

Arousing Love

a Teen Novel



M. H. Strom

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One

“You wanna play?”

“Yeah, okay.” I didn’t really but these girls were pretty cute, especially the blonde one.

“Throw the rings over the Eiffel tower.” The blonde girl pointed to the miniature Eiffel behind her. “You get a French treat for each one you get over.”

Her hand brushed mine as she handed me the rings, and I glanced up into stunning blue eyes. She turned away, and I traced the shape of her sleek, young body, my eyes lingering on the gentle curve of her hips and butt. I blinked and concentrated on the model Eiffel. I didn’t wanna make a fool of myself in front of these girls.

I threw the first ring, and got it over. Both girls cheered and I almost laughed at their enthusiasm. I tried to focus again but was too hurried this time and missed.

“Ohhh that was close.”

“Come on, you can do it.”

I threw the last ring, and the girls cheered again. I couldn’t help but grin at them. I wondered what my French treat would be. *A French kiss?*

The dark-haired girl held up a tray with some kind of tart on it and a bread stick with a French flag toothpick stuck through it.

I took my prizes. “You made these?”

“Yeah.” She smiled.

“Mmm ... it’s good.” I stood there eating, not wanting to move away just yet. “So ... how come you’re doing this beach festival?”

“It’s a camp activity. It was Lizzie’s idea to do a taste of Paris.” The blonde girl glanced at her friend, then smiled at me with such natural ease, her pretty face blooming into beautiful.

I glanced at the dark-haired girl I presumed was Lizzie. She looked plain now compared to her friend.

“That’s cool. So you’re camping here?”

“Yeah, with our parents.” The blonde girl smiled with such unguarded friendliness it took my breath away. “We come here every year.” Her lips were a soft, natural pink. “It’s a family camp.” Her long, golden hair shimmered as she combed her fingertips around one ear.

“What about you?” Lizzie, asked, distracting me from my stare.

“Uh, I live here. My parents own the convenience store up the road.” It sounded lame, but oh well.

“You’re lucky...”

I looked at the pretty girl again as Lizzie continued to talk. When she fell silent I realized I hadn’t heard a word she’d said, and now she was looking at me expectantly.

“Um, yeah,” I said, non-committal-like.

Lizzie smiled. “Me too.”

“I’d love to live near the sea.” The pretty girl looked into my eyes then glanced away, a slight blush coming to her cheeks. The skin of her throat down to her neckline was so smooth it shone with reflected sunlight. “It’s beautiful here.” She looked again into my eyes, and this time she held my gaze. I was shocked at how pretty she was. We were just staring at each other, and I knew I had to say something, but the conversational part of my brain had stopped working. I swallowed.

“You wanna play?” Lizzie called, looking past me. I turned to see a young boy approaching the booth, and stepped back to give him some room. The blonde girl gave me a wistful smile. I flashed her a smile, turned and walked away.

I was on an adrenaline high, it was such a rush talking to a pretty girl like that. *I wonder how old she is?* I started replaying our conversation in my head, inwardly groaning that I hadn’t even said one semi-intelligent or witty thing the whole time.

“Hey!”

I turned, and my heart jumped. She was right there behind me.

“What’s your name?” She asked.

“Uh ... Zach.”

She grinned. "I'm Joanna." She stood there for a moment, just looking at me. "Well, it was nice meeting you, Zach. Hope I see you 'round some time."

"Yeah..."

She whirled and danced away before I could say anything else.

Wow. I stood watching after her. She really was something to look at.

...

The next day, full of nervous energy, I jumped the fence and took a shortcut through the campground. I could hear the noise of the festival through the trees, and caught a whiff of popcorn and hotdogs, reminding my stomach I hadn't eaten yet. I came out into the wide-open blue of sparkling ocean stretching to the horizon, and joined the festivities on the beach.

Various stalls and booths were set around a stage area, where a small crowd had gathered to watch a performance. I wandered past them to the booth with the painted backdrop of the Eiffel tower and the words "Taste of Paris" scrawled above it. She wasn't there, only Lizzie sitting on a stool.

"Hi, where's Joanna?"

"She went somewhere with her parents."

"When'll she be back?"

"Donno."

I decided to stick around a while and wait for her. I leaned up against the booth.

Lizzie smiled. "She likes you, ya know."

"She does?"

"Yeah, she talks about you."

I smiled. "How old is she anyway?"

"Fifteen, same as me."

Fifteen? She didn't look that young.

Lizzie gave me a sideways look. "Why? How old are you?"

"I'm eighteen." I watched her face for a reaction, but she just looked away.

"Hi!" A bubbly voice said behind me.

I swung around to see Joanna with a beaming smile, obviously pleased to see me. She was wearing a dress with string straps, showing off her smooth, tanned shoulders.

"Hi," I said, suddenly self-conscious.

"We were just talking about you." Lizzie smirked.

"What were you saying?" Joanna looked from her friend, to me, and back again.

"Oh, nothing," Lizzie teased, and I laughed.

Joanna tried to frown at us, but couldn't hold her expression long before breaking into a big grin. "Hey, you wanna go to the games room with me?" She looked right at me, waiting so expectantly for my answer that for a moment everything seemed frozen in time.

"Okay," I said, breaking the spell, and she smiled happily.

We walked through the campground, the girls leading the way. Joanna danced around me as she talked, spinning in front of me and walking backwards, then spinning around again. She was so excited ... and so exciting.

Man, what am I doing? This girl's way too young for me. But we can still hang out and have some fun, right? We'll just be friends.

We came to a building, and Joanna grabbed my arm, pulling me through the side door. Arcade games lined the walls. There was a lounge area where some teenagers were playing cards, and in the middle of the room was a ping-pong table. A group of kids of various ages stood in line beside it.

Joanna followed my gaze. "Ins and outs. You wanna play?"

"Sure." I was pretty good at table tennis.

The three of us got in line, and it wasn't long until it was my turn, as an older boy was getting all the little kids out. He'd met his match with me though, and I quickly dispatched him to the back of the line. The little kids cheered, glad the boy was finally out. I looked at Joanna, who was next in line. She gave me a big smile then pushed Lizzie ahead of her. I laughed.

"Be nice. I'm not too good at this," Lizzie pleaded.

I gave her a gentle, loping serve, and she managed to hit it back a couple of times before she got out.

Joanna took the paddle from her. "Be nice to me too."

I served her a nice, easy one, which she smashed back at me, low and fast. I tried to get to it but the ball flew past me. I looked at her in amazement, and she gave me a big, cheeky grin. I laughed, shaking my head as I went to the back of the line.

I watched her while I waited for my turn. She was nice to the little kids, giving them easy shots they could hit, but not so generous with the older ones, especially the boys.

She was still in when it was my turn again, and I soon got my revenge, smashing her loopy serve. She made a face at me, poking out her tongue as she went to the back of the line.

A real camaraderie soon developed among our little group of players. We teased each other with silly banter, and I sometimes lost to the younger kids just to make things interesting for them. I was enjoying hanging out, giving them high-fives and encouragement. I kept glancing at Joanna, and I noticed she was looking at me a lot, too.

I started showing off, acting like a professional tennis player, keeping light on my toes and grunting as I returned the ball. I did big tennis-like serves, throwing the ball into the air and whacking it as it came down. I was enjoying myself and getting laughs, especially from Joanna, the crazy girl was giggling at everything. When I played her again, she beat me. She laughed at my exaggerated expression of shock.

Other kids in the room had noticed how much fun we were having, and the line became so long the people at the end could sit on the sofas in the lounge area. I went and sat down on one of the love seats and was soon joined by Joanna herself. She'd lost to a little kid and everyone was teasing her about it. I wondered if she'd lost deliberately so she could come and sit with me.

A little boy nudged me, "Hey, you're sitting next to a girl. That means you must like her!"

"Yeah, she's my girlfriend," I joked, then glanced at Joanna. She was blushing, but she grinned back at me. She didn't seem to mind that the boy was loudly telling everyone what I'd said.

When Lizzie got out again, she came over and whispered something to Joanna.

"Hey Zach, we have to go." Joanna gave me a cute, little pout.

"It's okay, I better get going too."

Some of the younger kids begged us not to leave, even pulling at my arms to keep me there, but most of them decided to quit along with us, and the game looked like it had come to an end.

Joanna was waiting for me by the door. "That was fun."

"Yeah it was. We should do it again sometime."

"How 'bout tomorrow?" She grinned.

"I could meet you here after five?"

"Okay." She nodded and smiled.

I walked home feeling light and happy. Joanna obviously liked me, and I liked her. She was pretty, and funny, and ... pretty. I couldn't wait to see her again.

...

The next day, after I got off work, I headed over to the games room. As soon as Joanna caught sight of me she broke into a beautiful smile, and I couldn't help but smile too. This girl just had a way of making me feel so good. Lizzie wasn't with her this time, in fact there was hardly anyone in the games room, and no one was playing ping-pong.

"Where is everyone?"

"I don't know, there's no paddles, but I found this under the chair." She held up a ping-pong ball. "You wanna play with me?" She grinned.

"Without paddles?"

"Yeah, just use your hands." She giggled.

It was actually a lot of fun. The ball didn't travel as far from our hands, but it made it over the net and was easy enough to return with a good slap. Joanna was giggling a lot, and I soon caught her mood.

"Sorry I'm being so crazy."

"It's okay, I like you like this."

"You do?" She giggled.

"Yeah."

We stood there grinning at each other.

"Let's play a proper game." She slapped the ball at me.

We played a game up to 21. Lizzie came in and watched us while we were playing.

"You guys wanna go to the beach?"

"You want to, Zach?"

I didn't want to. I was having too much fun with Joanna all to myself.

"Let's keep playing for a while."

"Okay." Joanna smiled at me, then gave Lizzie her cute, little "sorry" pout.

Lizzie slumped onto the couch. "When are you guys gonna be finished? I'm so bored."

We kept playing for a while, but it wasn't the same with Lizzie there—Joanna wasn't giggling anymore, the mood was broken.

I sighed. "Alright, let's go to the beach."

We hopped over the hot, white sand and found a place to sit. A couple of guys came and joined us, and Joanna introduced them to me. One was Matt—blond, tanned, and muscular. Her friends didn't seem to mind me being part of their group.

"Let's go swimming," Joanna said, looking at me. She got up and pulled her t-shirt over her head, revealing a light-blue bikini top underneath. *Whoa! Is she really only fifteen?*

"Come on." She grabbed my arm to pull me up.

"I'm not wearing swim shorts."

"So?" She grinned and pushed off her shorts, revealing a matching bikini bottom.

Wow. I sat staring up at her, unable to take my eyes from that perfect skin, taking in every curve of her smooth, sculptured body. She just stood there letting me look.

When my eyes finally met hers, she smiled and held out her hand. "Come on."

I didn't know what to do. I could swim in the shorts I was wearing, but for some reason I felt uncomfortable swimming with her like that. None of her friends were getting up either.

"Come on, Zach." She tugged at my arm, trying to get me up, but I resisted, staying firmly seated on the sand. I was feeling so awkward and unsure of myself.

She left me there and went down to the water's edge. I thought she'd given up on me, but she came right back, her hands full of wet sand, and splattered me with it, giggling with glee as she rubbed it through my hair. Her friends were all laughing as I stood up, shaking my head and feeling wet sand dripping down my back. I took off my shirt and chased a squealing Joanna down to the sea.

She looked back to see me coming in after her. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" She laughed and screamed as I came closer. "Zach . . . I'm sorry!"

I was close enough to grab her, but I hesitated. I was still shy about touching her like that, especially when she was hardly wearing anything.

We stood there looking at each other for a moment, until a big wave broke over us, wetting the last of our dry skin, making Joanna squeal. I laughed, and she lunged at me, but I easily resisted, grabbing her around the middle and lifting her up. Her screams were cut short as she plunged head first into the water. I swam away, and she gave chase, grabbing my legs and dunking me. We played in the surf, splashing and laughing and innocently touching each other as much as possible, and somehow we ended up holding hands and floating over the waves together.

Something was stirring in me. *Don't get any ideas about her, Zach, she's too young.* But as I looked into those perfect, blue eyes, I knew it was already too late.

When we came out of the water and joined her friends on the warm sand, there was another guy there with them. He'd been passing something around that they'd quickly put away when they saw us coming. I didn't wanna hang with her friends, I just wanted to be alone with Joanna.

"Let's go for a walk," I whispered.

"Okay." She smiled.

We strolled along the beach, the evening sea breeze cooling our wet skin, making us shiver. I placed my unbuttoned shirt around Joanna's shoulders to keep her warm, and she wrapped it around herself, smiling up at me appreciatively.

"Sorry 'bout my friends."

"What were they doing? Is it drugs?"

She nodded. "Not Lizzie though, she's not into that."

"What about you?"

"Of course not, I'm a good girl." She laughed. I was glad about that. For some reason it mattered to me.

"So, where are you from?" I changed the subject.

"Colorado."

"That far. How long are you staying?"

"Two weeks." She spoke with a noticeable shiver.

At the end of the beach was a large rock. I put my arm around her and directed her towards it, and we squatted down out of the wind. I kept my arm there and she didn't seem to mind.

"It got cold all of a sudden." Her teeth chattered.

“Yeah, it can do that.” I pulled her a little closer. “So ... what kinda things do you do at your camp?”

“We do activities and stuff, like the beach festival, and there’s a talent show. We’ve been here before, so I know lots of people here. That’s how I knew Matt and Lizzie, from last year. It’s cool, you know. What about you?”

“I just live here.”

“I know that.” She exaggerated her words. “Tell me something about you, like ... how old are you?”

“Eighteen.” I wondered if my age bothered her.

“I’m sixteen,” she said matter-of-factly. I gave her a doubtful look, and she blushed. “Well, I’m nearly sixteen... in August.”

I laughed. August was still a couple of months away.

“Are you going to college?” She changed the subject.

“I’m still deciding what I wanna do. I was thinking about art school.”

“You’re an artist?”

“Yeah ... well, I paint. I wouldn’t call myself an artist. I hate all the baggage that goes with that label.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, artists have that whole mystique, like they’re something special just because they’re artists. Most of the art these days isn’t even that creative. It doesn’t have much to say about anything, and most of it isn’t even beautiful. It’s meaningless, and anyone can do meaningless. There’s nothing to it.”

“Maybe you’ll be a different kind of artist.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. She was sweet. I watched as a drop of water from her hair trickled down her face, pooling briefly at the corner of her lips. Even now, loosely wrapped in my shirt, her hair limp, her skin blotched with sand, she was still so beautiful.

“You’re very pretty.”

She smiled. “What’s pretty about me?”

“Everything.” I laughed. “You have really pretty eyes ... like pieces of the sky, and when you smile, your whole face lights up, it’s amazing.”

“Keep going.” Joanna coaxed.

I laughed, and looked at her again. “I actually think you’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever met.”

“Wow, I thought you’d say something dumb, but that was pretty good.” She laughed.

“What did you think I’d say?”

“I donno, Matt once told me I looked good in a bikini.” She giggled. “I thought guys only noticed boobs and butts.”

“Well, they’re nice too.” I grinned.

She laughed and playfully smacked my arm, then she became coy, lowering her eyes. “I like the way you look, too.” She tilted her head to one side and smiled at me.

“What do you like about me?”

“Umm...” She giggled. “I don’t know...” She stroked my arm. “You feel strong,” she glanced up into my eyes, “and I like your face, and your eyes. You smile a lot.”

“So do you.” I laughed.

“You have a nice laugh too.” She grinned.

I felt her shiver, and pulled her close again.

“Can we go somewhere warmer? Where’s your place?” She looked up at me with large eyes.

“My place?”

“Yeah, just somewhere warm—”

“It’s up there.” I pointed up the hill behind us.

I stood up from behind the rock, and offered her my hand, just as I caught sight of an old friend from high school walking his dog on the beach.

He saw me. “Hey, Zach, what ya doing there?”

Joanna stood up next to me, and my friend’s expression kind of froze. I didn’t say anything, just smiled awkwardly.

“Come on.” I took Joanna’s hand, and we started walking up the hill towards the road.

“Who was that?”

“No one, just a guy I know.”

“Are you embarrassed to be seen with me or something?”

“No, it was just an awkward moment, that’s all.” I slowed down a little, and we walked hand in hand. I looked at her again, her face aglow in the warm colors of the waning sun. *How could I be embarrassed to be seen with her?*

We walked into the parking lot of my parent’s store.

“That’s my parent’s house over there, behind the store. This is my little shack back here.” I led her to the dilapidated guest house in the backyard.

We went inside and she looked around my room. It was a bit of a mess. My computer desk and dresser were piled high with junk. The set of shelves against the wall were filled with books and art supplies, and on the floor were some dirty clothes, which I pushed under the bed with my foot. I straightened my bed so she had somewhere to sit.

“Oh, you’ve got a guitar.”

“Yeah,” I grabbed a new shirt from my closet. “I just started learning it. I’ve mastered three whole chords so far.”

She laughed. “Can I play it?”

“Sure.”

She got my guitar, sat down on the bed with it, and started to play, her fingers expertly plucking the strings.

“You’re pretty good.”

“Yeah, I started learning piano when I was five, and picked up the guitar when I was, like, ten, so...”

“You could be a pop star. You have the looks for it.”

She laughed.

“I’m serious.” I finished buttoning my shirt. “I better go say hi to my parents. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

I went over to the house and called through the door, “I’m home.” I could hear the television blaring in the living room.

“Is that you, Zach? Your dinner’s cold. You want me to heat it up for you?”

“No Mom, I’m not hungry. I’ll eat later.”

I went back to the shack, and Joanna was still sitting on my bed strumming the guitar.

“I see you’ve got a shower back there.” She nodded in the direction of my bathroom. “Do you mind if I take one? I just wanna get warmed up a little.”

“Sure.”

She put down my guitar and went into the bathroom. “I’ll be quick,” she smiled and closed the door.

I sat on the bed, my back against the wall, listening to the sounds of Joanna in the shower. The water stopped, and my eyes were drawn to the bathroom door. *What’s she going to change into?* The door opened and she came out with just a towel around her, tucked into itself over her chest, the small towel barely reaching to her legs. My heart was already pounding, but I tried to stay cool, like it was nothing unusual to have a girl this close to naked with me in my bedroom.

She noticed I was staring at her, and she blushed. “Do you have anything I can wear? I didn’t wanna put my wet things back on.”

“Ah, yeah.” I went to my dresser and fumbled through the drawers, handing her a t-shirt and some shorts.

“Thanks.” She smiled. “Um, can you turn around?”

“Oh yeah.” I laughed.

I turned and faced the window. The last of the sun was setting into the ocean, leaving brilliant towers of castle cloud on the horizon, but I was more interested in the faint reflection I could just make out in the glass.

“Your shorts are too big for me, but this t-shirt’s so long it’s like a dress anyway.” She giggled.

Whoa! She looked so cute with my t-shirt hanging down like a mini dress. It was even sexier than the towel had been, I could see her shape through the thin cotton. She handed back the shorts, which I tossed behind me without taking my eyes off her. My heart was racing. *Does she even know what effect she’s having on me right now?*

She didn’t seem to. She was casually wandering around my room looking at all my stuff. She studied a poster on the wall. “Do you surf?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s so cool. I wish I could do that.”

“Maybe I could teach you sometime.”

“That’d be awesome.” She turned and smiled at me, and we stood there looking at each other, neither of us moving or saying anything, the tension building between us.

“Maybe I should go.” She glanced at the door, then back at me.

“If you want to.” I didn’t want her to.

“Okay.” She moved towards the door, then suddenly veered and kissed me on the lips. “Bye,” she whispered.

Her kiss, and the softness of her lips, took me by surprise. She looked up at me with such large eyes, not moving away.

I leaned in and gently caressed her soft lips with mine. The kiss lasted longer than I’d intended, but I couldn’t pull myself away. She didn’t pull away either.

The touch of our lips had kindled something in us. I pulled her close and she willingly gave herself to me, my hands slipping beneath her t-shirt, feeling the warmth of her bare skin. We were both breathing hard, and I could feel her body trembling as my hands moved higher under her shirt, slowly lifting it up, revealing her body to my hungry eyes.

A phrase suddenly leapt into my mind—*‘Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.’* It made me pause, my hands hesitating their advance towards her breasts. *What am I doing?*

Joanna pushed me away, looking dazed as she straightened her t-shirt down.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay, I have to go.” She backed towards the door, her hand reaching behind her for the handle. “Bye.” And she was gone.

I was stunned, my heart was pounding, I couldn’t make sense of anything. *Did that really happen?* I slumped onto the bed, still reeling with the passion that had overwhelmed me. I couldn’t believe what had happened. I was in some kind of shock. I lay there trying to calm myself down so I could think. *She’s fifteen! How could I be so stupid? She must hate me now. And what was that phrase, do not arouse or awaken love? Where did that come from?*

After a while, I got up and went to the house to get some dinner. My parents were sitting in front of the TV.

“Hey Mom, have you ever heard the phrase, ‘Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires?’”

“Yes, that’s from Song of Solomon, isn’t it?” She turned to Dad for confirmation.

“I think so.”

“Song of Solomon? What’s that?”

“It’s in the Bible.” My mom looked at me curiously but didn’t ask why I wanted to know. I’d never shown any interest in the Bible before.

Both my parents were Christians, but I hadn’t followed in their footsteps—not since I was old enough to stay at home by myself when they went to church. It wasn’t that I didn’t wanna believe in it or anything, just that I’d found it all so boring.

I grabbed a Bible off their bookshelf and took it back with me to the shack. Song of Solomon was listed in the contents, and I flipped to it. I was sure I’d never heard of it before. I read through all eight chapters. It was like a poem about love and desire, and some of it I definitely could relate to.

Your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

You have stolen my heart
with one glance of your eyes,
How beautiful you are and how pleasing,

Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.

I said, “I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit.”

Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.

That night, when I got ready for bed, I found her bikini on my bathroom floor. It was dry now, and touching the two pieces stirred feelings in me all over again.

I lay in bed trying to sleep, but my mind was filled with thoughts of Joanna. I remembered her kiss, and the touch of her skin.

Am I falling in love? I’ve never felt like this before. I feel so confused and ... I tried to think of the right word ... anguished? But it can’t be love, I hardly even know her. You don’t fall in love this easy. Man she’s sexy though. I like her so much.

When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed of her. She was in the shower again, and I was waiting for her. This time she came out completely naked, and just stood there letting me admire all of her. Then I saw that I was naked too, and she was looking at me in the same way. I could tell she liked me and accepted me the way I was. I felt no shame.

I woke up, the sun was seeping through the gap in the curtain, and I lay there thinking about the dream. My dreams were usually pretty unmemorable, but this one felt like it meant something.

