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Embracing the Good

*M*y feet were planted firmly on the ground, but it felt as if I were a part of the beautiful sky. I was closer to God than I had been my whole life. My head was more clear and my heart was more His. The unsure feeling of who I was subsided.

“Lord, thank You,” I cried. “I’m so grateful that You stuck by me. You are the truth, the way, and the light. The only thing that is important is pleasing You. I have given all of my trouble to You, and now I am free. I’m a new Payton Skky. I want to walk a life that pleases You.”

I completely loved the Lamb of God. I was happy to give my problems to God. With His help I could live a victorious Christian life.

As soon as I made it to my cold bedroom the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” Tad said in a way that melted my heart.

“Oh, hey. You made it home.”

“Yeah, I just wanted to let you know that I got here safely. I really enjoyed our evening,” he told me.

He was such a gentleman. We had come from my father’s Christmas party at the car dealership. Tad Taylor, my former boyfriend, meant more to me than I wanted to admit. Since I had taken him through so much, Tad decided we didn’t need to be together.

That night we didn’t kiss, hold hands, or do anything romantic, but it felt so right just being with him. Though he was dating another girl, I was starting to realize that, deep within, I was hoping we could be more than friends again. If we ever were, I knew I would not let go of such a special guy.

“I really enjoyed our time together, too,” I told him.

We spent another ten minutes on the phone talking about our Christmas plans. He was leaving the next day to go with the University of Georgia football team to the bowl game in Florida. I was going to spend the first part of Christmas Day with my family and then go to Conyers to spend time at my grandparents’ house.

“Do you think you’ll be able to go to the bowl game?” Tad asked me sweetly.

“I don’t know. Going down to Florida sounds mighty appealing, but I don’t know if I can.”

“Well, I have some extra tickets, so if you want to go just let me know.”

“Thanks for asking. Merry Christmas, Tad. I hope you get a chance to play in the game and show off.”

“I don’t know about all of that, but I hope we win.”

“You’re always so modest, Tad,” I told him.

“I don’t look at it that way. I’d say I’m just humble. This talent comes from the Lord.”

“Yeah, what are you thinking about? You’re kind of quiet,” I said after an unusual silence.

“I was just thinking about when I first met you. Payton, you blew me away with your beauty. Looking at you made me feel special.”

Inside I was breaking. As sweet as he was, I had messed up. I treated him ten times worse than anyone deserved, especially him.

His phone clicked for another call, which was a good thing because I didn’t know how to respond to his compliment. No matter how fond he was of me, I wasn’t his girl anymore. When he came back to the phone and told me it was Vonda, a girl from his hometown, whom he was dating. I knew that he was moving on without me.

“Rain, what’s wrong?” I asked in a panic as my best friend from high school entered my room with bloodshot eyes.

She stretched out her arms as if she wanted me to hug her. As we embraced, the tears started flowing from her eyes. She cried as if her whole world had fallen apart.

“Rain, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

I wondered what could have her so upset. *Did she have a car accident? Is someone in her family hurt? Or worse, did someone die?* While terrible thoughts raced through my mind, she continued to cry uncontrollably.

She still wouldn’t speak so I prayed to myself. *Lord, how am I supposed to help her when she won’t talk to me? My friend is in my arms breaking down. Help me get it together to open her up. If she won’t, then please don’t let the situation get any worse.*

Finally she said, “It’s Tyson.”

Tyson was her boyfriend all during high school and he was sweet. He didn’t go to Lucy Laney with us; he went to

school across town. Rain and Tyson were inseparable. They even went to college in the same city to be near each other. Rain went to Spelman while Tyson went to Georgia Tech.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked, handing her a tissue.

“It was just like what happened last year in high school with Dakari.” Rain spoke in a soft, sad tone. “A couple of girls keep coming on to him at Georgia Tech. He wants me to make a choice whether I want to be with him physically or not. I want to be with him, but I want to wait until we’re married. I thought he would understand. I got my Bible so that we could pray through it. Girl, he took my Bible and threw it across the room! He was so mad. He said he was faithful to me and when he wanted to take the relationship further he thought I would. He said I was wasting his time. He told me that by keeping the good-girl act I wasn’t going to get anybody. He used to tell me that he loved the fact that I was a virgin.”

