, "Let's get you taken care of," he said as he opened Keoni's backpack.

Keoni sat next to Brielle on the couch and held her while Jace dug through the bag and pulled out items to help Brielle's physical condition.

"God is going to protect us and help us get you out of here," Keoni whispered.

Jace took his coat off and wrapped it around her; the warmth from his body heat spread over her as she snuggled down in the large coat. Her body trembled as she began to warm up. Next, he took out a thick blanket and wrapped it tightly around her legs, like he was bundling a baby. Then he handed her a bottle of water.

"Here, sip this slowly," he said, "you need to take in your fluids gently."

Brielle eagerly reached for the bottle and began to sip small amounts of water. Her burning, dry lips and throat eagerly took in the moisture.

"Do you think you can eat something?" Jace whispered.

"Yes," she answered, "as long as it is something soft and easy to chew."

Jace then produced a box of mini-powdered doughnuts, "Not exactly the healthiest choice, but…"

Brielle's face lit up when she saw them, and she smiled, "You know me so well."

She only took a bite of the doughnuts as they were too dry for her parched mouth, but she continued to drink her bottle of water. She was ready to get going, anxious to go home, and still nervous about the criminals who would be searching for her.

"How are we going to get out of here?" she whispered.

"We have to try and get a message to Oba," Gideon said softly, "He needs to know about Hadley so he can let Mom know."

"It's gonna break her heart when she learns the truth about him," Keoni said, her voice full of emotion.

Brielle looked at her friend and placed her hand on her arm. “How do you know about Hadley?”

“We’ve been in the theater for a while, we heard everything that happened,” Gideon whispered.

“You were in the theater?” Brielle asked.

“How do you think those lights went out?” Gideon asked quietly with a smile, “I cut the power,” he said, producing a pair of wire cutters from his haversack. “Keoni had turned off the main power supply so I could cut it. Jace found this room, which is isolated, and then he brought you here. We should be in the dark for quite a while, but we need to get going.”

Brielle nodded, “Did you bring my haversack too?” she asked weakly.

“What did I tell you?” Keoni whispered, reminding Jace that no matter how weak Brielle was, she would be ready for battle.

“I’ve got it right here,” Gideon said, bringing her bag over to her and placing it on the couch beside her. She opened it up and saw her things inside: her pocket Bible, slingshot, rocks, nightshade case, and a small bottle of frankincense used for anointing. She smiled.

“Jace, why don’t you call Obadiah, and I’ll call the local police,” Gideon said, looking at his phone. “Wait… I don’t have a signal in here.”

“You’re kidding?” Keoni said, “We’re in the middle of New York City.”

“Yeah, but we’re in the basement of an abandoned building in a rundown neighborhood,” Gideon replied.

Jace checked his phone. “My phone won’t work either. We have to get out of here and see if we can find a signal.”

As they talked, Brielle looked around the room.

“What is this place? A costume room?” she asked.

“Looks like it,” Keoni answered, “Some of the things in here are pretty creepy,” she said, holding up a pair of white masks on the table beside her. One had a wicked, happy smile, and one had a sorrowful, crying expression. Chills ran up and down Jace’s spine when he saw them.

“Those are the masks that…” he began.

“The robbers wore in the mini-mart,” Brielle finished for him.

“Yeah,” he said, looking at her curiously, “do you think those men were part of this?”

“Yes,” Brielle said softly, almost dazed, “Yes, they were, but one of them…”

Brielle’s words were suddenly interrupted by the sound of voices and footsteps approaching down the hall.

“Quick,” Gideon whispered, “try to find a place to hide in case they have a key to the door.”

Jace helped Brielle behind a stack of boxes. Keoni gathered up Brielle’s water and food and dove into the costume racks. Gideon stayed behind the door in the corner.

The footsteps were coming down the hallway closer and closer until they were directly outside their door.

Jace held Brielle gently in his arms, and she began to pray.

"Father God," she whispered, "Mathew 21:22 says, '*If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer,'* and Lord, I ask You, please do not allow those men to come inside this room. In the Name of Jesus, I ask that they be removed from the door."

The voices on the other side of the door sounded like those of Brian and Sidney. The Intercessors heard them try the knob to see if it would open. When it would not, Gideon heard them talking about the keys. The Intercessors all began to whisper prayers, calling out to the Lord for their protection as they waited in the darkness. Their hearts were racing, and their hands were trembling as they waited quietly. They could hear the jingling of a keychain and then the sound of a key being placed into the lock.

It didn't work.

They listened, holding their breath as one, two, three keys were tried—all failed.

"There's another key ring in the office," they heard one of the men say.

"We'd better go get it and check this room too," the other voice answered. Then they heard the footsteps start to walk away, getting quieter as they faded down the hall.

"We need to go now," Gideon said, "We won't have much time before they come back."

"How did you get in here? Can we get out that way?" Brielle asked.

"No, we climbed the fire escape and came in through a broken window on the second floor. There is too much exposure; that's why we brought you here," Gideon replied.

"Besides, you're too weak for that right now," Jace said, "There has to be another way out of this place."

"The side door," Keoni said remembering her vision in the Pools of Peace, "We tried it when we got here but it was locked. That door that had an old worn painting on it of two white masks," she paused in thought, "two white masks that look like those," she said pointing to the drama-masks she had just held up.

"Maybe it's a service door or emergency exit of some sort, perhaps it's close by and can be opened from the inside. Let's get our stuff together, and we'll see if we can find it," Gideon said.

Brielle took her haversack and placed it across her shoulder and onto her hip. Before she knew what was happening, Jace had reached down and swept her up into his arms to carry her.

"Okay then," Gideon said, slowly opening the door to peer into the hallway, "Father God, please help us to get out of here. Keep us safe and protected from danger, in Jesus' Name…."

"Amen," the others whispered behind him as they quietly exited the room. They turned to the right and down another hallway, unsure of where they were headed.

The Intercessors walked down the hallway, climbed up the steps, and started down another dark hall. They walked like this, turning this way and that, quickly discovering they had lost their way in the building. Finally, they came to the end of a long hallway and found themselves in a large open area. The outside streetlights were shining through windows that lined the tops of the doors. The lightning from the incoming storm flashed brightly, blinding them from its brilliant, sudden light. They winced as it hurt their eyes to see it through their night shades. Gideon took his glasses off to look around and discovered they had reached what looked like the lobby of the old theater.

"I think this is the entrance," he whispered excitedly. "Jace, help me try these doors," he said, racing over to try each large brass door and see if any would open.

Though Keoni had said the doors were made of brass and glass, they were boarded up on the inside, keeping them from smashing the glass to escape. Lightning flashed again through the windows above, and Keoni and Brielle removed their glasses. They could hear the rain pouring down outside.

Jace looked around the room to see if there was anything they could use to pry the wood from the doors. There was nothing to be found that was sturdy enough. The only things he discovered were an old broom and a mop in a bucket up against the wall. The rest of the lobby was full of piles of tile fragments, broken ceiling sections, and wood debris, which was scattered all over the floor.

"We'll have to go back through and see if we can find that side door," Gideon said.

"And if we can't, then we try going back the way you came in," Brielle said, "I can do it."

"Let's try to find that side door first," Gideon said. "If the door is on the left side of the building, let's head in this direction and hopefully we'll find it."

They all turned to head down the opposite hallway from which they came when they heard a bone-chilling sound behind them.

"Going somewhere?" a voice said.

They turned to see Brian and Sidney standing on the other side of the lobby. Each of the men had a flashlight in one hand and a gun in the other. The guns were pointed directly at them.

"Get your hands in the air where we can see them," Brian said slyly.

Quickly, Jace looked back over the room again and saw the broom and mop beside them. He nudged Gideon and silently directed him with his eyes toward the two objects leaning against the wall.

"I'm so glad we found you," Brian said with his sinister tone, "I was beginning to get worried."

"That's so nice… about us?" Gideon asked in a friendly but mocking tone.

"No, about us," Brian said, "If you all made it out of here, that means we would be heading to prison."

Jace and Gideon slowly took a step to get closer to the broom and mop.

"Ah, I see, so everything is about you?" Gideon asked sarcastically.

"That's the way it is with dealers," Jace said, "They don't care about anything or anyone but themselves."

Brian and Sidney were slowly making their way closer to the group.

"Hey, that's not very nice," Sidney said, "Doesn't sound like a very Christian thing to say."

"Oh, are you Christians?" Gideon asked.

"Shut up!" Sidney shouted, "I'm sick of your mouth."

Gideon and Jace were now standing in front of the mop and broom, and Brian and Sidney were still moving toward them, closing the gap between them.

"You know, I have to say that always irritates me when people say that: '*Not a very Christian thing to say*'," Gideon kept on trying to distract the men with his endless chatter, "Especially when they have *no* idea what it means to actually be a Christian."

"I said shut your mouth before I shut it for you!" Sidney shouted.

Just then, the lightning flashed brightly, splitting through the darkness. Within that moment, Jace and Gideon made their move. Jace grabbed the broom and Gideon the mop. They spun around and struck their enemies' hands, which held their guns, knocking them to the floor. The guns flew across the room, spinning into the massive pile of debris from the deteriorating theater. Brielle and Keoni tried to follow where the guns landed with their eyes. They weren't sure, so they quickly put on their night shades, trying to watch the guys while looking for the guns.

Jace and Gideon quickly placed their broom and mop on the floor and stomped on them to break off the ends, leaving them each with a wooden rod.

Brian and Sidney were still trying to figure out what was happening when Jace and Gideon began to use their skills taught by Obadiah to defend themselves. The men fought back as hard as they could, but had no chance against the two Intercessors. Even though they had only studied this defense technique for a short time, God was on their side.

Gideon struck Brian several times before pulling his legs out from under him, crashing him to the floor. Jace spun around with the stick in his hand, striking Sidney on the head and chest, and then on the back of his knees, causing him to collapse on a pile of debris. Once Brian and Sidney were on the ground and unable to move from the pain, Jace and Gideon turned to the girls.

"Where are their guns?" Jace shouted.

"I don't know," Keoni said, "I lost them in all the debris on the floor."

"Forget it, let's go!" Gideon shouted as he and Jace put their night shades

back on. Jace scooped up Brielle and took off down the hallway in search of the side door.

"Stop!" Keoni yelled, feeling led to go through the auditorium, "We need to go this way! Follow me!"

Gideon opened the main doors to the theater, and they began to make their way down the aisles toward the stage. Brielle remembered what had taken place in the wing of the stage. She shuddered and tucked her head down into Jace's chest as she thought of T.J. and how Hadley had murdered him there, right before her very eyes.

"Which way?" Gideon asked his sister.

