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## ringing the bell

**d**<sup>ing dong!</sup> Things were going great until that moment. My boyfriend, Foster McDowell, and I had found our way back to each other, even though it was only through a phone conversation during my Christmas visit to my grandparents' house.

"Is that the doorbell I hear?" my boyfriend asked.

"Yeah. Hold on, Foster, OK?"

"Of course. Since you're in the house by yourself I will definitely hold on to make sure things are OK."

"You're so sweet."

"Go get the door. I'll be here."

"Thank You, Lord," I said. As I hurried to answer the door, I looked around at my grandmother's home, beautifully decorated for the Christmas holiday. Every single thing was in order, just as it should be.

My life was in order at that point too. My sprained ankle was feeling better, Foster and I were back together, my first-

semester grades were great, and I had good friendships with Brittany, Meagan, and Robyn. I also thoroughly enjoyed being a high school senior.

“OK, OK,” I said to whoever kept ringing the doorbell. “I’m coming!”

When I opened the door, to my amazement, I saw my family. Mom and Dad were front and center. My youngest brother, Luke, who was in ninth grade, stood on one side of them. My oldest younger brother, Liam, who was two years older than Luke, stood on the other side, grinning from one rosy cheek to the other. Behind them stood my grandmother and grandfather. They were all dressed in red stocking caps and green woolen scarves and were singing “Away in a Manger,” looking just like the carolers you see on Christmas cards. I listened to the harmonious sound for a moment, then remembered my boyfriend was still on the phone.

“Thanks, you guys,” I said, laughing, “but you don’t have to sing to me. I already know how good you sound. Go to another house.” I started to close the door.

“Where’s the eggnog?” my father’s father yelled from the back of the group. “Y’all dragged me out here in the cold. The least I deserve is some eggnog with a little nip in it. I should be able to get some from my own house.”

My grandmother hit him on the shoulder, then led the group down the street.

“How’s your cold?” my mother asked, hesitating in the doorway. “You seem to be feeling better.”

“Yep, I am.” I couldn’t keep from grinning.

“Where’s your brother? Have you checked on him?”

Since Liam and Luke were with them, I knew she was talking about my middle brother, Lance. I didn’t even know he was home. “I haven’t seen him,” I said, rubbing my arms to keep off the chill coming in the open door. “Maybe he went out for a second.”

“He said he wasn’t feeling well; that’s why he didn’t come with us. But we’ll be done shortly. We’re going to sing

at a few more houses and then come back and make you two some chicken noodle soup.”

“That sounds good,” I said, then watched her join the others. “And you guys sound good too,” I added before closing the door.

I fled back to the phone, only to hear a dial tone. I’d expected that, but it still broke my heart. When I tried Foster’s number, the line was busy. Then it dawned on me that maybe he was trying to call me. So I hung up right away. As soon as I did, the phone rang again. It was Foster.

“I tried to hang on, but someone rang in on the line for my mom. I didn’t hang up on purpose.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to take so long. It was my family at the door. They came caroling.”

“So, how are they?” Foster asked.

“My grandfather asked for alcoholic eggnog. Isn’t that weird?”

Suddenly I heard someone screeching somewhere in the house.

“What was that?” Foster asked.

“I don’t know. My mom said Lance was here.” The screeching grew louder. “I’ll call you back,” I told my boyfriend.

“No, I’ll hang on until you find out what’s going on.”

Putting the phone down again, I went out into the hallway. “What happened?” I called. “What’s wrong?” I hurried down the hardwood floor. When I turned the corner I saw a horrific sight. Lance was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, surrounded by shards of glass and a small pool of blood. My heart sank as I scrambled to him.

“Get back, Laurel,” he shrieked, gripping his left arm. “There’s broken glass everywhere.”

Ignoring his request, I squatted next to him and peeled his fingers away from his arm.

“Ow!” he screamed.

Blood poured out of a jagged gash. Without really thinking, I raced for the bathroom and snatched a hand

towel off the rack, then returned and wrapped it around Lance's arm. Within seconds, the blood soaked the towel, obliterating its peach-and-pink rose pattern. "This cut is really deep," I said. "We've got to get you to a hospital."

"No, Laurel," he said, staring at the floor.

"I've at least got to call Dad on his cell phone."

"No!" His body started shaking. He looked up at me. His eyes were filled with fear and his breath reeked of alcohol.

"What in the world!" I exclaimed. I stood, fighting conflicting emotions of concern and frustration. When my brother shrugged, frustration won out. I left him sitting there, howling in pain.

"You're not gonna believe this," I said when I got back to Foster on the phone.

"Is Lance OK?"

"I think he's drunk," I said. "No, I know he is."

"What was the screaming about?"

"He must have slipped in the hallway and cut himself on a wine glass he dropped."

"How deep is the cut?" Foster asked.

"I don't know. He's still screaming and I'm scared."

"You've got to get him to the hospital."

"That's what I said. But he won't let me." I started to panic. "Foster, I don't know what to do."

"Don't worry, Laurel," Foster said. "Everything will be OK."

"How do you know?"

"I'm going to be praying for you."

Immediately, my racing heart felt more relaxed. The situation hadn't changed, but just knowing that Foster would be praying gave me a sense of peace. "Thanks," I said.

After hanging up the phone, I returned to the hallway. Lord, I prayed as I ran, *guide my feet and show me what to do.*

I found my brother kneeling on the floor, trying to pick up some of the larger bits of glass. "I've got to clean up this mess," he said, his words slurred.

“That’s not important now. First we’ve got to get you fixed up.”

---

Fortunately I knew where my grandmother kept her car keys. As I started the engine of her brand-new Lincoln Town Car, I thanked the Lord that I had passed my driver’s license test just before Christmas break. I still didn’t have a car of my own, but at least I could drive other people’s cars once in a while.