I explained, “Maybe he was just saying what he knew you wanted to hear. I know it hurts back then because I’ve been there. I’m so happy that you and Dakari didn’t get intimately involved. Imagine how much worse you would be feeling if you gave it up to him and he still left.”

“If I would’ve done it, maybe he wouldn’t be gone,” she said, unsure.

“*Maybe* is the key word there. The uncertainty of it all is enough for you to send him packing.”

“You’re so strong, Payton. I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Remember, Rain, I wasn’t strong initially. One thing I have learned is that guys come and go, circumstances come and go, but God is constant, and He can see you through all of this. The reason you didn’t have sex with Tyson is that God wanted you to say no. Because you have honored Him, God is going to bless you. Yes, Tyson was the guy you loved, but you love God more and the Lord ain’t gonna leave you.

He's gonna fix this. Just watch. Please, just don't make the mistake I made. If God sends you a good Christian guy, don't make him second best. You're gonna get over this, Rain. You have to pray and let God be your everything. You know I'm here for you. It's too bad you didn't bring clothes. You could have spent the night."

"We just got back from my grandmother's, and we brought her with us. I think I need to spend some time with her. Thanks for being such a great friend. I love you, Payton Skky. I used to think you were selfish sometimes and only cared about yourself, but I was wrong."

"I wasn't always a good friend, but I'm trying to be a better person. I'm trying to live like Jesus would and not like Payton would. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah, that's good advice, and I need to do that too. I know these next couple of days aren't going to be easy, but before I go tell me what's up with you, Payton. What's up with you and Georgia?"

"My school is a totally different place than I was used to. When I get down, I just think about high school and I laugh. Something about you, Dymond, or Lynzi always gets my spirit up. I had a roommate who tried to kill herself, two girls who wanted Tad and Dakari, a suite mate that didn't like me, bad grades, and a whole bunch of stuff."

"Oh, girl, are we gonna make it? College is hard."

"Yes, it is, but we made it through high school at Lucy Laney and you know how crazy that place was. We can make it, right?" I questioned.

"Yeah! I miss you, Payton."

"Girl, I miss you too."

"Granddaddy?" I said in a startled tone when I awoke from sleep and saw my grandfather standing over me.

It was Christmas morning, but the sun wasn't up yet. I heard heavy breathing and something made me wake up.

"Granddaddy, are you OK?"

"Yeah. I just thought I would get up early and maximize my day. It's Christmas, you know. I remember when I was your age. It was my first Christmas out of high school when I proposed to your grandmother."

"Right out of high school?"

"We didn't have choices about college back then. When you graduated you were considered an adult. I asked her to marry me, but what other choice could she make? As you guys say, I was *the man* back then and my game was tight."

I couldn't believe I was laughing at 5:10 in the morning. Something about being with him right then and there didn't bother me. I didn't care that it was early. I didn't care that I needed more sleep. I was just happy that he sat on the edge of my bed and told me romantic stories of him dating my grandmother.

"She was a great gal, Payton, and similar to you. She is beautiful now, but back then she made my heart dance."

"Oh, that's so sweet."

"What about you? Is your heart dancing for anybody? I've been praying for your mate."

"Are you trying to marry me off?" I joked. "Times have changed, Granddaddy. I'm not trying to get married until who-knows-when."

"That's good. I'm glad you're focused. Being an independent woman is great. But there is nothing wrong with letting a nice young gentleman into your life, especially the right one, one who loves the Lord. I don't want you to get with someone who looks halfway decent but treats you like he treats the bottom of his shoe. Be smart, my dear. You're my granddaughter, and you deserve the best. When I'm gone—"

"Don't say that," I said, cutting my grandfather off.

He had been talking about dying a lot lately, and it was starting to make me uncomfortable. I know no one can live forever, but just because he was old didn't mean he was going to go before me. I hugged him tightly. How dare he talk about when he was gone? He was so strong he was probably going to outlive all of us.

"Do you smell them biscuits?" he asked. "That's one thing I love about your grandmother."