"Go to the left, this will take us to the left side of the building. I think the door is toward the back," Keoni answered as she ran.

Jace, holding Brielle tightly in his arms, kept up with the others. Once they reached the front row of the mezzanine, they ran to the left side of the theater until they found a doorway. They entered that doorway and found themselves once again traveling through the darkened hallways that surrounded the theater like a maze.

As Keoni ran through the corridors and hallways, she began to have flashbacks. She had been here before in a dream, the dream she had months before about Lacy drowning. God planted the images deep in her mind, and she began to remember the hallways, the brick walls, the rooms. They had made so many turns through these dark corridors that the others weren't sure of which direction they were headed in. Then there came an end to the hallway with two possible choices, one to the right and one to the left.

"I don't know which one to take," Gideon said, "I've lost my direction again."

"Look for some sort of signs on the surrounding walls," Jace suggested, "Maybe that will give us an idea."

They looked but could find nothing. Keoni closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and asked God to help her. "Lead me, Lord, show me the direction to go," she whispered.

In an instant, God told her exactly which way to choose.

"Follow me!" she said as she turned left and ran down another corridor. "Thank You, God, now please help us find that door!" she said as they ran. She made one more turn and finally, they approached a room with a door on the wall ahead of them. It was on the left side, just as she remembered.

"There it is!" Keoni exclaimed. She tried to open it, but it was too heavy. Gideon hit it like he was tackling someone on the football field, and it crashed open. He held it for the others to follow into the bitter cold rain. The icy water on Brielle's already half-frozen body was too much for her to bear, and she cringed in Jace's arms.

"I'm sorry," Jace whispered, "We didn't think about the rain."

As they looked around, they discovered they were in the dead end of an alley, so they started toward the other end toward the street. Jace had parked several blocks away so that he wouldn't attract attention to their arrival, as this neighborhood was extremely rundown. There were hardly any cars or people around to be seen at all.

"Gideon," Jace said, "Take my keys and bring the truck. She can't be in this freezing rain much longer."

Gideon ran over to Jace and got his keys, but as he turned around to head out of the alley, he stopped. There, across the alley exit, were four shadowy figures. It was Brian, Sidney, Joey the Snake—and Hadley.

"Oh, Lord, Jesus, please help us," Keoni whispered.

Brielle looked up to see the four men before her, but she wasn't afraid.

"Don't worry, Keoni," she said, "'*If God is for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31'*," Brielle took in a slow, deep breath and felt the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through her.

"Put me down," Brielle said softly to Jace.

"No, you can hardly walk," Jace whispered.

Brielle looked at him with a quiet, controlled confidence.

"It's okay, please put me down," she said, "God is with me."

Jace recognized the difference in her countenance, remembering how she looked when the Holy Spirit took control in the mini-mart. He could feel the powerful presence of God surrounding them and he did not argue but slowly placed her feet on the ground. As he did, the rain began to slacken. The alley where the Intercessors were standing was dark and shadowy, they were only dimly illuminated by the faint glow of the streetlights and the occasional flash of lightning that crossed the sky.

"I can't look at him," Gideon whispered. "I can't even speak his name; all these years I loved him and trusted him, only to know that he is the one who took our father away from us."

Brielle and Jace knew he was referring to Hadley. Brielle looked at Keoni who was staring at him as well, frozen in silence. This was the first time she saw Hadley since learning the truth about him killing her father and her eyes reflected her deep pain.

Each of the four men in front of them were holding guns, pointed directly at them.

"It's over, sweetheart," Joey the Snake shouted, "I have to say though, you all did much better than I expected," he said with a laugh. "You gave us a good challenge. We're not used to dealing with such… young enemies."

Brielle looked at her three friends around her. "Intercessors, this battle belongs to the Lord and He will not fail us."

The lightning flashed across the dark sky and the sound of thunder echoed through the wet city streets. Then suddenly, it stopped raining.

Jace, Keoni, and Gideon were astonished at the transformation of their friend. She stood strong and had a peaceful look of determination on her face. She was not the shivering, weak girl who couldn't walk; she had been transformed into a warrior of God. It was evident that the power of the Holy Spirit was strongly upon her, giving her strength, peace, and power.

"Come on out here and get this over with before it starts raining again! I hate the rain!" Joey yelled.

Brielle suddenly had a memory of her conversation with T.J. when he talked about how much he loved the story of David and Goliath. The Lord had given her an idea.

Looking at her friends she said, "And David said, 'The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."
1 Samuel 17:37."

Immediately the Intercessors knew what she was saying and looked at her nervously.

"I'm not accurate enough to do this," Keoni said.

"Me either," Jace whispered.

Brielle looked at them squarely, "*'All you who put your hope in the Lord, be strong and brave.' Psalm 31:24,"* she said with the confidence of the Holy Spirit.

The Intercessors did not reply but understood that it was not Brielle speaking to them but that of the Lord God Almighty who was moving through her and most certainly was with them all.

"You're losing time!" Joey yelled, "I have no problem shooting you right here in this alley, but I would prefer to do it in the building, so we don't have to carry your bodies inside!"

Brielle stood firm and shouted back, "*'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied!*"

Joey looked at the gun in his hand and then over at Hadley and Brian, "What is she, nuts?"

Then he turned his attention down the alley to Brielle, "This is a semi-automatic forty-five I have pointed at your head, sweetheart! Now, knock off the charades and get down here!" Joey shouted.

One by one each Intercessor slowly dropped their slingshots to their sides.

The four men laughed.

"What the heck is that?" Joey mocked. "I can't tell for sure in the dark, but it looks like… are those some sort of shoelaces?"

"It looks like the strap my father would whip me with behind the woodshed as a kid," Brian snickered.

"What are ya going to do? Spank us?" Sidney laughed.

Brielle did not falter but loaded her stone and began spinning her slingshot.

The others followed.

"I can't see them well enough," Keoni whispered.

"Concentrate on the Lord," Gideon gently commanded his sister.

Brielle spoke forcefully and with conviction, "'*This day the Lord will hand you over to me! I'll strike you down! And all those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's and He will give all of you into our hands. First Samuel 17:45!*'"

In that moment, the lightning flashed overhead with dazzling brilliance, completely illuminating the entire alley and the four targets at the end. Without hesitation, the Intercessors released their rocks simultaneously and they flew steadily, accurately, and with great speed. The rocks struck their enemies before them with the guidance of the hand of God and the four men fell hard to the cold, wet street.

The Intercessors stood silently for a moment, dazed by what they just witnessed God do through them. Brielle took a deep breath and sighed. Once again, she felt weak after the Holy Spirit had used her in such a mighty way. She collapsed to her knees exhausted; still, she was stronger than she was before. Jace and Keoni went immediately to her side.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she whispered.

"Give me your slings," Gideon said to the girls. Once he had them, he yelled for Jace to follow as he ran to the other end of the alley. Jace and Gideon checked the four men who were collapsed on the ground.

"They aren't dead!" Jace relayed back to the girls, "Just knocked out cold!"

Brielle rested in the comfort of her friend's arms and they both began to praise God, "Thank You, Jesus. Thank You, Father God, for being with us, for protecting us, for giving us Your strength and courage. Thank You, Holy Spirit for defeating our enemies and delivering us from the hands of evil."

Gideon and Jace quickly turned the men over face down on the ground and bound their hands with the ropes of their slings. They were both now able to receive a phone signal. Jace called the local New York City police and Gideon called Obadiah and Genevieve.

Soon the local police were on the scene to take the four men away. They secured the building and began bringing out all the items of the drug lab which were found just as T.J. had told Brielle, on the third floor.

When they brought out T.J.'s body all the teens stopped and watched. Brielle couldn't help but say a prayer for his soul. Her heart was full of a mixture of emotions upon seeing his body as it was placed in the coroner's vehicle. While she was so thankful that he had restored his relationship with Jesus Christ and knew that he was at this moment in the glories of heaven with his beloved Savior, it affected her deeply that a stranger had knowingly placed his life in the gravest of danger… to save her.

Jace, Keoni, and Gideon were asked to give their statements to the police

while Brielle was being treated by a paramedic when suddenly, she heard the voice of her mother calling for her through the crowd. How sweet it was to once again hear the melodious sound of her mother's voice!

Brielle stood up to look through the crowd of people surrounding the scene, searching for her mother. When she saw her, she cried out in joy. Genevieve ran to her daughter, taking her in her arms and holding her close to her heart as she had done the day she was born. The two fell to their knees in their embrace as Genevieve covered her daughter's head and face with kisses. Then she felt the arms of Asher and Obadiah wrap around her as well. They all knelt together at last in their joyful reunion, celebrating God's mighty Hand of protection and faithfulness and the victorious and unfailing power of Jesus Christ.

The battle had been won, and *God* had given them the victory.

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Brielle was taken to the hospital, where she was treated for hypothermia. She recovered from her ailments beautifully and was able to go home the next day. She came home to a barrage of phone calls from family, friends, local townsfolk, and, of course, the media were eager to talk to all the Intercessors

God had powerfully used the Intercessors, taking down one of New York's most successful drug lords, Joey the Snake. It was a multi-million-dollar drug ring that had been crushed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the hands of four young teenagers. Remarkably, like how God used David to defeat Goliath, the giant.

The Intercessors were thrilled to have been used by God to help stop such evil from not only infiltrating their town but from being spread to thousands, perhaps millions of others on the East Coast. They celebrated the protection of Brielle and how God brought her home safely to her family unharmed.

Even though there was much to celebrate, there were still other matters that had to be dealt with.

For Alma, Gideon, and Keoni, learning that the death of their father was committed by the hand of the man they loved, trusted, and respected was extraordinarily painful and surreal. It would be a wound that would take years for Jesus to heal. This information not only hurt them deeply, but it also hurt their town. To have an officer of the law who was supposed to serve and protect the good citizens of Fairfield be part of its destruction was something that would take time to heal. Still, the Fairfield townsfolk knew there were many good and worthy policemen and policewomen fulfilling their oaths and responsibilities to the community well, serving their town with dignity and honor; men like Officer Stockton, and they would help restore that trust and help bring healing.

While there was pain to be healed for the Toussaints, there was also an incredible gift that came to them. As promised, Jace's father, H.R. Devereaux, made good on his one-million-dollar reward for finding Brielle. Jace, knowing full well he did not need the money, passed on his share, happily giving the entire two million dollars to Keoni and Gideon. The twins were overwhelmed by the reward. They each gave their mother half their share, blessing her with a million dollars! They paid their tithes and gave for children in need to have Christmas gifts, then took the remains of their rewards, and placed them into savings accounts for college and future use—after Gideon bought a car, Keoni bought a new car and did some extended Christmas shopping, of course.

