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keeping it together

Picture this,” my handsome boyfriend of two years, Branson Price, whispered in my ear. “The hottest guy in school and the cutest girl in school—seniors! A couple again, ready to rule Salem High School. Every guy wanting her, every girl wanting him, but everyone else is out of luck because they want each other. Do you know what I’m talking about, Laurel? Can you picture it?”

All I could do was smile. He was talking about us. Though he had been my boyfriend since we were sophomores at one of the top schools in the state of Georgia, we had an on-again, off-again relationship. We were as fragile as the wind at times. Everything seemed to blow us apart, but we had made a commitment over the summer and now it was August. It was a hot day in Georgia and we were at Six Flags enjoying one of our last days of freedom. However, we weren’t really disappointed about the thought of going

back to school. After all, it was our senior year, the moment we'd been waiting for since kindergarten.

We were standing in line for the Freefall, a ride that dropped hundreds of feet straight down. I could imagine my heart falling out of my chest. I was scared and didn't want to get on the ride.

"You're riding with me," Branson said. "Relax. I've got ya."

I relaxed.

Six Flags was packed. It was the Friday before we had to go back to school. Although it was scorching outside, we were having a blast. We didn't need friends to accompany us. Just the two of us—that was the way I liked it. All of his attention focused on me.

Branson had grown a lot in our junior year. He was more mature as well as a lot more physically fit. Muscles rippled in his chest and a cute, tailored haircut accented his blond hair. He'd worn glasses the year before but now, with his new contact lenses, those beautiful blue eyes were even more vivid. Every time I peered his way, I was mesmerized. He had me in the palm of his hand. Whatever he said, I wanted to do instantly. Even the most uncomfortable things seemed all right.

As we waited in the long line to get on that scary ride, Branson propped himself up on the black iron gate, pulling me to him and whispering sweet things in my ear. He cupped his hand against the back of my head, then slowly fluttered his fingers through my light-brown hair, which fell in layers down to the middle of my back.

I loved his attentions. But when I saw a little girl of about nine years old watching us, I felt uncomfortable. She reminded me of Little Orphan Annie, from the movie I'd seen with my brothers the week before. This wasn't a sight she should see: a couple practically making out in an amusement park.

I didn't really want to stop my boyfriend. Things had

been great between us in the last two months and I didn't want to rock the boat before school started. However, my instincts pulled me back.

"What are you doing?" Branson asked with subtle frustration. "You're beautiful and you're mine. Don't turn away."

I always melted when he called me beautiful. My three younger brothers called me exactly the opposite, especially when I took too long in the bathroom washing my hair, putting on makeup, and deciding what to wear.

I was always trying to do more to make myself look beautiful. But no matter what I did, I never felt like I measured up to the other girls.

My best friend, Brittany Cox, was drop-dead gorgeous. She had blonde hair like Christina Aguilera. She dressed, talked, and even walked like some of the hottest pop-music stars. I didn't want to be like her, but I did admire her natural beauty. If she woke up and went to school without even combing her hair or putting on any makeup, she would still be beautiful . . . and she knew it. Her attitude made me lay into her quite often, but I guess that's what best friends are for—telling each other the real deal. Besides, I wouldn't have traded her for anything. I knew she would always be there for me.

My other good friend, Meagan Munson, was a cute red-head who was extremely shy.

I came across as shy to some people, but I wasn't. I was just not really confident, except on the balance beam in gymnastics. You can't step on the balance beam and do flips without being totally confident that you're going to make your next move.

I'd been competing in gymnastics since I was in the fourth grade. Salem High School didn't have an official gymnastics team, which was a huge disappointment to me. But Mom signed me up at Rockdale County Gym, which had lessons three evenings a week and every Saturday during gymnastics season, which started the same week school did.

Rockdale Gym always competed in a big state meet right after Christmas. This year I really wanted to qualify and compete in the National Championship. All the scouts would be there, and I desperately wanted to go to UCLA or the University of Georgia on a gymnastics scholarship.

The previous year, however, had not been a good one for me. My coach, Mr. Milligent, who had the build and face of a professional wrestler, was really hard on me. I guess that was good in a way. He always got me to do my best.

As much as I wanted to go to college on a scholarship, I also wanted to quit gymnastics altogether so I could spend more time with my friends. That was part of the reason Branson and I broke up so many times. He kept saying, "Gymnastics is coming before me again."

I always tried to make him feel like that wasn't the case, but one day I lost it and said, "Yeah, just like football comes before me every single time. And what are you gonna do about it?"

He shocked me when he said, "I wanna break up."

I thought back to the disheartening moments of being apart from him all that May, not even being able to go near his locker in the hall for fear he might be with another girl.

I didn't want to go through all that again. I wanted this to be the picture-perfect senior year. I could see us being the happiest, hottest senior couple around. As we got off the ride, which I had survived thanks to Branson holding hands with me, I knew we would make it.

My father, Rev. Dave Shadrach, was the pastor of our church in Conyers, Georgia, where we lived. We'd moved there from Conway, Arkansas, four years before. Conway and Conyers were both small country towns, and I had grown comfortable in the growing city of Conyers.

Being a preacher's daughter had never been difficult for me . . . until that year. I started to feel emotions for my boyfriend that went totally against the things my dad preached about every Sunday and in our Saturday Bible

study and at our Friday-night youth meetings. Abstinence was one of his big messages to us teens, and as adamant as he was about it to the church congregation, he was even stronger on the issues with his own children. He always said he knew how tough it was for us kids, but I knew he wouldn't understand or want to hear about my inner struggles. I could never walk up to him and say, "Dad, I just want to put my hands all over Branson, and when he gives me a peck on the cheek I want the kiss to last for days."

There is so much I didn't dare say. Partly because I knew my dad didn't really want to hear it, and also because I knew I shouldn't feel that way.

Branson and I walked hand in hand to the next ride. Since we were both sweating, we decided it should be Splash Waterfalls.

As we walked I thought, *Most precious God, I thank You for answering my prayers and putting me back with my boyfriend. Only You know how much I care for Branson and what a big place he holds in my heart. Now You have given him back to me and I know I need to honor that. But whenever I walk with his strong, tanned hand in mine, like now, I feel a little dizzy inside. I know those feelings are a sign of trouble. Help me stay focused in this relationship. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

"Earth to Laurel." Branson's voice broke into my thoughts. "Hey, where did you go?"

"I'm sorry," I said, tearing my gaze from the beautiful, cloudless sky. "I was just looking above. It's such a pretty day."

All of a sudden, with thousands of people walking all around us, he stopped me dead in my tracks and kissed me. After about six seconds, we pulled apart.