My grandmother was up cooking early Christmas morning, and I knew my mother wouldn't like that too much. The whole point of staying at our house on Christmas morning was so that my mom could prepare her spread in her kitchen. Just like my grandmother wasn't too fond of Pillar's mom because she is white, she never really liked my mother, either, and my mother is black.

My grandmother and my mom didn't have a bad relationship, but it wasn't a warm and fuzzy one. So I got up, put on my robe, helped my grandfather into the kitchen, and went to find my mother to do damage control.

I hugged her and said, "Grandma is helping you out so you won't have to work so hard on Christmas."

"Don't tell me she's in there baking," my mom said with a slight attitude.

"All right, I won't," I told her.

She gave my dad a sour look. "Perry, you know I wanted to do this. Why didn't you tell your mother?"

"You know my mom," Dad said, throwing his hands up in the air.

It was Christmas morning, and I didn't want any family drama. "Let's all take a deep breath," I said, "and remember this is supposed to be a good day."

"Yeah, honey, just tolerate my mom for today. You know she doesn't mean any harm. She never does."

My mom was extremely disappointed, probably more so because her parents decided once again not to come to

Christmas dinner. My maternal grandparents lived in south Florida. She had no siblings so she missed her parents terribly. My mom had an older sister who had died from scarlet fever when she was ten, and her relationship with her mother was strained because of that. Maybe that was why Grandma couldn't really relate to me.

Today wasn't going like she wanted it to, and she needed a hug. So I followed her into her bathroom.

"Mom, I'm sorry your day isn't going like you planned. I just want you to know that Christmas can still be special and I love you. We can still celebrate Jesus' birth."

She grabbed my robe and pulled me toward her. "Thanks for understanding, Payton. Thanks for caring about me. But I will be fine. Now let me get ready and eat some of your grandmother's cooking. I prayed to Jesus because I didn't know how I was going to make it this morning, but He sent you in here to give me the wind to carry on. I'm glad you're home for the holidays. We will have to do something extra-special before you go back to school."

I went into the living room and grabbed a couple of presents from under the tree. My father had already given me an empty square box. Self-esteem was inside of it, he said. He told me I was just like the box, that I had self-esteem wrapped secretly inside. Every time I looked at the package I knew that we had that in common. I had been dealing with a lot last semester at school. I felt as if I didn't measure up, and my father's present made my day.

Now it was Christmas morning and I was ready to open some presents, put on some new clothes, get some money or something. As my dad always did, he went over and pulled out some old videotapes from Christmases past.

Perry Jr., my younger brother, came over to me with a present. "Here."

During all the Christmas rush I had forgotten to get him

something. I had something for everyone except him.

When I opened the present I saw a beautiful silver bracelet. “I’m gonna hook you up,” I told him.

“You know what I want, right?”

Of course I knew. He wanted what he always wanted and what he could never seem to have enough of—tennis shoes.

Despite its rough beginning, we somehow got through the morning. My cousin Pillar and her family were supposed to come for Christmas, but they didn’t. Though I missed Pillar, I wasn’t heartbroken that she didn’t come. My grandfather was really disappointed, but his two daughters were going to be there.

We arrived in Conyers about two, which gave my parents just enough time to get to the airport to pick up my two aunts. My Aunt Esther was coming from Dallas and my Aunt Georgia was coming from New Jersey.

As we ate a traditional soul-food dinner at my grandparents’ table, I couldn’t help but think about the Georgia football team. I hoped Tad was having a good Christmas.

Wow! I thought. I’m not even thinking about Dakari, and he plays football, too. Lord, if there is any way You can help me get Tad back . . .

My grandfather led most of the dinner conversation as he reminisced about his life. He talked about being a father of four kids and about getting the dealership.

“As I think back over all my years,” my grandfather began, “life really started to get good for me at sixty. I finally went back to the place where I was born. God showed me that He wanted me to know Him, and that having a relationship with Him is far more important than anything. The Lord is my best friend. I’m going to leave here soon, but I know that I will have life eternally. Christmas Day is all about praising the name of Jesus Christ. When I leave this earth I can’t wait for my Lord to say, ‘Well done.’ If God can’t

be enough to fulfill you, then what do you have to look forward to? Thank You, Jesus, for being good to me! Thank You,” my grandfather shouted as he got up and left the table.

