



## beating the odds

**g**osh, you're pretty," Branson said, awakening me.

I sat up in the stiff hospital chair and stared at my ex-boyfriend. His head and chest were wrapped in white gauze, and his hands had tubes sticking out of them. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty in the afternoon," he informed me.

"Already? I got here at two, saw my brother for like five minutes, then came to see if you were all right. Guess I dozed off."

"I'm glad you came to see me. It shows how much you care."

I got up, stood next to Branson, and held his hand, careful not to disturb the tubes attached to it. "I do. Deeply."

He smiled. It felt good to let out my true feelings.

I'd been on an emotional roller coaster with Branson Price all through the last year of high school. We started out great, but then he wanted to take our relationship further

than I wanted to. When I refused to give in, he turned to my best friend, Brittany Cox. They went all the way.

I was angry at him for betraying me. And yet, I could never shake the deep feelings I had for him. Now, even if my dream of marrying Branson ever did come true, I would never be his first.

It wasn't just Branson I got angry with. Brittany and I didn't talk for months. But God reminded me that I was supposed to forgive others as He forgave me. Besides, circumstances in Brittany's life—like her being diagnosed with HIV—had turned my girlfriend into a different person. She'd become really humble. When I finally forgave her, she asked for my forgiveness too. So our friendship started anew.

"How's your brother?" Branson asked. I knew he felt guilty about getting into that car crash the night before. He and his best friend, Bo, had gotten drunk during prom and challenged a bunch of guys from a rival sports team to a race. My brother Lance and another guy piled into Bo's white Chevy Blazer. Moments later, the El Camino they were racing against smashed into the side of a mountain, and the Blazer went over a cliff. The guy in the backseat with Lance got out with just a broken arm. I'd heard the doctor say Branson had suffered a severe concussion and internal bleeding, though it seemed to be under control now. Bo, however, wasn't so lucky. He was still in a coma, and he'd lost all feeling in both of his legs.

"They released Lance this afternoon," I said, "just before I came in here to check on you. He's still a little lightheaded from that gash over his eye. And the stitches will probably leave a scar." *Still, it could be a lot worse*, I wanted to add. But I didn't want to compound Branson's guilt about Bo.

"And where's your boyfriend?" Branson asked.

I looked away and thought about Foster McDowell.

Foster was tall, tan, and gorgeous. He was also a strong Christian and extremely sweet. He played piano beautifully

and had an awesome singing voice. We'd done a couple of duets at church, and we made great harmony together. But there just wasn't the passionate spark between me and Foster that there'd been with Branson. I tried forcing myself to like him, but it wasn't working.

When Bo's car went over that cliff last night, I realized that I wanted to be Branson's girlfriend. I even blurted out that I loved him. Foster heard, and decided to break up with me. He wished me well, but I knew his heart was broken. He thought he was a better fit for me than Branson. I hoped to prove him wrong.

I stared into Branson's deep blue eyes. "I don't have a boyfriend anymore."

"Really?" he asked, a hopeful expression brightening his scratched-up face.

I nodded. "We broke up this morning."

"A beautiful girl like you should always have a boyfriend. Laurel, I know I messed up. I hurt you bad. I made a huge mistake with Brittany. That makes me feel worse than not getting that football scholarship to the University of Georgia."

"Branson, don't rule that out," I said, not ready to discuss the other topics he'd brought up.

Branson Price was the all-star quarterback of our school. When he hurt himself midseason, all the major-league schools stopped trying to recruit him.

"My one shot to walk on as a freshman went out the window when I busted my throwing arm," he groaned.

I kissed his forehead. "Don't talk like that. You have to pray and believe that everything will be all right. Have faith."

He squeezed my hand. "See, that's why I need you in my life. With you I can start all over again. Laurel, I love you. Be my girlfriend again."

I didn't get a chance to answer him because the door swung open and a redheaded nurse entered. "I see you're awake. How are you feeling?"

While Branson assured her he was doing fine, the nurse checked and recorded his vital signs.

“I’ll be back to check up on you again before my shift ends.”

Branson smiled at her as she walked away.

“Don’t get any ideas,” I teased him. “She had on a wedding ring.”

“Oh, Laurel, it’s nothing like that.”

“And what is it like?”

“Well . . . It’s just . . . See, this black nurse came in earlier and she said she was going to give me my checkup. I’m glad a new one came on the schedule before she could get back to me.”

“Why?” I asked.

He shuddered. “Just thinking about having a black lady touch me creeps me out, you know?”

I stared at him, appalled that he would say such a thing. “Black women have taken care of white people for years.”

“I know, but this isn’t the slavery days.”

“I’m sure the blacks are more happy about that than you are,” I said sarcastically.

“Look, I’m not prejudiced or anything. I have lots of black friends. You know that.”