Everyone was elated for the blessing upon the Toussaint Family. Alma had always been a hard-working woman, constantly holding a job to care for her family. She would work long and late hours to provide for herself and her children after her husband had passed away. Now, she wouldn't have to work so hard and could enjoy more of her life and time with her children. It was a

miraculous blessing from the Lord!

Obadiah, Genevieve, and Asher's reward was having their precious Brielle returned to them safe and sound. Nothing would ever measure up to how much she meant to them or could ever replace her beautiful life.

Jace was ecstatic with life overall. No longer did he try and hide his identity or worry about how people would treat him because of his money. He no longer cared because he had found true friendship… and true love. He realized his circumstances of wealth were an unusual blessing and decided that instead of concealing it from the world around him, he would use it to do great things for the Lord. He wanted to bless others in ways they never thought possible.

Jace was thrilled to see the blessing his father had given to Keoni and Gideon for their efforts to rescue Brielle, for he knew they were a family who would deeply appreciate and benefit from such a reward. Plus, he knew that their intentions to rescue Brielle had nothing to do with money; it never entered their minds. They did what they did because they loved her so much. He did too. He gave God praise constantly for His hand of protection on Brielle and that he had another chance to show her the love in his heart.

Brielle had been enlightened on many levels during this experience. She had found an even closer relationship with God, her heavenly Father, and His Son Jesus Christ. She had learned to trust in the Lord at *all* times and allow the Holy Spirit to take complete control of her life.

Although she had always known how much her family and friends meant to her, she was overly blessed to have had this lesson, for she would never take one day of her life or one moment with her loved ones for granted.

Brielle was also overwhelmed with joy for her best friends and their financial blessing. She knew that nothing could replace the loss of their father, but perhaps to have the justice of knowing his true killer had been caught would help them find closure. To be able to have their mother home with them more often and know that she wouldn't have to work so hard was going to be a tremendous blessing - one that would bring them even more healing.

As for her relationship with Jace, Brielle knew that God's hand was upon them, helping them and healing them. She believed the bond that they shared in their love was strong and would only grow stronger with each passing day. She was thankful that God had spared her life and had allowed her to have the opportunity to live and fulfill her destiny--a destiny she believed would be alongside Jace Devereaux. His money did not matter to her, only the fact that she now knew who he was. In knowing the truth, she was able to completely open her heart and love all of him freely and without fear.

Although there were so many things surrounding her that brought a spirit of celebration and joy, there was still something very important that had to be done--something that was not joyful. She spoke to her grandfather and mother about it, and once they heard her plea, they supported her completely.

On Wednesday afternoon, Brielle, along with her family, friends, and members of her school prayer group, gathered to give T.J. a proper burial. Officer Stockton had told Brielle that T.J.'s last name was Coleman, and he had no living family. The thought of his remains being laid to rest alone with no one there, after everything he had done for her, was too much to bear. She knew his soul was with Jesus, and he was enjoying the glories of heaven, but it would help her healing process to be able to honor him in this way. After all, he didn't have to try and rescue her that night, but he did, in essence giving his life to save hers.

Obadiah paid for a handsome coffin and burial plot in the same cemetery T.J. used to drop off his drugs. As Brielle and her friends walked past the old tomb, which was used as one of the drop-off places, it reminded her of T.J.'s former life.

Having T.J. buried here was a testimony to the saving power of Jesus Christ. He once came here as a criminal, but through the loving hand of his Savior, he was able to be forgiven. He had been transformed.

Once, as a little boy, because of the heart and compassion of a woman named Ruthie White, who loved to teach children about Jesus, he had the seeds of God's love planted deeply within his heart. Those seeds never died but stayed alive in him, even while he was living a life of sin, pain, and destruction. He remembered how he felt when Jesus came to live in his heart, and as he grew into a man, those memories lingered.

T.J. learned through the Holy Spirit, using Brielle in the mini-mart that day, that God was real. The seeds of God's Word, which had been planted in his heart, began to grow again, and God began calling to him; so much so that he finally came running back into the loving, open arms of Jesus.

At first, it pained Brielle to know he had worked so hard to get his life back on track, and then… it was taken from him. But then she was comforted with the knowledge that he had reached his ultimate destination. T.J. was now living forever in glory with His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and his Heavenly Father God, who loved him so much and never gave up on him. All had been forgiven. All had been reconciled.

They laid T.J. to rest under a beautiful oak tree, which was now bare from the oncoming winter season but would be beautiful during the spring, summer, and fall. Keoni sang *Amazing* Grace by the graveside, her voice lovely and peaceful. Brielle cried softly for the man she hardly knew. For even though she did not know him well, if it hadn't been for his diligent work to set her free from the locks and chains of her captors-- she might never have been rescued. She opened T.J.'s little Bible, which she now kept in her purse at all times, and read a scripture.

"John 11:25 says, '*Jesus replied, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die"'.* If it hadn't been for the help of T.J. Coleman on Sunday night, I might not be standing here with you today,"

she began, “Although none of us knew him well, I had the blessing of learning a little bit about his life. I know I will never forget him, and I hope others won’t either. The story of his life is true evidence of the amazing grace of Jesus. T.J. was once lost but now is found. He was a person saved from a destructive life. His sins were forgiven through the love of Jesus Christ, and now, great is his reward.”

Brielle then placed a red rose and a white rose on his casket. The white rose represented T.J.’s soul, which had been washed clean of all sin, and the red rose represented the blood of Jesus, which cleansed him and brought him eternal life.

After the service, Brielle thanked all her friends and family for coming to honor T.J.’s life. As people left, she asked if the Intercessors would come with her to one more place, an important place she felt led to visit. They drove together on Brielle’s instruction to a little house which had a small military banner hanging in the window, the home of Virginia and Lydia Roberts.

“Where are we?” Keoni asked.

Brielle began to explain about the new friends she had made at the house and hoped they would all come in with her. Jace felt ashamed.

“I’m sorry, Brielle,” he said.

Brielle reached up and took his face in her hand, “Don’t be sorry anymore. All is forgiven between you and I. Everything happens for a reason. If I hadn’t come here that day, I wouldn’t have met these people. They need Jesus, Jace, and they need friends,” then she smiled, “Once again, God took something not so good and is turning it into something beautiful.”

The Intercessors were warmly welcomed by Lydia and her mother, Virginia. They spent some time talking and ministering to both.

“We would like to invite you to come to a special night of prayer for our town,” Brielle said, producing a flyer from her purse. “It’s called ‘Inviting His Light’ and it is going to be held tomorrow night at our church. We would love to have you join us if you can come.” Lydia smiled at Brielle. She had already given her the invitation the day they met, but for her mother to receive one personally as well touched her heart. This was the kind of love and kindness her mother needed to receive.

Virginia and Lydia were thrilled to have the invitation. They needed to have a warm welcome from others and told Brielle they would plan to be there.

The next day was Thursday, and Brielle’s first day back at school. Genevieve had a very difficult time letting her go. At the same time, she knew she had to trust in the Lord to care for and protect her daughter just as He had done so many times before. She was living by faith and walking it one step at a time.

The night Brielle was abducted, word had spread rapidly on television and radio all through Connecticut and some of the surrounding states. When she was back at school, the students of Fairfield High celebrated her return. Most of them, anyway; Taryn Cavanaugh, however, did not show any interest in

celebrating anything to do with Brielle.

After school, the prayer group attendance had grown so large that poor Henrietta couldn't fit everyone inside her home. She happily opened the doors and windows so the students who were standing outside could hear all that was being said. She was busy making hot chocolate for them as well, knowing they were cold while they stood outside. She loved the work and was overjoyed to see so many teenagers coming together to sing to the Lord and unite themselves in prayer.

Once the prayer group was over and everything had been cleaned up and put away, Keoni and Gideon gathered their things. Brielle knew something was up by the look on Keoni's face, but Keoni just said they had to go home and get things ready for the "Inviting His Light" prayer vigil, which was the following evening.

"I would like to take you to dinner," Jace told Brielle, "If you would accompany me?"

Brielle smiled, "Yes, I'd love to, just let me call Mama to let her know," she said.

"She already does," Jace said shrewdly.

"Really? Hmm," Brielle said curiously.

"Yes," Jace said with a grin on his face, "She said just to make sure you are home by nine. School night, you know."

Then they all said their goodbyes and gave thanks to Henrietta, but before he left, Jace secretly left an envelope on the kitchen counter. It had a note that read:

Dear Henrietta,

We are all so blessed to have you in our lives. We all look forward to coming to your house every day after school to spend time with God--and with you. We know you spend so much of your own money to provide us with snacks and a warm place to pray. So, we wanted to bless you with a small token of our appreciation. Please accept this gift. We want to give you this blessing.

In His Love,
The Intercessors

Tucked inside the envelope was a cash gift that took Henrietta's breath away.

Jace walked Brielle to his father's SUV. He took her backpack, put it inside the truck, and opened her door like the perfect gentleman he was.

"Thank you," Brielle said shyly as she climbed into the vehicle.

Once Jace was inside and both were buckled in, Brielle asked where they were headed.

"We have to make a quick stop just up the street before we head to dinner," Jace said.

He then drove a few blocks away from Henrietta's house and pulled into a gas station.

Brielle looked at his gas gauge and saw that it was full. "What are we doing here? You don't need gas?" she asked.

Jace looked at her with his charming grin, "We aren't here to get gas," he said slyly. Then he hopped out of the SUV, went around, grabbed Brielle's backpack from the back seat, and he opened her door for her.

"Wow, so this is where the son of a billionaire takes his dates to dinner, huh? A gas station. Nice," she teased.

Jace then extended his elbow for her to take so he could escort her to the other side of the parking lot. Brielle looked at him in confusion but happily played along. As they came around the other side of the gas station, parked under the trees, was one of the coolest cars Brielle had ever seen. There was a man dressed in a driver's uniform standing next to the car. He had a large smile on his face as the couple approached.

"Good afternoon, Miss St. Claire, Master Devereaux," he said politely, tipping his hat at each of them.

"Brielle, this is Conrad, he takes care of my father's cars," Jace said, introducing the man.

"Hello," Brielle said, extending her hand to him, "It's nice to meet you."

Conrad looked at her with a pleasant expression of surprise. "Thank you, Ma'am," he said kindly, taking her hand to shake it. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you as well. I do hope that you will enjoy your evening," he said as he handed Jace the keys to the car. Then he took the keys to the SUV and headed across the parking lot.

The car was a brand-new Aston Martin Vantage; sleek, shiny, and British Racing Green. Brielle had never ridden in such a car before; in fact, she had never seen such a car in person before.