We all looked at one another. It wasn't a sermon, but it was a moving testimony.

My grandfather was right. Christmas was about praising the name of Jesus. The day was almost over, but before it was, my grandfather set us all straight about the true reason to celebrate Christmas.

Lord, I said on my knees in the guest room of my grandparents' home, I feel so at peace right now and it feels as if You've come down from heaven and wrapped Your arms around me. Not that I'm wishing that wasn't the case, but something seems weird. I join my grandfather in praising You. Thank You for my blessing.

My grandfather came into my room and cut my prayer short. “Payton, you make me so proud. Come and give me a hug.”

I got off my knees and hugged my grandfather.

“Keep on doing what you're doing. Don't lose sight of the goal. It's all about winning souls for Him.”

“I don't do a lot of witnessing, but Tad has helped me a lot.”

“He sounds like a nice young man.”

“I think you met him at graduation.”

“Oh, I remember he was a really nice gentleman. Payton, I don't feel good. I'm going to go lie down for a while. Will you bring me some water in a little bit?”

“Yes. Of course I will, Granddaddy.”

“Where did your dad go?”

“He went to play basketball with Perry.”

“Where are all the ladies? The house is so quiet.”

“They are out on the porch. Do you need any help?” I asked as I saw him cringe at his stomach.

“No, I’ll be all right. You just make sure that everyone gets along and knows that it’s Christmas.”

I went into the kitchen to get my grandfather some water. It had been twenty minutes since I had talked to him. The heat wasn’t on because the gas fireplace was going.

I opened the bedroom door and put the water on the dresser. He was asleep and it was cold in the house, but he didn’t have a blanket on him. I got a blanket from the closet and tucked it around him. It was as if he was a block of ice. I picked up the glass of water and tried to wake him.

“Papa,” I said softly, “wake up and drink some water.”

I went to the other side of the room and turned on the light. He was lying almost too still and I started to panic.

“Papa, wake up.”

I touched his chest. His heart wasn’t beating. Without a thought I let go of the glass of water and started trying to make his heart beat with my hands.

I screamed, “Papa! Wake up!”

I heard the back door open and my brother and father laughing.

“Daddy! Come here! Hurry! It’s Granddaddy!”

My father rushed into the room and Perry pulled me back. My father checked Granddad’s pulse. “Call 911!”

“Oh, no,” I screamed.

My screams alerted everyone. As they came into the room they realized what was going on and more cries started.

My dad turned to us and said, “He’s gone.” His eyes were bloodshot and I know it was hard for him to say.

I rushed to his side and buried my head in my grandfather’s lap.

The paramedics finally arrived and my dad pulled me

away.

“No! Leave me alone!” I shouted.

“Payton, c’mon, honey. If anything can be done, let them do it.”

I walked back to the doorway and stared at my grandfather. He had a look on his face that was happier than I had ever seen him. No one was touching me, but I felt that feeling again like when I fell on my knees. It was as if God was holding me. I realized why He had come earlier to give me peace. He knew I needed comfort that only He could give.

My grandfather was now with our heavenly Father, but I was really going to miss him. For that reason, it was hard embracing the good.



Releasing All Fears

*H*e was dead. Granddaddy was gone. Just as his heart had stopped beating, so did mine. Not for an eternity like his, but only for a second. However, that second felt like an eternity. I loved him so much because he taught me a lot. The thought of him not being at the head of our family anymore wasn't comforting.

Chaos was all around me. Paramedics were wheeling my grandfather's body from the house while another set of hands had to be called for my grandmother. It appeared as if she was having a stroke or a heart attack. My brother was so angry that he left the house in a fit of rage. My two aunts were crying uncontrollably. My parents were doing too much busy work, and it wasn't natural.

As I watched all of this, I stood as if I were a zombie. I realized I was scared. What would happen next? Papa was our rock. Now that he was gone, we were left to deal with the aftermath.

I should have gotten here sooner, I thought. He asked me to

bring him water. It's all my fault.

No, came to my mind as if God was speaking to me. It was his time. He told you to do something before he left. Do it, Payton. Do it.

