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Purity Reigns

Totally Free

Equally Yoked

Absolutely Worthy

Finally Sure

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**purity
reigns**

— s t e p h a n i e p e r r y m o o r e —

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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.

— L a u R e L —

— S H a D R a C H —

— S e R I e S —

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totally
free

— s t e P H a N I e P e R R Y m o o R e —

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d*ing dong!* 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.

— L a u r e l —
— S H a D R a C H —
— S e R I e s —

3

equally
yoked

— s t e P H a N I e P e R R Y m o O R e —

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beating the odds

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked away and thought about Foster McDowell.

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded. "We broke up this morning."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Branson smiled at her as she walked away.

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

“Oh, Laurel, it’s nothing like that.”

“And what is it like?”

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

“Why?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The teacher leered at us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked up at the principal.

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

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

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

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

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

“What's wrong with you?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, sure, yeah. I remember.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Whatever.”

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

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

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

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

“Branson, you should be at home resting.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— L a u R e L —

— S H a D R a C H —

— S e R I e S —

4

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recapping senior year

What was that?" I screamed, startled out of a deep slumber by a loud buzzing noise.

"It's your alarm," a mouse-pitched voice complained.

I smacked the snooze button on my bedside clock and stared at the blurry numbers in the darkness. Surely it wasn't four o'clock! I blinked several times and the numbers grew clearer, but they didn't change. *What was I thinking?* I buried my head in the pillow and tried to shake off my drowsiness enough to figure out where I was.

When the mouse-pitched voice said, "Go back to sleep," I realized the speaker was Payton Skky, my college roommate. Payton and I had tried to stay up all night chatting about the common bonds we shared, like our faith in Jesus Christ and the exciting freshman year awaiting us. But somewhere in the course of our conversation, we'd both fallen asleep.

I rolled onto my back, and for the first time I noticed an

amazing array of glittery glow-in-the-dark stars on my dorm room ceiling. I took that as a sign that God was watching over me in my transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Lord, I know You're up there, I thought. But I feel awfully insecure down here. I don't really know who I am anymore.

The confident part of me replied, *What are you talking about, Laurel Shadrach? You're an awesome girl with style and class and charisma. You're beautiful, brilliant, bubbly, and bright.*

The not-so-confident part of me said, *That's not me. It sounds more like Jewels, the girl on the other side of that wall. Or the sorority girls at the frat party last night. There's nothing special about me.*

Nonsense, I argued with myself. Think about where you've been. The experiences you went through during the past year have turned you into a dynamic person.

That was a good point, I had to admit. I had gone through a lot in a short time. As a high school senior, I was the top gymnast in the entire state of Georgia. I was expected to compete on the U.S. gymnastics team in the Olympics. But then I sprained my ankle and cost my team the championship.

As a senior, I'd had the boy every girl in my school wanted—Branson Price, the captain and starting quarterback of the football team. I'd been sure we'd stay together all year and that our relationship would only deepen after graduation. But when I refused to go all the way with him, he dumped me and turned to someone else—my best friend, Brittany Cox.

I went out with Foster McDowell for a while. He was a great Christian guy, and he treated me like a princess. But I couldn't stop thinking about my ex. We finally broke up but remained good friends.

The image of Brittany making out with Branson under the school stairs continued to bother me. That girl had everything. Money. A great body. She was on the cheerlead-

ing squad. I'd often envied her. And yet, she told me she hooked up with Branson because *she* wanted what I had.

Our friendship ended for a while, but then tragedy struck her life. An ex-boyfriend she used to mess with contracted AIDS. Most of my other friends thought it was perfect justice for Brittany and Branson since they hurt me so badly. But God softened my heart toward both of them, and our friendships started to mend.

When Branson's AIDS tests came back negative, he pleaded for my forgiveness and begged me to be his girlfriend again. But I told him he had to stand on his own and so did I. We both made it into the University of Georgia, but I was determined to start a new life without him.

Brittany wasn't as fortunate as Branson. Her AIDS test was positive. She thought at first that was the end for her. But I helped her through that rough time, encouraging her to look to God for purpose and meaning in her life. She applied to the University of Florida and was accepted. I wondered if she was lying on her dorm room bed thinking about me.

I drifted off to sleep but was again rudely awakened by my alarm. Snooze time was over.

I needed to get to the gym and practice if I hoped to earn a spot on the Gym Dawgs gymnastics team.