"Wow," she said softly, "we're going to dinner in this?"

"I don't want to hold back anything from you, Brielle, not ever again. I want to show you how much you mean to me, and nothing but the best will do. Plus, I wanted tonight to be very special, the best date you ever had," he said.

"It will be the best date because I'm with you," she smiled. Then she stepped back to take a good look at the car. "Wait… is this an Aston Martin?"

Jace smiled. "I hoped you would like it."

"Like it? I love it! It's absolutely stunning! And I love the color, too!"

"It's called British Racing Green. It's great, but still not as beautiful as the green of your amazing eyes. I wonder if they could create that color in a shade of paint for a car?" he grinned.

Brielle blushed, "I'm so sorry I hurt you, Jace. Going out with Zach was nothing but an act of vindictiveness," then she teasingly added, "and considering I was kidnapped on the first date of my life… it won't be hard for you to top it."

Jace laughed and once again opened the car door for her. Sitting on her seat was a single red rose. Her heart melted. She picked it up and smelled it. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Slowly, she slid into the black leather seat, which was so incredibly delicate and soft to touch. She looked around and was amazed at the dashboard and all the technology this car possessed. It reminded her of an airplane cockpit. She took a deep breath, and it even smelled heavenly. Jace got in and buckled his seatbelt.

“I actually wanted to take you in a horse-drawn carriage,” he said.

Brielle lifted her eyebrows in surprise. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am, but it would have taken too much time to travel where we are going,” he laughed. “So, I asked my father if I could drive you in one of his cars.”

“It’s amazing,” Brielle said. “I’m just curious. Why did we come here to the gas station to get the car?”

“Just because people know who I am now doesn’t mean I have to flaunt it,” Jace answered. “I’m honestly a truck-driving-type of guy. This car is great, but it’s just a car. There are more important things in life.” He said as he reached down to take her hand in his.

Brielle was impressed with his humble spirit.

“That’s very sweet. It’s nice to get to know the real you,” she smiled. So, where are we going to dinner?”

“It’s a surprise,” Jace said.

Brielle lifted her eyebrows, “Ah, I see. Can I have just a little hint?”

Jace shook his head and smiled, “Nope.”

He began to talk to her about some of the plans for the “Inviting His Light” prayer vigil the next evening. As they talked, Jace drove on and on until he had left the main area of town.

“I thought we were going to dinner,” Brielle said.

“We are,” Jace answered.

“Wouldn’t it help to go to a place where they serve food? We are almost to the Gold Coast,” she said absentmindedly. Then it dawned on her, “Are we going to your house?”

Jace smiled but didn’t respond.

Brielle’s heart began to pound. The night she was there was not a good experience for her. She was angry, hurt, and just wanted to get away from it as quickly as possible. That was all in the past. God had helped her work through her pain with Jace, and she had forgiven him. Now, there was nothing in her heart for him but love.

As they slowly approached the magnificent home, Brielle felt her hands tremble. “It’s incredible, really amazing,” she said, knowing full well her words didn’t do the home justice.

“Thank you,” Jace said, “It’s very old and full of history, has been in my

father's family for years. I will have him give you a personal tour sometime. It's pretty fascinating to know all about it."

"Is your father here?" Brielle asked.

Jace looked over at her with a mocking expression, "What do you think?"

Brielle sighed, "I'm sorry you are always alone-- and in such a big house."

"Now, maybe you can understand why I love *your* home so much. There's a lot of love there; it feels like a home. It's beautiful inside and out, full of laughter and warmth. That's what I dream of," he said as he approached the guardhouse. He rolled down the window to talk to the guard on duty.

"Hello, Stan," he waved.

"Good evening, Master Devereaux," the man greeted him as he bent down to look in the car window.

Brielle felt the butterflies fluttering as she heard the man address Jace as "Master Devereaux"; it sounded so sophisticated and charming.

"I wanted to introduce you to Brielle St. Claire," Jace said as he gestured to Brielle, "She will be visiting us a lot in the future, so I wanted you to meet her."

"Hello," Brielle said, feeling her face blush slightly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss St. Claire. I will look forward to your visits," Stan said kindly.

Brielle smiled, "Thank you, I will too."

"Not as much as I will," Jace said, picking up her hand and kissing it lightly.

"Is George around?" Jace asked Stan.

"He's walking the grounds and checking on the dogs, Sir," he replied.

"Maybe he will be here when we leave," Jace said, "I wanted him to meet Brielle as well."

"I will let him know, Sir," Stan said.

"Thank you," Jace said kindly. Stan then turned to walk back to the guardhouse when Brielle called out, "Have a good night!"

Stan turned and smiled, tipping his hat to her. He then went into the guard's house and pulled a lever that opened the giant gates. Jace waved and began driving down the long road to the mansion.

As Jace drove down the long drive to the great house, he explained how there were several gate guards for security, and he would make sure she met them all. He did not want her to have any complications when she came to visit him.

"So, Stan said the other guard was checking on the dogs. You have dogs?"

"Yeah," Jace said slowly, "but they probably aren't like the picture you might be painting in your head. They're highly trained guard dogs. More like little security officers with fur."

Brielle giggled, "I see, not the kind to pet while they lie by the fireplace."

Jace laughed, "No, not even close, but we take excellent care of them because they take excellent care of us and our home. I'd love to get an actual pet

dog someday. I love dogs."

"Yeah? Me too. I just always wondered if Piper would be jealous. She's always been so special to me."

"I'm sure," Jace said sweetly, "And she sure is beautiful.

"Thank you," Brielle replied happily. "I noticed the guards call you, Master," she said with a slight giggle.

"Yes, my family is very formal and traditional," he explained, "Since I am not married yet and still young, that is what they are supposed to call me."

"Then when you're older, they will call you, Mister?" she asked.

"Yeah, when I turn eighteen, it's kind of like when a girl goes from being called Miss to Ms. It's a little bit strange, I know," he said shyly.

"No, I think it's so cool--just as long as *I* don't have to call you Master," she said with a laugh, squeezing his hand.

Now that Jace was opening his life to her, she did not want in any way to make him feel awkward about it.

Jace laughed at her response, "No, please don't!"

When they arrived at the house, Jace parked the car in front of the courtyard fountain, then walked around to open her car door and help her out. Brielle walked slowly to take it all in. He gently took her by the hand and led her to the tall, majestic doors. The last time she was here, she did not take the time to study and admire the exquisite home, as she only came seeking the truth from Jace. Now she took the time to notice its magnificence.

Just as they reached the doors, one of them opened to reveal Oliver. He was waiting for them.

"Good evening, Sir, good evening, Miss St. Claire, welcome," Oliver said as he greeted them.

"Hello Oliver, thank you," Brielle said kindly, extending her hand to him to shake it, "I'm sorry I didn't take the time to meet you before."

Oliver shook her hand, "Thank you, Miss St. Claire, it is a pleasure to finally have you here with us." Then he turned to Jace, "Everything is ready for you, Sir."

"Thank you so much for everything, Oliver," Jace said, taking off his coat. He helped Brielle remove her coat as she stood speechless, taking in the incredible entranceway and staircases. Oliver took their coats and excused himself.

Brielle stood silently in the grand entranceway, gazing at the splendor before her. She admired the winding staircases with the owls perched on the newel posts and the enormous floral arrangements that adorned the entrance way. Everything was now magnificently decorated for Christmas. It was breathtaking. The two sets of doors to her right and her left were open this time, and she leaned forward to look at the rooms inside.

"Do I get a tour tonight?" she asked.

Jace smiled, then took her by the hand.

"Absolutely. No more secrets," he smiled as he led her through the entranceway to the room on the right.

"This is the reception room," he said.

"A reception room?" Brielle asked curiously.

"Yes, it is used to receive guests when my father has dinner parties and such. I never really come in here," Jace said.

Brielle took time to look at all the elegant furnishings, drapes, and décor. There was a magnificent Christmas tree in the room. She had never seen a room that was designed just for receiving guests. It was beautiful and relaxing. If this was the first room people would see when they came to visit, she couldn't wait to see the rest of the house. Jace then took her back across the entranceway.

"This is a room that I enjoy spending time in," he said, "The billiards room."

Brielle walked in to find the most striking pool table she had ever seen. It was gold with intricate carvings and embellishments around it. There was gold fringe that surrounded each pocket, and it was lined with a dark, wine-colored tabletop. There were cushioned benches and chairs that surrounded it, and a bar that ran along the back wall of the room with tall leather stools around it. The walls of the room were covered with large, magnificent paintings of landscapes and horses. The room itself looked like it could have been inside an English mansion from the 1800s—with the exception of the large flat screen television that hung on the wall behind the bar.

Slowly, they walked back out through the entranceway to the main hallway. There was a long, plush Persian rug that lay on the marble floor and ran the entire length of the hall. The walls were covered with a rich brick-red-colored fabric, not wallpaper, but the most striking element in the grand hallway was the ceiling. The ceiling was covered with elaborate frescoes.

"I've never seen it in person," Brielle said, "but this reminds me of the photos I've seen of the Sistine Chapel."

"Yes, the scenes are different, but my great-grandmother was Italian. My great-grandfather had these painted for her sixtieth birthday. It wasn't finished in time for that birthday, but as you can see, it took a while to complete," Jace explained.

"I could just lie down right here and stare at the ceiling," Brielle said, "I could literally stay here for hours and still not take it all in."

"Hmm, that is something I have never thought to do as long as I have lived here. We'll have to plan to do that on your next visit," Jace said sweetly.

Brielle felt a strange surge of energy flow through her veins. From the moment she saw him, she had been attracted to Jace. Now, to see him in this home and to know he came from such a strong and successful family, it brought another dimension to him, one that seemed a bit surreal.

"Are you okay?" Jace asked, noticing the curious look on her face.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, "it's just…"

"A lot to take in," Jace finished for her.

She nodded.

Jace looked slightly worried.

"But it doesn't change the way I feel about you. Not at all," she said softly. "It's just something to get used to."

Jace's face relaxed, and he again brought her hand up to his lips to kiss it.

"Thank you. Come on, I've got more to show you," he said as he turned to some of the portraits on the walls in the hallway.

"These are portraits of my family," he said, "This is a portrait of my great grandparents, Jacques and Adelina Devereaux. They had three children, Marcel, Celia and Abelard. Abelard or A.C. was my grandfather. The oldest son there, Marcel," he said pointing to the young man in the painting "was killed in a riding accident. He was thrown from his horse and broke his neck."

Brielle shivered, "Oh, how awful!" she exclaimed, "How old was he?"

"I believe he was only nineteen," he answered. "I think that is why my father never bought horses."

