

A Second Chance to Hope

A Clean Christian Romance

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Introduction

5 a.m., October 25, 1998

The balloon's heat warmed Neal's hands as he opened the invitation. *I don't even know this person.* Shaking his head, he stuffed the card inside his pocket and prepared for launch.

Alex, the balloon crew chief, said, "Hey, Neal. We've finished getting the liability waivers signed. Are you ready for the passengers?"

"Yes! Thanks, Alex. It looks like the weather's going to be perfect for this morning's flight. They'll have great mountain views."

As Alex walked away, Neal reached for the letter again. *I wonder if the Hope it mentions is the same one. I haven't thought about her in years. But anyway, she ditched me. I should trash this invitation.*

Not paying attention, he stumbled over a rock. In mid-air, a gentle touch grabbed his arm to steady him. "Hey thanks...!" He looked around, but no one was near him. *Okay, this day is getting a little weird and the sun isn't even fully up yet.*

Pondering what just happened, Neal heard a familiar voice inside his head, "Hello." Neal shook his head and said, "*Can't be.*" But he heard the voice again, "I am here."

"Jesus, is that you?" Neal asked. "No way, you gave up on me years ago. The same time Hope did, the same time everybody did...you all turned your backs on me."

Shaking his head again, he wiped his eyes and saw the passengers headed his way. "Hi folks, welcome to Above All Else balloon rides. Captain Johannsen will be at the helm today. You should have a beautiful trip overlooking the scenic Rockies." With the passengers loaded into the gondola, Neal called out, "Have fun! We'll see you back in a bit."

He waved goodbye and took a deep breath. Another successful launch.

Chapter 1: Colorado Springs

Sitting on a rustic, stone wall, fifteen-year-old Neal McGrath peered left, then right. He looked again. No truck. *Where is he? We've got to get ready for the balloon festival this weekend.* While waiting, he thumbed through the pages of *Fire Engineering Magazine*.

One page in particular caught his eye. The headline read: "Applications Being Taken for Junior Fire Academy." Neal scanned the article, especially the requirements to apply. I'll soon be the correct age, check. Good health, check. Not too far from here, check. Desire to be professional firefighter, absolutely check! *I can't wait to show Dad I really can be a hero just like him!*

Neal had committed the fascinating details of his father's dangerous career to his sponge-like memory. Growing up, Neal could think of no other life than standing next to his highly respected firefighting father and following in his footsteps.

In between fighting high-rise apartment or commercial oil and gas fires in factories just outside of town, Neal's father, Bud, tried pouring love into his only child whenever he was at home.

Continuing to wait, Neal's mind drifted to dreams he often had as a child and conversations with his dad. After one particularly vivid dream, Neal asked his dad if he had ever seen God.

"No. I don't think anyone has, son."

"I've seen his kid, Dad. Last night he leaned over next to me, shook my hand, and introduced himself. His name is Jesus."

"What do you mean, you saw him, Neal?"

"In my dreams. He's funny, and He laughs almost all the time!"

Getting back to reality, Neal ran inside, pulling his firefighting notebook off a shelf in his room. The first pages included all his notes about his dad's achievements: Bud McGrath, fire crew captain, Colorado Springs, Colorado. He sat on his bed flipping through the well-worn pages.

Snatching a blank piece of paper, Neal wrote out notes from the magazine ad:

- 1) Can start in the fall when high school starts.
- 2) They have an after-hours program.
- 3) They hold classes nearby so I can take the bus.
- 4) There are scholarships, too, and I haven't missed the deadlines.

So, it'll still be local, I'll be close to Mom and Dad. Plus, there's a strong likelihood I'd be offered a job as a firefighter when the program is over, and I've graduated.

Neal bolted upright, threw his fists into the air, and yelled, "This sounds perfect!"

He looked at his watch. Seven-thirty. *Still no Dad. Looks like we won't be going out of town tonight.* He threw his backpack on the floor.

Taking a deep sigh, he dragged himself downstairs. "Oh hi, Mom. I'm just going to grab some pizza bites."

"Neal, I'm planning on eating those while you and your dad are gone this weekend. Can't you find something else? They go great with rum and coke. I've got plans, too, you know."

"Fine. I'll just grab a sandwich."

"Oh, sorry, I finished off the lunch meat for dinner."

"Seriously? I can't believe you! You really don't care about me, do you, Mom?"

"Well, it was your Dad's idea to have a kid. I never wanted you. Now, go. You interrupted my show." She poured more rum and scooted him away.

His face turning red, Neal took a deep breath and headed toward the stairs, but he turned as the back door slammed and rushed to greet his dad.

"Dad! You're home. We're still going to the festival, right?"

"Yes, we'll go in the morning but not now, son. I'm whipped. We'll leave super early around four so go get a good night's sleep. By the way, here's a burger in case you haven't eaten. I love you, son."

"Yeah. Thanks for the food. I love you, too, Dad," Neal headed back upstairs.

The following morning, they headed off to Loveland, a couple of hours away. During the entire trip, Neal asked every question he could think of about firefighting and the training school.

"I'm proud of you, son. I know things haven't been easy for you with me being gone so much and your mom being the way she is. She wasn't always this way."

“Oh, sure Dad, thanks. But we’re together now. Look, I see balloons up ahead.”

They parked the vehicle and headed toward the liftoff area. Grabbing his binoculars, Neal gazed at the countryside. Its majestic mountains covered in evergreens and quaking yellow Aspen trees made quite an impression in mid-fall. Scattered wildflowers put the finishing touches on the picture-perfect landscape.

“Hey, Dad, can I walk around and get a little closer to the balloons?”

“Okay, son, but don’t wander far off.”

Neal walked close to the balloon launch area, wide eyed at all the balloons. Their bright colors ranged from traditional red, white, and blue to every hue of the rainbow.

As he studied a crew making pre-flight arrangements, he heard a familiar voice nearby. “Neal! Neal McGrath!”

“Ben! I can’t believe you’re here! What are the chances I’d run into a classmate more than a hundred miles from home? Say, is that super-hot chick with the long legs standing by your dad, Hope O’Leary?”

“Yeah, that’s Hope. She’s my cousin. Beautiful, isn’t she? Come on, I’ll re-introduce you.”

After chatting with Ben and Hope, Neal ran back to join his dad. A smile on his face, he said, “Dad, look what I have in my hand.”

“I don’t know son, a wrinkled piece of paper that’s seen better days?”

“Ha, ha. It’s Hope’s new phone number, Dad. Remember her? My friend, Ben, is here, and Hope is his cousin. She still lives close so we might get together this summer. And Dad, she’s really grown up—she’s beautiful now!”

“Okay, just don’t get too close again in case...” His voice stopped mid-sentence.

“In case, what, Dad?”

“Nothing, son,” he said, putting his hand on Neal’s shoulder. “Everything’s fine.”

Neal raised an eyebrow. “If you say so. As long as I have you, Dad, and of course, God in my life, I’ll be fine.”

Neal’s dad looked away, not wanting to make eye contact with his only son. *He will find out soon enough.*

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Over that summer, Neal and Hope saw each other almost every day. Putt putt golf, swimming, bicycling, and hiking consumed their time. They even enjoyed “youth nights” on Wednesdays at Hope’s church. For a while, Neal and Hope didn’t miss a week. Neal listened to the talks, but Hope couldn’t stop thinking about them. Her eyes glowed when she talked about God, and she began to have a strange peace Neal had never noticed before.

Dave, a young Bible college student, led them in deep, biblical discussions that touched on the everyday questions of teens. Since he was transferring to a four-year school out of town, he announced his departure mid-summer.

When his replacement, Bill, first arrived, he called everyone together. “Hey guys. Dave said you were an awesome bunch of kids. I know you want Christ in your life, right? So, let’s just do that right now... accept Christ as your Lord and Savior. Sound good? Let’s do it right now—just bow your heads and repeat after me...”

Everyone bowed their heads, except Neal. Bill pointed at Neal and said, “It will be the greatest thing you will ever do for God and yourself when you turn your life over to Christ.”

Neal’s face flushed, and anger welled up from deep inside. Neal shouted, “I will not be bullied into this! No way! I’m not ready yet. How can I be sure God loves me? My mom doesn’t even love me!” He jumped up and ran outside, Hope running close behind.

“Neal, wait up!”

“Hope I can’t do this Jesus thing like this. My mom yells at me all the time, ‘you can’t do anything right.’ Now I’ve got some Jesus freak telling me I must decide about something really big right this moment. I just can’t.”

After a quiet trip home, Neal hopped out of the car, barely saying a word.

“See you tomorrow, Neal?”

“Yeah, maybe. We’ll see.”

Before Hope could respond, Neal closed the car door and ran toward his house.

“Papa, he didn’t even let me talk,” Hope told her dad.

“Give it time, sweetheart. He’ll be okay.”

Days went by before he called her again, but one sunny day they rode bikes and hiked in the woods.

Before hopping on their bikes, Neal moved in close to her chest. “Hey Hope, you ride in front.”

“Um, sure, Neal. Please give me space.”

“Okay, baby,” he said as he inched in closer, caressing her arms.

Hope gently pushed him away. “Neal, that’s not giving me space.”

“I know. But at least ride in front of me. I like looking at your rear end and long legs.”

Hope blushed. “Neal McGrath!” She took off peddling hard to stay ahead. Huffing and puffing, he caught up minutes later.

“Hope, let’s stop here at this park so I can rest a minute.”

“Serves you right for getting fresh with me,” she said and laughed.

“You just wait,” he said.

“Until?” She peered over her riding glasses, a smirk on her face.

“Until...” He pulled her into his arms. Their kiss lingered. As they separated, a Frisbee flew by. Grabbing it, Neal threw it back to its owners, a nearby mom with two small children.

“Tank you,” one of the boys said. His mom smiled. “Sorry to interrupt you two. My boys are just learning how to throw. I can’t thank you enough for catching it. Otherwise, it might have gone into the stream.”

Turning toward Neal, Hope grinned. “Okay Mister hero guy, last one to the hiking trail has to buy ice cream!” And off they went.

The final weeks before summer’s end were packed with activities. Riding up to his house on his mountain bike, Neal noticed his dad’s truck at home. *That’s odd. He’s never early. Later than late maybe, but never this.*

Neal bounded into the house. His dad caught his arm and led him into the kitchen.

“Have a seat, Neal. We have to talk,” he said, pressing his lips together.

His hand over Neal’s, Bud stated, “Son, I have accepted a high-paying job fighting oil well blowouts and fires in Texas. The job will last for at least two years.”

Neal pushed his dad’s hands away.

“Two years! Why?”

“It’s a promotion. My captain says it’s a great honor. They chose me over a lot of firefighters from all over the country. I just can’t pass this up, son.”

“But what about me, Dad? Oh, no. You’re not going to leave me here with Mom, are you? She drinks all the time. Plus, she hates me. You will come home on weekends, right?”

“Oh Neal. Your mom doesn’t hate you. She just doesn’t know much about love. But no, I’m not going to leave you with her.”

Neal interrupted his dad. “So, does that mean I’m coming with you? Wow! I get to see you firsthand doing your hero thing! That’s awesome!”

“Not so fast, Neal. It’s not quite that simple.” He pulled a large envelope across the table. “Open it,” he said, shoving it in Neal’s direction.

With sweaty palms, he ripped open the envelope. Cards about some military school and pamphlets tumbled out with a letter congratulating him on being accepted at the Colorado Military Academy for Boys.

Neal rummaged through everything in the envelope.

“Dad, what is this garbage? What’s with a military school? You’re not thinking of that for me! Are you? Won’t that be as bad if not worse than me staying home with Mom? There’s got to be another way! I don’t want to do this. I want to go with you, Dad. We can make everything okay. I can get a job. Please don’t... no Dad... don’t do this to me!”

“Since I cannot be home to take care of you, Neal, I think it best to send you to this year-round military boarding school. I have arranged it all, son.”

“Dad, this makes no sense,” Neal flailed his arms and stared at his dad.

“And, Neal, there’s one more thing.”

“Oh, no! It can’t get any worse!”

“Your mom and I are getting divorced. At least I know you’ll be taken care of at military school.”

“Oh, wow. So basically, I’m going to be homeless. No one wants me.” Neal slammed his fist on the table.

In a calm voice, Bud said, “It’s not like that at all, Neal. I love you, son, and I am so proud of you. I’ll be leaving tomorrow. You have a week to prepare. The admissions officer is expecting your call, and he can answer all your questions. His number is there on the letter. I know you’ll make the best of this. I’ve arranged for them to pick you up a week from Saturday at 5 a.m. Your mother will stay until then. I know this is hard. You’ll just have to trust me. Always remember, Neal, I love you.”

Chapter 2: Leaving

Shaking, Neal stormed upstairs. He slammed the door to his room, throwing himself on his bed.

“Jesus? Where are you now? If you really cared about me, this wouldn’t be happening. Nobody loves me, not even you. I’ll just have to take care of things by myself from now on.”

Amidst his anger, just loud enough for him to hear, Jesus said, “Neal, it doesn’t have to be this way.”

With eyes wet and swollen, Neal flipped his hand and said, “Yeah, right. Whoever you are, you’re not my friend. I have no friends.” Pounding his fist into his pillow, he bawled and soon collapsed into a deep sleep.

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Bud yelled up the stairs, “Neal. I’m getting ready to leave. Come say goodbye, son.”

Barely awake, Neal groaned, *my head’s killing me*. Neal yelled down the stairs, “I’ve really got nothing to say to you, Dad. You’ve abandoned me!”

He turned over in bed, pulling the pillow over his head. Minutes later, he heard footsteps coming into his room. His father’s large hand rested softly on his shoulder. “Son, this is the best I can do. I love you. I’ll be calling to check on you soon.”

“I’ll be fine, I can check on myself. Bye.”

Bud hung his head and walked out of the room.

When Neal heard his dad’s truck spinning out of the driveway, he glanced at his watch. *Oh great. I told Hope we’d go riding this morning. I’ve got to go.*

He threw on his clothes, ran out the door, and jumped on his bike. Within minutes, he stood in front of Hope’s house. *What am I going to say to her?*

“Were you going to let me know you were here or just stand there all day?” Hope asked as she bounded down the steps. Looking up at him, she grinned.

His swollen red eyes gazed into hers. “Hope, you’re the one person in the entire universe who hasn’t given up on me.” He quickly turned away from her as a tear streamed his face.

Taking a deep breath, he said, “Grab your bike, we’d better get going.”

“Neal! What’s wrong? Of course, I’m here for you. Why is your face swollen?”

“I’m not ready to talk about it.”

“Neal...?”

“Let’s go riding for a while first. I need to clear my head.”

“Okay, but it’s your turn to go first,” she said, slapping his arm.

“Hope O’Leary, I believe you want to look at my rear end.”

“Believe what you want,” she said with a smirk.

As they rode the ten miles from Hope’s house to the scenic mountain trail, Neal’s nerves began to calm. After they locked up their bikes, they hiked the intermediate trail, semi-rugged with a great view of the lake. Sitting atop a boulder, they snacked on trail mix and water while Neal shared the news.

Tears running down her face, she snuggled next to him. His arms wrapped her tight. “I know you’re just going to be a few towns over, but I’ve heard about those schools. We’ll never get to see each other. They’re very strict.”

“We’ll just have to write each other. Besides, you’re going to be in high school so, you’ll be busy, too. You’ll forget all about me. Oh boy, I hope not, but it could happen.”

“We’ll just have to see each other as much as we can this week. And I promise, I’ll keep in touch,” she said, her long auburn hair glistening in the sunlight.

He smiled. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Their final week together flew by. Hope shopped for school clothes, while Neal did everything he could to avoid preparing for boarding school. The academy’s admissions officer, after numerous attempts, finally succeeded in pinning Neal down with details.

“You must have these items with you when we arrive to pick you up at five Saturday morning. From that time forth, you will be on our clock, and you must abide by our rules. If you don’t, well, we’ll just leave it at that, young man. Do you understand, Neal?”

“I guess.”

“What was that I heard you say?”

“Um, yes sir?”

“That’s better. See you Saturday morning.”

Friday evening, Neal rode over to Hope’s for one last time together, at least for a while. “Mom and I baked your favorite pizza, from scratch, can you believe it? We thought it might be a while before you get to have something this yummy.”

“Hope, you’re the best.”

They ate their pizza, reminiscing of all the fun they’d had during the summer. Hope left the room and returned carrying a bright blue bag with gold straps, the military school’s colors.

“Wow, what’s this,” he asked.

“Open it and see, silly.”

“This is the most beautiful picture of us. I will treasure it, Hope. Thank you. It will definitely help brighten my days while I’m at school.”

Afterwards, they walked outside into the spacious entertainment area, complete with a private sitting area, outdoor fireplace, and stunning mountain views. “Oh, this is a bittersweet moment,” Hope said, lounging on the wicker sofa with Neal.

He wrapped his arms and legs around her. “Hope,” he whispered in her ear. “You know you’re my girl, right?”

“Well, yes, of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Then, what do you think about us, well you know.” He put his hand on her chest. “Do you want to...?”

“Neal, stop. Why are you touching me like this? What are you doing?”

“Baby, it’s going to be a while before I can feel you next to me again,” he said, unbuttoning her top.

“No, this can’t happen. You’ve got to leave!” Hope shouted. “We can’t do this!” She jumped off the sofa, her arms flailing.

“But, Hope, I thought we were ...”

“I don’t care what you thought, Neal McGrath. Military school is obviously where you belong. Why did you have to ruin everything? Ugh! Now, I don’t want to see you again anyway. You should’ve known I am NOT that kind of girl!” Hands on her hips, she pointed toward the iron gate.

“You are such a prude! If that’s the way you want it then I’m done with you, too.” He burst through the gate and jumped on his bike.

When he arrived home, he ran upstairs and slammed the framed picture into the trash. Glass shattered. “Good riddance,

killjoy! I don't need to be reminded of you!" Since Hope's face on the picture was still intact, he tore it bit by bit.

Now, I'm ready for a real girl and maybe even the military!

Chapter 3: The Academy Boys School

Neal looked around and slowly exited the black four-door military car with official looking decals. The sights and sounds spoke of the discipline Neal feared.

Young cadets walked in formation around campus, their uniforms starched and shoes shining. *I can't do this. I can take care of myself without all this. I really shouldn't be here.*

Standing beside the car, Neal froze. A young man walked up and reached out to shake his hand. "McGrath, I assume? I'm Hudson, Will...your upperclassman mentor. Let's get you processed."

"Um, um, okay. And yeah, I'm Neal McGrath."

"McGrath, just a heads up. You might want to ditch the Um and yeah...Those words don't work well around here. Now come on."

Neal rolled his eyes and took a deep breath.

Will led him to a large concrete block building. Inside, young men were already being processed through a series of physical exams, vision and hearing tests, and being measured for uniforms. Neal's eyes landed on a man cutting a young man's hair. "Oh no, I did not sign up for this!" Neal said.

"McGrath, really? What other options do you have? If you're like most of us, you don't. Get over yourself and get this done," Will said.

"But..."

Putting his hand on Neal's arm, Will said, "I've been where you are. You can do this. Now I've got to go, but you'll be fine. Now get in this line."

One by one, the boys started their transformation from civilian to cadet. First, off with the jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes, then the hair. As a replacement, fatigues, jerseys, and black shoes.

After being processed, the commanding officer welcomed the new cadets and introduced them to Sergeant Allen, their drill instructor.

“Young men, listen up! You will stand at attention at all times unless I say otherwise. McGrath, you got a problem with that?” He poked Neal in the back, snapped his chin up with two fingers and demanded, “Stand up tall, shoulders back.

“Now you will all march to the auditorium where you will be given your assignments. I expect to only hear the sound of your feet marching in unison. Am I clear?”

“What was that? I don’t hear you!”

“Yes, sir!” the boys shouted. All but Neal.

“McGrath, is something wrong with your voice?”

“No sir.”

“All right then. Now, am I clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Neal joined in.

As they entered the auditorium, cadets were divided into squadrons. After lunch in the mess hall, the afternoon included meetings filled with an onslaught of orders and expectations.

Finally, hardly able to stand and tongues hanging out, the boys heard the order, “Stand down.”

One of Neal’s newly gained companions bumped him on the shoulder, saying, “Let’s go, buddy.”

They walked to their barracks, filled with activity and other cadets getting moved in. Neal walked to his room where he had stored his trunk earlier in the day. He peered around the room noticing its sparse accommodations: two twin beds, desks, end tables, and closets. *Well, that will do, I guess.*

A tall, brown-haired boy walked in and threw his trunk on the other side. “Hello. I’m Cal Simpson, your roommate. That is, if you are Neal McGrath.”

“Yeah, I’m Neal.”

“Good to meet you, Neal. What brought you here?”

“For all intents and purposes, my parents abandoned me.”

“Tough! My parents went to Europe for a year, so I guess you could say I was expendable, too.”

“Sorry.”

“No worry—I’m only staying the year. You?”

“Not sure. My dad sent me here without telling me much. He left for Texas to work as a fireman in the oil fields.”

“Interesting. That’s tough work. I bet you’re proud of him.”

“Yes and no. He’s definitely my hero...saving lives and all. But he deserted me! I don’t know how he could do that.”

“I’m with you. I totally get it. I would have liked Europe, too. But we’re going to do this thing. Right? Together.”

“Okay. Looks like neither of us have a choice. But if something worse happens, I’m out of here!”

Neal unpacked his duffle bag, then went to the showers. The cold, tiled walls and floor smelled like old, wet socks. Other boys beat him to stalls. Neal waited, his bucket of toiletries in hand. His eyes flashed from wet towels being snapped at newbies to his now wet shoes. *Will I get used to this?*

When he returned to his room, Cal was shuffling through some papers. “Oh Neal, I hope it’s okay I took this desk.”

“Yeah, fine. What are you looking at?”

“You might want to look at this stuff. It’s overwhelming even just glancing at it. This gives us our schedule for the week. Tomorrow, thank goodness, is Sunday. We can get settled in. Then Monday and Tuesday we have plebe orientation before classes start on Wednesday.”

Neal replied, “Wow. They waste no time getting us brain washed. I’m beat! I’m laying down for a while.”

As soon as Neal’s head hit the pillow, he fell into a fitful sleep, tossing and turning. Every time he awakened, sweat beaded on his brow and he coughed from the stale air in their hot room. When morning dawned, he peered around at his surroundings. *Where am I? Oh yeah, Dad made a huge mistake. I have got to talk with someone and explain I don’t belong here!*

He gazed at Cal. “What are you doing?”

“Good morning, Neal. I’m getting ready for breakfast, then Vespers at the chapel. You want to go with me? We have liberty this first Sunday, which means our schedules are flexible.”

“No, you go without me this time. You’re a nice guy and all, but I’m going to page my dad today and tell him he made a huge mistake. Besides, God pushed me out of his life a few months ago.”

“Well, good luck on contacting your dad, and I’m pretty sure God’s still there for you. I’ll say a prayer for you.” He headed out the door.

Alone in his room, Neal glanced outside his door. No one.

“Hello, friend.”

Neal walked back to the door and looked both ways. Still no one.

“Hello,” the voice said again.

“Hello?” Neal responded. “Who are you? Where are you?”
This place is creepy.

“It is nice to be with you again, Neal. It has been a while since we talked and just hung out.”

Neal dropped his arms and cocked his head, straining to hear the voice again.

“I enjoy being with you, Neal. I always have. I have never left you. I want you to know I am here, my friend.”

“Jesus, is that you? Hey wait, no way! We haven’t been friends for a while.”

Shaking his head, Neal watched as a tall, slender man dressed in full uniform headed his way. “Hey, Um, I mean, sir, was that you, that wasn’t you talking to me, was it?” Neal asked.

“Well, no, unless I’m babbling unaware, which could happen, I guess. What can I do for you, son? Are you okay?”

“I could use some help,” Neal said, walking into the hallway.

“Sure. What can I do for you? By the way, last name’s Hansen, first name’s Bill. I’m Sergeant Allen’s assistant. Remember, he’s the drill instructor.”

“Good to meet you, sir, I guess,” Neal said. “See, please don’t take it personal, but I don’t belong here. My dad made a huge mistake. Will you help me page him so he can come get me?”

“Ah. I understand how you feel, Neal. You don’t want to be here and feel all alone. I found myself in a similar situation when I got dropped off here years ago. It didn’t make sense to me either. But, because of this experience, I excelled in college, and now I get to work with promising young men like you.”

“What promise do I have?” Neal asked.

“Don’t fool me, young man. I reviewed your scholastic records. Not to mention, you excel in sports like mountain climbing and biking. You’ve got a lot going for you. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Neal pursed his lips and took a deep breath.

“Have you had breakfast yet?” Bill asked him. “Let’s get to that chow hall while we still can. They’ll stop serving soon.”

“Okay, man. I’ll try to give it a try,” Neal said. *Maybe I’m not so alone, after all.* Visions of firefighting and his dad began to fade.

Chapter 4: Finding Hope

During the last few months at the academy, cadets buzzed with excitement about the upcoming military ball. Every time they had liberty, someone raved about their date and family plans after graduation. Neal couldn't get away from it.

"Hey, man. Who are you hiding from us, Neal? Who are you taking?" Cal asked, slapping him on the shoulder.

"I thought I'd ask Loretta from the girls' school down the street. We've been out a couple of times. I think she's into me."

"Oh, yeah? I think you'd better come up with someone else. She's accepted a date from William Burrows down the hall," Cal said.

"For real? That's just wrong! She's going to be so disappointed she went with him and not me. It's just a stupid dance anyway. I'm going into town." Neal stormed out of the door.

Neal plodded downtown to the new pharmacy, several blocks from the academy. While in line to check out, he realized he forgot toothpaste. He stepped out of line, bumping into the young woman behind him.

"Oh, sorry, ma'am."

"No problem," she said. Unable to take her eyes off of him, she walked over and tapped him on the shoulder. "Neal? Is that you? Neal McGrath?"

He looked up and studied her hard. "Good grief. Hope? Is that you," Neal asked, laughing.

"In the flesh! Neal, how long has it been? I haven't seen you since you left for the academy! You look great!"

Before answering, he pulled her out of the register line. Her maturing beauty immediately smote him—stunning long flowing auburn hair with soft waves, and suddenly as tall as him with big green eyes. Seeing her characteristic smile, he asked, "Hope, do you have time for a root beer float? I hear they make a great one. Right

this way, ma'am." Following her to the soda fountain, he nodded as he looked her up and down.

Neal walked up to the counter and ordered two root beer floats. "We can talk more in the booth." Neal guided her to the farthest of the red vinyl seats. "It's funny I ran into you, no pun intended. You sure have grown up! You look absolutely great."

With a little giggle and a big smile, she said, "So do you! What are you doing now? Where are you living?"

"I'm doing great. This is my senior year at the academy. Are you still living on Tremont Avenue?"

"Yes, just me and Momma," she said, a sheepish grin on her face.

The clerk delivered their fountain drinks, they picked up their spoons, and smiled. The frozen bubbles on top made a crunch as Neal took a big scoop. Hope sucked up some of the foamy root beer as it tickled her nose.

Hope shook a little, realizing she was staring. "These are the best root beer floats I can remember having. And of course, the company makes it even better."

Neal sat up straight, anxious to continue making small talk. "How are your folks? Is your mom still making those great cookies?"

"No. I'm sorry to say she is terribly ill. That's why I'm here—to pick up her meds."

"Oh, sorry. But I suppose you're still active in your parent's church."

"No. Ever since my mom got so sick, she hasn't been able to attend church, and my dad left home a while back. I go to the little church not too far away on Walnut Street. Do you know of it? I still think about the fun we had at Youth Night. Do you? Is God anywhere on your radar?" Neal shrugged and focused on his diminishing drink.

He abruptly changed the subject. "Um, I don't know if you're dating anyone, and we didn't part under the best conditions, but would you like to be my date to my military ball in a couple of weeks?"

Hope looked away. "What do you think, God?"

"Do you want to give him another chance, Hope?" God asked.

Turning back to Neal, Hope replied, "Yes, I'd be honored to go with you."

Wow! Now that's a breath of fresh air. "Thank you, Hope. I think it'll be fun—there will be dancing, drinks, lots of food. I'll call you later this week and make arrangements."

Hope's eyes glistened. "Sounds great, Neal."

As they parted, she unlocked her new robin's egg blue trail bike from the rack in front of the pharmacy and waved goodbye. *Wow. I'm going to a ball with Neal McGrath!*"

"Can You believe this, Lord? Thank You!" She started for home, but lost track of traffic. A car horn blared its warning close behind her as she weaved too far out onto the road. She called out, "Sorry" and moved over. Not easily alarmed, Hope hummed a recent Christian radio tune as she peddled home, passing the neighborhood bakery and its heady fragrance.

She coasted into the driveway, noticing *The Gazette* lodged between the tapered entry posts sitting on their stone pedestals. Raising the two-car garage door, she rolled her bicycle into the empty side and flipped the kickstand down next to her mom's idle Subaru sedan.

She walked upstairs to the kitchen and then the second floor of their classic two-story gray and fieldstone house. She called out, "Mom, I'm home."

"Honey, please go out to the mailbox and also bring in the paper?"

"Sure Mom, I'll be right back." Hope rushed out the ornately paneled front door painted a deep burgundy. She skipped down the front steps, ran across the yard to the oversized mailbox—perfect for all the magazines. Scanning their pages brightened her mom's day and gave her purpose.

Hope pulled down the door, spotting a new *Good Housekeeping* peeking out of the stack. Hope thought, *this will help Mom forget her pain for a little while*. One last look inside assured her she had it all. Delivering it to Mom's bedside table brought the praise Hope always sought.

"Can I get you anything else, Mom?"

"No, thank you honey—you're such a good girl."