I crawled out of bed and tiptoed to the small refrigerator in the corner of our room, my mouth watering for the chocolate milk I'd seen Payton put in the night before, along with sodas and snacks and—

"What?" I cried out when I saw the refrigerator was empty.

"What's wrong?" Payton screamed, sitting up in her bed.

"Sorry I woke you," I said. "But I wanted to have a quick breakfast before practice."

Payton fell back into her mattress with a moan.

"Where's all our stuff?" I asked before she could go back to sleep.

“I think Jewels took it all,” Payton snarled as she punched her pillow.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because she saw me loading the fridge,” Payton said. “And because it sounds like something she’d do.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I’d only known Jewels for a few days, but she reminded me a lot of my spoiled high school girlfriend, Brittany. Both girls were demanding, self-centered, sneaky, and beautiful. Jewels’s dorm room was connected to ours by an adjoining bathroom, and I’d often heard her use some pretty untactful persuasion on her roommate, Anna.

Anna was a shy, self-conscious Catholic girl with curly strawberry-blonde hair and a sweet personality. She had a cute face and a somewhat plump body that Jewels commented about far too often.

What bothered me even more than Jewels’s treatment of poor Anna was the way she talked about my roommate, Payton. Just because Payton was black, Jewels had told me I should request a different roommate, claiming it might affect my ability to get into a good sorority. Jewels’s prejudiced remarks, both in front of Payton and behind her back, made me want to yell at her or ignore her. But I knew the Lord wanted me to love her, and I was doing my best to try.

“So, where can I get some nourishment at this hour?” I asked, noticing that my bedside clock said it was almost five.

“Vending machine’s down the hall,” Payton whispered with a yawn.

I grabbed three quarters out of my jeans pocket, put on my gym clothes, and walked to the vending machine. When I got there I noticed that it only offered sodas, and they cost a dollar.

“What a rip-off!” I started to head back to my room for another quarter, then decided to continue on to the gym to start my early practice.

The halls were quiet, everyone else still sleeping. I envied them in a way. But I knew it would take extra effort to make the University of Georgia gymnastics team, and I was determined to do whatever it took, even if that meant starting practice before anyone else was up.

As I approached the gym, I noticed the door was ajar and lights were on inside. I peeked in.

Someone else had beat me to an early start! I checked my watch. It wasn't even five-thirty.

I stood in the doorway and watched the girl work the parallel bars. She was awesome! Her routine looked flawless. Every move was filled with grace and confidence.

When she dismounted, landing perfectly, I could not believe my eyes. It was my favorite gymnast, Nadia Rhodenhauser. For years I had watched her compete nationally. I knew she was a college freshman, like me, but I didn't know she'd decided to go to the University of Georgia.

She looked shorter in person, even shorter than I, and I was five-feet-five. She probably wore a size three. Seeing her in her Olympics leotard made me long for the day I would wear one just like it.

Nadia was the best gymnast in the nation during eleventh grade, winning the gold medal at the Olympics. In her senior year she won the silver, and Marci Lotts, a girl I'd heard was coming to UG, snagged the gold.

"Are you just going to gawk, or do you want to come in and practice?" Nadia asked with a grin.

"Oh," I said, embarrassed that she'd caught me staring. "I came to work out. I just didn't want to disturb you."

She wiped her face with a towel from her gym bag and reached out to shake my hand. "Hi. I'm Nadia Rhodenhauser."

"I know," I said. "I've watched you for years. When you won the gold medal in the Olympics, I felt like it was my medal, too, in a way."

Nadia chuckled. Her eyes were the prettiest blue I'd ever

seen. She'd pulled her curly blonde hair into a ponytail, but most of it had escaped after her vigorous workout. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Laurel Shadrach."

"That sounds familiar."

"I've been in gymnastics since I was in the fourth grade," I said, excited that she might have heard of me. "I went to state competitions with Rockdale Gym and was captain of the Salem High School team."

"I remember you now," she said. "I went to see you at the regionals last year, but you weren't there."

I rolled my eyes. "I sprained my ankle two weeks before the meet!"

"How awful," she said, her eyes soft with compassion. "Are you planning to try out for the team here?"

"I'm hoping to walk on and maybe get a scholarship next year."

"That's great."

Suddenly I wondered if I'd made the right decision. I knew I was nowhere near as good as Nadia Rhodenhauser. How could I compete with her for a spot on the team? Still, if I did make it, what a dream come true that would be!

"Hey, you want a sports drink?" she asked, walking to a vending machine in the corner.

