



contents

Acknowledgments	9
1. Wanting Only Peace	11
2. Hoping in Him	25
3. Trying to Adapt	38
4. Being Totally Dismissed	49
5. Standing Really Tall	58
6. Feeling Really Special	68
7. Dreaming Isn't Bad	77
8. Being a Light	84
9. Accepting God's Will	94
10. Possessing True Joy	103
11. Resting and Relaxing	112
12. Helping Them Out	120
13. Releasing the Pressure	132
14. Mending Broken Hearts	143
15. Knowing I'm Blessed	153



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.

t w o



hoping in Him

after the interesting Christmas Day with my family in Arkansas, I was happy to get back home. I looked forward to having a few days to relax before going back to my dorm at UGA. As I lay in my cozy bed, the ringing of my phone startled me. Payton's frazzled voice on the line startled me even more.

"Why are you crying?" I asked her.

She was sobbing so much she couldn't speak.

"Please tell me what's wrong. You're scaring me."

"I'm here in Conyers," she finally choked out. "I haven't left to go back to school yet."

"Is everything OK?"

"My family's ripped apart," she said. "Our head is gone."

I didn't know if I'd heard her wrong or if she was crying so much that I couldn't follow her. She might have been talking slang that I didn't understand. See, Payton was a sweet black girl who loved God and loved life. Hearing her

down made me know something had to be really wrong with my strong friend.

“I was the last person who talked to him,” Payton went on. “He was here and now he’s not. I mean, it’s a good thing to know you’re going to heaven, but this is too much.”

“Your father’s gone?” I asked, trembling. I’d be hurt deeply if I lost my dad, even though I knew the Lord would help me get through it.

“Not my father,” Payton explained. “His dad.”

I could easily imagine Granddad passing away after visiting him at the hospital. “I’m sorry,” I said. “But your grandfather was a strong Christian. So even though he’s absent from the body, he’s present with the Lord.”

“But, Laurel, he’s gone.” Her deep sobs told me my words hadn’t been much comfort to her.

“I know,” I said, wishing I could hug her. “But he’s in a much better place. He wouldn’t come back here if he could. You’re going to see him again. And when we all get to heaven, I’ll get to meet him too.”

She paused. “I don’t know how I’m gonna get through his funeral.”

I clutched the phone. “God will get you through it. I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thanks, Laurel. You’re a good friend.”

“When is the service?” I asked.

“This afternoon.”

I heard someone call Payton’s name and she said she had to go, so she told me quickly where and when the service would be held, then we hung up.

I went downstairs to my dad’s study to see if he would go to the funeral with me. When I saw him pacing and reading, rehearsing for Sunday’s sermon, I lingered in the doorway. He’d been swamped ever since we returned from Arkansas, so I didn’t want to disturb him.

My father stopped pacing when he realized I was in the room. “What do you need, honey?”

“Nothing urgent,” I said. “I can talk to you later when you’re not so busy.”

He put down his sermon notes. “I always have time for you.” He pointed to a chair and took a seat behind his desk. “What’s going on?”

My dad could always tell when I needed to speak to him about something important. I rushed around his desk and hugged him tight. I wanted my dad to know he meant a lot to me.

“What’s that for?” he asked as we let go of the embrace.

Tears came to my eyes. “Payton’s grandfather . . .”

“He passed?” my dad guessed.

I wiped my eyes with my hands. “Yeah.”

“Where does Payton’s grandmother live?”

“Here in Conyers.” I fell into the mahogany chair on the opposite side of his desk.

“Are you going to the funeral?”

“I want to.” I wished this was all a bad dream. “But I’d rather not go alone.”

“I’ll go with you.”

I stared at him. “But you’re so busy.”

With a warm smile, he said, “I’ll make the time.”

A few hours later I was sitting in a small Baptist church with my hand clasped firmly in my dad’s. I couldn’t believe he was able to come with me on such short notice, but he kept his word and made the time. I was thankful he was there.