I got out of bed and took a look at the ocean. I couldn't see the beach from my window, but the ocean swell looked good from here. I grabbed my gear and headed out the door.

Down at the beach, I pulled on my wetsuit, grabbed my board, and ran into the sea. There were a couple of surfers out the back already, and I paddled out to join them.

"How's it?" I asked a guy I knew, and he gave me a thumbs-up.

I waited for the next set of swells. In the early morning light everything felt clean and fresh. A big wave came in and I went for it, cutting a swath across its glassy face.

After a good morning's surf, I headed back to shore. I saw a friend of mine on the beach with his board.

"Hey Josh, better get out there before the tide changes."

"Hey man, what's this I hear 'bout you bein' a cradle robber?"

"What?"

"Heard she's only twelve, bro."

I knew my friend was baiting me, but it was hitting a little close this time.

"Try sixteen. Anyway, what's it to you?"

I walked away. *Everyone's probably talking about it now.*

I lugged my board back up the hill. I had to get ready for work. *I don't care what anyone thinks, I have to see her again.*

Two

I hated working at my parent's store, the time went so slow, and I couldn't stop thinking about Joanna. I stared out the window, wishing I could go see her and talk to her. I just hoped she didn't hate me for last night.

Then there she was. I felt all jittery as soon as I caught sight of her coming up the road. She was wearing a light summer dress, and she looked so good. There were no customers, so I went out to meet her.

"Hi." She smiled, though not with her usual glow. She kept her eyes from mine.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

There was an uncomfortable silence as I tried to think of something to say.

"You left your swimsuit here. I'll go get it for you."

She looked embarrassed at the mention of her swimsuit. I started towards the shack.

"Zach..."

"Yeah?" I turned to face her, and she looked down at the pavement.

"Last night..." She looked up at me, her eyes searching mine. "I'm not usually like that."

"I know—"

"It's just ... the way you were looking at me and everything. I got caught up in all the attention and the way you make me feel, and then we'd gone too far and I didn't know how to stop..."

"It just happened. It wasn't your fault."

"I still can't believe I did that. I wasn't thinking. I've never done anything like that before."

"It's okay. I really like you Joanna."

"Yeah I know, and I like you. That's the problem."

That made me smile, and she smiled too, our smiles growing larger as we stood there looking at each other. The warmth of her smile washed over me, making me feel so happy again.

"I should get back to work." I glanced towards the store hoping my dad hadn't seen me out here yet.

"When do you get off?"

"Five o'clock."

"Okay," she smiled, "I'll see you at five then."

I watched her walk away, then remembered I hadn't given her back her swimsuit. I sighed and went back to the store.

My dad was waiting for me. "Who was that?"

"Umm..." *What is she, a friend? A girl I like?* "She's someone I met."

He frowned. "A little young isn't she?"

Why does everyone think she's too young? She's less than three years younger than me. Thankfully, he didn't say anything else, and went back to what he'd been doing.

Just before 5 o'clock, Joanna came into the store. Her bright smile took my breath away, I was so glad to see her.

"I was thinking, Zach, I'd really love to see some of your paintings, if you have any you could show me?"

"Yeah, there's some in the house I can show you."

I was happy to show her my art. As soon as I finished up, we went over to the house, and I led her into the living room.

"That's one I did last year." I pointed to the large painting above the fireplace. "And this one too." I went around the house pointed out my paintings to her. There were quite a few my parents had hanging on their walls.

"You're really talented." She peered at one of the portraits. "Do you have any more like this?"

"There's another portrait in my room. My parents didn't want it for the house."

"Why not?"

"It's a nude. Not really their thing." I grinned.

She laughed. "I wanna see it."

"Alright, but the subject's not as beautiful as another I've seen recently."

It took her a moment to grasp my meaning, then her mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you!" She slapped my arm and laughed.

I laughed too.

"Who's your friend, Zach?" My mom had come into the room.

"Oh, Mom, this is Joanna."

"Hello." My mom smiled at Joanna, then gave me her quizzical eyebrows look. I'd never brought any girls to the house before, so who knows what she was thinking.

"Joanna wanted to see some of my art." I explained.

"Oh yes, he's good isn't he?"

"He is. They're all very good. The portraits are my favorite."

"He's done some nice landscapes too. It's a pity there aren't more of them here. He keeps giving them away to his friends."

"We're going now, Mom." I ushered Joanna towards the door.

"It was nice meeting you, Mrs. uh ... Zach's mom."

My mom smiled. "It was nice meeting you too, Joanna."

We went out to the shack and I unlocked the door.

"Your mom seems nice."

"Yeah."

I closed the door behind us, and we looked at each other. I could feel a nervous tension between us, like we were waiting for something to happen.

"Maybe it's not a good idea to come here."

"It's okay, I won't take a shower this time." She laughed, though it didn't really ease the tension.

I pulled my painting out from behind the shelf.

"Why do you keep it back there?"

"It's not really something I'd want on my wall, and I've got nowhere else to put it."

I thought I detected a slight blush as Joanna looked over the female nude figure in the painting.

"It's beautiful. How long did it take you to paint it?"

"Not long. I work pretty fast."

"Who did you use for a model?" She lifted her eyes from the painting to look at me.

"It was just a photo."

"Oh." Her eyes wandered a little before returning to mine. "Have you ever seen a naked woman in real life?"

Her question took me by surprise. "Ah, you mean apart from you?"

"Yeah." She blushed.

"I don't know, probably not." I was ashamed to admit that. "Actually, I had a dream about you last night. It felt like it meant something."

"What was it?"

"It wasn't sexual or anything, but you were naked..."

I smiled as she blushed again. She was so cute. I put the painting back behind the shelf as I recounted the dream to her.

"...It was like you were seeing the real me, and I was seeing the real you—we accepted each other for who we really are."

She frowned. "So, I haven't seen the real you yet?"

"You have, it's just ... you know, sometimes we aren't totally ourselves with other people until we know them really well. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, but I'm not like that, I'm just me."

"You don't care what people think of you?"

"I care what you think of me." She smiled a little smile that made her look so vulnerable.

"You wanna know what I think? I think you're amazing. You're beautiful and happy and free, and you're so much fun to be with. I really like you a lot."

Joanna tilted her head to one side and smiled shyly. "You know, I think teenagers are afraid of rejection more than anything else."

"I know. We tear each other to pieces trying to be accepted. It's a teen eat teen world."

"And the media feeds our fears. They tell us what's cool and what's not, and how to look and act to be accepted."

I nodded. "We're majorly marketed to. It feels like everyone's trying to manipulate us, and they know how to target our weaknesses. I hate it."

"I hate it too."

"You're a deep thinker, aren't you Joanna?"

She smiled. "I guess."

"It's good to be able to think for yourself. There're people trying to force their thinking on us all the time."

“Like who?”

“You know, like the media, and all the politically correct stuff. They’re deliberately guiding our thinking in certain ways, which is like social engineering. It’s not all bad, but this is meant to be the land of the free, and it’s not freedom if we’re taught what to think. It’s indoctrination.”

“You’re a deep thinker too, aren’t you Zach?”

“I like to think so.” I grinned.

“Do you believe in God?” Her eyes searched mine.

“Uh, yeah, I guess. I don’t see much good in Christianity, though. Mostly a lot of hypocrites who think they’re better than everyone else.”

“I’m a Christian.”

“Oh...”

“Not that I’m perfect or anything, as you’ve already seen.”

“Well, I didn’t mean you ... and from what I’ve seen, you look pretty perfect to me.” I smiled, hoping I hadn’t offended her too much.

She smiled too. “I don’t think of myself as better than anyone else, but I try to be what a Christian is supposed to be. I’m not always good at that, but I guess God is still working on me. Hey, can I play you one of my songs? It’s kind of about this.”

“You write songs?” She just kept surprising me.

“Yeah.” She got my guitar and sat down on the bed. “I don’t usually play my songs for other people, so don’t laugh or anything.”

“Okay.”

She gave the guitar a quick tune. “It’s called ‘Why Me.’”

She started plucking the strings in an intricate melody, and then began to sing in a sweet, lilting voice. It was a song about the love of God who saved her even while she was still a sinner. She closed her eyes and sang with a gentle intensity, it was amazing.

When she finished, I clapped. “Wow, that was so good. You sing with such emotion.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and you’re really good with the guitar. You think you could teach me to play like that?”

“Sure, I could try. Actually, I was gonna ask you something...”

“What’s that?”

“You think you could paint me a picture?” She grinned.

I smiled. “That’s funny. I was going to ask if I could paint your portrait.”

She laughed. “Not nude though.”

“No.” I grinned. “I can just paint that in later, from memory.”

She laughed and grabbed my pillow to swing at me, and that’s when she saw her bikini lying there where my pillow had been. She just stared at it.

I was so embarrassed. “Oh yeah, I was gonna give those back to you.”

She gave me a strange look, then started laughing. “I’d let you keep them, since you obviously like them so much, but I kind of need them for swimming.”

I laughed too. *She’s so amazing, she never makes me feel bad about anything.*

“Hey, is that your camera up there? We should take some photos!”

I looked up where she was looking. “Yeah, that’s a great idea.”

I got the camera from the top shelf and we started taking photos of each other. We tried to take one with both of us in the same shot but we were giggling like crazy and all the photos looked like we were drunk.

We fell back on the bed laughing, and lay there looking at each other.

She smiled at me, and I leaned over and kissed her smiling lips, followed by another, and another, covering her mouth with tiny kisses. She responded with little kisses of her own, our lips opening and closing over each other’s, sharing each other’s quickened breath. The tips of our tongues touched, sending sensations through me.

I stroked my fingers through her soft hair. “You’re so beautiful,” I whispered.

We lay there for a long time, completely consumed with each other like nothing else existed, just staring into each other’s eyes, our souls communing.

Joanna sat up. “What time is it?” She looked around and saw my clock. “I should go, my parents will be wondering where I am. I could try and come back later, after dinner, if you want?”

“Sure. I could paint your portrait then.”

“Okay.” She smiled.

She kissed me and climbed over me to get up. At the door, she glanced back and said in a teasing voice, “Maybe I’ll even let you paint me nude.”

She flashed me a cheeky smile and was gone.

Whoa, she’s such a flirt.

I went to the house to see if dinner was ready. As soon as I walked through the door, my mom started asking me questions about Joanna.

“She’s very pretty. How old is she? How did you meet her?”

“She’s nearly sixteen, but she’s pretty mature for her age.”

“What about her parents? What do they think of an eighteen year old boy hanging around with their daughter?”

“I don’t know. They probably don’t know about it.”

“Be careful, Zach. She might seem mature to you, but sixteen year olds are still emotionally fragile. They seek attention and flattery at that age, they often have such a low self esteem they’ll do anything to be admired or loved.”

“She’s not like that. She’s very self confident.”

“You still need to be careful. You don’t want to break her heart.”

“Yeah, okay Mom.” I signaled an end to the conversation. She was right though, I had to be careful not to break Joanna’s heart. But maybe it was too late for that. *Maybe we’ll both get hurt, and there’s nothing we can do except live through it and eventually get over it.*

I headed for the door with my dinner in hand. My dad was standing in the hallway and must have been listening to our conversation.

He shook his head at me. “Zach, if you can’t see that girl is trouble, you’re a bigger fool than I took you for.”

“You don’t even know her, Dad.”

“I saw her, in that skimpy, little dress.”

I walked past him and out the door. *He’s so judgmental—as if he’s so perfect and knows everything.*

In my room, I put on some music to match my mood and turned it up loud. But then I remembered Joanna was coming back soon, so I changed it to some Ben Harper—I thought she might like that.

I got out my paints and brushes and set up the easel ready for her portrait. I only had two canvases left.

There was a quiet knock at the door and I leaped to open it.

“Hi.” She breezed in and kissed me, her eyes dancing.

“What did you say to your parents?”

“They just think I’m with my friends. Sometimes Matt and Dave make a fire on the beach and we stay out ‘til after midnight, so they won’t miss me for a while.”

“You want me to paint your portrait then?”

“Yeah.” She seemed to shiver. “You can paint me now.” She smiled up at me.

I showed her the two canvases I had left. “I can use one for your portrait, and the other to paint something else for you—whatever you want.”

“Maybe you can do two portraits—one for me and one for you to keep.”

“Okay, if you don’t mind sitting for two portraits?” I sure didn’t mind painting her twice.

“No, I don’t mind, but the one I keep can’t be a nude.”

I looked at her and she blushed.

“You mean...” I couldn’t even say it.

She nodded and smiled at me.

My heart was already racing. “Okay,” I gave her a reassuring smile, “Don’t worry, this’ll be great.”

I was saying it to myself as much as for her. I felt all jittery as I put the canvas up on the easel.

“So where do you want me?” She asked meekly.

“Umm, you can sit on the bed if you want, or stand, any way you’re comfortable.”

“Are we doing the nude one first?”

Her question took my breath away. “If you want to.”

Is she really gonna do this? I took a deep breath and watched to find out.

She was blushing, and fumbling with her clothes. She looked around at all the windows to see if anyone could see in, then she slipped the straps of her dress off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor with a flutter.

Wow, amazing how easy it comes off.

She stood there in her underwear, looking at me. “When I’m naked you can’t come near me, you’re only allowed to look, okay?”

“Okay.” My voice sounded strange.

She unhooked her bra and slipped it off, dropping it to the floor. I just stared. I couldn’t believe she was really doing this. She hesitated for a moment, then slipped her underpants down and stepped out of them.

My eyes swept unimpeded over her smooth, flawless skin, no longer interrupted by strips of cloth. The effect was amazing. I couldn’t help but stare in awe. I felt dizzy, overcome by her beauty.

She started turning around slowly, letting me see all of her. She was so beautiful, her sleek, young body with its alluring curves and long, slender limbs, so smooth and graceful. She was perfect.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at me like she was waiting for me to say something.

“You could ... lie down ... if you want.”

She swung her legs onto the bed, and lay on her side, her head resting on one arm. “Like this?”

“Yeah, that’s good.” I started trying to sketch her shape. “I don’t know if I can do this, my hands are shaking too much.”

“You’re shaking? I’m shivering like a leaf!” She laughed.

I breathed in a deep, shuddery breath and slowly exhaled. I still couldn’t believe she was doing this. I managed to sketch her shape, though it wasn’t the best outline I’d ever done.

I mixed some skin tones on my palette, and started to paint. As I got involved in what I was doing, I began to relax, though my heart was still pounding. Joanna was looking more relaxed too.

“Why did you decide to pose nude for me?”

“Umm, because you’re a good artist, and your nude portrait was beautiful ... and you’ve already seen me naked anyway. I just wanted to do something nice for you.”

I smiled. “It’s the best thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

She smiled too. She seemed to be enjoying her exhibitionism now.

“Do you like being naked like this?”

“Yes,” she giggled.

I laughed. I was enjoying this too. It was beautiful, and sexy, and the most exciting thing I’d ever done.

“It’s a bit like your dream isn’t it. Hey, I’ve got an idea, why don’t I paint you nude too?”

“Ha ha, no way!”

“Aw, why not?” She teased.

“Cause I’m not beautiful like you, for a start.”

“Yes you are! You’ve got a nice body, and that sexy surfer look.”

“The well-defined tan lines?” I laughed, but my ego was eating up her every word.

I continued to paint, working quickly with several brushes. She was quiet for a while, letting me work. After a long time of staying so still, she started getting restless, shifting the arm under her head.

“Sorry, my arm’s falling asleep. What part of me are you painting now?”

“Just some touch ups on your breasts.”

She opened her mouth in pretend shock, then grinned. “Can I see it?”

“Not yet. It won’t be much longer.”

I was pleased with how it was looking, but I still had some work to do on her face.

“Were you surprised when I said I’d pose nude for you?”

“Yeah, I thought you were joking.”

“You looked surprised.” She laughed. “I was joking when I first said it, but then I thought, why not? I guess I was being impulsive again. You think it’s okay to be doing this?”

“Yeah, of course. Don’t worry, nothing’s going to happen like last time.”

“No goodbye kisses?” She laughed, then became serious. “You don’t think it’s wrong though, for a Christian?”

“You’re asking me?”

“It’s what you think that matters. I don’t wanna be a bad example and put you off because of me.”

“You’re not a bad example of anything. At least you’re not judgmental like other Christians. And I don’t see this as something bad, beauty isn’t sinful. There’s lots of historical Christian nude art.”

“Yeah.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with our bodies. Adam and Eve were naked, so God must have liked it that way to begin with.” I looked again at her graceful form. “Besides, your body is the finest example of God’s handiwork I’ve ever seen. It has to be the best evidence that there is a God.” I smiled, feeling pleased with myself.

“You’re funny. But you’re right—this is about beauty, not something sinful. I want to please you with the beauty God has given me.”

Her words sent a warm, tingly sensation flowing through me.

“Thanks.” I said, my voice rough with sincerity.

She smiled, like she was just realizing how much this meant to me.

“Do you think this is stupid, though, putting ourselves in the way of temptation?”

“It’s okay, as long as we don’t fall into temptation, right? Being on the edge of temptation is the most exciting place to be. Are you feeling guilty about it?”

“No, that’s the weird thing though, I don’t feel guilty about any of this. It’s like part of me feels...”

“What?”

“Nothing, don’t worry.”

“What were you going to say?”

“I don’t know. Part of me feels like we already belong together, like we’re meant to be.”

I blinked, and my mother’s warnings came to mind. “Joanna, you know I really like you, but you’re going back to Colorado soon, and we might never see each other again.”

“You never know, though, Zach. Love can make a way if it’s meant to be.”

“Love breaks more hearts than it makes a way for.”

She didn’t say anything. I kept painting and didn’t say anything either.

“I should go.”

“Why?”

She got up and started gathering her clothes.

“No wait, don’t go. I’m sorry. I just get a little nervous with all this talk of love. We’ve only known each other a few days. You’re right, we don’t know what the future holds for us. I don’t even know how I really feel about you. I have all these mixed up emotions. All I know is I don’t wanna hurt you. I don’t care about me, I can handle it, but you’re young. I’m scared of breaking your heart.”

She finished putting her clothes on, but she didn’t leave. Instead, she came over and stood beside me to look at the painting.

“Wow that’s really good. Who are you going to show this to?”

“Just you.”

“No one else is going to see it?”

I shook my head.

She looked up at me and smiled sheepishly. “I’m sorry, Zach. I know I’m being stupid about everything.”

I pulled her to me and we hugged. She rested her head on my chest and looked again at the painting. “You made me look too perfect.”

“What do you mean?”

“My hips are wider than that, and you didn’t paint any of my blemishes. It just looks too perfect.”

“What blemishes?” I leaned back to look at her. “I don’t even see any.” *It’s amazing, even the prettiest girl can find something wrong with the way she looks.*

“You don’t see them?”

“No? You must cover them up with makeup or something.”

“I don’t wear makeup. I don’t like being fake.”

I had to laugh. She had such a natural beauty she didn’t even need makeup. “I painted you the way I see you, and if that’s too perfect, it’s ‘cause that’s what you look like to me.”

She smiled up at me, and I kissed her smile. When our lips parted she said softly, “I love you.”

My stirred emotions arose to her words, and I whispered, “I love you too.” The words were so powerful, I instantly regretted saying them. I knew what it would do to her young heart, but it was too late to take back now.

“I better go, it’s getting late.” She released herself from my arms. “I’ll see you tomorrow?” She looked up at me with such softness in her eyes.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll come by at five.” She opened the door, and it was dark outside.

“I better walk you home.”

“Okay.” She smiled.

We walked in comfortable silence. It was a warm, clear night, and Joanna turned her face to the star-filled sky. “See Zach, God’s an artist too.”

I looked admiringly at Joanna’s sleek silhouette. “He sure is. I’m a mere imitator of his artistry.”

I could just make out her smile in the dim light.

We reached the edge of the campground, and Joanna stopped. “You don’t have to come any farther.”

“Alright.” I guessed she didn’t want her parents to see us together.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” I leaned in to kiss her. She gently touched her lips to mine but teasingly kept them just out of reach of a full kiss, drawing me closer until my hungry lips caught hers and we kissed passionately, our bodies pressing against each other.

She pulled away breathlessly. “I really have to go.” She hesitated a moment longer, before quickly walking away.

I watched until I’d lost sight of her, then retreated back to the shack.

Alone in my room, I tried to understand what I was feeling. I liked her so much it was actually painful, I ached to be with her. *If this is infatuation it sure feels like love.*

There was a knock at the door, and I rushed to open it thinking Joanna had come back to me.

“Hey.” It was just my friend Josh.

“Hey.” I tried to hide my disappointment. I went over and covered the painting with a dust cloth. I didn’t want him to see Joanna like that.

“So what’s up with you?” He flopped onto my bed.

“You don’t wanna know.”

“Come on man, spill.”

I sighed. “I think I’m falling in love.”

Josh looked amused.

“Yeah, and she’s not even sixteen yet, and she’s only here for two weeks then goes back to Colorado. I know it’s stupid, but when I’m with her it’s like the happiest I’ve ever been.”

“You gotta stay away from the young ones. Toss her back and keep fishing.”

“She thinks we’re meant to be together, like it’s fate or something.”

He shook his head. “You’ve gotta end it, man. Tell her you’re not meant to be. How ‘bout I set you up with someone who’ll make you forget all about her. I know this girl, she’s a real babe, and you’ll soon know the difference between a sixteen and an eighteen-year-old.”

“You’re not helping, man. I don’t know if I’ll ever meet a girl like this again. She’s something special.”

“All girls are special. You just haven’t had enough of them to know that. You should come out with me. I’ll introduce you—”

“Nah ... thanks man, I just wanna be left alone.”

“Alright.” He got up. “You watch yourself with that girl though, dude. She’s too young to handle.”

He pushed open the door and looked back at me. “Hey, I’ve been there. It sucks but you’ll get over it. See ya in the surf.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

The door closed behind him, leaving me alone again with my thoughts. I closed my eyes and immediately pictured Joanna’s smiling face. I liked her so much. “What should I do?” I said aloud to the empty room, or perhaps it was to God.

I removed the dust-cover and looked again at her portrait. She was truly beautiful, a perfection of symmetry and proportion. It was definitely the best thing I’d ever painted.

I saw my parent’s Bible still lying there by my bed, and in a flash of inspiration, I knew how I was going to finish Joanna’s portrait.

It was late when I finally put down my brushes. I stood back and admired my work. Her figure was floating, her hair spread about her, her eyes closed like she was asleep. A flowing ribbon curled loosely around her with the inscription: ‘Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires’. She was a sleeping beauty awaiting love’s first kiss.

I was really pleased with it. I couldn’t wait to show Joanna.