"Sure do," I said, noticing all the nutritious snacks and drinks for sale. "But I've only got seventy-five cents on me."

"No problem," she said. "My treat." She stuffed some change into the machine, and out popped two bottles. She handed one to me.

"I'll buy next time," I offered.

"You've got a deal," she replied.

We sat on a mat to quench our thirst. "What time does the gym open?" I asked.

"Six," she said. "But I get here at four. The janitor lets me in."

I almost choked on my drink. I'd never gotten up before 4 A.M. in my life! "I heard you were going to UCLA," I said.

Nadia smiled. "You really have followed my career." She took a sip. "I did plan on UCLA originally. Most of the girls I've worked with are going there. But Coach Burrows kept trying to recruit me. So, just to be different, I decided to come here."

She finished her last gulp and asked if I'd spot her on the mats. I agreed without hesitation.

She did a tumbling routine that left me breathless and amazed. Her talent was even more impressive in person than on TV.

"Wow," I said. "I still can't believe you're . . . here. And that I'm . . . talking to you." I was tripping all over my words like a groupie. She may not have been a big celebrity to most people, but there wasn't a movie star on the planet I would rather have met.

"I'm just another college freshman like you," she said.

"But you're so . . . good."

"You can be as good as I am," she assured me. "You just have to believe it . . . and practice."

Her words made me realize I hadn't even started working out yet. I began my stretching exercises.

"I didn't want to compete with my former teammates anyway," Nadia confided as she stretched along with me. "They stabbed me in the back."

"What did they do?"

"Two of the girls I worked out with for years were jealous of my boyfriend," she began. "So they made up stories, telling him I was seeing another guy on our gymnastics team. They even went so far as to send him a picture of me kissing the guy."

"How did they get that?"

"After a meet, I gave the guy a congratulations kiss. I tried to explain that to my boyfriend, but he didn't want to hear me out. He apologized later, but when I realized he

couldn't trust me, I lost interest in him. I couldn't get close with my girlfriends after that."

Her story reminded me so much of what Brittany and Branson had done to me. I opened up and told her all the details of my senior year fiasco.

"So, when your boyfriend cheated on you, did you get a new one?" she asked.

"Sure did." I giggled. "I dated a Christian guy named Foster for a while."

"Wait a minute," she said, a smile tugging at her lips. "Are you a Christian?"

"Yes," I said. "Are you?"

"Yes!" She wrapped her arms around me and gave me a tight hug. "It's so great to meet a sister in the Lord."

I had heard Nadia give credit to God after a televised meet, and I'd read her testimony in *Gymnastics World*. But I was happy to confirm that her beliefs were real.

"So, are you still seeing that Christian guy?" she asked.

"No," I admitted.

"How come?"

I took a deep breath. For some reason, it felt perfectly natural to share all the secrets of my past with this girl. "I left my first boyfriend because he pressured me to have sex with him, and it really turned me off. But for some reason, when I found a guy who didn't pressure me, I wanted to jump his bones. It was the craziest thing."

"I understand," she said with a nod.

When I started telling Nadia about the shooting that happened at my school, she said she'd heard about it on the news.

"Well," I said, "my brother was the main target, and the shooter held me at gunpoint too."

She gasped.

"In a way, it turned out to be a good thing."

"How?"

"When I thought my life might be over, I figured out

what I really wanted,” I told her. “In that moment I realized that Foster didn’t have my heart. I was still in love with my ex-boyfriend, Branson.”

“Did you get back together with him?” Nadia asked.

“Not right away. I’d already promised Foster I’d go to the prom with him. But at the dance, Branson saw me with him, and he lost it. He had too much to drink and went joyriding with his best friend, Bo. Their car went over a cliff and Bo became paralyzed.”

“Oh, no!” she cried, her eyes wide.

“That actually turned out to be kind of a good thing too. Bo came to know Christ because of that ordeal.”

“Wow,” she whispered. “I thought my high school years were crazy, just going from fifth to first to second in gymnastics.”

“I wish that was my only problem.” I laughed. “I don’t even know if I’m going to make the team here.”

She smiled. “I’m going to pray that you do.”

“Really?” I squealed. “That’d be great!”

“I’d also like to help you out with some gymnastics tips I’ve learned,” she told me. She nodded at the balance beam. “How are you on the beam?”

“It’s my favorite apparatus,” I said.

“Great,” she said. “Show me what you’ve got.”

I approached the beam and gave it my best shot. When I dismounted, Nadia Rhodenhauser actually applauded me.