"I really dig it that you appreciate the little things," Branson whispered. "And that kiss should show you how much I appreciate you." His voice grew husky and seductive. "I want to appreciate every part of you. Why don't we leave Six Flags and go cruisin'?"

“Aw, c’mon,” I said, pulling his hand. “Let’s go on the log ride.”

I really had been looking forward to Splash Waterfalls. But the main reason I put him off was that I didn’t trust myself to leave with him, even though I had just prayed for strength.

The Lord knew I needed to stay in a public place. After some convincing, Branson finally conceded and we enjoyed the rest of the afternoon in the park.

We got home too late to make it to the Friday-night youth meeting, so we skipped it. As Branson drove me home in his blue Camaro, with my head buried in his chest, I was deep in thought. I wondered how I would be able to fight these feelings that Branson was having trouble holding in. I could tell he wanted to take our relationship further, but I couldn’t agree to that. A strong voice in my heart and my spirit said no. But my flesh was speaking a language altogether different. And with a guy as hot and handsome as the 6’1”, 210-pound stud beside me, I didn’t know what might happen if I wasn’t careful.

“I can’t believe you don’t have a boyfriend,” I said to my best friend, Brittany, as she helped me prepare for my date that Saturday evening.

“Boyfriends tie you down,” Britt replied. “I prefer the freedom of being able to go out with a different guy every weekend if I want to. That’s why I never let a guy think I’m his. Besides, if I had a boyfriend, I wouldn’t be able to take care of you and Branson like I do.”

“Oh, and I thank you so much,” I said sincerely, wrapping my arms around her neck. “We wouldn’t be back together if it wasn’t for you. I don’t know what you told him, Brittany, but it saved us.”

She hugged me back. “Don’t mention it. It was my pleasure. Do you like my nail polish?” She held up her square, bright-red nails.

“It’s a pretty color,” I conceded, “but it is totally not you.” Brittany was into French manicures, cotton-candy nail polish, and natural colors that go with anything. She got her fingernails and toenails done at a salon every Saturday while I was at Bible study. We were opposites, but for some weird reason, we had a connection.

My family wasn’t at all like hers either. When her parents got divorced, she and her brother, Gabriel, went to live with their father. Now that Gabe was off at the University of South Carolina, Brittany was practically an only child. Her father gave her everything she ever wanted.

Meagan was spoiled too. Her parents were still together, but they worked all the time. Meagan was practically raising her younger sister, Elise, who was entering the ninth grade. Their parents always left before Meagan and Elise got up for school, and they didn’t return until ten or eleven at night. They were both lawyers—her dad was with the district attorney’s office and her mom was in private practice. Meagan always said she was proud of her parents for their accomplishments, but I knew she wished they spent more time at home.

My mom was always around. She’d been a stay-at-home mom all my life, even after all four of us kids were in high school. I was about to start the twelfth grade. My oldest brother, Liam, the creative one, was going into eleventh grade. My middle brother, Lance, the athletic one, was starting tenth grade, and my youngest brother, Luke, the brain, would be in ninth. Luke was the smartest of my brothers because he’d been around older kids all his life. My father’s first priority was always home and family, even though he was the pastor of an always growing church. That was definitely a good thing, but sometimes he could be a little overbearing.

“What should I wear for my date with Branson tonight?” I asked Brittany, holding up two shirts. One was a pale-blue blouse with spaghetti straps and pearly buttons that I begged my mom to let me get last year because “everyone”

was wearing them. The other was a scoop-neck beige tank top that went with just about every skirt I owned.

“Ugh! I don’t like either one of those,” my friend ragged on me.

“But these are my favorites,” I cried. I knew my closet wasn’t a walk-in mall, but I thought I looked good in some of my stuff.

Brittany tilted her head. “I’m sorry, but both of those shirts are so . . . yesterday. You know what I’m saying? Hey, you asked my opinion, and that’s it. You have got to get some new stuff already. Tell me you’ve gone shopping for new school clothes. You can’t be wearing last year’s stuff. You’re a senior now!”

“My mom has picked me up a few pieces here and there,” I said in a weak voice.

“Where are they? Pull them out,” Brittany insisted, her hands on her curvaceous hips.

“Actually, I haven’t even seen them yet. When I was at Six Flags with Branson yesterday, she took my brothers shopping and she said she bought me some stuff.”

Brittany’s big blue eyes opened as large as the dangly gold hoops hanging from her earlobes. “Girl, tell me I just heard you wrong! Do you mean to tell me you let your mother pick out clothes for you? And she just got you a few pieces two days before school is about to start?”

“So?”

“So do you want to look good for your date tonight or not?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that question. Sure, I wanted to look good for my boyfriend, but after being with Branson yesterday, I knew the surface stuff didn’t matter anymore. Our relationship had gone deeper than that. After all, Branson said he wanted to take it to the next level, and that proved things were extremely serious between us. He loved me and I loved him, and if I wore a paper bag, then my Branson wouldn’t care.

So, after talking myself into believing that Brittany's comments didn't make sense, I tossed the tank top on the nearest chair, pulled on the spaghetti-strap top and a modest-length skirt, and smiled at my friend and myself in the mirror.

Brittany sprawled across my bed. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"It's Sunday; I'm going to church," I replied. It was a dumb question to ask. Brittany knew I went to church every week of my life.

She sat up and folded her shapely legs under her. "But you went to that Bible study thing at your church this morning. And tomorrow's the day before our first day of school!"

"So what's your point?" I asked, curling the ends of my long hair with a hot iron.

"How can you stand being cooped up in church all the time when there's so much stuff to be done? Aren't you sick of being a pastor's kid?"

"Are you sick of being a doctor's kid?" I teased.

"My dad is so tired after working all week that the last thing he thinks about on Sunday is getting up and going to a worship service. And that's just fine with me," Brittany bragged, as if sleeping in on Sundays was a good thing.

I turned away from the mirror, sat next to her on my bed, and looked her in the eye. "For me, going to church is a joy. I have so many insecurities and so many crazy thoughts, the house of the Lord is a safe haven for me. It's a place where I can thank God for all He has done in my life."

She didn't look convinced.

"Our church is different from a lot of other churches around."

"Oh yeah? How so?"

"Why don't you come with me and find out? We go everywhere else together. Why not church?"

Brittany stared at her fingernail polish. "I wonder why they call this 'waitress red.' I've never seen a waitress wear this color. It really is pretty, though, don't you think?"

I couldn't believe my friend was so set against learning more about God. Suddenly, for the first time in four years, it hit me that Brittany couldn't care less about the Lord. But I needed a friend who could keep me accountable, a friend who would help me follow the things of the Spirit, not the things of the flesh. If waitress-red fingernail polish and fashionable clothes were so important to Brittany, how in the world could she help me get closer to God?