Satisfied her mom was fine, Hope began thinking about the ball again and how thrilled she was that Neal asked her. However, she now had a problem—what to wear. She quickly called Jessica and squealed, "Neal McGrath has invited me to his military ball. That's the good news. However, I don't have a new dress. Actually, I have nothing suitable to wear. And I need shoes, Neal is a leg man! Is it at all possible you would have something that would work?"

Jessica, who always dressed well, replied, "Wow, I can't think of anything I have that would be good enough for a ball! Aren't they pretty formal?"

"Neal said just something a little fancy and sexy."

Jessica said, “Oh, that’s all they ever think about. I’ll help you find something. This sounds like tremendous fun.”

“Oh, it will be, Jessica—you are a lifesaver.”

“Hey, with all the times you helped me get through math classes, it’s no problem. Let me ask my sister Julie, who’s living on campus at University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (UCCS). She’s a little shorter than you but is about your size. She’s always going to fancy parties. If she doesn’t have something, maybe her roommate does, but she’s even shorter. When do you need it?”

“Don’t shoot me, but it’s the Saturday after next.”

“Wow. I’ll get started. I’ll call you back as soon as I find something.”

“Wherever it comes from or however it fits, what choice do I have? There’s so little time. I’ve got to go, Mom’s calling. Thanks for everything, Jessica.”

“Coming, Mom!”

Walking into her bedroom, Hope asked, “What do you need, Mom? What can I get you?”

“Come here. I want to talk to you. Sit down. Did I hear you say you are going to a ball?”

“Yes, Mom. Remember Neal McGrath? You made those bakery sized cookies for him? Well, we ran into each other at the pharmacy when I picked up your meds. He bought me a soda. We talked a few minutes, and he invited me to his military ball.”

“A *military* ball?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you. Neal has been boarding at a military school here in town, and he graduates this year. He hopes to go on to the Air Force Academy. And he asked me to go with him on Saturday after next. Isn’t that wonderful? Also, he asked how you were doing and about your delicious cookies.”

Mom gave a weak smile and said, “That’s nice. Honey, just one more question—aren’t you a little young at sixteen to be going to this ball?”

“No mom, it’ll be like going to his prom.”

Mom pressed, “And what about a dress?”

“No problem. That’s why I called Jessica. She’s going to loan me one. Isn’t that great?” Hope’s face glistened with anticipation.

“Okay, honey, but I still worry about you being out late, at night, and around older men, but I guess it’s too late to worry about that now. She leaned her head back onto her pillow.”

As Hope’s mom drifted to sleep, Hope tiptoed out of the room. Glancing back at her mom, a tear rolled down her cheek.

Chapter 5 The Ball

Neal walked around the rear of the taxi, puffed up his chest adorned with medals, leaned down, and opened Hope's door. Clasp ing her dress, she swung her long legs onto the bricks, trying not to wobble in her black two-and-a-half inch, patent leather heels. Neal reached out to steady her.

Walking into the elegant lobby, Neal saw the military poster pointing upstairs. She put a hand on her man's bent arm as he guided her up the curved stairs. Hope flushed with excitement as she slid her hand over the gleaming brass banister surrounding the imposing staircase. *This is exactly what a prince would do.*

With lights turned low and chandelier glowing, the couple stepped into the ballroom. They both blinked and laughed while adjusting to the darkened room. Already packed with cadets and their dates, the room glistened with medals, sequins, and diamonds. Neal recognized several guys milling around, nodding to acknowledge them while beaming over the girl on his arm.

Deep laughs and female squeals echoed from across the room at the obvious center of a celebration. Neal glanced at Hope. "Hmm, it looks like we've crashed a wedding." They chuckled.

After the couple exchanged vows, the chaplain motioned them toward two lines of military dressed men holding swords in the air over the couple as they walked between them. The last soldiers in line put their swords down as if to block the couple's forward steps. It was the signal for them to kiss. Cheers and applause erupted throughout the room.

Wide-eyed, Hope soaked up each part of the ceremony, her hands clasped tight on top of the table. At the kiss, tears welled in her eyes. Neal's leg slid over next to hers. Leaning toward Neal, she whispered, "Now that's true love. That's the way it's supposed to be."

The smell of Neal's cologne and the sight of the rippling sinews on the back of his powerful hands overwhelmed her. Hope's

cheeks flushed as she gasped for air. *But why? We just got here, and this is beautiful.*

Taking in a deep breath, she leaned back from Neal and tried steadying her tingling legs. “*Dear Lord, don’t leave me now,*” she whispered louder than intended. An older woman at the next table turned and flashed a quick, knowing smile.

Hope, still a little shy about the shortness of her dress, leaned over and said, “The wedding party is in all long gowns. Aren’t I dressed wrong?”

Neal said, “Not for me. I think you fit in just fine.”

Just then, one of Neal’s classmates walked over and said, “And who is this lovely lady? Is she your sister, Neal?”

“No, this is Hope! Hope this is Tom.”

“You are beautiful, ma’am? Can I sit with you guys? I’ll buy the drinks. Okay?”

Blushing and almost speechless, she looked over at her date and mumbled, “Neal?” The red-faced Hope leaned over further and whispered, “Neal, I can’t drink—I’m underage.”

“Don’t you want to try one? It’s really not that big a deal.”

“I’m not sure. Well, okay—I guess. But if someone asks my age, I won’t lie, and I don’t want to get drunk and get you into trouble. Are you sure, Neal?”

Smiling broadly, Neal looked at his friend and said, “She’ll have a glass of white wine and get me a rum coke. Thanks.”

Conversation buzzed around them. It seemed more like a roar to Hope, unaccustomed to parties. When the drinks arrived, she smiled. “Thank you,” as he set the wine before her. *I’ll just hold it and smile. That way, no one will know.*

She turned to the two of them and asked, “So, what were the swords all about?”

“Oh, they were just getting married military style,” replied Tom.

“Does that happen all the time?”

“No, ma’am, it’s just for the guys who are really into it. Personally, I think I would like a church wedding.”

“Oh, so you’re Christian?”

Tom shrugged his shoulders and said, “I guess so. Maybe.”

Thinking he had better change the subject, Neal said, “Do you mind if I dance with my date?”

“No problem—I’m next.”

Neal glared at Tom. Maybe I shouldn’t have let him buy the drinks. No way are we sharing my date!”

Neal gently led Hope to the dance floor and turned her toward him. Hope put one hand on his shoulder and her other arm raised. Neal also pulled her upraised arm onto his shoulder and put both of his arms around her; hands resting just below her waist. She reached back and pulled them up. A head shake and soundless appeal with her eyes begged him not to do that again. The awkward silence passed quickly. With her head tucked safely under his closely shaved chin, they rocked side-to-side with the melodies drifting from the band.

Safely in the arms of her prince, Hope allowed herself the pleasure of his heady smell and the strength of his arms. She occasionally felt him pull her gently to one side and start a waltz step. She moved easily into his knowledgeable lead. *Wow, the military even taught him to do that.* Enveloped in his tall, undeniably strong stature, she placed her cheek against his solid shoulder, not so innocently enjoying his stability and cologne even more; he smelled like leather with a hint of wood smoke.

His shoulders and arms pulled her firmly against his chest; the pounding could have been his or hers. The gentle swaying made her body feel like a warm mass of soft pudding. She no longer knew what her feet were doing. They danced to a variety of slow medleys, but Neal stopped when the band picked up speed playing the Beach Boys' "Surfing U.S.A."

She looked at him with raised brows, shook her head back and forth several times, saying, "No, no, no."

They walked back to the table and their drinks. Neal said, "Not here. Come on—let's go find a quiet place where we can talk."

Hope nodded. He finished his drink, set the glass down next to her untouched wine, and finished it, too. He took her hand and led her to an alcove surrounded by majestic palms in huge pots off to the side of the main ballroom.

They took seats in pink nubby upholstered barrel chairs. At first, they simply smiled at each other. Hope spoke first. "How have you been, Neal? Really?"

"Better than I thought I'd be. I've had a hard time not seeing my dad much. I could care less about my mom. When I first got here, I couldn't take the harsh discipline, and I got into lots of trouble mouthing off to my superiors. But at some point, I guess you could say I grew up a bit and stopped being so rebellious. At least I've been able to get respectable grades and have gained a couple of great friends."

“That’s awesome, Neal. I’m proud of you. I know it hasn’t been easy.” She held her hand out to encourage him.

“Well, I haven’t been the typical over-achiever, but I’ve managed to do all right. What about you? You said something about your dad leaving? What’s up with that? I always thought he was a real family man.”

“He was. Dad was great growing up, but in the end, he got more and more distant from Mom and me. I can’t explain it because I don’t really understand myself. Something changed when Mom and I got older when we needed him so much. It’s as if all the doctor visits, the tests, and all the rest caused him to freak out and run away. What about your dad, Neal? Is he still away?”

“Yes. Remember, that last week we were together he left to go fight fires in the Texas oil fields? I wanted to go with him, but he kept saying I was too young so that’s how I ended up here. I hear from him about once a week and have gotten to see him a few times a year, but I miss him so much.”

“I’m so sorry, Neal. That sounds so rough on you,” she said. But now that you’ve graduated military school, what’s next?”

“For the summer, I’ll be on a forest fire crew. Training starts this coming Friday.”

Lifting her brows with mouth open, she reached out both hands to touch his and said, “Neal! Isn’t that dangerous? Wow, I’m overwhelmed.” She shook her head and smiled saying, “You have become such a strong, honorable man!”

Neal beamed. “It won’t be bad. In the beginning, I’ll be mostly clearing brush and other combustibles out of the fire’s path. I don’t think I’ll be in the thick of it right away, but I wish I could!”

Incredulous, Hope raised her brows and simply asked, “Why?”

“It seems as significant as my father fighting oil well fires. No, I guess not that good, but it sounds exciting. Don’t you think?”

“Challenging maybe, but it would terrify me! So, after the summer, then what?”

“They’ve accepted me into the Air Force Academy prep classes. This is the first step into the Academy—that’s where I’ll be studying to become a pilot.”

“Wow, that’s great! I can imagine you doing something like that.”

Neal looked at her with an appreciative smile and asked, “So what will you be up to this summer?”

“I’m taking a summer class in marketing at the community college. That’s my planned major at UCCS this fall. Then at the end of the summer, I’ll attend college orientation week. Can you believe I’m graduating high school a year early? They’ve been working with me so I can better care for Mom.”

After they ran out of “what are you doing” questions, the conversation became more like Hope remembered in grade school as the two of them discussed anything and everything under the sun, including how they felt with things closer to the heart. Neal knew they would soon have to separate come Monday, so He invited Hope to Sunday lunch at the base. “The food is great, and I’d like to talk more.”

Hope said, “I would, too. It’s a date then.” Neal glowed with pride. Hope swooned from the excitement of their conversations and his masculinity.

As he helped her into the cab, he thought, “*Now that is an amazing pair of legs.*”

As they stood on the Tremont Avenue porch, he politely asked for a kiss. She put her arms around his neck and responded with a longer than expected soft kiss.

He pulled back and looked at her. Their eyes met. “Thank you,” Neal mouthed.

He reached out for her and pulled her close, not caring about anything but kissing this beautiful, yielded creature in his arms. Her heart pounded. She responded to him willingly as he placed his hands on her waist and up the sides of her now quivering body.

She felt him kiss her cheek and then down the side of her neck. He slid his finger over the bare skin of her shoulder. She gasped and held on to him, fearing she’d fall from the force of the thrill. They indulged in thirty seconds of kissing abandon.

Being afraid to invite more, she blushed and leaned back. “Thank you for a great evening, Neal.” He leaned closer, but she put a hand on his approaching chest. Hope turned and bounced to the door. She stepped carefully over the raised entry, looked back, blew him a kiss, and disappeared.

Leaving the front porch, Neal’s shirt was wet with perspiration and felt as though he just run a race and won. Rushing down the stairs breathing hard, he cleared two steps at a time, full of a newfound sense of victory.

Hope’s pounding heart pushed her up the stairs. She waved to Neal from her bedroom. After the cab disappeared, she flopped down

on her bed with arms wrapped around her chest. “Wow! Jesus, thank you for bringing my prince to me!”

On the ride home to his barracks he wondered, “*Should I have said more, done more? She seemed so into me. Maybe she’s this way with every guy she dates. I hope not because I think I’m falling for this girl. She is soft, gorgeous, and her kisses are delicious.*” His hormones raged for several hours, sleep not coming easily.

Hope slept like a baby with her extra pillow tightly clasped to her chest. The next day, she got ready early, even though lunch with Neal wouldn’t happen for hours.

She glowed when she checked in on Mom. “What are you so happy about today? Still shimmering from last night at the ball?”

Hope said, “I hope you don’t mind a sandwich for lunch today. I won’t be here; Neal has invited me to his base for lunch.”

“I didn’t know they allowed women.”

Hope said, “Apparently, they do!” as she bounded away.

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During the pleasant meal, Neal’s friends talked to Hope and ogled her every chance they got. She paid maximum attention to her date by extending her hands toward him. Neal gladly covered them. Hope felt the warmth and strength in his manly hands with well-trimmed nails. She began to relax and took in his entire appearance, with his neatly pressed military dress blues. Hope leaned back and asked what she thought was an innocent enough question. “Do you have a chapel on base? I’d really like to see it.”

Neal’s face fell as he exhaled a long sigh. He dropped his head, moving in thinly veiled anger, “Yeah, but I’ve only gone when they required it.”

He paused, then said, “Are you finished eating? We should go.”

Hope’s eyebrows raised as she grew incredulous. She looked at her half-eaten food. “Yeah, I guess,” came her sad reply. *I should not have said yes; I should have kept talking.*

Neal sat tight-lipped and silent on the trip back to Hope’s house. Hot and confused, Hope blurted out, “What did I do wrong to cause all this?”

Neal breathed in, then exhaled through his nostrils loudly. Twice. “What is it with you? It’s always God, God, even wanting to see the chapel—it’s you and God, all the time.”

“What’s wrong with that? You told me you talked with Jesus when you were a youngster. And what happened with you at Youth Night?”

“I just can’t stomach all the religion. All you ‘godly people’ spout words that aren’t normal! I tried to watch a TV preacher one time, and all I heard was his raised voice and a bunch of mumbo jumbo.”

Hope retorted, “Are you calling me one of your so called ‘godly people?’”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“Have you ever heard mumbo jumbo from me, Neal?”

“No, not really. But why does God always have to be between us? Why can’t it just be you and me?”

“I don’t get you, Neal. I understand about religion—I feel the same way sometimes. But God is real. I’ve seen Him work miracles of protection in my life. And He’s given me the strength to keep going when I’ve been dead tired from school and especially while caring for Mom. He can help you, too, if you’d let Him.”

Neal’s face turned red, and the veins in his neck stood out in fierce detail. He glared at her and yelled, “Yeah right, He didn’t help me when my dad sent me away!”

“You’ve always been rebellious, Neal. They may kick you off the wildfire crew for not obeying. Maybe God is trying to tell you something. I don’t believe you’re listening.”

“Oh, knock it off, Hope. You just don’t understand.”

“Maybe not.” She opened her door and slid out.

“Goodbye, Hope,” Neal said with a loud voice and a dismissive flip of the back of his hand.

“Goodbye, Neal. I’ll pray for you.”

“Don’t bother!”

Fully in tears, Hope quickly climbed her stairs, stopped at the door, and sorrowfully glanced back. The cab was gone.

Chapter 6: Hope at UCCS

A freshman at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, Hope found her first few days exhilarating—from the thrill of meeting new people, the smell of fresh paint, linen-covered hardback textbooks, and walking across the sprawling campus.

Smiling broadly, she bounded into her dorm room and flopped on the bed.

Snickering at her roommate with joy bubbling from her every vein, Cindy commented, “Hope, you look and act like the cat that ate the canary. You really must tell me what has you so giddy!”

“Cindy,” Hope said, “I love being here at college! The guys are so much more mature than those I knew in high school. Most have cars. I love nights and weekends where we can talk, hang out, eat burgers at the drive-in, laugh, and kiss just for fun.”

Cindy said, “Yeah, I know—the guys seem to gravitate to you—it must be exciting.”

“Yes, it is, Cindy. I never had such fun with guys, except for, well, never mind,” Hope said, as her smile evaporated and her mood changed to sadness.

“Except for whom, Hope?” Cindy asked.

“Oh, nobody really. Well, he was really somebody. Somebody pretty awesome. But I blew it,” Hope said.

“You never know, Hope,” Cindy said. “I’ve heard of couples getting together years after they first dated.

“Besides, your name is Hope. You can definitely hope for it!”

Both girls laughed.

“Yes, I can, Cindy! Great suggestion! Until then, I guess I’ll just experience all that college has to offer. Young men and all!”

Weeks later, Hope arrived back at her dorm room after being gone an hour.

“Hope, what’s wrong? Why are you home so soon? I thought you really liked Johnny.”

“I thought so, too. It was horrible, Cindy,” Hope said, tears streaming her face. “He put his arm around my neck, and I thought he just wanted a kiss. But, he, Um, oh I can’t breathe.”

“It’s okay, Hope. I’m so sorry. Please go on if you can.”

“Well, he started getting rough with his kisses, if you know what I mean. He put his hand on my knee, but before I knew it, he had slid it all the way to my thigh.” Hope took a deep breath.

“I told him no and pulled his hand away, but then he pressed his hand against my breast. And Cindy, that’s not the worst part. I slapped him hard, leaving a bright red handprint on his cheek.”

“Well, it sounds like he totally deserved it, Hope!”

“I know. He did. But I’ve never hit anyone before. I felt so violated though.”

Within days, all of Hope’s dates for the following week had cancelled. News travels fast. She would not compromise her values, nor tolerate anything that would.

As her first semester grades suffered as much as her social life, Hope’s interest switched from guys to studying. “Cindy, these classes turned out much harder than I thought.”

The rest of her first year blurred by with classes, homework, eating, and sleeping. Time passed so quickly she hardly took time to consider if she was happy. One day, Hope thought, “*That last assembly with the marketing recruiters was so weird. The whole marketing thing does not make sense to me.*”

After the semester ended, over the summer she rested at the neighborhood pool, guarding little ones at the shallow end. “*Helping them paddle around and hearing them squeal is pleasant, Lord. Why is that?*” She didn’t wait for an answer.

Time on her blanket on the grassy lawn near the pool gave plenty of opportunity to reconsider life. “*Marketing? Maybe not.*” Leaning back on her blanket, the thoughts continued, “*Neal? It might have become something more. He is such a hunk, strong, a talented dancer; and, uh huh, leather and smoke. Too bad he dumped me—I hate him for that!*” Her days and nights filled with much thinking and distracting memories of the ball.

As the new school year approached, Hope knew she couldn’t go into marketing. *Too much selling. I hated selling magazines in grade school. I hate sales!*

Upon receiving a letter from UCCS asking her to confirm her major field of study along with the perfunctory financial questions, she sat at the kitchen table with her head buried in her hands. *Last year was so confusing; what am I doing anyway? I need to change*

majors, but what a drag—all new people and I would be starting behind right from the beginning. Maybe even college itself is totally wrong.

She checked in on her mom, who asked, “Why so sad? Is everything okay, Hope?”

“Not really, Mom. It’s time to start school again, but I am so confused.”

“About what, honey? What’s wrong?”

“Campus life was wonderful. I finally got great grades, but I worried about you all the time I was there. I know you didn’t like the caregiver we hired. Really now—how did that work out for you?”

“I’d love to tell you everything was fine. I miss your father so much, and then with you being gone, the house seemed like a tomb.”

“I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“There was nothing you could do, honey. You needed your own life.”

Letting her guard down, Hope felt her face flush. “Well, I haven’t had much of a life so far, what with all that’s needed here.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Oh, daughter... I didn’t realize. I should have. Come here, honey.” Hope fell into her mom’s outstretched arms.

“Mom, I know how you feel about missing Dad. I feel he rejected and abandoned me, too.”

Her mother pulled away and looked into Hope’s eyes as her hands gently held her face. “I think he rejected us because he’s a workaholic. He was always too busy making money when all we needed was him. Honey, I knew I was failing, and I didn’t want him seeing me at less than my best. Now I’m doing that to you. I’m so sorry.”

Feeling like her heart would burst, Hope said, “Give me a minute, Mom.”

Taking a deep breath, she slipped out into the hall. Leaning on a wall, Hope talked out loud, then fell into the seclusion of her mind. *“When I was a kid, I believed I had the best dad in the world. He took time to ask me how my day was and teased me until I giggled. He took me and Mom for ice cream cones, clapped when I wore the new dress Mom bought for me, and always told me how pretty I am. He even drove Neal and me to ‘Youth Night.’ And he always wore a big smile!”*

Hope stretched, yawned, shook her shoulders free of the tension, then walked back to her mom and offered her a hug.

Mom looked at her, nodded appreciatively and said, “Thank you, daughter. I needed that. You know, things are different now. We both need to accept things as they are. But you were telling me you have a problem going back to school. What’s going on? Maybe I can help.”

“I feel like I don’t know who I am or what I’m supposed to do anymore.”

“Honey, our pastor always said, ‘The best place to find God is when you don’t know what to do or where to turn. Should you consider praying?’”

“I’ve been ranting so much; I don’t know if God will even want to talk to me.”

“Don’t be silly, Hope. He is God, and God is always on our side. I’m sure he wants to hear from you.”

“Well maybe. You think He can help me figure out what to do this fall?”

“Why don’t you ask Him?”

Hope grabbed a tissue from the box by a bowl of potpourri, holding the familiar scent belonging to her mom. She sniffled and wiped her nose. With a shrug, a little wave, and a smile, Hope returned to the papers in the kitchen. She sat motionless for several minutes. Realizing it was quiet and nothing needed to be done, she slouched back into the well-worn, spindled chair and waited. Her mind struggled. *What do I want to do with my life? Just what? Life was so much easier when I was young, back when Sundays were so pleasant with the meal, Mom and Dad reading the paper, black and white television. All of it.*

Her mind drifted, settling into her past, thinking about Youth Night. Without realizing it, she asked God, “Why were those times so pleasant, Lord?”

Jesus said, “I remember being there.”

“It sure differed from the way things are now.”

Jesus asked, “Do you think I might have had something to do with that?”

She sat up straight, realizing that she was talking with God, and asked, “Is that really You, Jesus?”

He answered, “Hi, Hope. I love you.”

“Hi, Lord. I didn’t know You were still here.”

Embarrassed, Hope asked, “Lord, can You help me sort out what I’m supposed to do? I know marketing is wrong. Is college wrong?”

Jesus replied, “No, Hope.”

Hope shook her head and put her hands behind it. She leaned back as if to give herself time to prepare for His answer. She knew God always answered her in the past, but she never asked this big a question before. She let herself get silent. Peace consumed her.

She looked up. When she opened her eyes, Jesus seemed to be right in front of her. Jesus smiled and said, “Hope, tell me what you enjoyed most when you were in high school.”

“Math classes mostly, and science. I was good at both. I got my scholarships to UCCS from math.”

Jesus asked, “How about staying in the school of business, but major in math. Maybe accounting?”

“I know nothing about it. I always studied theoretical math, just solving intractable problems.”

Jesus didn’t flinch. “College can be where you learn new skills. Even some very new ones. Wouldn’t that interest you?”

“Hmm, never thought about accounting. I don’t know why.”

“You thought you wanted a high-paying job for after your mom is no longer holding you back. You should know I will provide for you no matter what you do.”

“Yes, but Dad won’t be paying my bills forever.”

“But I will,” said Jesus. “I want you to do what is pleasing to you. All my kids want this, and I do, too.”

“But isn’t working for money my responsibility?”

Jesus said, “Working hard is your responsibility. Getting provisions to you, or money as you call it, is My domain. Having faith and trusting Me to make a way is how you get it. College is hard work. Learning is hard work. Life can be hard. Staying close to Me can seem hard. But doing what is hard and remaining willing to try new things as I lead you can be more rewarding than what you see right now.”

“Wow, Lord. Really? Wow.” Jesus nodded and said, “Think about your life from My perspective, Hope. I want to love you, and I want you to love Me back. I want to provide for you, and I want you to appreciate that I helped you get it. I love you.”

Jesus’s reassurance gave Hope the courage to change majors to accounting, although she missed graduating with her freshman class by a semester. Summer internships at Keene Developments gave her experience as an apprentice accountant under the vice president of acquisitions, Suzy Cummings.

Weeks before graduation, Suzy called Hope and asked when she could start as Accounting Manager. Hope gleefully accepted and lifted her hands to God, thanking Him over and over. She settled

down later that evening and said, “Lord, thank You for all of this. You really know what You’re doing. I’m impressed.”

Jesus said, “You have been a good girl all your life. Now I want you to love Me. Do you understand?”

“No, Lord, I don’t.”

“You have been good for your mother; you have been good to your employer and friends, but now I want you to focus your love on Me.”

“But I *do* love you, Lord.”

“Yes, but you have thought only about being good. I’m calling you to really love. It’s a call to love deeper.”

Hope squirmed and twisted a lock of hair believing she was about to be reprimanded. “I do not understand.”

Jesus asked, “Do you remember when I told you it was okay to let your mom go to the nursing home?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“I got mad that I spent so much of my youth as a caregiver and then I got no satisfaction from hearing, ‘job well done.’”

Jesus said, “Yes, that happened. But what I say now is to see your actions as a sacrifice of love. And love is what I’m made of. I’m pleased. Job well done!”

“Wow, I feel You are sitting right here next to me.”

Jesus said, “People often talk about things that are on their minds. I like it when people talk about what is on their hearts. What is really on your heart now, Hope?”

“Well, on that awful day, my heart broke, Jesus. Dad called me into the living room, sat down next to me on the sofa, and explained that he and mom were divorcing. I remember him saying it was not my fault, but he had to leave and would try to see me when he could. He said he and mom talked, and it was best if he left right away. He picked up his bag, hugged me and said, ‘I love you, honey.’ I heard his car back up and then drive away.

“My heart died, Jesus. I listened to the last of the gravel crunch. It was over. Gone! I never saw him again. I often wonder why You let this happen to me, Lord. It must have been my fault. Dad must really hate me. So where were You, Jesus? Sometimes I fear I don’t know You at all.”

Jesus gave a reassuring smile and said, “I was right there, and you do know Me, Hope. You can’t see it now, but your dad still loves you and your mom. He simply loves himself more. He has much money and has stopped loving Me.”

For people will love only themselves and their money.
2 Timothy 3:2, NLT

Jesus said, "I still love him and hope he will return before he gets too far away. I want your dad, mom, and even Neal to come back to Me. I want all My people back."

Hope responded, "It's interesting that You mentioned Neal. He left me because of You. Isn't that right, Lord?"

"Lord?"

Silence fell without an answer.

Chapter 7: Flight School

Sorting the mail, Neal pulled out an official looking letter from the Air Force Academy. As he opened it, he anticipated being rejected. As he read the words, anger burned in his spirit. “So much for the military, Dad! Thanks for nothing!” Tearing the letter to shreds, he wadded up the pieces and slammed them into the trash can.

He grabbed a beer, guzzled, grabbed another one, and within hours a six-pack had been devoured. Neal’s cluttered thoughts filled with continuing resentments he harbored against his mom, and now his dad. *Dad promised that military school would help me get into the academy so I could become a pilot. Now what? What a waste of time!*

Days went by with little sleep. Dishes filled the sink. Trash piled in the kitchen. Neal stumbled outside and picked up the *Gazette*. Tossing it onto the counter, an ad grabbed his attention. “Help Wanted: Ground crew position available for strong self-starter. Apply at ‘Above All Else’ hot-air balloon company.” *Why not? Yeah, why not! I love hot air balloons.* He called the number and drove the next day to a location in the Colorado eastern plains.

The following year, Neal labored with the crew while working toward becoming a pilot. By studying hard, he quickly received his primary license and studied even harder to earn his commercial license. Neal became a proud “Above All Else” pilot.

One day, Rolando, a crew member, sidled up next to Neal, gave him a hip bump and said, “Hey, you haven’t told me if you have a girlfriend or even if you’re married.”

“Not married. I used to have a girl, but that was a long time ago.”

“What happened?”

“We just drifted apart both times.”

“Two times?” questioned Rolando.

“Yeah, we became good friends in grade school, and spent some time with each other at the end of military school. She dressed up going to my senior ball. She is a real looker; magnificent hair, big green eyes, and fantastic legs.”

“So again, Neal, what happened?”

“Unfortunately, she’s heavy into the God thing. Hope grew up in church and wanted me to accept God before we could continue. I can’t handle the religious hypocrisy, so we just drifted apart.”

“What’s so wrong with accepting God? I have.”

“When we were kids, they had a Christian youth group with an okay leader. When he left, the new guy was terrible, so I just left. I guess God’s religion and I don’t fit well together.”

Rolando laughed and said, “Yeah, right. You and half the world!” They continued getting ready for the next flight, Neal preparing the engine, Rolando coiling up ropes.

Days later, the owner, Warren, took Neal aside. “Neal, you are an excellent pilot, but you’re also good with people. You work hard, and I would love to offer you a salaried position as our events director. I need someone like you I can trust to handle this responsibility.”

“Are you sure?” Neal asked. “I enjoy flying.”

Warren said, “I know you do, and this would take you out of your comfort zone, but I feel like you are a perfect fit. And if you don’t feel good about it after a few months, then you can always go back to being a pilot. But you’ve helped build this company, Neal. You’ll be doing much of what you’ve already been doing, but in an official capacity. Plus, you’ll be getting paid for it. Deal?”

“Deal,” Neal replied.

Weeks into his new position, Neal and Warren had already landed sponsorship events in Snowmass, Colorado, known for its stream of wealthy tourists. Neal wasted no time in scheduling the events and placing ads for rides in newspapers and on radio and television stations.