As she showed me some moves on the vault, we chatted some more. She told me she was an only child. Her mother had worked three jobs for as long as Nadia could remember, since her dad had walked out on them shortly after Nadia was born.

When she was sixteen, her dad suddenly came back into her life. At first she was reluctant to trust him, but he showed up at every meet she’d had over the last two years, and gradually a bond developed between them.

Her parents fought constantly whenever they were

around each other. Nadia had figured she was the reason they'd broken up, so she tried really hard to bring them back together. But nothing worked.

"Coach Gailey and his wife were my saving grace," Nadia told me as we rested between routines. "They introduced me to Jesus Christ, and they provided me with a stability I never knew at home."

At Nadia's urging, we worked on a complex tumbling trick. Finally I collapsed on the mat, unable to move. Nadia performed a routine on the uneven bars and gave me a grin.

"Now I know why I'm not as good as you," I teased.

"You can be," she said, "if you really want it."

"I do," I assured her.

"Then keep practicing," she advised.

"Want to work out together tomorrow?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "Four o'clock?"

I gulped. Then I said, "I'll be here."

We hugged, then went our separate ways to get ready for class.

When I walked back into the dorm room, Payton was standing there, dripping wet, a towel wrapped around her. Her caramel-colored skin glowed, and her curly, shoulder-length brown hair sparkled with water droplets. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"Practicing," I reminded her as I went to the closet to pick out clothes for the day.

"You're sweaty," she said. "You want some water?" She strode to the refrigerator. When she opened the door, I saw a row of bottled water on the shelf.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked as she pulled one out.

"I had a talk with Jewels this morning. She admitted to stealing all our drinks, and since she had tons of water in her fridge, I made her give me half." She opened the bottle and handed it to me.

“Thanks for being such a good roommate,” I said after taking a long drink.

“No biggie.”

“No, I really appreciate it.”

“I’m going to go get dressed,” she said.

When she went into the bathroom, I dropped to my knees on the hardwood floor. *Lord, I’m worried about my future. I feel so frail. I need Your strength, Your power, Your guidance. Help me see what I need to do. I want to go forward and not look back. Take over my thoughts and make them positive, fresh, and righteous. Guide my actions. Make me stand for You in all I say and do, and help me to be an example for those who are trying to live Your way. Help me to lead people to You.*

My knees started to hurt, and I considered ending my prayer there. Instead I reached for a pillow, placed it under my knees, and continued.

Thank You for Payton. And for Jewels and Anna. I pray for Nadia and for my parents. I pray for Branson and Foster too. When I start acting more like a person of the world than a child of Yours, help me get back to putting You first. Thank You for showing me what I’ve done wrong and what I did that was right. I’m looking forward to being a freshman here at the University of Georgia. I’m no longer recapping senior year.

— L a U R E L —
— S H A D R A C H —
— S E R I E S —

5

finally
sure

— s t e p h a n i e p e r r y m o o r e —

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wanting only peace

it was such a joy being back in Conyers, Georgia, for the holidays. I loved college, but sometimes I missed being at home with my family.

“I am so in love with You, Lord,” I said to the dimly lit sky as I leaped up off the frozen ground in front of my parents’ home. It was Christmas Eve and I was going to be happy even though my life wasn’t perfect.

I had just heard the news that my paternal grandfather had had a stroke. I didn’t have a boyfriend. I knew I probably wouldn’t make my college gymnastics team. But none of that really mattered.

I did want my grandfather to be OK, of course, especially since he wasn’t saved. His salvation was really important to me, so I prayed that Granddad Shadrach would receive God into his heart.

It had taken eighteen and a half years, but I was finally

getting to the place where I was comfortable with myself and satisfied with my relationship with the Lord.

As a cold breeze played with my long brown hair, I started dancing in the snow. Come what may, I knew I didn't have to fear anything because I was a child of the King. I could practically hear God's voice in the wind, telling me He loved me.

"Yes, Lord," I shouted, letting the cold air kiss my face. "I love You too!"

Although I was by myself, I was not dancing alone. God was twirling me in His arms.

As the howling wind whisked me around, I felt the Lord saying to me, *I'm so proud of you, Laurel. This last year and a half has been tough. But I'm here. I love you. I love all the people in the world. Make sure you share that with everyone you know.*

My friends sure did need the Lord. All of them were going through some sort of drama. My best friend, Brittany, had been HIV positive for almost a year. She seemed to have the disease under control, though, and I hoped things would remain that way. Meagan, my other close high school buddy, had recently learned she was pregnant and decided to take a semester off to have the baby. Robyn, my African-American friend, was depressed about having had an abortion, and she wanted to change schools to be near Jackson Reid, her aborted baby's father. I thought her reason for changing colleges was a bad one, but I prayed her transition would be smooth.