"So," she said, grabbing a pillow, "tell me about Six Flags yesterday. Did you go straight home afterward or did you guys go . . . you know . . . parking?"

"What are you insinuating, Brittany?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me. Remember our conversation two months ago when I spent the night over here? You told me everything that was inside that Christian brain of yours. You said you wanted to put your hands all over every inch of Branson's body."

I got up and looked under the bed for my shoes. "Do you have to remind me? You know I feel horrible about that. I'm trying to put those thoughts out of my mind."

Her eyes sparkled. "Why?"

"You know why," I said, slipping on my Converse All Stars.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. That Bible stuff again. OK, I'll leave you alone for now. But I've got to tell you two things."

"What?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

"First of all, we're seniors now, and Branson is so hot he can have his pick of any girl at Salem High. So don't give him a reason to pick someone other than you. Get my drift?"

I nodded. "What's the second thing?"

Brittany looked at my tennis shoes. "You have got to get yourself some platform shoes, girl. Seriously!"

We had a good, long laugh. Then I noticed the time.

“Hey, Branson’s going to be here any second. I’ll call you after church tomorrow.”

“No way,” Brittany said, getting up off my bed. “Call me tonight. I want to hear the details.”

As I walked her to her car, Branson’s blue Camaro pulled up. “Hey, Britt,” I said, “I’ve got to run inside real quick. I don’t have my purse or keys, and I need to let my mom know I’m leaving. Can you tell Branson I’ll be right back?”

“No problem,” she said. “I’ll be happy to talk to him for you.”

“You’re the greatest,” I told her, giving her a hug. “I’ll be right back.” I raced up the sidewalk and barreled through the door.

“So, where are you two going?” my mom asked.

“Just a movie,” I said, grabbing my purse and keys off the table in the hall.

“Which one?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said. Rolling my eyes, I added, “Something PG, Mom, I promise.”

“Sweetheart, I know you’re getting older and you don’t think you should have to report to your parents about everything you do. But I need to know where you’re going.”

“Don’t you trust me?” I asked.

Mom straightened a wisp of my bangs. “Sometimes it’s better to be safe than sorry. Besides, you’re a teenager, and it seems you really like this boy.”

It scared me how perceptive my mom could be. But then, she was more than my mom; she was my friend. I’d always found it easy to talk to her when I was younger. But lately, with all the tough issues I was facing, things were different. It was like she could read my mind and knew what to say about stuff even before I brought it up. Maybe it was the Lord talking to me through her. Or maybe she just remembered her own adolescence and was giving me the same advice her mother gave her. That didn’t mean I always

liked what she had to say. Even when I knew she was telling me what I needed to hear, my spirit often rebelled against it.

“Look, Mom, I’ll be in by eleven,” I promised. “We plan to watch the movie, not make out the whole time.”

“Don’t get sassy with me, Laurel. I’m not joking.”

“Sorry, Mom.”

“Just be responsible and have a good time.”

That’s all I wanted to hear. I gave her a quick hug, then headed out the door. Brittany was doing a great job keeping Branson occupied. I was worried he wouldn’t be entertained, but when I came out he was all smiles. The three of us talked for about five minutes, then said our good-byes and I hopped into Branson’s car.

We drove for about ten miles, and Branson hadn’t said a word to me.

“Why are you so quiet?” I asked.

He gave me a strange look but still didn’t say anything.

“Talk to me, Branson.”

“Britt told me you struggled with what to put on for our date tonight, that you didn’t think I’d like any of your clothes because they’re old or something. I hate it when you go through all that trouble for me. I thought our relationship was deeper than that.”

“I just want to look good for you,” I said.

“Baby, you always look gorgeous.” Branson pulled into the parking lot of the movie theater. “As a matter of fact, I love that outfit you’ve got on.” He reached over and easily unbuttoned the top button of my blouse.

“What are you doing?” I asked, staring down at my too-exposed chest.

“I just thought you needed to loosen up a little,” he said, putting the car into park. “We’re going to a movie, not prep school.” He leaned over and nibbled on my ear. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

“C’mon, we’re gonna be late for the movie,” I said, opening my door.

As Branson stood in line to buy tickets, I lingered near the theater entrance, replaying his words in my head. Why in the world would Brittany tell my boyfriend the opposite of what had happened in my room? She was the one saying my clothes were too old to wear. It made no sense. She had to have some reason to misrepresent the situation. Or maybe Branson got it all wrong. Whatever it was, something wasn't right and I was determined to find out what was going on.

Branson smiled at me from the ticket line. He was so cute! Two teenage girls behind him started giggling. Though I couldn't hear what they were saying, I could tell they were whispering about how attractive he was. It was clear that they would have loved to be out on a date with him.

What if Brittany was right about other girls giving him what I wouldn't? Could I let that happen? A wave of jealousy ran up my spine. I didn't want Branson to be with anyone besides me. I walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek. I wasn't trying to gloat, but I wanted those girls to know this man was taken.

Sitting in the back row of the theater was kind of romantic, I thought. We held hands until the movie started. Then Branson cupped his hand around my knee and started sliding it up my skirt.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"No one can see us," he whispered back. "And with the surround sound in here, no one can hear us either." He tilted my head toward his and kissed me passionately.

I melted in his arms. Then his hand went back to my leg and started moving to an area that was definitely off limits. Without interrupting the kiss, I grabbed his wrist and kept him from going any farther. Suddenly, he stopped kissing me. He sat up, crossed his arms over his chest, and stared at the movie screen.

I didn't know what to say. Couldn't he see how hard this

was for me? Sure, I wanted to give him what he desired. And to be perfectly honest, I had some of those same desires too. But part of me knew it was wrong, and that part had allowed me to stop the passion.

I reached over and started stroking his hand. I wanted to tell him, “*Look, I understand this is tough. It doesn’t seem fair. But I love you and we’re going to be OK.*” But his eyes stayed focused on the screen, and his hand remained tightly clenched around his forearm.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, still rubbing his hand.

Without looking at me, Branson yanked his hand back, got up, and left the theater. Suddenly, without his warm body next to me, the place felt frigidly cold.

I waited for five minutes, rubbing my arms and trying to figure out what was going on in the movie. *OK, Branson, I thought, you can come back any time now.*

Five more minutes passed. I began to wonder if my boyfriend had gone home without me. If he was still at the theater, was he waiting for me to come out? I felt confused and fragile. We had just gotten things back on track, and with school starting in two days I had to do whatever it took to make sure things stayed right between us.

I exited the theater in a panic. I looked everywhere for Branson. I even asked the guy working the refreshments counter to check the men’s room for my blond-haired boyfriend. When he came out alone, shaking his head, I realized that my man had bailed on me.

