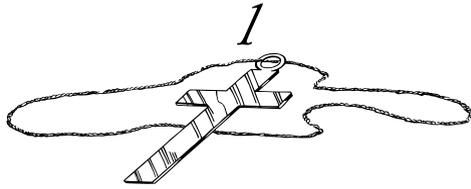


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Toasting Into Trouble

*P*ayton Skky, you're the most beautiful girl I've ever laid eyes on," my boyfriend genuinely whispered in my ear, as we waltzed across the ballroom in high style.

Leaning my head on his strong shoulder, I quickly replied, "I don't know how I look on the outside, but on the inside being in your arms makes me feel like Cinderella."

Continuing to twirl, I reflected on why I was so happy now, and how the last several months had been more trying than any other period of my short seventeen years. I'd been through quite a bit. Yet, as I trusted God to straighten out my problems, life had gotten remarkably better.

See, I used to date a guy named Dakari Graham. That's Kari 'The Bomb' Graham. This guy is drop-dead fine: caramel skin, perfect flashing smile, and an 'all that' personality. If you didn't know better, you'd think he was Denzel Washington's little brother. Boy, is he smooth.

Anyway, we were together for two great but crazy years. On again, off again—better, best, and sometimes worst. Even

though things weren't perfect, I still thought we'd get married one day. You know, high school sweethearts graduating into eventual wedded bliss.

Sounds great, BUT, Dakari had a different agenda. To be blunt, he broke up with me because I wouldn't put out. He found someone else to give him what I wouldn't. Honestly, it hurt badly that Dakari would rather have none of me if he couldn't have one particular thing. It took a long time, too, for me to see that. I had to get past all the fluff to see that Mr. Graham was missing one particular characteristic. In all his beauty, he failed to hold a strong love for the Lord as deeply in his heart as he held his ego. Luckily, before it was too late, I learned that it's better to please God than to please a guy.

After struggling and straining to stay pure, both physically and spiritually, I chose the higher ground and walked away. What a great choice.

"What are you thinking so hard about, pretty lady?" my escort inquired.

"Oh, nothing," I replied. "I'm just so blessed to be here with you."

When I trusted my heavenly Father and dwelt in His goodness, the Lord soothed my aching heart. He helped me turn my focus back squarely toward Him. See, God knew better than I that I needed much more in my life than just a cute guy. He knew I needed to firmly trust Him in my love life, my friendships, everything. After I got the lesson, the Lord sent my way one of His own to call my own. Mr. Tad Taylor and I have only been dating for a few months, but he's a strong, godly guy. Plus, he's tall, dark, and handsome. That doesn't hurt either.

Although staying pure 'til marriage will be tough, with Tad there's no pressure. We both have the same goal. He actually has a deep relationship with the Lord, which helps him stay strong. That relationship means more to him than

anything he could get from me. He's so much unlike my former beau, Mister "I-want-it, I-get-it," who only cared about satisfying his flesh.

The music was bold, yet sweet. The moment was precious and priceless. The ballroom was strikingly elegant, decked out in red, white, and gold floral. Mom and her Link sisters had really outdone themselves putting this affair together. As Tad and I moved in rhythm with the other dancers, I took it all in and silently reminded myself to tell Mom, "Thanks."

Glancing out of the corner of my eye, I saw my three girlfriends: Rain, Lynzi, and Dymond. We had a sisterhood that meant more to me than a million-dollar savings bond. We were all different, yet genuinely enjoyed each other.

We'd just gone through a terrible misunderstanding—the kind that happens when you make assumptions and jump to conclusions without getting the facts. Fortunately, God allowed us to not be deceived with foolish lies. Thus, we straightened things out and vowed to remain close forever. This Debutante Ball was so special because all of us were overjoyed that our friendship was back intact.

Of the three, I'm the closest to Rain. We've been buddies since we were tots. Rain is my confidante and I'm hers. There's nothing we can't talk about. Although sometimes we don't agree, there's never a time we won't hear each other out. We try to tell each other the truth—the real, hard truth.