"I can understand why," she replied.

"My great-grandfather came here as a boy with his family with one skill and one skill alone. Can you guess what it was?" he asked.

"Umm, he was, uhh… I have no clue," she laughed.

"He was a baker," Jace said. "His father, my great-*great*-grandfather, came here from France and opened a bakery, or rather a *patisserie,*" he said with his best French accent.

Brielle was surprised at this information. "That's not what I expected you to say."

"No, nobody ever guesses that," Jace continued, "He used that skill and worked hard in his father's bakery so he could attend college. He made it into Harvard. There, he got a degree in Business Administration and Management. He knew there was something special about what his father had created. He took his father's little bakery and developed it into a huge franchise, using family recipes that people all over the country loved.

"From there, he bought all kinds of small businesses and did the same thing. He would find something great and expand it. He got into some real estate development and invested in a couple of car companies. He was smart and went through the Great Depression remarkably well. So by the time my grandfather came into the picture, the Devereaux Corporation was already a multi-million-dollar company.

Brielle looked thoughtfully at the portrait of the family, remembering what she had said the day she saw this house.

"I knew it," she said.

"Knew what?" he asked.

"The day Keoni and I first saw this house, I said that whoever owned it must

have been smart and a hard worker," she said.

"Yes, my great-grandfather was both. He also loved his family and made time for them… or so I've been told; a trait that unfortunately did *not* pass down through the generations to reach my father."

Brielle sighed, squeezing his hand.

"It's okay now. I'm not alone anymore," he said, looking down at her, "God blessed me with you and your family."

She smiled at him and turned back to admire the painting. The ladies wore exquisite ball gowns with sparkling tiaras, and the men were so dashing, so handsome. It was clear to see that Jace came from beautiful gene pools.

He then moved down to the next portrait on the wall.

"These are my grandparents," he said, "A.C. and Iris."

"Yes," Brielle said, studying the gentleman's face in the portrait, "This is the same man in the painting hanging in the lobby of the Devereaux Memorial Hospital, only younger. You resemble him."

"Really? I've never heard anyone say that before. He and my grandmother had two children, my father, Holbrook, and my aunt, Victoria. My grandfather, A.C., inherited the company and, with his father's lessons of expansion, turned a million-dollar corporation into a billion-dollar corporation, expanding worldwide."

Brielle looked closely at this painting and noticed something similar to the first one. The mother in the first painting, Adelina, wore a beautiful tiara of sparkling diamonds. With her tiara and elegant gown, she looked just like a queen. She walked back to examine the tiara in the first painting more closely.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That tiara," she said, still comparing it between the two paintings, "Is that the same one?"

"Yes," Jace said, "My great-grandfather had it made for my great-grandmother, among many others that she owned. This one in particular, she gave to my grandmother to wear on her wedding day."

"Wow," she said softly, "it's stunning."

"Yes, it is," he agreed.

"Is this your father?" she asked, studying the portrait closely.

"Yes, that painting was done a long time ago. He's probably about fifteen years old there," Jace laughed. "He took the Devereaux Corporation and turned it into Devereaux Enterprises. He had a greater vision than just business on land. He expanded the company to the sea, investing in fishing boats all over the world."

"And you choose to work on one of those boats for minimum wage?" she asked with admiration.

"It's not exactly minimum wage," he laughed, "Fishermen work hard, but from time to time, they do alright."

"And you want to be a doctor," she added.

"I do. My father thinks that I need to follow in the family footsteps, take the company over, and expand it yet again. Not sure what is left to expand to," he said dryly.

"There's always… space. Perhaps there is a need for a bakery on the moon; you could sell powdered doughnuts! The aliens would love it," Brielle teased.

Jace laughed, "Yes, that's true, I could conquer the final frontier of the Milky Way!"

"The Chocolate Milky Way," Brielle said, then wrinkled her nose, "Too much? It was a dad joke, I know, but it had to be done!"

They both laughed, but then Brielle took the discussion back to Jace.

"But running the company is not in your heart?" she asked.

"No. It's not," he said.

"What will happen to it if you don't?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. My Aunt Victoria has a son and a daughter. I don't know them very well. They moved to Italy before I was born," he answered.

"Do you think they should take it?" Brielle asked.

"I have mentioned it to my father before, but he won't listen. He says they will kill it, that they are spoiled and undisciplined. He's probably right. They have no idea what it is to do real work in the real world," he answered.

"Pray about it," she encouraged, "The Lord will give you direction on what you should do."

Jace smiled, "I do, every day. I know that God will work it out. I want to do His will. I just want to become trapped in this company like my father is. I want to use the gifts God has given me."

"Just be patient," she said, "Remember, be still, and know that He is God. *'Delight yourself in the Lord and—*'"

"'*He will give you the desires of your heart.'* Psalm 37:5. That one, I have memorized," he grinned.

"Well done! Yes, keep on that path. God won't fail you. This I know. I will pray for you, too." She said, then turned her attention back to the painting of his father when he was younger. "Wow… he is a strikingly handsome man," she said.

"Yeah, but he was quite young when this was done," he said.

Brielle laughed in surprise, "What are you saying? You don't think your father is handsome?"

"I guess, but everyone says I look more like my mother," he said as he led her down to the next portrait on the wall.

As Brielle approached the painting, her heart skipped a beat. This was the first time that she had seen an image of his mother. She had visualized her to be some sort of ugly witch-like creature because of her behavior and treatment of Jace. But instead, she saw a gorgeous creature. Next to her own mother, Jace's mother was one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen.

Jace was right; he did favor her. With the exception of her golden blonde hair, he had her striking dark brown eyes, and their smiles were exactly the same. Brielle looked at the painting of Jace. He appeared to be very young in the portrait. As much as he was a beautiful young man, he was even more so a beautiful little boy.

"When was this portrait done?" she asked.

"Um, a while ago," he said, unsure, "I think I was around six or seven years old there."

"You're so cute," she said teasingly, "I just want to pinch your cheek!"

Jace laughed.

"Your mother is quite a striking woman," she said softly.

"Yes, she was," Jace said.

"Was?" Brielle asked.

"Her lifestyle and drug abuse are taking their toll on her," he answered. "She doesn't have that radiant glow about her anymore; she looks tired and worn out, and she's aged a bit."

"When was the last time you saw her?" she asked.

"Right before school started," he replied, "I went to see her in a production in London."

"That was over four months ago, right?" Brielle asked.

"Yes, that is what it has come to these days. It used to be just a few days she was gone, then a few weeks, and now, years. My father still loves her. He still has hopes she could get off the drugs, get herself clean and sober, then perhaps they could be happy together again. I don't think that will ever happen. I think she likes her life the way it is. She just doesn't want to be a wife and a mother," he said, staring at his mother's portrait with sad eyes. "That's why I have grown so close to your mom," he said, "She's a real mother."

Brielle's heart was heavy for him. She just couldn't understand how anyone could have a child and then abandon them so easily. She looked back at the painting. As she looked at the woman before her, she didn't seem to be as striking as Brielle had originally thought. The only thing beautiful about her was her outer beauty, but without inner beauty, the outer doesn't do much for a person.

Brielle noticed that his mother was also wearing the same tiara as the other ladies.

"Your grandmother gave her the tiara, too?" she asked.

"Yes, but she doesn't have it anymore; my father does. He took it and locked it up in one of our banks in Switzerland. He doesn't trust her with anything valuable like that. My father says he wants to keep it safe so that I can give it to my bride someday," he said softly.

Brielle felt her heart pounding hard against her chest, and the butterflies exploded all through her at his comment, not at the thought of the tiara, but at

the thought of possibly one day being his bride.

Jace looked down at her, “Are you okay?” he asked curiously, getting her attention back from her thoughts.

Brielle nodded shyly, “Yes, I’m sorry. I’m just taking it all in,” she replied casually.

“Come on, I have something for you,” Jace said.

Brielle was full of anticipation, almost as much as she was the night they first traveled to the Prayer Sanctum.

They walked by a grand living room, or at least what she thought was the living room. Brielle shook her head as she marveled at the beauty of the room and its furnishings. Through the window, she could see the lavish landscape of the gardens and pool that lay outside the back portion of the property. But Jace didn’t stop to show her these places; he seemed very determined to take her somewhere else.

“That day when Keoni and I saw you come out of this driveway, we thought this home looked like something in a Jane Austin novel,” she said.

“Which one?” Jace asked curiously.

“I would have to say Pride and Prejudice, without a doubt. It reminds me of Pemberley,” then she looked up at him, “I guess that would make you, my Mr. Darcy.”

“And you, my Elizabeth,” Jace said gently as he looked down into her jade-green eyes.

His heart was full of joy and thankfulness to the Lord for giving him another chance to have Brielle in his life. He walked along through the home, leading her through the same hallway Brielle had walked through the first night she was here. She remembered these doors well as they were the same doors where she stood outside, listening to Jace play the guitar.

Once they had reached the ballroom, Jace stopped outside the closed doors and turned to look at her.

“Since this is our first date, it had to be incredibly special, and since I missed getting to take you to Homecoming and the Festival of Lights, I wanted to make up for it,” he said. “I know the last time you were in this room… well, it wasn’t a good experience for either of us. I hope to change that now.”

Jace turned to open the doors for her to walk through. When he did, Brielle gasped at what she saw.

The entire ballroom was lit only by the romantic and dazzling glow of white Christmas lights, which had been gathered in the center of the room and stretched to drape down like a large tent that had been set up indoors. It was a canopy of glistening, twinkling illumination that dangled down from a ceiling that was over twenty-five feet high. Brielle was awestruck. She was completely overwhelmed; it took her breath away.

Jace took her by the hand and led her slowly into the room, which was full

of the lovely and elegant sounds of soft classical music. She saw in the center of the floor a little elegant table set for two. As Jace led her onto the floor, he turned quickly and swept her into his arms to begin gently dancing. Brielle felt as if she were not in her real life but in that of a dream. As he glided her around the grand dance floor, she felt as if she were a princess---only in blue jeans and a sweater. How she wished she were wearing an elegant ball gown.

After their dance, Jace led her to the table where two plates under silver dome covers waited for them.

"I know I don't have to ask if you are hungry," he said teasingly. He took her to her chair and gently pulled it out for her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Then she felt the soft touch of his lips on her cheek, "You're welcome," he whispered.

Jace sat down and asked for her hands so they could pray over their meal. When he was finished and she opened her eyes, she was almost startled to see that Oliver had come into the room and was standing by an elegant serving cart on wheels. He quickly walked over and lifted the lids of the silver domes for them.

"Bon appétit," he said.