My stomach started churning. I headed for the door, briefly explaining to the manager that I had to check the parking lot for my boyfriend’s car. I wished I had a cell phone like Britt and Meagan. I did have some money with me, so I could call home and ask my dad to pick me up if I had to.

Of course, I could never tell my father why my boyfriend had left the theater without me. Branson and his family were strong members of our church, and everyone in our

congregation thought we were the perfect match. If my dad knew why he had to come and pick me up, Branson's name would end up on the "not good enough for my daughter" list for sure. Then I'd never be allowed to date him again.

Relief swept through me when I saw Branson's car still parked in the same place. I heard loud rock music coming from it, so I knew he was inside. I walked up and tried to open the passenger door. It was locked. I tapped on the tinted window. No response. I banged harder. *Why won't he let me in?*

The tears I'd been holding back refused to stay captive any longer. I leaned against the car, sobbing. Finally I heard the lock pop up. I quickly brushed the tears off my cheeks and crawled in.

Branson was leaning way back in his seat, not even looking my way.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. Then, without thinking about it, I started unbuttoning my blouse. He turned to me and smiled. Then I seduced him as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

The windows in the Camaro fogged up. Somehow Branson got on top of me in the driver's seat. His hands mingled through my hair. Even though we were only seventeen, I felt like an adult. I didn't want his kisses to stop.

Then, without warning, my spirit prevailed and I pulled away.

"Laurel, what are you doing to me?" Branson asked with disgust. "You can't do this. Look at me, I'm excited."

Without even asking if I wanted to continue, he started kissing my neck. He was double my weight, but I prayed for God to give me the strength to push Branson off me. I shoved with so much force he bumped his head on the top of the car.

Rubbing his skull with one hand, he yanked me out of his seat with the other. "Get back to your side of the car. I'm taking you home now!" Before I could fasten my seat belt, he had the engine revving. "This is crazy," he grumbled as he shoved the car into gear. "I don't know why I thought

things would work out for us. I thought you were ready for me.”

“I’m sorry,” I whimpered. “I’m sorry.”

I hadn’t been trying to lead him on. But I felt like I was two different people. One girl desired him; the other wanted to push him away.

Branson drove me home in silence. I could practically see the steam coming out of his ears. He pulled up to the curb but didn’t turn off the engine.

“Branson, I . . .” I wanted to say something, anything, whatever would make things right between us. But I couldn’t think of the right words, and I didn’t think he’d hear me anyway. I got out of the car. The Camaro’s tires started squealing the instant I shut the door.

I adjusted my clothes and ran my fingers through my hair to pull out the tangles. Then I trudged up to the front porch and let myself in. As soon as I opened the door, Mom came in from the kitchen.

“You’re home early,” she said. “How was the movie?”

I didn’t want to be rude, but I really couldn’t talk just then. So I just continued on up to my room without a word.

Mom followed me. “Laurel, honey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Mom.” I flopped onto my bed and buried my face in the pillows.

“Sweetie, I know you,” she said, standing next to my bed. “Something’s up.”

I lay still, ignoring her, pretending the world didn’t exist.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then go ahead and get some rest,” Mom said, then she slipped out of my room and gently closed the door.

The next morning my head was pounding from lying awake half the night waiting for Branson to call, and then crying the rest of the night. But after I cleaned up and got dressed, I started to feel a little better. My family went out for breakfast to our favorite place, the Cracker Barrel. Their butter-pecan pancakes made my day look almost bright.

Dad's church looked more like a theater than a sanctuary. Instead of a robed choir, we had a live band with drums and guitars. A group of teens and adults always put on skits and plays to coordinate with the message. We even had spotlights and a terrific sound system.

My brother Liam sang a solo with the band. By the time my father got up to deliver the sermon, the congregation was ready to hear what he had to say.

His message touched my heart in a powerful way. He talked about what a privilege it is to be part of the body of Christ. And with that privilege comes responsibility. God has high expectations of His children. The members of God's family should live godly, holy lives.

I knew I wasn't doing that. I didn't have a firm grip on my Christianity, and that needed to change. I had really been struggling between obeying God and giving in to my fleshly desires. I needed to trust God and believe that His way was best for me.

After the service, I headed up the aisle toward the door, where several people were standing around talking to my father. I saw Branson's parents there, and he was waiting beside them. I slipped out a side door and nearly bumped into Foster McDowell.

Foster was tall and handsome, with a tan to die for. He'd come to our school in the middle of last year, and he struck me as sort of quiet and mysterious. When baseball season came around, he ended up being the star of the team.

"Foster, right?" I asked, pretending I wasn't sure.

"Yeah." He flashed me an intriguing smile. "So, Laurel, how's your summer been?"

Before I could think of an answer, Branson came up and grabbed my hand. "Hey, Foster," he said, "I see you're back on the street. How was that Christian camp of yours?"

"FCA camp? It was great."

Branson sounded like he was trying to make a joke at

Foster's expense. But Foster didn't seem to care. He looked calm and collected. He also looked like he was eyeing me.

"Come on, Laurel," Branson said, tugging on my hand. "Your dad said he wants to talk to you."

"Hey, it was good to see you," Foster said as Branson pulled me away. "See you tomorrow at school."

I smiled back at Foster. Then I pulled my hand out of Branson's grip.

My dad came up to us before I could ask Branson what he thought he was doing. "I'm so happy that my daughter has found a good guy like you to date," he said, patting Branson on the back.

Branson put his arm around me and squeezed my waist, playing the part of the attentive boyfriend and making it seem like we were still the cute couple everyone thought we were. I still wanted us to be together. I just wasn't sure what it would take to make that happen. At the moment, it felt like we were barely keeping it together.

t w o



hoping for sunshine

hurry up and get in!” Brittany yelled at me. Apparently I was taking too long to get into her car.

“I hope this drizzle doesn’t turn into much more,” I said, climbing into her brand-new, black Jetta. A twenty-thousand-dollar car seemed a little much for a high school senior. But Brittany was definitely spoiled, sometimes to the point of being a brat about it. She didn’t mean to flaunt her wealth in my face. She just liked talking about her material possessions. As her best friend, I guess it was my job to listen.

“Close the door already! I don’t want my car getting all wet.”

“It’s just sprinkling, Britt. Calm down.”

“You should just be happy I’m picking you up,” she said as she headed off toward school.

“Why do you say that?”

“Oh, come on,” she replied. “We’re seniors now. We can’t have our moms dropping us off anymore. That would

be way too corny. Besides, with me, you can ride in style. Much better than having Laura drop you off.”

“My mom’s name is Mrs. Shadrach to you.”