As I glanced at the gorgeous, tall, slender girl nearby, I couldn't believe our time on the same road was fading out towards different paths. She was dancing with her equally tall beau, Tyson, who didn't go to our school, Lucy Laney. He went to one of our rival schools, T.W. Josey.

Then there was Lynzi. Boy, had the two of us gone through a lot lately! Both of us had had boyfriend problems. Not only are there biblical reasons not to have sex before you are married, but Lynzi found out there could be terrible

consequences to that sin as well. My girl had a close call; she thought she was pregnant. By grace, only grace, she was not. Luckily, things are looking up for her too, although she is back with her all too pushy guy, Bam. Supposedly, she's got a different mind-set this time. She's trying not to make the same mistake again. I hope she succeeds.

And Dymond, how gorgeous she is as she turns. To think people used to call her fat. Yeah, she's chunky, but boy is she fly. Her thick-framed boyfriend Fatz is crazy, fun, and cool.

My parents seemed so proud sitting nearby as they gazed at me. My mom wanted me to be a deb for years. She is a member of The Links organization, who sponsors this event. At first, I didn't think I'd like being a debutante, but I have truly enjoyed the experience.

Being a deb is as precious as being a budding rose, blooming and blossoming in your own time. We young ladies are learning to make the most out of every day and trying to spring forth goodness. Yet, even as we change, we hope to change into something better.

As we did the figure eight dance and changed partners, I was paired with my ex-boyfriend. He is a senior, just like me, at the same high school. He told me he was going to back down from coming on so strong, but as I noticed him caressing my back and drawing me even closer to him, I kinda figured something else was up.

"What are you doing? What are you doing? Don't you realize it won't work for us anymore? You called it off at the beginning of the school year to date someone else. You didn't want me then, and I don't want you now," I breathed, full of emotion.

"Yeah, I hear what you say, but I also hear my heart. You just met that Tad dude, man. Ya'll only been together . . . what, a couple months? We were together for years, baby, for years, and you s'pose to be mine. I'm sorry, I just gotta

let you know that when you want this, when you want what you used to have, it's yours," Dakari verbalized, as he spun me back into the arms of the one I wanted to be with.

"What was that all about? The brother seemed like he was sayin' some things I'd have a problem with," Tad voiced in an overprotective tone.

"It was nothing. Kari just made me realize that sometimes you don't know what you have until it's gone, and now that I have you I don't want to make Dakari's mistake. So let's not waste time talking about him. Let's continue enjoying this magical moment, 'cause I can't imagine anything going wrong. Our proms are coming up, and pretty soon we'll be graduating, then summer, then college. And I'm ready for it all!" I said to him excitedly.

Tad then flung me back into the arms of Dakari once again. I hated to leave his embrace, but I knew we'd be apart for only a brief moment. My eyes, however, couldn't focus in on my present dance partner. They lingered on the one who owned my heart.

"Why you keep staring at the brother?" Dakari voiced with jealousy. "Him and Starr are all the way on the other side of the room. You got the best-lookin' dude in the place right here. So, check me out!"

I teased, "Someone wants my attention . . . how precious."

Waltzing with Dakari wasn't so terrible. Actually, we were laughing at some of everything. I was glad that he seemed to be cool with us being friends. That's the only way it would ever be.

"Stop, stop putting your hands all over me!" I heard coming from across the room.

The most physically attractive girl at the ball was acting as if she'd lost her mind. And the scariest part about it to me, as I stared at her pushing away from the guy she was twirling with, was that it was Tad Taylor. My escort. Although the orchestra kept playing the music, we all stopped dancing.

Forty-nine debs and forty-nine escorts all turned inwardly to view the spectacle before us.

Starr's long, black, shiny hair was swishing back and forth, as she was pointing at Tad in the weirdest way. He, on the other hand, kept his poise and tried to calm her down.

"What are you talking about? Touch you? We're just dancing," he retorted.

"D-d-don't you try . . . d-d-don't you even act like you weren't trying to get this," Starr mumbled, stuttering and falling all at once.