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After a whirlwind first year working under Suzy Cummings at Keene Developments, Hope asked for time off, intending to hike the Colorado mountains. She pulled out the *Gazette* and saw an advertisement for hot-air balloon flights in Snowmass. Her eyes stopped on the contact person and phone number: Neal McGrath. She raised her brows, feeling her heart skip a beat. She opened her

wallet and dug out a neatly folded, yellowed corner of a napkin. The almost illegible number matched the ad. She raised her brows again and whispered, “Wow, Neal in Snowmass. And maybe hiking in Snowmass? Now, that is interesting.”

Chapter 8: Divorce

After leaving work early on Friday evening, Suzy drove up to her house and took a deep sigh. *I'm exhausted. I sure hope we can have a quiet weekend.* She scuffled into the house, tossed her briefcase onto the entry table, and hung car keys on the hook. "Richard, I'm home!" she shouted. "What do you want for dinner? Richard, where are you? I'm home on time for once."

As she walked into the kitchen, a note lay on the counter. *Phooey, He's going to be late.* Before she could read it, the doorbell chimed. Opening the door, a uniformed sheriff met her and asked, "Suzanne Cummings?" After she nodded, he slapped an envelope into her hand. "You've been served." He turned and walked away briskly.

"Served what?" She scanned the legal stuff on the envelope, skimmed the note Richard left and cried out, "You coward! How could you say nothing and just leave me a note! The audacity to have divorce papers drawn up and then not give them to me yourself! You creep!" *Darn it. Darn it. Darn it! Richard!*

She stormed around the house—all four thousand square feet—slamming doors, kicking the cat's bowl, and anything else she could do to wreak havoc without causing damage. As her anger dissipated, tears began to flow. And flow. Pulling her hair, she screamed, "I cannot believe this is going on. Stay calm, Suzy, you have got to figure this out. Lord, I am going to talk to You, but right now I am outraged. I'm shaking inside and out."

Tears dripped onto the divorce papers. She flipped them aside. Just what is he doing? Maybe this is a ploy to get more attention? Or a wake-up call that we have a bigger problem than I thought?

She walked to the bedroom, opened his closet, and found it empty, the bureau, too. Falling into a chair, Suzy sobbed. *What now? What now?*

As dusk set in, the room darkened. Her watch read 8:45. She rose on stiff legs, flipped on lights, and meandered into the kitchen, staring at the refrigerator. She munched on a chunk of cheese, then threw it in the trash. As her head throbbed mercilessly, she made her way to the bed where she fell into a restless sleep.

At daybreak, the birds sang like nothing was wrong. Her cat, Chloe, purred at her side. She stretched and then, with a jolt, remembered Richard was not there. She rose with a sigh, slipped into her pink fuzzy slippers, and splashed cold water onto her swollen face and puffy eyes. "Come on Chloe, I can at least make you happy."

After the cat ate, Suzy let her out on the back porch. Finding the porch door unlocked, she told herself, "I need to be sharper because I have to check windows and doors by myself. Richard did a lot of things that are mine to do now. Darn it all, Richard!"

"None of this makes any sense, but Lord, if You are still here, I need Your help to deal with this new reality. Will You speak to me?"

Jesus' one-word answer dumped into her mind: "Hope."

She cried out, "Hope? How can I have hope? Lord, hope is what I do not have. That is why I am coming to you. Have mercy Lord, I know You do, and I have come too far with You to stop now, so I do trust. But... hope? No way."

Suzy walked to the bedroom, pushed her pillow up against the headboard, plopped her big Concordance down on Richard's side, and sat her Bible on top of his pillow. She heard the automatic coffee-maker beep, picked up a mug, and climbed back under the covers. After nestling into a sitting position, she flipped through her Bible, looking for something to tell her what to do next.

Suzy spent Sunday taking a long hot bath, hoping her emotional scars would somehow get clean and hurt less in the soapy water. *Maybe I simply need to get away for a while. I wonder if my parent's rental house in Snowmass is available.*

Again, she heard the Lord speak oh so clearly in her head. Jesus said, "Good idea Suzy. And why don't you have a party?"

She dismissed the crazy thought, but then asked, "Jesus, did I hear you correctly? I believe you said to throw a party?" She giggled, followed by a snicker, which turned into uproarious laughter. Tears flowed from her eyes. *That has got to be my own warped sense of humor!*

She laughed until she couldn't any longer. After she washed her face with cold water, she said, "I'm sorry, Lord. Let me start again. Your Word says if I lack wisdom, I should ask. And the Bible promises You will basically give it to me. Right?"

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God,
who gives generously to all without finding fault,
and it will be given to you.

James 1:5, NLT

“So, I am asking, Lord. What should I do?”

Jesus said, “Throw a party in Snowmass.” And Suzy heard “Hope” again, in her head, but then she heard, just as clearly, “Kneel” or maybe it was “Neal.”

Suzy said, “If that’s You, Lord, I need You to be very close to me. I mean, *very close*.”

Jesus asked, “Do you actually want Me *with* you? Are you asking for that?”

“I need help. I don’t know what else to say. Will You be with me?”

Jesus replied, “Yes, I will be with you. Just believe. Don’t worry about people. More will come. Have no fear.”

“This is really weird. I don’t know anyone living in Snowmass now to invite.”

Jesus smiled, “No problem, I will be with you.”

“That’s great, Lord, but I’ll be in absolute terror with people I don’t know in my parent’s house! No matter what, Lord, I know You promise in the Word never to leave me or abandon me. With that settled, I guess I will trust You to lead me into and through this bewildering party. That is truly what you said, “Throw a party. Right?”

“Yes, Suzy.”

She inhaled deeply, held it, then blew it out slowly. She looked down—not believing what she just agreed to do, but knowing she did—looked up, sheepishly smiled, and nodded. Rest came easily, at least on that night.

Chapter 9: Suzy in Snowmass

Suzy woke early Monday morning to Chloe doing her familiar habits of nudges, looking up, and purring for food. She poured a mug of coffee and proceeded through her normal routine. Determined to put her best foot forward, she put on the navy suit trimmed in dark red piping, made up her face to hide the crying, and with her brightest lipstick carefully applied, took a quick look in the entry mirror, picked up her briefcase, and charged out the door in her favorite red heels.

She arrived at work to ask for time off, seeking permission from the president for an unplanned family emergency. *After all, I have six weeks of accumulated time off.*

After receiving the okay followed by a threat to get her affairs taken care of within a couple of weeks, Suzy huffed into the break room for some deep breaths. *I should just quit; it would serve him right. Oh, just like a man!*

Eyes barely open, Hope reached for her morning coffee.

With a chuckle, Suzy said to herself, “Oh, wow, Lord. Is she the ‘Hope’ you’ve been talking about?”

She walked over and said, “Good morning, Hope! Can I sit with you?”

With a confused smile, Hope looked up and asked, “Sure, but why? I’ve rarely seen you take breaks. Is everything okay?”

“I know this might seem strange, but I’m supposed to throw a party at my parents’ house in Snowmass. Now don’t laugh, but I was praying—I know this may sound wild—but anyway, your name came to me.”

Hope’s face brightened with excited interest. “Nothing sounds far out to me when it includes the Lord. I believe in praying about all things, too. And Jesus often surprises me with His answers. What kind of party are we talking about? Managers? Friends?”

Suzy relaxed her shoulders. “Right now, it looks like it will be a small gathering. Okay, I will be honest—it will probably be only two or three people I don’t even know, and Jesus. Would you be willing to come and help me? It’s a beautiful house.”

“Sure, that sounds great! I was thinking of going to Snowmass, anyway. There is some great hiking, and I have planned some time off. But when is this?”

Suzy said, “I am hoping for a long weekend, actually *this* weekend.”

“Yep, that’s the Lord alright. That’s exactly the time I asked for over two months ago.”

“By the way, do you know a person named Neal? When I pray, I hear that name, too?”

Hope laughed and said, “You have got to be kidding! Yes, I know a Neal and he is going to be at the Snowmass balloon festival of all things.”

“This is getting more interesting by the minute. I’m supposed to invite this Neal to the house. Do you have his address?”

“I have his company address. It’s right here in the *Gazette*. I saw it last night.”

“What kind of guy is he?”

“He’s a total hunk, but he walked out on me the last time we were together.”

“Why? What was his problem?”

“Neal can’t handle God. He can’t seem to separate God from religion. He’s simply blind to the fact that religion has little relevance to following Jesus. Do you have any idea why you are to invite him?”

“Not at all! Let me have the paper. I’ll send a quick invite. Who knows, Hope?”

Hope smiled. “Yeah, who knows?”

“Okay, I still have to make some phone calls, one to my parents. We’ll talk later if everything is okay.”

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After closing the office door, Suzy asked her mother, “If the Snowmass house is available, would you mind if I use it?”

Suzy’s mom said, “Sure honey. I don’t see a problem.”

She heard her mom yell, “Henry! Suzy’s on the phone. She wants to use the Snowmass house. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No!” he called back.

Her mom asked, “Suzy, honey, are you okay?”

“Yes, I just need to get away.”

“Do you need to talk?”

“No, I’m fine, Mom.”

“Okay honey, give our love to Richard and just have fun!”

Suzy sat the receiver down. *Yeah right, Mom, I’ll have fun.*

She dialed the property management company to reserve the house. At two thousand dollars a night, it had better still be available.

“Lord don’t let any rich folks near it.”

She sorted the myriad of thoughts in her mind. My original plan of a pity party for one and a few decadent pints of ice cream is disintegrating. Now I am planning a full-fledged house party for three or four. And Jesus is talking about more. Ouch! I must call and see what Gloria and the caterer can pull together on short notice.

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Suzy drove her Tuscan Blue 4WD Range Rover into the empty four bay garage. Her parents’ striking rental house sat gracefully behind gray toned cedar siding nestled between massive stonework. It appeared to grow seamlessly out of the mountain. The stunning view through floor to ceiling windows revealed magnificent groves of Aspen trees dressed in white bark, golden leaves fluttering in the breeze, and early fall sunshine.

Three bedrooms with baths surrounded an elegant kitchen and counters that serviced two dining areas. A huge living room nearby had an imposing fireplace—just one of three throughout the home.

Still in a bewildered state of shock, Suzy walked into the property on Wednesday feeling like she might fall apart at any moment. She tossed her jacket and sweater onto the bed. Having thrown a bag together, she unpacked a second pair of jeans, underwear, and a few pullovers, sliding them into the master bedroom dresser drawer.

She almost ran into Gloria, the live-in housekeeper.

“Oh, hi Suzy, can I take your bag?”

“No, I’d better take care of Chloe. She’s having a tantrum—lately she just hates moving vehicles.”

Gloria looked through the grill and saw the beautiful silver tipped, grey Nebelung cat. “Aw, poor Chloe.”

Chloe howled, waiting for Suzy’s soft touch as she unzipped the satchel. Lifting the four-legged creature into her arms and gently petting her, the cat let out a thunderous purr.

Walking into the living room, Suzy turned on the gas fireplace. Shaking like she'd had too much coffee, she sat on a cobalt blue velour chair close to the heat and replayed recent events in her mind. Chloe leaped out of Suzy's lap and began exploring her new surroundings.

Suzy got cozy in her favorite chair, sipping a steaming cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows. She relaxed into the familiar posh surroundings and closed her eyes. When she opened them, Jesus sat across from her.

"Oh, hi...who are you?" Suzy asked.

"I am Jesus. Sorry I startled you. Didn't we agree I would be here? Were you not expecting Me?"

"Of course, I was, but I didn't imagine having you physically right here in the room."

The tall, muscular Jesus, with curly dark brown hair and striking blue/green eyes, was dressed in a long, embroidered white shirt falling over white linen slacks and sandals.

Suzy stumbled over her words. "I am so here glad you are! Coffee? Silly question that?"

Jesus smiled. "Coffee would be enjoyable, thank you."

Speechless, Suzy poured two cups and offered cream and sugar. *This guy is gorgeous.*

Suzy leaned back in her chair and took Him in. She immediately relaxed into His peaceful demeanor. "Hi, Jesus. Sorry I didn't recognize You right away."

"It is common for people not to recognize Me. I am used to it."

"I recognize your voice, though. You sound just like when I pray. Wow, I can't believe You are right here!"

"I am here because you believe. I love you, daughter."

"Wow."

"Now, tell Me what is on your mind."

"Lord, my mind is a jumble of thoughts. You probably don't want to hear me rant. Do you? Anyway, I can't think straight with Richard gone. I'm scared imagining me hiring a lawyer. How do I protect myself? Can You help me with this whole mess? Can You tell me where I failed?"

Suzy inhaled deeply as she vented, "I didn't even want to build our expensive house. Richard was the one who wanted it to be big and perfect. He had to have the right architect, the right contractor, the expensive features, in just the right neighborhood. I tried to tell him it was too expensive, but he just would not listen. So, I kept working hard, making sure I didn't lose my position. My

responsibilities continued to get bigger and bigger. And now he divorces me? What am I supposed to do? Where do I start?"

Jesus asked, "Do you want your house?"

"You mean the house Richard built? I don't know. Well, I need somewhere to live."

"What do you want from Me?" asked the Lord

"I'm not sure what to ask You for. I know I need a little more money for the mortgage that is due. You know, my parents were always short of money. Later in life, Dad made up for all of that and turned out wealthy from his real estate dealings. My dad is smart, and he thinks Richard is, too. Now, Richard leaves me and I'm the one short of money! It seems like all the bad in my life is repeating itself. Can You stop this cycle? I hope so because I'm lost."

Jesus changed her question into one of His: "When did we first meet, Suzy?"

"At the crusade."

"Did you feel lost, then?"

"No, of course not."

"And you are not lost now. I can lead you through this dilemma. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

Jesus calmly said, "Then be at peace."

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Hebrews 13:5 NIV

Jesus' penetrating gaze searched Suzy's glazed, bewildered stare. Looking compassionately at her, He gave a little smile and a nod, but said nothing more.

Chapter 10: Hope in Snowmass

Hope dressed in a crisp yellow blouse with coordinating cardigan, leaving early for Snowmass on a bright morning. The crisp autumn air carried the aroma of dry leaves littering the road and in piles stacked on recently raked yards. Sunlight seemed to sparkle as dew touched leaves floated down onto the road; crunching and billowing as she passed through.

Thursday around nine, she got her first look at the immense house with river rock columns standing guard across the front. Hope took a deep breath of mountain air that ended with a satisfied sigh. *I will not think about numbers, columns, rows, or anything accounting until Tuesday at nine. Until then, I am on vacation, and I'm going to enjoy every minute of this.*

Reflecting on all the activities she had missed out on ever since her mom got terminally ill, she stopped and paused. Years of being her caregiver, missed parties, missed dates, missed life... and what do I have to show for it? After nine long years of Mom rejecting anyone's help but mine, I didn't even have the satisfaction of caring for her at the end. She decided, all on her own, to go to a nursing home! I'm going to enjoy this weekend!

As Hope started skipping up the stairs, the door opened, much to Hope's surprise. "You must be Hope. Please come in. I'm Gloria, the live-in housekeeper."

Upon hearing Hope's voice, Suzy ran to the door around Gloria, sprinted down the long stairs, and gave Hope a big hug. A little taken back by the uninhibited reception, Hope hugged Suzy back.

The tall, stately Gloria said, "I have coffee and freshly baked cookies available. I'll get your things. Leave them right where you are."

A big smile on her face, Suzy took Hope's hand and said, "Come on up. I'll show you to your room so you can freshen up, then cookies!"

Laughter and small talk filled the kitchen; everything was fair game. Neither of them knew much about the other, even though they sometimes worked on the same projects at Keene. Soon they were sharing like old friends at a neighborhood coffee klatch. The morning passed quickly.

Hope suddenly became quiet and looked around. "Are you thinking about Jesus?" Suzy asked.

"I just feel like someone else is here."

Suzy reassured Hope, "Yes, that is Jesus. He projects an awesome presence—you can feel Him when He is close."

"Um, so where is He?" Hope asked.

"I'm sure He's off praying, probably in the library. Let's go check."

"Maybe we shouldn't bother Him?"

Suzy responded, "He always tells me He's never bothered by people. He loves them. Come on, let's go find Him."

As they walked around the corner, Jesus stood in the library doorway. He stepped out to meet them and said, "I have been expecting your arrival, Hope. I'm glad you came."

Awestruck, she stared at Him, fixed on his eyes before simply replying, "Hello."

Suzy said, "Let's all go into the living area to sit and talk." Jesus motioned them to go first. Suzy turned her head to see Hope's brows raised and mouth open.

Gloria, completely at home with Jesus, walked down the steps with a tray full of sandwiches. She held it out to the ladies. Jesus respectfully waited His turn. Hope's eyes were still wide and her mouth ajar when Jesus said, "You had a long trip, Hope. You should eat something." Hope's awe rendered her not hungry.

Jesus asked, "I've seldom heard you be so quiet. Do I frighten you, Hope?"

"No, Lord. You just seem so big and strong. I wasn't prepared for that. And your eyes are so bright. You are beautiful."

Jesus continued, "I was praying concerning you when you came upon Me. Your Spirit is alive and full of expectation. I always enjoy thinking about you. I love you, Hope."

"I love You, too, Lord."

"I am glad to have some time with you before the others arrive."

Suzy asked, “Others? Like how many, Lord? I’m not ready for a lot more!”

“There will be more than you planned for. However, I am here. Be at peace.”

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you;
not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.
John 14:27, NKJV

Talk soon focused on planning weekend activities and food. “Talking about food, I called the caterer Mom and Dad always use. They said they can do something Saturday and Sunday, but not Friday; so, we’ll have to wing it tomorrow.”

Hope waved her hand and said, “I don’t see a problem. When does Neal arrive?”

“I’m still not sure he’ll come, but if he does, it should be Friday afternoon. As for the ‘others’, I do not know.”

Suzy looked at the Lord and asked, “Do you know Neal?”

Jesus answered, “Yes, we go back a long way—back to his childhood.”

“What kind of guy is he?”

Hope said, “He’s a hunk. Tall, handsome, strong, and smells fantastic. You’ll see.”

Suzy smiled. “I’ll ask no more.”

Chapter 11: Neal Travel/Mall/Invite

Neal checked his maps, planning on back roads to save time. *Commuter traffic on Friday this time of day will be horrible.*

As he passed Twin Lakes and climbed toward the mountain passes, winds suddenly whipped, and thunder pealed. Icy rain and sleet fogged his windshield instantly. Before he knew what happened, Neal drifted off the side of the road, stopping suddenly against a rock. He surveyed the damage—finding nothing serious. Now soaking wet, muddy, and angry, he got his Jeep back onto the road.

As often happens in the mountains, when he dropped in elevation, the storm passed as quickly as it started. Half an hour later, he arrived in Aspen and stopped for gas and directions.

“Fill it. And can you tell me how far it is to Snowmass?”

“Where did you come from?”

“The back way from Colorado Springs.”

“Just keep going and take the second left after you cross the bridge. It isn’t far. That’ll be twelve fifty.”

Neal tried to call Audrey, but no answer. After trying repeatedly to reach her on the radio, Neal called the police, asking if there had been an accident. He then tried reaching the ground crew, “Where are you guys?”

“Rolando spoke into the CB saying, “Ground crew to captain—we’re just about to the Snowmass exit. It doesn’t look too far after that. Where are you, boss? Over.”

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Audrey and Tony arrived in Snowmass early Friday afternoon. They walked out of the mall when she realized she absentmindedly left her radio in the car. After hiking the long uphill walk, they saw

the passenger side window smashed in. She ran to her car screaming, “Oh sweet Jesus, help! Of all the times!”

Shaking, she yelled “Keys! Do I have my keys?” Reaching into her pocket and finding them, she said to Tony, “I locked the car. Right? Would you get the CB base unit from the trunk? It has its own handset. I must call Neal. Do you see it?”

“Calm down, Audrey. Stop panicking, it’s going to be okay. I’ve already checked it out—they jimmed the trunk—it’s all gone. We’ll have to walk back down to find security or the police. We’ll get help.”

Back at the mall they walked into the lower level where ski shops mingled with restaurants. They stepped into “Just Soup” and explained their predicament. The Norwegian looking girl at the counter told them, “The sheriff is down by the entrance circle just a little further down. Use the stairs right around that next corner.”

After being welcomed by an overweight officer, Audrey explained what happened.

The officer asked, “Is the car drivable?”

Audrey replied, “I think so, but there’s glass all over the place.”

After learning the location of her car and telling them to help themselves to coffee, he said, “Stay here until I get back. I need to take some Polaroid shots. Is it locked?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Hand me the keys, just in case. Try to take it easy. My deputy, Sandy, here, will stay with you.” The accommodating young woman said, “How do you like your coffee, or I have a hot chocolate with me. There’s hot water at the cooler.”

Tony replied, “Coffee with cream and sugar would be great.”

“Powdered, okay?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

Audrey said, “I’ll just get some water.”

Later, the sheriff, Dirk, dashed through the door as spray from the flower watering crew playfully doused him. Laughing, he wiped his glasses off and announced, “Not only is the car damaged, but they also slashed the front tires.”

Audrey slapped her hands to her cheeks and exclaimed, “Oh no! I hope there’s a ‘Triple A’ up here!”

Sandy responded, “Yes there is. The Conoco down the hill does it around here.”

The sheriff put his camera down, saying, “Got excellent pictures. You’ll need to file a vandalism report. Your insurance company will probably need one.” Dirk opened a file drawer, pulled

out a couple of papers, and slid them over the desk toward Audrey. “So, Audrey, are you the owner of this car?”

“Yes. It’s mine.” She hastily filled out the papers and asked, “Now, what am I going to do with my car?”

The sheriff picked up his phone and said, “With the tires and other damage, you’re going to need a tow. I’m calling Charlie now to see if he can do it right away.”

After some small talk, Charlie let the sheriff know he would get right to it. “The repairs will probably take some time,” said the tow truck driver, “but I’ll pick it up now. Where is it?”

“You can’t miss it in the second lot.”

Sandy said, “I’m just about finished for the day, so I can give the two of you a ride to the garage on my way home.”

Tony said, “Great. That takes care of that problem, but we still don’t know how to reach Neal and the rest of the crew.”

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Raining and dark, Neal followed the directions to Snowmass. The turnoff showed up as described. It surprised Neal how fast traffic traveled on the narrow, winding two-lane mountain road. Soon, he pulled off onto a side road. Neal opened the invitation Warren stuffed into his backpack just before leaving the Springs. He glanced at the unclear directions. *Instead of trying to figure this out, I’ll just go get directions!*

He pulled into the Conoco and spotted Audrey’s car, with Tony standing by the door. Neal ran inside saying, “I’m relieved to see you, Tony—where is Audrey?”

“Right here, Neal.”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“We’re fine, but some jerk broke into my car, smashed the window, and stole the CB. And they jimmed the trunk and got the base station too. Why are you so muddy?”

“Long story.”

“Where’s the crew?” queried Audrey?

Neal answered, “I was hoping you’d tell me they got to your friend’s house.”

Audrey said, “We have a problem. The town has filled up, and Laura, my friend—well, her family came to the festival, too, so we have nowhere to stay. There’s not a place for you, me, or the crew. I called a camping company to see if we could rent an RV for the weekend—no deal. I’ve called down as far as Carbondale and

Glenwood Springs—there’s nothing. Evidently, there’s a convention of cardiac surgeons in Aspen, so the towns are extra full. Our housing was coming together so easily. I should have known it was too easy. We’ve just run out of luck, Neal. I think the crew might be waiting for us at the launch site. They call it the rodeo lot.” *We may have to cancel this entire trip, return the deposits, and lose all that income. Warren will not be happy. I might even end up losing my job.*

Neal said, “Let’s not panic. I have an invitation here. Let me check it out. Since we can’t leave Snowmass, yet I’ll get directions to find this Suzy Cummings. Something might turn up there, maybe she has a housing connection.

Charlie, the gas station attendant, wiped his hands on a greasy blue rag and greeted Neal. “Yes, I know the Cummings’ place. Go back down, turn right at the rodeo lot. Stay on that road, keep right at the ‘Y’. It’s marked ‘2022’. They’re on the mountain side.”

“Got that, Audrey?”

“Roger, boss.”

After arranging to leave her car for repairs, Audrey and Tony piled into Neal’s red Jeep Gladiator. They stopped at the rodeo lot launch site and reconnected with the crew. “Where’ve you guys been? It’s cold,” Rolando complained. “We went to the condo Audrey’s friend had ready for us, but they said plans had changed and didn’t know where Audrey went. We tried to reach Audrey, but she didn’t answer, so we’ve been here at our second rendezvous point waiting.”

Neal said, “Plans have really gotten messed up. We’re going to try finding some place to crash. You just have to chill a little longer.”

“Chill? That won’t be hard—like I said, it’s *cold* out here! Fix this quickly, boss. Please, boss?”

Chapter 12: The Snowmass House

With engine running and heat going full blast, Neal turned to his crew. “Hey everyone,” he said, “Stay here and warm up while I go find out what’s going on with this Suzy and what the invitation is all about.” Another cloudburst drenched him further as he ran up the long steps to the entrance. Now wetter and still muddy, Neal knocked on the door.

Suzy opened it; her mouth wide open. She exclaimed, “You poor man. Come in, please.”

“Hi, I’m Neal McGrath.”

“Oh wow, Lord! This is Neal McGrath!”

“Please forgive me. I look like a drenched dog. I’ll try not to shake off water and mud on your floor.”

Suzy laughed and said, “No problem. Come on in.”

Neal stepped through the ornate door, onto the terrazzo tiled floor. “Thank you so much,” he said with a big smile. “And I hesitate to tell you, but I have two more in the truck.”

Gloria piped up, “Oh, call them in—of course! Before you tell us what happened, let me go get towels.”

Neal motioned for them to come quickly. Audrey turned off the engine as she and Tony hopped out and ran up to the house.

“These are only two of my crew, there are three more.”

Suzy said, “Three more, Neal? First, thanks for coming, but your crew is all going to commit to agreeing with some of my requirements. There’s no problem with bedrooms if the guys can bunk together. But you saw the invitation. The Lord is going to be here. If they bring in alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes, they’ll have to leave. They must agree with that.”

“They’ll agree. I’ll talk with them.”

“I’m not looking for lip service. I’m very serious about this. How many vehicles are we talking about?”

“They will all come up in our nine-passenger van. So, do we have a deal?” Neal held his breath and prayed, *“Oh please God, let her answer be yes.”*

“Have a seat, Neal. Let me have a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Going into the library, Suzy asked, “Lord, are You here? Is this a wise thing to do, or should I be more cautious? Will their presence interfere with our weekend?”

Jesus laughed and said, “If they will stay with your rules, of course they should be here with us.”

Suzy walked back to the foyer where Neal sat and said, “Neal, the Lord says He planned to be here with everyone if you are all willing to stay within my requirements. Would you like to use my phone to call the rest of your people?”

“No, I have CB communications. I’ll just go to my truck and call them. I do need to give my boss your phone number if that would be okay.”

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After Gloria handled the water and mud problem, Suzy said, “You guys must be freezing—come to the kitchen and get hot cups of coffee. How do you like yours?”

“Black would be fine for me,” said Neal.

Audrey asked, “Do you have any milk?”

“And I’d like sugar, too, please. If that’s okay?” said Tony.

Neal said to Suzy, “This is Audrey, a crew member, and my right-hand girl. She helps me with preparations for every flight.”

Audrey, with a little smile, put out her hand, gave a firm handshake, and said softly, “Hi Suzy.”

“Welcome, Audrey. And who is this young man?”

Neal answered, “This is Tony. He’s almost a crew member and is usually somewhere near Audrey.”

Audrey’s light blue eyes seemed to float within her shoulder-length light brown hair, finger-brushed over her ears. Her tall, husky farm girl looks fit surprisingly well with her soft voice.

“Since you’ve finished drying off, Gloria will bring your coffee to the living room,” said Suzy. “Now come with me. I have someone who would love to meet you.”

“Really? Who?” asked Tony.

“You’ll see. Come with me.”

The sunken living room sprawled out into clusters of chairs, sofas, and loveseats sitting before the immense fireplace and

expansive floor to ceiling windows. Walls covered in pink and beige lightly textured print, plush leather seating, cloud-like carpeting, and soft music completed the luxurious scene.

Jesus stood at the entry to the living room with His hand extended toward Neal. An unmistakable glow set off his friendly demeanor. Suzy said, “Guys, let me introduce you to the Lord.”

Neal spoke first. “Hi. I always wondered what a lord would look like. You look so normal. I expected to see you in a robe and crown. Not white slacks and sandals.”

Jesus said, “I have robes and a crown, too! I would love to show them to you someday! Would you like that?”

“Sure. Who wouldn’t?” replied Neal.

The Lord sighed, “There are people who don’t want to see anything I have. They would only be interested in seeing my crown in heaven. I’m glad you do, now.”

“Heaven?”

“Yes, Neal, heaven. That is My full-time home. I am Jesus.”

“So... you mean... you are God?”

“One and the same.”

“I feel we have met somewhere before, but I can’t place you.”

Jesus spoke, “It was a long time ago. We should talk about it later, after everyone arrives.”

“I would like that.” *If this is actually God, is he talking about when I was a kid?*

Neal asked, “Jesus, you act like you think it’s normal for anyone to regularly talk with You.”

“It is normal for those who believe in Me. They become My kids. I love talking with kids.”

“But I didn’t do any religious thing like with that new guy pushing me to accept You at Youth Night.”

“You were too young to know about any of the religious jargon. You just loved Me like you loved your dad. Love is easy when you simply do it.”

Suzy said, “Easier said than done for some people, Jesus!”

“People bring hurts and negative experiences from the past or bad teaching when they try to love on their own. Since I am made of love, doesn’t it make sense to come and learn from Me?”