He asked me to bring him water, but I dropped that on the floor.

No, the voice stepped in, something else he asked you to do. He asked you to try your best to keep the family together.

That was my job. I had to tell everyone how happy he was in his last moments and how proud he was of us all. How my grandfather wanted us to continue victoriously until the day God called each and every one of us home.

I went to the bathroom and washed my face. The water refreshed my body and my soul. My grandfather wasn't there, but he was with Jesus, of that I was certain. It gave me hope because I didn't have to worry. The Lord knows how to take care of us better than anyone else. My grandfather was fine.

I went around the house trying to console everyone. I had strong arms for my aunts. They leaned on me, and I calmed them down. I checked with my grandmother, who was with the paramedics, and they said she was going to be OK. She didn't even need to go to the hospital; it was just shock. I held her hand as she fought the medicine that made her sleep.

"He's OK, Grandma. He was happy and God has him now."

When her eyes closed I went around the back of the house looking for my brother. He was out there shooting foul shots.

"It's not fair," he said when he noticed me standing behind him. "I didn't even get to say good-bye. I didn't get to tell him I love him. Why'd God have to take him out like that? Dang!"

"Who knows? There were a whole lot of things I wanted to do with Granddaddy, but we maximized his last hours

here. He sat up and watched videos with us last night. We spent Christmas together. Though Christmas isn't the day I would have picked for Granddaddy to die, it helped that the family was together and we were able to lean on one another 'cause Granddaddy is OK."

"What are you talking about?" Perry asked as he threw the basketball down on the ground.

"Because he accepted Jesus, we know that Granddaddy will live with Him eternally. There is another life for him, a better life."

"Do you really think there is life after death?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

"C'mon, Payton. I believe in God and all, but we're about to see Granddaddy put into the ground. There is nothing appealing about dying. What do I have to give me hope that what you're saying is true?"

"Faith. When Granddaddy had his stroke a while back God could have taken him then, but He didn't. He gave us more time with him. There is Someone up there who cares about us, and all we have to do is believe and we can have everlasting life. We don't have to stress about it. Heaven is a wonderful place. I don't think I'm ready to go tonight, but if He calls, I'll go running. Granddaddy once told me that the only reason we are here is to get people fired up about going to heaven. I want to witness more."

My brother smiled and sat down by the basketball.

Lord, give me the words to minister to him and every other nonbeliever. I'm not used to witnessing, but I'm ready to be used by You.

"Payton, people are going to be coming over and I need you to clean up," my mom said, giving orders as soon as I walked back into the house.

I went over to my mother, grabbed her hands, and held them firmly. She was hurting and she didn't even realize it. My grandfather loved her like one of his own daughters.

Tears streamed gently down her face. "I'll miss him."

"I know, Mom," I told her. "So will I."

I wanted to help my dad deal with his father's passing, but he was at the store so that when people came over they would have food other than Christmas stuff to snack on.

I couldn't go to sleep that night. I wanted desperately to talk to Tad. He had just gone through this. His grandmother passed away at his graduation. Maybe what got him through could help me and my family, but he was in Florida getting ready for the bowl game. I certainly didn't need to get him down with my sad news. Even if I did want to talk to him, I had no idea where he was staying.

It wasn't as if he had an obligation to get me through it. He was no longer my boyfriend. I tried calling my girlfriends Lynzi, Rain, and Dymond, but all I got were answering machines. I thought about calling Laurel my college roommate, because she lived in Conyers, but it was too late. I would call her the next day.

I sat alone with my pillow, rocking myself back and forth. I was hurting, but I was trying not to make too much of it. Somehow I fell asleep and must have gone through the next couple of days in that same daze.

It was the last time I'd get to see Granddaddy. He still had that happy smile on his face. They were about to close the casket and my insides were turning. I felt uncomfortable. I felt scared. I felt weak because my grandfather just wasn't here anymore.

My brother, Perry, held my right hand while my cousin Pillar held my left.

“You don’t have to worry about him. He’s OK,” Pillar said, trying to give me comfort as a tear trickled down her face.

“Thanks,” I told her softly as I gripped her hand harder.