Payton’s family took up the first five pews on both sides of the church. Payton sat on the front pew with her head held high, so she appeared to have outer strength. She looked around to see who was in the crowd. When she saw me, I smiled, and she smiled back through her tears.

The mood was sad but not without hope. Payton’s grandfather’s heart was right with God, so we knew he was in a better place.

I wanted desperately to tell my grandfather one more time what Jesus had done for him. He needed to accept Christ into his heart so He could wash his sins away.

As I watched Payton's grandfather's body lying in an open casket in the front of the church, I felt God confirming to my heart, *He's with Me, Laurel. Tell Payton her grandfather is with Me.*

A choir sang "Precious Lord," then the pastor gave a sermon.

"We weep today because we are saddened by the departure of a loved one," the pastor said. "But this man accepted Jesus as his Savior, and he is now sitting next to God in heaven, happier than he ever was here on earth. He encouraged people to keep the faith. He knew God could heal wounded hearts."

As the pallbearers pushed the coffin into the hearse, I hurried to Payton's side and hugged her tight. "Don't worry. Your grandfather's with God. He's happy, so take comfort in that."

"Thanks," Payton said. She embraced me, then joined her family.

Two of my best friends from high school, Brittany and Meagan, stopped by my house the next morning. We sat in my room and chatted, mostly about Meagan's unwanted pregnancy. She had decided to give the child up for adoption. But Brittany thought that was a bad idea.

"I don't see how you can just give up your baby," my pretty blonde friend said as she sat on my bed.

Meagan lay beside Brittany with her hand behind her head. "At least I didn't get an abortion. Giving my baby to strangers is better than ending his life."

I sat beside Meagan and glared at Brittany. "Meagan's right. She made a mistake, but she's trying to do the right thing. She's willing to make a sacrifice so her child can have

a better life than she can give it. You've done bad things in your life, too, and I'm not perfect either. We've all made mistakes. Let's be there for her."

Brittany gave me an angry frown. "What happens when the kid hunts Meagan down one day and asks, 'Mom, how could you just give me up to people you didn't even know? Didn't you love me? How could you do that? Didn't you care?'"

"I'm sure my child will ask me those questions one day," Meagan said, holding her head high. "If he . . . or she . . . ever . . . finds me." She rolled over and shoved her face into the pillow. "Oh, what am I doing?"

I touched her trembling shoulder. "You're putting your baby in God's hands. Bethany Christian Services will find a wonderful family for your baby. My dad says they're excellent."

Sighing, Meagan sat up. "You're right. I can let God be there for my baby."

"I'm sorry, Meagan," Brittany said. "I didn't mean to make you sad."

"It's OK," Meagan said, taking Brittany's hand. "I know you had my best interest at heart."

Brittany sprang to her feet. "I've got a great idea. Let's go somewhere fun to eat, then come back here, and I'll paint your fingernails and toes."

Brittany always had her nails done at a salon, so offering to do our nails at home was her way of saying she was sorry. When tears fell from Meagan's eyes, I knew she was accepting Brittany's support.

"You're my hero," Brittany said, hugging Meagan.

"I love you," Meagan responded.

Brittany apologized to Meagan probably fifty more times that afternoon. I knew that Brittany finally understood this whole thing when she said God was in our midst doing a great work by cleaning up the mess we'd made along the way. She talked about her own life and said she was glad the

AIDS virus had been detected early. She'd changed her lifestyle from being promiscuous to abiding by the Lord's wishes, taking her medication daily, getting a lot of exercise, and starting to think positively.

Meagan said she was glad she could bless a family somewhere with her baby. I admired her strength to place the child's needs above her own.

I began thinking about my high school boyfriend Branson and how I'd let him go a little too far with me. Now I was starting to have romantic feelings about the guy I'd met in the library. The guy I called Charlie was cute, funny, and intelligent. But I didn't know if he felt the same way about me, so I'd been suppressing my feelings and looking for signs from him.