After a quick cleanup, I crawled into bed and drifted off to sleep with Joanna’s beautiful image still lingering in my mind.

Three

Five p.m., but no sign of Joanna. I waited for her outside the store, and eventually she turned up, her face flushed, her eyes red.

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to talk to you.” She glanced towards the store. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

We followed the rough dirt path that led down to the beach. For some time she didn’t speak, then she stopped and faced me. “My parents know about us. Lizzie told them I wasn’t with her last night. They wanted to know where I was ... they yelled at me.”

She started to cry. I put my arms around her, and she buried her face against my chest. When she looked up at me again, her eyes full of tears, I gently asked, “So what did you tell them?”

“That you’re just a friend, but they freaked out when they asked how old you are.”

I hugged her tight. “It’s okay. We’ll just keep a low profile for a while.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

“Don’t worry about me.” I gently wiped a tear from her cheek. “I don’t mind getting in trouble for you.”

“I don’t want my parents to be mad at me, either. I don’t wanna sneak around behind their backs and have to lie to them.”

“So ... what then?”

She didn’t say anything.

“You think we should stop seeing each other?” A small part of me felt relieved at the thought of it ending, it was already so emotionally intense. But the rest of me couldn’t stand the thought of losing her. I started to feel angry. *What happened to true love making a way? She just gives up at the first sign of trouble. And I was worried about breaking her heart.*

“Zach, do you think you could talk to my parents? I know if they met you they wouldn’t be so freaked about it.”

“You think they’ll let us keep seeing each other?”

“I don’t know,” she lowered her eyes, “I hope so.”

“But if they don’t ... will you keep seeing me anyway?”

“I don’t wanna disobey my parents, but I don’t wanna lose you either. I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Alright, let’s go see them then.”

We started walking back up the path. Joanna took my hand, giving it a little squeeze of appreciation.

I was nervous about meeting her parents—I could just imagine some big confrontation.

“What are your parents like?”

“They’re Christians—but don’t worry, they’re not scary or anything. Just don’t mention the times we’ve been alone in your bedroom together.”

“What should we say then?”

“I don’t know ... just say we were hanging out and talking.”

I sighed. *Is this really worth it—getting a grilling from her parents so I can spend some more time with a girl I’ll probably never see again?* But even one minute with Joanna was worth it. I had no choice.

We entered the campground, and she led me through the woods, past several campsites. She squeezed my hand again as we neared a campsite with two tents. I could see a middle-aged couple sitting at a table, but they had their backs to us and hadn’t seen us yet.

Joanna released my hand. “Mom, Dad, this is Zach.”

They both turned in surprise. Her father stood up and looked me over as he offered me his hand.

“Hello, Zach.”

“Hi.” I shook his hand. He had a firm grip.

“Take a seat.” He motioned to the chair across from him, and I sat down. Joanna sat next to me.

Her parents didn't look too scary. I could see the resemblance between mother and daughter—her mom was still good looking even at her age. Her father was tall and distinguished looking, but he had a friendly face.

"Zach wanted to come and meet you to clear up some things." Joanna's voice sounded a little higher pitched than usual. She smiled at me, and it gave me some courage.

"It was good of you to come and see us, Zach." Joanna's father spoke with a calm seriousness. "We were very concerned when we heard Joanna was spending time alone with a boy we didn't even know about."

Her mother fixed me with a piercing look.

"You're eighteen, Zach?" Her father looked at me with a serious intensity. *Okay, so they were a little scary.*

"Yes, sir. I know it might seem strange for me to be hanging around with your daughter, but ... uh ... she's just really nice to talk to. I like hanging out with her. I didn't mean to cause you to worry."

Her parents stared at me like I was from another planet. I glanced at Joanna, and she smiled encouragingly.

"Zach, we don't allow our daughter to date. If she goes out with a boy it's always with a group of her friends—never alone." Joanna's mother was trying to sound calm and controlled like her husband, but there was an emotional edge to her voice. "You're much older than she is. We want to keep our daughter from situations she's not ready to handle yet." She gave Joanna a disapproving look. "Joanna knew she was breaking our rules."

This wasn't going too well. Joanna had slunk down in her chair. She seemed so much younger all of a sudden. I wanted to tell her parents to stop treating her like a little child, but I knew if I said that I'd never be allowed to see her again.

"Zach," Her Father spoke again, "we'd rather you didn't see Joanna anymore. We prefer her to be around others of her own age, that we know."

Yeah like Matt. He's a great influence.

Silent tears rolled down Joanna's cheeks. I tried desperately to think of something I could say to change their minds.

"I ... I understand you want to protect your daughter, but we've already become such good friends, and I'd really like to continue our friendship if that's possible. Would it be okay if we stayed in a group with her other friends?"

Her mother shook her head. "She hasn't been very trustworthy with you so far, Zach."

My mind raced. "Well, that was my fault. I'm sure she wouldn't have left her friends if I hadn't asked her to. She was talking to me about her faith, and I didn't feel comfortable talking about it in front of her friends. What we've been discussing has really opened up some things for me."

I watched their stern faces begin to thaw. *Wow! Using their religion, how did I come up with that?*

I looked at Joanna. She was looking at me with a strange expression. *She probably doesn't like me lying to her parents, but it's not really a lie—she did talk about her faith, and it did touch me to see her sincerity.*

"Is this true, Joanna?" Her father looked at her, and I held my breath.

"Yes." She said meekly.

"Well, perhaps we have been a little hasty." He turned to his wife, "What do you think?"

She nodded. "Would you like to stay and have some dinner with us, Zach? We could have a little chat and get to know you better."

"Sure."

Her mother's attitude changed to all smiles and sweetness as she went to work cooking up something on their camp stove. Both parents started peppering me with questions, and I felt uncomfortable under their scrutiny. I tried to get them to talk about Joanna instead.

When dinner was ready, we sat around their small table, and Joanna's father said grace before we all started eating.

"I notice you don't like talking about yourself much." Joanna's father looked knowingly at me across the table.

"There's not much to tell."

"And you'd rather talk about Joanna." He raised an eyebrow at me. "I'm getting the impression your interest is something more than just friendship."

I looked at Joanna, she was blushing, and her father had noticed that too. I didn't say anything, I just focused on what I was eating.

Joanna's father leaned back in his chair and looked at us. "There's a good reason why we set these rules about dating. I know what it's like to be a teenager, and how easy it is to be swept up by your emotions and lose all common sense. You know, the Bible teaches, when two people have sex, they become one flesh. Today we have a marriage ceremony and legal papers that make people married, but it's the union of flesh that makes someone married in

God's eyes. I'm telling you this because the world treats sex like a thrill ride at an amusement park, but sex is something special. Jesus said, 'What God has joined together, let no man separate'. There's never anything casual about it."

Why is he telling us this? Does he think we've had sex?

I looked at Joanna. She was looking at me and I couldn't tell what she was thinking. I hadn't heard any of this stuff before. *No wonder Christians make such a big deal about sex. But it kind of makes sense that God would give us a natural way of marriage. We always add our own stupid rituals to everything.*

Joanna was still looking at me. *Is she thinking how close we came to being married in God's eyes? What if we'd actually done it?* I realized, with surprise, that the thought didn't scare me. In fact I liked the idea of being married to her. *Maybe I really am in love.*

Her father continued. "If you're not ready for the whole deal of marriage, and babies, and everything else, then don't even get started with the sexual stuff. And you're not ready yet, even if your bodies think you are. When you have feelings for each other, your bodies go crazy with hormones. Nature's job is to make us procreate. That's what attraction and sex is for on a basic level, to make babies. Nature battles against us sometimes, and it can be hard. Our souls seek a soul mate and our bodies seek to procreate. You need to be wise and self controlled, and not put yourself in a place where nature might overcome your commonsense."

Joanna was blushing again, and her father sighed. "I don't mean to embarrass you, but I know the world doesn't teach these things. The world says sex is just a fun thing to play with, but sex is more than just an exciting game to play, and who you have sex with really does matter."

"What you're saying makes sense," I said cautiously. "The world always lies about everything."

Joanna was looking at me strangely again. *She probably thinks I'm just saying it to look good to her parents.*

"There's only one truth, Zach. Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.' And only his truth can set you free."

It was too much. I just wanted him to stop talking.

"I should probably get going." I stood up.

"Okay, well you're always welcome to drop by and have a chat with us, and if Joanna's around, you can spend some time with her while you're here."

"Okay. Thanks for dinner."

Joanna stood up too. "I'll show you the way back," she turned to her father. "Is that alright, Dad?"

He frowned then nodded.

We walked some distance from their campsite before Joanna turned to me. "I'm sorry, I didn't know he'd lecture us like that."

"Is he a preacher or something?"

"No, not really."

"At least we can keep seeing each other."

"Yeah." She smiled. "Thanks for talking to them. I know how horrible it must've been for you."

"Yeah, your dad's okay, though. At least he speaks the truth."

"You believe it's true?" She looked surprised.

"Yeah, I think what he said is true. You know, I realized something else..."

"What's that?"

"The thought of being married to you didn't actually scare me."

Her face lit up. "Me either! I was thinking about that too."

We stood there grinning at each other.

"I should get back to my parents. I don't want them worrying about us."

"Hey," I grabbed her hand as she turned to go. "I love you." My words were heavy with emotion. It was such a powerful thing to say and really mean it.

"I love you too." Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked, and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

I caught the salty tear with a kiss, then my lips moved to hers, kissing her with all the love I felt for her, a love set free from my intellect trying to convince me it wasn't real. I knew I was in love, my heart ached with it, it was so pent up inside me longing to be expressed.

She pulled away, smiling up at me through her tears, then, as if unable to speak, she just turned and walked away.

Getting ready for bed that night, I saw my parents' Bible still sitting there. I picked it up and started reading, beginning in the New Testament because I wanted to read about Jesus.

I thought I already knew the Bible from all the Sunday school lessons I had as a kid, but I was surprised by what it actually said—especially what Jesus said.

I couldn't help but compare it to my parents' lives. I couldn't see anything of their religion in what Jesus taught. They were more like the Pharisees who judged everyone by outward appearances and kept empty rituals and laws. Jesus was radical—all about loving others and giving up everything for God. He didn't care what people thought of him, he hung out with the worst people. This was the real Jesus—not the church version. *I bet Jesus wouldn't even be welcome in most churches today. He'd be too radical for them.*

I put the Bible down and turned out the light. In the darkness I thought to say a prayer.

“Thank you for bringing Joanna into my life. Please God, allow us to keep seeing each other. I really care about her.”

It was the first time I'd prayed since I was a little boy, and it made me feel reassured somehow, like I had a new-found hope.

•••

I usually slept late on weekends, but this Saturday I was already up and heading over to the campground before 8am.

There was no sign of life at their campsite.

“Anyone here?” I called.

“Just a second.” Joanna's muffled voice came from the smaller tent.

“What are you doing?” I could hear her shuffling around inside.

“I'm getting changed. Hang on.”

She burst out of the tent. “Hi!” She beamed, her eyes sparkling with happiness. She threw her arms around me and we kissed.

“Is that where you sleep?”

“Yep, that's my tent. My parents sleep in the other one.”

“Where are they?”

“They went out somewhere. They wouldn't want us to be alone together. We should go find my friends or something.”

“Can't we be alone for a while, just to talk?”

She shook her head and pouted. “My parents are so strict.”

“They're just protecting you.”

“Yeah, from you!” She laughed.

“You need protecting from me.” I grabbed her around the waist and drew her to me, kissing her giggling mouth.

I looked into her beautiful, smiling face. “You know, I was thinking ... the only way we could keep seeing each other after the summer, is if I moved to Colorado.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you serious? You'd move all that way to be with me?”

“Would you want me to?”

“Yes! I *really, really, really, really, really* want you to.”

I laughed. She was so cute. “It'd be hard though. I'd need a place to stay, and a job. I don't have much money. I guess I need to know if we're really that serious to even be thinking about it.”

“I'm serious. This isn't just a crush, I'm in love with you. I know this is real. It's different from anything I've ever felt before.”

I smiled. She made me feel so happy.

“Is there...” She hesitated. “Is there anything I can do to show you I'm serious?”

“Like what?”

“You know ... anything?” She seemed to hold her breath, waiting for my answer. I didn't know what to say.

“Come on, let's go find your friends.”

We found Matt, Lizzie and the other guy at the far end of the beach. I felt a little jealous watching Joanna chatting and laughing with her friends. I didn't wanna share her with them, I wanted all of her attention.

Matt was flirting with Lizzie and saying suggestive things, but she was totally not interested. It was fun listening to their banter. I started to relax, and found myself laughing at their dumb jokes. They were good to hang with.

“You smoke, Zach?” Matt asked me.

“Nah.”

“Yeah, I don't smoke ... cigarettes.” He gave me a knowing look and laughed. “Ever tried mushies?”

“Matt!” Joanna gave him an evil look.

“What?” He thrust out his hands, all innocent.

“Why do you even do drugs?” Joanna’s attitude changed to concern for her friend. “Don’t you want to achieve something with your life? Drugs are just going to mess it up.”

“Yeah,” Lizzie piped in. “You could end up homeless and living on the streets. That’s what happened to this guy I know. He owned his own house and everything, and lost it all ‘cause of his addiction.”

“I’m not addicted. It doesn’t even do anything, it’s like a little party in your brain. It’s not as bad as you think.”

I’d always thought doing drugs was dumb, but if that’s what they wanna do, it’s their life. I wasn’t the kind of guy to tell anyone else what they should or shouldn’t be doing. But now I found myself wanting to back Joanna—“Yeah man, drugs are like a party, and you think the guy throwing the party is your friend. But while the party’s going on at your place, he’s out the back stealing everything—your intelligence, your ambition, your health, your future, everything you want in life—all gone in a puff of smoke while you’re enjoying the party. Drugs aren’t your friend, man, they’re your enemy.”

Joanna flashed me a smile.

“Hey, that’s deep,” Lizzie laughed.

Matt shook his head. “Yeah, but everything’s bad for you, everything’s a risk—what you eat, having sex. We all die in the end anyway.”

For a while no one else spoke, and the silence soon became uncomfortable. Matt just sat there like he was lost in thought or sulking or something. I felt bad for him.

“I don’t touch drugs, or anything like that, after what happened to a friend of mine.” Lizzie said, her eyes fixed in the distance.

“Why, what happened?” Joanna prompted.

“She liked this guy, but she wasn’t gonna do anything with him. But when she got high she had sex with him.”

“Ohh.” Joanna put a hand on her friend’s shoulder.

Lizzie shrugged it off. “Yeah, she got pregnant. She was only fifteen and had to get an abortion.”

“This is gettin’ depressing.” The other guy got up. “I’m outta here. See ya later.”

“Hey, wait up.” Matt jumped to his feet and followed his friend, leaving just Joanna, Lizzie, and me.

“I’d hate to be in that situation, but I’d never get an abortion.” Joanna stated.

“She didn’t want her parents or anyone to know about it.”

“So? That’s not a reason to kill your baby.”

“It was a hard decision for her,” Lizzie started to raise her voice. “Sometimes you have to make hard decisions like that. I think she did the right thing.”

“I wish abortion wasn’t even an option.”

“It’s a woman’s right to choose!” Lizzie folded her arms and glared at Joanna.

“The baby should have a right to live. There’s no right that says you shouldn’t suffer the consequences of your actions. She didn’t have to keep the baby, she could’ve given it up for adoption after it was born. The right to choose is so selfish, it’s only for the inconvenience of pregnancy.”

“Pregnancy’s a big deal, ya know, and having to adopt your baby to someone else would be horrible.”

“You’d rather put the baby to death?”

“It’s not a baby yet. It’s not fully developed, it has no feelings, it doesn’t even know if it wants to live or not, it’s not like you’re putting an actual person to death.”

“No, Lizzie, you don’t get it. That baby has a whole future ahead of her, and her life has already begun. If she wasn’t terminated she’d live out a life—maybe get married and have children. If you kill her, even when she’s tiny, you’re taking her whole life away and all she was meant to be and do. You’re not just killing a fetus, you’re killing a destiny.”

“It’ll never know the life it missed out on.”

“Either would you if someone killed you right now. That’s what murder is, it’s stealing the life you were supposed to have.”

Lizzie fell silent and stared at the sand.

“What do you think, Zach?” Joanna turned to me for the first time.

“Uh, well, I’ve never really thought about it, but, I guess if I was able to make a choice when I was an unborn baby, I’d choose to live. I think we all would. I’m glad my mother didn’t abort me.”

Joanna gave me a little smile.

“I’m going. You guys can have your own little morality party if you want.” Lizzie got up and started walking away.

“Lizzie, wait.” Joanna stood up. “Why is this bothering you so much? Was it you that had the abortion?”

Lizzie turned to face her. “No, it was a friend from school. It wasn’t her fault, she didn’t wanna get an abortion. You know, sometimes life is hard and you have to do things you don’t want to. Sometimes you even have to do things that aren’t right. You have no choice.”

“I know it can be hard to do what’s right. I’m not judging your friend. I wish I could’ve helped her.”

“But you *are* judging her, Joanna.” Lizzie turned and walked away. Joanna watched her go then turned to me, her lips pressed together in a sad little frown.

“Well, at least we know how to get rid of your friends when we wanna be alone.” I tried to lighten the mood.

She dropped down on the sand next to me. “I’ve never talked to my friends like that before. I think it’s ‘cause you’re here, you give me the courage to say what I truly believe. I always wanted to say something to Matt about his drugs. What you said was really good. I hope he thinks about it.” She sighed. “I just hope they don’t all hate me now.”

“Don’t worry, you told them the truth, that’s the important thing, right? But maybe next time you could be a little more tolerant of their views. That’s what Jesus was all about, right? Hanging with the sinners and loving them.”

“Yeah, but sometimes tolerance is the opposite of love. I know what you mean though, you can be intolerant just for the sake of being right.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know you had such strong views about abortion. You’re amazing, ya know? You’re so smart and articulate.”

She blinked and looked at me like she didn’t know what that meant.

“Well, what are we gonna do now? We’re not supposed to be alone together.”

“We can say we stayed with the group but the group didn’t stay with us?” I smiled.

“Yeah, I guess it’s okay if we stay in public view like this.”

I grinned. The nearest person was halfway down the beach.

“I finished your portrait. I wish I could show it to you.”

“Are you gonna paint me another one? I can’t pose for it now, but you could paint me something else instead?”

“Yeah, what would you like?”

“How ‘bout a self portrait of you? Not a nude though.” She laughed.

I laughed too. “Okay, I’ll try.”

We sat in silence for a while. I loved just being there with her. I didn’t care what we did, it was nice just lazing in the sun together.

I sifted sand through my fingers. “So, what’s it like in Colorado?”

She smiled. “It’s beautiful, you’d love it there. It’s perfect for an artist...”

Am I serious about moving to Colorado? Or am I just trying to give myself some hope that this isn’t gonna end, and I’m not gonna lose Joanna? It’s a fantasy isn’t it? I hardly even know her.

“...snow, and in autumn it’s so beautiful when all the leaves change. That’s my favorite time of year.” Joanna paused. “Were you even listening to me?”

“Yeah, I was just thinking, I don’t really know how I can move there. It’s such a big thing.”

“You could come and stay with us?”

I laughed. “I don’t think your parents would like that somehow.”

“God will make a way, Zach. You’ll see.”

I smiled. “I read some of the Bible last night. The Gospel of Matthew.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I wanted to read about Jesus.”

“That makes me so happy. I’ve been praying God would help you find the truth. Now I know everything’s going to work out for us.”

“I’m not gonna become a Christian, even if it was the truth.”

“Why not?”

“I’d hate to be one of them. Ya know, most Christians don’t even live by Jesus’ teachings. They’re more like the Pharisees.”

“Christians are just people who believe in Jesus. It’s not what you *do* that makes you a Christian, it’s who you believe in.”

“It should be what you do as well, if you really believe in it. I see them living the opposite of what Jesus taught. They think they’re Christians, but they’re fake. It’s meant to be all or nothing. They’re supposed to give up everything for God.”

“But how can you judge them, Zach? Have you ever tried living by Jesus’ teachings? No one can live up to that standard. I think most Christians feel guilty about that because we know we’re not fully living like we’re supposed to.”

“From what I’ve seen, most of them aren’t even trying to live by Jesus’ teachings. They’re completely ignoring everything he said and stood for. Jesus was radical—he didn’t preach conservative values. He preached love and

complete giving of your life away. His whole message is so different. It's like radical versus conservative. They're opposites."

Joanna sighed. "Maybe you're right. My dad always talks about the church needing a revival because it's become so lukewarm and not pleasing to God."

"A revival?"

"It's when God wakes up his church and makes it righteous and spiritual again. You should talk to my dad about it some time. Hey, you wanna go swimming?"

"Okay." I was glad to end this conversation.

She went to pull off her t-shirt but stopped. "Oh, I can't. I'm not wearing my swimsuit. You wanna walk back to the tent with me?"

"Have you ever swum naked before?"

She laughed. "I'm not going skinny-dipping in the middle of the day on a public beach!"

I grinned. "What about at night?"

"Come on."

We went back to her tent, and I waited outside while she changed. While I was standing there, her parents came back.

"You waiting here for Joanna?" Her father frowned at me.

"Yeah, she's just getting changed."

Joanna came out of the tent in her bikini, holding a couple of towels. "Is it okay if we go swimming, Dad?"

"Where are your friends?"

"They left us on the beach 'cause we were talking about abortion and stuff. I don't think they wanna hang with us anymore."

"Well, I guess we could all go down there." He turned to his wife. "How 'bout a picnic on the beach?"

A picnic sounded great to me. I suddenly realized how hungry I was.

Joanna's mother packed a picnic hamper, and we set off down to the beach together. Joanna and I went for a swim while her parents spread a blanket and set out the food. I was careful not to touch Joanna while her parents were there watching us. We just splashed around, and I tried to show her how to body surf.

When we got too hungry, we came in and sat down with her parents. Her mom had made us some sandwiches, and I quickly devoured mine. As I finished the last mouthful, I noticed they were all staring at me.

"You were hungry, weren't you Zach?" Joanna's mother smiled, and I felt embarrassed. Joanna laughed.

"Are you gonna come to the talent contest tonight, Zach?" Joanna's father asked.

"No? I didn't even know about it."

"We've been trying to persuade Joanna to enter it."

"Daaad!"

"You should! You could sing that song you played for me..." I stopped in mid-sentence, realizing I was giving them too much information.

"That's too personal to sing in public. It would be like you doing a painting while everyone was watching you."

"You paint, Zach?" Her mother asked.

"Zach's really talented. He does amazing portraits." Joanna answered for me.