To Brielle's surprise, it was not the dinner she had expected. Instead, properly laid out before her were a variety of some of her favorite foods, including a slice of pizza, a barbeque beef sandwich, and mashed potatoes with gravy. She giggled when she saw the meal.

"My goodness!" she said with delight, "This *is* quite a surprise."

"A good one?" Jace asked.

"Definitely! I just thought I was going to have to eat some sort of unrecognizable Cornish hen dish or leg of lamb, something like that," she mused.

"I would have loved to have had your chicken parmesan, but then I couldn't surprise you," he laughed.

"No, this is great!" Brielle said, picking up the slice of pizza, "Mm, delicious!"

As they ate, they laughed and talked about many things. Good memories of the times they had spent together, and then powerful memories of the times when God had done miraculous things in their lives. After dinner, Oliver brought dessert, which was also covered with silver domes. When he lifted them, Brielle broke out in laughter. There, sitting on the most exquisite China and arranged so precisely and creatively, were powdered doughnuts. She covered her mouth and began laughing even harder.

"I couldn't think of a more appropriate dessert for you than this," Jace said, "After all, if it hadn't been for your love of powdered doughnuts, I don't know if you would have ever noticed me."

Brielle shook her head. "I would have noticed you."

"I don't know. I sat behind you for a full week and didn't get so much as a

glimpse," he joked.

"Trust me," she smiled, "I would have noticed you. It's just, God had me on a Lacy mission and I had laser focus on her during those days."

Jace sat back in his chair and looked at her. His beautiful, dark brown eyes reflected the shimmering lights that hung from above. The way he was looking at her, taking in her beauty, almost made Brielle feel shy.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

Jace nodded, "That night that you came here, I thought I lost you forever. Then when they took you… oh… I nearly lost my mind," he sighed, "So, now that you are here with me, I'm perfect, absolutely perfect and I don't ever want to lose you again."

Brielle stared back at him, "I don't want to lose you either," she whispered.

"I'm glad you said that," he said, reaching into his pocket. He produced a small, flat black box.

Brielle's heart began to pound; she had seen this black box before. He placed it in the palm of her hand and slowly opened it for her. There in the box was his grandmother's pin. Brielle looked down at it, her eyes starting to fill with tears.

"I want to give this to you and ask if you will be mine," he said softly.

Brielle looked up at him with mischievous eyes, "Just to be sure, this means that I would only date you and not Zach Thompson, right?"

"*Especially* Zach Thompson," he laughed, "If you accept this, it means we are pinned, just like they did in the fifties," he said, taking the pin out of the box to give it to her. "It means we belong to each other."

Brielle swooned, "Yes, I accept," she whispered, "But I don't have anything to give to you."

"Just give me your love, that is more than enough," he said sweetly."

At these words, Brielle felt the butterflies explode throughout her body.

"I can do that," she said.

Jace stood up to come over and help her pin it on her sweater. "There," he said happily, "it looks beautiful on you."

"Thank you so much. I love it," she said, "I had no idea you were such a romantic."

"I have my moments," he said, "My grandmother would be so proud."

"Which grandmother was this?" she asked.

"None of the ones I just showed you. Of all the grandmothers, she was the one I was the closest to, and yet, we don't have a painting of her. I wish we did. I do have some photos of her. She was my mother's mother," he replied.

"What was her name?" she asked.

"Gloria," he said.

"As in 'In Excelsis?" Brielle asked.

Jace laughed, "Yeah, you know I never thought about it like that. She was

named for praising the Lord. And praise the Lord, she did. She's the one who took me to church and taught me about Jesus."

He then knelt by her chair and took her hand in his. "I was thinking that we should probably seal this deal," he said softly.

"Seal… the deal?" Brielle struggled to ask, the moment taking her breath away.

"Any proper contract must have a proper seal of some sort," Jace said.

"Seal it… with a kiss?" Brielle asked softly.

Jace nodded. He then moved in slowly toward her. She reached out her hand to place it on his cheek. His lips touched hers so gently, yet the impact of the feeling that rushed through her was of sheer intensity.

He took her face in his hand and gazed into her eyes. "I love you, Brielle St. Claire, and I always want to be with you."

Brielle smiled, her heart overflowing with joy and her stomach overwhelmed with fluttering butterflies, "I love you too, Jace Devereux, and I always want to be with you," she whispered.

Oliver then came back in to clear off all the dishes.

"Was everything satisfactory, Sir?" he asked.

"Everything was excellent, Oliver, thank you," Jace said.

"Yes, thank you so much, Oliver," Brielle replied, "It was all delicious."

"You are most welcome, Miss St. Claire. I am glad you enjoyed it," Oliver said kindly.

Jace stayed by her side for a moment, gazing into Brielle's eyes, and then he turned to walk to the side of the room, where he picked something up. He had another gift in his hand.

"I originally got this for you as a Christmas present," he said, sitting back down in his chair, "but I think I want to give it to you now."

He handed Brielle a small stuffed Koala that held a box in its pouch.

"How cute!" she delighted. "I love koalas!"

"It's because I thought your mother called you a Koala, remember?" he asked.

Brielle giggled, "That's right, I do remember that. Thank you very much," she said, taking the box from inside the pouch. She looked up at him with an inquisitive expression, wondering what was inside.

The box was beautifully wrapped in green- and white striped paper with a green satin ribbon around it. She opened it carefully, not wanting to tear apart something so beautiful. When she opened the box, her eyes grew wide in surprise, and she looked at Jace in amazement.

"It's the angel," she whispered, "I saw this the night…"

Jace nodded, "I know."

"How did you know I liked this?" Then she answered her own question, "You were following me."

"Not really. Well, it didn't start like that. I had dinner with Rateesh and Priyanka, then I tried to try and catch a movie, but they had all started, so I just walked around until I landed at the Festival of Lights. I was listening to the band, drinking a hot chocolate, when I saw you. I couldn't take my eyes off you. You were so beautiful. I was so mad at Keoni that night. I thought she probably had helped you pick out your outfit."

Brielle covered her face and giggled, "She did! She did! I had no idea what to wear!"

"And you looked incredible," He continued, "I watched you go into this lady's exhibit and saw you admiring this angel," he said.

"How did you know what I was looking at from that far away?" she asked.

"I didn't. I had to ask the sales lady. She showed me what it was you had in your hand. I thought it would make a good Christmas present," he said.

Brielle nodded and laughed, "You're right. It does. I love it. Now, when I see this, I will always think of you. Not just because you gave it to me, but because it represents you. You were my guardian angel that night, Jace. If you hadn't been there, watching over me… well, I don't know what would have happened. Thank you. Thank you so much."

Jace didn't speak but, overcome with emotion from her words, immediately went to her and held her tightly.

"All that night I just kept feeling like a stalker," he said.

"No. You were being led there by the Holy Spirit to watch over me so that you would know what had happened. If you hadn't been there and seen that I was gone, Zach might have just thought I had ditched him or something and gone home and… well, let's not think about it. God sent you, and you rescued me. My guardian angel, Jace," she said, hugging him close.

Jace kissed her on the side of her head as he held her close, "I pray to God nothing like that happens again, but if it does, I will *always* come and find you."

Brielle nodded, "I know you will," she said, lowering her eyes. "Did you know I saw you that night?"

Jace looked at her with surprise, "Really? You saw me? When?"

"As they were taking me away in the van, I could see out the back windows, and I saw you running around searching for me. I had no idea where you came from, it had to have been God that put you there," she paused, "I saw the look on your face."

Jace squeezed her hands gently, "Yeah, that was the worst experience of my life. But God protected you and showed us where you were. Thank You, God. You are *so* awesome," he said with a tone of thankfulness.

Then he stood up and walked around the table to take her by the hand. "Come with me."

She stood and walked with him to the corner of the room, next to a musician's platform. There stood a satin black, eight-foot concert grand piano, a

set of drums, and an acoustic guitar on a stand.

Jace led her to an elegant couch where he asked her to sit. Then he walked over to the platform, picked up the guitar, and brought a chair to where she was sitting.

"I had something I wanted to give you for your birthday," Jace said, sitting down in the seat and tuning his guitar.

Brielle felt a rush of guilt sweep over her. "I'm sorry I was so cruel to you, Jace," she said meekly.

"What was it you said to me the other day? All is forgiven between us," he said. "I'm just glad I have the chance to give it to you now."

He then began to play the most delicate and beautiful song, filling the room with its sweet, romantic melody. As Brielle listened, she was covered from head to toe with goose bumps.

When he finished, she clapped her hands gently. "That was beautiful," she said, "What is it called?"

Jace looked down at the floor, "I guess… 'Brielle's Song'."

Brielle felt her heart skip a beat. "Brielle's Song?" she asked slowly.

"Yes, I wrote it for you," he said.

Brielle was aghast, "You… you wrote that… for me?" she asked, overwhelmed at the thought.

Jace nodded.

Brielle felt the warm rush of love flow through her at the thought of him taking the time to compose such a lovely song just for her.

"How long did it take you?" she asked.

Jace put his guitar down on the floor. "I didn't have a lot of time to work on it. I guess I did it off and on over a couple of months," he said.

"A couple of months?" Brielle said, doing the math in her head, "But we've only known each other since September," she said, "That means you must have started---"

"The day I met you," he said, moving closer to her.

Once again, Brielle was overwhelmed with emotion at the thought of his feelings for her. The warmth was now covering her entire body, and she could feel the beat of her heart pounding through every part of her.

"I don't know how to thank you for such a gift," she said, "I don't have anything I could possibly give you that could compare."

"Don't worry," he said, moving in close to kiss her gently, "You are my gift."

The next day was Friday, and that night was the "Inviting His Light" prayer vigil. The Intercessors couldn't believe this night had come so quickly. So much had happened since the day they planned it. They prayed hard in the days before this evening and worked hard preparing the crosses and handing flyers out to those in the community. Now, they would go to the church and see who would come to support praying for their beloved town of Fairfield to claim it for their

good, loving God, Adonai.

When Jace had taken Brielle home the night before, it had begun snowing, and it snowed all through the night. Though the December days had been full of freezing temperatures, this was the first snow that had come to their town that year. Everyone was excited about the snow. The kids in the high school were acting just as happy and playful as the elementary school kids, building snowmen and having snowball fights.

That afternoon, the Intercessors did not have prayer group after school as usual, which turned out to be a good plan as it had not stopped snowing throughout the day. Jace and Brielle went to Henrietta's house to pick her up early and take her to the church. Genevieve, Asher, Magomu, and Alma were going to have dinner ready for them so they could help get the church ready for their guests and prepare their thank you gifts.