There were some black players on the football team. Jackson Reid, for instance, was one of Branson’s best friends. That made me wonder where he was getting all this attitude from.

“Hey, you still haven’t answered my question,” he asked, pulling me onto the bed beside him. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

I looked into his precious face and softly answered, “Yes.”

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The next day, Monday, I had to go to school. After that horrible prom, I dreaded the first day back. I even skipped

my before-school gymnastics practice at Rockdale County Gym and let Brittany drive me to school.

The attitude in the car was somber. Brittany had lost her usual perky demeanor. At school, all the students walked around like zombies. Just like they had last March, after we had that school shooting. My youngest brother, Luke, got shot that day, and so did Faigyn, Foster's younger sister. They were just freshmen, and their lives could have ended. Thank the Lord, both of them were all right.

Our principal, Dr. Wood, called a special assembly first thing. "I know you're all grieving about Saturday's tragedy," she began.

I spotted Foster across the room. His eyes were locked on me until he saw me looking at him. Then he quickly turned away.

Yesterday at church, when he told me it wasn't working out between us because I wasn't committed enough to our relationship, he'd said it was no big deal and that he would be fine without me. But today his eyes revealed a loneliness that wasn't there before. He was hurting.

I saw my girlfriend Robyn walk up to him. He pointed over to me, and she circled around the gym toward me.

Robyn Williams was an African American girl with caramel skin, a cute fluffy haircut, and a lot of backbone. I knew she would stand by me no matter what.

"Hey, girl," Robyn said, taking the seat beside me.

"Shh!" The teacher at the end of our row glared at us.

Robyn rolled her eyes. "She wouldn't give me all that drama if I was a white girl," she said under her breath.

Now, what was that supposed to mean? Did she really feel that way? I was sure that if I'd talked while the principal was speaking, the teacher would have hollered at me too. I was tempted to try it, but didn't want to embarrass myself. So I pretended I didn't hear Robyn's comment.

"Hey, I heard you and Foster broke up," Robyn whispered. "Don't keep all the juice to yourself. What's going on?"

Her slang often made me smile. Not that I longed to imitate it, but she had a neat way of expressing herself. She didn't talk that way all the time. She spoke in proper sentences more often than I did.

"I'll tell you later," I whispered back. "I don't want to get in trouble."

"Girl, forget about that teacher." Robyn's dismissive gesture almost made me laugh.

"That's what I like about you," I said. "You're different."

She shot me an angry glare. "What do you mean, different?"

The teacher leered at us.

"You know," I mouthed. "Different."

"No, Laurel, I don't know," Robyn responded defensively. "Why don't you explain it to me?"

I sighed, wondering what had gotten into her. "I just meant you're not a regular black girl. You wear cool clothes, you live in a nice house, your mom's an author. You don't have gold teeth or tattoos, and you don't live in the projects."

"You know, not every black person is poor."

"I realize that." I glanced at the teacher in our row. This time she looked too engrossed in the principal's speech to notice us. Desperately wanting to change the subject, I asked, "So, you want to hear about me and Foster?"

Her eyes flashed at me. "No, I don't," she snapped. "Foster is the best guy you've ever had. You shouldn't let Branson's little accident convince you to get back together with that jerk. But you know what? I don't even care."

Before I could say anything in response, my friend Meagan Munson, who was sitting on the other side of me, elbowed me. "Listen," she hissed.

I looked up at the principal.

"This has been a difficult year for all of us, but Salem High is still going strong," she was saying. "The sorrowful times we have experienced have made you all stronger. School will be dismissed early today, and all after-school

sports practices are cancelled. But I know you will all come back tomorrow with a new attitude, prepared to make the rest of this school year the best it can be.”

Normally, I would have been thrilled at the thought of getting out of school early. But I had a very important gymnastics meet coming up and I had been counting on practicing that day. Yet I realized sometimes people have to put their plans on hold when tragedy strikes.

As we all cleared out, I wanted to find Foster and talk to him. But when I looked around the gymnasium, I couldn't find him anywhere.

When I got home that afternoon, my middle brother, Lance, was on the phone, yelling like crazy. The next minute he slammed down the receiver.

“What's wrong with you?” I asked.

“I need to get out of this house,” he grumbled, raking his fingers through his short blond hair. “Can you take me for a drive?”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug, wondering what his problem was.

As we climbed into the van, Lance said, “Don't just take a short trip.”

I pulled out of the garage and headed down the street.

Lance was the quarterback on the sophomore team. He was athletic and popular. He'd had a problem with alcohol, but he conquered that after a binge at Christmas sent him to the hospital and a New Year's Eve party made him pass out. So I didn't know what could be bothering him now. Then I got an idea. Was he still gambling? He'd won and lost quite a bit of money during the first few months of the year, mostly betting on basketball and football games.