"Really? I'd love to see them." Joanna's mother smiled. I somehow didn't think she'd appreciate seeing the last portrait I'd done.

"I think Joanna just managed to change the subject. What were we talking about again? Oh, that's right, her entering the talent contest." Joanna's father ruffled her hair.

"Yeah, you have to enter it." I nudged her. "You have an amazing talent that you shouldn't hide."

"Stop it, Zach. I don't want to."

"Just think of all the people who'd get to hear your song, though."

"I'd be too scared."

"You're the least fearful person I've ever met."

"Yeah, when I'm with you."

"I'll be there."

"You'd be on stage with me?"

"No, but I'll be there watching."

"I'll do it if you go on stage with me."

I laughed. "What would I do? Just stand there next to you?"

"You could play your guitar."

"I hardly know three chords."

"That's good enough. I'll teach you the rest."

"Okay then, let's do it."

"We need another guitar though, I don't have mine here with me."

"I'm sure we can borrow one from somewhere," Joanna's father said.

"I'll go get my guitar and meet you back at your campsite."

"Is it okay if we practice at the campsite, Dad?"

"Yes that's fine. Just behave yourselves, alright?"

"We will," we said in unison.

I took a shortcut back to the shack. I was a little nervous about playing the guitar in front of lots of people, but I wanted to do this for Joanna. I was excited for her, she was so good, she was going to blow everyone away.

I grabbed my guitar and went back to their campsite, finding Joanna already there strumming another guitar.

"Great, you found one."

"Yeah, but this one's so different to the one I'm used to. My guitar is more like yours."

"Here, you play mine and I'll play that one."

"I'm having second thoughts about doing this, though, Zach. I don't wanna sing my song in front of all those people. Maybe I could do it if we did a different song instead."

"Come on, you have to sing your song. It'll be so great. The way you sing it is amazing. I'll be surprised if you don't win."

"I'm scared though." She pressed her lips together.

"I'll be right there with you, probably making a complete fool of myself, but you'll be great. You just need some courage and you'll amaze everyone."

She looked at the ground for a moment, then she looked up at me and smiled an insecure little smile.

"You'll be fine. Stop worrying about it."

"Alright." She smiled with a little more enthusiasm. "I couldn't do this without you."

We practiced together all afternoon. Joanna taught me two new chords, and showed me when to change chords during the song. Eventually we got it sounding all right, though I was sure it would've sounded better without me and my mistakes. But I knew I wasn't there to make the song sound better, I was there to give her confidence.

Her parents came back from the beach, and I noticed they'd given us a lot of time alone together. I wondered if they were easing up on their restrictions now they knew me better, or if it was just 'cause of this talent contest. I knew they wanted her to sing in it as much as I did.

We played Joanna's song through for them, and they were full of praise, saying it was just perfect.

Joanna's mother fixed us some dinner, then Joanna went to her tent to change into something for the show. She came out in a light yellow summer dress.

"You're wearing that? You're gonna win just by looking so good."

She beamed, and her mom raised her eyebrows at me.

Seeing what she was wearing, I realized how under-dressed I was.

"I should go change too."

Joanna looked me over in my shorts and t-shirt. "Okay, but hurry up. It starts in half an hour."

I jogged back to the shack and put on some pants and a long-sleeved shirt, then looked at myself in the mirror. *Hmm*. I put on a pair of sunglasses and grinned at my reflection. *Now that looks like a musician*.

Taking a deep breath, I headed out the door. *This is gonna be interesting*.

When I got back to their campsite, Joanna and her mom had already left, but her father was there waiting for me. He looked me over and smiled.

"Come on, I'll show you the way."

He led me through the campground. "You know, Zach, you seem to be a good influence on my daughter. She wouldn't have entered this contest without your encouragement."

I just smiled.

"I appreciate you doing this for her. It's a big thing to get up in front of all these people. She has so much talent, I just want to see her doing what she loves without any fear holding her back. This might be just what she needs to give her that confidence boost. I hope she does well tonight."

"Yeah, I'm sure she will."

We arrived at a natural amphitheatre. A stage was set up at the bottom of the bowl-shaped valley, and quite a few people were already there finding a place to sit on the grass slopes.

I saw Joanna and her mom near the stage, and made my way towards them. Joanna saw me and gave me an exaggerated grin to show how nervous and excited she was.

“It’s starting soon. We’re third up.” She was so antsy she couldn’t stay still. The amphitheatre was filling fast, and there was a real buzz around the place—especially near the stage area.

I was sweating. I had so much to remember—all those chord changes. *I wish we could’ve practiced one more time.*

They announced the beginning of the show, and the first contestant, a drummer doing a solo, went up to perform. He was pretty good.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this. I’m so nervous. Are you nervous? I’m really nervous.” She was talking fast.

“Calm down, just breathe.” I laughed. “I’m nervous too, but it’s not a big deal if we make a few mistakes, right?”

“What if I freeze up there and can’t sing?”

“You won’t. Just look at me if you feel nervous. I’ll keep you from freezing.”

“How’ll you do that?”

“I don’t know, I’ll dance around and make funny faces or something.”

She laughed. “Oh, my mouth feels so dry.”

“I’ll get you some water.”

“No, Zach, we’re up next.”

Sure enough they were announcing: “Up next, Joanna and accompanist.”

“Accompanist?” I looked at Joanna. She just stood there not moving, so I grabbed her arm and started leading her up the stairs and onto the stage.

We looked out at the audience, and I couldn’t even remember what chord I was supposed to start on. Joanna started playing, so I hurried to play a chord. She looked over at me and smiled, then she began to sing.

The whole world seemed to fade away as I watched this beautiful young girl sing from her heart with simple, angelic purity. I don’t even remember playing, I was so mesmerized.

Joanna performed her song, and the next thing I knew we were walking off the stage to a cheering audience.

I was dazed and elated. As soon as we were down the stairs, Joanna jumped on me, giving me a huge hug—guitar and all.

“That was so amazing! I feel like ... I can’t even describe it. I can’t believe we did it!”

I laughed. “You were amazing, it was the best I’ve ever heard you.”

“I know! I made a few mistakes on the guitar though. You didn’t notice?”

I shook my head. “It sounded perfect to me.”

She laughed. “I can’t watch the rest of this. Let’s go somewhere.”

“But you’ll probably win.”

“I don’t wanna find out. Come on.” She grabbed my hand.

We left our guitars beneath the stage with a pile of other stuff, and started down a path towards the beach. It was already getting dark, and hard to see where we were going, but an almost full moon helped light our way.

“Thank you so much, Zach.”

“For what?”

“For everything! For making me do it. I couldn’t even go up those stairs without you. You’re so amazing. I can’t believe you got up there and played in front of all those people just for me, and you hardly know how to play the guitar. You’re so brave.”

I started laughing. “I don’t think I changed chords the whole time I was up there.”

“What?” She started laughing too, and then we both couldn’t stop.

“I was playing ... the same chord ... the whole time.” I gasped out the words, as we laughed uncontrollably. I had tears in my eyes.

“You’re so bad. Oh my goodness.”

“Hope I didn’t cost you the contest.”

“I don’t care about that. It was getting up there and doing it that was so amazing. I’m just glad I did it. It was one of the best things I’ve ever done in my whole life. Everything’s been so exciting since I met you.”

“Yeah, my life’s definitely been more exciting since I met you, too. I never know what’s going to happen next.”

“This.” She came up close and pressed her lips to mine. I pulled her into my arms and we kissed passionately, my hands caressing down her back. She took my hand from behind her and placed it on her breast, and I gently squeezed its ample softness through the thin fabric of her dress.

I was breathing harder, desire was rising up in me. I wanted all of her. Somehow, I found enough self-control to pry my lips from hers.

“We better stop, we’re getting too passionate.”

“I know,” she said breathlessly. “I’m sorry, I’m being stupid again.”

“It’s okay, I like it when you’re stupid.”

She laughed. “I like it too, ‘cause you stop us before we go too far.”

“I wish I didn’t—”

She stopped my words with her mouth, and we kissed again.

Joanna pulled away this time. "I wanna give you something special as a reward, and I just thought of something we can do. Come on."

She grabbed my hand and started leading me down the path again.

"What are we doing?"

"You'll see." She giggled.

I resisted, pulling her to a stop. "What is it?"

She smiled. "We're going swimming."

I laughed. I knew what that meant.

We ran down to the now deserted beach.

Joanna looked at me. "Shall we?"

"No, not here. Let's go 'round the point, it's more private there."

We walked around the rocky headland to the secluded cove on the other side, where a small sandy beach lay bare to the moonlight.

"Wow," she looked around. "I didn't even know about this place. It's very romantic."

We stood there for a moment, looking at each other, before we started taking our clothes off. She finished first, and I could see all of her, her bare skin luminescent in the moonlight.

I kicked off my underpants into the pile with my other clothes, and stood there naked. She'd never seen me like this before. She smiled as I took her hand in mine, and we ran together into the sea.

Joanna squealed as the water surged up around us, but it wasn't that cold—it felt invigorating and liberating.

We fell into the sea and immediately grabbed for each other, pulling our bodies together, our flesh touching as the waves broke around us.

My hands moved down her body, but before I could explore too much, she let go of me and swam away. I groped for her and grabbed a leg, feeling along it for the rest of her. She slipped out of my grasp and got away, squealing and giggling as I chased after her.

She let me catch her in the shallows and stood up, her body glistening in the moonlight. She was so beautiful.

I stood up next to her, so close we were almost touching, the waves crashing all around us. She reached out and gently stroked her fingertips down my chest and stomach, tracing the contours of my muscles.

I reached for her too, my hands cupping her perfectly formed breasts. They were so soft to touch, their smooth, rounded flesh contrasting with her pronounced nipples.

We kissed as my hands explored more of her, curving down her body over smooth, wet skin, until my fingertips reached the fringe of her pubic hair.

She stopped my hand with hers. "Zach ... we should go. My parents will be wondering where we are." She kept hold of my hand and started wading back to shore.

We found our clothes on the beach.

"How are we gonna get dry? I can't put my dress on while I'm wet, it'll soak right through."

"Yeah, we didn't think of that. We could build a fire and sit around it 'til we dry off?"

"That'll take forever."

"It'd be romantic though." I grinned.

"This is serious. We'll be all wet, and my parents will figure out what we've been doing."

"It's okay, just use my shirt to dry off, we'll go back to the shack and dry off properly."

"We'll be gone so long."

"Let's just worry about one thing at a time."

"Okay." She seemed to relax, like she was trusting me to get us out of this situation. She started drying herself with my shirt while I pulled my pants on over wet, clingy legs.

When she'd finished, she handed it to me and I put on my now damp shirt. She put on her dress, and we headed back around the point carrying our shoes and underwear. I could still hear distant music coming from the campground.

"We might still make it back before it finishes."

We ran together along the beach, laughing and giggling at the crazy situation we were in. When we made it to the shack, I got some towels from the bathroom, and she took off her dress and started to dry herself.

I watched her for a moment. "I'll go get my mom's hairdryer."

"Okay, thanks." She smiled at me.

I came back with the hairdryer and she dried her hair and some damp spots on her dress. I peeled off my clothes and dried myself too, then changed into a new shirt and some pants similar to what I'd been wearing.

“No one’s going to guess we’ve been swimming.”

“Yeah, but they’re gonna ask us where we’ve been.” She pushed open the door and we headed back to the campground.

“So what should we say?”

“I don’t know. I hate lying to my parents.”

“We’ll just say we went for a walk after our performance.”

“Yeah, we walked down to the beach and back. That wouldn’t be lying.”

The campground was deserted. I could hear music in the distance, and we made our way towards it. The music stopped, and we picked up our pace. We soon joined the crowd around the edge of the amphitheatre. Joanna started pressing her way through, and I followed her.

A man on stage spoke into a microphone, “And now, for the moment you’ve been waiting for ... the winner of this year’s talent contest is ... *Joanna and accompanist.*”

We both froze and looked at each other. She looked stunned.

“You won!”

She just stood there, so I started pushing her towards the stage.

“There she is.” The man on stage pointed to us, and the crowd parted. Joanna walked up the stairs still looking completely dazed.

“Smile!” I called out to her.

She smiled as the man handed her a trophy and everyone clapped. I caught sight of her parents, her father was capturing the moment with a video camera, and her mom had tears rolling down her cheeks. I couldn’t help being caught up in the emotion of it all, I had a big lump in my throat as I smiled up at my beautiful Joanna.

She graciously took her trophy and retreated back down the stairs. The crowd was still clapping as she came to me, smiling and holding her trophy up for me to see.

Her mom and dad came to us, and Joanna hugged them both. We stayed there in a huddle as the crowd around us began to dissipate. Her parents were bubbling with joy. They didn’t even ask us where we’d been.

We collected our guitars from under the stage and started walking back up the hill. A few people called out their congratulations, and Joanna thanked each of them.

“Wasn’t this a great night!” Her father enthused. “I got it all on video. You were so good. You deserved to win.”

“It was wonderful.” Her mother still had tears in her eyes. “I knew you’d win. You were good too, Zach.”

I grinned and looked at Joanna, who gave me a happy, relieved smile.

When we reached their campsite, I said my goodnights and walked home with my guitar, whistling the tune to Joanna’s song.

I was proud of Joanna. The more I knew her the more there was to love about her. *I guess that’s what love is like, you fall in love with someone you hardly know, and then you get to know them and your love deepens, or you begin to fall out of love. I never knew love happened so fast, I thought you had to know everything about a person first to truly love them. But love doesn’t wait for that. Love is blind.*

Four

I awoke to a knock at the door and looked at the clock—8:22am. I eased out of bed, rubbing my eyes as I went and opened the door. All annoyance evaporated at the sight of Joanna standing there.

“Good morning.” Her smile was like a sunrise.

“Hi!” I opened the door wider for her to come in, and she looked me over admiringly—I was wearing only boxer shorts. I closed the door behind her, and she wrapped me in her arms, smiling up at me so lovingly.

“Am I still dreaming?” I laughed. “What are you doing here?”

She laughed too. “My dad sent me to ask if you’d like to come to church with us this morning.”

“Oh...” My smile froze. “Which church?” *Not my parent’s church.*

“I don’t know, we haven’t decided yet.”

“I have to take a shower first. Can you wait for me?”

“Sure.” She smiled up at me, and I kissed her petal-soft lips. She returned my kiss with passion, her hands caressing my body. I was growing increasingly aware my boxer shorts weren’t hiding the way she was making me feel.

“You better go take your shower.” She giggled.

“Yeah.” I sighed.

I went into the bathroom and turned on the water. She was still watching me through the open doorway. When it was hot enough, I slipped off my shorts and stepped into its warm stream.

After a quick shower, I wrapped a towel around my waist, and she openly admired me as I came back into the room. It felt so sexy being admired like that.

I stood there, looking at her looking at me. “Hmm, maybe I should go,” I said in a falsetto voice. I made to walk past her, then suddenly veered and kissed her on the lips.

She laughed and ripped my towel away. I gasped and she fell into a fit of giggles.

After I’d dressed, we walked out into the warm sunshine. It was another beautiful day with Joanna, and I felt happy. We held hands and walked slowly.

When we got to her campsite, her parents were already waiting for us in their car.

“There you are! We were just about to come and find you.” Her dad leaned out the car window. “Come on, we’re gonna be late.”

Her mom smiled at me as we climbed in the back seat. “Nice to see you again this morning, Zach.”

We drove into town and parked in the parking lot of a large church. It wasn’t my parent’s church, but it still made me nervous.

It was pretty grand inside, with plush seating facing a stage with a large stained glass window behind it. We sat near the back. I looked around and I recognized some people. The meeting started with some singing. I didn’t know any of the songs, but I liked listening to Joanna sing them.

The pastor then got up and started speaking about the blessings of God. He mostly talked about financial blessing and stressed that giving to the church would bring God’s blessing on their finances so they could continue to be a blessing to others. I couldn’t help but compare his message to what I’d read the other night. *This isn’t what Jesus taught. He said don’t seek after the things of this world, and you can’t love both God and money. What’s wrong with these Christians? Don’t they read their Bibles?*

After he’d finished speaking, he asked people to give their money, and they handed around a collection basket. I watched one guy stuffing money into it. *This is so wrong. It’s just a big con.* You could see what they spent their money on, and it wasn’t the poor and needy. I felt disgusted by it all.

After the service, Joanna’s Father drove us home. “I’m sorry about that, that wasn’t the right church to take you to.”

“Yeah, I knew that guy wasn’t speaking the truth.”

“They think it’s true, Zach. Everyone likes the idea of God blessing them with nice things and a happy, comfortable life in this world. But why would God want to bless our greed and worldly consumerism? He doesn’t want to bless us when all we’d do is use it selfishly on our own pleasure and comfort. He doesn’t want spoiled children, he wants children of good character. Jesus didn’t die to give us luxury in this world. He gives us life so we can live for him and go to the poor and the sick and the lost and bless them with his love and the good news of the gospel.”

He shook his head. “It’s such a shallow form of Christianity. They live for themselves, they don’t know anything of denying themselves taking up the cross and following Jesus, they just fit their Christianity around their worldly lifestyle. They see the blessings God has for them, but they don’t see the blessing God wants them to be to this world, because that requires sacrifice. That’s what true worship is, Zach, laying down your life, and everything this world offers, and living for God. Our reward is eternal not temporary. We’re not supposed to run after the things of this world but seek after the things of God, and trust him to take care of our needs.”

I was surprised at the passionate way he spoke. He obviously cared deeply about it.

“Tell him about revival, Dad.”

He glanced at us in the rearview mirror. “Revival, that’s what the church desperately needs.”

“What is it?” I asked, not sure I really wanted to know.

“It’s an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, when God’s holy presence comes upon a place so powerfully, all the people become very aware of their sins and repent, and they’re purified and made holy and righteous and full of love for one another. It’s an exciting time. Miracles happen and many people are saved. The last time it happened here in a big way was a hundred years ago, but I believe we’re going to see another revival soon, and the church as we know it will be completely changed. That’s what I’m praying for.”

He pulled into their campsite and parked.

“Can me and Zach go to the beach?” Joanna asked.

Her parents looked at us, and her father smiled. “I think you’ve earned some time alone together. But stay where people can see you, no going off in private anywhere.”

Joanna’s father grinned as we both agreed. I could tell he liked me. I wondered just how far he was willing to bend the rules for us. While Joanna went to get changed in her tent, I decided to try my luck and find out.

“Uh, actually I wanted to ask you something.”

“What’s that, Zach?” He gave me his full attention, which made me nervous.

“Do you think I could take Joanna out to a movie sometime ... like, maybe tonight?”

He raised his eyebrows. “You mean on a date?” He glanced at his wife, who was obviously listening in. “Zach, she’s not allowed to date—”

“Yeah, I know. I just thought, since you’re loosening the rules a little, you might let us go on one date.”

He gave a quick laugh. “I admire your boldness, Zach, and I’d like to say yes, but I’m not about to abandon our rules. They’re there for a reason.”

“Maybe we should let them.” Joanna’s mother surprised us both. Her parents stared at each other for a moment, as if silently communicating with their eyes, then they went off some distance from me and talked quietly. I heard her mother say something about young love and not wanting to look like they were coming between us. Joanna’s father came back and stood there looking me over as if trying to make up his mind about me.

“Can I trust you, Zach?”

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “Alright, we’ll let you take her out on one date, but I want her back here as soon as the movie’s finished.”

Wow. “Okay.” I nodded, almost in shock that he’d said yes.

“And no fast driving, or going anywhere dangerous.” Joanna’s mother added.

“I won’t.”

“What movie will you take her to?” She was starting to sound anxious now.

“I donno, I’ll let Joanna decide.”

Joanna came out of her tent wearing a short, little dress.

“What?” She looked at us all staring at her.

“Nothing.” I smiled. I wanted to keep our date a surprise.

After lunch, Joanna and I went down to the beach. The ocean looked beautiful, with big sets of waves coming in. We climbed a sand dune, and sat and watched the surfers. Wisps of Joanna’s golden hair spiraled and fluttered around her in the breeze.

"I'm so lucky I have such a beautiful girlfriend."

She smiled. "Am I your girlfriend?"

"Yeah?"

She giggled happily. "I've never had a real boyfriend before." She looked off into the distance, her smile fading. "I want us to have a future, though, Zach. I'm leaving in a few days and I'm scared we'll never see each other again."

"I thought you were here for two weeks?"

"It's already been a week. We're going home on Saturday."

I felt a fist tighten around me. I didn't want her to go. I didn't want to lose her.

Joanna must have sensed what I was feeling. She leaned over and kissed me, gently at first, then with growing passion, pressing me back against the sand until she was on top of me, her legs straddling me, and I could feel her inner thighs pressing up against me. My hands slipped under her dress, and she sat up.

"We shouldn't be doing this." She climbed off me. "We have to honor my parent's trust in us. They gave us time to be alone together, but not to do this."

I just looked at her. I knew she was right, but I loved doing this with her.

"I'm sorry, Zach, I know it's hard, but we need to do what's right."

I sighed. "Yeah, but it's literally hard for me."

She smiled sympathetically. "Poor Zach. I wish I could do something for you."

"Poor me." I pouted.

She lay down beside me, resting her head on my chest, and I put my arm around her, closing my eyes to the sun's glare. It was peaceful lying there, with only the sounds of the surf and the occasional cry of a seagull. I felt contented with her in my arms. I didn't want to think about anything else, especially her leaving.

"I wish we could stay like this forever." I whispered.

"Mmm, cuddling up like this in your bed all night."

"Yeah."

"Naked." She giggled.

"Yeah." I laughed.

She sighed. "We shouldn't talk like this. It just makes it harder, I mean more difficult."

"I have a surprise for you." I changed the subject.

"What is it?"

"I asked your parents, and they said I could take you out on a date tonight."

Joanna sat up. "Are you serious? My parents wouldn't let me go on a date?"

"Your mom doesn't wanna keep us apart. She knows you're in love."

"How does she know that?" Joanna blushed.

I laughed. "I guess she can tell somehow."

"I can't believe this. I'm going on my first date." She stared vacantly at the horizon. "Wow, my parents must think it's okay for us to be in love." She looked at me, her eyes wide with excitement. "So where are we going? What are we doing?"

"I was thinking dinner and a movie."

Joanna looked so excited and happy and amazed all at once.

"I should go get ready."

I laughed. "It's not even two o'clock yet."

"I can't wait!" She laughed. "My parents must really like you, Zach."

"Yeah, I know. It's weird."

She jumped up. "I'm too excited to just sit here. Come on, let's do something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." She looked around, then suddenly cart-wheeled down the sand dune, grinning back at me from the bottom. I laughed, and somersaulted down the sand to land at her feet.