Dakari got over there just in time to catch her before she fell to the floor. No one knew what was up. We all were so scared. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Love, rushed on to the floor.

Before they could get to her Dakari yelled, "She's OK, she's OK. She just passed out."

His words calmed everyone down. At least she hadn't died right there before us. And then Dakari explained, "She's drunk."

I rushed to Tad's side. "Oh my gosh, what's going on?" I said to him.

"Yo' boy's right. She kept tripping over me. Out of nowhere she started accusing me of stuff. Then she just passed out. But I smelled something on her breath and asked her if she was OK."

She's drunk. Inebriated. Intoxicated. How could someone pour down so much alcohol that they would pass out? She had to be totally out of her mind to drink so much. She had been humiliated earlier in the evening when this guy from the crowd called her some horrible names; maybe it had been too much for her to take.

Dakari and Mr. Love carried Starr off to the side. As she slowly came to, her sluggish body wasn't its usual together self. It was weird to witness.

Amazingly, the music hadn't stopped. However, no one

felt like dancing, most of all Tad. Even though it was a lie, the accusations still hurt.

Velda Flannery, the choreographer, started pushing everyone to get in line for the last dance, The Promenade March. We were to march and parade ourselves before the crowd one last time and then march out into the lobby. As the group began the dance, the pep in our step was lost. Even though I was in a daze over the whole thing myself, I turned to Tad to help him regain his zeal for the moves.

“It’s OK. Everybody knows she was making it up, Tad. Try to forget it,” I urged.

“No, it doesn’t have anything to do with what she said,” Tad told me.

He was very frustrated. I hated the fact that something was weighing heavy on his mind. I hoped he’d open up.

“People don’t ever think about it . . . consequences . . . actions. I wish folks would think about stuff. Then . . .” Tad counseled the air.

He was so disgusted that he couldn’t even finish his thought. Although he never regained his enthusiasm, we finished the dance. I was so thankful that he was my escort. As we marched out of the place, I thought, though it wasn’t a perfect night, Tad was surely a perfect date.

About thirty minutes had passed. Everyone stood in line to take pictures with their escorts under the display of roses. Even though the fizzle had faded from our evening like a soda turns flat, Tad and I managed to pose with a smile.

“Are you ready? I’m kinda ready to go,” Tad said to me after our shots were finished.

“No, no, we can’t go now. They’re . . . um . . . having refreshments for us in the back room. Just hang with me for a few more minutes. Please?” I begged him with puppy dog eyes, trying to convince him to stay.

Tad agreed to stay. When we entered the other room, he went to stand with my girlfriends' escorts, Tyson, Bam, and Fatz. I sat down with my girls, and we reviewed the night's events.

"Miss Starr had two episodes tonight, ya'll. See, ya trip on folks and that stuff comes back to you," Dymond giggled.

"Ya'll! What kinda word is that? With the GPA you have and all the stuff you've got going for you, you talk so crazy, Dy," I said, actually trying to stop the gossip.

My three friends looked at me as if I was the one who was crazy. Slang is all we ever speak to each other. It's our own language. It's who we are. How we breathe.

I sounded like my mother. "OK, OK, OK, I'm trippin'," I apologized.

They all shook their heads in agreement and we laughed. The detour had worked. At least we weren't still bashing Starr. I was kinda angry too. I figured she had enough to deal with without us trippin'. Suddenly, we all felt a chill and simultaneously turned our heads toward the door.

"I kinda feel sorry for her," I said to my three girlfriends.

Starr was standing there in front of all of her peers. She had to be embarrassed. She had to be humiliated. Dakari was nowhere around.

"Who's she lookin' for?" Rain questioned.

"Don't know, but I saw Dakari leave. He's through with that girl. And needs to be," Lynzi said.

"Why do you feel sorry for her anyway, Payton?" Dymond asked. "Who cares about her? All the drama she gave you, taking yo' man and stuff. Tryin' to get your other one. And you feel sorry for her. Tuhh! Give me a break."