My family was in chaos too. My dad, who was a pastor and a really cool guy, was upset about his father dying of cancer, especially since Granddad didn't know the Lord. My dad had been kinda taking things out on my mom, which really bothered me.

The older two of my three brothers, Liam and Lance, were still mad at each other over my friend Meagan, whom they had both dated for a while.

Liam, who was a year younger than me, was very talented.

He loved music and led the church youth band. Liam's biggest problem was that he was judgmental. He thought he was almost as perfect as God. Not!

Lance, who was a year younger than Liam, was a ladies' man. Or so he wished. He was actually a sports jock and sort of a hothead, always starting brawls.

My youngest brother, Luke, had been a computer geek all his life. After he started high school a year ago, he became cooler. But that was leading to a whole different set of problems.

With all the difficulties of my friends and family weighing on my heart, I had decided to come outside to be alone with God, to let Him know how I felt and seek guidance from Him.

As I listened to His response in my spirit, I knew He was telling me that I had to trust Him. I needed to always be satisfied with Him. He wanted me to have peace in my heart, even if there wasn't peace in my circumstances.

That's what I longed for too. I didn't want to let the crazy world dictate my life. I could be peaceful if I kept my eyes on the Lord. I could be the calm center in a tornado, a light in darkness.

At that moment I felt so close to God, I wanted to remember this night with Him always.

Lord, I love You so much! And I know You love me. All I need is You. Please don't let me forget that. When the storms come, and I know they will, help me stay calm. Let me carry You with me always.

When I stepped back inside the house, I heard my three brothers arguing. I couldn't tell what they were upset about. But as soon as I walked into their room, their verbal disagreement turned into a physical fight.

Liam and Lance started rolling around on the floor like idiots. Luke just stood there watching.

"What's going on in here?" I asked my youngest brother.

"We were all talking about how none of us wants to go

to Granddad and Grandma's house, and it turned into this." Luke stepped out of the way as our wrestling brothers came crashing toward us.

"Stop it, y'all," I hollered.

Lance and Liam acted like they hadn't even heard me. They just pulled each other up off the floor and started pounding on each other.

I turned to Luke. "Help me break this up." I tried to pry the fighters apart, but Lance shoved me to the side. I landed on my bottom with a thud.

Luke grabbed his brothers' shoulders and tried to push them apart. "They're like glue," he shouted over the racket.

Finally my parents marched into the room. Luke slipped out as quiet as a shadow. Liam and Lance stopped fighting as soon as they noticed Mom and Dad standing in the doorway, both with their arms crossed.

My mother demanded to know what was going on. Liam stared at the floor, his left eye all red and puffy. Lance tried to hold his ripped shirt closed. Obviously, neither one wanted to answer Mom's question.

I decided to spill the beans for them. "They don't want to go to Arkansas for Christmas."

I wished we didn't have to make the ten-hour drive, either, but we'd done it every year since we moved to Georgia five years ago. When we were younger, the trip had been fun. But now that we each had our own life, we all preferred spending our time hanging out with friends.

Mom glared at Dad. "This is all your fault. I told you the kids didn't want to go to your parents' house this year, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"What are we supposed to do?" my dad said, raising his palms. "We obviously can't leave them here, not with the way they're acting."

Mom gently touched Dad's shoulder. "Dave," she said softly, "I don't see why the boys have to go if they don't want to."

“We’re all going and that’s final,” my dad said. Then he stomped down the hall, with Mom right behind him.

My dad’s stern voice sent shock waves through me. He usually referred to my mother with some term of affection like honey, sweetie, or baby. I almost never heard him yell at her.

“It’s gonna be a great trip,” I mumbled.

Liam stalked down the hall to the bathroom and slammed the door. Lance jumped on his bed and turned his back to me. Clearly there wasn’t anything I could do at that moment to resolve this mess. So I went to my room and knelt by my bed.

Being light in darkness is really hard sometimes, Lord, I prayed. Please show me how to respond as You would.

That night, I dreamed about Charlie, my college library partner whom I’d grown fond of. In the dream, he and I were running away from a bunch of enormous dinosaurs. The T-Rex was gaining on us when an angry voice startled me awake.