She laughed at me. "Try doing this."

She did another cartwheel with perfect technique, flashing me her underwear in the process.

"You're good at those."

She did a handstand, and I caught her legs as she balanced on her hands, her dress falling down around her. She squealed as I kept hold of her.

"Zach ... Stop looking... at my panties!" She giggled, and I let go. She fell back on the sand, her face flushed, giggling up at me. I smiled down at my crazy, beautiful girl, and I felt so full of love for her. I offered her my hand and she pulled herself up, then danced away down the beach. I chased her and she squealed as I caught her around the middle and spun her into my arms, drawing her giggling mouth to mine. We kissed, completely wrapped up in each other, too in love to care about anyone seeing us.

We held hands and strolled along the beach, Joanna playfully bumping her hip against mine, giggling and saying silly little things to make me laugh. It felt so good to be with her, like everything in the world was perfect.

We saw her friends on the beach, and Lizzie waved to us.

Joanna waved back. "Should we go talk to them?"

"If you want."

As we approached them, the guys started calling out—

"Here's the famous rock star."

"Hey Joanna, can I have your autograph?"

Lizzie stood up. "We saw you last night, you were amazing."

"Thanks." Joanna beamed.

"You were great up there too, Zach. You really looked like you knew how to play that thing." Matt laughed.

"Yeah, thanks." I grinned.

Lizzie took Joanna by the arm, and the two girls wandered a little way from the group, talking quietly.

I sat down with Matt and his friends.

"Seriously, that was pretty cool what you did for Joanna."

"Was it that obvious?"

"Uh, yeah." They all laughed.

Joanna and Lizzie joined us, and we sat around talking and laughing like yesterday never happened.

"We're having a fire on the beach tonight, if you wanna come. You could bring your guitar and sing for us if you want." Matt raised his eyebrows at Joanna.

"Oh, I can't, Zach's taking me on a date tonight."

"Ooo, sounds serious." Matt laughed.

"It is." Joanna blushed and smiled a shy, happy smile.

"You'll have to tell me all about it afterwards, okay?" Lizzie gave Joanna a wink.

We eventually said our goodbyes and walked back along the beach.

"What were you and Lizzie talking about before?"

"Oh, she told me my song really touched her last night, and we were both sorry about yesterday. I told her I didn't judge her or her friend, I said none of us is perfect, but God's love is bigger than anything, and he forgives everyone who comes to him for forgiveness. I am so glad I sang that song and not something else like I wanted to. It's all 'cause of you." She wrapped her arm around mine and leaned her head against my shoulder. "You're such a great guy."

When we got to the end of the beach, she released my arm.

"I'm gonna go get ready for our date."

"It takes you this long to get ready?"

"I have to take a shower, do my hair, choose a dress to wear... you're lucky I don't have all my clothes with me." She giggled. "I wanna look my best for you."

I smiled. "Okay, well I'll pick you up around six."

She gave me a beautiful smile. "I can't wait."

I didn't think Joanna would appreciate going on her first date on the back of my motorcycle, so I asked my mom if I could borrow her car. She was reluctant at first when I told her what I needed it for, but after I explained I had her parents' permission, she handed over the keys.

I went back to the shack, took a quick shower to wash off the sand, and changed into my best casual clothes. I checked myself in the mirror. *Looking pretty good there Zach, if I do say so myself.*

I still had some time to kill before I had to pick her up, so I got on the computer and started looking up art schools in Colorado. If I could get into college there it would solve everything, and we could still be together.

At six o'clock, I drove to her campsite.

"Hi Zach." Her mom greeted me with a warm smile. "Joanna's still getting ready but she won't be long. She's very excited."

Joanna's father was sitting at the table, and gave me a little wave without getting up.

I heard the sound of her tent zipper, and turned to see Joanna coming out, her hair tied up in a pretty way revealing her slender neck. She had bare shoulders and a low cut dress that showed her cleavage, the long dress hung sleek against her body. She looked so elegant and sexy.

"Wow, you look amazing." *She's treating this like the prom or something.*

"You look good too." She smiled.

"Let me get a photo of the two of you." Her mom waved a camera at us. "Move a little closer, Zach ... put your arm around her."

She took some photos, and I turned to Joanna, her eyes bright with excitement.

“Shall we?” I took her by the hand and opened the car door for her.

“Zach, remember, straight home after the movie.” Her father called after us.

“Yes sir.”

Her mom had tears in her eyes as we drove away.

“Your mom gets pretty emotional.”

“Yeah I know. I guess it’s hard for her seeing me grow up so fast.”

I kept glancing at Joanna as I drove. “You look so beautiful. I didn’t expect you to get this dressed up with your hair and everything.”

“You like it?”

“Yeah!”

She smiled. “My mom helped with my hair. She’s such a romantic, she was almost as excited as I was.”

“She didn’t mind you wearing that dress for our date?”

“No, why?”

“It’s very sexy.”

She looked down at herself. “You think it’s too sexy?”

“It’s sexy in an elegant way.”

“Well that’s alright then.” She giggled. “Where are we going for dinner?”

“There’s a great, little Italian restaurant in town. It’s got a nice ambiance.”

“Ambiance? Really?”

I laughed. “It means atmosphere.”

“I know that.” She laughed. “It’s just that I’ve noticed you have a good vocabulary, but you don’t always use it.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I think you’re very smart, Zach, and I really like that about you.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I like not conforming to the typical surfer stereotype. You’re not exactly the stereotype pretty blonde, either. You’re smarter than all the other girls I’ve known, even though you’re still only fifteen. I love that about you.”

She smiled. “Have you known a lot of other girls?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“Have you dated much?”

“A few times, nothing serious.” I stopped myself from adding ‘like this’.

We turned into the parking lot and parked in front of the restaurant. I went around and opened the passenger door for Joanna.

“Such a gentleman.” She beamed, putting her arm in mine, and we walked into the restaurant.

Everyone seemed to notice Joanna as we crossed the room to be seated. We ordered some drinks, and Joanna took a look around our dimly lit surroundings.

“This is nice. It’s very romantic.”

She looked beautiful in the soft candle light. She looked across the table at me with large eyes, holding my gaze for a few seconds before glancing away.

“You’re not nervous are you?”

“A little.” She smiled sheepishly.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It feels different being on a date with you. It’s more romantic and special.”

“I’m the one who should feel nervous. You look stunning.”

She smiled shyly, taking little glances at me while she studied her menu.

When the waiter came back, I ordered the stromboli, and she ordered the grilled chicken spinach salad.

“You eat healthily.” I smiled.

“Yeah, I even exercise sometimes too.” She giggled.

“Do you do any sports?”

“Um, I do ballet, if that’s a sport?”

“I guess it is.”

“I think it’s more of an art, but it’s still athletic.”

“Yeah.”

She took a sip of her drink. “I can’t believe I’m actually on a date with you. My parents have changed their whole attitude, and now my mom’s even helping me get ready for a date with you. It’s unbelievable.”

“I know.”

“Why haven’t you dated more, Zach? You’re good looking, and smart, and funny, and you’re not shy or anything. Why haven’t you had a serious girlfriend before?”

“I can be a little shy around girls sometimes, especially really pretty ones like you. But I guess, until now, I’ve never really met anyone worth getting over that awkward stage to get to know properly. You know what I mean?”

“You weren’t shy with me?”

“I was, you just blew it all away somehow. I don’t even know how.” I laughed.

“You thought I was worth getting to know?”

“Yeah, definitely.” I grinned.

“What’s so special about me?” She looked into my eyes.

“Everything. You’re beautiful, and talented—”

“Is it just my looks?”

“No,” I smiled, “it’s everything about you. I love how impulsive you are, and how joyful and exciting you are. You don’t hide what you’re feeling, you just show it all, and you’re so happy and playful and crazy, and sometimes you’re not, you’re just quiet and soulful and deep. I love all that about you. You have a beautiful soul. It shines in your eyes, and through your smile, and lights up your face, and that’s when you’re so beautiful you take my breath away.”

Joanna lowered her eyes from mine, taking only shy glances at me, the corners of her mouth curled into a coy, little smile.

“You’re pretty close to my ideal guy, too.”

“Pretty close?”

She looked into my eyes again. “If you were a Christian you’d be the perfect man for me.”

“Well, I guess no-one’s perfect.”

There was a long silence as I tried to think of something else to say.

“What made you become a Christian?”

She blinked. “Um, well, I’ve always believed it was true, even if I don’t always live like it sometimes. Some people would think I’m worldly and superficial, but I love God with all my heart.”

“You’re not superficial. Why would they think that about you?”

“I don’t know, I guess I’m not overly zealous or anything. But I wanna live for God, I’m just not sure how I’m supposed to do that. I still have fun and enjoy my life, and sometimes I get caught up in worldly desires, you know, like with you.” She blushed slightly. “You must think I’m really weird, being a Christian and being so flirty with you all the time.”

“No, I like it. You’re naughty and nice.” I laughed. “Maybe worldly Christians get the best of both worlds. They get to enjoy life and have a happy Christianity as well.”

“Yeah, but that’s why it’s so hard to be a real follower of Jesus. It’s easier to be a lukewarm Christian and enjoy this world. But it’s like a weed that chokes your faith and keeps you from doing anything good for God.”

“It’s funny, I love talking about all this stuff with you, even if I don’t really understand it all. I used to find it boring, but now it’s kind of fascinating.”

“Are you gonna become a Christian then?” She smiled.

“No.” I laughed.

“Why not?” She seemed hurt, though trying to hide it.

“It’s not for me. I don’t wanna be like one of them.”

“That’s just your pride getting in the way, Zach. You don’t want to be like them because it doesn’t fit the image of who you think you are. But which do you love more, your self image, or the truth? Jesus said you have to become like a little child to come to him.”

Our food arrived, and I was glad for the interruption.

“Mm, this looks good.” She started picking out the tomatoes from her salad and putting them aside.

“You don’t like tomatoes?”

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “You can have them if you want.”

“Sure.”

She laughed as I took her discarded tomatoes from her plate.

Neither of us spoke for a while as we ate.

“What were you like as a little girl?”

She laughed. “Um, I was a typical little girl, I guess. I played with dolls and stuff.”

“I bet you were really cute, though.”

“Yeah, I had really blonde hair, even blonder than this.” She grasped a wisp of her hair.

“I love your hair.”

“You like it up like this?”

“Yeah, I do. I like it all the time.”

She smiled.

There was another long silence.

“You’re right, it’s different being on a date, it feels less natural, and makes you have to think of things to talk about.”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “It’s good though. We’re getting to know each other better. I wanna know everything about you, Zach.”

“Yeah, me too. I mean about you.” I smiled. “I was gonna tell you something ... I found some colleges in Colorado I’m going to apply to.”

“Really?” Her eyes brightened.

“Yeah, four art schools. I have to send them slides of my work and my high school transcript. I’m still putting it all together.”

“Where will you get slides from?”

“I have some already, from high school.”

“You really do wanna be with me, don’t you?” She looked at me in happy amazement.

“Yeah, I do.”

She smiled a happy smile. “But when will you find out if you got in?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s going to be so hard leaving here not knowing.”

“What happened to ‘love will find a way’?”

“But will you find a way, though?” She searched my eyes.

“Yeah, I’m not gonna give up on you.”

She smiled.

After we’d finished our meal, I paid the bill and we left the restaurant. I opened the car door for her again, and she gracefully got in.

“What movie are we going to?”

“Anything you want.”

“Even a chick flick?” She giggled.

“Within reason.” I grinned.

The movie theater was just down the road. We drove past it slowly to see what movies were playing.

Joanna peered through the window at the sign. “There’s nothing I’ve heard of.”

“It’s a small theater. There’s a bigger one ten minutes away—”

“No, I see one we can go to.”

“Which one?”

“*50 First Dates*? It sounds like the perfect movie for our first date.” She laughed.

We entered the darkened theatre. There were only a few people there, so we chose some seats away from everyone else. The movie started just as we sat down.

“Perfect timing.” I whispered.

It was an Adam Sandler movie, and it started with some pretty coarse jokes. I glanced at Joanna, hoping she wouldn’t mind too much.

As the movie progressed, it developed into an interesting romance with Drew Barrymore. There was one part of the movie where Joanna and I both laughed so hard we were gasping for breath. The end of the movie was very moving, and I saw Joanna wiping her eyes. She saw me looking at her and laughed in embarrassment.

We sat there as the credits rolled, not wanting to leave.

Joanna sighed. “That was such a good movie. It was funny and sweet.”

“You know it’s a good movie when it makes you laugh and cry.” I grinned.

“That scene where she hit Ula with the bat...”

She laughed. “I know, I can’t remember laughing like that in a movie before.”

“That’s gotta be the best Adam Sandler movie I’ve seen.”

“I like Drew Barrymore. She was in *Ever After*.”

We held hands over the arm rest. Everyone else had left, and we were all alone. I leaned over and kissed her.

The credits finished and the movie screen went dark.

I sighed. “Well, I promised your dad I’d bring you home as soon as the movie finished.”

We stood up to go, but she wrapped her arms around me and we kissed again, pressing our bodies together like we were trying to merge into one. I kissed her long, slender neck, making her sigh out loud. It was like we’d suddenly become desperate for each other.

We broke apart at the sound of an usher coming through the door. “Oh sorry, didn’t know anyone was still in here.”

We left the theatre and walked to the car. It was dark now. I opened the door for her.

“This was the perfect date, Zach. You were wonderful.” She kissed me on the cheek.

I felt so full of love for her. I put my arms around her slender waist and pulled her to me.

“I love you.” I whispered.

“I love you so much.” She whispered back.

As we drove back to the campground, we were both silent, like we didn’t want to ruin the moment with words. We kept glancing at each other, her with looks of such softness she was melting my heart, I was swimming in love.

I turned onto our road. “I wish we could go to my place instead.”

“Me too. I wanna be with you, Zach. I wish this date didn’t have to end.”

“We still could if you want. They don’t know what time the movie finished.”

“You know we can’t.”

“Yeah, I know.” I had to be true to my word.

I turned into the campground driveway and parked behind their car. Her parents were waiting for us, as we knew they would be. I got out and opened the door for Joanna, and she leaned towards me, her eyes closed. I hesitated for a moment, then gently kissed her soft lips, stroking her cheek with the back of my finger.

She opened her eyes and smiled. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I glanced over at her parents. I couldn’t believe we’d just kissed in front of them like that. I gave them a wave and they waved back. They didn’t seem upset or anything.

Joanna looked like an angel standing there, her dress aglow in the bright beams of the car’s headlights, as I backed up and slowly drove away.

That night, I couldn’t sleep, my mind was filled with thoughts of Joanna. I lay in bed imagining her lying there with me, remembering the feel of her in my arms when we lay on the sand together. *It was such a natural feeling. It’s how we’re supposed to be. Our love makes us meant to be together. It’s unnatural to be apart like this.* I sighed. *I love her so much. I wish she was here with me now. I need her.* I knew it was crazy to think this way, she was only fifteen, but I couldn’t help it. All of me yearned for her, my body ached to be with her, it was too painful to keep thinking about. I tried to think of something else.

I wondered what her parents had thought of us kissing in front of them like that. It was strange how going on an officially sanctioned date made our relationship seem more real and legitimate, like we were allowed to be in love now.

I thought about what Joanna had said to me—that I’d be her perfect, ideal man if I was a Christian. It stung to know I wasn’t perfect for her. But I couldn’t be a Christian just for her. I didn’t wanna be a Christian. The church we’d gone to this morning had reinforced that. *They’re so fake, like they don’t even really believe in it.* I sighed. *But what if it’s true, would I care too much about my self image to accept it? Maybe Christians aren’t representing the truth very well. That’s what Joanna’s father thinks. That’s why he’s so different, he really believes it.*

“God, I do want the truth. Show me what’s true.” I whispered.

Eventually I fell asleep...

Five

That night, I had a dream. I was standing at the back of the church we'd gone to, and the pastor was speaking—"I've decided to hand the microphone over to you today. I want each of you to come up here and tell us why it's good to be a Christian."

I watched as each person went up to speak—

"It's good to be a Christian because you receive God's blessing upon your life."

"It gives your life purpose."

"It makes you happy."

"It gives you peace."

"It makes you a better person."

"It gives you a better, more fulfilling life."

As I listened to them, something like anger began to burn within me. I didn't wanna go up and speak, but I couldn't hold back. I marched up to the front and grabbed the microphone. I didn't know what I was going to say, but I just started speaking—

"God hates sin! He showed us how much he hates it by creating a hell to burn it in. As much as he loves us, he hates sin. He showed us how much he loves us by giving us his own son to save us from sin. He is holy, and he will judge all of us. That is why you need to be a Christian."

I was shocked at my own words. I didn't know where they'd come from. As I was speaking, the people in the church started falling on the floor around me, wailing and sobbing and crying out to God for forgiveness.

I woke up and was immediately filled with fear. It was like all of Heaven stood open above me, and I could feel his holy eyes looking right through me, seeing everything.

I hid under the covers, begging God not to look at me.

There was such a heaviness pressing down on me, I couldn't even move.

"Please God, don't look at me."

The feeling gradually subsided, and I lay there, my heart pounding, trying to calm myself down. *That was so intense. I couldn't hide from his eyes. He is so holy.*

I got out of bed and got a glass of water, and my hands were shaking. I went back to bed but I couldn't sleep. I lay awake until morning and got up before my alarm went off.

At work, I tried to rationalize the whole experience. *It was just a dream. Probably all that stuff Joanna's father was going on about revival.* I tried to put it to the back of my mind, but I couldn't stop thinking about it. Deep down I knew it was real. I'd seen the difference between the fake and the real, and the real was scary.

"Are you okay, Son? You're looking a little pale."

"Yeah, I'm fine. I didn't get much sleep last night, that's all."

"Girl trouble?" My dad looked knowingly at me.

"No."

"You haven't got her pregnant have you?"

"No!"

I so wished I didn't have to work today. I wanted to go see Joanna and tell her all about last night. I felt a flicker of excitement and anticipation about it.

"Actually Dad, I'm not feeling that great, can I take the rest of the day off?"

He sighed and nodded.

I was soon bounding up the path to their campsite. Her mom saw me coming and called out, "She's at the swimming pool."

"Thanks!" I kept running.

I got to the pool and peered through the chain-link fence. I could see a blonde head that was probably hers. A sign on the gate read 'campground residents only' but I ignored it and went in.

She didn't notice me at first, until I got to the edge of the pool, then she saw me and her whole face brightened in happy surprise.

“What are you doing here?”

I grinned. “I’m taking a sick day.”

She swam up to me, and I crouched down to kiss her. She wrapped her arms around my neck and planted a big wet kiss on my lips. I felt her pulling me towards her, and suddenly lost my balance plunging headfirst into the pool. When I came up spluttering, she was laughing hysterically, and so was everyone else. She squealed as I grabbed her around the middle and started tickling her.

“Hey!” The lifeguard yelled at me.

I let go of Joanna and looked up at him, my apprehension turning to surprise in finding a face I recognized.

“Josh? What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question. This is a campers only swimming pool, ya know.”

“I wasn’t planning on going swimming.”

“Wait, you know each other?” Joanna asked.

“Yeah, Josh this is Joanna.”

“Helloo.” Josh raised his eyebrows and gave her a sly smile as he looked her over.

I gave Josh a bemused look. “So this is your new summer job?”

“Yeah, it’s a good way to meet the babes.” He grinned. “You’d be surprised, they really go for lifeguards for some reason.” He looked back at Joanna and gave her a wink. “I better get back to work, someone might be drowning or somethin’. You kids have fun.”

“Nice meeting you, Josh.”

“Yeah, nice meeting you too Joanne,” he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

Joanna slipped her hands around me and started peeling my wet t-shirt off.

“Wanna go in the Jacuzzi with me?” She grinned.

I laughed. “Alright.”

The large Jacuzzi was set in a gazebo away from the swimming pool, and we had it all to ourselves. Joanna turned the jets on, and we eased into the liquid heat.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

“Okay?”

“Umm...” I wasn’t sure how to start. “Last night I had a dream—”

“Is this another naked dream about me?” She giggled.

“No, this is serious.”

“Okay.”

“I had this dream, and when I woke up I could feel God’s eyes looking right through me, it was really freaky. I was actually scared.”

Joanna’s eyes widened. “What was the dream?”

I recounted the dream to her. “... then I woke up and I could feel what all those people in my dream must have been feeling. He’s so holy and I felt so unclean. I was begging him not to look at me.”

“Wow.”

“I didn’t feel his love, just his holiness. It was scary.”

“His love is found in Jesus, he saves us from God’s wrath. He’s the sacrifice for sin, and by his blood you can have forgiveness and be made clean before God, but you have to believe in him that he’s paid the price for your sins on the cross.”

“I know all that stuff.”

“But do you believe it?”

I thought for a moment. “Yeah, I do, but I don’t feel saved.”

“Maybe you need to be baptized.”

“What for?”

“When I got baptized, they told me it was being spiritually buried with Jesus and becoming one with him in his death, so you’re dead to your old life and you’re raised up in him to new life. My dad knows all about this. We should go talk to him.”

“No, I want you to do it.”

“Do what?”

“Baptize me.”

“But my dad knows what to do—”

“I want you to do it. Please Joanna?”

Joanna bit her bottom lip. “Right here?”

I looked around. I could see Josh sitting in his elevated lifeguard chair.

“No, not here. How ‘bout the cove?”

She looked at me for a moment, then nodded.

We walked down to the beach, neither of us saying anything. I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect—another spiritual experience like last night?

At the cove, we held hands and walked into the cold water. When we were in over waist deep, she turned to me.

“You sure you wanna do this?” She looked so unsure herself.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” She pressed her lips together for a moment.

“Zach, do you accept Jesus Christ as Lord of your life?”

Her question took me by surprise. A phrase came to mind, ‘Not my will but yours be done.’ I knew it was a big thing to commit to, but I had to do it.

“Yes, I do.” I said, full of sincerity.

“Then I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ.”

I took a deep breath and let her push me under. I closed my eyes as the water came over me, and in my mind I immediately saw myself as a little boy playing with wooden blocks and a train track. The train track was a circle, and I'd built bridges and buildings all around it. Then I heard a voice say, “At the end of the day you have to put it away.” I somehow knew instantly what it meant. In the end, all the things that made up my life would be put away like toy blocks. Then the bridges and buildings disappeared, and I saw the train track become a straight line for a train to travel along, shining its light into the darkness.

My head broke the surface of the water and I opened my eyes. I stood up, feeling dazed by what I'd seen. Joanna was looking at me, and I suddenly realized I was free, there was no more guilt or fear. I felt so light. Everything seemed to shine in a new way.