I drove quickly but carefully. I sure didn’t want to get stopped by a police officer and delay getting Lance to the hospital by having to show my temporary license and my grandmother’s registration and insurance information, which I hoped were in the glove compartment.

After a frantic drive to the emergency room, followed by a two-hour wait in the visitor’s area, the doctor came out and told me that my brother was going to be fine. “Do you have his insurance information?” the doctor asked.

“Yeah, I do.” I pulled out the family’s medical card and he handed me a clipboard full of forms. I filled them out the best I could, then turned them in to the nurse behind the counter. When she asked me for the co-pay, I came up a little short. In spite of my brother’s plea for silence, I had to call Grandmother’s house.

My panicking mom answered the phone. “Where are you guys? We came home and found your grandmother’s car gone. Then we saw blood all over the hallway carpet. Laurel, what’s going on?”

I told her about Lance dropping a glass and cutting his arm. I didn’t tell her about the alcohol I’d smelled on his breath.

“Your father will be right there,” she said.

After hanging up, I went into my brother’s room to make sure Lance was really OK.

“Hey,” he said in a groggy tone.

“Hey yourself,” I said, approaching his bed. “You scared me half to death.”

“Me too. You know, I’ve been thinking about it, and I honestly don’t know what happened.”

“Lance, alcohol is what happened,” I said, my voice stern. “Where did you get it and what were you doing with it?”

“I don’t know. I just went behind Grandpa’s bar and tried a little bit of everything I found there.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It felt good. I was really relaxed.” His eyes focused on mine. “Laurel, you can’t tell Mom and Dad about this.”

I felt my jaw clench. “I had to call them. The hospital needed a co-pay and I didn’t have enough money to cover it. They’re on their way here right now.”

Lance’s eyes widened. “Did you tell them what happened?”

“No,” I said. “But I can’t promise you I won’t. They’re gonna want to know.”

“Just tell them I slipped. You know Grandma’s floor is always slippery. Laurel, please,” my brother begged me. “I’ve been there for you. Just be here for me this time.”

I hesitated. He was right. Lance had been there for me. I immediately remembered one night during my junior year when he caught me at home alone with Branson, my old boyfriend, and I begged him not to tell our parents. He never did.

Being a teenager was tough for anybody. But being pastor’s kids made our lives even more difficult in some ways. A lot was expected of us, by people in the church and especially those outside it.

“OK,” I said tentatively. “I won’t say anything.”

Lance sighed and closed his eyes. He looked like he was about to fall asleep, so I crept quietly back to the waiting room. As soon as I got there, my dad rushed up to me. I didn’t lie outright but I didn’t tell everything I knew.

My father was relieved that Lance was OK, and he seemed to believe what I said about Lance's accident.

I led Dad back to Lance's room. As I stood there watching him hold my brother's hand, my mind flooded with questions. I wasn't sure if I had really helped Lance out by not revealing the complete situation to our parents. But I finally decided to leave it alone, at least for a while. It was Christmas and I wanted to relax a bit.

Still, I was certainly planning to talk to my brother about this. I prayed I hadn't done him more harm than good by keeping his secret.

---

"Laurel, get up!" My grandfather's forceful voice woke me before the sun had risen.

"What's the matter?" I asked groggily.

"I need to talk to you. Right now."

I rolled out of bed and put on my robe and slippers, then glanced at the clock. He had to be out of his mind. It wasn't even five A.M.

"Grandpa, I need to slap some cold water on my face," I said, heading for the bathroom sink.

"Hurry up, then. I'll be in the den. Don't you get back into that bed until we've had a discussion."

"Yes sir."

*Lord, what is going on now? I prayed as I stumbled to the sink and ran the water. I thought my life was finally on track. When Branson wanted intimacy with me, I stayed true to You and didn't give it to him. But then Brittany did, even though she was my best friend and he was my boyfriend. How Brittany and I remained friends is anyone's guess. And then You sent Foster, a great Christian guy, to take Branson's place. I almost lost him by putting pressure on him to have sex, but by Your grace, we worked that out. Now Lance is a drunk and Grandpa is yelling at me, and I don't know why.*

The cool water on my face helped me think more clearly. Grandpa must know about Lance, I realized.



As I entered the den, I saw my grandfather and Lance sitting in chairs, not looking at each other. Before I had a chance to speak, Grandpa walked behind the bar and pulled out three half-empty liquor bottles.

“These bottles were brand new and unopened before we went out Christmas caroling. What’s the explanation for this? There can be only one. My son is spending more time pastoring that church full of hypocrites than spending time with his own family. He doesn’t even know his children are drinking. Who is responsible for this?”

Lance started crying like a baby. “Grandpa, I’m sorry. I just wanted to try some. Please don’t tell my dad.”

Grandpa’s face softened as he looked at Lance’s bandaged arm. “Well, I can see you learned a lesson.”

“Yes, Grandpa. I definitely did.”

My grandfather turned to me. “But Laurel, I’m very surprised at you.”

“She didn’t have anything to do with it,” my brother said.

“Don’t cover up for her,” Grandpa said without taking his eyes off me. “The first step in recovery for alcoholics is admitting that you are one.” He got so close to my face I almost fell off the chair. “I can smell liquor on her breath now!”

“What are you talking about?” I cried. My grandfather had no right to accuse me of such a thing. Alcohol was his problem, not mine. His addiction had almost destroyed his marriage.

When I was younger, my grandparents got into a huge fight, and my grandmother started pouring liquor down the sink. Then my grandpa started smashing her china. They sent me out of the room, but I watched through a crack in the door. My grandfather nearly choked my grandmother. It was the worst fight I had ever seen.

I felt my cheeks turn hot and my hands tighten into fists. “You’re the alcoholic, not me,” I blurted out. “You have

been for years! You monitor those bottles so closely you know if anyone has even touched them. No wonder your marriage is shot. Alcohol is ruining your life!”