“Again, I didn’t learn to love from You. I just did it.”

“You’re right, Neal. Kids come into this world ready to be loved and to love back. I made youngsters that way. And you can trust that I made you to love and be loved, too. It’s safe for you to believe and to love, Neal.”

Neal said, “So You are the Jesus of the Bible, like Almighty God. Let me ask you, please, don’t You have many more pressing things concerning you than hanging out here with us?”

“There are many things I am involved with, but Suzy asked for My help. I will always respond to one of My kids asking for help. Besides, this party was My idea. Right, Suzy?”

“Absolutely, Lord. I intended to come here to have a private pity party, nothing like this.”

Neal asked Suzy, “Then what was with the invitation from you back in Colorado Springs? You must have known what God was planning in order to do that.”

“He told me to write and send the invitation, but I did not know how this would develop.”

Just then, Neal’s handheld CB radio blared, “Breaker-breaker, one, nine. Neal, do you copy?”

“I copy, Rolando. You’re still at the rodeo lot, right? We’re at a house close to you.” He relayed directions and told them what Suzy said.

Rolando replied, “Hey, we brought our own brew. We were expecting a party. What’s with this no alcohol business? And what do you mean, ‘the lord is there’? Are we supposed to bow or get Audrey to curtsy?” They all laughed. “You’d better tell us what this ‘lord’ business is all about, boss. We might prefer partying in town and sleeping in the van!”

“You guys know better, and you also know you don’t have to call me boss, Rolando. Don’t you?”

“Oh yeah. But I enjoy giving you some respect, boss. Maybe you’ll give me a raise!”

Neal told them again to be on good behavior.

“Of course, boss, we wouldn’t have it any other way!” Muffled laughter followed, but quickly, “Over and out.”

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Suzy greeted the remaining crew when the doorbell chimed. As they walked in, Suzy said, “Sit on the bench and chairs, guys, they won’t get damaged. Neither will the floor. This house is used to ski boots and snow.” Suzy soon returned with an armful of towels and ski booties.

Neal looked at each one sternly, letting them know he was watching for any misstep and pointed them toward the living room.

As they walked, Neal whispered, “I will not allow any of you to act up because the ‘lord’ is actually God. His name is Jesus, and He actually glows.”

“Who? He does what?” quipped Alex.

“You’ll see. Just be good.”

Jesus met them at the stairs and said, “Hi Alex and Rolando, and I hear you’ve been good, Jeff.”

Jeff responded, “I’m pleased to meet you, Sir, Jesus.”

“You don’t call me that when you pray, Jeff. Or do you want Me to call you Mr. Jeffrey?”

“No. You know me, Lord—I’m just Jeff.”

Alex asked, “So, you call yourself God? Like, how is that possible? I don’t even believe there is a God.”

Jesus said, “I know, Alex.” The Lord looked at him with compassion.

Suzy stepped down with a tray of coffee and pastries. She said, “Gloria and my great new friend, Hope, should be back from the store shortly with some sandwich makings. I hope that will do well enough for tonight.”

Rolando, talking with his hands, said, “Ma’am, anything is fine with me. This is quite the place you have here.”

“Oh, this is not mine. I spent a little time growing up here, but it’s owned by my parents.”

Looking at Neal, Alex asked, “Did you find us a place to stay?”

“Well, if you guys all maintain your manners, Mrs. Cummings says we can all stay here.”

“Who is this Mrs. Cummings, Neal?”

Suzy raised her hand.

“Oh, sorry,” said Alex.

“You can call me Suzy. Please introduce me to the rest of your crew, Neal.”

“Now Alex here, he’s the crew chief, but he’s just part of the crew.”

Alex said, “But a critically important part. Right?” Audrey shook her head and laughed to herself, not believing what Alex said.

Neal sidled up to Rolando, a stout Hispanic man with closely trimmed black hair. Neal continued, “And this is Rolando, our fast-driving chase vehicle driver. Don’t mind him, but he always talks with his hands, and his loud voice fits him perfectly.”

“And then there is Jeff. He is the stable one you can always count on when flying conditions aren’t perfect. You can see he’s

strong. He and Audrey can hold down a drifting balloon almost by themselves. It's a good crew, Suzy. They won't give you any trouble."

Jesus looked at Alex and said, "I hope you will consider Me and become one of My kids."

Alex said, "Wait a minute, Jesus. What do you mean 'one of my kids?' I thought we were all considered to somehow be in 'the family of God.'"

"That is only a human saying. You find the truth in this Scripture," Jesus said.

See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don't recognize that we are God's children because they don't know him.

1 John 3:1, NLT

"You must be born into My family by the Holy Spirit because He, the Father, and I are one Spirit. You must believe we exist before you can do that, Alex. What will it take for you to believe I exist?"

"I guess I need to see something real happen only God could do."

"Okay. Would you believe if I made Suzy glow like I do?"

"You could do that?"

"I do it all the time, in varying degrees, for all those who believe in Me. It's called Glory."

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 3:18, KJV

Alex placed his hands on his hips. "Okay, then do it!"

Everyone stared. Those who believed saw a warm glow come over Suzy. Applause erupted. However, Alex didn't see it.

"Alex, I will open your eyes for a moment so you can see."

Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw.

2 Kings 6:17a, NKJV

Flipping his hand, Alex said, "Okay, that's not bad, but special effects people do that kind of thing all the time in Hollywood. What else can you do?"

“Alex, unbelieving people have been looking for one sign after another for generations. You have seen Suzy glow with My Glory. If you can’t believe this, showing another won’t do you any good. You will see no other sign until you believe.”

[Jesus] sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? I tell you, no sign will be given to it."

Mark 8:12, NIV

Suzy’s glow remained for a few moments longer as she lifted her hands in praise. The believers joined in, then fell silent in reverent awe.

Chapter 13: The Party, Friday Night

As Gloria and Hope walked in from the garage, Gloria asked, “Can we get some help with these bags?”

Jeff moved quickly to the door.

Neal dropped spellbound when he heard Hope’s voice. As he watched her move about the kitchen, he walked up behind her, smelled her familiar coconut shampoo, touched her shoulder, and said, “We meet in the strangest places!”

Hope turned, surprised, then opened her arms wide and gave him a warm hug. “I am so glad you’re here! It has been so long. You look fantastic!”

“Not tonight, I’m all wet and muddy.”

“You look fine to me!” Hope could feel her face flush with the smell of Neal’s cologne teasing her nostrils. Gathering her wits, she said, “We’ve been expecting you.”

Neal asked, “Me? Here?”

Suzy giggled and said, “Don’t worry Neal, it will all make sense when we have time to talk later. Right, Lord?”

Jesus said, “Right,” and nodded with a knowing smile.

Hope wanted to keep hugging Neal, but instead of grabbing his hand and dragging him away, she dutifully returned her attention to the grocery bags. “I hope everyone is hungry. Everything looked so good, I just kept piling it into my cart. I’ve read that You like figs, Lord, but I could not find any. However, they had great looking fig tarts—so I bought them out. And they had charbroiled flounder. So, I brought back fish, and I also bought black Mediterranean olives. Will those be to Your liking?”

Jesus said, “Thank you, yes. It all sounds great. I enjoy many foods just like Simon Peter. However, I must admit I prefer fish, especially since I spent much of My time around a lake with fishermen.”

Suzy said, “Everybody, say hello to Hope. She works for the same company I do, and she’s been a blessing helping me with the details of this party and now with feeding you tonight. I’ve had the other meals catered, but she and Gloria have been great. Hope manages our accounting department and deals with numbers all day long.”

Audrey exclaimed, “That’s the one part of my job I don’t like.”

Hope declared with her hand sweeping over everyone, “We’ve grown into such a crowd. Maybe after you get your sandwiches made, we’ll go around the group and share something about ourselves. And then, to make it a little more fun, while we have some dessert, we’ll let each of you tell something about someone else that they probably don’t want us all to know.”

“Um, oh,” said Alex. “But be careful guys, I’ll be thinking about you, too!”

Hope said, “No, no, not like that—it has to be something funny, not embarrassing. This is just an icebreaker to have fun with.”

“That’s good because I was getting uncomfortable,” said Tony.

Hope put everything away and soon Gloria motioned to Suzy that the informal “great room” dining area behind the fireplace was ready. The deli meats, cheeses, flounder, and bakery breads with all the extras were down the middle of the table.

Alex looked at the spread and sat at one end, opposite Jesus.

Hope said, “Find places, everyone.”

Alex filled his plate, but Tony put his hand on Alex’s shoulder and said, “Jesus, don’t You want to say a blessing over the food?”

Jesus looked up and said, “Thank you, Father, for this bounty You’ve provided. We bless You for it and receive it gratefully.”

Alex continued filling his plate. Audrey leaned over to Tony and said, “We finally silenced Alex and his barbs—just put great food in front of him!” Alex gave a trivializing snicker and continued to load up his plate.

Jeff, well into his forties, sat down next to Jesus. The broad smile and large stature of the six-foot six-inch, 295-pound Nigerian black man set off his smooth skin and powerful hands. Jeff wore freshly polished chukka boots, like always.

Jesus said, “Jeff, it looks like you and I are the only ones here with Jewish roots. One of the lost tribes of Israel may have settled in your country.”

“Yes, I read that somewhere.”

“They’ve dispersed to many countries with people persecuted just because they believe in Me,” said Jesus. “Religious leaders incited a mob that persecuted Me to the point of death.”

Tony sat next to Alex, whom he respected as the lead crew member. Audrey, with raised eyebrows, whispered to him, “What’s with sitting next to my arch enemy?”

Tony quietly responded, “Haven’t you heard ‘Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer?’”

Jesus smiled and said, “That saying is often quoted as a biblical proverb, but it is not in the Bible. However, this is what the Bible does say.”

... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
Matthew 5:44, ESV

Tony was so awestruck by the Lord’s presence that he perpetually studied Him between bites.

Suzy sat across from Jeff, also placing her next to Jesus. She said, “It looks like this will be much more fun than the pity party I had planned.”

Jesus smiled at her. Hope sat down next to Suzy, and Neal asked Hope if he could sit next to her. Hope smiled broadly and said, “Welcome.”

Suzy asked, “So Alex, you sound like you come from somewhere on the East Coast. What brought you to Colorado?”

“I grew up in the Boston developments. You had to be tough to survive in my neighborhood. I worked in the ‘T’ public transportation department, but I had to get away from the congestion. I wanted to see the wide-open spaces in the West, so three years ago I moved out here. I convinced Warren that I was a hard worker and willing to learn. He said he saw the sensitive side of my nature.”

Audrey choked back, “Yeah, right!” Most of the crew laughed. “Who is Warren?” asked Suzy.

Neal said, “He owns the company we all work for.”

“Why isn’t he with you?”

“Foolishly, he trusts Neal,” quipped Alex.

“That’s the tender side of Alex showing up,” Rolando said and snickered.

The crew laughed again.

Jeff chuckled. “Actually, Warren trusts me. He tells me to watch over all of you guys!”

Tony broke up. “Oh! *That’s* what you do!”

Hope broke into the crews’ bantering, saying, “So now we know—you all have great affection for one another.”

Audrey looked across the table. “Almost all, Hope.” She picked up a piece of bread, dipped it in her water glass, and held it out to Alex.

“Ooh, she got you there Alex,” said Tony. The crew chuckled.

“Well, she really doesn’t belong in a guy’s crew. She’s a girl.”

Suzy stood with hands on hips. “Alex, I think you should stop while you’re ahead. Don’t be a chauvinist. It’s out of fashion these days.” The meal ended with everyone satisfied and appreciative.

Suzy said, “Before you all sit down and get lazy, why don’t you go get your things. I’ll show you to your rooms. The guys will be in the bunk room downstairs next to Neal, but Audrey, we have a guest room up here for you.”

Alex growled, “Of course.”

The guys walked downstairs behind Suzy. They found a well-appointed bunk room with larger than normal bunks, each with a light and skiing pictures on the walls. Suzy said dessert would be ready after they got settled.

Jeff took a bottom bunk right next to the bathroom. It prompted Alex to say, “Of course.”

“Well, I thought it would be better than my feet dangling in your face!”

“You’re right there, Jeff.”

Rolando said, “I’m part of ‘Above All Else’ balloon company, so I’ll take the top one above Jeff. After all, then I’ll be higher than all of you! Ha.”

“Okay, Alex. What will make you happy? You want the top or the bottom?” asked Tony.

“As long as you don’t dangle your feet—I’ll take the bottom.”

Tony gave a broad smile. “No guarantees, but if you’re happy—I’m happy.”

Lightning flashed through the bunkroom windows. A loud clap of thunder followed almost simultaneously. Tony jumped. “Ouch! That one was close! We got our gear inside just in time.” Outside, the wind blew unabated, and rain cascaded down the windows, flooding the terraces.

“Come on, let’s see what Suzy’s dessert spread looks like,” said Alex.

Rolando laughed. “Okay guys—let’s follow the lead-er!”

The stairs led back through the large restaurant style kitchen with gleaming chrome appliances and a huge refrigerator.

“Wow, guys. This kitchen is enormous, big enough for a *big* party,” said Neal as he trailed behind the crew.

Plates full of dessert items and napkins were on the table. Without asking permission, everyone took one and walked down into the living room.

“Well, now that we’re all sitting and relaxing, you’re probably wondering how this party got started,” said Suzy. “A week ago, I got home early from work expecting to surprise my husband, Richard, and instead the house was quiet. I walked upstairs to change into something cozy when I noticed all of Richard’s closet doors were hanging open and his bureau drawers were ajar. My first thought was that someone robbed us.”

Tony moaned, “Oh no!”

“It wasn’t long before I realized he left me. Just like that, he’s gone. I didn’t even look at the divorce papers—I just wanted to run away. So here I am. This happened last week.”

Neal asked, “But why did you send me the invitation, and why is Jesus here?”

“I cried out for Jesus to help me. We talked, I mostly yelled. After a while, Jesus heard I wanted to run away, and He said, ‘Why don’t you make it into a party?’”

Alex said, “I don’t get all this Jesus talk. Are you saying God talked to you? Where was he supposed to be? Like here?”

Neal was thinking the same question even though, as a kid, he knew the answer.

Jeff said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t follow. How did we end up here?”

Neal replayed all he knew that happened. Audrey and Tony spoke about their ordeal, and Rolando just said how cold he got.

Suzy said, “I’ve talked with Jesus for a long time. Ever since I met Him at a ‘Crusade for Christ’, at Denver’s ‘Mile High Stadium.’”

Alex seemed confused. “Met Him? How?”

“If you will get quiet and say, ‘If You are real, Jesus, I’d like to talk with You’ and then just listen, maybe with your eyes closed, I know you can meet Him, too.”

“Now that is simply ridiculous! Talk into the air to someone I don’t know or see and do it with my eyes closed? Sure, Suzy. I’m smarter than that.”

Jesus said softly, “Yes, Alex. You are smart enough to doubt. But is that really the smartest thing you can do?” The room became still.

Just then, Gloria walked in from the kitchen. “Coffee has finished brewing, and drinks are in the refrigerator if anyone wants something.”

Alex, without thinking, said, “What kind of beer do you have?” Suzy glared at Neal, who stood and motioned Alex to come with him. The front door closed firmly as Neal told Alex how much his outburst may have jeopardized their staying. “I told you Mrs. Cummings’ rules! What is the matter with you? She said in no uncertain terms that drinking and smoking aren’t okay.”

“I didn’t do either!” retorted Alex.

“You didn’t have to! What is the matter with you? If we have to leave because of you, I’ll fire you right here!”

Alex sneered, “Easy does it di-rect-or! I work for Warren, not you.”

“If Warren loses all this income, he will be livid! I won’t have to do a thing!” Neal told Alex to wait in the van until he found out what would happen next.

Inside, Jesus had been speaking with Suzy on the porch just outside the living room. Neal walked back into the house, not sure where to go or what to say. The agitated Suzy had quieted down by the time Neal returned.

Jesus asked Audrey about her background. “I grew up in a small eastern Colorado farm town. When I was there it had a McDonald’s, one traffic light that always blinked yellow, and a few stop signs. We had one small church. It was a classic white one with a bell tower that old Mr. Jenkins rang at 9:30 sharp on Sunday mornings and 6:30 sharp Wednesday night. The townspeople set their watches by the bell. The town was almost wiped out by a tornado three years after I left.

“We did not even have our own pastor, just traveling preachers. I remember one like it was yesterday; tall, wore a black suit, thin, black tie, and shiny, black pointy shoes. He looked funny with his bushy white hair. He also scared me because he always talked about hell, never smiled, and pointed a lot when he stayed at our house for two nights. I hated it. He slept in my bed—I had to sleep on the couch.

“He yelled at me and said, ‘I will not leave this house until you kneel and ask God to save you.’ Mom kept him away. I was only eight.”

“After he left, I asked Mom if she thought hell was real. Mom said the Bible talks more about love than about hell. My mom is so gentle and kind. But, when I was alone, I was still afraid of hell. I couldn’t stop thinking God would be mad at me every time I did something wrong.”

Jesus asked, “Do you still feel that way?”

“Yeah... sort of.”

“You don’t have to, Audrey,” said Jesus.

“I tried to read some of Dad’s big Bible, but the words looked weird. Some letters were big and others in color. Sometimes Dad would read it to us, but it still made no sense to me. The only thing I knew was it came from God, and it was scary. I sort of felt that I didn’t have to be scared, but I was.”

Jesus looked disheartened. “I wanted you to have a children’s Bible. You and your mom would have enjoyed reading it.”

While Jesus and Audrey spoke, Neal worked things out with Suzy and waved Alex inside. He made his re-entry, strode over to a surprised Suzy and apologized. He sounded sincere. She took in a big breath and accepted.

Just then, Jesus attracted everyone’s attention when He asked Alex one pointed question: “What do you think about Me, and about Almighty God?”

Alex replied, “Well, for sure, I don’t believe there is a God. And I think you are an actor, not God.” The hush was palpable.

“What if you are wrong, Alex?”

“Wrong is relative. If I do something that is fine with me, but you think it’s wrong—well, then your opinion doesn’t really matter. It isn’t wrong for me.”

Jesus said, “You believe running over that boy’s dog and driving off was not wrong?”

“Who told you about that?”

“I was there.”

Alex turned his head sideways. “I don’t believe you.”

“You looked out your rear window and saw the little boy run into the road after his dog and yell, ‘Stop!’ Right?”

“Well, it was just a dumb dog.”

“Didn’t your godly, in-born sense of right and wrong tell you to stop?”

“I guess, but it was just a dumb dog.”

Rolando broke in, “Jesus, did You really watch Alex hit a dog and then drive off without stopping?”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean You are always watching everything I do? I mean, like everything. Like even when my wife and I are in bed?”

Jesus asked, “Does that embarrass you?”

“Well, sort of—well, yeah, I guess it really does.”

“There is a difference between Me watching and simply being aware of what you are doing. Rolando, would you rather I be distant and let you do things without Me around? Or would you like Me to be closer?”

“I’m not sure. It’s a tough question.”

Jesus said, “Many people grapple with that question. The ones who want Me close are those who know Me well and benefit from receiving My love.”

Alex glared at Jesus and said, “I don’t want you always watching me and besides, I still think you’re just an actor.”

“But what about the dog?” asked Jeff. Everyone watched for Alex’s reaction.”

“Give it up, guys!”

Jeff continued, “Well, Jesus, I know I want You to be as close to me as You can be.”

Jesus asked, “Do you know Scripture says My Spirit will always be with you and even in you?”

... But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will
be in you.

John 14:17, NLT

“Now that is totally weird!” declared Alex.

Jeff said, “I find it comforting.”

The room became quiet. Jesus turned to face Alex directly. “Back on the incident with the boy’s dog, I put an innate sense of right and wrong into you. You might call it a foolish thought, but it was your conscience that I placed within you. Alex, do you know what your father always said when your mom would tell him something you did wrong?”

“No, but he was always tough on me.”

Jesus asked, “Do you remember what he would say?”

“Not really.”

“He would tell your mom, ‘Oh, he’s just a dumb kid.’ He hurt you deeply and you’ve hated him ever since for those words. I can forgive you and remove that hate.”

“I don’t need forgiveness. I did nothing wrong.”

“But you hate.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Like I said, I was there. I am God, Alex. My name is Jesus. You know, the God of the Bible?”

“And I don’t believe the Bible is anything but a storybook. It’s all a bunch of myths.”

Jesus continued, “The hate you feel is not affecting your father anymore. It is, however, hurting you. If you will believe in Me—that I am real and that I can make you whole, I will remove the hate, forgive you, and heal that pain.”

If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matthew 6:14-15, NLT

“What in the world does what you call ‘sin’ have to do with some dumb dog? And besides, why do I need forgiveness? Like I said, I did nothing wrong! My father needs to ask for forgiveness. He’s the one who was always getting down on me. What about him?”

Jesus looked deeply into Alex’s eyes. The room became silent. All eyes were on Jesus.

“Your father doesn’t know Me, just like you. When he does, he will realize kindness was missing in your upbringing.”

“What do you mean, ‘when he does?’”

“I show him kindness all the time. I have faith that My love will finally take hold of him.”

“Yeah, right. That man will never change!”

Jesus asked, “Like you, Alex?”

“Are we talking about that dumb dog again?”

“We’re talking about kindness.”

“So, what about it? My father had no kind words when he spoke to me.”

“What about your lack of kind words for Audrey?”

Alex looked over at Audrey. “Oh, that’s just talk. She knows I like her. Right Audrey?”

Audrey shook her head and said, “Sometimes you can’t prove it by me.”

“What do you mean? You know I understand you work with Neal. I respect that.”

Audrey lashed out, “That’s all you want! Respect, respect, respect! You demand it from all of us. You treat us like we should

understand you are the boss of a chain gang in the South! Sometimes you seem to like me, but sometimes you treat me like dirt, Alex.”

Jeff moved to the front of his seat. “I don’t like the chain gang analogy, but Audrey’s got something there. Being boss doesn’t mean you act that way all the time. You make mistakes, you know.”

“Yeah, everybody does,” barbed Alex. “But why is everybody getting down on me? I have done nothing wrong!”

Rolando stepped into the fray saying, “Hey Alex, what about that dog again?”

“Get off it, Rolando, or I’ll talk about your driving.”

“What’s wrong with my driving? I haven’t gotten a ticket in over a year.”

Hope and Neal were talking off to the side. Their laughter brought the taunting to a halt, so they stopped when everyone looked at them. Hope said, “Neal was just telling me about when Warren reassigned him from being a pilot. How he no longer has dreams about crashing and burning.”

“Do tell, Neal!” exclaimed Rolando.

“I used to have nightmares about landing on a brush fire. I don’t know where they came from since I never flew in conditions anything like that. They kept me awake many nights. There were other things going on, but Warren offered me the position of director and I snapped it up.”

“Is that why you don’t even want to go up on a flight?” Rolando stood and faced Neal with an uncharacteristic look of concern on his face. “I mean, what if this new pilot doesn’t work out? Would Warren let you fly, then?”

“No, I’m sure Warren would find another pilot quickly enough. There are lots of them in the Colorado Springs area.”

Rolando kept pressing the issue. “So, does this mean you are afraid to fly?”

Neal walked around to the soft leather chair Rolando just vacated and sat down.

“Hey, I didn’t leave permanently!” said an only slightly joking Rolando.

Neal looked up from his newly gained seat and said, “Not afraid. I just found working on the ground was more to my liking.”

Jesus looked over at everyone, resting his gaze on those who were looking back at Him and asked a question. “When you run into a situation where you think you must leave something you used to enjoy, and you pray, what do you hope might happen?”

Neal pondered his words carefully and said, “I found my love of flying at the Air Force prep school. I got my pilot's licenses and flew for several years. However, when these dreams, nightmares really, came every night, I got so uncomfortable I had to talk to Warren. That’s when I stopped flying.”

Jesus said, “I saw your pain. I also saw your fear.”

“Maybe fear—definitely confusion.”

“If you came to Me looking for answers, I would have helped you. You cried out ‘God help me’ some nights, but did you really think I would?”

“Not sure,” admitted Neal.

“Did any of the rest of you have a similar experience?”

Rolando gave a little laugh, squirmed in his newly chosen seat, looked in the general direction of Jesus, but did not look directly at Him. “Every time I see the flashing police car lights behind me, I always say a prayer. Then I always pull right over to the side and stop.”

“Do you stop because of Me or the police?”

“The police. They have the power to take my driver’s license away.”

“Why did you bother to pray?”

“I figured You could make the cop go easy on me.”

Jesus asked, “Why do you think I would do that?”

“Wouldn’t You?”

“Were you doing something I should intervene in?”

“I was only going ten over the limit!”

“Was that wrong?”

“I guess.”

Jesus asked, “Did you really think I would intervene?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was just hoping, so I threw up a quick ‘Hail Mary’ prayer.”

Jesus said, “Many people do, Rolando. Most of the time people do not expect Me to do anything, let alone care or even notice. I am grieved when I am considered so lightly. Back to you, Neal. Your flippant cry to God for help—we heard in heaven. We hear all prayers—even the thoughtless ones.”

Jeff shook his head forcefully. “No! I would never think of sending a thoughtless prayer to heaven. Maybe I have unwittingly though. Have I, Jesus?”

The Lord responded, “You have a kind and gentle spirit, Jeff. I love you.”

Behind a sheepish look, Audrey said, “I wouldn’t call me ‘kind and gentle.’ Is that a requirement to be accepted by you?”

“No. However, it shows how close anyone is to Me. My Spirit has many attributes. Kindness and gentleness are just two. There are more.”

But the Holy Spirit produces... kindness... gentleness...
Galatians 5:22-23, NLT

Gloria walked in from the kitchen, saying, “The pies are all cut and ready. They are rich and should put you to sleep all by themselves. I also have water for hot cocoa and decaf tea or coffee ready if anyone wants it with their pie.”

Suzy jumped in, “Speaking of sleep, you guys had big days today, and don’t you have big plans for the festival tomorrow? It’s already ten.”

“You’re right Mrs. Cummings,” said Jeff. “I agree. We all should hit the beds, but I wonder about the weather. We’ll have to wait until morning to find out.”

One by one, they took their plates and mugs to the sink and walked down to their appointed sleeping berths. Lights turned off quickly except for Jeff’s. He always read his pocket Bible every night before retiring. Neal quickly went through his nightly routine and climbed under the covers, expecting sleep to come promptly. However, he tossed and turned, unable to stop thinking. He flipped his pillow repeatedly, trying to settle down. It was no use—he was awake.

Neal thought over the strange events of the day. *Suzy never said how my name came up regarding this party. She’s never even mentioned a complementary flight. This is bizarre. How did this whole thing happen? It’s almost like this isn’t real. And how does Jesus, or whoever He is, fit into this? And why is Hope here? I do not know what I got us into. And what’s with the invitation? If it hadn’t arrived before I left, it would have left us out in the rain or back explaining this to Warren. Something’s got to happen tomorrow to make sense of all this. Then again, maybe not.*

He set his watch and, after a few more pillow flips, drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 14: Saturday Morning, 3:00 a.m.

Suzy woke abruptly to her alarm and realized the guys had to be at the rodeo lot by 4:30. Suzy blurted, “It’s already 3!” Hope was already in the kitchen making an urn of coffee. Neal woke on his own as usual.

Walking up the stairs, Neal saw Hope in shorts and an untied robe. She didn’t notice him. *She is gorgeous. Those legs are perfect. Why in the world did I let her go?* He continued looking her over when she turned.

Hope’s cheeks flushed as she caught him staring. “Good morning, Neal,” she said, quickly gathering her robe. “Impeccable timing—the coffee has almost brewed. Mugs are over there on the counter. Pick out two good ones, would you? I’m sure Suzy has already grabbed her special one. I’d like to go with you guys today. It’s going to be great! It has stopped raining!”

“But it’s still windy. Just listen.”

Being well before dawn, Suzy flipped on the floodlights. Looking at the swaying, creaking aspens, Hope asked, “Does that mean no flying?”

“Precisely. God throws a wrench into lighter than air flight with either rain or wind.”

Suzy turned on TV to catch the weather. Not finding any, she dialed in the down valley radio station: “This just in folks,” blared the announcer. “The long-awaited hot-air balloon festival planned for today in Snowmass has been cancelled because of the windy and rainy conditions. No news yet about tomorrow. More on that when we get word. The full weather report in fifteen. Now back to music with Jim and Sally on WKBP!”

Suzy dropped her head; her voice deadened by the news, “So now what, Neal?”

Just then, Warren called and relayed the same news. Neal said, "I'll get with the organizers and find out what we're doing. I'll call you later, Warren... goodbye."

Alex listened intently from the kitchen. Gripping his mug of coffee and starting downstairs, he called back, "I'll tell the rest." It was now 3:15.

Suzy, sitting in the living room, said quietly, "Well Lord, it looks like we'll all be here today." She leaned back into the pre-dawn solitude.

Hope and Neal looked out the expansive windows. Neal turned behind her, leaned in, and rested his hands on her hips. "Careful there," said Hope

His playful touch warmed Hope to her core. How does he do that to me every time? I must be a pushover.

Suzy became restless and found her mind consumed with the expected problems of entertaining this odd mix of people. As she walked past the library, she heard Jesus' unmistakable voice call to her. "Suzy, it was I who suggested this party. Do not be afraid. I am right here with you. Have you stopped trusting Me?"

Suzy relaxed her shoulders and said, "No, Lord. I haven't stopped trusting You." She walked back and turned the gas fireplace on; it seemed to crackle more loudly than normal in the nearly empty room. Suzy walked to a side table stacked with cozy throws, picked one out, sought her favorite chair, curled up, and settled in.