I couldn't answer them. Starr had made my senior year crazy. To a rational person, it did seem kinda stupid for me to care about her feelings and to care about her pain so

much. But I did care. I cared a lot. We were about to graduate in a few months. Prom was before us, and our summer was full of expectations. Then college right down the road. Yet, I couldn't feel completely happy when someone else was sad.

I left my friends to go to Starr's side. Before I could get there, Starr started towards Tad. "OK, OK, what's going on?" I said to myself. "What is she saying to him?" Tad saw me and reached his hand out to mine. I came over to his side.

Strangely enough, Starr unexpectedly replied with remorse, "I owe you both an apology. Um, I'm sorry. I feel sick now and I know I made a fool of myself, but I didn't have to say what Dakari said I said to you. I actually can't even remember too much, but . . . I just want to tell you that I'm sorry."

"You should be sorry, you lush!" was yelled out from some unknown, cruel person in the room.

Whoever said that terrible remark should have been thrown out. However, the sponsors weren't around yet. Plus, no one knew who said it.

Starr picked up the bottom of her dress and left the premises. Although once again I felt bad for her, I knew I couldn't solve all her problems. So, I did the only thing anyone could do to help her. I silently prayed.

"Lord, she needs You," I breathed at heaven. "Starr Love needs Your help."

"Let's go!" Bam came behind Tad and me and whispered. "I got a surprise for ya'll in my ride. C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

After gathering the group, all of us were finally out at Bam's car. He went to the trunk and pulled out a bottle. At first, I didn't know what to make of the situation.

"Man, what's up?" Tad asked.

"Ahh, just a little som'n, som'n to celebrate this wonder-

ful accomplishment. You know, the coming out of these fo' beautiful ladies."

Bam started passing cups around. Dymond and Lynzi grabbed theirs instantly. Rain hesitated, but then slowly took a cup herself. Like a heart in two pieces, I was torn.

Tad gently leaned over to me and uttered, "I don't want any part of this. Let's go."

My girlfriends looked at me and could sense my reluctance. I almost felt as if they were in my ear and heard every private word Tad spoke to me. Though it wasn't a cool evening, the confrontation chilled me.

Tad didn't wait around for my decision. He left me standing with the group. His dark frame, usually so upbeat, now took on a somber appearance. Watching him stroll away, I sensed his disappointment.

As Tad walked away Bam blurted, "Man, don't be no punk. It ain't nothin' but a lil' sip. What's up? Ya can't handle that?"

"Man . . . whatever," Tad retorted, turned, and retreated. "Not that I owe you any explanation, but I don't touch the sauce. My Bible tells me not to. Havin' God's approval is more important than yours."

"Alright then, church boy. I hear ya. Hope ya don't mind if I have a lil' nip-nip?" Bam kiddingly questioned.

With a serious expression, Tad replied, "Sad scene, brother, if your 'little' turns into a lot. Then the next thing you know, you and this car end up in a ditch somewhere."

Surely he was exaggerating. What could it really hurt? I thought. I mean it was really only just a few sips. Nothing more! I wasn't going to drink the whole bottle. Besides, I had never tried alcohol. I was curious.

I knew Lynzi dabbled with it. Her mom let her drink wine at home. She had been trying to get me to taste it for a while. I wasn't interested in doing so, 'til that moment.

As I watched Bam pour my glass, I had some doubts.

Although I knew I shouldn't, I really wanted to. That desire to be daring grew stronger as I heard the sizzle fill my cup.

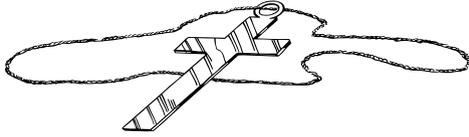
"Are you ready?" Tad probed, as he returned and nudged my shoulder.

Firmly, I replied, "No, I want to try it."

Disgusted with me, he stormed away. As I slowly lifted my glass, I reassured myself that I did want to do this. Life was changing for me. So many good things were happening. I deserved a celebration. "Cheers," Bam toasted.