“You're gambling again, aren't you?” I asked, my nervous foot pressing harder on the accelerator. “Is someone after you?”

Before he could answer, a police car pulled up behind me, its lights flashing. I was in deep trouble.

I pulled over and looked into the rear view mirror. A

cop in his mid-fifties with a pot belly and freckles sauntered up to my window and asked for my license and registration.

“Shadrach, eh?” he said, examining my paperwork. “The only Shadrach I know is the reverend at Kensington Community Church.”

“That’s our dad,” Lance spoke up. “I just got released from the hospital and my sister—”

“You don’t have to explain. I was gonna let you go when I saw y’all were white kids. Often as not, them crazy black troublemakers think the rules don’t apply to them. Since y’all are good kids, I’m not gonna rain on your day. You just take it easy, now, ya hear?” The officer handed me back my license and registration, then moseyed on back to his squad car.

“Isn’t that sad?” I said to Lance as we pulled back onto the road.

“Sad? It’s great! You didn’t get a ticket.”

“Yeah, but if we were black he would have given us one.”

“Well, we’re not black, so who cares?”

I ignored his comment and kept driving. But my thoughts raced on. Why was everything around me so black and white all of a sudden? It was starting to bother me. I was going to have to pray about it because I didn’t have any answers, and I definitely needed some.

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The following day, everybody’s spirits had picked up a little. Students acted friendlier to one another. Things were definitely not normal, but they were better.

“Why are you so nervous?” Meagan asked as we stood together in the lunch line. My shy, redheaded friend was cute and sweet, but she could be a little dense sometimes.

“Duh! Tonight is the most important gymnastics meet of our school history. If we win this one, we go on to the regional championships. I’ve been talking about this for weeks.”



“Oh, sure, yeah. I remember.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” I confessed. “I’ve been practicing like crazy, but I’m still having trouble on some of the routines. I really wish we could have practiced yesterday.”

“You’ll be fine. You’re great. How’s Branson?”

I sighed. Meagan wasn’t athletic, so she couldn’t really understand how important this was to me. I decided there was no point in trying to explain. “He’s supposed to be getting out of the hospital today.”

“That’s great. You know, I didn’t think you and Branson would ever get back together.”

Brittany cut in line behind us. “What are you saying, Meagan? That after I messed him up she’d never want him back?”

“It doesn’t matter what went on between you and Branson,” I told her. “What’s important is that we’re back together now, and I hope it lasts forever this time.”

When Brittany didn’t say anything Meagan spoke up. “If he’s who you really want, I hope it works out.”

When we sat at our table, I was still kind of mad at Brittany. She just didn’t get the concept of true friendship.

“I’m getting some of the other cheerleaders to go to your meet tomorrow,” Brittany said.

“You are?” Meagan asked, swallowing a bite of meat loaf.

“Yeah. Everyone knows the great Laurel Shadrach might be going to the Olympics someday and we all want to be there to see her in action.” Brittany winked at me. “Branson’s coming too. I invited him.”

“Brittany, you don’t need to call my boyfriend for me,” I said. “I have a tongue, I can speak for myself.”

“Whatever.”

I got up. “You should have at least told me first. I might be a little nervous with Branson at the meet.” I threw my lunch in the trash and left the cafeteria. I couldn’t eat. I was way too anxious. Something about Branson and Brittany

bothered me. Was he coming because he wanted to support me, or because he knew Brittany would be there?

I would never be able to concentrate on the meet with all this confusion going on in my head. I had to pray and give it all to God. I went into the bathroom and prayed until I felt better. It worked wonders. I felt as if a load had been lifted from my shoulders.

I proceeded to the gymnasium, arriving an hour before the meet to practice. As I approached the balance beams, Branson walked up to me and pulled me close to him.

“Branson, you should be at home resting.”

“I wanted to support you,” he said. Then he kissed me and slid his tongue down my throat.

I wanted to push him away, but I didn’t want to make him fall over. “Not here.”

“Why not? Because your old boyfriend is looking?”

I didn’t know what he was talking about until I turned around and saw Foster standing by the bleachers staring at us. I wasn’t sure how to respond so I walked away from both of them.

As I passed Foster he said, “I just came to wish you good luck.”

So much for my extra practice. I stormed into the locker room and prayed there until the other gymnasts started showing up.

It was a really close meet. We were coming in second until my event on the balance beam. I had to get at least a 9.98 for our team to win. I closed my eyes, shot up a quick prayer, and did my thing. My body moved effortlessly and I received a perfect ten!

All the girls on both teams ran to the center of the floor and hugged me. Coach Turner picked me up and swung me around so vigorously I nearly kicked a couple of my teammates. But they didn’t seem to care. We were going to the regional championships. What a joy it was beating the odds!