Hope followed her lead, taking herself and her mug to the blankets and found a recliner. Neal stretched out on a sofa and nodded off into a fitful snore. Jesus stayed in the library's solitude to pray as windblown gusts of rain splashed against the windows.

Snuggled under a down comforter on her puffy pillow-top bed, Audrey stirred to the aroma of coffee. After seeing the vintage wind-up clock on her bedside table reading 4:45, she bolted upright. Throwing on last night's clothes, she charged down the stairs and yelled, "Hey everybody, we overslept! We are due to launch in fifteen minutes! Hurry."

Alex grumbled, "It's cancelled."

"Cancelled?" Audrey yelled. "What are you talking about? Alex, stop dreaming! Hurry!" She rushed upstairs but found no one in the kitchen.

Suzy called to her, "Relax Audrey. They canceled the festival today due to weather. Just look outside."

Audrey stood motionless. "What? Is that true? Where's Neal?" A moan in the living room gave the answer. Neal sleepily walked into

the kitchen and said, “That’s right Audrey—everything is off for today. It’s all true.”

Suzy threw up her hands and exclaimed, “True, true, true. That’s what Richard always said. ‘It’s true, the house will be closed for a week. We can make do—yes, it’s true. Yeah, the delayed siding, that’s true’ or ‘It’s true that it’ll just take three more days.’ He tried to tell me all kinds of things were true. I couldn’t believe him. Often many things weren’t true.”

Jesus walked in from the library just as Suzy made her declaration. He said, “Finding what is true is only useful for a short time. Finding out the truth in a situation is more important. Consider this: gravity being real is true, but Jesus being the only way to God is the truth.”

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 14:6, NKJV

Just then, Jeff appeared. “I’ve heard you both talking. I’m a little confused about the difference between something being true, yet not being the truth.”

Jesus said, “Not that something that seems true isn’t. The perspective simply changes when you seek the truth.”

Jeff continued, “On the gravity example, how do you think differently from a truth perspective?”

“It is true that gravity works on Earth. Consider the astronauts. They live in a weightless environment. They only have gravity when they make it artificially. So, you can defeat gravity even though it’s true. Truth is, I put gravity in effect when I made the universe,” said Jesus.

They drifted to the living room. Alex got his coffee and walked in saying, “That’s fine, but other planets have gravity—it isn’t just on the Earth.”

“That’s right Alex. Just remember, I made the other planets, suns, galaxies, everything, and made them spin, so I made gravity. That’s the truth.”

All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

John 1:3, NKJV

Alex said, “Never heard that before.”

It got quiet. Finally, Jeff said, “Before we get too deep, what about breakfast?”

In a cheery voice, Rolando said, “Good question, Jeff. I rarely eat until we have the passengers back to their rides. But this morning, I’m famished. Don’t know why.”

Suzy said, “It’s a little early, but let’s get moving, ladies. It’s going to take a little time to pull this all together. Let’s get with Gloria to see what she has up her sleeve and what she needs help with.”

Gloria was already in the kitchen and said, “I’ll do a sheet of bacon and while it’s cooking, maybe one of you can butter some bread and the rest come help me. I just bought some lettuce and there are still tomatoes on the vine in the courtyard. There’s more than enough for this crew. Come on down! Let’s cook, ladies.”

Suzy said, “I’ll get the drinks.”

Neal said, “Don’t worry about the drinks, I’ll get them.”

Gloria grabbed a basket sitting next to the door and said, “I’ll be right back with the tomatoes.” Audrey went to work laying out strips of thick sliced bacon filling four large pans. “If nothing else, we’re going to have plenty of great bacon.”

Hope asked, “What kind of bread do you have for these many sandwiches?”

“I have thick sliced bakery bread in the freezer that should be perfect for this.”

“Do you think we should toast it?”

“Oh, absolutely,” replied Gloria. “Here are the cookie sheets we can use under the broiler. That will toast them quickly.”

Audrey pulled lettuce out of the crisper and broke it into sandwich-sized layers while Hope sliced tomatoes. “These are so ripe, Gloria! Did you say you got them from right here?”

“Yes. I grow them year-round in the little greenhouse on the sunny side of the courtyard.”

Gloria took charge, saying, “Okay girls, let’s assemble and deliver this meal!” Soon a BLT feast was on the table.

Hope asked, “Would it be okay, Jesus, if I said the blessing over this meal?”

“Yes. Gratitude is good. Now is fine.”

“Father, we praise You and thank You for this gathering, this food, but especially for the fellowship. I pray for the healing of the broken-hearted amongst us. We rejoice in Your love. Amen.”

Jeff said, “Amen. Wow, girls. These are the best-looking BLT’s I’ve ever seen! Yum.”

Alex snatched his and took an ostentatious, crunchy mouthful.

“You are always so gross, Alex! Being the lead crew member, you really ought to have better manners,” complained Audrey.

“Oh, give it up Aud. You’re not so perfect, you know.”

“Whatever. And don’t call me Aud. My name is Audrey, and I’m just as perfect as you.”

After they enjoyed brunch, each one took their plates to the kitchen and drifted down into the living room.

Neal sat across from Jesus. “You know, Jesus, I have a question about this religion you started. When you said that You are the only way to God... well... back in school... the guys all talked about other religions being just as valid as Christianity. When they talked about God, which wasn’t very often, the consensus was that there are many ways to God. Are You and God really that exclusive? So, no insult intended, but what makes You and the Bible the only correct way to God?”

“Exactly!” yelled Alex. “And besides, like I’ve said before, and I’m saying again. I don’t even think there is a God. What do you say to that, Jesus?”

“What makes you so sure there isn’t a God?”

“Well, for instance, I’ve never seen a miracle.”

Jesus said, “Yes, but many people have.”

“Well, not me.”

“There are many books with stories that talk about people having or seeing miracles. You can find them in any bookstore, Alex.”

“I probably wouldn’t believe them, anyway. I know what I’m talking about.”

Audrey piped up, “There you go again, being so sure that the way you think is the only way to think.”

Rolando leaned over toward Alex. “You do sort of think that way, Bro.”

“Oh, get off it guys—I’m just saying I’ve never seen God or a miracle.”

“What about Jesus, who is sitting right here?” asked Neal.

“Like I’ve said, I think he’s an actor. He may be some kind of lord, but not God. I’m sure of it!” huffed Alex.

“What about the glow around Him?” asked Neal.

“Haven’t figured that out yet, *but I will.*”

“I’m patient with you, Alex. You might notice the Bible shows many people realizing I am real and the Lord.”

[The centurion] said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!”
Mark 15:39, NKJV

... that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and
that believing you may have life in His name.

John 20:30-31, NKJV

Alex said, “And I don’t believe the Bible is all that true either!”

“Alex, you have two choices. Believe Who I say I am or do not believe Me at all. There is no middle ground, even though many say there is.”

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.

2 Timothy 3:16, NLT

Alex continued, “What is the big deal about the Bible? I’ve read it, and it makes little sense to me.”

Suzy broke in. “I doubt you have read the whole Bible, Alex. Few people have. If you just read the book of John with an open mind, I’m sure you would think differently. It’s near the middle of the Bible.”

Audrey quipped, “Yeah, but that would mean Alex has an open mind. Not likely!” Laughter erupted.

Jesus said, “Anyone who accepts Me will receive the Holy Spirit. He, the Spirit, will bring understanding.”

But without faith it is impossible to please Him,
for he who comes to God must believe that He is,
and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6, NKJV

“Okay, okay. For crying out loud—pick on someone else, will you? I wish we were flying.”

Jeff said, “Not me. This is great fun.”

“I’m really enjoying this, too,” said Tony.

Hope said, “I believe because You were with me as I was taking care of my mom. There were many times I was at the end of my rope, and I’d cry out to You. Somehow, You sent someone by or had someone call just at those critical times when I needed to hear

another human voice. You would lift me up and strengthen me to keep going a little longer. I could always see my way clear again. Thank You, Lord.”

“Yeah, I guess I believe, too,” said Neal. “At least I did when I was a kid. I often had dreams about You, Jesus. I remember one vivid dream where we threw a ball back and forth. And You were outside with me when I played fireman on a ladder. Yeah, I believe. And in the dream, You looked just like You do here.”

Jesus asked, “What about you, Jeff?”

“You know I’m a believer. I talk with you all the time, Lord. It’s sort of odd sharing You with everyone here. Our times together are so intimate. I love it when we get together and talk. You know, Lord?”

“How well do you think you know me, Rolando?”

“I talk to You, God. It’s usually when I’m in trouble or I’m having difficulty with something. You know I read the Bible occasionally, but You also know how tough life can be sometimes. I just have little time to read. I know I should try to find some.”

Hope, coming back from getting a Pepsi said, “I pray and read the Bible almost every day. I feel overwhelmed with day-to-day stuff when I don’t.”

Rolando asked, “How do you have time to read every day? Don’t you have problems at home that take a lot of time? Do you have kids? I have three. My family is large when you count grandma, papa, the uncles, and cousins. I’m always too busy to read. They all live around me.”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” answered Hope. “No, nothing like that for me, although when I was the only one caring for my mother, it took a lot of time. But I still found time to read the Bible.”

Jesus smiled and said, “I’m always available to help when I’m invited to be part of your busy lives. I don’t require a lot of time.”

“You sure helped shake me out of my planned pity party by suggesting this party!” exclaimed Suzy. “I trust You will go back with me to my shattered existence when we all go back home. Anyway, the house I expect to be going back to was once called a home. I sure wish you could ride back with me in my car, Jesus.”

“I am with you any time you call on Me.”

“I know, but I mean physically.”

“I often affect physical things in what people call the real world.”

Jesus looked at Alex and said, “You might call them miracles if you are looking for them. Sometimes they are big and sometimes they are unnoticed. I love doing things with My people.”

Fixing His gaze upon Audrey, Jesus asked, “Do you remember when you called out to Me the time a balloon almost went over the steep downhill slope leading to a lake?”

“I do, Lord.”

“Do you also remember having more strength than you thought you had and being able to pull on the drop line quickly and maneuver it away from the edge? You said, ‘Wow, that was a surprise!’ Can you believe it was Me who gave you that additional strength?”

Audrey exclaimed, “Wow—I do now! Thank You, Jesus. You know, I can remember lots of times You must have been helping me physically. You really do that stuff, don’t You. Yes, I believe.”

Neal said, “I remember a time when a gust of wind blew the balloon I was piloting, and Audrey did the same thing.”

“You’re right Neal. I remember that time, too.”

“And you believe you can do this now. Right, Audrey?”

Audrey relaxed her shoulders, breathed in deeply, and said, “I really do, Lord!”

“There is a Scripture that talks about that kind of believing.”

... Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

Matthew 22:21-22, NIV

Rolando broke in, saying, “One time my wife was helping me when I had to jack up our porch to place stronger support under it. Marie lifted her end that was still sagging while I leaned over to pick up another 2x4. That’s all it took. I heard the crash behind me—the porch fell on her. I cried out to You, ‘God, help!’”

I ran to the corner where it trapped her. I lifted the entire end of it! It was much heavier than I can pick up. I’m strong, but that was way beyond me. Marie fell back and pulled out her leg and foot. She was completely unhurt, no problems at all. She wasn’t cut or anything! This is what You’re talking about. Right, God? I call that a big miracle!”

Jesus said, “I do, too, and I had fun helping. I’m glad you see I do matter when someone cries out to Me.”

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13, NKJV

Alex immediately jumped up and burst out loudly, “Now there you all go again. Taking something that showed exceptional strength—I accept that—but then saying God did it is taking it too far. I’ve heard of other times it happened. Like when someone lifted a car off a kid that was hit. He didn’t credit God.”

“It still could have been God, Alex. Maybe the guy just didn’t know God,” answered Neal.

“That’s right, Neal. I cause many more things to happen all over My creation than any human being could know or understand.”

... Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man
The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.
1 Corinthians 2:9, NKJV

Jeff raised his hand in praise and recognition of what Jesus said. “When I look up at the stars, I am amazed they are up there by Your hand, Lord. You keep the entire universe under Your control. Isn’t that right, Lord?”

“Yes. However, some things take more work keeping everything running smoothly—like people, Jeff.”

After sitting in the background reveling in her time with Neal, Hope came into the conversation. “I know something about people impeding things running smoothly.

“At work, I regularly tell division heads what I need from them, and when I need it, to give my accounting sheets to upper management. Often, I’m running around from office to office collecting what they should give to me if people were allowing me to run my department smoothly. Why don’t people understand my needs, Jesus?”

Jesus asked, “What do they need from you to meet your expectations?”

“It isn’t my job to meet their needs. Is it? I’m over them. I’m accounting manager. They are only department heads. Don’t they have to help me?”

“Are you asking Me what to do?”

Hope answered, “Sort of, Lord. They all rub me the wrong way.”

Suzy said, “You are probably not the only one dealing with workers who are slacking off, Hope. Maybe the remedy needs to come from your superiors. They may have to make doing things on time a requirement of employment.”

“I don’t feel good about asking a superior to do that. I don’t want to lose *my* job,” cried Hope.

Suzy asked, “What do you mean, a superior? I’m a VP, you know. If this is a major problem, I can take it to the president myself. Do you really think this is a corporate-wide problem or does it have something to do with just a few department heads?”

“I don’t know. You can probably find that out, too?”

“Maybe. I’ll see.”

Jesus said, “Managing others is a talent and a skill that grows by practice, both given by My Father to him who asks. Scripture says much about relationships with others.”

... Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves.

Don’t look out only for your own interests,
but take an interest in others, too.

Philippians 2:3-4, NLT

Hope rolled her eyes, swallowed hard, and said, “Ouch, Jesus.”

Suzy agreed with Jesus. “I know when I think about the person across the table from me when I’m in negotiations, the result is noticeably better. But even with knowing that, it’s hard to do when the conversation gets heated.”

Jesus said, “That is the time to remember Scripture.”

Hope shook her head in disagreement. “That is definitely easier said than done. When I get upset about something, the thought of remembering a Scripture never crosses my mind. I pray and ask for Your help when I’m having difficulty. You know that, Jesus. And I read the Bible. However, I really don’t have time to sit down and *study* the Bible, let alone *memorize* Scripture.”

Jesus showed compassion, but asked, “Before you became an accountant, did you know which side of the ledger to put the entries?”

“Well, no, of course not.”

“How did you figure it out?”

Hope answered, “I took classes. Oh, I get it—I studied. So that’s what I need to do with the Bible?”

Jesus asked, “Sound difficult?”

“It sounds time-consuming.”

“Did you always read a textbook fully concentrating and scrutinizing it word for word?”

“No. Sometimes I flipped pages quickly until I found the answer I needed.”

“Reading the Bible can almost work the same way.”

“How?” asked Hope.

Suzy stepped in, saying, “I can help, Jesus. There are some easy-to-get tools to make finding an answer quickly. The one I like is a concordance. Every word of the Bible is in it, like in a dictionary. You just look up a word that interests you, and it gives you that word in several scriptures so you can easily find what you’re looking for.”

A little taken back that she didn’t know about this, Hope said, “Really? I mean, I’ve heard the word, but I never thought much about it. I always thought you had to know the Bible word for word and if you didn’t it was like a foreign language.”

Suzy reassured her, saying, “I didn’t know what a blessing one was until I asked my pastor how to find out what Scripture said about a particular problem I was having. He got me started. I didn’t know about it—and there are a lot more tools like topical Bible reference works, dictionaries, commentaries, and many other resources.”

Hope’s shoulders snapped back. Her head raised, and a smile slowly creased her lips. “I never put two and two together. This sounds great.”

Jesus said, “It might also help you that many of My people who know the Bible word-for-word fail to actually know Me. They know about Me, but rarely know the living God at all. I want to know people personally and I want them to know Me, the real Me.”

Suzy walked toward Hope with her phone to show how a concordance worked. Hope kept shaking her head back and forth, not believing she missed all of this. “Mom didn’t have a concordance, or at least I never heard her talk about it. I just thought she had read the Bible for so long she committed much of it to memory.”

Jeff walked over to Suzy and her phone, equally interested. He said, “I never knew about this either. I wonder if there’s a pocket version. I enjoy reading the printed word.”

Suzy answered, “Probably not. They are quite large. You would be much better off using your phone, or maybe a tablet.”

Tony was listening to all of this, however, he didn’t join in. He folded his arms over, crossed his legs, and sat back. Jesus stood and ambled over in Tony’s direction. Jesus said, “You are a quiet and inquisitive man. You listen very well. What do you understand about the current conversation?”

Tony answered, "I'm glad I have *The Church*. Everything I know about God comes from The Church. I know I can trust it."

Audrey spun her head toward Tony. "How do you know you can trust *your* church? It's only one of many. I think it's just one of the Christian religions. The only time I went to one of *your* churches, it all seemed bizarre. Singing in Latin and kneeling on cue? What's that all about, anyway?"

Jesus said, "It is simply one way of showing honor and reverence to Me. It isn't the way you grew up knowing Me. But in Tony's defense, I know he is not comfortable with you dissecting the Bible, either."

"You got that right! The Bible is the word of God and that's that. You just have to believe it," barked Tony.

"Religion is man's way of trying to reach God, but it doesn't work. I am the way to God," said Jesus.

... I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one can come to the Father except through me.

John 14:6, NLT

Neal turned his palms up, "Do You mean no religion is necessary? If there were no churches at all, I doubt any of us would know anything about You."

Jesus answered, "Religion comes from man. Churches that know, obey, and love Me come from God."

"I know some churches don't know You because they hardly mention Your name. I've heard about them from talking to the guys at military school. Now, I must ask, what happens to the people who go to those churches? Do they all go to hell?"

Tony, now fully involved with the dialogue, said, "Yes, Jesus. What is the most correct church? I think it is *The Church*. And what happens to people who don't attend?"

Audrey waved Tony away with disgust and said, "Jesus, You need to handle him. He's gotten a long way away from any sense of normalcy. *The Church!* What pride! Yuck!"

"Okay, Audrey. *My Church*. Is that better?"

"No!" She wheeled around and stormed out of the room.

Not understanding what was wrong with Audrey, Tony shook his head and looked at Jesus through crunched shoulders, questioning what was going on.

Alex demanded, "All right, Tony, what did you do now?"

"I do not know."

Alex, smelling a good fight, continued to pry. “Did you insult her? Just what did you do? Jesus, what did he do?”

“They disagreed over how best to worship Me. It happens all the time. It grieves the Holy Spirit when My people are not in unity, and it particularly saddens Him when the way believers act goes against all that is God—love.”

“Really, what did they fight about?” he taunted. Alex wouldn’t let it go. It was as if he wasn’t listening, couldn’t hear, or didn’t want to.

Gloria broke the tension by announcing, “Hey everybody, wash up. I’m almost ready to serve lunch. You can talk later after you’ve had some food. Come on, now.”

Chapter 15: Saturday afternoon

While everyone drifted toward their preferred seats around the table, Neal resumed his leadership duties and dialed the festival organizers. “Hi, this is Neal from Above All Else. Do you have any decisions about what’s happening tomorrow?”

“From the forecast I heard it’s supposed to clear up this afternoon, so tomorrow we should be good to go.”

“Oh, that’s great. We’ll be ready.”

Alex nudged Neal and whispered, “Ask if the schedule is the same.”

“What time is the first flight?”

“Okay, that’s fine.”

“I’ll have to call our office to see how many rides we still have. I’ll call you back with our plans. Okay. Thanks.”

Neal called Warren and found only one passenger canceled, leaving three, plus any impromptu show ups. He called the organizers back. “Hi, Neal again. We have three definite plus any unarranged flights. I trust that works for you?”

“Good. See you tomorrow morning around five?”

“Great, Goodbye.”

Neal returned to the party. Gloria and Suzy put out cheese and crackers, hot pretzels, and bakery cookies. Although rain was still coming down, it seemed lighter, and without the wind blowing it sideways.

Hope watched Gloria and Suzy, saying, “Gloria! When did you get all that food? It looks great!”

She said, “I’m planning on putting out mini-quiche and fried shrimp shortly. Will that be, okay?”

Hope looked at Jesus with raised brows.

Jesus replied, “Sounds delicious!”

Suzy said, “After the meal, I’ll show you all the fun places this house offers.”

“Like what?” asked Jeff.

“Like a game room with a pool table, board games, a hot tub, and you have got to see the bowling alley!”

“You’re kidding!” exclaimed Rolando.

“No, really. Oh, and there’s also an exercise room and a small theater.”

“Now that’s what I call luxury!” said Jeff.

Soon after eating, the party guests hastened down to the basement level to check out the opulent amenities.

Alex and Jeff lined up at the bowling alley. The single ribbon of wood coursed between the exercise room and stairwell. The alley had gutters and a ball return. Marbled red, blue, and lavender balls sat at one end of the rack while an assortment of traditional balls filled the rest of the spaces.

“Hey Jesus!” called out Alex. “Want to bowl a few frames?” He calmly smiled and walked to the door at the far end.

Jesus called back, “You fellows have fun. I’ll reset the pins and return the balls for you.”

A wide-eyed Alex said, “I never expected that.”

Jeff said quietly, “It doesn’t surprise me knowing Him like I do.”

Looking at Jeff, Alex shook his head, finding a ball that suited him. Jeff found his quickly. Neal invited Hope to play a game of pool. Audrey and Tony, thinking Audrey would house them at her friend’s condo, had packed bathing suits for the hot tub. They grabbed their stuff and went to change.

Rolando asked Suzy what she would like to do. She showed him to the pinball machine her dad loved. Rolando looked for the coin slot, but Suzy turned on a switch under the front. He said, “Thanks, Suzy” and was ready to do battle.

Suzy decided a nice quiet puzzle was exactly what she needed to unwind the tension shadowing her. Looking at unopened puzzles, she chose a cross-country ski trail nestled below a village with a harvest moon lighting up the scene. It helped her relive many pleasant memories.

At the pool table, Hope once again saw Neal as her knight in shining armor. He carried an aura of pride that intoxicated her.

Neal handed her a cue stick after sighting down its length to see if it was straight. *I hope I get to teach Hope how to play, a great excuse to place my arms around her.*

“Thanks.”

“Have you ever played? You might be a ringer with that cute smile of yours.” She giggled.

“Okay, I’ll take a chance.” He twisted chalk over his stick.

Hope, watching closely, did the same.

After racking the balls, Neal handed her the white one. “Show me what to do with this, funny man,” she said as she handed it back. He grinned and flashed a knowing smile. Hope gave him a sassy smile back, which made Neal more interested. Finally, after some laughter, Neal hovered over her, helping her stroke the cue ball several times along the side before letting her make the first break. She stroked a shot into the rack and the balls clacked loudly around the table.

“Nice break, Hope!”

“Thank you, sir,” bowing slightly with a big smile.

“Keep going, it’s still your turn.”

“What do I do?”

“Strike the white one into any colored ball and send it to a pocket.”

“Show me?”

He leaned over her. “Like this.” His cheek pressed against her neck. She breathed in his cologne like the fresh air at Christian camp by the lake. She realized her inattention to the game was noticeable, but she didn’t care. Not only did he smell great, but his presence over her also made her legs feel rubbery. She wondered what it would be like to give in to Neal. However, knowing she was a good girl, she pushed the thought away. But it made her want to leave the table and wrap her arms around him. His touch sent waves of electricity across her. Neal backed away to give her room to play.

I wish he didn’t do that. Worried the pounding in her chest would interrupt the heady quiet, she tried to concentrate and follow his directions. “Wow! Look! I did it. Right?”

“Only the cue ball, the white one, can’t go in at the same time.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“You did great, though. Why don’t you take another shot? Want me to help you line this one up, too?”

“Like the last one, no. Will you teach me better?” She blushed but readily leaned over the table again. He touched her back, causing her to shudder in anticipation. She accepted his overtures gladly, albeit with caution. The warmth of his presence made her readily laugh and enjoy him. They shoulder and hip bumped, rubbed each other’s arms, talked, and joked just like young teens. He turned and

leaned toward her, giving a soft kiss on her cheek. She wanted more, but he re-chalked his pool stick instead.

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Suzy occasionally thought about the others, but her mind continued to mull over Richard. She struggled to make sense of his departure from faith and becoming absorbed with getting “things.” Starting deep within her soul and making their way through her lips came repetitive and deep sighs.

Her attention drifted to Jesus, wondering where He was. Leaving the game room to Rolando, she looked but did not find Him anywhere. She walked upstairs. Not finding Jesus there, a heartfelt fear that He might have left surged through her. *Did He not like playing? Is He mad at me? This is terrible! Did He really leave?* She ran downstairs in a panic and cried out, “Has anyone seen Jesus?”

“Yeah, He’s running the ball return and resetting the pins,” shouted Jeff.

Suzy walked quickly to the back of the alley, looked at Him, and asked breathlessly, “What are You doing back here?”

Jesus said, “I’m serving. The two of them needed My help. Why are you surprised?”

“Why are *You* doing this?”

“I am a servant to all. Why would I not do this?”

... If anyone desires to be first,
he shall be last of all and servant of all.

Mark 9:35b, NKJV

Incredulously, Suzy said, “Yeah, but You are God! You shouldn’t be doing this kind of thing. It’s dirty work—look at Your hands—they are all black!”

“Look more closely at My hands.”

Suzy gasped as she saw the nail wounds. She choked back a sob, looked at Jesus, and broke into deep sobs. They stood motionless for some time.

Alex yelled, “Hey. What are the two of you doing back there? Talking? Come on, we’re wait-ting!”

The ball returned. Suzy and Jesus did not. They were immediately back in the living room.

“I know anything You do shouldn’t surprise me, but just how did You do that?”

“By the Holy Spirit.”

Now when they came up out of the water,
the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away.

Acts 8:39a, NKJV

Suzy smiled, but asked, “Won’t the others miss us, especially Alex and Jeff bowling?”

Jesus smiled knowingly. “They won’t mind setting each other up, and the others seem too preoccupied to care. They will all find us when it is time.”

“Okay. Why are we here, though?”

“Weren’t you thinking about Richard?”

“Yes. I was wondering how he left You after he made a commitment back when we were in college.”

Jesus explained, “He committed to the good feelings he had and to your excitement over his decision. However, his heart was not toward Me.”

The Lord continued, “I am the only One who knows for sure. It is not for you to be, as some in My church call themselves “fruit checkers.” Those people look at others and judge whether they know Me by how they act. Judging others is not for you to do. Only through righteousness should one judge.”

Do not judge according to appearance,
but judge with righteous judgment.”

John 7:24, NKJV

“I would like to know—what is righteousness?” asked Suzy.

“Correctness or rightness in God’s eyes.”

“Well then, since none of us can see through God’s eyes—no one should judge another. Right?”

Jesus nodded, “Well spoken.”

“Does that mean Richard won’t go to heaven?”

“Only the two of us will know.”

“Will I go to heaven?”

“Read and understand the scriptures. The Bible is clear about going to heaven. Search out the answers you believe are correct.”

Jesus continued, “Do not judge Richard or anyone else. Live as the scriptures say and keep praying for him.”

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks;

for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NKJV

Hope and Neal made their way into the living room. “We were wondering where you guys went,” said a smiling Hope. “We had fun! Did the two of you just talk?”

Jesus smiled and said, “No. We both played.”

Suzy said, “Well, He didn’t. He worked.”

“Worked on what?” asked a surprised Neal.

Jesus said, “The guys took our places at the bowling alley.”

Suzy chuckled and excused herself.

Hope inquired, “I guess everyone else is still downstairs? I heard the pinball machine, and when we left, the boys were still bowling.”

Neal said, “Audrey and Tony must be waterlogged by now. I’m sure they’ll be back up shortly. Don’t know about Rolando.”

Jeff appeared, saying, “Alex wanted to roll a few more frames. He’ll be along. By the way Suzy, this residence is fantastic. What a place for a party.”

“I’m glad you are enjoying it.”

Jeff continued, “Hi Jesus. You sure act differently than I thought You would.”

“How did you expect Me to act?”

“No, I mean, You act wonderful. I just didn’t expect You to get so involved in bowling. It was great, You just surprised me. And I don’t understand the glow around You.”

“Do I frighten you?” asked Jesus.

“No. I can’t say that. But I wonder if this is the way we will all look when we get to heaven? I mean, will we look like we do now, only glowing?”

“The Bible has much wisdom concerning heaven. Consider these scriptures among many, Jeff.”

Now we see but a dim reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:12, BSB

Dear friends, we are already God’s children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is.

1 John 3:2. NLT

Jeff asked, “It seems like we will be something like You, and those that are already in heaven will know us like when they knew us here on Earth. Is that right?”

Jesus said, “The Holy Spirit will give understanding and revelation to all of God’s kids when they ask for it. Keep seeking and asking. Much will become clear to you.”

Rolando, looking somewhat lost, leaned over toward Neal. “Hey, boss, now that the rain seems to have slowed down, do you think the ‘Balloon Glow’ will go on tonight?”

Neal replied, “The organizers said they have cancelled everything for today.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean tonight, boss.”

Neal answered, “Actually it does. She said so.”

“Should I take the trailer down to the launch lot now? To save a suitable spot for the morning?”

“No, I’d rather take our chances. I think it is too risky to leave the trailer even with the hitch locked. They do not supervise the lot at night. Just the occasional police car drives by.”

“Good thinking, Neal,” said the newly arrived Alex. “Remind me what time the contact said we fly in the morning?”

“First flight lifts around 5:00.”

“Did Warren say when our passengers expect to arrive?”

Neal replied, “I’m about ready to call Warren to find out if he knows more.”

Alex said, “Yeah, and decide what time *we* actually fly—you know I hate standing around.”

“The passengers determine when we lift off, Alex. You know that.”

“Yeah, but you have a way with them. I hope these are good ones.”

Neal asked Alex, “What has you so edgy? You’re normally more in control.”