“Yeah, right!” Brittany giggled. “Only when she’s around. It’s just you and me talking now.”

“Whatever, Brittany.” I really didn’t want to get into this on the first day of senior year.

“Why does it bother you anyway?” Brittany persisted. “We are almost adults now, you know.”

I tried to ignore her by staring out the window. The gray clouds mirrored my mood. This was supposed to be the happiest time of my life. The start of my last year in high school.

I remembered the first day I stepped foot in Salem High School four years ago. The walls seemed so big and the halls so long. I didn’t know anyone from middle school because my family had just moved to Conyers. As the years passed I made friends, and the place that was once scary became as comfy and cozy as home.

Unfortunately, the one guy I most wanted to be cozy with was angry at me. He hadn’t called since Saturday night. Oh, he’d put on a show in front of people we knew at church. But I wanted to talk through this whole thing. I wanted to see if we could work it out. I needed Branson to understand where I was coming from.

From the looks of that sky, it didn’t seem like the sun was ever going to come out. I could only hope my day at school wouldn’t be so dim.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you?” Brittany’s voice broke into my depressed thoughts. “We’re supposed to be talking about the first day of school and it feels like I’m riding in the car alone.”

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“What you got to be sorry about, girl?” She glanced in my direction. “Your hair looks great. That blue eyeliner makes your brown eyes practically shine. You even have on a cute outfit.”

Did Brittany really think that was all that mattered in life?

“OK,” she said. “Maybe I’m not being sensitive enough. I’ll put what’s going on with me on the side and put you at the forefront of my thoughts. Now, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “It’s just that—”

“Trouble in paradise again, huh?”

“It’s not at all paradise right now for Branson and me.”

“Well, what exactly is the problem? You’ve got a hot guy who wants to be with you. So make it work. Don’t rock the boat; don’t shake the baby; don’t jump off the bridge.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, totally confused.

“Let me put this into language you’ll understand. You do whatever it takes to keep that boy. Got it? Whatever it takes, Laurel! That goody-goody act of yours is cute and all, but playing nice only *gets* the guy. It doesn’t keep him.”

I wanted to say, “*You’re a fine one to be giving me advice.*” I kept my mouth shut, but my eyes must have communicated the thought for me.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she said. “You think I’m not telling the truth, that I don’t know because I don’t have a steady boyfriend? Look in my purse, and you’ll find ten numbers from guys I could have right now with one cell-phone call. Hey!” Brittany hollered when another car almost crashed into us. “People sure don’t know how to drive.”

“Maybe you’d better slow down. It’s raining kinda hard.”

“I wish you didn’t live way out in the sticks,” she complained.

I never could understand why Brittany went out of her way to pick me up and take me to school. I told her she didn’t have to, that my mom didn’t mind driving since she had to take my brothers to school anyway. I guess she just wanted an entourage.

When we finally pulled into the school parking lot, Brit-

tany looked at me with a pleading expression in her eyes. “Come around and get me,” she begged.

“Why?”

“You’ve got that big umbrella.”

“Are you making fun of my stuff? Where’s your dainty little umbrella that curls up and fits in your purse?”

“I left it at home. I’m sorry for teasing you. Please don’t make me walk in the rain.” She was whining like a baby.

I shook my head. Brittany was one of those girls you either loved or hated. I loved her. Among other things, I found her extremely comical.

I did as my friend asked and we walked together, under my big umbrella, to the school building. As we stepped onto campus and went our separate ways, I held my breath. This was going to be the first day of my last high school year. I really wanted it to meet, or even surpass, all my high expectations.

Lord, I prayed, go with me this year. Help me to please You in everything I do. I’m starting to become fearful of things unknown, but I know You’ve got my future in the palm of Your hand. Help me release it to You. Help me to be strong. And help me to have a good first day. Amen.

Just then, I felt a strong, masculine hand grab hold of mine. Before I could look up, I got a kiss on my cheek. Then sweet words were whispered in my ear. “You look better today than you did in my dreams.”

I smiled, still not looking up. My heart was warm because I knew who it was. And I knew I would be thinking about those words all night long!

Branson turned me toward him, put his hand under my chin, lifted my face to his, and planted a soft kiss on my lips. “We’re OK,” he mouthed.

We walked hand in hand down the hall. It was a feeling unlike any other. Girls were watching him and guys were watching me . . . some in awe and some just jealous. Even though we were surrounded by other people, I kinda felt

like we were the only two in the school, because as long as I had Branson, no one else mattered. The rain was still pouring outside, but we were fine. Better than fine; we were great. The tough issues still hadn't been discussed, but I knew we could work through everything. Even though he hadn't called me the day before, at least he thought about me. Maybe at the same moment that I had wrapped my arms around my pillow and stared up at the ceiling pretending to see his face, he was envisioning mine too.

We decided to share a locker, and since mine was positioned better than his, that was the one we used. The first thing he did was pull a prom picture from last year out of his pocket and stick it to the locker. He must have planned ahead because there was already tape on the back of it. Then he took a marker, and even though we weren't supposed to mark up school property, he wrote, "Branson loves Laurel."

Just as I was about to kiss him, Meagan came up and grabbed my arm. "We're gonna be late," she hollered. "You're in my first-period class. Now, let's go. Come on."

Meagan tried to tug me away from my man. But Branson tugged back. They were pulling on me from opposite directions like I was the wishbone from a Thanksgiving turkey. Branson finally won, and I gave him a laugh, a hug, and a kiss.

Meagan started to leave without me.

"I've gotta go," I said. "But you . . . you really made my day!" I messed up his hair, then rushed to catch up with Meagan. This was not only going to be a great day but a great year. Branson had said we were fine, and that was the way my heart desperately wanted it to be.

"You're all smiles, I see," Meagan teased as we picked seats for our first-period class.

"Why shouldn't I be?" I said with a grin. "Things are great between Branson and me!"

"I'm glad you've got a steady boyfriend." She busied herself getting things out of her backpack.

“Meagan, you say that like you can’t get somebody.”

“Well, I don’t have it like Brittany,” she said, “with a different guy for every day of the week.” She shook her head. “Still, there is this one guy . . .”

“Really?” I squealed. “That’s great!”

“But I don’t know what to say to him. Laurel,” she pleaded, “you’ve got to help me. I mean, I don’t want to just come out and reveal everything I’ve been thinking.”

“So who is this guy?”

“I don’t know his name. But he’s really suave, you know? I mean, you can imagine him on a motorcycle poppin’ wheelies, showing off like he was James Dean or something. Then again, he kind of looks like he could be a supermodel.”

“OK, I get it. He’s hot.”

“Yeah, he’s definitely a ten-plus.”