I looked at Joanna in amazement. “I feel new.”

We made our way back to shore.

“You have a huge grin on your face.” She laughed.

“I've never felt like this before.”

We sat on the beach and I described what I'd seen while under the water.

“That's a vision from God, Zach.”

“It's amazing. I can't believe this has happened to me.”

“It's so exciting, you're a Christian now! There's nothing standing in the way of our love anymore. I knew you were the one for me.”

I looked into her beautiful, blue eyes and smiled, but something in me felt restrained, like I couldn't think of her that way anymore.

“Joanna ... the vision I saw, I think God wants me to give up everything in my life and focus on doing his will.”

Joanna studied my face.

“I have to give up everything, my art, surfing...”

“That means me as well?” She said in a quiet voice.

“I'm not giving you up. We'll still be friends.”

“Why?” Joanna's eyes filled with tears and she turned her face from me. “God didn't tell you to give me up. That's your own idea. God wouldn't tell you to give up the one you love.” She stood up.

“Joanna—” I tried to reach for her, but she ran from me.

She turned back. “This isn't fair! I baptized you, and now I'm being punished for it!” Then she ran, leaving me there with an aching heart, yearning to go after her and comfort her. I felt her pain like it was my own, and it broke my heart.

But I have to do this. Not my will but yours be done. I took a deep breath. *This is so hard, God. Help me to do your will.*

I wasn't going to be a lukewarm Christian. It was all or nothing.

I went back to the shack and started pulling down my posters and grabbing stuff off the shelves—I had to get rid of everything.

I looked at the portrait of Joanna on the easel. *Can I just keep this one thing to remember her by?* But I knew I had to give it up. I looked it over one last time, then stuffed it in the garbage bag.

I'm giving up everything I used to be so I can be what you want me to be.

Deep within I was grieving, but I ignored it. I tried not to think about Joanna, I felt so bad for her.

Living for God is a lot harder than I thought. It's like a self-inflicted life of misery. But even as I had that thought, I could feel God with me. I still felt new and there was a deep excitement in me I'd never felt before. I just wanted to please God with my life.

There was a knock at the door and I went to open it, half expecting it to be Joanna, but it was Josh.

“Hey dude, just got off work.” He strolled past me and flopped onto my bed. “I see you're doing some redecorating. Going for a minimalist look?” He saw the Bible next to the bed and gave it a strange look.

“Yeah.”

“That girlfriend of yours, I’ve gotta say, she’s pretty hot for a sixteen year old.”

“We just broke up.” My voice sounded so expressionless

“Why?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Okay. I could tell you’re depressed. To immature, right? These young girls look hot but they’re not ready for anything—”

“No, it’s not like that. I had to give her up...”

“You’re not gettin’ all religious on me now, are ya?”

I smiled. “I guess you could say I found God.”

“Yeah? Where’s he been hiding?”

“Come on man, I just had a major religious experience, and God is real to me now, not just a distant idea, he’s real and he’s with me.”

“You’re too young for this, Zach. Life’s too good for this, man. There’s so much you’ll miss out on.”

“No, it’s the other way ‘round. You’re just wasting your life doing stuff for yourself instead of what you could be doing for God. What good is your life if it’s lived for your own enjoyment, just passing moments of pleasure quickly forgotten? It’s all meaningless.”

“I wanna enjoy my life, what’s wrong with that?”

“In the end, everything you’ve ever done will be wiped away like it never happened. But if you live for God everything you do will count for something.”

Josh shook his head. “You can keep your religion, man.” He got up and headed for the door. He looked back at me. “Let me know when you’re over all this, and we’ll go surfing some time.”

After he’d gone, I felt really depressed. *I wish I could make him understand. He’s so blind to the shallowness of his life.* I prayed for him, and for Joanna too, my heart ached for her.

•••

I went to work as usual the next day, then spent the rest of the time shut in my room. I didn’t want to admit it, but I was miserable. I missed Joanna so much, my life felt empty without her. I tried to keep myself focused by reading the Bible.

There was a knock at the door, and I opened it to Joanna’s father. I was so surprised to see him I just stood there staring at him.

“Can I come in?”

“Uh, sure.” I let him in and he glanced around my room, then turned to face me.

“Joanna told me what happened.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s ... well, she’s still upset, but she wants whatever God’s will is for your life.”

“I never wanted to hurt her.”

“I know.” He sat down on my computer chair. “Look, Zach, I understand what you’re going through, I’ve been there myself. You’re full of zeal. You want to serve God and give up everything for him.”

“Yeah?”

“Zeal is a good thing, but we can be zealous for God and not know exactly what he wants of us. We can end up with misguided zeal, and that can be a dangerous thing. We have to know for sure what God wants of us, and only then act with zeal.”

“Did Joanna tell you about the vision I had?”

“Yes she did.”

“It’s pretty clear what God wants me to do. He showed me that all the stuff in my life was going to keep me going ‘round in circles, but if I get rid of everything in my life I can be used by God.”

“I think you’re misunderstanding what God wants of you, Zach. God knows there are things in this world that we need, and things that make us happy. He made them for us. Jesus said don’t run after those things like the world does, but to seek God first, and all those things will be given to us as well. This is about our attitude and our mindset. We seek first God’s will for our lives and we put all that other stuff last. We don’t exist just to satisfy our needs and wants like the rest of the world does. His will for our lives becomes our biggest need and want.”

“What do you think the vision means then? What does God want me to do?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t want you to get rid of everything in your life. That’s an impossible way to live. It’s all about your focus and your attitude. Don’t be focused on the things of this world and what you want for your life. Focus on what God wants for you. God doesn’t want your sacrifice, he wants your heart. He doesn’t want you to throw away everything he’s given you, and everything

that makes you who you are. He wants you to love him and put him first above all else. Most Christians don't live like that, their faith might be important to them but it's just a little piece of their lives. They have worldly goals that they want to achieve, and they put them first in their lives—a career, possessions, family. Their faith might be important to them, but it isn't the over-riding thing. But God is calling you to have a different attitude, to have a goal in life of serving him and doing his will. Instead of your faith being one little part of your life, like a train track going around in circles, he wants your faith to be the thing that drives you and sets the goals in your life. That's the train track going in a straight line."

"So I shouldn't give up anything then?"

"We can ask God to show us if there's anything in our lives that doesn't please him, or hinders us from doing his will. Those are the things we need removed from our lives. He calls us to love him with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. If we do that, we hold onto everything else very lightly. We see the world as it really is—something temporary, and we seek the eternal things of God.

"Okay, so I just have to give up these things in my heart. It's about putting God first above those things."

"Exactly." Joanna's father smiled.

I knew he was right. "I feel so stupid now."

He laughed. "I was just like you. I thought I had to sacrifice everything in my life for God when all he wanted of me was to love him more than anything else on earth, and not let anything get in the way of obedience to him."

I nodded, suddenly feeling all emotional. "Thank you for coming to talk to me about all this."

"My pleasure, Zach" he smiled.

"I'm still scared I'm going to let him down somehow. I'm scared I'll miss out on what he wants to do through me."

"God is much bigger than that, Zach. He doesn't rely on us in our weakness, He knows we're only human. He wants us to trust in him, not in ourselves, and he'll give us the strength. He can use our faith, but not our misguided zeal. Just love him and be willing to obey him completely. He'll do the rest.

"Man you're wise. I have so much to learn."

"You'll get there, Zach, he'll see to that." He stood up. "You should come and see Joanna when you get the chance. She'd really like to see you again."

"Yeah, I know." The thought of seeing Joanna filled me with so many emotions.

"Okay." Joanna's father slapped my shoulder. "We'll see you later, then." He gave a little wave as he went out, closing the door behind him.

I fell on my bed and buried my face in the pillow. I was overwhelmed with so many emotions. "God, I'm sorry I hurt Joanna, I'm sorry I gave her up when you never wanted me to." God felt so near to me, I knew he was helping me, and I could feel his love. "You're so good to me. Thank you for sending Joanna's father to talk to me."

I got up and brought all the garbage bags back inside. The posters were ruined, but everything else looked okay, including Joanna's portrait. I was relieved to have it back. It was like having Joanna back again. *I've gotta go see her.*

Feeling all emotional, I headed over to their campsite. Joanna must have been watching for me. She came running down the path and flew into my arms. My heart just broke open. I held her tight, tears welling up in me, I couldn't even speak. We just held each other.

"I'm sorry." I finally managed to say. "I'm so sorry, Joanna. I love you, I never wanna lose you."

She smiled up at me through her tears. "I love you too."

I felt so happy. It was like the whole world was floating up with me into the bright, blue sky.

We walked slowly back to her campsite, still holding on to each other.

"I had to switch my heart off when I gave you up. It was like I became stone, but it broke my heart. I really do love you. I will always love you. I realize now how much I need you in my life."

"I'm glad you're willing to give up everything for God. It shows the kind of man you are. I'm just glad you realized you don't have to give me up."

We reached her campsite, and her parents greeted us with big smiles. Her mom seemed especially happy to see me again. We sat with them, and they got me to recount my dream and my spiritual experiences. I told them everything, and they were amazed.

"That's a profound dream you had, Zach." Joanna's father sat back in his chair looking thoughtful. "The church today often emphasizes God's love, and as a

result minimizes God's holiness, but as you said in your dream, God hates sin as much as he loves us. God is love, and God is holy. We have to understand his holiness and our depravity to fully understand his grace, which is why the Old Testament revealed his holiness through the law and his judgments, before the New Testament revealed his love and grace through Christ."

It felt so good to be in their company again, talking of God and feeling the warmth of their friendship. I'd never felt it like this before.

"Zach, you know we're going back home on Saturday, don't you?" Joanna's mother asked gently.

"Yeah, I know."

"How are you and Joanna planning to keep this relationship going after that?"

"I applied to some colleges in Colorado. Hopefully I'll get in, but I guess we'll have to have a long distance relationship until then."

"What will you do at college?"

"A fine arts degree."

"Oh yes, Joanna told me you're a good artist."

"He's not just good, he's amazing," Joanna said, and I laughed.

"You know, Zach," Joanna's father leaned forward in his chair again, "your artistic ability is a gift from God. You can do great art for him."

"Yeah, you're right, I hadn't thought of that."

"When will you move to Colorado, if you get into college?" Her mom asked.

"Um, I guess sometime in August. When I'm there, will I have your permission to date Joanna?" I was sure they'd say yes.

Her parents looked at each other, and they both smiled.

Her father nodded. "I wouldn't let her date anyone else, but if you come to Colorado you'll have our permission to date."

"Thank you Daddy!" Joanna hugged her father.

"Normally I'd be worried about you dating at this age," Joanna's mother added in a more serious tone, "but I can't help thinking there's something special about this relationship. I just hope you don't ruin it by moving too quickly."

"We won't." Joanna said, and I agreed.

After dinner, her mom suggested Joanna and I go for a walk to have some time alone together. We happily took her up on that, and headed down to the beach.

"Your mom is being really nice."

"Yeah, I know. I'm amazed how well she's coping with me having a boyfriend. She actually likes you, and she's glad we didn't break up. It's not what I expected."

"Your dad's cool about it too."

Joanna smiled. "That's 'cause he sees himself in you when he was your age."

"Did he say that?"

"Yeah."

We walked along the beach, arm in arm. The sun was just beginning to set, and the beach was nearly deserted.

We followed the water line, letting the waves wash over our bare feet. Joanna lifted the bottom of her long hippy dress to keep it from getting wet.

I picked up a stick and wrote our names in the sand with a heart around them. Joanna laughed. She took the stick from me and wrote '4evr' under our names. She stood with the sun setting behind her, making a sexy silhouette through her dress.

I picked up another stick and wrote 'I love Joanna', and she wrote in reply 'I love Zach', the waves erasing our words. We stood there in the warm glow of sunset, looking into each other's eyes, and we kissed.

I took my stick and wrote in the sand 'Joanna will you marry me?' She laughed and wrote 'Yes' before another wave washed our words away.

We climbed a sand dune and sat down to watch the sun dipping into the sea. The waves glowed transparent green, and we could see fish shaped silhouettes darting along them. I looked at Joanna, her eyes sparkling. She smiled at me, and her smile filled my heart. We kissed as the sun melded into the horizon, and a cool breeze began to blow.

"Were you serious when you asked me to marry you?" She searched my eyes.

"Yes, I meant it, I'd love to marry you as soon as you're old enough." The thought of being married to her seemed too good to be true. I couldn't even imagine anything that good ever happening to me. "I know it seems crazy, we've only known each other a short time, but I love you so much, and when I thought I had to give you up, it made me realize how much I needed you. I never wanna lose you again. Did you mean it when you said yes?"

"Yes." She laughed. "I've always known it. I had my doubts sometimes, when you said you'd never become a Christian, but part of me always knew you were the one for me. You remember I told you that once, when you were painting my

portrait? I never felt guilty about anything we did because it was like I was doing it with my future husband.”

“Yeah, I remember. When did you start feeling that way about me?”

“God must’ve whispered it in my heart when I first met you, and the more we fell in love, the more I let myself believe it. Now I know without a doubt. I know you’re the one for me and I’m going to marry you.”

I smiled. I didn’t know what to make of that—if it was true God had shown her I was the one for her, or if it was just the fanciful imagination of a young girl in love.

I stood up and offered her my hand. She took it and I pulled her up as the wind pressed her dress tight against her slender figure. I pulled her to me and we kissed, the wind whipping her hair across her face.

I combed her hair back with my fingers. “If I married you I’d be the luckiest man...”

She looked at me with such soft eyes. “I love you, Zach. Let’s go to your shack.”

“Why?”

“So we can be alone. We’ll do whatever you want.” She looked at me with large eyes. I didn’t know what to say. “And I need to play your guitar. I have an idea for a song. My mom did say we could have some time alone together.”

“I don’t think she meant my bedroom. Besides, it’s a bit of a mess right now.”

“It wasn’t a mess before?” She laughed.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, especially after what we’ve been talking about. We could end up making it happen.”

“Would it be that bad if we did?”

I looked at her, and she was serious.

“It wouldn’t be bad, but we have to wait.”

“I know.” She smiled wistfully and looked away. “I don’t know why I said that.” She looked at me again. “How long will we have to wait, though, Zach? It feels like forever.”

“It won’t be forever. We just have to wait until you’re old enough. Maybe after I move to Colorado—”

“I’ll be sixteen then. Will that be old enough?”

“Your mom said we could ruin it if we rush it. It’s worth waiting for.”

“I know, but we already know we’re meant for each other.” She sighed. “Come on lets go get your guitar, we’ll take it back to the campsite.”

We held hands as we walked in the gathering twilight.

“What’s your new song about?”

“It’s about you, and about God’s gift of love.”

“Wouldn’t it be great if we could make music together? We could form a band.”

“Yeah, I’d love that!”

“I have to learn the guitar properly, first.”

“I wanna make majestic music for God. Something powerful and beautiful that speaks of God’s glory and inspires awe in everyone who hears it.”

“Wow, that would be awesome.”

Joanna smiled. “Our life is gonna be so exciting, Zach. We’ll serve God together. I can’t wait.”

We got to the shack, and I went in to get the guitar. Joanna peered through the door.

“What did you do to your room?” She pushed the door wide and came in. “Where are all your posters?”

“I got rid of them when I gave up everything for God.”

“Oh.” She gave me a sympathetic smile. “What about your art?”

“I’ve still got that. I managed to salvage it.”

“That’s good.”

I felt ashamed of my foolishness. “Come on, let’s go back to your campsite and you can play that song for me.”

“I don’t wanna sing it in front of my parents, it’s too personal. I’ll sing it for you here. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Okay.”

She sat down on my bed with the guitar. “It isn’t a proper song yet, it’s just in my head, so I don’t know how it’ll sound.” She started playing, and after experimenting with a few chords, she started singing in her hauntingly, beautiful voice. It was a love song about me, and it made me feel warm and tingly.

She stopped playing. “That’s all I’ve got so far. What do you think?”

“It’s amazing. Thank you.” *Man she makes me feel so good.*

Joanna smiled up at me, and I bent down to kiss her. She put the guitar aside and put her arms around me, and I felt the desire rising between us as she lay back, drawing me down with her.

I broke away from her. “We can’t do this, we’re just torturing ourselves.”

“I know.” She spoke with sadness in her voice.

“Come on, let’s go.”

We were both quiet as we walked back to her campsite. Her parents had lit a fire, and we joined them around it. Joanna played some worship songs on the guitar, and her parents joined in singing with her. I didn’t know the words so I just listened, but my heart was stirred with praise to God. I started picking up some of the words and joined in where I could. It felt so good to express my love to God for all he’d done and all that he is, worshipping him together under the stars.

Joanna yawned. “I can hardly keep my eyes open.”

“Yes sweetie, you must be exhausted. It’s been such an emotional time for you lately.” Her mom patted her on the head.

Joanna said her goodnights, giving us each a kiss on the cheek. My eyes followed her to her tent, and lingered there after she’d zipped it closed behind her. I couldn’t help thinking about her getting undressed behind those thin canvas walls. The zip suddenly opened again and she came out in a skimpy nightgown that looked almost see-through.

“Just brushing my teeth.”

I watched as she bent down to get some water from a container, her nightgown pulling tight around the curves of her butt.

“Goodnight,” she called again, and went inside her tent, zipping it closed. I glanced at Joanna’s father, who was looking at me with a bemused expression, and I felt embarrassed.

We sat around the fire for a little while longer, talking quietly, then I said my goodnights and dragged myself away. Walking home, I looked up at the star filled sky. *To think the God who made all those stars cares for me.*

“You really are an amazing God.”

Six

It was another beautiful, hot day. My dad was in an uncommonly generous mood and let me get off work early. I went to see Joanna at the campsite, but she wasn't there. I found her at the beach, sunbathing in her bikini, lying on her back with one knee slightly raised. Her eyes were closed, and I just stood there admiring her. Every little part of her was beautiful.

"Are you gonna stand there staring at me all day?" She smiled without opening her eyes.

"How did you know I was here?"

She cupped a hand over her eyes and grinned up at me. "I saw you coming."

I sat down next to her, and she propped herself up on one elbow.

"My dad told me off this morning because of you."

"What for?"

"For coming out in my nightie last night." She giggled. "Did you think it was sexy?"

"Yeah." I laughed. "It looked see-through."

"It's not, but it's very filmy. I wasn't wearing anything underneath." She smiled impishly.

"You like teasing me, don't you?"

"Yes." She grinned. "You like it too, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do." *Though maybe I shouldn't.*

"You wanna go to the cove?"

"Okay."

She gathered up her things, and we set off along the beach arm in arm. We passed a group of bikini clad girls, and after we'd walked a little farther Joanna released my arm. "Why did you look at those girls?"

"What girls?"

"I saw you looking at them."

"I only glanced at them. It was nothing."

"Why do you look at them when you've already got somebody? It's like you're still looking for someone better than me."

"No, I'm not, it's just an instinct. We see a girl and we have to notice if she's pretty or not. We can't help it. It's just the male instinct for finding a mate, and we can't turn it off after we've found someone."

She started walking again, and I hurried to keep in step with her.

"Men are so shallow. You're only interested in physical beauty and sexual attraction. You don't care about the more important things."

"Yeah we do. Physical attraction is just the first stage."

"When you look at a girl like that, you're seeing if she's someone you'd want to have sex with, right? That's what sexual attraction is?"

"No. You can find something attractive without wanting it. And attraction doesn't mean anything without actually getting to know them. You fall in love with a person, not a body."

"Well it hurts that you're with me and you're looking at other girls and being sexually attracted to them."

"I hardly looked at those girls. I find you way more attractive than any of them."

"What if you did see someone prettier than me?"

"That's impossible." I smiled.

"Why do you look then?"

"I told you, it's just instinct."

"Jesus said if you look at a woman lustfully you've already committed adultery in your heart."

"Well, I've lusted after you lots of times."

She half smiled. "That's okay, but you can't lust after any other girls."

"Honestly, I've never wanted to have sex with anyone but you."

"Really?" She blushed and looked away.

We walked in silence for a while. It was high tide, and we couldn't walk around the point. I looked for a way up the steep bank where I knew there'd be a path to the cove. There were some rocks we could use to climb up on.

“Here, I’ll help you up.” I gripped her around the middle and easily lifted her onto a large rock.

I climbed up beside her, and we stood face to face, only inches apart. I looked into her sky-blue eyes. “Joanna, I’m sorry I looked at those girls. I didn’t even wanna look at them, I’m not interested in them at all. I wish I could just stare at you all day and never notice another girl ever again.”

She smiled. “Well, I guess it’s not your fault. Girls want guys to notice them and see how pretty they are.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Your instincts make you wanna be beautiful to get our attention, and our instincts make us look. We’re all controlled by our instincts.”

We climbed up the bank and found the path that led over the point. She went ahead of me, and I got to watch her pretty, little bikinied behind as I followed her up the hill. I loved the way she moved.

She reached the crest of the hill and turned to face me. “That’s true, it’s the way the world is, everyone’s shallow, everyone’s engrossed in the physical things instead of the spiritual things that really matter. We judge and value everything by appearances, but God sees our hearts.”

I smiled. “You really are wise for a fifteen year old.”

She smiled sheepishly. “I’m sorry I got mad at you.”

“I’m sorry too. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She grinned at me. “Was that our first fight?”

“Yeah, I guess it was.” I laughed.

We held hands as we walked over the crest of the hill and down the steep path to the cove.

“Yay! We have it all to ourselves.” Joanna leapt down onto the white sand and spun around, grinning back at me. She spread out her towel, and I lay down beside her on the sand.

She propped her chin on one arm and studied me. “Do you think our relationship will be more serious when you come to Colorado?”

I was pretty sure she was talking about sex, but I played dumb.

“Well, yeah, it’s a big thing moving to another state to be with someone. It shows how committed we are.”

“It shows how committed you are. I wanna show you how committed I am.” She said seriously.

“You already have.”

“I wanna show you in a real way, not just with words.”

“Like how?”

Joanna smiled and looked away. “You’ll see. It’s a surprise.”

“You’re gonna surprise me with something that’ll show how committed you are to me?”

“Yeah.” Her smile broadened at my puzzlement.

“I know we both want to...”

Her smile was replaced with her own look of puzzlement. “Want to what?”

“You know, make love.”

She looked shocked. “My surprise isn’t sex!”

“Oh.” I laughed.

She laughed too. “I know where your mind is.” She smacked my arm. “You thought I was gonna surprise you with sex?”

“Yeah, I thought you might be planning to sneak out at night and come and be with me or something.”

“Would you let me do that? Would you let me give myself to you?”

I knew I should say no, and not show her how much I really wanted that, but it was too strong a desire to completely deny. “I don’t know.”