Obadiah had a friend in the Bible business who gave him a great deal on several hundred pocket Bibles. He purchased them to give to every person in the community who came to stand with them in prayer for their town. Keoni wanted them to be beautiful and had brought boxes of Christmas ribbons to wrap around each one.

Gideon and Keoni arrived first but found that the journey, which usually took about twenty minutes, took forty-five minutes due to the steady snowfall. Jace and Brielle arrived sometime later with Henrietta.

They all gathered in the church, and while the women wrapped decorative bows on the Bibles, the men helped clean the sanctuary and shovel the sidewalk. However, the snow kept falling.

The hours passed quickly, and before they knew it, the time was five o'clock. The ladies had finished preparing the Bibles, and the men had the church looking clean and lovely. The ladies' ministry of the Maple Grove Church had already decorated the building for Christmas the week before. With its old-fashioned structure adorned with Christmas trees, wreaths, holly, ivy, lights, and candles, and it looked like a scene out of a Thomas Kincaid painting.

They all took a break to have dinner together. Pastor Diffie, along with his wife, Hazel, and the Youth Pastor Nathan, and their families, all arrived safely after carefully plowing their way through the rapidly growing mounds of snow on the roads and parking lot.

They had a lovely dinner together and afterward went into the church to light the candles in the foyer, down the aisles, and on the platform.

It was seven o'clock.

Pastor Diffie went to the bell tower to ring the church chimes, calling out to all those who would come. But no one came.

The Intercessors sat down across the front steps of the platform, and they felt defeated.

"I'm sorry, kids," Pastor Diffie said sadly, not knowing how to comfort them,

“I guess the snow was just too much for everyone.”

Brielle nodded her head, “Yeah, I know,” she said sadly.

“Of all days to have record-breaking snowfall,” Gideon said, “it had to be today.”

“Wait a minute,” Keoni said, “Even though we hoped for more people in the town to come… we are all here.”

“That’s right,” Brielle said, “There’s nothing to stop us from still claiming our town for God and inviting Him back into Fairfield. We can still pray together.”

They all gathered at the church altar to join hands and begin praying for their town. Pastor Diffie led them in prayer, but just after they began, Pastor Nathan heard something. He quietly left the prayer circle and went to find the source of the sound. Everyone had their eyes closed, praying softly, so no one noticed Pastor Nathan return and whisper in Obadiah’s ear to inform him of what he found.

“Please forgive my interruption,” Obadiah said, “but I think there is something you need to see.”

Obadiah and Pastor Nathan started at the back of the church. At the same time, they threw open the shutters to the windows. One by one, they worked their way to the front of the church, opening each set of shutters that covered the inside of the windows until at last, every window was revealed.

The Intercessors all stood in awe, speechless at what they saw before them. As they peered out the windows on both sides of the building, they saw them coming down the road, bright glowing lights; candles burning brightly in the darkness. They were coming from all directions, the shimmering illuminations of hundreds of townsfolk.

The roads of Fairfield had been too covered with snow for them to drive, but in their determination to take a stand for the Lord and claim their town for Him, they came. The snow had stopped falling, and the moon had appeared through the thick clouds and was reflecting off the white blanket of snow on the ground. Everyone in the church who saw the sight of those coming through the bitter cold to join them in prayer was blessed beyond measure.

“As long as I live,” Brielle said, “I will never forget what I am seeing right now.”

The Intercessors grabbed each other, hugging and celebrating the victory they knew Fairfield had already received. By these determined people pressing on to come and take a stand for their town to claim it for the Lord was not only a miraculous sight; it was also a victorious one.

They all went to the foyer to receive those who were beginning to enter. The crunching of their footsteps in the snow was resonating down the streets. This was the sound that had caught Pastor Nathan’s attention while they were praying.

Brielle and the rest of the group were completely amazed to see that the

first ones to the door were Jim, Laura, and Lacy. Lacy had been released from the hospital just days before and was still not strong enough to walk on her own, so Jim had carried her down the street to the church.

"Lacy!" Brielle exclaimed, reaching up to hug her friend, "Jim, did you carry her all the way here?"

"Yep! And I was happy to do so! I haven't had the chance to hold or carry my little girl for years," Jim said happily, "I've loved it every step of the way!"

"I didn't want to miss being part of this," Lacy said softly, "I have so much to thank God for."

One by one, the people began to come inside, happily arriving together and feeling energized by their determination not to be defeated by the weather. As the people came into the church and began to fill the seats, the Intercessors noticed different ones who came to stand with them: Nurse Carrie and her family, Capt. Espindola, his wife Debbie, and Javier, the crew member on the Bonnie Jane. Benjamin Duncan from The Liberty Bell antique shop, Odelia Triboli, Officer Stockton and his family, Coach Barnes, of course, Mr. Bennet, the American History teacher from school, and Virginia and Lydia Roberts. The Intercessors were ecstatic to see them all.

Jace went immediately to greet his boat Captain, his wife Debbie, and Javier, his shipmate.

"Javier!" Jace said excitedly, hugging the man.

Javier smiled, "Hey Jace, it's good to see you. Wow," he said, looking Jace up and down, "You clean up nice, kid."

Jace laughed, "Yeah, it's amazing what wearing normal clothes that aren't covered with fish guts can do for a guy. I smell a lot better, too!"

Javier laughed and took Jace by the hand to shake it, and as he did, he looked into his eyes, "I want you to know that your prayers for me to kick smoking have been working."

Jace looked at him with a face of joy, "There's power in prayer!"

"Yes, there is," Javier said, "I used to smoke at least three packs a day, but God is helping me work it out of my system. I'm now down to three cigarettes a day!" he said happily.

"That's awesome," Jace said, "and I believe without a shadow of a doubt that God can deliver you from them completely."

"I'm trying," Javier said.

"God will help you," Jace answered.

Javier then went to sit with Capt. Espindola and Debbie.

The Intercessors were warmly greeting all those entering when Brielle caught sight of a familiar face that walked in the door. It was Rateesh along with his sister Priyanka and brother Nakul. Brielle quickly made her way through the crowd to reach him and, with no words spoken, grabbed Rateesh and hugged warmly.

"Thank you," she whispered in his ear, "Thank you for coming." Then she turned to grab both Priyanka and Nakul as well to welcome them and thank them for coming. They were happy to be there.

At this point, Brielle was so excited and full of happiness that she would have hugged anyone. That feeling would soon be tested as the next person to come through the door was Derrick Whitfield, Dylan's older brother and the one who so profoundly claimed to be an Atheist. She looked at him with surprise.

"Derrick," she said, trying not to gasp, "Hello, I'm… I'm so thrilled to see you here," she said excitedly.

Derrick grinned at her shyly, "Thank you. I wasn't sure if I would be welcome."

Brielle furrowed her brow, puzzled by his statement, "Of course you are. Everyone is welcome with God."

"I just wasn't sure how it worked for people who were once Atheists," he said humbly.

"It works just like it does for anyone who comes to believe," she said, "You are welcomed by God and all of us with open arms," then she wrapped her arms around him tightly to hug him.

"Thank you," he said, "I want you to know… I know it was God who healed Dylan. I was there the day you prayed for him in the chapel. I heard you. It wasn't long after that Dylan opened his eyes and I just… knew somehow… it was God that healed him."

Brielle smiled broadly at him, "Yes, God works like that sometimes, and it's just like you said; somehow, you just know."

She then took Derrick by the arm and walked him inside to the sanctuary and up to Gideon. Gideon was shocked to see him-- he was thrilled but was speechless. He grabbed Derrick and hugged him, thanking him for coming.

Brielle enjoyed watching everyone arrive and seeing so many people happy and excited to be there. Her eyes moved around the room until she saw Keoni talking with a guy, but she couldn't see his face. She wasn't sure who it was until he turned around. When he did, she gasped with joy.

It was Carlos.

Keoni was beaming with joy and was talking with him excitedly. Brielle was so exhilarated by everything taking place, she hardly felt as if she were standing on the ground but rather floating a few inches above.

Brielle walked toward Carlos to welcome him and thank him for coming. As Brielle started to move, a woman, a stranger she had never seen before, came up to her. She was short like Brielle and had a very sorrowful expression on her face, her eyes red and swollen from crying. She introduced herself to Brielle.

"Hello. The gentleman over there said that you are Brielle St. Claire," she said, pointing to Obadiah across the room.

"Hello, yes," she answered, "I'm Brielle."

"I wanted to introduce myself to you. My name is Barbara Ledger… I'm Ryan's mother."

Immediately, Brielle understood the woman's expression and tear-filled eyes. They were the eyes of a mother with a broken heart. Brielle reached out and touched the woman's arm, "Oh, Mrs. Ledger," she said softly, "it's so nice to meet you."

Mrs. Ledger was surprised at Brielle's warmth, "I wasn't sure if I should come here tonight, but my Ryan, well… he begged me to come. He was too ashamed to come here in person. But he wanted me to send the message to you and your friends that he is so sorry for what he did," she said, beginning to weep. "He is working on turning his life around. He wanted to know if you and your friends would come and see him sometime so he can ask you all for forgiveness… and so he can ask Jesus into his heart."

Brielle felt tears of joy immediately swell in her eyes. "Yes, yes, of course we will," she whispered, barely able to speak over the emotion that was flooding her soul. "It will be our blessing to do that."

Mrs. Ledger smiled and hugged her close, "Thank you," she whispered, "Thank you so much. I have loved Jesus most of my life, but Ryan… well, all God's children have to come to choose Jesus on their own now, don't they?"

Brielle nodded, wiping the tears from her face, "Yes, yes, they do."

Mrs. Ledger thanked Brielle again and went to find a seat. The church was quickly filling.

Jace went to find Brielle, who was staring in awe at the townspeople as they came in from the bitter cold. They had come seeking a better way of life for themselves and for their town. Determined not to be defeated by the weather, they had come seeking God.

"Isn't this amazing?" Brielle heard Jace ask behind her. She turned to see him standing in the center of the aisle in front of the stage.

She walked over and hugged him, "You have no idea," she said, enjoying this incredible moment for the Lord with him.

Jace was busy talking about all the different people who had come, rattling on like she had never heard him do before, when suddenly, he stopped. He stopped talking, and he even stopped hugging her; he just froze completely still.

Brielle looked up at him curiously, "Are you alright?"

She looked up at his face, which had a look of complete astonishment. "What's the matter?"

Jace didn't answer. He stared across the church to the back door, where people were still coming in with their candles from the cold night. He was looking at someone. A man who was well dressed, distinguished, and very handsome. She found herself staring at the man, too, finding him vaguely familiar.

"Jace," she asked softly, "Is that?"

Jace stood there for a moment, still frozen in astonishment,
"My father," he whispered.