My grandfather had so many people who loved him. It took everything to hold my head up. I saw Dymond, Rain, and Lynzi, seated in the back. Seeing them gave me strength. I also saw Laurel and her father in the audience. All of my friends had blessed me with their presence. It felt as if my grandfather was telling me I didn’t have to be afraid.

An hour later, when my grandfather’s body was physically placed in the ground, I prayed. *Thank You, Lord, for my grandfather’s faith in You. He was an awesome man. Because of his love for You, most of his children and grandchildren love You too.*

As I looked around and saw all the people, I knew my grandfather had left a great mark on this side of heaven. I could only hope that when it was my time to go, my life could be as fulfilling.

“Oh, so he wanted *you* to be over the estate,” my Uncle Percy yelled to my father. My aunts were pretty angry, too, and my grandmother wasn’t smiling.

My grandfather had left my father, the younger of his two sons, to oversee his estate. Upon my grandfather’s retirement he had about a quarter of a million left to take care of. What my dad tried to explain to his siblings was that none of them lived close enough to help with any of his investments. This wasn’t money my dad was going to put into his bank account.

“That’s not true,” my Uncle Percy continued. “Your way of thinking is all wrong. I could sell the rental properties and the money could be split among the four of us.”

“What about me?” my grandmother piped up. “Shouldn’t

it be split five ways?”

“No, Ma, I’m thinking four,” Percy said. “Perry already has the car dealership in Augusta; he doesn’t need any of this.”

It was becoming a mess. My granddad hadn’t been buried two days and they could hardly get along. I had to get out of there. My friend Laurel had told me she wanted me to spend the night at her house sometime. I didn’t know if tonight would be a good time, but dealing with all this drama made me reconsider in a hurry.

I wanted to hang out with Pillar, but she, my aunt, and Pillar’s brother flew back the night of the funeral.

“Laurel?” I said through the receiver as a sweet voice said hello.

“No, this is her mother. Payton?”

I was surprised that she recognized my voice and a little disappointed with myself that I didn’t know Laurel’s.

“How are you, honey? We’ve been praying for you and your family.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Shadrach. I’m fine and I know my grandfather’s in a better place.”

“Hold on one second while I get Laurel.”

Moments later Laurel came to the phone. “Hey, Payton. When are you coming to stay with me?”

“If you’re not busy I would love to come over tonight.”

“That would be great. Some of my girlfriends are coming over to watch a movie.”

I said “OK, I’ll see you later.”

When Perry dropped me off at her house, Laurel wouldn’t let him leave. She wanted him to come in and talk to her three brothers. Perry was hesitant about meeting them, but being that the NFL playoffs were on and my grandparents didn’t have cable, he jumped at the opportunity when Laurel said they were watching it.

“Hey, guys,” Laurel called out to her brothers, Lance, Liam, and Luke, “this is my roommate Payton and her brother, Perry.”

“Hey,” they all chimed back without taking their eyes off the television.

My brother plopped down on the couch as if he’d known them forever. “What’s the score?”

“It’s tied seven to seven going into the third quarter,” Lance, her middle brother answered.

Perry responded, “Oh, it’s a good game!”

“C’mon,” Laurel said to me.

She took me upstairs to meet one of her friends. I was surprised to see a black chick sitting in her room with her arms out ready to give me a hug.

“Payton, I’ve heard so much about you. I’m Robyn.”

“My other girlfriends, Brittany and Meagan, are coming by later,” Laurel said to me. “After the football game is over we can watch TV downstairs. Do you want something to drink?”

“Yeah, whatever you have is fine with me,” I told her.

Laurel left us alone and shut the door. I didn’t know how to act around Robyn. I wasn’t sure if she was down or if she was one of those black girls who acted white.

“So what’s up?” Robyn asked. “Do you really like Georgia? Being up there with all those white people?”

We both laughed.

She was cool and I could tell that she and I were going to get along fine. She graduated with Laurel, but before going there she attended Southwest DeKalb High School. She was now at Fort Valley State University.

“There is a girl at Georgia who went to Southwest.”

“I think I know who you’re talking about. If she is as fast now as she was then . . .”

“Yep, we’re talking about the same girl. She tried talking to my ex-boyfriend.”