As my words echoed in the room, I saw a look of dejection cloud my grandfather’s face. Clearly I had crossed the line.

Without a word, Grandpa stormed out of the room. I stared at Lance, wondering whether our grandfather would tell on us and what our fate would be if he did.

“Now look what you did,” my brother had the nerve to say. “Why did you have to do that? I told him you didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Obviously he didn’t believe you.”

“I was handling things just fine before you opened your big mouth.”

My hands clenched into fists. “If I would’ve let you handle things last night you would have bled to death on the floor. Show a little gratitude, huh? I’m covering your back. I didn’t even have any alcohol, and now I could be in serious trouble too.”

“For what?” he asked, peering at me.

“For lying, Lance. I didn’t tell Dad the whole truth. I intentionally tried to deceive him.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “You are so dramatic.”

“Look, if you don’t realize how serious this alcohol thing is, maybe I should tell our parents.”

“I know how serious it is,” he said, instantly changing his tone.

“Yeah, right.”

There was no point in going back to bed. I tried to find my grandfather to apologize to him, but then I heard his car drive out of the garage and down the street. Though what I had said was the truth, I hadn’t meant to hurt his feelings. Regardless of whether or not it was true, I shouldn’t have spoken so disrespectfully to him.

I took a long bath, trying to think of the best way to apologize to my grandpa. As I was getting dressed, I heard

my grandmother stirring in the kitchen. When I walked through the living room, my brother Liam stopped me.

“Hey,” he said. I turned and saw him sitting on the couch with a Bible in his lap. “Want to join me in prayer?”

“No thanks,” I said. Though I needed prayer, I didn’t want to pray with him. Liam was totally different from Lance. He was a good boy, just like my father. He loved the Lord with all his heart and didn’t care who knew it. He spent every minute of his day trying to serve the Lord.

Liam also had good instincts. He knew I was holding something back. “So I suppose you don’t want to study the Word with me, either.”

“No,” I said, my words clipped. “Is that a crime?”

Liam stood. “Why are you so on edge, Laurel? What’s going on? What really happened last night while we were out caroling?”

I shrugged. “You know perfectly well what happened. Lance slipped and fell on his juice glass. Why do you have to act like there’s more?”

“Why do you have to be so defensive?” he asked, moving closer.

“I’m not defensive,” I argued, taking a step back. “Let’s just drop it, OK?”

Liam grabbed my arm. “There’s something else going on.” I pulled away and headed toward the kitchen. “I don’t know why you’re always covering for him,” Liam called after me.

Breakfast was uncomfortable. Lance couldn’t even hold his fork without shaking. He might as well have worn a sign around his neck saying, “I drank alcohol last night.”

Out of the blue Dad asked, “Has anyone seen my father?”

I started to say yes, but before I could get the word out of my mouth Lance knocked over his orange juice. It spilled all over my mother’s beautiful hand-crocheted tablecloth.

“Oh, my goodness!” she cried, rushing around to clean up the mess. “Oh, my goodness!”

Just then I heard the garage door slam and heard my grandfather's footsteps in the hall. I started to panic. "Can I be excused, Mom? I don't feel good."

"Sure," she said, distracted by her cleanup attempts.

"I don't feel too good, either," Lance added.

Mom paused in her sopping to look up at us. "Maybe you two should go lie down for a little while."

"Yes ma'am," I said quickly, getting up from the table.

"OK, Mom," Lance replied at the same time. We both fled out of the kitchen and into the corridor. "You might as well give it away," Lance whispered.

"We need to talk to Grandpa before he goes back in there," I said.

"You want to talk to me?" The bathroom door beside us popped open and our grandfather came out into the hall, surprising us both.

"Grandpa," I said, "I just wanted to ask you to forgive me. I was totally wrong this morning and I'm sorry. I was disrespectful and I said way too much without thinking."

His eyes narrowed. "Laurel, cut the bull. You aimed to be vicious and you were successful in hitting me where it hurts. Don't try to butter me up now just so I won't tell your parents. I'm not going to tell them, because I had a big part in the whole thing. If I didn't drink, then the liquor wouldn't have been there." He took a deep breath, as if the truth of his words had really sunk in. "Let me tell you something, Laurel," he said. "You were right. Alcohol did get the best of me."

It wasn't my place, but I blurted out, "So why is that stuff in this house?"

"Hey, I'm a grown man and I'm set in my ways. Besides, we're all going to die one day. I might as well be happy when I go."

I glared at him, making sure he knew I thought his explanation was nothing more than a lame excuse.

"Look, I can manage this. But you kids, learn from me.

Don't make the same mistakes I have." His voice cracked, as if he was about to start crying.

"Grandpa, I'm sorry," I told him.

"About drinking?" he asked, his voice soft but accusatory.

My back stiffened. "I didn't touch your alcohol."

"I'm the one who's been drinking," Lance put in. "But I've learned my lesson. I'm sorry, Grandpa."

"And I'm sorry about what I said," I added.

"It's OK, Laurel," my grandfather said. "You just opened my eyes to reality." He reached out and hugged both of us tightly. I could tell he was fighting back tears. "OK, kids. Since it seems we are all feeling better, let's hit the road."

---

Three hours later, as my family was all settled in our van for the twelve-hour ride from Grandpa's house in Conway, Arkansas, back home to Conyers, Georgia, I looked over at Lance. He was asleep, but his face looked tortured. I hoped I had done the right thing by not telling our parents. I knew he would have done the same for me. But what if this wasn't the first time? What if he needed help and I denied it to him by not telling? What if he became an alcoholic and killed himself or someone else? I would have to keep an eye on my brother.