“No problem. I guess this whole Jesus thing is getting to me. How can this guy know so much about me? I’ve never even seen him before.”

Tipping his head toward Jesus, Neal challenged, “Maybe you ought to ask Him.”

Alex shook his head. “No, not yet. I still have to figure this out for myself.”

“Suit yourself but aren’t you the one who usually asks all the questions. Are you afraid of Him?”

“Come off it, Neal. You know me better than that.”

“Just asking, Alex.”

Hope sauntered in Suzy’s direction and sat next to her. “What can I do for you, lady?” asked Suzy.

“Actually, would you mind if I went for a hike? The rain has really slowed down, and I expect to leave Monday. I’m looking forward to walking some trails in the mountains.”

Suzy nodded. “Fine idea, Hope, but I doubt you’ll be alone. I’m certain these guys will want to work off some pent-up energy.”

Hope laughed and said, “I don’t mind if they can keep up with me, but they have to find their own way back if they lag!”

“I’m sure Alex is up to the challenge.”

Hope asked, “Could you point out some good trails?”

“Easy, moderate, or hard?” came the answer.

“Moderate. I want a minor challenge. I have been sitting at a desk for the last couple of months. Well, you know, Suzy. We’ve been busy.”

Suzy walked to the entry and opened the credenza drawer. “Take your pick, Hope,” handing her a handful of trail maps. “I hear the Brush Creek Nature Trail is nice this time of year, but there are too many to keep track of.”

Hope raised her brows and said, “Does it start in the immediate area?”

“You mean from right here at the house? No, you must drive to reach the trailheads. However, the mountains start right behind us. They marked no trails per se, but you’re free to go see what you can find—snowmobiles travel all around here, so they must leave some trails behind.”

“Sounds like fun,” replied Hope. I think that’s exactly what I’ll do!”

Looking impish, Suzy said, “You could always ask Jesus to go with you. He wouldn’t get lost!”

“Great idea!” Hope walked over to Him and asked.

Jesus lifted His brows and said, “I thoroughly enjoy doing things with My people. I love being around what I made you call nature. I would love to go.”

“Okay then!” She called everybody to her and laid out the plan, asking who would like to come.

Alex derided, “I’ll go—I’d like to see Jesus hike in sandals.”

“You’re useless, Alex,” said an acerbic Audrey.

“You’re getting on my nerves, too, A-u-d-r-e-y. Just back off.”

“Then try to calm your nerves big boy, cause I’m coming!”

“Who else?” quizzed Hope.

Neal waved them off and left to use the phone. Some went, mostly hoping to interact with Jesus. They got ready to go while the others drifted to the kitchen or in front of the fireplace.

Jesus walked out the door first with Hope bopping out after Him. “Wait up, Jesus.”

At the same time, Jesus walked up the stairs to the others. Neal said, “Jesus? I thought You went on the hike with Hope and the crew.”

“I did. But I wanted to stay here with each of you, too.”

“How can You do that?” questioned Neal.

He answered, “I am with all people, all the time they want Me. I am not confined by space or time. They are both only to help people and the rest of My creations.”

“Hi Jesus. You’re here, I’m glad You stayed,” said a surprised Suzy. “Didn’t the idea of a hike sound good to You after all?”

“I am hiking, along with being here with you. Do not be surprised. I am God.”

“I want to assure each of you that My Father has provided for your needs ever since we made man. My Father has several names that describe His character beautifully. One of them, Yahweh Jireh—you might have heard it as Jehovah Jireh—means the Lord my Provider. Suzy, if you will please hand me a few index cards and a pen, I’ll show everyone how it is written in My original language.”

Everyone gathered as He deftly wrote out, יהוה יִרְאֶה “God Provides.” One card for each person.

Neal mused, “Unless He can bring my father back to me or at least take me to him, He has not provided for me. I’ve needed to make a way for myself, but not significantly like my father. For crying out loud, he is fighting huge oil well fires and I’m just flying balloons!”

Jesus answered Neal’s thoughts, “The Father has provided everything you need, Neal.”

“That just isn’t true.”

“Why do you think it is not true?”

“How can it be? I lost my mom. Now, I’m not with my father. He shipped me off to a military school I did not need. You have not provided my needs!”

Jeff said, “That sort of sounds like you’re talking about what you want, not what you need, Neal.”

Neal asked, “So what’s the difference? I want what I need. Right?”

“Not necessarily,” Jeff continued.

“How’s that, Jeff?”

“I just think you may have a skewed view of what you really need. Maybe military school helped you get where you are now. Think so?”

“Maybe, but military school was a pain because they forced it on me. How can something like that be helpful?”

Suzy sat across from Neal. She said, “I think Neal’s right, Jeff. I had a divorce forced on me. How can that be meeting my needs?”

Jesus asked, “Each of you believe the Bible, don’t you?”

Suzy replied, “I do.” Jeff nodded. Neal groaned and said, “Yes. I guess so. Only, when things really don’t work out right... you know, I think God isn’t home for me. If it doesn’t work in the real world, what good is it?”

“That is a good question, Neal,” responded Suzy.

“I don’t think either of you are right,” said Jeff. “I’ve had many situations where it looked terrible. I just swallowed my pride, sucked it up and in the end, I could usually see God’s hand in it.”

“Have you ever been divorced, Jeff? It really makes you feel abandoned.”

“Not divorced, but I’m a black man if you haven’t noticed. Just walking the streets in a mostly white city makes me feel discounted as a human being. I feel for both of you. I really do. But I think you may miss the big picture.”

Jesus nodded, then said, “It is difficult for finite minds to grasp My words, ‘good for you.’ You must learn to accept that I love you and have only your best interests in mind.”

Neal abruptly whipped his chair around to face Jesus directly. “What could be good about forcing me into military school?”

“Consider your father’s circumstances. The decision he had to make tore at his heart. He loves you deeply,” said Jesus.

“Okay then, have him call me down to Texas!”

“He might. Wouldn’t it be better, though, to honor him and stay? You could please him by writing and telling him how well you are doing. He would love it. There is good in all situations, Neal.”

Neal said, “I just don’t believe you!” and darted off in a huff.

Jesus looked at Suzy and said, “This holds true for you, too.”

Suzy replied, “I know the scripture about all things working out for good, but just like Neal, I have a lot of trouble seeing how divorce will work out after all I put into my marriage.”

“My marriage, not our marriage?” asked Jeff.

“Sure, Richard had something to do with it, but not as much as me!”

Jesus said, “Suzy, look more closely at the scripture you just referenced.”

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

Romans 8:28, NLT

“Do you see that working together for good has much to do with love and with God’s purposes?”

“But I love You and the Father. The Holy Spirit, too.”

“Do you love Our purposes for you no matter what?”

“I can’t say that, exactly.”

Neal walked back in. “I hear You, Jesus. I can’t know everything You are doing. But do I have to simply accept everything that’s going on?”

“You must trust that I am for you, regardless of what you see. However, you must not say, ‘It’s up to God to take care of this or that.’ Pray and seek My will in every situation. Search for the good and work with Me. Do not think you are all alone. I will never leave you. The Bible says so.”

The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

Deuteronomy 31:8, KJV

Jeff jumped up and declared, “That’s exactly right, Jesus! I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Jesus leaned back and said, “Thanks, I’m glad you agree.”

“Sorry to get so self-righteous, Jesus. It’s just that I’ve had to learn these lessons myself. I can honestly tell you that for me, things have all worked out in the end. It’s just that sometimes I had to trust way longer than expected.”

Outside, the rain turned into a light drizzle. Suzy went down to check on the others, turning on the outside lights in case they were late.

As the inside crew enjoyed the conversations with Jesus, the reality that Jesus was also with those on the hike hadn’t crossed their minds.

The LORD is close to all who call on him,
yes, to all who call on him in truth.
Psalm 145:18, NLT

Jesus walked first in line, looking back often to make sure He wasn't moving too quickly. Hope was always second. She remarked, "I'm glad the rain has subsided, Jesus."

"The rain was always pleasant back home. The roads we walked were always dusty. I am looking forward to this."

Audrey, with Tony at her side, followed them closely. She said, "So, where are we going to start, Jesus?"

"I see a trail made by deer up ahead and around that stand of aspen trees on the right."

"Did You plant them?" asked Audrey.

"I did. I spoke them into their places."

She continued, "Do you actually remember doing it, Lord?"

"I do. Yes. Being able to remember is a gift of God for all His creations here on Earth. Those in heaven know all things, so there is no forgetfulness and therefore no need for memory. The joy of experiencing all that is before us is another gift from God. Come on! Let's go!"

He started out quickly, glowing all over. The crew hurried to catch up, the glistening grass sloshing under their feet. A small noisy animal dashed off to the side, angry at the intrusion.

Hope yelled out, "Look at that interesting squirrel! I've never seen one that looks like that."

Jesus said, "That is a marmot. They often live in the mountains. The alpine marmots don't live here, though. They prefer Europe. This one reminds Me of children—he is happy and active just like them."

Jesus excitedly described the mountain creatures, trees, and even wildflowers with absolute joy. He often paused from His youthful pace to let the others catch up. He spoke during one of those respites.

"Creating things like nature is something I enjoy. I love it. But more than the animals and vegetation, I love Our greatest creation—man and woman. I love each of you more than nature.

"Before My Father made all of you, We had the natural. It was beautiful, but it was lonely. The Three of Us got together and planned out how We would make mankind. We designed you with completely free will. We also determined how you would solve problems as they arose. Considering that, My Father looked at Me lovingly and said,

‘make them, but try to make it so they will remember Us. I know You will make Me proud, Son.’ So, I made you all just as you are. Shall we go on?”

The narrow climb rose between hilly rock-strewn areas interspersed with patches of mountain grasses. Columbine flowers burst out on the trail shoulders, and the sun came out. Jesus pointed to all the unique things. He spoke like an excited schoolboy sharing what He made for “show and tell” in grade school.

“Look at that rock, Rolando,” Jesus said with enthusiasm. “Isn’t that like the one you found last year in the mountains around Tucson when you were vacationing with your family?”

Rolando breathlessly looked closely at it and said, “It looks exactly like it! Is this mine?”

“No, this one has more striations. Why don’t you take it, too? They would match well.”

“Yes, definitely. Thank You.”

Jesus also said, “It’s a little heavy. I’ll carry it if you’d like.”

Tony said to Alex, who was now at his side, “I’m really getting into this God, Jesus. He’s just like you and me, Alex.”

“Yeah, maybe. Just don’t get into the habit of thinking he’s God. He just can’t be.”

“You don’t know everything, Alex. Why don’t you just relax and enjoy Him or at least enjoy the time off.”

Alex glared and shook his head.

A little further up, a startled doe and her fawn bounded away into the brush. The buck standing above the trail nervously watching with his head erect, snorted, and ran off to join his family.

Jesus had no trouble walking in His sandals. They were like the ones He wore all the time when He was on the Earth. He arrived first at a field of large rocks in clear view of the lightly dusted ski slopes. It often snowed in the mountains in early fall. The view and cool air invigorated everyone as they sat or leaned against their chosen rock. It was now 4:30. Hope nudged Jesus. “Soon, we should start back down.”

After their rest in the waning sunlight, the troop sadly retreated down the mountain, not noticing Jesus and Hope lagging and whispering.

She asked Jesus, “Why does Neal hate You so much?”

“He doesn’t. He simply dislikes organized religion almost as much as I do.”

“But that dislike keeps him distant from me when I say anything about God. Will he ever be able to accept You?”

Jesus said, “Remember, Hope, Neal only met me when he was a child. Sunday school teaching never registered in his mind. Almost everything he has heard about God came from uninformed classmates in the military. He simply does not know Me.”

“But he can see and talk to You right here.”

“Yes, but once someone decides God is not for them, it is hard to change their mind. Neal equates abuses within religion to represent Me. They do not. So far, Neal believes the lie that I am religion. As you know, there is more to Me than that.”

Hope said, “I think he just needs someone close to tell him about the real Jesus and how it all works. Maybe like Jeff.”

Jesus smiled and said, “Or maybe like you?”

The sliding door opened with a noisy rumble announcing the group’s return. Mud splattered shoes quickly fell to the floor. The hikers made their weary muscles carry them to the kitchen. Coffee and a pot of hot chocolate were ready on the stove. Suzy told everyone to wash up and relax, mentioning the caterers would arrive in about an hour.

Chapter 16: Saturday Evening

The caterers presented a rustic feast befitting the Rocky Mountains—lamb fondue (lamb being one of Colorado's most-famous foods), prime rib, Rocky Mountain oysters, and lobster macaroni and cheese.

After the meal, everyone found their preferred seats in the living room, with the hikers laying back in the recliners. Neal said a few words about tomorrow's work, but then looked thoughtfully in Jesus' direction. "I don't know if I read it or overheard someone say it's possible, but can You actually change things in real life? Really—*change* things?"

Alex said, "Good question, Neal!"

Jeff said, "I know He changed me from the scared little black kid I used to be. Jesus, I know you have changed me for the better."

Neal continued, "Yes, I can see You doing stuff like that, but isn't that just changing attitudes by learning about You? I'm talking about changing *real* things."

"Yeah, like keeping the rain away!" barbed Alex.

"I have stopped and started rain," Jesus said, "in response to prayer." One time, a prophet named Elijah needed it to rain, so he prayed with passion."

Then Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of abundance of rain." So Ahab went up to eat and drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; then he bowed down on the ground, and put his face between his knees, and said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea."

So he went up and looked, and said, "There is nothing." And seven times he said, "Go again."

Then it came to pass the seventh time, that he said, "There is a cloud, as small as a man's hand, rising out of the sea!" So he said,

“Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot, and go down before the rain stops you.’”

Now it happened in the meantime that the sky became black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy rain...

1 Kings 18:41-45, NKJV

Jesus continued, “At another time, I turned the sun back so My people could win a battle.”

On the day the LORD gave the Israelites victory over the Amorites, Joshua prayed to the LORD in front of all the people of Israel. He said,

“Let the sun stand still over Gibeon,
and the moon over the valley of Aijalon.”

So the sun stood still and the moon stayed in place until the nation of Israel had defeated its enemies.

Is this event not recorded in The Book of Jashar? The sun stayed in the middle of the sky, and it did not set as on a normal day. There has never been a day like this one before or since, when the LORD answered such a prayer. Surely the LORD fought for Israel that day!

Joshua 10:12-14, NLT

“My people have asked Me to change many things—often the weather. Farmers habitually ask. People in the way of hurricanes and other storms frequently ask. I stilled a storm back home from a boat filled with My followers.”

When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Silence! Be still!” Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm.

Mark 4:39, NLT

“The weather responds to Me. Many times, major storms have changed their courses because of sincere prayers from My people. God is all powerful. He can change the weather. However, He knows how events will affect people and their faith. Remember, God wants all people to come to Him. He wants to answer your prayers. But you must come to Him in faith, believing. At another time, one of the great men of God needed to confirm what God told him. God responded through the weather.”

Then Gideon said to God, “If you are truly going to use me to rescue Israel as you promised, prove it to me in this way. I will put a wool fleece on the threshing floor tonight. If the fleece is wet with dew in the morning but the ground is dry, then I will know that you are going to help me rescue Israel as you promised.” And that is just what happened. When Gideon got up early the next morning, he squeezed the fleece and wrung out a whole bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, “Please don’t be angry with me, but let me make one more request. Let me use the fleece for one more test. This time let the fleece remain dry while the ground around it is wet with dew.” So that night, God did as Gideon asked. The fleece was dry in the morning,
Judges 6:36-40, NLT

Jesus continued. “However, you cannot ask on a whim or because you want something and expect God to move. You must base it upon faith and trust in God’s timing and His will from an eternal perspective. For instance, a king fell out of favor with God and was told when he would die, however he prayed.”

Then this message came to Isaiah from the LORD: “Go back to Hezekiah and tell him, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of your ancestor David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will rescue you and this city from the king of Assyria. Yes, I will defend this city. ‘‘And this is the sign from the LORD to prove that he will do as he promised: I will cause the sun’s shadow to move ten steps backward on the sundial of Ahaz!’’ So the shadow on the sundial moved backward ten steps.
Isaiah 38:4-8, NLT

The Lord said, “Changing things in the ‘real’ world is easy for Me. It is most important to know that I will act for My people. Father God made all people, but not all people accept Him. It grieves Him deeply. That is why He sent Me—to bring mankind back to Him.”

It was quiet. Only a few leaves falling outside disturbed the atmosphere within the now silent house. Jesus stood and walked to the fireplace, saying, “This reminds Me of being with the disciples around the lake. Fires on the shoreline were a common sight.”

Jeff also rose and drifted over to Jesus. “Did You really stop the Earth from turning?”

Jesus said, “No, that would have destroyed the earth. I added light, which changed the shadow on the sundial. As for day and night not passing for Joshua until he won the battle, you’ll have to wait and ask the Father about that one.”

“Fair enough,” said Jeff. “But what about the fleece?”

Jesus said, “I did that one.”

“Want to tell me more?” asked Jeff.

“Faith will give you the answer to this and so much more. If you could understand everything in the natural, you wouldn’t need Me. Many people believe the lie that only natural things are real.”

Neal joined them at the fireplace. “So, Jesus, are You saying I had faith when I had the dream about You and me playing in heaven when I was a kid?”

“You believed Me with no doubt. You were a little child.”

And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18:3, NIV

Jesus added, “And you trusted I was in heaven with you.”

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God,
and trust also in me.

John 14:1, NLT

Rolando leaned over to Tony and whispered, “This guy really enjoys the Bible. He seems to know it all.”

Tony replied, “Of course He does. He’s God!”

Audrey moved closer to Tony and asked Rolando, “Are you doubting that Jesus is God?”

“It hasn’t become real yet. I’m not sure He is.”

“Who else could do everything you’ve seen so far this weekend?” asked Audrey.

Rolando shrugged his shoulders and said, “I guess.”

Tony reinforced Audrey’s question, “And who else but God glows?”

“I cannot explain that,” admitted Rolando.

“Then just try to trust Jesus. Ask Him your questions. If He has good enough answers, you will know He is God. No human being is that smart,” explained Tony.

The group at the fireplace followed Jesus as He walked directly to Rolando and asked him, “What do you need Me to do that

would convince you that the Father and I are real and that I am here?”

Rolando moved over, face-to-face with Jesus. “I’m not sure, even with the time on the porch. I remember that miracle giving me the experience of peace, and I feel that same peace emanating from Your presence now. Maybe I never put two and two together. I can’t help thinking You couldn’t be here and in heaven at the same time.”

“I am here in the Spirit and in heaven in truth. Can you see Me now?”

“Yes, I do,” replied Rolando. “And You are glowing.”

“That glow is the Glory My Father gave Me.”

Now, Father, bring me into the glory we shared
before the world began.

John 17:5, NLT

Jesus sat down as everyone gathered closely around Him, profoundly interested in His words. “I want all of you to understand I am real, and I speak only truth. The Holy Spirit spoke God’s truth when He inspired men of old to speak and write. They recorded those words in the Holy Bible. The words I speak here, however, only each of you can document. You must decide if I inspired these. Remember, you only hear Me through your finite understanding. I am enjoying being here and talking with you all.”

Hope and Suzy listened to the conversation after returning from the kitchen. Gloria put the finishing touches on a beautiful triple chocolate layer cake for later.

Neal abruptly began talking about work on Sunday. Audrey declared, “Party pooper!”

“We have three flights. The first one starts at 5:00. Soo—let’s get our act together and get some sleep.”

Suzy asked, “When do you think you’ll finish so I can have lunch ready?”

Neal said, “Oh, I didn’t think we’d come back when we’re done. We’ll just pack up and head back.”

“Do you have to? I thought with all of us getting to know each other so well and Jesus being here, that we would have a pleasant Sunday afternoon together.”

“I thought you said we have nothing scheduled until Friday, boss. I’d love to spend more time hearing Jesus. Besides, the food is great!” said Rolando.

Neal thought for a minute. “I’ll have to call Warren. It will concern him if we don’t show up.”

“Well, get to it, boss.”

“What about you, Hope? Didn’t you say you were free until Tuesday?”

“Yes.”

Suzy questioned Neal about timing in the morning, which turned out to be the same as today.

Neal pulled out the wall telephone in the kitchen, dialed and spoke briefly with Warren. “Okay guys, if Suzy wants us, we can stay until Tuesday,” as Neal took in a deep breath and shook the tension out of his shoulders.

“Suzy—Warren wants us to pay you for putting us up and feeding us and all.”

“No charge, Neal. This has been therapeutic for me, even though my world is still in shambles. I still have lots more to ask concerning my problems back home. That’s if I can call it a home.”

Jesus said, “I am always available whenever and wherever, anyone calls out My name in faith.”

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

Psalm 46:1-2, NIV

Jeff said, “I have read my Bible every night for years, but some of what you’ve quoted is foreign to me. I don’t doubt You, Jesus, but why is that?”

“Read the Bible by asking the Holy Spirit to give revelation relating to you specifically. He will, because He knows you right now, and He knows the Bible. After all—He wrote it.”

“But the Bible doesn’t speak to things going on in today’s world. Does it?” asked Jeff.

“Do you remember Suzy talking about a concordance? It will help you look for answers.”

Giving an embarrassed laugh, Jeff said, “I don’t know if I have the patience or enough smarts to study the Bible.”

“Get away with Suzy before you leave. She will show you how easy it is to find answers. Will you try? For Me?”

Remembering being slow to learn in his youth, Jeff said, “I’m not sure I can, but I’ll try.”

Chapter 17: Neal and Jeff

Jeff walked to the kitchen for a pop when Neal approached.

Neal said. “Jeff, can we talk?”

“Sure, Neal. What's up?”

“Well, you seem to be into the God thing. I know there's something to it. But it's got me unnerved.”

“What's so unsettling, Neal?”

“Well, you seem to control it fine. But it just sort of seems like, well, everybody who's into God isn't into anything else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I know you read your Bible every night before you go to bed. And Hope talks about God all the time. She wants to know if I've decided. I don't know if I've decided anything—about Hope or God.”

“You know, Neal, you can have both.”

“It doesn't seem that way.”

“Well, it's true.”

“How so?”

“I know Roberto loves his wife. And he loves God.”

“Yeah, but not how Hope does. Or even like how much you do.”

Jeff said, “Let's ask Jesus what he thinks about this. Okay, Neal? I will go get him.”

“Actually. I want to talk with just you, Jeff. You seem so stable.”

“You know my history, Neal. You know I've been anything but stable.”

“Yeah, I know you've had a tough time growing up. In this situation here, I don't find you fawning over Jesus. You just seem to be settled into how you're acting. And then what do you think, like if you had a girlfriend? Wouldn't you want to give all your time to her? And pull away from your faith?”

Jeff said, "Neal, there's something you may not understand. Even in normal life, Jesus is not some nebulous thing in the air somewhere. Both the natural and spiritual worlds exist at the same time. Side by side. Touching each other. Therefore, Jesus can be here in the natural and He can be in the spiritual. He is normally in the spiritual world, but they are going on at exactly the same time, except He is the son of God. You'll find you can talk to Him and when you learn to recognize His voice, you will hear from Him right where you are. Sometimes when I'm talking to Jesus, I'm sure I can feel him. He seems so close."

Neal said, "I understand that because I talked to Jesus and heard him when I was a kid."

"That's very common, Neal. Kids have no reservations about talking to God, they simply believe. We adults must relearn simple trust. But once you have committed to accepting God His way, which simply means you accept Jesus as His Son, then the conversation becomes as natural as anything here on Earth. The two worlds live side by side at the same time. The Bible says they're separated by a veil, so when you're talking about Hope loving God, she does, but she also loves her mom and she can also love you, Neal."

Neal asked, "How so? I really don't understand."

"It's sort of like these two famous scriptures. The first one says, 'Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength.' And the second one is like it. 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Most people miss what I see in these scriptures. The key word is love. So, what is being said here is that you can love God with everything inside of you, with everything you've got. But you can also love your neighbor as yourself. To me, that means a girl or anything. You can do both."

"Interesting. But that leads me to my next question. Why don't you have a girl?"

"I have told no one this. I had a girlfriend. A long time ago. She was very much like you, Neal. She had little room for God, and I found we had nothing in common."

"Well, there you go. You *can't* have both!"

"No, it was simpler in my case. The girl or no God. But I know it can be a girl *and* God, Neal."

"How do you know?"

"Again, look at Rolando. He has both, and he doesn't seem stressed. Right? Which one are you looking at, Neal? God or Hope?"

Neal answered, "Not sure."

“For you and where you're at now, it might be easier to get close to Hope. She doesn't seem to be the threatening type.”

“No, she's a good kid. But what if I don't change and I don't come to faith?”

“Ask her, Neal.”

“You make things seem so easy, Jeff.”

“God and Hope could be very easy. All you must do is learn how to love. Once you learn the ways of love, the questions of ‘who do I love’ or ‘how many can I love’ sort of disappear.”

“Easier said than done, Jeff.”

“Maybe not. Why don't you think of something you love? Anything. You used to love flying. You love your truck. And I've seen how you look at Hope. I think you love the way she looks, too.”

Neal said, “I cannot argue with that. But liking Hope is not like loving God.”

“Yeah, it is. All you need to do is care unconditionally about someone or something. You just say, ‘I'm going to love you no matter what it takes.’ And then just jump in.”

“I guess I don't think Jesus is going to take me just saying ‘I'm going to love you.’”

“Once again, I tell you, Neal, ask Him. Just ask Him.”

Neal sighed, “Thanks, Jeff, I'll think about it.”

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Suzy walked over to Hope and said, “Neal and Jeff have been talking about you. I heard your name mentioned several times.”

“What did they say?”

“I don't know. They were talking quietly. I still think there's hope for Neal.”

“Maybe, but there's still the ‘God thing.’”

“They used His name, too. Like I said, there may be hope, Hope. The guy really is handsome. He's quite a hunk.”

“There's no doubt about that. No question at all.”

“So, what is the real problem with taking Neal to task about the God thing? I mean, really. I don't see what the big deal is.”

“You don't know Neal. Once he gets something he doesn't like into his head, it's there forever.”

“Why don't you invite him to have another game of pool?”

Hope said, “I'm not sure I want to get him more interested that way.”

“Which way?”

“He seems to be only physically attracted to me, and I don't want to foster just that kind of interest.”

“He obviously is Hope, but I do not find that to be a problem. He's just a guy. Don't be such a prude. Sheesh!”

“I don't know, Suzy. I just think I'll get myself in trouble with a guy who doesn't accept God.”

“I know he doesn't like religion, but are you sure he's turned off by God?”

“Well, you've seen how he acts here toward Jesus. Neal listens carefully when anyone questions Him.”

“Yes, but Neal can always change. All it takes is someone he trusts to lay the entire story of Jesus out so he can hear it. Also, any guy that has an interest in you is going to listen to you, so if it's mostly physical with him, so be it. Again, he's a guy. No problem with that, Hope. Invite him to another game of pool and just talk to him. It's okay to let him fawn over your beauty. You are beautiful. Don't you know that?”

“Some days it seems like all I have are my looks.”

“So, capitalize on them! I think Neal is quite a catch. Don't you dare throw him away.”

“He is handsome, strong, and kind.”

Suzy said, “See what I mean? What else do you like about him?”

“Well, he's pretty opinionated, but he is a good listener.”

“Invite him downstairs and start talking. And you need to be a good listener, too. Really find out what his problem is. It may be something you don't even understand. And if you're really confused, you need to ask Jesus because He seems to know Neal better than you and I put together.”

“That all makes sense, Suzy. Now I can see why you're a vice president.”

When Neal walked by, he said, “I hope you guys don't mind me coming over. Can I sit in?” Hope smiled, slid over, and said, “We're finished.”

“Good, because I want to tell you something interesting. I had a dream last night. It was about the ball.”

“So, what about it?” She tightened her lips.

“I normally don't dream in color. But last night I did. It was very sexy.”

Hope leaned over toward him and whispered, “That is interesting, ya know, because I had a dream last night, too.”

“So, what was yours about?”

“I hate to say it, but it sounds like yours. We were in a car, and you kissed me.”

“Go on.”

“It was just a dream, after all.”

“I enjoyed kissing and holding you after the ball.”

“Me, too. But what happened after lunch at your base left me sad and confused. You didn’t call or anything. Did I really do something so terribly wrong?”

“I just had second thoughts about you being wound up with religion.”

“About that, Neal, I must ask, have you made your decision? About whether He is real? You know Jesus?”

“Well, some things He says make sense.”

Suzy looked at Hope and pried, “Now what are you guys talking about? Is there something new I should know?”

Hope responded, “We both had dreams last night.”

“Do tell.”

“They were about a long time ago at the ball.”

“I understand it was quite a night for both of you.”

“Yes, it was,” said Neal.

“Well, dreams can mean something,” said Suzy. “I’m not saying anything, but dreams can mean something.”

“Enough Suzy,” said Hope.

“Girl, just saying.”

Neal said, “You girls keep talking. I better go see what Alex is doing.”

Suzy looked seriously at Hope, shook her head, and said, “You are at risk of losing that very desirable man unless you get over your fears and take him to another game of pool. Yes, he is confused, but so are you—you make a great pair! However, you both want each other—it’s obvious to everyone that you belong with each other.”

Hope said, “But he just left.”

Suzy put her hands on her hips, huffed, and said, “Wait for him. Do not fail in this or you’ll hate yourself forever. Do not let him go!”

Chapter 18: A Game of Pool

Hope tried to relax and accept Suzy's declaration when Neal returned. Almost afraid, she asked, "Neal, can I challenge you to another game of pool?"

"Sure. It sounds great."

At Hope's insistence, Neal broke first, but scratched on his next shot.

"Aw, poor Neal."

"Hey! Watch it, lady. Nobody's perfect, you know."

"Yes, I know, and I'd like to talk to you about that."