She just looked at me, and there was a new tension between us.

“Would you want me to?” She asked in a quiet voice, her eyes searching mine.

“Yeah ... but we can’t. I’m willing to wait for you until you’re ready—”

“We are ready if we’re totally committed to each other.”

“What if we rush it and find out later we weren’t right for each other, or one of us wasn’t as committed as we thought? We don’t know the future. We need to be sure.”

“I’m as committed as I say I am.” She looked into my eyes. “If we have sex, we’ll be one flesh, and we could never break that bond. If you left me afterwards it would be the same as divorcing me, and I’d never marry anyone else. If I have sex with you, I’m committing myself to you for as long as we both live, no matter what happens. That’s what a marriage commitment is. I love you, Zach, and I’m ready to make that commitment to you for the rest of my life.”

Wow. Until that moment, I must have had some unconscious doubts about her love for me, that it was just an infatuation or something, but now I knew how real it was. I didn’t understand how she could love me so much, I felt so undeserving of it. It was scary, but man it felt good to be loved like that by her.

“I just realized something, Joanna. Marriage is more than a commitment, it’s believing in the other person’s love and commitment to you. It’s having faith in their love.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “Like the faith we have in Jesus’ love.”

“Yeah.” I wished I could give her the same feeling of security her love gave me. I knew that’s what she needed from me. “I believe in you Joanna. I believe in your love and your commitment. I’m scared of it though, it’s such a big thing. It’s like you’re giving me your whole life. I don’t feel ready for it yet. I have to be able to provide for you and for our future. Right now I don’t even know how I could do that. I’m not in college yet, I don’t have a career. I’m only eighteen, and you’re still only fifteen.”

“No-one knows what the future holds, Zach. I don’t put my faith in you to provide for us, I trust God to provide for us, and I know he will. We’ll look after each other and we’ll be happy, whether we’re rich or poor. I can work as well, so it’s not just your responsibility, it’s both of ours.”

I smiled. “Maybe that’s why men are so scared of commitment—they have an over exaggerated sense of responsibility.”

“Yeah, or they’re scared of being stuck with the same woman for the rest of their lives.”

“I’m not scared of that. I’d love to be stuck with you for the rest of my life. I feel so lucky to be loved by you. I don’t even know why you love me so much.”

She smiled. “Why wouldn’t I? You’re honorable and good, and you’re a wonderful man, and you love me.”

I didn’t dare look at her, I felt so much love for her.

“I want to marry you, Joanna. I just wanna do everything right before God, and right for us, and right for your parents and everyone else. It would be unfair to them if we got married like this without them knowing about it. We should have a proper wedding so they can celebrate it with us.”

“So we have to wait ‘til I’m eighteen? That’s more than two years. Why do we have to wait that long when we feel this way about each other?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t wanna talk about this anymore.

“It’s okay, Zach. Let’s not worry about it.” She leaned over and kissed me so gently, looking into my eyes with her big, soft eyes, not moving away.

“You have no idea how much I want you.” I whispered, my voice strained with emotion.

She didn’t say anything, she just hovered there, so close I could feel each breath from her lips on mine. It was like I knew just one kiss and we’d be powerless to stop. Slowly our lips came together, setting all my desire free.

I’d been trying so hard to be the sensible one, the responsible one, but with one kiss it was all undone. I needed her so badly, the desire overruling everything, all my ‘no’s becoming one big, passionate yes.

She lay back as I kissed her lips, and neck, and body, my mouth caressing the exposed parts of her breasts above her bikini top. She reached up and pulled at her top, exposing more of her breast to my hungry mouth, and my tongue explored the sensual area around her nipple. My hands slid down her body to her bikini bottom, and she groaned as my fingers caressed her through the thin fabric. I stroked her inner thigh along her bikini line, pushing my fingertips beneath its edge. Her body tensed, and she moaned. She was visibly trembling now, and I expected her to stop me, but she didn’t, her eyes willed me on.

Adrenaline surged through me as I started easing her bikini bottom off. She arched her back to aid me, but something in the corner of my eye made me glance up. Someone was there, walking on the ridge above the cove. Joanna sat up too, and quickly rearranged her bikini. We watched as the man disappeared from view.

“Do you think he saw us?”

“I don’t know, but he couldn’t have seen much from that far away.” I looked at her and sighed. “It kind of ruined the moment, huh?”

“We can go to your shack?” She looked at me expectantly.

My heart was pounding, and I was still reeling with the intensity of my desire, but my mind had cleared enough to start thinking with some sense.

“I think we should go to your campsite and hang with your parents for a while.” I couldn’t read her expression. “This isn’t the right time for us, Joanna. I don’t want us to regret it.”

“What are we gonna do, Zach? How can we wait two years if we feel like this the whole time?”

“It would help if you were actually trying to stop me instead of trying to persuade me to do it.”

She looked surprised and hurt. “I was just telling you how I feel.”

“I know,” I said more gently. “I feel the same way. I don’t know what we can do.”

“I wish we could just make love and not have to worry about it anymore.”

“Me too.” I looked at her lying there, with that soft, smooth skin, so beautiful, so desirable. I was starting to feel shaky again.

“We should do it before I go back home to Colorado.”

“Why?”

“Cause then I’ll know you won’t forget about me, and you won’t change your mind about coming.”

“Is that what you’re afraid of? Joanna, I could never forget how I feel about you, my whole being longs for you like you’re the missing part of my soul.” I stroked her soft hair. “I couldn’t forget how much I love you and need you in my life.”

“Will you promise to come to Colorado?”

“If I get into college I will. If I don’t get in I don’t know what I’ll do, but I won’t give up on you. It might take me longer but I’ll find a way somehow.”

“I’m scared you’ll just forget about me.”

“I won’t. I’ll find a way to be with you. You’re the one that knew in your heart we’d be together. God told you I was your husband, remember? I’m sure I’ll get into one of those colleges, and even if I don’t, it doesn’t mean our relationship has to end. I might get in next year instead, or we’ll just have a long distance relationship until you’re eighteen, then get married.”

“That would be so hard. I hate this. I hate not knowing. I just wanna know for sure that you’re mine and I’m yours forever.”

“I know. All I can give you is a promise that I’ll always love you and I’ll do everything I can to find a way to be with you. That’s all the commitment I can give right now.”

She had tears in her eyes but she smiled up at me, and I hugged her.

These relationship conversations were too intense. “Come on, let’s go swimming, we need to cool off.”

I took off my shirt, and she joined me as we ran into the sea. We played in the surf together, splashing and laughing and innocently touching each other as much as possible. Afterwards, Joanna let me use her towel to dry off.

“I’m going back to the shack to change. I’ll come see you after dinner?”

“I could come with you.” She smiled.

“What for?”

“Just to be with you. We won’t do anything.”

For a second I let myself consider it. “We better not.”

“We could have a shower together.” She grinned impishly.

I laughed. “You’re too dangerous for me right now.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help it.”

“You’re driving me crazy.” I smiled to soften my words. “I’ll come see you tonight, okay?”

“Okay.” She pouted.

“Hey, I love you.” I lifted her chin, smiling into her pretty face, and she couldn’t resist smiling back.

We walked up the hill and went our separate ways.

I had to get away from her. She really was driving me crazy. *I thought it would be easier after I became a Christian, but it’s even harder now. We were so close to doing it. It’s like there’s a point of no return, and once you cross it you can’t stop.*

What should I do, God? Should we just have sex and get it over with? Would it be a sin if we did? It’s so hard, I just wanna do what’s right.

Back at the shack, I took a cold shower, then went to the house to make myself a snack. My mom had given up making dinners for me since I was never there anymore. I took my sandwich back to my room, and got out my paints. Painting would allow me to forget about things for a while, and I still needed to paint a self-portrait for Joanna before she left. I studied myself in the mirror, then started to paint.

It went well at first, but after a while I started having problems with it. For some reason I was finding it really difficult to paint myself. I kept trying, but eventually I got so frustrated with it I just wanted to slash my brush across that ugly face. I gave up and decided to go see Joanna before it got any later.

It was already dark when I got to their campsite. She was sitting by herself, and by the light of the lantern, she didn’t look happy.

“What took you so long? I’ve been waiting here for ages.”

“Sorry, I was working on something and lost track of the time.”

“What were you working on?”

“Just something. It’s a surprise. Where are your parents?”

“They went out. What’s the surprise?”

“Nothing, I’m not even sure I can finish it, it’s so bad.”

“Your self portrait?”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “Good guess.”

“I wanna see it.” She was all excited now.

“No, it’s really bad.”

“Maybe I can help you with it? I could give you some suggestions, I probably know your face better than you do.”

“Where did your parents go? It’s strange they left you here on your own.”

“They went to a theatre under the stars thing. I didn’t wanna go.”

“When are they coming back?”

“I donno. Not for a while.”

“Hmm, what can we get up to while they’re not here?” I raised my eyebrows suggestively, and she laughed.

“I could show you my messy tent if you want?”

“Okay.” I grinned.

She took the lantern and we went into her tent. It was a big mess of clothes all over the floor. I saw her airbed and sleeping bag, and then I spotted her nightgown on the floor.

“Hey, I’d love to see you in that thing again.” I was already excited at the thought of it.

She looked at me, then smiled. “Okay, but you’ve gotta turn around while I put it on.”

“Turn around?”

“Yes.” Her smile widened. “You wanted me to stop us going too far, so I can’t let you see me naked anymore. Turn around.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. I turned my back to her and listened as she undressed, but I couldn’t resist taking a look over my shoulder.

“Hey, no peaking!” She laughed, and I laughed too. “Okay, you can turn around now.”

I turned to look. Her slinky nightgown glistened in the lantern light, and I moved closer to see her better. It wasn’t transparent, but it was definitely very sexy. I reached out and touched the filmy fabric, my hands gliding easily over her silky curves and down her smooth stomach to the hollow between her legs. We kissed as the light of the lantern threw our entwined shadow against the canvas walls.

“Zach ... we can’t keep doing this. It should be all or nothing.”

“I know, but what can we do? We’re stuck between all and nothing.”

“I want our first time to be perfect. I want us to both want it, and not feel guilty about it afterwards. I want it to be the beginning of our lives together, and to mean the same thing to both of us, that it’s us becoming married, and it’s a true commitment before God. If you can give me that then you can have me. I’m yours.”

“That’s what I want too—”

Just then, the arcing beams of a car’s headlights lit the walls of the tent.

She gasped, “That’s my parents!”

The car parked and the engine shut off, leaving no doubt it was her parents.

I quickly unzipped the tent and stepped out, zipping it closed behind me to hide a frantic Joanna grabbing up her clothes.

I heard the car door open and someone coming towards me in the dark. I just hoped they hadn’t seen my hasty exit from her tent.

“Zach? What were you doing in there?” Her father asked. “Joanna, come out here please, right now.”

“I just got here. She was gonna show me something.”

“And she had to show it to you in her tent?” Joanna’s father looked at me with a grim expression, at least it seemed grim in this light.

“Here it is, Zach.” Joanna stepped out of the tent, holding the lantern. She was dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. “This is for you.” She said breathlessly, and deposited something in my hand. I looked down at the small jewelry box.

“What is it?” No need for acting now.

“Open it.”

I opened the lid to find two silver rings glinting in the lantern light. “Wedding rings?”

She laughed and glanced nervously at her parents. “They’re promise rings. One for me and one for you.”

“Oh.” I looked at her. In the light of the lantern she was noticeably flushed, and I wondered if her parents had noticed.

“Here.” She took the box from me and took one of the rings, looking at it closely. “I think this one’s yours. She handed it to me and put the other ring on her finger. I tried to slide the ring onto my finger.

“It’s supposed to go on your ring finger.”

“Which one?”

She laughed and took the ring from me. “This one.” She held my hand and slid the ring on the right finger. It fitted a little loosely.

“This is getting so serious.” Joanna’s mother sighed.

“What’s wrong, Mom? You weren’t worried about it before.”

“I’m not worried, I’d just like to see things move a little slower, that’s all.”

I was feeling so uncomfortable around her parents. I tried to think of a polite way to escape.

“How was the theatre?” Joanna asked

“Oh, it was good...”

While Joanna’s mother was talking, I turned to her father and said quietly, “I think I’ll get going now.”

He looked at me with surprise. “I thought you just got here, Zach?”

Joanna’s mother stopped talking, and everyone looked at me.

“Yeah ... but I wanted to try and finish my painting tonight. It’s bothering me the way I left it.”

“Can I go with Zach and help him with his painting?” Joanna pleaded. I was amazed at her boldness. I held my breath.

He looked at his wife. “What do you think?”

I was shocked he would even consider it.

“Does Zach even want her there?”

“Yeah ... she could be my muse.” I smiled, but my heart was racing at the thought of it. Talk about inevitable. *God, I’m not strong enough to resist this anymore. If they let her come back with me I know we’ll end up going all the way. If you don’t mind us doing it, then let it happen. I’ll take it as a sign that it’s your will.*

“Where do you do your painting, Zach?”

“In my room.”

“Please Mom...”

“I don’t think so, Joanna. It’s not that we don’t trust you, I just don’t trust human nature. We need to be wise and avoid temptation.”

I felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. Joanna looked so sad. I gave her a smile to try and cheer her up, but it didn’t work. Then I had an idea. I turned to her parents.

“Do you think I could take Joanna out on another date tomorrow night?”

Her mom readily agreed as if pleased to make up for saying no before. We were all happy as I made my farewells.

I walked home in the dark, thinking about what her mom had said about avoiding temptation. *Is sex too strong a temptation even for Christians?* I remembered what I’d said to Joanna, that looking at a pretty girl was just an instinct and I couldn’t help it. I remembered Joanna’s father saying sexual desires were just an instinct of our bodies wanting to procreate. *We seem to be controlled by our instincts and desires. We try not to give in to them but we can’t be trusted not to, our instincts are too strong. Is sin just our natural instincts working against our morals? I thought after you became a Christian you wouldn’t sin as much anymore, but nothing has changed, the only difference is I have to try a lot harder not to sin, and I have to be careful to stay away from temptation.*

I sighed as I pushed open the door. My self-portrait was still there on its easel, but I couldn’t bear to even look at it. I wasn’t in the mood to paint anymore anyway. I flopped onto my bed. *Christianity is too hard. I can’t keep all the rules and try to be good all the time. I’m already failing. What’s the point in trying anymore? I can’t do it.* “I can’t do this God!”

I saw the Bible sitting beside my bed, and picked it up. I’d been reading so much of it lately, I was so hungry for the truth. I opened it up and started reading, looking for something that would speak to me, and some words seemed to jump off the page—

‘Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.’

I knew God was speaking to me. *But how do I live according to the Spirit? I wanna be controlled by the Spirit, and not my sinful nature.*

I thought about all the sexual stuff we’d been doing. We’d disobeyed her parents and abused their trust. Her dad even told her off for wearing that nightgown in front of me, and I’d made her disobey him by wearing it for me again. *Real love would seek the best for the other person, and I know the best for her is to wait until she’s old enough.*

I’m sorry I did that with Joanna. God, I love her so much and I wanna do the right thing. I don’t wanna cause her to disobey her parents, I don’t want to hurt her. Please God, help me not to give in to my selfish desires. Let me do everything out of love, by your Spirit.

I felt better, like I'd been released from something I wasn't even aware of. I looked over at the easel, and wondered if it had been guilt holding me back. *It's hard to paint something you don't like the look of.*

I got up and took another look at my painting. It kind of resembled me but it had no life or spirit to it. I studied myself in the mirror, and I knew what it needed.

I got my brushes and set to work again, painting it with bolder contrasts, and the painting came to life. I painted a background of clouds with a streak of sunlight breaking through. I imagined it being the light of God's truth shining down upon me. Behind the figure, I painted the ocean, and in the foreground a sandy beach beneath my feet, with the words written in the sand— 'Joanna and Zach 4eva' within a love heart. *She'll love that.*

The waves still needed some work, but I could fix them later. I needed to get some sleep.

Seven

I awoke early and lay there thinking about our date tonight. *I could take her to a performance—I think there's a string quartet playing somewhere, she'd probably like that. Or we could do something fun, like mini golf.*

My alarm went off, and I pulled myself out of bed. Another day of work lay ahead of me and I was already tired.

Just before 11am, Joanna came into the store. I was busy with another customer and didn't notice her until she came to the counter with a soda and candy bar.

"Hi! What are you doing here?" She instantly elevated me from boredom to delight, I was so happy to see her beautiful, smiling face.

"I was in the neighborhood." She beamed. "How's work?"

"Boring. How's your day going?"

"Same. I miss you."

Another customer was waiting to be served, and Joanna moved out of his way. After he'd left, she glanced around. There was no one else in the store.

"I wanted to tell you about the promise rings. I didn't wanna give it to you in front of my parents like that. I wanted it to be special."

"Yeah, I kinda guessed that. It was a good cover story though."

"I wanted us to exchange rings and make promises to each other, like a little ceremony."

I could tell this meant a lot to her. "We can still do that if you want. We'll take them off and give them to each other again."

"Okay." She smiled.

"We can do it on our date tonight."

Her smile faded. "I'm not so sure it's likely we're still going on our date."

"Why?"

"Well ... after you left last night, I had a talk with my mom and I said some dumb things to her."

"Like what?"

"I asked her what would be so bad about two people having sex if they were totally committed to each other and totally loved each other and knew having sex made them married in God's eyes. She kinda freaked about it, 'cause she knew I meant you and me."

"What did she say?"

She mimicked her mom's voice—"You have to be mature enough to make that kind of commitment and be able to keep it. Bla bla bla. She told me I'm not mature enough to really know myself, and I don't know you well enough either. Stuff like that."

"Hmm."

"But I still don't see why it's so wrong if you know for sure you're meant for each other, and you both love God and know you're becoming married in his eyes. She thinks we're too young, but it's not like older people are any better, they get divorced all the time. They have all these reasons young people should wait, as if waiting makes so much difference."

"Did you say that to her?"

"Kind of."

"No wonder she freaked out."

"Yeah, I know."

"I kind of agree with your mom. Not saying you're not mature enough to make that commitment, but you're still fifteen and that's pretty young to decide something like that." I could tell what I said wasn't going over too well with Joanna, she was kind of glaring at me. "I'm not saying I doubt your commitment to me. I know you mean it, and I believe in your love. But we have to make everyone happy, not just us. I don't want you to disobey your parents. I felt guilty about it last night."

Her eyes dropped. "I know." She looked up again. "But you don't need to be mature to make the right decision if God shows you you're meant for each other."

“You have to be mature enough to cope with marriage though. It’s hard, just look how many people get divorced.”

“That won’t happen to us. We love each other too much and our commitment is stronger because we believe in God and know we can’t separate what God has joined together. I think it’s better to get married when you’re still young and your love is strong, rather than waiting ‘til your passion dies and you’re more controlled and sensible and mature and dull and boring and old.”

I grinned. She tried not to smile, but she couldn’t help it, and a grin broke across her face too. My dad came into the store and saw us standing there grinning at each other. He shook his head and started walking away.

“Hey Dad, do you think I could take my break now?”

“Ahhh guess so.” My dad half smiled. “Go on then.”

My dad was being so nice lately. *He must be getting soft in his old age.*

I smiled at Joanna. “Come on, let’s get outta here.”

We went outside, and I took a breath of fresh air, “Ahh, momentary freedom. I’ll show you my self portrait if you want. I worked on it last night, but it’s not quite finished yet.”

“Okay.”

We went to the shack, and I showed her the painting still on its easel.

“What do you think?”

She studied the painting. “It’s really good.” She looked at me, then looked at the painting again. “It’s definitely you.” She sighed happily. She tilted her head sideways looking at the heart with our names written in the sand. “Ohhh, I love it. Thank you.” She beamed at me.

“I need to fix up the waves still.”

“It doesn’t need it. It looks perfect like this.”

I looked at it again. “I guess—”

“So it’s finished?”

The background looked a little vague, but I guess it was impressionistic. “Okay. I’ll sign it, then you can have it when it’s dry.”

“How long does that take?”

“It should be touch dry by tomorrow.”

“Well sign it now then, and don’t do any more to it or it won’t be dry in time before I leave.”

I hated the reminder she was leaving that soon. We only had two days left. She was right, I shouldn’t touch it anymore, sometimes I’m too much of a perfectionist. I grabbed a fine tipped brush, dipped it in some paint I had left over on my palette, and signed my name on the bottom right corner.

“What does the ‘A’ stand for?”

“That’s my middle initial.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Something that starts with A.”

“You’re not gonna tell me?”

I grinned at her. “Well, what’s your middle name? Actually I already know it.”

“What is it then?”

“Joanna Banana of course.”

She laughed. “I’ll tell you mine for real if you tell me yours.”

“Alright, what is it?”

“Rebecca.”

“That’s nice.”

“What’s yours?”

“I can’t tell you, it’s too embarrassing.”

“Tell me, or I’ll go ask your dad.”

“Hah..”

She started heading for the door.

“No, okay, it’s Albert.”

Joanna tried not to laugh. “Are you joking?”

“Nope.” I laughed. “Named after Albert Einstein. My parents had high expectations.”

She laughed. “It’s so cute. I’m gonna call you Zach Albert from now on.”

“That’s so funny.” I grabbed her around the middle and starting tickling her. She squealed, falling back on the bed, and I pinned her down. “You gonna call me Albert?”

“Yes.” She giggled.

I tickled her some more, enjoying her laughter and the feel of her squirming beneath me.

“Okay.” She gasped. “I won’t call you Albert.”

“Promise?”

“I Promise.”

I eased off her and she grinned up at me. I bent down and kissed her lips, and she immediately returned my kiss. I knew where this was heading. My body was already aching for her. I pulled myself off her and got up.

She remained there on the bed. “Zach ... in my heart I’m already yours. You know that, right?”

I just looked at her. I wanted her so much. *I wish she wouldn’t keep doing this to me.*

“I know we’re meant for each other. I know it so strongly it’s like it’s already real to me, like you’re already my husband. It’s like I’ve always known it, but now I know it with all my heart.”

“You’re too intense for me, Joanna.”

She looked at me with those big, innocent eyes. She was too beautiful.

I sighed. “I just wish we could hang out like we used to, and have fun without worrying about all this stuff.”

“I’m leaving on Saturday.”

“I know.”

There was a long drawn-out silence, neither of us saying anything, we just looked at each other.

God, I want her so bad. I can’t keep doing this—I repent and just get tempted all over again, and I’m not strong enough. You’ve gotta help me. Should we just have sex? Is it wrong if we truly love each other? I know she’s too young, but we can’t wait—

“Hey, is that my portrait?” Joanna interrupted my silent prayer. “You never showed it to me after you finished it.”