Before the alcoholic beverage could touch my tongue, I witnessed my boyfriend kick his car door. Doing what I wanted was causing us problems. The thought of losing him over champagne made me begin to taste how bitterly stupid that choice might prove to be.

Suddenly I shook from the strong taste. Then questions filled what was left of my brain, as my heart felt warm. I realized I might have been in over my head. Was this the right choice? Was one drink, one drink too many? Was I toasting into trouble?



Hosting Without Permission

Seconds after the funny fizzle went into my system, I felt a little woozy. It was weird, but it wasn't totally a bad weird. I actually liked it. So I smiled, and my peers knew I wasn't against the taste.

Lynzi bumped me. Dymond gave me a high-five. Rain simply giggled. I could tell she was a little woozy, too.

"You know you like it. Yeah, all ya'll like it," Bam said with such confidence. "Well, folks coming out of the ball now. We . . . we need to . . . we need to move this joint. What's up? Where we goin', where we goin', where we goin', ladies?"

"Ah, let's go over to Payton's house. Her parents are gon' be at the Links' after-party thing for a while, right? Right, Payton? We're coming to your house," Lynzi invited herself.

Without really thinking about my parents, my date, or if I even wanted company, I said, "Sure, whatever."

Bam tried to pour me another glass. I glanced at Tad, and the car door he just bashed in, and refused. Walking

over to him, I knew he was angry. His negative response kinda bothered me. Why be so tight and stiff? Why be so against fun? Why trip?

“It’s not that serious, really it’s not,” I mumbled to myself.

And just when I thought it wasn’t that bad, I tripped over my own feet. My dress hit the concrete. Mud and water splashed on me. I knew the white gown was ruined, along with my pride.

The mean stare melted from Tad’s face as he dashed over to me and helped me up. The gentleman he has always been since the first day I’ve known him came flying out like a Lear jet. I loved how much he cared for me.

“You OK?” he asked me softly.

“Yeah, but look at me. I’m a mess.”

He could’ve said I told you so. He could’ve said it was the alcohol. He could’ve said so many things. Luckily, he said nothing.

“I think my . . . my foot is sprained. It hurts—ouch!” I told him as he gently touched it. Then I walked a couple of steps. Although it hurt, I could walk. My so-called friends were laughing! As if this was funny. My mom would surely kill me for ruining my outfit.

My mother was planning to send it to Pillar, my estranged cousin on my father’s side who lives in Denver, Colorado. See, her crazy father, my dad’s older brother, said he wasn’t buying a prom gown ’til she was a senior. If she planned to go she’d have to get a dress from somewhere else. Being that Pillar is my mother’s goddaughter, they have remained in touch. My mother agreed to help her. Help her with my stuff. So even though Pillar doesn’t like me, she was supposed to wear MY gown at her junior prom.

Did I bring this on myself? Did I trip from drinking only one drink? Or did I fall because I had too much pride to stand up to Tad for what I believed was OK? This adventurous night was filled with questions.

We'd been riding for twenty minutes. My ankle was feeling a little better. After driving in complete silence, my guy spoke.

Curiously, Tad asked, "Are they following us? I see Bam's car right on my tail, and two other cars behind them. What's going on? Why are they turning into your neighborhood?"

"Well, you know, Rain lives around here also. But, um . . ." I paused trying to get out of it. "But, um . . . they're coming to my house."

Tad's relaxed disposition changed instantly. I knew this was going to be uncomfortable for him. Unfortunately, I had already said they could come.

"I'll just pull in your driveway and see to it that you get inside. I don't want to get in the way of the party," Tad informed me with sarcasm.

"Don't be like that. Please, please, please just stay for a minute. I mean . . . uh, we had such a great night. I don't want it to end like this. Don't be mad. I . . . I . . . I know I should have asked you," my batting eyes and soft voice uttered to him. "I'm sorry, but—don't go."