As we got up to go to dinner, I hesitated. For some reason I couldn't understand, I just didn't feel like hanging out with my friends.

"What's wrong?" Brittany asked me.

"Nothing," I said with a shrug. "I just don't feel like going out after all. You guys go ahead."

"Laurel," Meagan pouted.

"What a party pooper," Brittany said as she headed for the door.

"I think I just need to spend a little time alone with the Lord," I said. "Why don't you come back after dinner?"

"That's cool," Brittany said. "Maybe we can have a sleep-over."

"Great idea," I said.

We hugged and they left. As soon as I sprawled out on my bed to think and pray, the phone rang. It was Payton. She was still sad over her grandfather's passing, and I figured if I could get her to think about something else, that might distract her from her sorrow.

I invited her to come over, and she said she was up for spending the night at my place. After we hung up, I remembered I had other company coming over. The more I

thought about Payton being in the same place as Brittany and Meagan, the more I panicked.

Payton had been through a whole bunch of turmoil with our suite mate, Jewels. Jewels was always making snide remarks about our belief in God, complaining when we spent too much time in the bathroom, telling us what was wrong with the way our room was arranged, and basically criticizing everything we did.

Jewels was a lot like Brittany. They were both beautiful and spoiled.

During our senior year of high school, Brittany had gone through a lot of tension when her dad started dating an African-American woman, who turned out to be the mother of Robyn Williams, a spunky African-American girl I'd met in one of my classes. They conspired to get together and break up their parents' relationship. In the end, they were successful. But after their parents' hearts were broken, they both felt bad. They hadn't talked to each other since.

I ran downstairs and found my mother in the kitchen making herself a grilled cheese sandwich. I wondered where Dad and my brothers were, then remembered they'd gone out to dinner together.

"Would you and your friends like something to eat?" Mom offered.

"Britt and Meagan went out," I said, "but I wasn't hungry."

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked, peering at me.

"I'm fine. I invited them to come back later for a sleep-over."

"That's nice," Mom said, taking her sandwich off the griddle with a spatula.

"Payton asked to come over tonight too," I told her. "But I don't think Brittany and Meagan will get along with her very well."

As Mom took her plate to the kitchen table, she said, "They're all your friends. Maybe it's your role to unite them."

“Maybe,” I said, trying to think of something they all had in common besides me.

“Why don’t you pray about it,” Mom suggested. “After all, the only approval you need is God’s.”

I kissed my mother on the cheek, thanked her, and ran back to my room. After praying about it for a while, I thought about my friend Robyn. She had gone to a historically black school. However, she’d told me she wanted to go to the University of Georgia the next year since that’s where Jackson Reid, her ex-boyfriend was.

If Robyn came over, I figured, that might balance things out and maybe Payton wouldn’t feel so out of place among all us white girls. Besides, if I introduced the two of them, Robyn could meet someone from the college she was planning to attend.

I called Robyn and told her about my get-together.

“So,” she teased, “you want me to come hang out with the black chick so you can spend time with your white friends.”

“I just want her to feel comfortable.” I explained that my roommate really needed a happy evening to combat her mourning.

Finally, Robyn said, “OK, I’ll come. I ain’t doing nothin’ tonight anyway.”

After we hung up, I spent the next two hours cleaning my room and putting out extra linen so my guests could sleep comfortably on my floor. Then I knelt by my bed, closed my eyes, and prayed.

Lord, I’m putting this night in Your hands. Be with us. Guide our thoughts. Five college freshmen with completely different issues are coming together. Let us enjoy each other and You. Thanks in advance for blessing our time. I love You, Lord.

The minute I finished praying, Robyn showed up in my bedroom doorway.

“I know I’m early. But I figured you might need help

cleaning up.” She glanced around my room. “Dang! The place looks great.”

She sat on my bed, and I shut my closet door. “Thanks for coming over on such short notice.”