As I tried to put my stuff on the desk without taking my attention away from Meagan, I misjudged the distance and my books and papers fell onto the floor. Meagan laughed. When I bent down to pick up my things, a kind gentleman bent down with me.

“Here, let me help you,” a familiar voice volunteered.

“Thanks,” I said. When I looked up I saw it was Foster McDowell who had come to my aid. “Thanks a lot.”

After helping me pick up my mess, Foster asked, “So, how was your night?”

I was a bit taken back. I mean, why would he care how my night was? It seemed like a weird question. I answered anyway, not wanting to be rude. “It was great. And yours?”

“It was cool. I spent most of my time trying to imagine what the first day of school was going to be like.”

“You too?”

“Since I’ve only been here less than one semester, I was tempted to call you and ask you to fill me in on everything. But I didn’t have your number.”

“Here,” I said, grabbing a pen, “let me give it to you.” I ripped out a corner of paper from my spiral notebook. “Call

me anytime. I know everything there is to know about Conyers.” I jotted down my number. “Not that I’ve been here all my life, but it is a small town. I can tell you all the places to go and hang out, where the library is, all that stuff.”

“Thanks.” After slipping my number into his pants pocket, he headed to the back of the class.

When I looked back at Meagan, she had a disturbed look on her face. “What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“That’s the guy,” she whispered, nodding toward Foster without looking his way. “He’s the one I think is so hot. And you gave him your number! Laurel, you already have a boyfriend. Can’t you think of anybody other than yourself?”

“What are you talking about?” I argued. “How was I supposed to know he’s the guy you were talking about? You never said his name. I gave him my number because we’re friends. He goes to my church, and he knows I have a boyfriend because he saw me with Branson yesterday.”

Megan played with her pencil. “I could tell he likes you.”

“Whatever!”

“You didn’t even introduce me to him,” she pouted. “I think you just want him for yourself.”

“Oh, now you are really going off the deep end.”

Fortunately, our teacher showed up at that moment. I wasn’t excited about studying but getting into a book was much better than carrying on a hopeless conversation with Meagan.

She and Brittany were total opposites. I didn’t agree with Brittany’s style, but at least when she liked a guy she didn’t make herself invisible. She fought for what she wanted, found ways around obstacles, and dealt head-on with competition. Meagan needed some of that spunkiness. I would never recommend going after a guy, but making yourself nonexistent to someone you want to notice you just doesn’t make sense. A simple hello was all she had to say.

I wanted to be angry with her because she was blaming

me for Foster not noticing her. But then I remembered how immature I used to act when I wanted Branson to talk to me. I liked him way back in the ninth grade, and all that year, he never once looked my way. It bothered me when I saw him speaking to every girl in the hall except me. Then I realized that when he came my way I always turned around because I was too nervous to acknowledge him. When I finally mustered up the confidence to smile at him, he did notice me. And he had never forgotten!

When the teacher turned her back to write on the board, I wrote Meagan a note. "I'll introduce you to Foster after class. I'm sorry I didn't do it sooner. Great choice. He's a nice guy, and if I weren't with Branson . . . Just kidding!"

I passed the note to Meagan. She perked up after reading it, so I knew she had forgiven me.

True to my word, I introduced Meagan to Foster as soon as we got into the hallway after class. Then I made an excuse to leave so they could talk.

Halfway down the hall, I saw Brittany headed toward them. I cut her off. "Where do you think you're going?" I asked.

"I just want to find out who she's talking to. It seems to me that boy's got my name written all over him."

"I don't think so," I said. "Meg likes him."

"She can at least tell me his name. I want to log him into my address book." Brittany started toward them again, but I pulled on her shirt to stop her.

"Let go," she whined. "You're gonna ruin my blouse."

"I'll only let go if you promise to behave," I told her.

"Going over to introduce myself isn't against the rules."

"Oh, come on, who are you fooling? You just said you wanted to get with him. Meagan likes him, and it's her chance to—"

"What? Strike out?" Brittany replied.

I didn't like the mean, hateful way she was talking about

Meagan. But I let go of her shirt anyway. She stayed put but continued eyeing Meagan and Foster. I could tell she was planning something devious, plotting against Meagan, who was supposedly her friend. I was beginning to wonder just how much Brittany valued friendship.

Just then I remembered a promise I had made to the Lord about my senior year. I was determined to say what I thought and stop holding stuff in. In the past, I had always harbored my feelings inside and let them fester and grow. I knew I needed to deal with the tough issues and let people know my true feelings or one day they would explode.

I needed to start exercising my new resolve, so I said to Brittany, “You know, I see something wrong with this. Meagan is your friend, she likes this guy, and you just want to try and take him away from her.”

“Take him away?” she asked, her thin eyebrows raised. “Those are pretty strong words. I can’t take something away from Meagan that she never had in the first place. I mean, look at her. She’s standing ten feet away from the guy and she isn’t even trying to turn him on. This isn’t elementary school, Laurel; this is high school. If she wants a guy to consider her as something more than a friend, she needs to do something.”

I stood my ground without saying a word.

“OK, I won’t give free advice,” Brittany said, twirling her long blonde hair. “But anyone can see he’s not interested in her.” Brittany swung her hair over her shoulder and headed to her next class.

Meagan had asked me to watch from a distance so I could give her pointers on how she did. I wasn’t an expert or anything, but I did have a boyfriend. And when I thought about that, I suddenly realized that I needed to tend to my own concerns and not sit there and baby-sit her. I hadn’t seen Branson in almost an hour.

I tried to get Meagan’s attention to let her know I had to go. But she wasn’t looking my way, so I figured I was in the

clear. After all, their conversation had already gone past the two-minute marker.

See, we had a thing around our school that if a guy talked to you for more than two minutes, at least he didn't think you were a geek. Knowing there were only a few more minutes until the bell rang, I left Meagan on her own and headed for my locker to meet with Branson.

"Where have you been?" he asked as I turned the corner. "I've been waiting for you."

"Do we have any classes together?" I asked, getting out my schedule.

Branson dug his schedule out of his book bag and checked. A big smile spread across my face when I noticed we had the same fourth-period math class. I would have loved to have had more than one class, but if I could only have one, fourth period was perfect. That was right before lunchtime, which meant an extra forty minutes each day that we could spend together. I guess it was a good thing he wasn't in all my classes, 'cause if he was, I wouldn't get any work done.

"Come on, Laurel," he said, gathering his stuff. "Walk with me to my class."

"But it's on the other end and mine is that way."

"I've been standing here waiting for you," Branson complained, "ever since I got out of class. I don't know what you were doing. I'm just asking you to walk me to my class. You know you'll get back to yours on time."