"Okay?"

"You know, I don't think God is looking for either of us to be perfect. Why are you so against Jesus?"

"I'm not sure I am, at least not all that much. I am, however, very much against religion."

"Okay. But why does my acceptance of God turn you off?"

"I guess I just expect you're going to want me to go to church with you and play the religious games."

"I don't want to play games either, Neal! But I won't turn away from God."

After Hope lined up her shot, she said, "I doubt that you really want to give up on God. Not really. Am I right?"

"I have to admit my memories about Him are good and He says some things here that make sense. I just hate this religious mumbo jumbo I hear on TV. I've tried to look at it twice, but it's... it really sours me."

Hope said, "I can't really blame you there. I understand, but I'm looking at something deeper than that. I want to know what's really going on in your head."

"Why?"

"Because I like you, silly."

"I like you, too, Hope."

Hope stroked her cue stick firmly, and one ball dropped. However, she missed her next shot. Neal softly put his hand on her shoulder and eased her out of his way. His subtle but firm force felt good. She placed her hands on the table and said, "So, will you consider Him, please? I mean Jesus?"

"I'd rather just consider you."

"You can have both of us."

"That's what Jeff said. I don't know how, though. You seem so involved with your God."

"What else would my life contain? The only thing going on in my life is work. I would love to be involved with something else. Want to apply for the job?"

She whispered, "I do not believe I said that."

"You are an interesting girl, Hope." He slammed a ball hard into the corner pocket. "A very interesting girl."

"So, you wanna be friends again?"

Neal leaned his stick against the table. Moving close, he tenderly held her upper arms in his firm hands and said, "Yeah, kid. I think I do."

His embrace pulled her tighter to him than she ever felt with anyone. It appeared he might not let her go. Tingles shivered up her spine. Pushing her hair back and pulling away from him, Hope gasped for air. *I am a good girl. I just cannot do this!*

Neal fell slightly forward. *Wow. Now that is exactly what I need!* Grabbing her, he pressed hard against her lips. A gentle slap startled him.

"What was that for? You basically said yes to me. Remember?"

"But now, I'm saying it just doesn't feel right."

"It does to me."

"Yes, I know. You're just a guy, Neal."

"What do you want? A girl?"

"That's disgusting!"

"Just what do you want from me, Hope?"

"Love. A good life."

Neal said, "It doesn't seem like you want that from me."

"Just because I want to wait?"

A sigh escaped through Neal's nostrils. He said, "I guess not, but you are something other than the girl I thought you might be."

Hope asked, "What kind of girl is that Mr. McGrath?"

"Oh, forget it. I knew this wouldn't work out." He walked up the stairs. "Come on. We're done here."

Alex saw Neal at the top of the stairs and said, “Where have you been? Directing things, I suppose.” He saw Hope and moved out of their way.

Following them into the living area, Alex tapped Neal on the shoulder and asked, “What’s up, Neal? Why so quiet?”

“It’s just girls, Alex.”

“What about them? I don’t think they belong on a balloon crew, but otherwise they are fine.”

Neal said, “Not all of them, Alex.”

“Something wrong with Hope?”

“You could say that.”

“She wouldn’t let you touch her?”

“Don’t get into it, Alex.” Suddenly, the room seemed too bright for Neal, and everyone seemed too close for comfort. He went to his room to be by himself and just think. He didn’t mind, though, when Jesus knocked on his door.

Chapter 19: Jesus and Neal on a Porch

Jesus said, “We should go out on a porch. I’d like to share some things with you. Would that be, okay?”

Neal shrugged but followed the Lord. Once outside, Neal leaned onto the railing, still wet from the recent storms. A chill in the air, Neal hugged his arms, rubbing them for warmth. “What is up with Hope, Jesus?”

Neal’s question didn’t expect an answer, but Jesus asked, “What do you think is up with Hope?”

“I do not know. No ideas.”

Jesus asked, “What do you want, son?”

“I’ve never heard you call me ‘son.’”

“Does that name upset you?”

“No, but it is a little confusing.”

“Do you not see yourself as part of My family?”

“Not sure yet. Should I?”

Jesus said, “Your heavenly Father gave you to Me a very long time ago and marked you to be someone special, destined to do something great. You entered My world as a youngster playing fireman up on that ladder when you said, ‘I love you, Jesus, I really do.’”

“Is it always that simple?”

“Not always. It was this time because you were unashamed and as serious as any child can be. From that time to right now I have been watching over and caring for you as My child. But we were talking about Hope.”

“I almost forgot. So, tell me, Lord, what is going on with that girl?”

Jesus smiled and said, “I haven’t heard you call Me ‘Lord’ before.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not. I liked it rolling off your tongue, sounding so natural.”

“I thought we were going to talk about Hope.”

“She likes you, Neal, and has from the time she first saw you. She still does.”

“It sure doesn’t seem like it.”

“A rejection does not mean dismissal. She is afraid of you.”

“Afraid of me? Why?”

“She felt your strength and needed to pull away from you. Hope is an exceptionally good girl. She is perfect in My eyes. And maybe even perfect for you. What do you think?”

“Actually, she scares me a little. She seems too good. I do not want a saint around me, You know what I mean? I want physical love for sure, but more than that. Oh, I don’t know what I really want.”

“That is true, son. However, if you stay with Me and trust Me, I will show you what you want.”

“If You already know what I want, then just tell me and I’ll be on my way.”

“We need to discover it together, Neal. That is how it works. You with Me, Me with you. You in Me, Me in you. You need to understand Me more before this will make any sense. You must trust. Will you, Neal?”

“What do you mean, ‘You in me and me in You?’”

“Didn’t you feel you and your father were like one when you were a kid?”

“We were like one. We ate the same breakfast and talked about fighting fires almost all the time! Yes, we were like one.”

“It should be the same with Me. I want to be your hero, just like your dad was to you. And I want you to be My kid just like you were back then. I want to make you a hero, too... just like your dad wanted for you after you grew up.”

Hope waited until Neal and Jesus finished talking. When they were out of earshot, she asked Jesus, “Do you think I’m ever going to find a guy that’s right for me?”

“What’s wrong with the one you have now?”

“I don’t have one now.”

“Neal is very interested in you.”

“I think all he wants is physical stuff. He wants nothing to do with You, Lord.”

“Are you sure of that? I’m not.”

“But You saw what happened downstairs. He just got physically excited, and it bothered me.”

“He frightened you?”

“Yes, he did!”

Jesus asked, “Do you think maybe you scare him?”

“Suzy asked me the same thing. I don't know how I could scare him.”

“How do you think he would act if you wanted him to join a cult? Do you think he would like that any better than following Me?”

“No, I'm sure he wouldn't.”

“Neal doesn't know the difference right now. Spiritual things are scary to him because he doesn't understand them.”

“Okay fine, but I know if he would just accept You, it would all become so clear to him.”

“Neal may think that if you would just accept him, everything would be fine. Maybe he could understand your position better if you would just accept him.”

Hope looked incredulous. “Do you mean I should accept his advances?”

“Didn't you feel a physical attraction?”

“Definitely! He is strong and gorgeous. I could fall for him physically far too easily.”

“You and Neal are in the same boat because neither one of you understands the other, nor Me all that well. I know you have read much of the Bible, Hope, but have you really paid attention to the book of Ruth or the Song of Solomon? They both talk about physical attraction. Ruth became a woman by Boaz. Solomon got excited by the Shulamite woman. It is all natural, Hope.”

“Okay, but shouldn't love come before the physical stuff?”

“It comes as a package deal, Hope.”

“So, should I accept his advances?”

“What did he do?”

“He pulled me close, kissed hard, and I could feel him get excited.”

“If that is what you call his advances, then yes, accept them. He likes you, Hope. I would say you infatuate him. That is not a bad thing. Love flourishes in that kind of setting. The Bible is clear about my commands concerning sexual relations—I am not silent about that. But you are avoiding the pleasures of attraction for no reason at all. Do you like Neal?”

“Yes, I do... but...”

Jesus turned His head questioning, “What is your hesitation?”

“Why did Dad have to leave my mom? Why did Neal's parents have to break up? Did they just get together because of physical

attraction? Where was the love—I mean, like, ‘it's the two of us against the world’ kind of love?”

“You would know more if you sat down with Neal and asked him these questions.”

“I feel safer asking You.”

Jesus said, “But that does not get you a man or a prince. Apologize for pulling away so abruptly and ask him to go with you to be quiet, sit, and talk. Maybe even down by the pool table, again.”

Chapter 20: The Phone Call

Suzy called out, “Neal, the phone is for you.”

A firm male voice asked, “Neal McGrath?”

“Yes, this is Neal. Who is this?”

“This is Mark from your father's company.”

Neal jumped to attention and said, “Does my father want me to come to him. I'm sure he wants me with him.”

No sir, I'm sorry. I have bad news for you. Your father died yesterday afternoon in an unexpected explosion. I'm very sorry, sir.

Neal yelled, “What do you mean, *unexpected? What happened?*”

“Mr. McGrath, apparently your father tried to set something up for the next day. I don't have all the details, but I'm told it was sudden and unexpected.”

“Did my dad put you up to this? Is this a sick joke?”

“No, sir. I'm sorry.”

“I don't believe you. My father is the most careful person I've ever known. How could this have happened?”

“I know there will be more information available after all the details come out. It's sort of sketchy right now. I will be in further contact with you, Mr. McGrath. I wish there was something more I could do, but I have nothing else to tell you. We will be in touch—goodbye, sir.”

Sweat pouring off his brows, Neal started shaking and he dropped the phone. He turned and glared at Jesus. Running toward Him and shaking his finger, he shouted, “First you took me away from my dad and now this. You obviously aren't anything I want or anyone I need. You are useless, and You call yourself God?” He bolted through the house, slamming the front door. Soon, he was in his truck racing to some unknown destination.

The first two bottles of beer went down quickly, with no effect. The shot of whiskey he tried next burned his throat. “Hey! I need

something that tastes good, but will get me drunk,” he shouted to the bartender.

Three strong vodka cokes allowed him to slump in a chair. He let out a loud sigh. His mind was a mass of jumbled thoughts. *“How could this have happened to my dad? Wasn't someone with him? There always had to be two people working at the same time. Right? If only I were there. I should have been. Why did he have to send me away?”* Slamming his fist on the bar, he cried out, “I hate you, God!”

The drunk at the next table raised his beer and said, “Here's to that, buddy.” Neal suddenly felt a chill, and horribly alone. The next drink went down easily. After a brief stumble, he relieved himself and sat at one end of the rustic bar. A raspy, female voice asked, “God let you down?”

“You could say that” replied Neal.

“Have anything to do with a girl?”

“You could say that, too—they are two peas in a pod.”

“How so?”

“She loves God. God loves her. I have no room for either of them anymore.” The barkeep waited for more. Neal leaned his arms on the bar, head in hands. “God let my dad die yesterday.”

“So sorry, pal,” said the raspy voice.

“I know God could have prevented it. But He didn't.”

“An accident or something?”

“I don't know all the details. It just happened. They said, ‘suddenly.’”

“How does the girl play into it all?”

“She is just so into the God thing. I'm all done with both.”

The bartender asked, “Do you blame God for all the bad things that have happened?”

“Who else!”

“Sometimes, things just happen, pal.”

“But God says He runs this whole thing. Nothing happens unless He lets it.”

She said, “I think you have that a little wrong. I've never read that in the Bible.”

Neal slobbered and said, “What makes you a Bible expert?”

“I've read it all in my day. Have you?”

“No, just from Sunday school.”

Her voice got stern and even raspier, “My advice for you is to get a Bible, talk seriously to both God and the girl before you do any more blaming. Where are you staying?”

“My crew and I are flying a balloon at the Snowmass festival. We're staying at a house.”

“Is the girl there?”

“Yeah.”

The now familiar voice asked, “What are you going to do now?”

“Not sure. I won't go back until I'm completely drunk and then I don't know how I'll get back. Pour me another, please.” He felt the chill again.

“What's your name?”

“Neal.”

“Hold on, Neal, I've got an idea. What are you driving?” She made a phone call. “When you're ready, my friend said he'll drive you and your truck back to Snowmass. It'll cost you a hundred plus the cab to get him back. Okay?”

Neal nodded. Once again, the drink went down easily. Neal stayed until closing, downing drinks as quickly as they came until coffee suddenly appeared.

A guy sat next to him, clapped him on the back. “You okay, buddy? Everything's going to be okay. Come on, where is your truck, man? It's time to go.”

Neal slid off his stool and wobbled to the truck with this new unknown friend by his side. Neal almost fell, but climbed in, hung his head, and nearly passed out.

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Hope and Suzy hung out in the kitchen. Hope said, “Neal always runs away when something happens that he doesn't like, anytime something goes wrong. He did it again, Suzy!”

“We all heard Neal yell about his dad. I suppose something happened to him.”

“I know he loves his dad. If he could only love God like he loves his father, he would be a perfect man.”

“Those men don't exist, Hope.”

“Do you think he'll get into trouble?”

“I don't know. He was furious when he took off.”

“Should we go try to find out where he went?”

“I don't think so. We have great police and sheriff departments all the way from Aspen down to Glenwood Springs. They'll take care of him.”

Gloria walked over to the girls and said, "Don't worry about a thing. I'll stay up and wait for him."

Hope said, "If he would only stop running away."

Gloria took Hope's hand, looked her in the eye and said, "We all need to grow in our own ways, you know? I remember you saying a while ago that you hated Neal. Now you're worried about him. Relax and let each of you grow. I think you're both going to make it."

Suzy smiled and said, "I agree. What do you say Hope? Let's go out and see what Jesus has to say about all this?"

As the girls returned to the living room, Jesus and Alex were laughing with everyone gathered around them. "What's so funny?" asked Suzy. "Are you guys getting along now?"

Alex said, "Yeah. He was just talking about some funny things that happened with fishermen back when He lived in the Middle East. He's not that bad of a guy."

"That's saying something coming from you, Alex," said Hope.

"Hey, you guys have got to stop getting on me. I'm not that bad."

Jesus said, "You are not a bad person. You do, however, do some bad things."

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 3:23, NKJV

Alex replied, "I don't think my doing some bad things qualifies me as being this horrible sinner You people talk about."

"Do you think you are better than other people?"

"I know I am better than some."

"Do you think you are as good as God?"

"...There is only One who is good.

Matthew 19:17, NKJV

Alex asked, "Are You calling me a sinner?"

Jesus answered, "Would you rather not be?"

"Yeah, I guess. What would I have to do to get accepted by You?"

Jesus replied, "Believe that I am who I say I am, and follow Me."

"I don't think I have to follow anyone just to be good."

Jesus looked deeply into Alex's eyes and said, "It isn't about what you think, or even about being good. It is about what you believe."

Rolando said, "Alex—what's the big deal? Just believe. You can't deny that He glows. When He speaks, His words differ from when any of us talks. He knows the Bible. What's not to believe, man?"

Jesus said, "Alex, you believe you'll get wet when you go outside in the rain. Right? The rain is all around you. It is the same with me. When you seek me, I am all around you and you will know it. You will talk to Me and hear Me answer. Although you probably won't see Me, you will experience Me. You will be at peace."

Alex said, "It sounds spooky to me."

Jesus smiled and said, "Many people think that. However, those who know Me don't."

"So, explain how you're visible here, but you wouldn't be if I asked to see you later."

Jesus said, "Like I said, Suzy asked for My help, and I suggested we all come."

"Yeah, but did You know we would all be here?"

"I knew she would invite you," said the Lord.

"This is all so weird." Alex paused. He looked into the kitchen and asked, "So, do you girls know where Neal went?"

Gloria said, "He'll show up soon. Don't worry yourself about him."

Alex stood and rocked back and forth, trying to relax. He looked around at everyone and said, "If Neal doesn't get back, I guess I'm the boss. So, we all better get some sleep. We have a full morning tomorrow, especially if we don't have Neal. You all go on. I'm going to call Warren. I'll fill you in, in the morning."

Audrey walked past Suzy and said, "That Alex always seems to know how to get things done."

Jesus left to pray in the mountains.

Chapter 21: The Return

The sound of Neal's truck woke Gloria at 1:35 a.m. After paying the driver and thanking him, Gloria watched the cab carrying Neal's driver leave for the return trip. After guiding Neal to bed, she locked up, wondering what sort of intrigue Sunday morning might bring.

Neal spent an hour tossing and turning. Although groggy, he could not sleep. Finally, he got up, walked into the bunk room, and shook Alex. "You have to handle the morning Alex, I can't do it," but Alex didn't stir. Jeff said quietly, "I'll tell him. I heard you."

Neal pulled on pants and gently walked upstairs, holding his exploding head. He fumbled with getting a cup of warm coffee. Leaning against the counter, he looked out over the darkness. Suddenly, the lights glared on. Hope stood motionless, with arms folded across her chest.

A downcast Neal said, "Hi." She gave no response. "I guess I owe you an apology."

She shrugged her shoulders and let her arms fall. "Where did you go?"

Neal said with his aching head hanging down, "To a bar."

"Why?"

"Not sure, Hope."

"You often say that you know."

"Sorry."

"You say that a lot, too. I can't figure you out, Neal. You run away from me all the time. Just who are you, anyway?"

"My dad died."

"Oh no. Was that the phone call?"

"Yeah... I wish I knew what happened. The guy who called said he would get back to me. It's all over, Hope. Everything's lost. My dad's gone. Nothing matters anymore."

“Oh wow, Neal. I am so sorry. Come here.” She pulled him close as his chest heaved, sobbing. Soon he pulled away, sniffled, swallowed, and cleared his throat. “It’s all up to me.”

“What is Neal?”

“Life. I’m all alone now.” He sobbed again.

Gloria walked toward their voices. She heated his cup in the microwave while the new pot brewed. “Why don’t you two go down to the poolroom and sit. Shoo, shoo, I’ll take care of the crew. I think I hear them coming.” Jeff tiptoed past them. Alex followed.

Downstairs, Neal frowned and looked at Hope through sad eyes. “It’s all I ever wanted. Just to be with my dad. Your God did it to me again. He must really hate me.” Neal fell back onto the loveseat.

Hope said, “That’s not true Neal. I’m sure of it. God wouldn’t hurt your father. It isn’t who He is.”

“Easy for you to say. I hurt all over.”

I know you do, Neal, and I’m sorry for that. But you can’t take it out on God. He didn’t cause your dad to die. I know it will all be clear later. You just have to trust me, even if you don’t trust God.”

“You talk like you really know. How do you do that?”

“Neal, I know God and I know Jesus. And that’s what I know He would say.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Like I said, I know Him. Will you trust me? I care about you, boyfriend.”

“I thought we were over.”

“Says who?” She nuzzled his hair, pulled it up past his forehead, and kissed his nose. She pushed him around so she could massage his shoulders. Continuing down his muscular back, she thought, *I would always do this for him if he would simply believe in me and God. Please, Jesus, convince him. Please?*

Neal relaxed under her physical touch. She stopped, put her arms around his neck and stroked his masculine chest before returning to his back and arms. Touching his body was almost more than she could bear, wanting so badly to be in his full embrace. Leaning forward and kissing him on the back of his neck, she thought, *That cologne is going to do me in.*”

Neal moaned with pleasure and turned to her. “You do that very well, girlfriend.”

“I’m glad,” said Hope. “Do you think you could trust us just a little?”

“Us?”

“Yes, me and God.”

Neal stood up, but Hope pulled him back down. “Oh, no, you don’t! You don’t leave until you answer me, mister.”

“There is no answer, Hope.”

“Yes, there is. There must be. You said you like me. And you used to like Him. What happened to you?”

“God is religion. Right? And I don’t buy it.”

Hope glared and said, “Where in the world did you come up with that silly connection, anyway?”

“From the guy at Youth Night and some of my buddies in the military. They wouldn’t steer me wrong.”

“Again, Neal—who says? You need to know the real Jesus, and this is a great place to find Him. So, do you have to run the flights today?”

“No. I told Alex to take over.”

“Great! Then you and I are going to go talk with Jesus. Come on, do it just for me.”

By that time, Alex and the crew were gone. At the Rodeo lot, generators growled, fans puffed the balloons, and propane engines flamed to life. The morning’s flights proceeded flawlessly. The returning passengers held plastic glasses of Champagne, the traditional celebration over a successful flight.

“Congratulations!” said Alex. “Yes, congratulations to each one of you for a high, long, and safe flight. You all did perfectly! We would love to take you up another time—just give us a call.”

Soon checks and cash were in the box, and they started the arduous task of packing up. After the passengers left, Alex puffed his chest and said, “That wasn’t so difficult. I think I handled this morning just as well as Neal. Don’t you guys agree?”

Audrey huffed, “The only thing that would have been missing is your constant pride! Yuck!”

Roland said, “Come on, home!”

“Me, too,” said Tony. “Let’s get out of here.”

Alex interrupted their plans, saying, “Hold up, guys! We need to go back to the house. I think it’s necessary for the entire crew to say goodbye to Mrs. Cummings. She has been great to us!”

Back at the house, Neal and Hope walked upstairs to the living room where Jesus was sitting and glowing. He motioned them to come. Jesus looked back and forth at them saying, “I love you, Neal. And I love you, Hope. I do not play favorites. I love you both. That means you can each love Me, and you can love each other all at the same time.”

Neal sat in silence, not sure what to do or say. Hope was afraid of Neal's response but trusted like usual and waited. Gloria and Suzy drank their coffee in the kitchen, listening intently.

Jesus said to the two across from Him, "Love says to trust and believe. Neal, the Bible says that 'to come to God you must believe that He exists, and that He is a rewarder to those who seek Him.' I exist, guys. You can see that. Now you must seek to know Me. You both love and trust more than you think. Now is the time to believe and receive Me."

Neal looked at the Lord, paused and finally said, "But what about my dad?"

Jesus smiled. "He is with the Father right now. They are laughing." Jesus continued, "Just trust Me, Neal. You'll see."

Neal's mouth opened wide, as did his eyes. Hope nudged his arm and asked, "Now, can you believe?"

Suzy couldn't stay silent, spouting, "I hope someone remembers all this because Richard needs to hear the whole thing!"

Hope led Neal to a spot by the windows with just two chairs. They talked for a while, but soon, he left for a break. Neal's countenance turned pensive.

Returning, he said, "Hello again," and pulled his chair over so he was sitting across from her.

"Hi there, guy. Don't you want to sit next to me?" Hope noticed his change in mood.

"I think we need to talk. Jesus makes more sense than I've heard in a long time. And I really like you, Hope..."

"But...?"

"But we still need to talk about me, and about my life."

"Okay. What about you and your life?"

"I can still imagine me fighting oil well fires even without my dad. Doing that would save all kinds of things—people, the environment—important things."

"So, where does that leave me?"

"Not sure. What if I decide to go to Texas on my own? I couldn't take you with me. That wouldn't be right. Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure of anything right now."

"In other words, your father's dreams are more important to you than I will ever be. And that probably means that they are more important than even God? Phew, it does—doesn't it?"

Neal fell silent and looked out the window. Hope stood, huffed in exasperation, and walked toward her room. Before she got there, she turned and stomped back. "Neal, I have to know. What's

happened to you? Are you expecting me to follow you around like a lovesick puppy? After we leave, am I ever going to hear from you again?"

"I know I should love and appreciate you."

"Why don't you?"

"I'm not sure what happened. I'm scared."

"Scared of what? Me?"

"I don't know, Hope. I'm just not sure." Neal rose and stared out the windows. He slowly turned, sat down again, and said, "I'm not sure I'm the boyfriend type."

Bewildered, Hope asked, "What type are you?"

"Not sure. I think I'm looking for more."

"Maybe you're the type that up and leaves like my father did. It wouldn't surprise me."

Neal said, "Sorry. Maybe you're right."

Hope's ever-present smile faded into a sad face. She stared at Neal.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I really like you, Hope. I just don't think I can do this."

Hope asked, "Have you been all show with no meaning behind it this whole time?"

"No. I really enjoy being with you. You are great—I like you a lot. I don't know what's wrong."

Hope exclaimed, "You are someone I simply cannot figure out. I don't think I can trust you." She stood and rushed toward her room, "Men! Yuck!"

Suzy grabbed her hand and pulled her all the way to the entry. "I can't believe I accepted him and now he backs out. Yuck! Men!" Hope spun and ran to her room.

Suzy followed but stopped at Neal, motioning him to stay. Suzy yelled, "Okay, what did you do, Neal? What did you do? Talk to me!"

Neal said, "I'm just not sure about things. I did nothing that wrong."

"You must have! What did you say?"

"Nothing. I'm just a little confused, that's all."

Suzy yelled even louder, "Darn you, Neal! You'd better hurry and get unconfused because you really hurt that young lady!"

Suzy put hands on her hips and stared Neal down. Breathing heavily and exhaling through taut lips, she threw her hands up in disgust and screamed, "I do not understand you men! Augh!"

In her room, Suzy fumed and cried—she cried for Hope, sad for herself, unforgiving toward Richard, silent concerning God. Sobbing, she collapsed face down after pummeling her pillow mercilessly. “This is hell,” were the last words she remembered muttering before she succumbed to sleep.

Chapter 22: Neal and Jesus

Neal walked down to his room. Jesus was there, waiting. Once Neal saw Him, Jesus asked, “Have you forgiven me yet?”

“Why would I have to forgive You, You’re God? You do all the forgiving. Isn’t that right?”

“You were mad at Me when you thought I left you hanging out to dry and thought I forced you into military school. I think you need to forgive Me.”

Neal said, “I was mad.”

“Have you forgiven Me yet?”

“I wouldn't know how to do that even if I wanted to.”

“What is forgiveness, Neal?”

“I guess just telling someone that you're sorry for something you've done wrong.”

“It is much more than that, Neal, so much more. It is the way you get free from a wrong someone has done to you. I know you are mad at Me. Maybe you are also mad at your father?”

“Well, I guess that's true. But why did I have to go to military school?”

Jesus said, “If not, you wouldn't have run into Hope when she was all grown up. You wouldn't have been at the pharmacy.”

“Okay, I can accept that.”

“And you wouldn't be working in a flying business if you hadn't learned about hot air balloons at military school.”

“That's also true.”

Jesus continued, “And you wouldn't be here talking to me.”

“I'm still not sure that's a good idea, either.”

“You are still uncomfortable talking with me. I love you, Neal. I want the best for you. So much is available to you, son, things you haven't even dreamed of yet. Things that will make you feel worthwhile and significant.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Simply because I am God.”

Neal asked, “What can I do that would be significant? I mean, other than fighting fires?”

“Neal, the word ‘significance’ can mean many things. Most often, the answer involves people. For instance, what do you see happening with Hope? Can you love her? Do you want her to love you?”

“Those are hard questions. I really don't know the answers.”

Jesus asked, “Will you trust Me to give you those answers? Let's go for a walk and talk like we did when you were a kid. I remember it well.”

“Actually, so do I. Okay, let's go.”

Once outside, Jesus spoke first. “Neal. You have been angry for some time. Anger causes hurts. Other people get hurt when you hurt.”

“Like who?”

“Your crew. Your dad. And especially, Hope.”

“Yeah, but that's just the way I am.”

“Are you sure you want to be that way, Neal? Would you accept being changed?”

“By becoming Christian, I assume. And reading the Bible. I know Hope would like that.”

“What about you, Neal?”

“One thing is for sure. I know I don't like religion!”

Jesus said, “That's okay, I don't like religion, either!”

“Are You saying *You* don't like it? *You don't like religion?*”

“Not at all! I fought against it all the time I was on Earth.”

Neal looked dubious and said, “Wow. Are You saying hanging out with You isn't religious?”

“Have I said or done anything religious?”

“No, I guess not. Well, yes. What about all the spooky stuff?”

“Are you asking about the supernatural things I do? I do most things that way because I am Spirit. I won't speak religion to you, it isn't in My nature. I will only talk to you as a friend if you will accept Me and believe in Me. I would like to call you, My friend.”

“Then, what would I have to do to make You, my friend? Please don't give me any church words.”

Jesus looked at Neal with compassion and said, “Nothing more than believe I am who I say I am.”

“Really? That's not what the new guy said at Youth Night. He was pushing me to repeat some religious words.”

“He thought he was doing right. Haven’t you done some things in your life you thought were right but afterward found they were not? I’m sure he has those thoughts now, too. He was young. Just like you, Neal.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Jesus continued. “Growing up is hard Neal. I never said it was going to be easy to follow me. But I believe it’s worth it. Will you give Me a chance to prove it?”

“Never thought about it like that. I just got mad and left. I do that sort of thing sometimes.”

Jesus said, “Let’s leave it at that and go back inside.”

Coffee was waiting, it seemed to hit the spot.

“Where have you guys been?” asked Hope

Neal said, “Just outside, getting a breath of fresh air. We talked a little.”

“Oh?” asked Hope.

Jesus said, “I believe you two have a date by the pool table where you can talk.” Neal looked at Hope. Jesus smiled at Hope and nodded but said nothing more.

Hope said, “Only if you want to, Neal. Do you?” She flashed the warmest smile she could muster. He nodded and led the way.

The crew returned from the balloon festival to Gloria’s cookies. She explained the delay of getting real food on Neal and Hope. Alex said, “No problem—what a great day! Warren can’t help but be pleased with all the extra people we flew. They just seemed to appear from nowhere asking for rides! We made more money this weekend than normal! Hey, where is everybody?”

Gloria answered, “Jesus and Neal were talking then Neal and Hope went downstairs.”

Chapter 23: Boyfriend/Girlfriend?

Downstairs, Neal said, “I just don't get you, Hope. Here we are back around the pool table, and you seem totally female, but then when I come on to you, you act like a Quaker. I'm frustrated. I'm not sure we should even talk.”