Brielle turned again to look at the man who had now made eye contact across the church with his son. Jace took Brielle by the hand and quickly maneuvered his way through the crowd to his father. When he reached him, his father smiled and extended his hand out to his son. Jace stood there for a moment and looked at his father's hand. Then he bypassed his handshake and grabbed him to hug him close.

At first, his father was surprised by Jace's embrace. The longer Jace hugged him, the more it melted his father's heart, until he too held his son in a tight and loving embrace.

Brielle felt floods of joy sweep over her and stood there thinking about all the miracles that God had done for them and their town. She thought about how it all began with a robbery on a cold fall morning. How God took that situation and turned the heart of a criminal into a heart full of love for Jesus.

Then she thought about Lacy, who had been under the bondage of satan for so long, using drugs and cutting herself because of the demons that attacked her. Now, she was set free and had a brand-new life through Jesus Christ ahead of her.

She thought about Rateesh and the family members that once served other gods, but through the miraculous healing power of Jesus Christ, had the truth of the One True Living God revealed to them and now had opened their hearts to Jesus Christ and confessed Him as their Lord and Savior.

Looking over, she saw Derrick, a man so staunchly against God and His existence that he wouldn't let a Christian person near his family. Now, here stood Derrick, miraculously changed by the hand of God, who spoke to him through the Holy Spirit and the healing of his younger brother. And Carlos, a person who once lived a different lifestyle which was not in accordance with God's Word, now came to choose Jesus, to follow Him, and live his life according to the truth of God's Word.

Brielle's heart was overflowing with joy. Never before had she felt such amazing amounts of exhilarating joy, hope, and peace as she felt on this night. God had taken four teenagers who loved Him and transformed them into warriors for *His* glory.

God had blessed her with a family that dedicated themselves to serving Him and would work for the rest of their days to help build His Kingdom. She was thankful to be who she was and where she was in that exact moment, space, and time.

As she watched Jace embracing his father, her mind turned to her own father. How she missed him. However, she knew he was still with her in spirit, was watching down upon her family, and would be proud of the work she was doing, carrying on where he had left off.

Jace looked at his father and smiled, “Thank you for coming, Dad,” he said.

“I’m happy to be here. I found your flyer on my desk,” his father said.

Jace looked at him curiously and then smiled, “Oliver,” he said.

“Yes, Sir,” Jace heard Oliver’s voice come up behind him. Jace turned around to hug the gentleman. “You’re here!” Jace said happily.

“Yes, Sir,” Oliver said politely, “It was remarkable that your father had nothing else scheduled for this evening,” he smiled.

Jace understood and smiled back. “Thank you so much,” he whispered.

Jace turned back to his father, “Dad, this is Brielle,” he said, introducing them.

Jace’s father was pleased to meet Brielle. “So, this beautiful little girl is Brielle?” he asked.

Jace laughed, “Well, what did you think?”

“I thought she would be pretty, but I had no idea she was this lovely,” he said, taking her by the hand. “I’m H.R. Devereaux. It is my pleasure to meet you, young lady,” he said, lightly kissing her on the hand.

Brielle blushed, “Thank you, Sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you too,” she said.

Jace then took her by the hand and led his father and Oliver inside.

“He’s charming—and handsome,” she whispered, “Like father, like son.”

Jace laughed.

Genevieve went onto the platform and began playing the piano to bring everyone to attention. Jace made his way to the platform, where he took his place with his guitar. Brielle sat down on the front row while Gideon and Keoni walked up to the front steps and asked everyone to please join them in an opening song.

As the congregation stood and joyfully began to sing, Brielle felt a surge of the power of God flow through her like she had not felt in a long time. It wasn’t like when the Holy Spirit came upon her as she battled the enemy in the mini-mart, or on the shore by the lighthouse, or even when she stood before Joey the Snake. This was a different presence of God she felt upon her, one of healing. She looked at Gideon, Keoni, and Jace up on the platform before her, boldly leading the people in worship to the Lord, and suddenly… she had the desire to sing.

She walked up to the platform to stand with Keoni and Gideon, who watched her curiously. Then she began to sing, and when she did, it blessed her friends and family in a powerful way. For they knew that she had not sung praise to the Lord since the day she lost her father.

God had truly done great things in the lives of the Intercessors, and they looked forward to seeing what He had in store for them to come. They would work hard, study His Word, and prepare themselves for the battles which lay ahead, for they knew that to serve the Lord would not be a life without trials and tribulations. There would be daily tests for them to endure, but they were not

afraid, for they knew that God, Adonai, Eloheinu, Yahweh, Jehovah, their Heavenly Father, and His Mighty Son Jesus Christ, Yeshua Hamashiach, their Lord and Savior, and the Holy Spirit, their Friend and Comforter, would give them the victory!

They held hands and stood together, united with all those in the congregation before them who came together for the cause of Jesus Christ. Together they lifted their voices in song and worshipped Him, singing loud and strong.

"O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!"

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**Bible Texts taken from the English Standard Translation and the Jewish Christian Bible*

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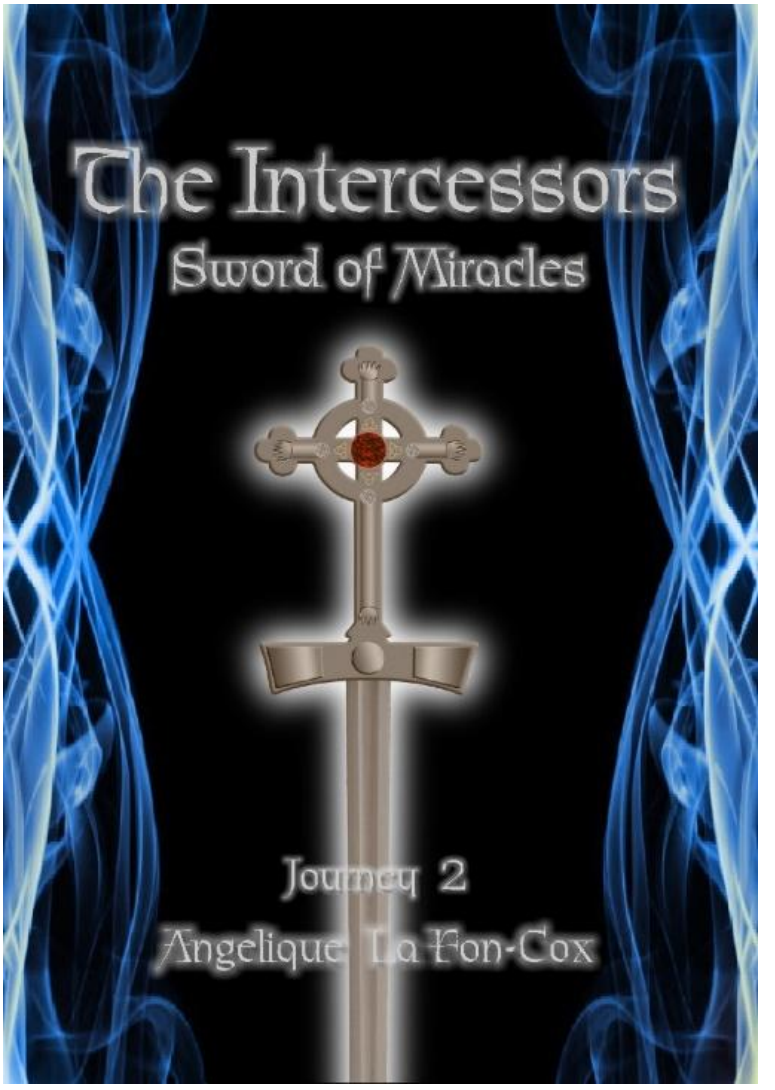
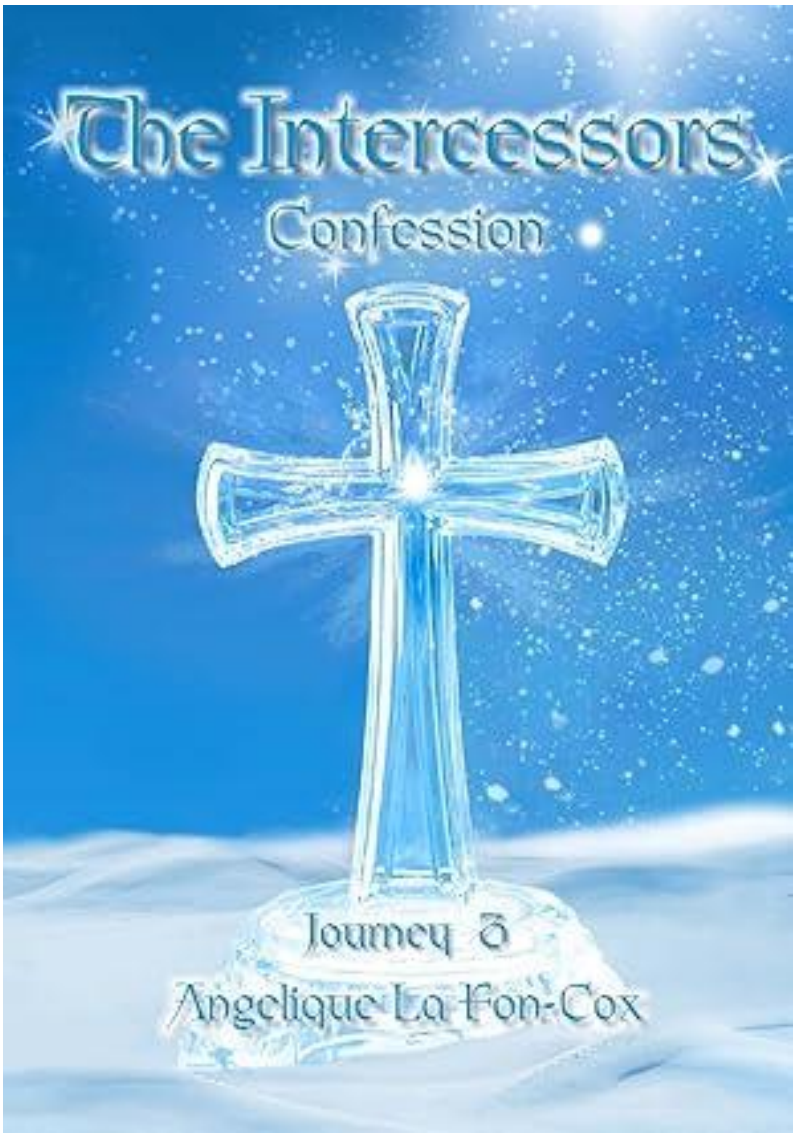
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