I felt like saying, "*You should be walking me to mine.*"

That's when I realized that my resolve to let people know what was on my mind could have very different results in various situations. I knew I had to express myself more often, but I had to do it wisely. I didn't want to become rude.

I reached for Branson's hand, but he reached around my waist instead. So I wrapped my arm around his waist too. The stares were intense as we walked toward his class. He

was my guy and I was his girl, and I wanted everyone to know how much I loved him.

On the way down the hall, we ran into my brother Liam, who sometimes acted like he was my dad instead of my brother.

“Hey,” Branson said to Liam.

Liam lifted his head in the air like he thought he was cool. I could tell he wanted to speak to me, and I could guess about what. I knew he wouldn’t like the physical display I was showing with my boyfriend.

I figured I should give him the chance to say what was on his mind. I could always let his words go in one ear and out the other. “I have to talk to Liam,” I said to Branson. “Why don’t you go on to class so you’re not late.”

“Go ahead,” Branson replied, being the sweetheart that he is. “I’ll wait.”

I walked a few feet away with Liam. “So, what’s the deal?” I asked.

“It looks really cheap walking down the hall like that so everyone can see. Don’t you have any self-respect?”

“OK, OK,” I said, not being able to ignore his comments after all. “But Liam, you’re not being fair. He’s my boyfriend and I was just walking him to his class. I don’t know what your problem is.”

“My problem is him,” Liam said, pointing his thumb at Branson. “Every time you guys break up, he snags five or six girls, and then he brags about it to the whole football team.”

“And how do you know that?” I asked. I could feel my face getting hot.

“Lance tells me everything he says. And you know what? One day we’re both gonna tell Branson Price what we think of him.”

“Oh, really?” I said, my hand on my hip. “And what’s that?”

“That he’s not as tough as he thinks. And that he shouldn’t treat anyone the way he treats you.”

My blood was really boiling now. “And what’s wrong with the way he treats me?” I demanded.

“Whenever he decides he’s ready to get together with you again, you go right back to him. And you two go walking down the hall hand in hand, or arm in arm, or whatever you call that thing you guys were doing.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” I asked.

“It makes people believe all those rumors Branson says about you.”

I couldn’t believe what my brother was saying. “Branson would never spread anything about me!” I threw up my hands in disgust. “Why am I listening to this? I’m gonna be late to class.” I turned to leave, but my brother grabbed my elbow.

“Fine, Laurel, have it your way,” he said. “But the next time you want someone’s shoulder to cry on because that jerk walked all over you, don’t come to me. Because when you get back together with him, it’s not easy for me to forget what he’s done to you.” Liam walked away, shaking his head.

It wasn’t the first time my brother had tried to tell me Branson was no good, or at least not good enough for me. I just had to figure out whether or not to believe him.

I looked back at Branson. He was laughing with a group of freshman girls, who were giggling at everything he said. Suddenly my brother’s advice seemed way too real.

“Branson,” I called, with a touch of anger in my voice, “let’s go.”

He said good-bye to the girls and sauntered up to me. But when he tried to put his arm around my waist again, I pulled away. Whether my brother was right or not, I didn’t feel comfortable with that anymore.

Branson didn’t seem bothered. He just chatted away, saying the silly, fun things that always made me really like him. At the end of the hallway, he grabbed my hand and took me under the stairs to a little corner I had never seen before. As the bell rang he kissed me passionately. It was so unexpected that all I could do was respond.

No freshman could handle this man, I assured myself, or make him feel appreciated the way I did. I was his girlfriend and that was enough.

We were still kissing when the bell stopped ringing. At that instant, I heard the voice of our principal, Dr. Wood.

“To my office, now!” she yelled.

Dr. Wood dragged me into her office, and the vice principal escorted Branson into his. When the door to the office closed, my heart skipped a beat. Dr. Wood was a friend of my mother’s. They were in the same Bible study class. Explaining to my mom why I was in the principal’s office on the very first day of school was not something I was looking forward to.

Even though they were friends, the principal and my mother were definitely opposites. Dr. Wood was unmarried, held a doctorate degree, and had a lot of power. My mother, on the other hand, stayed at home, had four children, and was only responsible for running the household. Although that’s a really tough job, she didn’t have a faculty and about two thousand students to control. I respected and loved my mom. She was always there for us. However, as I thought about my own life and where I wanted to go, Dr. Wood’s career path seemed far more appealing. I thought it strange that they shared a common bond, but then again, Christ was the tie that bound their friendship together.

“Laurel,” Dr. Wood asked as she sat in her chair, “do you want to explain yourself?”

My lips refused to move. I didn’t think she would appreciate me telling her that I was in love and sometimes love makes you do crazy things.

“You’re not talking to me, Laurel. You are one of the brightest students here. What’s going on with you?”

She must not have checked my grades lately, because there was nothing marvelous about them. I had barely managed a 3.0 GPA last semester.

She must have noticed the look on my face. “Laurel, I know you’re not an A student, but I do keep up with you. You’re not a troublemaker. You have a positive attitude and you’ve got goals. A lot of kids here don’t look forward to anything past the end of the day, but you’re better than that. I don’t want your vision to be clouded because of a man.” She leaned back in her chair. “I know you and Branson were dating last year, but what I witnessed today was much more serious.”

“I do apologize, Dr. Wood,” I managed to say. “I know that’s unacceptable behavior on school grounds.”

“You’re right about that. Physical affection should not be displayed in the Rockdale County School System. But Laurel, is that acceptable elsewhere? I know I’m not a teenager, but I do understand what guys think.”

She straightened and looked me in the eye. “I don’t want you to go down the road that leads to a dead end. Right now, I’m talking to you as your principal, so I’m limited as to what I can say. But if you need a friend, I want you to know that you can come and talk to me anytime. My door is always open.”

Part of me was tempted. Maybe it would help to get an adult’s view on things. It was possible Dr. Wood might have some interesting insights on my situation. But I knew there was no way.

“What’s the problem, Laurel?” she asked.

I decided to be honest with her. “How can I talk to you when I know you’ll just tell my mom everything I say?”

She smiled. “Well, maybe it’s your mom that you need to go and talk to.”

I let out a quick laugh. “Yeah, right. Like I could tell her some of the crazy things I’ve been thinking.”

Dr. Wood leaned closer to me and spoke softly. “Laurel, have you prayed about your feelings? Have you released this to the Lord?”

“Yes, definitely,” I said.

She said nothing, but her expression encouraged me to explain myself.

“God has stopped me many times from going too far with Branson. But there’s a whole other side to it, Dr. Wood. It’s hard to explain.”