“I'm sorry, Neal, but please don't walk away. I'm not very good at this and I'm not sure where to start, but I have questions. What do you want from a girl? I mean, really, what is it you expect a girl to give you? Sex? Adventure? Maybe just a friend? I'm not sure what I would give to a relationship. Are you?”

Neal said, “I'm sure I *don't* want what my parents had.”

Hope nodded. “And my parents started out fine, but then it all fell apart. Maybe that's just the way it works. But I don't think it does all the time, because it seems there are lots of happy married people around.”

“Is that what you want, Hope? A marriage proposal?”

“Well, no. I want to have fun. I just need it to be safe. That's all. I want it all, Neal.”

“That's a nebulous thought. We all want ‘it all.’ Do you want a happily-ever-after, like marriage and kids and a white picket fence? I don't. At least not yet.”

“Okay. I'm not sure I want that either, but what do you want, Neal?”

“I'm just a regular guy, Hope. I want to have some fun, physical fun, and I want to be doing something important, like my dad.”

“So, you're planning on leaving? Just like your dad?”

“Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure what's going on or what I want. This entire party has unsettled me, I mean the Jesus thing.”

“Didn't you meet Jesus before you came to this party?”

“Yes, as a kid.”

“Have you let Him into your life? Have you let Him run your life?”

“I don't know what that even means, Hope. I'm not sure *I* can run my life.”

“You seem to have done well for yourself so far.”

“Yeah, I guess. Hey listen, Hope. Let's not get into this God thing again. I'm here because you asked me to come talk with you. Is that all you wanted to talk about?”

“No, Neal. I don't know why I started that again. I just want to talk about you and me. About us.”

“What about *us*, Hope?”

“Do you want a girlfriend, Neal?”

“Yes.”

“Will I do?”

“Are you offering Hope? I like you very much, but we have some things to iron out. First, would you be able to accept me just the way I am?”

Hope said, “I guess the question really is—will you accept me as *I* am?”

“I am hoping you will change some things. You are probably thinking the same about me. Right?”

Hope said, “What would I have to do to be accepted by you as your girlfriend? I want you to be totally honest with me, Neal. What would I have to do to earn your favor?”

“I want someone I can be close to—to hug and hold hands and kiss and put my arm around. I want to make out with a real girl.”

“I think I can do that.” Hope paused to think before answering. “Yes, I can do that, but could we go slow with the making out? Please?”

Neal said, “And I don't want you ending up loving God more than me. Like, I would need to be in first place in your life. Could you do that?”

“Can't I have both you and God?”

“What were you doing? Listening in on my conversation with Jeff? Anyway, he thinks it's possible.”

Hope said, “Do you want to try being boyfriend and girlfriend just to see if it works out? Talking about it doesn't seem to be working.”

Neal relaxed. “I'd like to. Do you want my graduation ring? Some girls seem to want to put them on a chain around their necks.”

“No, silly. Well, maybe. So do you... I mean, are you now my boyfriend?”

“Can I have a friendly hug and a kiss like regular guys and girls do?”

Hope gave her big, patented smile, but her face questioned his intentions. Then she relaxed, looked into his eyes, and nodded. Neal pulled her arms around his neck, gave her a long, soft kiss and a hug. Afterward, Neal said, “Again?”

Hope complied. He pulled her firmly up against him and gave her a more passionate kiss. She thought, “*Uh oh,*” as she felt her resolve weaken.

“One more time?”

She was still cautious, but this time Hope tasted a little more of the experience, deeply breathing in his now more masculine smell.

He held her very close. Hope thought, “*This is a little scary, but I can’t back out now.*” He kissed her repeatedly on her lips, cheeks, and down the sides of her neck. She hung tightly onto him as he slid his hands down her sides. She thought the floor shook, but realized it was her. When he stopped kissing her, she leaned back and breathlessly said, “Hello, boyfriend. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, girlfriend.” He bumped her shoulder, guy style.

Pulling away, she said, “Ouch, Neal.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize that was too hard.” He touched her shoulder, carefully.

Her softened voice pleaded, “No problem, but I am just a little girl, ya know. Ya hafta treat me gentle. Awright?”

“Sure, kid.”

“Is kid an endearing name, or are you already looking down on me?”

“No, not at all. I really do like you. What should I call you? Simply, Hope?”

“We’ll see.” She broke free and bounded up the stairs with a little shake of her behind.

As they arrived, Neal put his arm around his now beaming prize and said, “Hey, Gloria and Suzy. I want you to meet my new girlfriend.”

Suzy ran to them and gave each a big hug, saying, “Fantastic! I knew you guys couldn’t stay away from each other much longer. I just knew it!”

Gloria smiled, too, and said, “It looks like it’s time to pull out the sparkling cider.”

Jeff congratulated Neal, saying, “That was a quick turnaround! What did you do?”

“We were just talking and suddenly we were seriously kissing. That’s sort of all I remember, but it was great, Jeff. Really great. She is so soft and warm.”

“It seems like she softened you up, too. You look and sound good, man.”

Suzy picked up two glasses of cider and motioned for Hope to follow her. Stepping onto a porch, Suzy said, “So tell me everything. What happened? How did you pull that off?”

Hope blushed and said, “I really don’t know. We were talking, and he kissed me. Everything after that is a blur. I know he held me close. I kissed him and before I knew it, we were boyfriend and girlfriend. Can you believe it?” Taking a deep breath, she asked, “So, what now, Suzy?”

“Have fun, and don’t be afraid of him. Be careful but enjoy the romance. Just stay true to yourself.”

Hope began holding onto Neal like a teenage girl with her first boyfriend. She found immense pleasure holding hands and closely leaning into his arm. He acted the part by regularly hanging his arm over Hope’s shoulders.

They soon became inseparable, walking everywhere side by side, sitting together, leaning in toward each other and whispering. It was cute and almost embarrassing to the crew; however, Gloria watched with amusement and wore a refreshing smile, laughing every time they walked past her.

Suzy, however, found the in-your-face romance unnerving. Her thoughts constantly found the pain of separation. “Why didn’t I just accept Richard as he is and enjoy the excitement of a new house? I should have trusted that God would work the money thing out like He always has in the past. After all, Jesus never worried about paying for lodging. Now, because I was foolishly afraid, I’ve lost Richard.”

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. She felt hollow inside, the sorrow of thinking about returning to the empty house drove Suzy to her room. She cried until it felt like her insides would spill out. She thought and cried until Audrey knocked on her door.

“Are you okay, Suzy?” came the concerned voice. She didn’t want company, but habitually rose and opened the door. After a few awkward glances, the now concerned Audrey asked, “Can I bring you something? Can I help?” Suzy shook her head. “Is it Richard?” She gave a slow, tear-filled nod.

“Do you want to go out for a drink somewhere and just talk?”

“Yeah, maybe. You wouldn’t mind?”

“Wash your face and let’s go.”

Suzy began venting her sorrow over not being the wife Richard needed. She also allowed her anger to flow freely. "I love him, and I hate him."

Audrey reached across the table, grabbed hold of Suzy's hands, saying, "I can only imagine."

"I'm trying to understand, but I keep falling into muddled thoughts about why he turned so bitter. I don't think I was so bad. Oh, maybe I am."

Audrey shook her head. "I think you are beautiful. Not bad at all. This sounds a little like Hope's story about her dad leaving. I'm sure it's not all your fault."

Audrey looked for the waitress and motioned to get a new beer for Suzy. After a big gulp and a deep sigh, she said, "Thanks, this is helping. You are a good friend."

"Do you have any plans?"

"None."

"Would it be good to talk with your parents?"

"Not on your life! They think Richard is the best. This whole thing is ready to explode in my face."

"Can you talk to Richard?"

"I don't know where he is, or who he might be with. No, I think I'll stay right here. Gloria will take good care of me."

Chapter 24: Monday Morning

The bright, sunny morning provided Hope with more than enough reason to invite Neal to a hike in the Aspen Mountains. Hand in hand and grinning, they picked up maps, stopped for Lox and cream cheese on croissants, picked up bottles of water, and took off toward the Maroon Bells campground and trailhead. The sun-warmed air in town soon turned crisp as they rose to over 9,000 feet. Snow on the Bells and surrounding mountains, and along the sides of the road brought added pleasure to their coat-warmed hugs.

The kids, as Gloria called them, had the time of their lives. Even with the reduced air at elevation, they threw snowballs, ran aimlessly, and played on the swings in abandon. Life could not be better.

As they took a break to sit on a felled tree, Neal said, “I love you, Hope. You and I fit well together.” Hope wanted to respond with, “In God’s beauty,” but she restrained herself. Her smile was enough.

After hiking to Maroon Lake, the couple took in a matinee movie with the prerequisite candy and popcorn. Hope felt alive and in love. She smiled and said to Neal, “You know, you fit my dream of a prince saving me from a lonely life and premature death in the castle.”

“Now, that is—like you say—silly!”

“No, it isn’t! It’s romantic. Don’t you feel that?”

“I guess it’s okay for a girl.”

“Well, take a good look, because that’s exactly what you’re sitting next to.”

Neal leaned back and took a long look. “And you are a gorgeous girl at that! When we’re together like this, you are perfect for me.”

“And yes, I love you, too,” said Hope.

They made it a day and ate a meal at the upscale Jerome Inn.

After taking in the “mountain classy” surroundings, Hope said, “We’ll need to go Dutch, this place looks expensive.”

“Not for my girl!”

The waitress led them to a private booth with high, dark, distressed wood walls and took their drink order. Neal asked for white wine and a rum coke.

“Do you remember the last time you did this?” asked Hope.

“Remember what?”

“This is what you ordered for us at the ball.”

Realizing he hadn’t asked what she wanted, he quickly said, “Sorry, I guess I fell back into an old memory.”

“I’m not sorry. The ball was wonderful! So many glorious memories.” She thought, *“Oh no, don’t think about, and definitely don’t talk about, the terrible memories.”*

Neal moved to Hope’s side. They talked and laughed and cuddled. The sumptuous meal, with a few more drinks, lasted into the late afternoon, ending with a mint chocolate and crème de menthe. Hope swooned in the heady atmosphere with her prince. Every time Neal’s leg slid over hers, she felt a twinge of fear, thinking, *“Will he expect too much from me now?”* But his touch always provided a rush and surprising heat to course over her oftentrembling body. He wrapped her in his arms and planted a passionate kiss. She moaned and kissed him back, parting her lips ever so slightly. Hope’s reservations faded. Neal looked hopefully at her. “You want to go parking tonight?”

“Shouldn’t we be getting back? They may worry about us; we didn’t tell anyone. We just left.”

“I suppose, but I’m really getting into you, and I haven’t had a genuine hug for hours.”

“Now you’re getting silly. This has been so much fun, but we are Suzy’s guests. We should go. Okay?”

Neal left a healthy tip and helped with her jacket. A cold bite in the air caused them to pull in close as they walked to his vehicle. Hope shivered as Neal pulled out of the Rugby field lot. The oncoming fall darkness was noticeable as they pulled into a line of cars with headlights glaring in both directions. The narrow road seemed more winding than remembered.

The sparkling Snowmass house lights welcomed the weary lovers. Gloria said, “Hi, guys. We thought you might have found another place to roost.”

Hope laughed, “No, but we had a great day!”

“Did you find something you were looking for?”

Hope grinned, shook her head up and down, and said, “Yep!”

Neal took her jacket and kissed her. Hope looked aglow. Audrey left the crew talking with Jesus and turned to Hope. “Want to talk? You seem so happy.”

They took up residence on a love seat away from the others. “Neal and I hiked to a lake, saw a movie, and he arranged an elegant lunch. He paid for it all! He is such a gentleman and such a hunk. I want more of him than I dare let myself get into.”

Audrey asked, “Are you afraid of him?”

“He is definitely more man than I have ever known.”

“Cool! Just keep your safe distance. You’ll be fine.”

Hope smiled and said, “But I’m not sure I can hold him off.”

“I could talk to Neal and tell him to cool his heels?”

“No, that would be embarrassing. Besides, I really want him.”

“You seem like such a good girl. I’d hate for you to make a wrong turn here. Enjoy the ride, but don’t do something that doesn’t feel right.”

“I get confused because everything feels so right—I am giddy, but I can’t stand this. I get all shaky, and my temperature rises whenever he looks at me. And then he kisses me... oh my goodness.”

Just then, the object of her passion called out, “Hey, Audrey, don’t you have something to do?”

She patted Hope’s arm and said, “Okay, girl. I leave you to your man. Bye.”

Chapter 25: Another Return

Monday morning after Neal and Hope left to explore Snowmass and the outdoors, Gloria served a big brunch since most had slept in. About eleven, she heard a car enter the garage. The front door opened, and Richard called out, “Hello?”

After talking to Mr. and Mrs. Cummings, he had called the management company and asked if his wife was at the Snowmass house. “Yes, Mr. Cummings, your wife came in last week.”

As Richard walked in, he grimaced, seeing Suzy look at him through swollen eyelids. He said, “I came back for you because I feel for your hurt.” Looking around, he said, “But who are all these people? I can’t believe you’re here celebrating—what are you doing? Throwing a party?”

Suzy gave a sorry smile but laughed. “No, you don’t understand—I was heartbroken. It’s not what it looks like.” Pointing to Jesus, she said, “It was His idea!”

“Who is *he*, anyway?” asked Richard, his voice taunting her.

Suzy couldn’t hold back another laugh. “Oh, He is Jesus.”

“Why are you playing with me, Suzy? I really came to apologize to you.” He looked both soft and hurt at the same time. “I was wrong Suzy. Very wrong.”

Suzy touched his arm and looked lovingly at him. She impetuously hugged him, dropped her head on his shoulder and said a hushed, “Thank you. I love you.”

“I love you too, Suzy.”

Richard stayed for breakfast, cautiously considering Jesus in a matter-of-fact manner. Suzy worried about how Richard might handle the Lord. He finished quickly, intending to drive back to their house ahead of his wife. She wanted the party to end quickly so she could go home and reunite with her husband with no further potential conflict.

However, Jesus asked them to sit for a while. The Lord said, “In a relationship, whether new or being renewed, a spirit will have control. Richard, you must recognize the results of obeying spirits of pride and excess. Suzy, you’ve experienced the results of listening to the spirits of lack and loss of control. Those spirits are not of Me. The Bible says My Spirit brings abundant life.”

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it in all its fullness.

John 10:10, BSB

With eyes glaring, Richard complained, “Pride? Excess? Like when?”

Suzy answered abruptly, “Like over the entire build of our house, Richard. I kept trying to say you were going overboard. Too big. Too expensive. I didn’t want that!”

“But you always said you liked everything I did.”

“Yes, Richard, because I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. I kept thinking everything would work out if I just worked harder. I needed to somehow make more money to keep up with all the bills that kept coming in. Like getting a raise or even a promotion.”

“A promotion! You already worked ten-hour days. You always said you were tired. We started eating take-out more and more. At the end, I simply felt like I didn’t know you. What we had was gone.”

“Was there another woman?”

“Could have been, but no. Was there another man for you, Suzy? You were often not home.”

“*Oh!*” cried a frustrated Suzy. “You just don’t get it! Anyway, tell me, Richard, just why did you up and move out saying nothing to me?”

“I simply got lost in all the emotions, imagining I was doing the only thing I could do. I don’t know what I was thinking!”

“You decide now, Jesus. Who’s right and who’s wrong?” asked Suzy.

Jesus answered, “In forgiveness, there is no right or wrong.”

Richard asked, “So who’s going to forgive whom?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “Each of you has that need.”

“Well, I’m embarrassed to admit it, but You, Jesus, showed me how I was making Richard an idol by trying to finance his dreams. In that regard, I am wrong.”

Richard quickly replied, “I’ve already said I was wrong and I’m sorry.”

Suzy quipped, “That’s not asking for forgiveness.”

Jesus said, “Forgiveness is not saying ‘sorry’, nor is it proving who’s right or wrong. To forgive someone means that no matter what has happened, you accept you were at least a party to the problem, and you accept the other has more behind his or her story. You decide to say, ‘I ask your forgiveness for what I have done’ and truly mean it. Then stop talking, even if the other person says nothing back.”

... one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.
Colossians 3:13, HCS

Richard said to Jesus, “Okay, but if I do things or say things you don’t like, does that put me on the outs with you?”

Jesus answered, “I may not accept some things you do or say, but I will always accept the real you, provided you believe My death paid the price required for those errors.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I cannot talk intimately with you or be your friend.”

“Why not? I’m a relatively nice guy.”

Jesus looked deeply into his eyes and said, “The problem is, I am holy. You cannot be without believing on Me as God’s Son. Would you like to accept Me?”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“You can believe now or later. Just talk with Me when you are ready. I am always available.”

Richard asked, “Does Suzy know this?”

“She does. She is part of the family of all believers—the family of God. Will you come? Now?”

“Can I talk it over with Suzy? I still have questions.”

“Yes. After she satisfies you with her answers, come to Me and we will talk. Okay, Richard?”

“Yes. Okay. My word is good. Yes, we will talk later. Thank you, Jesus.” He leaned over toward Suzy, “I need to go to the store to get some things.”

A few hours later, Richard quietly slipped back into the house and set up a loving reunion with champagne, balloons, and flowers.

“Gloria, we’re disappearing to the master suite,” shouted Richard, as he grabbed Suzy’s hand, luring her to their own romantic getaway.

Chapter 26: The Letter

Monday evening, the phone rang for Neal. “Hi. It’s Mark again. From the company your dad worked for. I don’t have any further details concerning your dad’s death. I do, however, have a letter from your father’s file to give you if something happened to him.” Neal asked Mark to read the letter:

“Dear son, I went to a hole-in-the-wall diner tonight. I talked to a young pastor who was quite nice. I heard him out. This young man asked frankly, ‘If you die, do you know where you would end up? You are in a dangerous occupation, you all are.’” We talked about what happens when you die. Like do things just end, or do you go somewhere like to heaven or hell? That’s if they are even real. The pastor said they are real, but which one I go to depends on me. He asked, “Which ending would you like, Bud?” I asked him, “What’s this? Are you selling fire insurance?” He said, “No, just giving you a chance to choose while you still can.”

“At first, I was going to blow him off. But something he said rang true. The more we talked, the more he made sense. Before I knew it, I was bawling and telling God how wrong I’ve been. He called it sin. Then God forgave me. Neal, I want you to know—I chose heaven. Suddenly, I felt clean all over, like a new man. That was quite a night. You also have that choice to make too, son. Please don’t blow it off like I almost did.

“Neal, you are better than being a grimy and slimy substitute for a man walking around on oil-soaked ground and living in dirty tents. Son, I am not proud of working in the fields—I don’t feel like I’ve done anything significant. I wanted a good godly life, but I went for the money. I ask for your forgiveness, son. Caring for you and your mom would have been much better. I am left with nothing. Neal, I believe you will make it. I love you, son. I always have and I always will. Please believe me. And believe in God. Love Dad.”

Jesus wrapped His arms around the tear-streaked young man and asked, “Would you like more significance than your father had?”

Neal stammered, “Yes, but I don’t know how.”

“Neither did my students back on the shores of Lake Galilee.”

“Where do I start?”

Jesus said, “Become one who wants to know Me and follow Me.”

Neal stared out at nothing, still afraid to commit. He dropped the phone and sank lifelessly into a chair. Tears poured, dripping onto his shirt and lap. Hope sat next to him and touched his shoulder while handing him some tissues. She silently prayed for her hurting boyfriend, then asked, “Can you tell me what’s going on? Is there anything I can do for you?”

Neal looked at her and said, “My dad finally told me what’s what with him. It isn’t what I expected. He said he failed and asked me to forgive him. I don’t think he failed.”

“Why don’t you ask Jesus if your dad failed?” Neal choked on the question when he looked at the Lord.

Jesus said, “Have no fear, your father knows Me and is with the Father. He simply saw life from a different perspective. You can, too. When you are ready, I am willing.”

Chapter 27: Monday Evening

The tired crew was thinking more about going home than staying. However, Alex uncharacteristically walked over to Gloria and said, “We had a great time. Please be sure to thank Mrs. Cummings for all of us. And thank you for putting up with us and all you did, too.” Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Jesus walk into the living area, apparently from praying in the library.

Jesus sat on the side of the hearth. Gloria turned on the fireplace and sat in a swivel chair across from Him. The crew rushed up and down from the bunkroom to pack their vehicles. Hope saw Jesus and went to say goodbye. When she approached Him, He seemed so authoritative that no words formed in her mouth. When Neal saw her, he also gravitated toward the fire. Soon, everybody was together.

All eyes were on Jesus. As He looked at each one before Him, His expressions changed from an accepting nod, to a joyful smile, to a raised brow-questioning look until He had visually interacted with everyone. Each guest saw the Lord in a way that meant something special to each of them. Hope couldn’t quite understand the look Jesus gave Neal—playful but challenging.

Jesus’ firm, rhythmical voice sounded like a church organ. He said, “I’m not here to change your lives. No, I’m here to give you life... life that lasts much longer than the hundred years or so you have on Earth, one far better than any life you could make by yourself. Love Me first, then love the other people and things you desire. I will respond to all your love.”

He continued, “I know you have questions. You have doubts. I offer an open invitation to each of you, to come and seek answers from Me. I will never deny a genuine heartfelt question.”

“However, if you think I’ve not answered you in the past, come and ask a different way. Questions come with many different intents. So do My answers. You can trust that I am who I say I am—the living

Son of God. The Father, Holy Spirit, and I await you. It gives us great pleasure when you accept what we offer. Come. Believe. Receive.”

With that, Jesus stood and held his hands out, palms up. He looked up, briefly glowed brighter, and was gone. No one spoke. One by one, each of them walked away in awe.

Chapter 28: Afterward

Neal said to Hope, “Let me drive you back to town. Please? I already asked Jeff if he would drive your car. If you don’t want to, he can ride back with me, but it’s just that I need to talk to you away from the crowd. Will you please allow me to drive you back?”

“Sure, I guess, but what more do we have to talk about?”

“You’ll see.” He cupped her delicate face in both hands and tried to draw her gently to his lips. She pulled back and questioned him with a semi-sweet smile.

They lingered, searching each other’s eyes, until Audrey poked her head around the door. “The crew has gone. I guess Jeff has Hope’s car, and Alex is driving me and my car back. See you guys later!”

Gloria said to herself, “I really didn’t see that coming, but it might be good for Alex and Audrey to be alone without the crew around on the drive back. Wow, what a weekend.”

Neal carried Hope’s things to his truck. Deep in thought, he went to the passenger’s side and helped her in. They were on the road for some time without a word. Neal spoke first. “Hope?” She didn’t know if she should hope for what he might say or protect herself from impending disappointment.

Neal said, “I can’t get the last thing Jesus told me out of my mind.” Neal became quiet for a moment longer, then said, “Jesus told me, ‘The love I crave only I can accept.’” He nodded knowingly.

After a pregnant pause he said, “Hope?” She looked at him with tears forming.

“I accept you, Hope.”

He straightened in his seat, smiled at her, his eyes sparkling, and said, “And I accept your God.”

Hope’s heart leaped, pounding recklessly, and feeling like it was in her throat. Her eyes suddenly filled. She let out a pent-up breath and flashed an overwhelmingly accepting smile.

Neal reached his hand over the console, meeting hers. “Now understand, I must learn how to love you and Jesus at the same time. If you can accept waiting for me while I learn, well then, I am flat out, unquestionably, head over heels in love with you, Hope O’Leary.”

Sniffling back joyful tears, she said, “That’s good, because I love you, too, Neal McGrath!”

Hope reached and grabbed Neal’s hand, kissing it ferociously, repeatedly...only letting him leave her grasp to drive. Her fingers constantly caressed his shoulders, arms, neck, thigh; every part of him she could reach. He moaned.

She pulled back quickly. “Sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“No. You felt good. Really, I’m fine.”

Hope looked seriously at Neal and said, “Now, I have to ask you. Will you give me time to learn how to love you? Physically, I mean?”

Neal said, “It would be my pleasure, ma’am.” His heart bounded as he took in a big gulp of air feeling the exciting potential of their future relationship. “Yes, it would be my great pleasure, me lady.”

Hope tipped her head toward him and whispered as seductively as she could, “I expect the pleasure to be mine as well, sir prince.”

Excited conversation flowed between the young marrieds-to-be as light snow fell on the mountain passes.

When they reached Colorado Springs, Hope asked, “Neal, if you think you can...” She signed quotes and said, “... if you can be ‘good’ before we get married... if you can, maybe you could move into the guest room in my house? That way, we wouldn’t both be living alone in big houses.”

Without hesitation, Neal said, “Yes.”

He drove straight to her house and unloaded both of their bags. Hope was flushing, fearing she had made a serious mistake. But he was a perfect gentleman, except for the occasional playful pat on her behind.

Hope made a pot of coffee and soon they sat on his freshly made bed in the guest room, talking. It wasn’t long before she was on her back with Neal hovering over her. She felt his hands touch her excited body in ways unfamiliar to her. Soon, his embraces became intense. She cried out, “I can’t do it this way. Please don’t keep going.”

Neal took a deep breath and blew it out forcefully. His resigned head fell between her breasts. He lingered to take several

deep breaths, then rolled his frustrated body away. He stood up, straightened himself and after one more big exhale said, “Sometimes you are just a little girl... ya know?”

She gave a little laugh. “Yeah, but can ya still love me?”

“Yes, I still love you. Can’t we go to the marriage chapel on Foster Street and make it official?”

“No. Please? It would make me feel cheap somehow. Please wait.”

Neal leaned over her and gently kissed her forehead. She looked up into his pained eyes, hoping earnestly he would continue to honor her wishes.

Neal’s phone chimed. Warren told him there was a big flight coming up, and they needed to plan. In the “Above All Else” office the next morning, the two asked Warren if he would consider partially funding a ministry for kids who don’t believe God is real. Warren said, “Maybe, but first tell me what went on in Snowmass. You look great and somehow different, Neal.”

“I have changed, Mr. Fitzgerald. Of course, I’m different. I met Jesus.”

“That’s great, Neal! I am so pleased for you! Now, you must know, all believers have met Jesus.”

“No, that’s not what I mean, Warren. I really *met* Jesus.”

Hope turned away, not showing the hearty chuckle coming from the satisfied place deep inside her.

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As Alex dropped Audrey and her car back home, he said, “Hey lady, just to let you know...” He stopped, strangely a little unsure of himself, touched a hesitant finger to his lips, and awkwardly said. “I do like you and find you comfortable to be around. Could we talk more about the weekend?”

A welcoming smile lit Audrey’s face. “Sure, I’d like that. When? Now?”

Alex said, “I’ve been thinking... how about six thirty tomorrow night at the Pub?”

Audrey relaxed her shoulders, nodded, and said, “Yes sir, Mr. Alex. I will be there.”

“Wait! I need to drive this car. I’ll pick you up. And I’ll drive you wherever you need to go while I get the adjuster to okay repairs and I get this fixed. That’s if you want me to.”

“Great!” but Audrey suddenly felt vulnerable, like being around that preacher when she was a kid. “I can accept you driving us to the Pub if you’re still willing. Then, if things work out, we can regroup and maybe talk some more. Okay?” She felt safer. It delighted her when she saw a happier than normal smile in her bathroom mirror. She cooed softly.

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Hope and Neal married the Saturday before Thanksgiving in a simple, intimate service at the little church, and formally moved into Tremont Avenue before Christmas. Hope quickly learned to successfully satisfy her husband while Neal’s disarming male ways left her deeply loved day after day, night after night.

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Neal continued working with Warren as his partner, focusing on additional business duties and the new outreach. The crew became more cohesive as the company turned a corner, becoming the premier hot-air balloon flying company in Colorado.

On Neal’s last Sunday as flight director, the crew landed near a barn with acapella praise music peeling through its open doors. The next week, Neal took his wife to “The Barn” service, sitting on hay bales, petting young lambs, and sipping coffee out of oversized mugs. The leader talked about Jesus in an unassuming, gentle manner as Hope, Neal, and the small gathering learned the ways of God.

One Sunday, a gentleman nudged Neal and asked what he did for a living. They talked for a while, with the man mentioning the company name sounded familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it. Neal said, “It’s sort of hidden, but it comes right out of Scripture.”

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously,
and he will give you everything you need.

Matthew 6:33, NLT

Commitment and yielded love became hallmarks of the McGrath family.

The End

And finally, from the characters:

“Hey guys, this is Hope, I never once believed God would *really* let me down, but I did have my doubts. And I definitely had doubts about Neal. Maybe you did too? Anyway, I had a blast hanging out in the Snowmass and Aspen mountains as well as at Suzy’s parents’ house. I hope you did as well!”

“I know I enjoyed it,” says Neal! “If you want more of this type of book, BetteLou is writing another. It should be available sometime before Christmas, 2022. It’s about the love between Joy and Randy, and their critical need for forgiveness and redemption.”

“I know we all gave you a lot to think about,” adds Alex. “And I know I caused a lot of it, but that’s just the way I am—maybe Audrey can smooth out my rough edges. Yeah right. Well, maybe.”

“I never expected any of this,” says Suzy. “I thought that once I got married my life would settle down and get comfortable. Boy, was I wrong! I’m back at Keene Developments and Richard now works as their Construction Executive. But God! Right?”

And Jesus says, “Thank you for considering Me anew or even for the first time. I love you more than you might believe right now. Please know that I am looking out for you. I care!”

Finally, BetteLou is asking, “If you liked my book, please write a quick note saying how much you liked it. You can find all of us at our website. I can’t give you the direct link to post until *A second Chance to Hope* is published. But having your review written and saved now makes everything work best. That way you can just post it when I tell you “It’s time.” Okay? And I’m sure Goodreads and other booksellers would appreciate it too. Thank you so much for reading or listening! I’m off to write more romance. I hope to see y’all again. Bye for now.”

All my love,
BetteLou Price