Tad decided to stay. He wasn't that comfortable being in the midst of all my friends, yet he was as great a sport as he was on the football field. I came up to him several times just to make sure he was OK. He assured me he was fine. However, I knew if he could have had things his way, we'd have been alone right now. Not to mess around, just to kind of be on the same page, and although I didn't take another drink, Bam, Lynzi, Fatz, and Dymond were on their third bottle.

Bam left my crib to go and get something. "Chill out," said Lynzi when I asked what it was. I had a bad feeling about where this evening was going. Although my folks

were not home and my brother, Perry, was sleeping over with a friend, I still didn't want my house trashed. I also didn't want company 'til crazy hours of the morning. Church was tomorrow, and no matter how tired I was from the ball, I knew my parents were going to make me go to Sunday school.

Asking an irritated Tad nicely, I voiced, "So where do you think Bam's gone?"

"I'm sure he went to get some more to drink. Champagne is probably not strong enough for him."

"He can't bring anything in my house. I can't have any cups or anything like that laying around. My parents will know. They'll be able to notice somethin' was up. I'll get in trouble. No way!" I panicked.

"I don't mean any harm, Payton, but . . . umm, you don't want it in your house only because you might get in trouble," my guy probed. "They've already poured down a bunch of alcohol. If they drink any more, they should not be on the road. Nobody should leave here 'til they at least sober up. Have you thought about that?"

What he had preached earlier was coming true. It was unfortunate, but the 'one drink' had turned into way too many. And however awkward the confrontation with my so-called friends would be, I couldn't allow any of it in my house.

I looked around to find Rain. I didn't see her. Surely she hadn't gone upstairs. Tyson, Mr. Basketball Star, was bouncing from room to room. I searched every room upstairs—mine, my brother's, the two guest rooms, even the three baths. After all that looking, I still didn't find my best friend and her escort. Then I heard commotion coming from the double doors of my parents' room, on the main floor of the house. Rain surely knew not to go in there, I thought. I thought wrong.

I heard screaming and yelling. Rushing downstairs, I

tried not to reinjure my ankle. I opened my parents' oak bedroom doors and practically stepped into the Jerry Springer show. Lynzi and Rain were going at it.

Apparently, after I sorted through all the drama, Rain had gone into my parents' bath and came out to find Lynzi with Tyson on the bed. Their clothes were on and they hadn't started kissing, but the position was totally compromising. I, too, was disgusted with Lynzi.

Tipsy or not, she surely knew Tyson wasn't her man. Yet, it was as if she didn't care. Although Rain was strong, I have never seen her violent, but she flew out of that bathroom and pushed Lynzi two feet back.

"Oh, it's like that, huh? What? You want some of this? You want to push me?" Lynzi huffed as she tried to gather her composure and confront Rain.

Rain cried hysterically, "Tyson, how could you? I know she's tacky, but how could you let her in your arms?"

"Baby, she came on to me," he explained.

Before Tyson could finish explaining, Lynzi and Rain started cat fighting. It was so ridiculous. So petty. So unnecessary. And the culprit was the alcohol.

Tad knew that instantly. I, on the other hand, didn't see it so plainly. I just figured Lynzi was being flirtatious Lynzi, and hurt her dear friend in the process.

After the uproar, Lynzi came out with a bloody nose and Rain a bruised arm. Even worse than that, they broke my mom's vase. Just great. Just great.

"What've you guys done?" I yelled when I saw the pieces scattered on the floor. "Which one of ya'll got two thousand dollars? My mom bought this crazy thing years ago, in Paris. Perry and I have always been scared of breaking it. To us it was priceless; now look at this. It's . . . it's ruined!"

Tyson ignorantly suggested, "Can't you just glue the thing back together?"

I stormed out of the room in frustration. As soon as I left

their presence, the front door to my home opened. Bam entered the hallway with two cases of beer.

“Oh no, I don’t think so,” I said to him, while pushing him back out the front door. But he wouldn’t budge, even as I kept pushing. As I tried to nudge him once more, my ears were irritated by the thundering sound from the living room.