“Oh, girl, stop,” Robyn said.

Robyn told me that Fort Valley was a great school, but she had been partying and she ended up with a 3.6 grade

point average.

“I’m thinking of transferring to Georgia. Is it cool up there?”

“Yeah, girl, it’s nice, but it’s different.”

Laurel came back to the room and said, “Well, gosh, you two are all chummy. I thought you’d get along. There’s the doorbell. I’d better get it.”

Robyn said, “OK, brace yourself because these two chicks are not like Laurel. Especially Brittany—she’s out the box.”

Brittany came into the room and said, “Payton, your outfit is adorable. Laurel didn’t tell me her roommate had this much style.”

I could tell what Robyn was talking about.

“So, Payton, what do your parents do?”

Laurel answered for me. “Her dad owns a car dealership in Augusta.”

“Oh, really? Wow!”

The other girl hadn’t said a word. I remembered that her name was Meagan. They decided to show me around Conyers. We all piled into Brittany’s car and headed to the Waffle House. It was so packed with teenagers that we had to order our food and wait in the parking lot.

“I know he is not coming over here,” Robyn said as she tried to walk behind me.

“Who?”

Before she could explain, a fairly cute guy who looked sort of familiar said, “Hey, don’t I know you? You go to Georgia and hang with Tad and Dakari.”

That was weird.

“I’m Jackson. I’m on the team with them.”

“Why aren’t you in Florida?” I asked.

“I’m going down for the game, but I’m not playing.”

Robyn hit me in the back. “Ouch!” I said.

“Robyn,” he said.

“Hey, Jackson.”

The two of them had something going on, but I couldn't tell what it was.

"You know her? Are y'all friends?" Jackson questioned.

"Yeah, we're friends through Laurel," I told him.

"Robyn, I heard you were coming to Georgia. Couldn't live without me, huh?" he said arrogantly.

"Don't flatter yourself," she responded, rolling her eyes.

When we got back to Laurel's house, Brittany and Meagan decided not to spend the night, but Robyn did. She, Laurel, and I had a blast talking about everything.

"Did Laurel tell you about her boyfriend, Branson, breaking up with her right before homecoming?" Robyn asked, eager to share juicy tidbits of gossip about our mutual friend.

"Homecoming?" I asked. "I thought it was prom." I gave Laurel a confused look. "Or did he break up with you twice?"

Laurel chuckled. "No, it was homecoming."

"And he took your best friend to the dance, so you had to go with your brother," I said. "I know I remember that."

"Now you're on the right track," Robyn confirmed.

"She was a cheerleader, right?" I said, wanting to make sure I had all the facts straight. "Wendy Cartright or something like that."

Robyn and Laurel started laughing so hard they almost fell off the bed.

"Wendy Cartright was our physics teacher." Robyn giggled.

"The girl who went to homecoming with Branson was Brittany Cox," Laurel explained.

I stared at Laurel. "You don't mean the Brittany who was just here, do you?"

Robyn and Laurel nodded.

"And you're still speaking to the girl?"

Laurel shrugged. "We did go through a pretty rough time there for a while. But eventually I had to forgive her. That's what friends do. That's what Jesus did for me."

"True, true," Robyn said.

I knew the Lord had brought me some terrific friends—girls I could laugh with, be myself with, and also be serious with when there was something to be serious about.

Robyn told me that Jackson Reid was her high-school love and they had problems in their relationship so she called it off, but she still liked him.

“Is that why you’re going to Georgia?” I asked.

“No. It’s not that far from home, and with my mom traveling with her books I need to be closer to my little sister.”

“What books?” I asked.

“Oh, my mom is a Christian author.”

“Really? I’m a Christian and I love to read.”

“Great, I’ll have to hook you up with some of her books. Anyway, that’s the reason I’m going.”

“Yeah, right, girl,” I said. “I’ve got two ex-boyfriends at Georgia. I know.”

We laughed about so many things. Laurel didn’t seem a bit out of place, nor did I with a brand-new person around. I had a great time and I knew that’s what my grandfather wanted me to do. I could only hope my relatives had solved their problems.