When Mom noticed I was awake, she said, "You know, Laurel, we never got a chance to thank you for being there for Lance last night."

"You don't have to thank me," I answered in a hushed voice, so as not to wake my brother. "I should have called you right away, but I panicked."

"I can't imagine how your brother slipped," my father probed. "I know it was a hardwood floor. But quarterbacks are not clumsy people. And where did the broken glass come from?"

I stared out the car window, not saying anything, hoping

he didn't really expect an answer from me. I didn't want to get Lance or myself into trouble.

---

After the ride home, I went straight to my bedroom. The next day, my friends Brittany and Meagan came over.

"So, you endured another long, boring vacation with your family," Brittany said as we sat around in my room. "I'm so glad my relatives come to our house for the holidays. And when we do go visit them, we fly instead of drive."

"Actually, it wasn't that bad," I said. The truth was, I usually enjoyed having family discussions during car trips. But I didn't admit that to my friends. "Especially since we have a TV in our van."

"Oh, yeah. Your van is like a house," Brittany joked, obviously preferring her brand-new Jetta to our big old van.

"Lay off, Brittany," Meagan said.

Ignoring the comment about our van, I asked Brittany, "Have you gotten your results from the HIV test yet?"

Dead silence filled the room. "Everything's going to be fine," Brittany said. "I feel great. As a matter of fact, I'm having a party to celebrate the new year and my good fortune."

"You're having a party even though you don't know your results yet?"

"Yes," she said with a quick nod. "I have faith. You should understand that."

"Britt, I'm not trying to be funny, but exactly what do you have faith in?"

My gorgeous blonde friend played with the hem of her short skirt. "Faith in the fact that I'm going to be OK." She looked up. "So, are you going to join me in my celebration?"

"I don't know. Foster and I plan to spend some time at church on New Year's Eve and then pray together at midnight."

Meagan and Brittany blinked at me like that was the stupidest idea they'd ever heard. I was disappointed with them.

They were supposed to be Christians trying to strengthen their walk with Christ.

“So you’re gonna choose a guy over us?” Brittany asked.

I couldn’t believe she said that. Only a couple of months ago she had slept with Branson Price, who was my boyfriend at the time. She had certainly chosen a guy over our friendship!

The hurt I’d felt when I found out about Brittany and Branson still stung. “I’ll be right back,” I said, then hustled to the bathroom.

Meagan followed me. “You’ve got to ignore Brittany. She really is worried about her results. The doctor’s office called her three days ago and told her the results were ready. But she’s been too afraid to go in and get them.” Meagan gave me a pleading look through the bathroom mirror. “Please come to her party. She needs you there.”

I turned and looked at my cute, redheaded girlfriend. “I really admire you for being a peacemaker.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

We hugged and went back to Brittany. “Let’s go to Party City to get goodies for your celebration,” I suggested.

Her face lit up. “I’ll drive!”

---

I wanted to be there for my friend on New Year’s Eve. But I also wanted to follow through on my plans to spend time at church with Foster. I had to figure out a way to do both.

I could go to church for a little while and then head over to Brittany’s. Foster could come with me. But my parents wanted me to be at church all evening. It would be hard convincing Foster and my father.

When I brought it up at dinner that night, Dad bombarded me with all types of questions. “Who’s going to be at the party? Why don’t you want to stay at church? When will

the party be over? Didn't you have plans with Foster? Is he going too?"

Between bites of my meal, I answered each question until he ran out of things to ask. Then I turned to my mom. "It's OK with you, right?"

"You know, honey," she said to my dad, immediately starting to plead my case, "Laurel will be on her own next year. She's got to start making some of her own decisions so she'll learn to be responsible."

"Well, I don't think I want her spreading her wings on New Year's Eve."

"Dad, have I ever done anything crazy? I've been going out for two years and I've only missed curfew once. And then it was because Branson put me out on the street. Give me a chance here."

He threw his hands up. "Go ahead," he said in a dejected voice. "If my own daughter doesn't want to be at my services, it makes me wonder why any other teenagers would want to bother."

"Dad, this doesn't have anything to do with you or God," I assured him. "I love you both with all my heart. But this is something I want to do. It isn't a sin. I just want to hang out with my friends."

"Do your friends go to church?"

"Yes," I shot back, "just not 365 days a year!"

My father's face turned red. He rose stiffly and left the room, several bites of his dinner still on the plate.

"Laurel," Mom said, "you know it's wrong to speak to your father in that tone of voice." Then she continued in a whisper, "If you could come to the beginning of the church service that would be great. Since you're spending the night at Brittany's house, we won't have to worry about you being on the roads late at night. I think you'll be fine."

"Thanks, Mom." I jumped up and hugged my mother. "But what about Dad?"



“Don’t worry,” she said, patting my arm. “When he’s cooled off a little, I’ll talk to him. But you be sure to apologize.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said with a grin, returning to my seat.

“So,” she asked, “what are you going to wear to Brittany’s party?”

I paused, mentally surveying my wardrobe. “I don’t know. That’s another problem.”

“You know, there are still some presents under the tree,” she said with a smile. “We didn’t take everything to your grandparents’ house.”

My mouth dropped open. “Really?” I said.

“Maybe if you open yours you will find something for the party.”

“Oh, Mom. You’re the greatest!” I rushed to the tree. Sure enough, there were four wrapped packages with my name on the tags. Inside the boxes were cute outfits from The Gap, Old Navy, Express, and Eddie Bauer. This was going to be a great new year.

---

“Laurel, I don’t want to go to a party,” Foster said as we played Scrabble in my den that night. “I want to be in church.”

“We will go to church,” I assured him. “We’ll just leave there a little early and go to Brittany’s party.”

“Brittany is not someone I want to hang out with,” he said, absentmindedly playing with his letter tiles. “I want to spend that night thanking God for what He’s done for me this year and for what He’s going to bless me with next year. Why do you want to go to a party when you could be doing that?”