“Why didn’t you pack all that stuff last night?” my dad roared from his bedroom. “I guess I have to do everybody’s job around here.”

It was only two in the morning. *What is going on with my father?* I wondered.

I knew some ministers acted one way in church and a different way in the world, but with my dad, what you saw in church was always what you got.

I’d noticed a change in him lately, though. Something was wrong. I wondered if he was even more worried than I was about his father’s physical and spiritual health.

Within a few moments, everyone in the house was rushing around getting ready to leave. My dad was yelling and pouting about his schedule being off. Personally, I didn’t see why we had to leave so early. A few hours later wouldn’t have made much difference, it seemed to me.

I could tell my mother was mad, as I saw her roll her eyes and bite her bottom lip. But she didn't disagree with him. She simply finished packing.

I wasn't sure I agreed with the way my mom just went along with whatever my dad wanted. If the Lord ever allowed me to be someone's wife, the whole submission thing would be a gray area for me. Where was my mom's backbone? Where was her strength?

When I got my own suitcase packed, I carried it downstairs and dropped it near the front door, then went into the kitchen, where Mom was packing a cooler with ice.

Remember, you're a light, my heart said. Be a light to your mom.

"Need help?" I asked.

She stopped and gave me a big hug. "The cooler's all filled," she said after our embrace. "Can you check on the boys, see if they're ready?"

"Sure."

As I went back upstairs, I said a silent prayer for my dad. He had never reacted to stress so crazily before. Then again, his father had never been severely ill before. If my dad ever had a stroke, who knew how I'd react. Since I wasn't walking in his shoes, I couldn't judge how he was wearing them.

An hour later, we were all in the van. Dad still looked mad, but he'd stopped yelling, so my brothers and I went back to sleep.

When I woke up, Liam was in the driver's seat. His swollen eye had turned black, red, and purple.

We pulled into McDonald's at our usual halfway point a little after 8 A.M. Unfortunately, we still had five more hours to go. After using the restroom and getting some breakfast, we continued to drive west.

When we finally arrived in Arkansas, we went straight to the hospital. My father had called ahead to see how Granddad was doing and what room he was in.

A nurse at the reception desk told us only three visitors at a time were allowed, and Grandma was already in there. So my brothers and I waited in the lobby while our parents took off down the hall.

I stared at the light blue walls, the magazines on the tables, and the small television in one corner near the ceiling. Lance and Liam sat in a couple of plastic chairs near the TV, and Luke sprawled out on a small couch in the opposite corner. Before I could decide where I wanted to sit, I heard my grandpa's voice.

"Why did you let them come out here? I'm fine, I tell you! Why do you always have to mess up everything?"

A nurse left her station and scurried down the hall. As she entered a room, I saw my grandma coming out. Her face was white and tears streamed down her cheeks. She fled down the hall, past the lobby, and continued along the corridor.

My brothers and I stared at one another. Then I took off in the direction Grandma had run. When I reached the end of the hall, I looked left and right. No sign of my grandmother. I went right for a while, but didn't see her, so I backtracked.

I finally found her in the chapel. She was sitting in the front pew facing the altar, her head in her hands. I tiptoed down the aisle and stood beside her, stroking her back. Her head remained bowed, and I heard her sniffing.

I sat beside her. *Lord, what am I supposed to say?*

The chapel door opened. We both turned around. My dad stood in the doorway. "Come on, Laurel," he said, his voice strained. "We're going to Grandma's. Granddad doesn't want us here."

I looked at my grandma and saw tears in her eyes.

"Mom, we'll see you back at the house," Dad muttered.

Hesitantly, I left my grandma's side. When I got to the door of the chapel, I turned around and saw my grandmother kneeling at the altar, praying softly.

It was Christmas Day. All I wanted was to give my grandfather a hug, make sure he knew Jesus, go to my grandparents' house, eat a big family meal, and thank God for sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for my sins. But it sure wasn't working out that way, and there was nothing I could do about it.

We all piled back into the van. My father drove with an angry expression on his face. My mother sat in the passenger seat looking sad. My brothers acted as if they would rather be anywhere else in the world.

"We didn't have to leave the hospital," my mom said to my dad in a soft, concerned voice.

"With my father carrying on the way he was, I didn't see any point in staying," Dad said. "We drove all this way and he told us to get out. We just have to let him cool off. We'll be at the house when he's ready to talk to us."

"But your mother needed us," Mom persisted, "and we just left her there."

Dad sighed. "Laura, these are my parents, and I've got to handle this the way I see fit."