Because my parents were going to be in Conyers for the rest of my vacation, Laurel and I had been hanging pretty tight. When she wasn’t available, Robyn played hostess and spent time with me.

Though I hadn’t heard from Tad, something told me to check my messages, and to my surprise he was on my machine.

“Payton, hey, it’s me. I was just calling to see if you were OK. I hope things are getting better for you and your family. I still have those bowl tickets. I’ll leave them at the front desk of the hotel. Come if you want them. They’ll be waiting.”

“What are you smiling about?” Robyn asked.

“Nothing. I didn’t think he would call. It’s no big deal.”

“You didn’t think who would call?”

“Tad, but it’s no big deal.”

We were eating Chinese food when Robyn asked, “What’s going on?”

“I want to go to the bowl game, but I’m not sure if I can. My dad probably won’t come.”

“Well, I’ll be there and I’m sure Laurel will want to come also.”

“That’s a great idea, but how are we going to get there?” I asked.

“Jackson’s parents are going and they have an eighteen-passenger van. I’m sure we can ride with them,” she suggested.

I never called Tad, although two days later I was in the van with Jackson and his parents, and we were headed to Orlando.

“Do you think Tad knows you’re coming?” Laurel asked.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “Why in the world are Jackson’s parents white?”

“Those are his foster parents. They really love him a lot and would do anything for him. Jackson feels the same way about them.”

We were an hour away from Orlando, but we couldn’t wait to eat so we stopped at Shoney’s. The only problem was, I couldn’t find my shoes. Jackson volunteered to stay and help me.

When I ducked my head to search under the seat I felt his hand touch my hair.

“What are you doing?” I asked harshly.

“I couldn’t resist you and wanted to check you out.”

“Don’t touch me again.”

“Don’t come off like that. You know you liked it,” he said as he put his arm around me. “Why you tryin’ to play me? You

know you like me. We can do this 'cause Robyn ain't my girl."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I pushed him back quickly.

Before I made it into Shoney's, with one shoe on and one off, he grabbed my hand and said, "Don't say anything about this."

"First of all, don't be givin' me orders. Second, take your hands off me." I walked into the restaurant like nothing happened.

When we dropped Jackson off at his hotel, relief ran through my body. He was disgusting, and I was glad when he got out of the van.

We headed straight to Disney World in order to maximize our time in Florida. All the little children were happy to see the cartoon characters come to life. It reminded me of when I was young and my world was perfect. But now my Mickey Mouse days were gone.

"Thinking about something?" Laurel asked.

"Just taking life seriously."

"Don't take it too seriously or, before you know it, it will be gone."

"I know. I just want to make sure my life pleases God."

"That's great, Payton. God knows your heart, and He'll help you. Why don't we pray?" Laurel grabbed my hands and prayed, "Father, I ask You to bless Payton. Give her peace. We thank You for the forthcoming semester. Help us be a light to others. And selfishly I pray in the dating area. Help us there too."

I couldn't help but smile. The end of Laurel's prayer was silly, and I was truly thankful for a friend like her.

We were sitting in the stands watching the bowl game and Georgia was getting creamed by Michigan. It was the

fourth quarter and the score was 0–30. Tad hadn't been in the game. The other running back was getting all the playing time and losing for us horribly.

Finally, with three minutes left, the coach put Tad in the game. I screamed louder than anyone in the place when Tad ran forty-seven yards with the ball. When he got the ball a second time, he ran fifty-six yards and scored a touchdown.

Unfortunately we still lost 7–30, so there wasn't much to celebrate. But we headed down to where the football team was anyway.

"I can't wait to meet him," Robyn said.

My heart skipped a beat when Tad walked out of the locker room, but before I could get to him I was cut off by a girl wearing one of those football hostess outfits. It was Vonda. The hug he gave her deflated my joy. What was I thinking?

"You should at least say hello," Laurel said.

"I don't want to."

"Tad!" Robyn called out.

He came over to me and said, "How have you been?"

"OK. I've been in Conyers. My grandfather passed," I said as my eyes started tearing up.

He pulled me to him. No one embraced me like Tad did. In the midst of all he had going on, he put his world aside and truly felt my pain. We were both there crying, and I felt as if I was releasing all fears.