I was sick of questions, and it was obvious that this was going nowhere. “Fine,” I said with a sigh. “I guess you and I will just do different things on New Year’s Eve.”

“What?” he said. “But you said you’d go to church with me.”

“I will,” I said. “But then I’m going to Brittany’s party.”

---

As promised, I attended church with Foster on New Year’s Eve. Then, at ten o’clock, Meagan came by to take me to Brittany’s house.

When I walked in the door, I saw kids and beer bottles everywhere. I also saw a big brass bell hanging from the ceiling in the entryway. But I did not see Brittany’s parents.

*OK, Lord, I just made another wrong decision. I left a peaceful candlelight service with my family and my boyfriend to come to a crazy party packed with drunk teenagers.*

“Hey, Laurel!” Brittany screamed over the music as soon as she saw me. She pulled me into the kitchen. “I’m so glad you came.”

“Where are your parents?” I screamed back.

“They had to go out of town,” she hollered into my ear. “Stop being so uptight. Here,” she said, shoving a cup full of punch into my hands. “Drink this.” I was really thirsty, so I took a big gulp. “Whoa, don’t drink it so fast,” Brittany cautioned. “You’re gonna get sick.”

“Sick?” I asked. Then I noticed a bitter aftertaste. “What’s in here? Is this stuff spiked?”

“I just wanted you to have a good time,” she said, laughing.

I wanted to be angry, but I suddenly felt light and care-free. The punch was delicious. I took another sip.

A guy from school grabbed my hand and pulled me into the living room. A bunch of kids were trying to dance in the space between the couches and chairs that had been pushed against the walls. It was crowded, but I didn’t care. I threw my hands in the air and started shaking my body. I was having a blast, but after an hour or so I started feeling dizzy. I was about to fall, so I wrapped my arms around the guy’s neck to keep myself upright.

Suddenly, over the music, everyone started counting. “Ten! Nine! Eight!” I felt the guy’s hands settle on my

behind. I wanted to move them but I couldn't release my hold on the guy's neck without falling to the floor.

I glanced around the room. It started spinning. The crowd yelled, "Three!" I saw someone who looked like Foster standing just inside the doorway on the far side of the room. I tried to pry myself away from the guy with his hands on my behind, but as I did, the crowd screamed, "One!" The guy kissed me. His mouth tasted like alcohol, and he slobbered all over me.

Brittany screamed out, "Happy New Year!" and started ringing the bell.



## standing for Christ

**L**aurel, are you OK?” Meagan asked after I pulled myself away from the sloppy kisser. “You look like you’re about to fall down.” She pointed to the cup in my hand. “Did you drink some of this?”

“Just a sip,” I said, my head still foggy. “I think. Maybe a couple of sips. I really don’t remember. Where did Foster go?”

“Foster was here?” she asked, looking around.

“Yeah, I just saw him at the door. I’ve got to go find him.”

With my heart racing, I looked everywhere for my boyfriend. Suddenly, someone grabbed my arm and twirled me around.

“Hey, where are you going?” Branson said, still clutching my elbow. “Let’s dance in the new year.” My ex-boyfriend wrapped his arms around my waist and started twisting my body.

“Stop it,” I begged. “You’re making me dizzy!”

He stopped and looked into my eyes. “Laurel, have you been drinking?” He grinned. “Now I know we’re gonna dance the night away! It’s about time you decided to loosen up.” He picked up a paper cup from the buffet table. “Here, have another drink.” He placed the red cup against my lips and tilted. Some of the punch spilled onto my cream sweater, but most of it went down my throat.

“What’s in this stuff?” I asked, trying not to choke.

“Not like you’d know if I told you, but it’s a combination of rum, vodka, and Scotch. And a tiny bit of fruit punch.”

“It’s nasty.” I took a sniff of the concoction and crinkled my nose.

“Come on, babe,” he said, slipping his arm around me again. “Let’s dance. I’ll have Bo put on a special song for us.”

“I’ve got a headache,” I said. It was true. I was starting to lose my balance. The room was spinning around. I felt sick to my stomach.

“Tell me the truth, Laurel,” he said, putting his lips close to my ear so he wouldn’t have to yell the words. “You were jealous when you saw me with Brittany. Admit it.”

His words caused some of the haze in my brain to clear. “No, Branson,” I said carefully. “I’m sorry, but you are dead wrong. I don’t need you in my life to be happy. And I’m not jealous. I have God. He’s the one who makes me happy. And He has given me Foster.”

Branson leered at me. “Oh yeah? Well, where is that fine, righteous boy now? In church somewhere? With your dad? While you’re here drinking? Laurel, you may love God, but you’re just like the rest of us.”

“I am not,” I cried. I didn’t want to be like these people.

Branson stroked my hair. “It’s OK, Laurel. Alcohol isn’t going to kill you. You might as well get used to it, because that’s what college is all about. You’d look pretty stupid if you got there and couldn’t hold your liquor.”

I pushed him out of my way and headed for the hallway.

“Wait,” he called after me. “I want my New Year’s kiss.”

I ignored him and started searching the rooms. I still couldn’t find Foster, so I headed for the front door.

“You’ll be back,” Branson yelled as I dashed out into the cold night.

It had been so crowded in Brittany’s house, the fresh air felt wonderful. I noticed some movement down the street. When I looked more carefully, I recognized Foster getting into his midnight blue Toyota Celica. I started skipping down the steps, suddenly realizing I was still holding the cup of punch.

“Wait,” I called out. “Foster, don’t go!”

Either he didn’t hear me or he didn’t care what I had to say, because he got into his car without hesitation. He started to drive up the street. I stood in the middle of the road to stop him.