My mother's lips tightened and she stared out the window.

"I can't believe my father was fussing at my mom like that," Dad grumbled.

"Why not?" Lance rebutted angrily. "You're fussing at Mom."

Dad swerved the van to the side of the road, slammed on the brakes, and turned around. "I am tired of your smart mouth, young man, and I'm sick of your defiant behavior."

"Just following your lead, Dad," Lance said. "Look in the mirror before you come after me."

I leaned slightly left, figuring my father was going to take a swing at Lance and maybe get me on the way by. But he just sat there, staring at his son. After several deep breaths, Dad turned back around, put the car into drive, and took off down the road.

I reached over to hold my brother's hand, but he yanked it away.

With three generations of Shadrach men filled with rage, and no one sympathizing with one another, I knew somehow, some way, that cycle had to be broken. It was Christmas, after all. And this family definitely needed the Savior.

Lord, I wondered, how can this be fixed?

I wished I was back at college. I wanted to talk to Charlie, the sweet, mysterious guy I'd met in the library. He really seemed to understand me. Nothing romantic was going on between us, although I wondered if our friendship might turn into something more. I missed him and wished he was there beside me so I could tell him what was going on and he could give me some good Christian advice.

I didn't even know his real name, and he didn't know mine. The first time we met, we'd given each other pet names—Charlie and Lucy, after the *Peanuts* comic-strip characters—and the names had stuck.

I remembered dancing with the Lord the night before, confident that God was all I needed. I knew I had to have His help to get through this mess with my family.

I took the box of tissues off the seat beside me and handed it to my mother. She accepted it with a smile that let me know hope was around the corner. God had His eye on my family. I just had to stay calm in the midst of the storm. I needed to trust in Him.

My mom's parents lived a few miles away from my dad's folks, so Dad dropped us off at my maternal grandparents' house and then took off. We were welcomed with open arms and big hugs from my grandmother, my grandfather, and my Aunt Sara, Mom's only sister.

As I looked around my grandparents' house, I noticed my Aunt Sara's furniture mixed in with the things I was

used to seeing there. The old rocking chair still stood in the usual corner of the living room, but cardboard boxes were scattered around it. My aunt's six-piece set of Gucci luggage sat near the doorway, and my cousin's CD collection was stacked up behind Grandma's antique couch.

I sat on the couch and grabbed the gray afghan off the back. As always, it gave me a cozy feeling inside.

After my brothers went to the back room to wash up for dinner, my grandmother sat beside me. "Laurel, dear," she said, patting my knee, "it's so good to see you."

"Why are Aunt Sara's things here?" I asked.

"She and the girls are staying with us." The seriousness in her voice made me think my aunt was there for more than just the holidays.

I had two cousins on my mom's side. Simone was seventeen, a year younger than me. She had big hazel eyes and long blonde hair. She was sarcastic and outspoken, could never keep a secret, and loved to start arguments.

Rebecca, on the other hand, was polite and sweet. She was nineteen, a year older than me, a sophomore at Arkansas. She was incredibly beautiful with long honey-blond hair and bright blue eyes.

"I know you and Simone don't always get along," my grandmother said, "but I don't want you to fuss at her this visit. Their family is going through a tough time right now." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Sara's getting a divorce."

My heart practically leaped out of my chest. I felt like part of my insides were sliding away.

Grandma gave me a hug and then went out to the kitchen to start getting dinner on the table. As I walked into the family room, I saw Becca and Simone sitting on a love seat watching TV. I wanted to ask them about their parents' divorce. But I decided to keep my nose in my own business and went to the bathroom to wash my hands.

We all gathered around the dinner table, the parents and

grandparents at one end and my brothers, cousins, and I at the other. Every person there seemed to have a sad look on his or her face. But the spread my grandmother had prepared smelled heavenly. I hoped the turkey and side dishes would brighten everyone's spirits.

The dinner conversation was light at first. Our grandparents got updates on how we all were doing. Not wanting to worry them, I only shared my high points. They were glad to hear my transition to college had been a smooth one.

While the conversation continued at the far end of the dining table, Becca whispered to me, "Where's your dad?"

"I'm not sure," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "He's been pretty moody lately. Hopefully he went somewhere to cool off."

Simone's lips curled into a smirk. "Hey, maybe your parents will split up like ours."

I felt like snapping at her. But I remembered Grandma's warning not to fuss with her. So I concentrated on my food and ignored her hurtful words.