“It’s called the flesh, Laurel,” she told me, “and I understand. I’m forty-seven years old and not married. I struggle with the same issues you do. But every time those inappropriate thoughts and desires come into play, I just talk to the Lord and ask Him to help me. And He does. Do you know how He does it?”

I was hanging on her every word. “How?”

“He teaches me to love Him more than anything or anyone. To focus on His Word and what He has for my life. Laurel, you’ve got to quit thinking about pleasing yourself and pleasing Branson and focus on pleasing God. The strength you lack in that area will be restored. Trust me. God did it for me and He’ll do it for you too.”

The thought of being forty-seven, unmarried, and still struggling with this area was beyond my comprehension. Granted, I didn’t know when I was getting married, but I sure hoped it would be way before Dr. Wood’s age. Then again, if it was God’s plan for my life that He was my only mate, would that be enough for me? I knew the answer had to be yes, that I was supposed to love God regardless of where He led me.

As Dr. Wood walked me out the door, I thanked her several times. She told me I wouldn’t be getting any punishment for my actions. “This will just be between us,” she said.

I thanked her again. “I won’t ever let you down,” I promised, “at least not in this area.”

“I’m going to hold you to it,” she said with a smile.

Branson was getting out of the vice principal’s office at the same time. We walked down the hall together. But this time we didn’t touch each other. If there were three people in the hallway, they could have walked between us.

“What did Mr. Racklin say?” I asked.

Branson got a smug look on his face.

“Come on, what did he say?”

“That we can’t do that stuff here. But he told me about a couple of places I could take you if we wanted to continue what Dr. Wood saw going on.” He gave me a seductive look. “Do you want to?”

“No way,” I said, totally appalled.

“No way what? You don’t want to continue, or you don’t want to try those places?”

“I mean I can’t believe the vice principal said that to you!”

“Well, he is a man, so he understands what I’m going through.”

I felt like slapping him, but I restrained myself. “Look, don’t make this about you, Branson. I thought this was about us.”

He stopped walking and stared at me, his eyes cold. “I just can’t seem to get on the same page with you. First you get me hot and then you go cold on me. Come on, Laurel, what’s it gonna be? Football is the only game I want to play.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. I wasn’t playing games; I just wanted to do the right thing. I wanted what we had to be special.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, then he turned and strolled away.

I walked in late to my last class of the day, which was physics. I didn’t see anyone I knew in the classroom, and there was only one empty seat, next to an African-American girl. I didn’t know too many black students, although a lot of them had come into my school since my freshman year. I wasn’t prejudiced or anything; I just hadn’t made a point of making friends from different races.

Her fluffy haircut was really cute, and she had on an outfit I knew Brittany would love. She was a little shorter than I was, with caramel skin and a killer body. I figured she probably worked out.

“Hi, I’m Laurel,” I whispered, trying not to draw the teacher’s attention. “Is anyone sitting here?”

“I guess you’re sitting there now,” she said. She wasn’t cold, but she didn’t sound overly friendly either. I turned my attention to the teacher.

“You are going to be lab partners with whoever you are sitting next to,” he said, “so take a few minutes to get to know that person.”

I turned back toward the girl beside me, but I didn’t know what to say to her. She seemed totally closed off. Why did I have to be the one to break the ice?

“I don’t think I’ve seen you here before,” I said, trying to sound friendly.

“That’s because it’s my first day in this school,” she answered without even looking at me.

“Really?” I said, acting like I didn’t notice her cool tone. “Where are you from? Let me guess. Michigan? Philadelphia? Illinois?”

She glared at me. “Now, why would you guess those places? Are you trying to say that all black people are from the north?”

“No, no,” I said, “it’s not a black thing at all. I was just playing a guessing game.” *For crying out loud, girl, lighten up already*, I thought.

“I’m from Decatur,” she finally said. “Do you know where that is?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s about forty minutes from here, right?”

“More like twenty.”

Picky, picky. “It must have been awful to have to change schools in your senior year and leave all your friends,” I said, trying to show her a little compassion.

“You got that right,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “And I’m sure I won’t be making many here.” She scanned the classroom, and I realized for the first time that every student in there was white.

If the teacher hadn’t told us to get to know our lab

partners, I would have just let this girl stay in her own little world and left her alone. But she wasn't making any effort to get to know me, so I didn't see that I had much choice. "Where did you go before you came here?" I asked.

"Southwest DeKalb High School," she said, "an all-black school."

I couldn't imagine how hard it would be for me to go from an all-white school to one that was predominantly black. No wonder this girl was so closed off. "What do your parents do?"

She leered at me. "Why are you all up in my business?"

"Did I do something to hurt you? If so, I want to apologize. The teacher said we have to be lab partners, so I was just trying to make conversation. Maybe I should ask the teacher if we could switch or something." I started to get up, but she nodded for me to sit back down, so I did.

"My name's Robyn," she said softly. "I'm sorry. It's been a long summer and I haven't had a very good first day of school." Her eyes became misty. "This place is so different from my world. I've been here all day, and I can count on one hand the number of people who have said hello to me." She quickly brushed the back of her hand across her cheek. "It's really frustrating, but I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"I never really thought about our school that way." I wasn't sure my words were helping any, but I did want to try to make Robyn feel a little better. "I kind of know how you feel, though. My parents decided to move here from Arkansas when I was in the ninth grade. I had to leave all my friends and I hardly ever see them anymore. At least you're only twenty minutes away from where you used to live." Robyn still wasn't saying anything, but her eyes had lost some of their hardness. "Hey, do you have your driver's license?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you're a step ahead of me on that one. Maybe you can visit your old neighborhood on the weekends." I

thought about how I'd feel about only seeing my friends two days out of the week. "But hey, I'm sure you'll make some new friends here."

She smiled. Finally, I'd said the right thing!

Unfortunately, the bell rang just then and the first day of school was over. "I'll see you around, Robyn," I said, then took off to my locker to find Branson.

When I got within a few feet of it, I saw my boyfriend whispering into some girl's ear. I stopped in my tracks. Several people in the hall started saying, "Uh-oh" and "Ooh!"

I brushed right past Branson as if he wasn't even there.

When he saw me, he chased after me. "Laurel, wait! Wait!"

I spun around to face him. "Come on, Branson. Talk your way out of this one. What were you doing with that girl? Giving her your number for a homework assignment?"

"This jealousy stuff is ridiculous, Laurel. I know we're together, but you've got to give me some space."

"Oh, I'll give you plenty of space," I said, then I stomped down the hall and out of the building.

It was raining again outside, and now it was raining in my heart. I had just walked out on my boyfriend without even saying good-bye. What was going to happen? What did I want to happen?

I didn't care about the rain hitting my face. I only cared about what was going on in Branson's mind. And I was desperately hoping for sunshine.