Foster slammed on his brakes, then got out of the car. “Laurel, what’s wrong with you?” he asked in a panicked voice. “What are you doing in the middle of the street?”

“I was trying to catch you,” I said. “I wanted to wish you a happy New Year!” I started to swing my arms around his neck but spilled my punch all over his coat.

He jumped back. “I gotta go,” he said, and he swung back around toward his car.

“Wait,” I begged, grabbing his arm. “I don’t feel good. Please don’t leave me. I need you.”

“I told you not to come to this party,” he said, looking straight into my eyes. “I knew something would go wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” I whimpered. “I just wanted something to drink. I didn’t know there was alcohol in the punch. Then, as I started to loosen up, it began to taste pretty good.”

“I thought you were stronger than this,” he said.

“Why are you putting me down? It was a mistake. It’s no big deal.”

“You’re right.” He broke free of my grasp. “Since it’s no

big deal, why don't you just go back to the party and let your friends take care of you!"

Foster got back in the car, pulled around me, and drove away. I was devastated. I took another sip of my punch and went back inside. I desperately needed to sit down. As I wandered around looking for an empty chair, Kirsten Wells confronted me.

"Well, looky here," my brunette teammate from Rockdale County Gym said, placing a hand on her petite waist. "If it isn't Laurel Shadrach. The one who acts perfect for Coach Milligent just so she can try to make the rest of us look bad."

"Hey, I never try to outdo anyone but myself," I replied to Miss Uppity. She rolled her coppery green eyes at me. "Believe what you want, I'm tired of trying to defend my ability."

She peered at my paper cup and raised an eyebrow. "And now you're drinking hard liquor. What a hypocrite! I wish Coach could see you right now."

I used the loud music as an excuse to raise my voice. "I never said I was perfect, even though you say it all the time. Well, now you see that I'm not. So just get off my back." I brushed past her to continue my search for a place to sit. Not finding one, I finally sat on the floor against the wall and put the cup down beside me.

*Don't you feel just horrible?* I heard my conscience say.

*No, my flesh battled back.*

*You should, my heart persisted. Sure, Kirsten seems all relaxed and cool on the outside. But remember what you overheard at that last practice before Christmas break? She lost her boyfriend. Again.*

"Laurel?"

I looked up and saw my boyfriend standing over me. "Foster," I whimpered. "I thought you left."

"I did. But then I realized that you really need me to be here, even though I don't approve of your drinking."

My stomach churned. “I really feel sick,” I groaned.

Foster helped me to the bathroom. Within seconds I was throwing up.

After regaining some composure, I came out of the bathroom. Foster was waiting in the hallway just outside the door. “Thanks for coming back,” I said. “It really is sweet of you to care so much about me.”

He gave me a sad smile. “You know I care, Laurel. I was angry, but I shouldn’t have left.”

I melted into his arms. “Let’s just say I won’t be doing this again. I don’t understand how people can get a thrill out of alcohol. My head really hurts!”

“Probably because you drank too fast,” he said. “Let’s get you some water, then go outside for a little fresh air.”

Foster led me slowly down the hall to the kitchen, where he poured me a tall glass of water. I took a sip then let him escort me outside. I sat on the porch swing, and Foster sat close beside me.

“You’re going to feel pretty bad tomorrow,” he said, curling his arm around my shoulders.

I groaned. “I’ve already learned my lesson.”

“What a great girlfriend I have,” he said, smiling. “She learns so fast.”

I hugged him tightly and gave him a grin. “Happy New Year.”

He laughed. “Hearing that you’ve learned your lesson tells me this might be a happy new year after all.”

With the little energy I had left, I chuckled at Foster’s humor. In the midst of my craziness, God had sent him to rescue me. Although I didn’t have all of my faculties, I was thankful from the depths of my soul.

People started coming out of the house and heading for home. Some climbed into taxis, obviously too drunk to drive. Several others started sauntering down the sidewalk, although most of them couldn’t keep a straight line. I was surprised at how many climbed behind the wheels of their cars



and drove off, either with tires screeching or so slow they were barely moving.

“I sure hope they all get home OK,” I said. “We should pray about that.”

“Yes, we should,” Foster agreed. We whispered a quick prayer for the safety of everyone who had been at the party.

“We’ve got to get you cleaned up before I take you home,” he said after the amen.

“I’m going to crash here,” I said. “I told my parents I wouldn’t be home till tomorrow.”

Foster and I said good night at his car, then I walked slowly up to Brittany’s room. I still felt horrible—spiritually and physically. Mentally, I was starting to get a grip. As I drifted off to sleep, I promised myself and God that I would stick to my commitment and never do anything like this again.

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“Laurel, wake up!” I heard Brittany and Meagan say.

I didn’t know how much time had passed, but waking up was not the thing I wanted to do.

“Laurel, it’s your brother Lance,” Meagan said.

I forced my eyes to open. “What about him?” I asked, trying to focus.

“He came to my party,” Brittany whined, “and now he’s drunk. Passed out in the downstairs bathroom!”

I groaned, wishing I could go back to sleep. “What time is it?” I asked, my voice groggy.

“It’s three in the morning,” Brittany informed me, sounding both irritated and panicked.

“He’s got to go home,” Meagan said. “Your parents are probably worried sick about him.”

“But he’s not sober enough to drive,” Brittany added.

“He can’t drive anyway,” I said, sitting up in Brittany’s bed and holding my throbbing head. “He doesn’t have his license.”

“Then how did he get here?”

“I saw your mom’s van in the driveway,” Meagan announced.

“What?” I squealed. “He stole Mom’s van?”

Brittany shrugged. “I guess.”

“I’ve got to see him.” I crawled out of the bed, my legs feeling like overcooked linguini.

Meagan and Brittany followed me down to the basement. Lance sat on the bathroom floor beside the toilet, saying all kinds of stuff but not making any sense.