Dymond and Fatz were playing some filthy rap song that they had pulled from her vehicle. They didn’t even ask; they just assumed I wanted to hear it. As loud as they were playing it, the whole neighborhood could have heard it. And when I went to turn it down, they both looked at me as if I were crazy. Dymond danced around me to the beat playing in her own head and turned the stereo back up.

“C’mon girl, listen and groove,” she said, taking my hands and making me move with her. “Girl, your man’s in there in the family room all by himself. You need to loosen up so he’ll loosen up and have some fun. Don’t be so serious.”

“Don’t be so serious? You don’t even know what just happened! Lynzi and Rain are in my parents’ room not only breaking things up, but beating each other up as well. You guys are out here acting like lunatics, like you’ve lost your minds. I see my mom’s good pillows thrown all crazy in the living room. Ya’ll had to be dancing on the couch or doing something. Bam got more alcohol and brought it into in my parents’ house. You know I’m not supposed to be drinking, much less have company over here drinking in the house,” I said, basically talking to myself, because my friend was dancing, not listening.

I thought things couldn’t get any crazier. Ten minutes later, they did. Bam and Fatz had beer cans in quite a few places. Chips were all around the formal area of my house. Fingerprint smears were all over the glass tables.

I went to the bathroom for a minute of peace and I just

prayed, "Lord, I don't know how I got myself into this mess. How wanting to celebrate turned into such a crazy night is beside me. I honestly didn't think it was wrong and I can't even tell You that I now believe it was . . . at least my part anyway. However, my stupid friends are taking it to the extreme. I'm sorry, but I'm sure You agree. They're pretty dumb, drinking and driving. I don't even know how to make coffee. I can't let them drive. My parents will be home in a second. Oh Lord, I'm sorry, but I do need Your help."

After coming out of my solace, I thought of Tad. He had to be able to help me. Surely he could. He was the only person in the house who had been rational all night long. Yeah, he had to be able to help me.

"Tad, where are you going?" I called out as I saw him at the front door about to leave.

He explained, "Just not my kind of scene, Payton. I think you need to decide what's important to you and what you want to be around. This just isn't me. I got this out of the car for you."

He handed me a box. I was in awe when I witnessed the gorgeous gold cross and chain.

On the entry stand was a dozen red roses. I went over to them and admired the beautiful arrangement. The card read, "Thanks for giving me the honor of escorting the most lovely debutante of all. Tad."

"The necklace is so pretty, and the flowers smell beautiful," I uttered with sweet emotion. "This means more than you'll ever know."

Tad had the beer box in his hand. There was also a can by his foot. He knelt down and picked it up.

As he stood loaded down with cans, he told me, "I'm going to take this to my car and dump it somewhere so your parents won't see this all over the house. You know I care about you a lot and I don't want you to get in trouble. Seeing you in this environment tonight . . . I just don't know

if you're for me."

My lips moved to say "Sorry," yet I couldn't utter a word. My heart was breaking. He was fed up. I had chosen others over him, and for what? Trouble, problems, a party? How crazy of me.

No sooner than he could open the door, it opened from the other side. No, I thought. No, it can't be.

"Mom! Dad!" I said surprised and scared.

The look on their faces told me more than they could ever say. Seeing our lovely home trashed out made them very, very angry.

"Tad, what are you doing with beer?" my mom quizzed in a disappointed tone.

"Young man, don't ever come back here!" my dad said without waiting for mom's question to be answered.

"But, Dad, you don't underst—" I hopelessly tried explaining.

Dad demanded in haste, "Payton Skky, you get up to your room; I'll get all these people out of here!"

"Sir, if I could just explain," Tad tried saying.

"Son, I trusted you with my daughter. I don't want to hear anything you have to say," the stern voice of my daddy replied.

It was as if all my friends sensed my parents' existence in the home. They all flocked to the door and exited out. Endless tears rolled down my face.

After everyone was gone and the door was shut, my mom looked at me and said, "I can't believe you'd betray our trust like this. What were you thinking, young lady, hosting without permission?"