“Don’t worry about it. I miss hanging out with you. Besides, maybe meeting your friend will be a blessing for me. I could use another sista.”

When the doorbell rang I rushed to answer it. But when I opened the door and saw Brittany, Meagan, and Payton all standing there, and noticed the irritated look on Brittany’s face and the confused look on Payton’s, my chipper spirit vanished.

Robyn chuckled.

“Well,” I said, “everyone follow me.”

As I led them all up to my room, Brittany grabbed my arm and whispered, “Why do you have other people here? This was supposed to be our night to lift up Meagan.”

I ignored her and kept walking. Everyone said hello to my mother as we passed her in the hallway.

When we got into my room, Brittany and Robyn stood by the window while Payton and Meagan sat on opposite sides of the bed. They all stared at me.

After taking a deep breath, I said, “I apologize for not telling you all that everyone else was coming. There was no secret plan. It just happened this way. So let’s try to enjoy each other’s company, OK?”

“I’m fine with that,” Payton said. “I just need an introduction.”

Everyone laughed and the tension faded away. I introduced everyone to Payton, and they all responded warmly.

As we chugged root beer and munched on popcorn while watching a movie on TV, I knew God had answered my prayers. The five of us were acting like we’d been friends since preschool. When I saw Payton smile during a funny part of the movie, I smiled too. My friend was going through pain but it was temporary.

Four of my dearest friends had a perfect evening together because I had prayed to an awesome God. I realized that hanging out with these ladies in heaven one day was something I definitely wanted to do. Winning souls for Christ was what my life was going to be about.

When I walked into the school library, I immediately took the elevator to the third floor, where I'd met the guy who'd been on my heart through the whole Christmas break. Charlie was seated at our usual table, focused on his studying. I strolled up to him and teased, "So, what's your name?"

Charlie looked up, stood, and placed his hands around my face. "I'm Stewart Little," he said jokingly, "and you're adorable. Kiss me."

"Laurel, wake up," Robyn said, waking me from my dream. "We're at Shoney's."

I looked around me and realized I was in a van with Payton, Robyn, Jackson, and his foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ford. As I shook the cobwebs out of my sleepy mind, I remembered we were on our way to the UGA bowl game. Georgia was going to play Michigan. Since the Fords were members of my dad's church, my folks had allowed me to go on the trip.

Jackson was supposed to ride with the team since he was part of the Georgia Bulldogs defense. However, the athletic department decided they could only fly down the playing squad, and Jackson was just a red-shirt freshman on the practice team. Once he got there, however, he'd be able to stay with the team.

During the whole ride, I'd felt weird vibes around me. Whenever Robyn wasn't looking, Jackson was flirting with Payton. I could tell Payton was irritated but didn't want to hurt her new friend Robyn. I was caught in the middle because Robyn was sitting next to me whispering about how much she wanted to be with Jackson.

When we arrived at the restaurant to get a quick bite to eat before the game, we all piled out of the van. Halfway through the parking lot, Payton said, "I left something in the car. You guys go ahead. I'll catch up."

After Payton turned back, Robyn started talking to me again about her feelings for Jackson. I wanted to tell her, "*Get a clue. He's not interested.*" But I didn't want to break her heart.

When we finally reached the restaurant door, I looked back to see if Payton was coming. I noticed Jackson had followed her back to the van. I knew about Jackson's appetite. If he was willing to wait on food just so he could be with a girl, something was going on. However, I shook my head, knowing Payton could handle herself, and went inside to join the Fords and Robyn.

Robyn and I took a booth near the window. Jackson's foster parents sat a few tables down. Just as a young blonde waitress with "Carol" on her nametag arrived to take our order, Payton and Jackson came in and joined us. Payton was smiling, but her flared nostrils and tight mouth told me she was angry.