“You’ve got to call someone,” Brittany whispered, not taking her frightened eyes off my brother. “If your parents send the police out looking for him and they find him here, I could get in a lot of trouble.”

“I can’t call my parents,” I moaned. “What would I tell them?”

“I don’t know,” Meagan said, shaking her head as she looked at Lance.

I couldn’t imagine my brother stealing the family van, but that was the only thing that made sense. I had stepped in and saved him before, but I couldn’t do it again.

Then again, was that any way to act toward my brother? I had made the drinking mistake myself, and if it wasn’t for Foster, who knows how I would have ended up? Maybe my brother deserved a little more grace.

“I’ve gotta drive him home,” I said.

Brittany gasped. “I thought you were gonna stay and help me clean up. This place is a mess! I can’t take care of this all by myself.”

“I’ve got to get my brother home, Brittany,” I repeated. “There’s no other way.”

“Do you feel OK to drive?” Meagan asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll be all right . . . I hope.”

“You need some coffee,” Brittany decided. “There’s some upstairs.”

“What’s coffee gonna do?” I asked, watching her traipse up the steps.

“Wake you up,” she replied over her shoulder.

I stared at my brother, who had passed out again. “I can get him into the car if you guys both help me,” I said to Meagan. “But once I get home, I don’t know how I’m gonna get him up to his room. I don’t want to get caught. My parents would be so disappointed in both of us.”

“We’ll have to get him some coffee, too, then,” Meagan said.

“Good idea.”

As we walked upstairs to the kitchen, Meagan asked, “How are you going to explain to your parents why you didn’t spend the night here after all?”

“I don’t know,” I said, unable to think clearly through the fog in my brain.

After thirty minutes of pouring coffee into my brother’s mouth, I got him somewhat coherent. With my girlfriends’ help, I piled him into the van and headed toward home.

I glanced at his slumped body leaning against the car door, his eyes closed. “Lance, I don’t know if you can hear me or not, but this is ridiculous. How could you steal Mom’s van?”

“Steal?” he said, his speech slurred. “I’m part of this family, and this is a family car. I was gonna have it back by morning.”

As I pulled into the driveway we came up with a game plan. We would go into the house through the back door, and Lance would sleep on the couch. Since he shared a bedroom with Liam and Luke, we couldn’t risk getting him up to his bed. In the morning, he would tell our parents that he fell asleep watching the ball drop in Times Square on TV. After helping him to the couch, I would go back outside, walk around to the front door, then go up to my room. If my parents saw me, I would say that Brittany’s mom had dropped me off.

I got my brother through the back OK, but as I came back in through the front door, Liam, my oldest younger brother, suddenly appeared out of the darkness.

“You scared me!” I yelled at him in a whisper.  
“Laurel, what’s going on?” he asked, peering at me.  
“What are you talking about?” I asked.  
“I saw you driving Mom’s van,” he said. “Where’s Lance?”  
I rolled my eyes. “Why do you have to know everything?”  
“Why do you have to hide things?” he countered.  
“Aren’t you supposed to be asleep?” I argued, starting to walk away.

Liam grabbed my arm. “I was asleep. Until Meagan called.”  
I stopped and looked up at him. “Did Mom and Dad wake up?”

“No,” he said. “She called my private line.”  
“Did she tell you what’s going on with Lance?” I asked.  
He nodded. “I can’t believe you’re gonna cover for him. And Meagan told me you said this wasn’t the first time.”

“Well, Meagan’s got a big mouth,” I said, yanking my arm out of his grasp and storming toward the stairs.

“Laurel, don’t walk away from me. We need to talk about this.”

I turned around. “Liam, if you want to talk about this, then talk about it with Lance in the morning.”

“Laurel, if Lance has a problem with alcohol, you’re not helping him by covering it up. You’re just making it worse.”

Hearing him speak the words my mind had been torturing me with only made me more irritated. “Good night,” I said, then hurried upstairs before he could say anything more.

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A few hours later, my mom opened my bedroom door. “Laurel,” she said, “I thought you were spending the night at Brittany’s. Are you all right? When did you come home?”

“I got in early this morning,” I said groggily. “I have gymnastics this afternoon, so I need to get some more sleep.”

“On New Year’s Day?” Mom asked. “That doesn’t seem right.”

I rolled over and buried myself deeper into the covers. “It’s the first practice with the new school team,” I explained, moaning. “We want to go to nationals, and top athletes don’t take breaks.”

“OK, honey,” Mom said. As she closed my bedroom door, she added, “Happy New Year.”

Later that morning I awoke to the sound of two of my brothers fighting. I figured from their noise level that they had to be the only ones in the house. Unable to sleep through the racket, I crawled out of bed, slipped into my robe, and ventured into the hallway. The noise was coming from the boys’ bedroom. I wandered down the hall and peeked around the open door. “Do you two mind?” I groaned. “I have a headache.”

“Laurel, stay out of this,” Liam said.

“Don’t get on her case,” Lance replied. “She was helping me out.”

“You need to watch it,” Liam threatened, “or I’ll tell Mom and Dad about your drinking binge.”

“Hey, I’m not gonna let you hold this over my head forever. If you’re going to tell, then tell. Let them come down on me. You’re not my parent.” Lance brushed past me and left the room.

Liam turned on me next. “So you think you’re helping him out by keeping this a secret? You’re hurting him worse than you know.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I shook my head, but only slightly since it hurt so much. “You told me that last night. Unless you have something new to say, I’ve got to get to practice.” Without waiting for an answer, I walked out of the room.

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After my head started to clear, feelings of guilt crept into my mind. All during gymnastics practice at the school, I kept slipping off the bars because I couldn’t concentrate. What if Liam was right? Had I made things worse for Lance

by keeping my mouth shut? I knew I shouldn't be making up stories and lying to my folks.