"Weekend visitation is actually pretty cool," Simone said as she took a second helping of mashed potatoes. "Dad always takes us to the mall. He never did that when he lived with us."

Becca tossed back her hair. "Come on, Simone. You know you don't want her parents to end up like ours."

While I listened to my cousins argue, I prayed that whatever was causing their parents to break up would reverse itself before the divorce became final.

At the far end of the table, I heard my mother saying encouraging words to her sister. I was proud of my mom. In the midst of her own strife, she was still compassionate toward others. My mom was one unselfish lady.

The doorbell rang, and my grandfather got up to answer it. When I saw my dad standing at the door, I jumped up and ran toward him.

“Son,” I heard my grandfather say sternly, “I have never interfered in your marriage. But this afternoon my baby came to my house in tears. Now, you need to take care of her properly.”

“You’re right, sir,” my father said, his voice filled with remorse. “I’m sorry.”

My grandfather shook my dad’s hand and stepped back so he could enter the house. When my dad saw me, he hugged me. Then I returned to my seat.

My dad was a proud man, but he never minded admitting when he was wrong. He came into the dining room, apologized for interrupting our dinner, and looked into my mom’s eyes. “I’m sorry for being such a jerk,” he said right in front of everybody. “Please forgive me, honey.”

Mom immediately rose and hugged my father.

Dad glanced at our end of the table. “Kids, I owe you an apology too. You were right, Lance. I was mad at my father for doing something I was guilty of myself. I was so agitated and frustrated, I couldn’t see it. Thanks for helping me realize that I was wrong.”

My brothers and I cheered.

My father sat next to my mom and she fixed him a plate. “Dad’s out of the hospital,” he announced, “and he’d really like to see all of us.”

We rejoiced at Granddad’s change of heart. After dinner was over, we said good-bye to Aunt Sara and her daughters and hopped back into the car.

When we got to my other grandparents’ house, we all scrambled inside and embraced my grandma. My dad’s father called us to his room. My parents and I went back while my brothers waited in the living room with Grandma.

I found my grandpa propped up in bed, watching television in his pajamas. Since he’d only had a light stroke, he looked almost like his usual self, just a little paler and tired.

He picked up the remote, clicked off the program, and looked each of us in the eye. “Saying I’m sorry isn’t my cup

of tea,” he stammered. “But I want you guys to know I’m happy you’re here.” He gave a small chuckle. “I’m glad I’m still here too.”

We all hugged him and told him how much we loved him. Then Granddad said, “Y’all go back to the family room and enjoy the holiday.”

My folks squeezed his hand and cleared out, but I couldn’t leave. I just stood there staring at my grandfather. His life had been spared, but what if his time to go was just around the corner? If he didn’t ask the Lord to come into his heart before he died, he’d be going to hell. I needed to tell him that.

“Pudding Pie,” he said, trying to keep the mood light, “I know you want to talk to me about God, and I love you for caring about me. But I’m an old man, set in my ways.”

“Granddad, you’re alive,” I said, tears stinging my eyes. I hoped he realized that the Lord had spared his life. “You still have a chance to accept the Lord. Don’t wait till it’s too late.”

He rubbed my hand. “I’m too tired to argue with you right now. But I’m OK, believe me. Now get out there with the rest of the family.”

I kissed him on the forehead and sulked out of the room. It hurt to leave him without having him accept Christ.

I trudged back to the living room and found my brothers and my dad watching TV. My mother and Grandma were in the kitchen making apple pie. As I took a whiff of the delectable aroma, I felt God’s presence and peace.

My dad saw me in the hallway and waved me over to him. Smiling, I sat beside him on the couch. He took my hand. “I overheard you in there witnessing to your grandpa. Don’t be discouraged, honey. The Lord’s working in his heart.”

“I know,” I said quietly.

“I’m really proud of you, Laurel,” he said. “You love God and you don’t care who knows it.”

My mom came in and sat with us. Dad gave her a big kiss. It was sweet seeing them all romantic.

During dessert, my brothers were so nice to one another, it was like nothing bad had happened. After we ate our fill, the whole family gathered around the piano to sing Christmas carols.

As I sang, I realized my dad was right. Things weren't the way I wanted them to be, but they were good. This was the anniversary of the day Christ was born, and that was something to celebrate. I also had close family who would help me weather any storm.

Our family didn't open any presents that night. But we all had the gift of happiness. At the end of the day, all was well in the Shadrach family. I thanked the Lord for that. He had given me the best gift I could ever receive. For the last twenty-four hours I had been wanting only peace.