Half an hour later, we were eating our food. Jackson was rudely smacking on his sandwich. I wondered what he'd done to Payton. After he got Robyn pregnant in high school, he'd dumped her. He'd hit on me the following summer, even though he knew how close I was to Robyn. When I looked at Jackson eating a French fry and making goo-goo eyes with Robyn, I wished he would choke on that fry.

Jackson announced that he was going to the bathroom, and Robyn got up and followed him under the pretense that she had to use the restroom also. I figured she wanted to get him alone to give him a hint that she still liked him.

I looked at Jackson's foster parents. Mrs. Ford was feeding her husband some of her salad, and he laughed with every bite. She reached over to wipe a drop of dressing off his mouth, and he held her hand briefly. The love this couple displayed melted my heart.

God hadn't blessed them with children of their own, so they had opened their hearts to take in Jackson Reid, an at-risk African-American male who was eight years old at the time. Even then Jackson had exhibited aggressive behavior.

I knew not all African-American guys were troublemakers. Derek, a black Georgia Tech football player, had lived with us briefly, and he was a great Christian, nothing like Jackson Reid. Yet the Fords loved their foster son just as much as my parents loved me. They'd told several people at church that they'd become a more loving couple after going through all the struggles they had experienced together.

Payton touched my leg to get my attention. "I'm sick and tired of that boy," she whispered. "If he keeps messin' with me, he's gonna lose something he don't want to lose."

"Was he really coming on strong with you?" I asked.

"He wouldn't leave me alone," Payton said. "Kept tellin' me how good we'd be together. Really got on my nerves. He finally got the message when I told him flat out I wasn't interested. Now he's over there with Robyn, acting like he wants her." She pointed to the hallway near the restrooms, where Robyn and Jackson were standing close together. "If I'm ever that blind, slap me back into reality."

Payton was so heated I knew she needed God's strength to calm her down. So I held her hand and prayed.

As Robyn and Jackson came back to our table, the Fords came over too. "Laurel," Mr. Ford said, "I've watched you in church over the past few years, and your light has always shone bright for Christ. But seeing you and your friend praying right here in the restaurant, not caring what anyone else thinks about that, convicts me that I need to talk to God more myself."

"You need to talk to your trifling son, too," Payton mumbled. I gently kicked her under the table, and we shared a smile.

When we were all walking back to the van, I saw Jackson touch Payton's bottom. She raised her fist, but before she could make contact, Jackson dashed up to Robyn and

placed his arm around her. Robyn smiled and turned to him for a peck on the cheek. Payton was livid.

I prayed for Payton as we drove to the hotel where the football team was staying. When Jackson got out of the van, Robyn and the Fords got out to say their good-byes to him. Payton and I stayed in the car.

When I saw Robyn give him a passionate embrace, I prayed silently, *Lord, please work all this out. Help Payton and Robyn's growing friendship to stay intact. Thanks for Your help, Lord.*

The next day, at the packed bowl game, all I could think about was Charlie. He was just my brother in Christ, my friend, and my study partner. I didn't want to fall for him, mainly because I was sure he only thought of me as a friend.

In spite of all the screaming fans, our team was losing badly. In the fourth quarter we were down by thirty points.

I felt sorry for the team—especially the kicker, Casey Hanson, who'd proclaimed in a school newspaper article that he was a Christian. I had empathized with him on several occasions throughout the football season. He was under a lot of pressure.

With less than two minutes to go, Hanson attempted a fifty-two-yard field goal. It bounced off the upright and veered outside the goalposts. The crowd booed him, which really aggravated me. He shuffled to the sideline, then took off his helmet and threw it on the ground.

I sent up a prayer to God to help him. The kicker was one of the bright lights on our pitiful Georgia Bulldogs team. If it wasn't for his points, we wouldn't have won the games we had. But on this particular day, none of his kicks went through the uprights.

I knew pouting on the sidelines wasn't what the Lord would want for Casey Hanson. So I prayed for him to be a witness in the midst of disappointment. In times of despair, God always wants us to keep our faith and keep hoping in Him.