I attempted a simple maneuver on the balance beam, my favorite piece of equipment and the area I excelled at most. But I felt so frustrated, I blew my approach. After hitting the beam with my fist, I shed a tear.

All the girls stared at me. I didn't recognize any of them, and I wondered if they knew I was going to be the team captain. The captain was supposed to be the best. Instead, I looked like the worst.

"Laurel," my coach called out, "can you come here a second?"

I went into Mrs. Turner's office and took a seat.

"Is there something going on that I'm not aware of?" she probed, closing the glass door.

"No." I fidgeted in my seat. "I just stayed up a little late last night. You know, for New Year's Eve."

"I'm beginning to regret asking you to come to practice today. Coach Milligent told me you'd learned a new routine. He said you could perform it for us at our first meet. Do I need to hold off on putting you in?"

"No," I assured her quickly. I knew when Mrs. Turner offered to make me captain of the school team that my practices with Coach Milligent at the county gym would take a backseat. But I also felt the two teams might complement each other. I didn't want to lose the respect of either of my coaches. "I was just a little off track," I said. "Things will be better tomorrow."

"Well, why don't you go on home now and come back tomorrow, then?"

I went straight to the locker room to change into street clothes. As I was getting ready to leave, I heard two of the girls on our team come in and start talking on the other side of my row of lockers.

"He's a senior, and he's got brown hair," one said in a babyish voice. She giggled. "He is so cute!"

“Have you talked to him?” the other asked.

She giggled again. “No.”

“You’ve got to be aggressive, girl.”

I must have still had some alcohol in my system, because I stuck my nose in where it didn’t belong. “Never let a guy know you like him,” I said, coming around the corner of the lockers. “That really turns guys off. You’ve got to have some dignity about yourselves.” The girls stared at me. “What are your names?” I asked.

“I’m Shaney,” one of the girls said. I recognized her voice as the one who liked this boy. Shaney was cute and blonde, with a petite figure.

“My name is Madison,” said her friend.

“I’m Laurel,” I said.

“Oh, we know who you are,” Shaney said. “We’re so excited you’re on the team. You’re so good!”

I felt my cheeks redden. “Well, my practice today didn’t show it.”

“We all have bad days,” Madison replied. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Isn’t Lance Shadrach your brother?” Shaney asked.

“Yeah.” So they did know some things about me.

“How is he?” she asked shyly.

I could tell she liked him, but I wasn’t going to set Lance up with anyone until he got himself together. “He’s . . . sick right now,” I told her.

She looked sad. “I hope he gets better.”

“Yeah, me too.”

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Two weeks passed. My practices got much better after that first day. Foster and I were doing well too. We were studying the Word and praying together often.

But I didn’t talk to Lance at all. It felt like he was avoiding me. I prayed for him every day.

“Lord,” I whispered beside my bed one morning, “please forgive me for drinking on New Year’s Eve. I know that being drunk is a sin, and I don’t want to sin against You. I should have stayed at church on New Year’s Eve. Thank You for helping me to regain my focus on gymnastics. Lord, Lance seems so distant lately. Please reach him, Lord. Help him know that You love him. Thank You for loving me and forgiving me.”

As Foster and I walked through the hall at school that day, we talked about the New Year’s Eve party at Brittany’s. “I still wonder why I had a desire to taste that alcohol,” I said.

“It’s easy to do the wrong thing when we’re tempted to do something we’ve never tried before,” he observed. “The key is not doing it again.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’ve definitely learned my lesson.”

The bell was about to ring, so we went our separate ways. I headed for choir, which I had with Robyn, a black girl I’d met in chemistry class on the first day of school. I was looking forward to chatting with my new friend. Unfortunately, by the time I got to class, our choir director, Mrs. Moreland, had already started.

After class Robyn came up to me. “Hey,” she said, “Monday is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Do you have any plans?”

“My church is having a special service in the morning, and in the afternoon we’re supposed to feed the homeless,” I said. “Why?”

“There’s a celebration at the King Center and my mom is selling books there. They need some hostesses. She told me to ask if you wanted to help. You could come by in the evening, after you’re done with your church thing.”

“That’d be great,” I said. I was always thrilled to help Robyn’s mom. It felt great to know a real author, especially one who wrote novels for teens. I hoped she might ask me to look over another manuscript for her.



Saturday afternoon, after gymnastics practice at Rockdale County Gym, I had a three-way call with Brittany and Meagan. I told them about my plans for Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

“I don’t understand why you have to go anywhere with that Robyn girl instead of hanging out with us,” Brittany whined.

“She already told you,” Meagan said. “She’s going to volunteer. We can do something together later.”

Brittany huffed. “It’s not even a real holiday.”

“It’s a holiday,” I defended. “If it wasn’t for Dr. King, no minorities would be able to vote. I appreciate what he did. He stood for something.” I got nothing but silence on the phone line. “So, what are you guys going to do for the holiday?”

“I’m not celebrating it at all,” Brittany said.

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That Monday night, as I performed my duties as hostess at the King Center, I felt uneasy. Something was wrong with me, but I couldn’t tell what it was. As I greeted visitors, I thought about the life of Martin Luther King Jr. Then I thought about my own life.

What did I stand for? What did I truly believe in? Sure, I was a Christian. I had accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior years ago. But was I doing everything God had called me to do? Could people around me see Christ in me? Was I willing to give up my so-called rights, possibly even risk death, so that God could use my life to bring honor to Himself?

“What’s wrong, Laurel?” Robyn asked, interrupting my thoughts. “You look upset.”

No visitors were approaching, so I opened up to her. “I’m disappointed in myself,” I said. “I want my passion for Christ to burn strong. But lately, I’ve been giving in to temptation. I don’t want that any longer. I want to be standing for Christ.”