“Oh yeah.” I smiled, glad for something to talk about other than sex.

Her nude portrait was leaning face up against the wall. She turned it around and looked at it. She read aloud— “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires’. Hey, that’s really deep. What does it mean? Wait ‘til you’re ready for love?”

“It’s from the Bible. I guess it means don’t do anything to make it happen before the right time.” The meaning came as a sudden revelation. It was exactly our situation.

She frowned. “Is that what I’ve been doing?”

“I think we both have.” It was still dawning on me—*God must’ve spoken it to me that first time.*

She looked down. “I’m sorry, Zach. I didn’t mean to pressure you or anything.”

“I know. I love you Joanna, I want the same things you do. We just have to be patient and trust God. Everything will work out, there’ll be a right time for us.”

She nodded. “I should go. I’ll see you tonight?”

“Yeah.”

The rest of the day went by slowly. I thought about what Joanna had said to her mom—*she basically told her she wants to have sex with me. That’s gonna make things interesting. Maybe they won’t let us be alone together anymore, but maybe that’s a good thing—it’s been too intense lately.*

I finished up at 5 o’clock, and got ready for our possible date. I borrowed my mom’s car again, and drove to the campground, parking behind their car. Joanna and her parents were sitting there talking, and Joanna didn’t look like she was ready for a date. I got out of the car.

“Zach, come and join us. We’re discussing something that involves you.” Joanna’s mother called.

Joanna gave me a strange look that warned me something was up. I sat down in the empty chair next to her, and they all just looked at me.

Joanna’s mother spoke first. “We’ve become increasingly concerned with how serious this relationship has become in such a short amount of time. We’re worried that your strong feelings for each other are leading you to contemplate a physical union.”

“Huh?”

“We’re worried you might be thinking of getting married physically.” Joanna’s father restated it for me. He kept his eyes on me, waiting for an answer.

Everything seemed so serious and formal, like a court case.

“Well, we have thought about it, and talked about when we’d be ready for that, but we both want to do what’s right, and I’m willing to wait until we’re both ready.”

“So you don’t think you’re both ready for that right now?” Her father asked.

Joanna looked like she was holding her breath.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Zach. At least one of you is showing some sense and maturity.” Joanna’s mother turned to her daughter. “When you’re your age, you’re impatient to experience life, and you think you’re ready for everything. But you’re not ready for this yet.”

“How are you supposed to know when you’re ready?” Joanna asked.

“Well, that’s a good question.” Joanna’s father spoke with his usual calm deliberation. “The Bible says a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So when you’re ready to leave your parents and be able to support yourself and take on all the responsibilities of life, then you’re ready to get married.”

“Why does God give us these desires and then make us wait years for it? He’s made it so hard for us. We’re given all this responsibility for our feelings and desires but we aren’t responsible enough to get married. How are we supposed to wait so long?”

“I don’t know why God does things the way he does, but part of growing up is learning how to cope with your emotions and the intense feelings you have. It is a testing time for you, and if you learn self control you’ll gain maturity. I’m sorry I told you that sex makes two people one flesh and married in God’s eyes. I think if I hadn’t told you that you wouldn’t even be thinking about marriage, you’d be content to wait until you were older.”

“We probably would’ve had sex by now if you hadn’t…” Joanna’s voice trailed off as her mother looked aghast.

“Is that true, Zach?” Joanna’s father looked at me.

“Uh…” My mind searched for the right answer. “Well … I think it made us wanna wait, and treat it more seriously because we knew what a big commitment it was, and we might have treated it less seriously if we’d just thought it was something we weren’t supposed to do but didn’t know why, or what it meant. But I think it was God that kept us from going too far—”

“Too far?” Joanna’s mother fixed her eyes on me. “How far did you go?”

I was shocked at the question. I just sat there, not daring to say anything.

“How far, Joanna?” Her mother now turned her interrogating eyes on her miserable daughter. I had to say something.

“We let our passions get the better of us at times, but we’ve repented of that—”

“What did you do? I want to know. Did you touch her?”

Joanna’s father came to the rescue. “There’s no need to embarrass them, I think we can guess the kind of things they’ve been up to. I shouldn’t have trusted you alone together. It’s our fault as much as yours. I’m just glad you respected my daughter enough not to go any further than you did.”

“I guess this means we won’t be going on our date tonight.” I didn’t know why I said that, I guess I was trying to lighten the mood, but it sure didn’t work.

Joanna’s mother snorted. “And give you another chance to put your hands all over my daughter? I don’t think so.”

“Hey, come on. Let’s all calm down, this isn’t that bad.” Joanna’s father put a hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“How can you say it’s not that bad? Your own daughter—”

“It could have been a lot worse. And I’m sure it’s not all Zach’s fault either.”

“It’s my fault more than Zach’s. He’s the one who stopped us when things got too passionate.” Joanna defended me.

“Joanna! I’m so disappointed. I thought you knew better than this.” Her mother looked so hurt.

“I know, Mom, but Zach is different. It’s like we already belong to each other. It never felt wrong ‘cause I knew he was the one for me, and I love him.” Joanna burst into tears.

Her mom went to her and drew her into an embrace. She looked at me with tears in her eyes. “At least you didn’t take advantage of her, and I’m grateful for that.”

The emotional heaviness of the moment seemed to settled over all of us. Joanna’s father placed a hand on my shoulder, his other arm around his wife and sobbing daughter.

“I think we should pray.”

His wife nodded and opened one arm towards me so I could join their huddle.

“Heavenly Father, you know our hearts. I know that Zach and Joanna want to be right before you. Lord, please forgive them for any mistakes they’ve made, and help them to do what is right. Give us your wisdom in this situation, in Jesus name, amen.”

Everything was so quiet, only Joanna’s shuddering breaths breaking the stillness. I looked into Joanna’s tear streaked face and felt so much love for her. *Please don’t let them keep us from seeing each other. I know we’ve been stupid, but please don’t let it ruin everything.*

“What happens now? Will we still be allowed to see each other?” Joanna asked in a small, quavering voice.

Her father released his grip on my shoulder. “We’re leaving on Saturday, so you won’t be seeing much more of each other anyway.” He sighed. “You can still see each other, but you must stay here at the campsite where we can keep an eye on you.”

Joanna looked relieved. “What about when he comes to Colorado? Will we still be allowed to date?”

Her father looked at his wife, and she replied for him. “We’ll worry about that when Zach gets there.”

They’ll never let us date after this. I wish Joanna hadn’t said anything to her mom.

“Zach, I’d like to talk to you alone if I could. How ‘bout we take a drive?” Her father gave me such a serious look it made me nervous.

“Sure.” I nodded.

His car was blocked in, so we took my mom’s car. Joanna watched us go with a worried look on her face. Her father sat in the passenger seat as I drove through the campground and out onto the main road. I didn’t know where he wanted me to go, and he didn’t say, so I turned onto the coastal highway that wound its way around the sea cliffs. I knew he had something to say, so I waited for him to speak first. The silence grew uncomfortable, then he sighed deeply.

“How likely is it you’ll be moving to Colorado?”

“I don’t know, hopefully...”

“Well you’ve left me in a quandary, Zach. I don’t want to break the two of you up and stop you from seeing each other, but I can’t trust you alone together anymore. If you do come to Colorado, I’m not going to be able to let you date. I’m thinking it would be for the best if you didn’t come, and you just let it end here when we leave.”

“I can’t do that, that’d break her heart.”

He sighed. “Yes, I know my daughter loves you, and I know you have some feelings for her, but I don’t know how serious—”

“I love her! I won’t stop seeing her.”

“So you see yourself marrying Joanna in the future, then?”

“Yes.” I was more certain of that than I’d ever been. “I know she’s young, but I can wait.”

He nodded. “I’ve never seen Joanna like this before. She’s not usually so adamant about anything. She’s never shown much interest in boys before, and now suddenly she’s head over heels in love. After your baptism, she came home crying, and I admit, at first I was relieved that you’d broken up, but I’ve never seen her so upset like that before. She told us she was in love with you then, but I didn’t take it very seriously. She’s young, and I knew she’d get over it eventually and forget about you. But the next morning when I woke up, I had such a strong impression from the Lord that you were important to Joanna’s life.”

Why was he telling me this? Does he want us to keep seeing each other? I decided to be completely open with him. “I’ve never been in love before either. I never knew it could happen this fast. I never thought you could meet someone and within a few days you’d never want to let them out of your life again. It’s scary how fast it happened, I can’t even bear the thought of living without her now. We talk about everything, and I’m constantly amazed at the things she says. I’ve never enjoyed being with anyone as much as her, she’s so much fun, and she’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever known. I know she’s too good for me, but she loves me, and her love for me is so huge, I don’t even know why. All I know is her love is real and it blows my mind that she loves me that much. I’d do anything for her. I just hope I haven’t ruined it all, because I know it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, apart from finding God, and even that was ‘cause of her. It’s amazing how you can meet one person and your whole life changes forever.”

I glanced at him. He was nodding, and he smiled. “I see you really do love her, Zach.”

“Yeah, I do. I know I’ll never meet anyone...” My emotions got the better of me and I got all choked up. Embarrassed, I focused my attention on the road, and he turned his face to the window and the rugged coastline below.

“I’m sorry I let you down. I know I betrayed your trust in me.”

“Yes you did, but I forgive you. I know how hard it can be.”

We drove in silence for a while. The sun was lower in the sky now, its glaring light coming through the windows on his side of the car.

“Zach, can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure?”

“Are you still a virgin?”

“Yes.” I was relieved I could still say that to him.

“And you honestly believed having sex would make you married in God eyes?”

“Yeah.”

“So you understand marriage isn’t just a piece of paper that can be ripped up, divorced from or annulled. It’s not the vows between a man and a woman that can be broken. It’s a covenant of flesh made before God that joins you together as one, and what God has joined together may no man separate.”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“In Biblical times, a father would give his daughter in betrothal to a man in exchange for a bride price, and after that she would be considered his, but they weren’t married until the day of their wedding, which was often a year or more later. On their wedding day, she’d be given to him, and they’d go to his bedroom and become one, then everyone would celebrate. There was no religious ceremony, no priests or vows or anything, all the legalities were done already when she become betrothed to him.”

“Okay?”

“The role of the father was very important. He had authority over his daughter, and he was the one who gave her away, she didn’t give herself away. Any prospective husband had to negotiate with him for her, and he was responsible for choosing the right man to give her to in marriage. I know we don’t do that anymore, the state has replaced the father’s authority and taken that role from him. But if you want to marry each other in a biblical way, you can’t ignore the role of the father.”

“Okay, I didn’t know that.” *So I’d have to negotiate with him for Joanna?*

“I’ve been thinking about this, Zach. How would you feel about being betrothed to Joanna for a future marriage when she’s old enough?”

My mind reeled. “What would the bride price be?” I asked almost as a joke.

He gave me a serious look. “The bride price would be that you don’t do anything sexual with her until the day of your wedding.”

“Oh...” A thousand jumbled thoughts swam through my head, until one thought surfaced—“But if we had sex we’d be married in God’s eyes?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Reneging on your bride price would actually make you one flesh, but I would hope you’d want to do things properly, and have me give her to you with our blessing after you’ve fulfilled the bride price I’ve set for her.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“You wouldn’t be allowed to do anything even slightly sexual with each other, and if we found out you had, we wouldn’t let you see each other for as long as we’re still responsible for her. The whole thing would rest on you and your word of honor. You’d have to agree not to do anything sexual with her until you’re allowed to marry, and we’ll have to trust you to keep your word.”

“You’d still trust me?”

“I think this would be a good incentive to keep you from fooling around, and it’ll make it easier for both of you to know exactly what you’re waiting for and how long you have to wait. Do you think we can trust you Zach?”

“If I make a promise like that, I’ll keep it. I know it’ll be hard but I’ll keep it.”

He nodded. “So you think being betrothed will help keep you from fooling around?”

“Yeah, I think so. We’ll help each other because we’ll both have the same goal to wait for.”

“You’ve made it hard for yourself, though, Zach. You’ve had a taste of what it’s like, and seen how good and exciting it is. It’ll be difficult for you to take a few steps back from all that.”

“Yeah, I know.” *He’s right, it’s going to be really hard.* “When will you let us get married?”

“When Joanna turns eighteen.”

“Okay ... but ... do we even need to be betrothed then? We’ll probably get married when she turns eighteen anyway, so it’s not like betrothal would be anything more than what it is already.”

“You’ve lost a lot of trust with us, Zach. This betrothal will lay a new foundation of trust. Without that, I don’t think we can trust you seeing our daughter anymore. Betrothal is a very serious commitment. Once the deal was done and the bride price paid, the father had to give his daughter to the man at the agreed upon time. He couldn’t give her to anyone else because she was already his. So it’s not a small thing to agree to. When she turns eighteen, we’ll ask you if you’ve kept your word and not done anything sexual with her. If you’ve kept your word, we’ll give her to you as your wife, and you can marry her.”

“I can see why it’s a good thing, and I like the idea, but what I meant was, Joanna and I can legally get married at eighteen anyway. And that’s a long time to wait when you’re in love. It would be easier if we could get married before that.”

I glanced at him nervously. He was looking at me with raised eyebrows.

“Before she turns eighteen?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t believe how bold I was being. This was a scary conversation, and I was aware I could easily overplay my hand. I glanced at him again to get his reaction. He was slowly shaking his head, and ... was he smiling? I took a deep breath. “I can’t believe what I’m saying either, but it seems to me this is a negotiation of the bride price.”

“Yes, you’re right.” He laughed. “I understand it from your point of view, you don’t want to wait that long, and it doesn’t really give you anything you can’t have already when she turns eighteen.”

“Yeah, and the longer it is, the more difficult my bride price is to pay. Not saying that I won’t keep it, it just makes it harder to have to wait that long, and I think you wanna try and make this easier for us not to fail, right?”

“Right. So you think the bride price is too high in terms of how long you have to keep your promise.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t think Joanna is worth the price?”

“It’s not about what she’s worth. If I had to pay what she’s worth I’d never be able to afford her.”

He chuckled. “This reminds me of Jacob in the Bible. He wanted to marry Rachel, and he offered to work for her father for seven years as a bride price for her. The Bible says the seven years felt like only a few days to him because of his love for her. Waiting two years would be a lot easier than waiting seven, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know, I think it’ll be hard for us to wait that long, but I’ll do what I have to do.”

“You’d want to marry her when she turns seventeen? That’s a little more than a year from now.”

“We’d be able to wait one year a lot easier than two.”

“I get your point, and I’ll think about it, but to be honest, I didn’t even like the thought of her marrying at eighteen. I thought that was too young. Seventeen is very young to be getting married. Do you really think you’d be ready for marriage in a year?”

It was a good question, and I wasn’t sure. The thought of it was exciting, and it would make Joanna happy.

I nodded. “I think so. Do you think it’s fair to Joanna, though? She’d be so young.”

“I don’t know that myself, Zach. I only have one daughter, and I only get one chance to get this right. I don’t think her mother will like it, but I’ll discuss it with her and we’ll see what she says. So you’re definitely interested in making this kind of arrangement then?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Nothing’s decided yet, but we’ll discuss it and pray about it.”

“If we do it, when will we be betrothed?”

“When you move to Colorado.”

“Okay.”

We fell silent again as I thought it all through. It felt like we’d just had a huge conversation of momentous importance, and somehow I felt closer to Joanna’s father now. *He actually wants us to be married.* The thought of being married to Joanna still seemed totally unreal. *I still feel like a kid pretending to be an adult. Just think how Joanna will feel. Maybe her father is bluffing to scare us into realizing how young and unready we are for marriage. It’s a good tactic if he is, it’s kind of working. Marriage is such a scary thing. It’s huge.*

“Sorry you didn’t get to go out on your date tonight, Zach.” Joanna’s dad interrupted my thoughts.

“That’s okay, I got to take you out instead.” We both laughed. “I think this conversation was more important for our future than a date would have been anyway.”

“Yes, it’s been a good talk.”

This seemed to signal the serious discussion had concluded, so I turned the car around and headed for home.

“Will I get to have some more time with Joanna before she goes home?”

“You can come to the campsite and see her there.”

“I know, but will we get any time to be alone?”

“No, Zach.” He shook his head. “There are consequences for what you’ve done. This will probably be a very testing time for both of you anyway, a looming separation can bring out some powerful emotions. We’ll let you have enough privacy at the campsite to talk by yourselves.”

“Okay.” My voice betrayed my disappointment.

“You know, Zach, before you’re married the importance of sex is so overblown. When you get married sex becomes a normal part of your life. An enjoyable part of life, but not something you obsess over. It’s important that you be clear headed in making these decisions that’ll affect the whole of your life. It’s not just about sex, you need to think about the life you’ll be spending together.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You need to pray about it and know for sure if you’re meant to marry Joanna, or if you’re meant to come to Colorado at all.”

“Yeah, I will.”

When I turned onto our road, Joanna's father told me to let him off at the gate and he'd walk back. I pulled into the campground driveway, and he got out of the car. He looked back at me through the open door.

"Thank you, Zach."

I leaned over and extended my hand. He smiled and we shook hands. It seemed like the right thing to do after our frank discussion.

I took my mom's car back home and parked it in the garage. I wondered if I should go spend some more time with Joanna tonight while I still had the chance. It might be a little awkward with her mom still, but Joanna was leaving soon and I didn't wanna waste any of the time we had left.

Eight

After making myself a quick snack, I went back to their campsite. They were sitting around the fire, and they welcomed me into their circle. Joanna's mother seemed reserved but not displeased to see me. Joanna seemed quieter than usual too.

"You'd probably like some privacy to talk." Joanna's father smiled at me. "You can go over there where we can still see you." He pointed back behind the tents.

Joanna and I took our camp chairs with us and sat behind her parent's tent so we'd have as much privacy as possible, though they could still partly see us from where they were sitting.

Joanna glanced back at her parents. "They're probably talking about us. I wonder what they're saying."

"You can still hear them, listen."

We both strained to hear what they were saying.

"Don't look, or they'll know we're listening."

"Let's move closer." She nodded her head towards the other side of the tent.

"They said to stay in view..."

But Joanna was already moving. We stealthily crept around the other side of the tent, then crouched and listened.

We heard her father saying something about betrothal and a bride price, then her mother's voice clearly— "How can you still trust them after this? We should just let them part ways and hope they forget about each other..."

Joanna wrinkled her nose. I wondered if we should be listening to this conversation, we might not like what we hear. But on the other hand, this conversation might determine our whole future.

Her father was speaking again. "I think you underestimate ... feelings for each other. I'm pretty sure Zach is not going to They really do seem ... love..."

"...if he moves to Colorado then."

"I like Zach... decent young man. I'd rather Joanna ... him than some... At least we can see Zach is..."

"Honorable?" Her mother raised her voice again. "That's not the word I'd use after he ... who knows what behind our backs... After ... came home from their date... thought that was their first kiss. I was actually thinking how romantic..."

"...how many young men do you know... beautiful girl like Joanna... the fact he didn't... with her shows he must ... care for her."

"I don't see how you can believe...not ...do anything sexual..."

"...it's an incentive. They're given something concrete to wait for."

"Zach," Joanna whispered, "Let's move closer." I shook my head, but she was already edging forward. This was so dangerous. We were too close now, not even properly hidden, only a slight angle of the tent between us and them. I hated the thought of being caught eavesdropping on them after everything else that had happened today.

"... I discussed with Zach ... married when Joanna turns seventeen. That way they'd only have to wait a year, which will make it easier for them—"

I watched Joanna's reaction as she heard what her father was saying. She looked a mixture of shock and delight.

"There's no way she can get married at seventeen. She isn't ready for that. She's just a child! How could you even think..."

"Well, if they're going to get married at eighteen ... only a difference of one year. I think if they can survive a whole year together, and they're still ready to make that kind of commitment, they'll have proven their love..."

"She hasn't experienced anything of life yet. She only knows school. She hasn't been out in the real world. She has no idea what it's like to have to take care of herself."

"Well, what's the alternative? We let them date and hope they don't do anything? We have to be realistic here."

"...not letting them see each other at all until she turns eighteen. That would be a good alternative. The longer they have to wait, the longer their relationship

is tested and the older and more mature they'll be. It's only one year, but it makes a huge difference."

"We don't want ...secretly behind our backs. And do you think they're going to wait that long? They'll be ... before she turns seventeen if we.... At least this way we give them a reason to wait. I think one year is a good enough test. How many couples their age can last a year.... If they're still as much in love after a year, that's a good sign This is a big commitment for them to make. They'll have to be sure of themselves and each other. A lot can happen in a year, and I wouldn't be surprised if they decide they're not ready for marriage yet, and we'll have prevented them from making a big mistake in the meantime. That's what we're trying to do ... delay them so ... have a chance to get to know each other... to know if they ... want ... rest of their lives. They haven't known each other long ... but ... already fooling around. I don't want to break them up. I like Zach... I think ... good for her, and their love is genuine.

"She's too young to be in love."

"You're forgetting what it's like.... We met when you were seventeen."

"...didn't get married until I was twenty one."

"Yeah, and we could hardly wait either."

"We managed to keep ourselves distracted."

"...not so easily distracted these days."

"Waiting is good for them, it teaches them patience ... learn to control their desires."

"I know."

"Zach is a nice boy, I like him too. I just wish they'd met when she was older. "

"I wish that too. This isn't exactly what I wanted either."

"She's only fifteen. We're not supposed to have to worry ... this kind of thing for ... years."

"...growing up so fast."

"And you ... giving her away a year earlier than ... before she's ready... before I'm ready..."

"I didn't want ... either. I just think this is a good solution."

"Zach is hardly ready for marriage either. He won't be able to support her."

"We can't make them wait until he finishes college."

"Why not? We can make them wait until he has a job and can support her."

"...be lucky if they wait one year, let alone four."

"...a lot more ready for marriage in four years. Eighteen is too young, let alone seventeen."

"...wishful thinking. Not that long ago seventeen was the common age for girls to marry, and ... even younger ... they didn't have divorce back then. There wasn't this fear of failure that makes us wait to make sure.... The maturity that really counts is the maturity you gain... being married... You learn as you go. Everyone is immature when they first... married. No-one has any idea what marriage is going to be like, or what you're supposed to ... You have to learn it through experience. It's the same with children, who's really ready for that? The thing we're scared of ... she makes a mistake ... who she marries. I don't think Zach is a bad choice for her....

"... testing their relationship by waiting a few years ... if they're right for each other. It helps when you're more mature. You can handle the pressure better and the little arguments don't seem so huge. You have more perspective. Letting them marry at seventeen might doom a good marriage ... lasted a lifetime if they'd only waited a few years."

"You might be right."

"Let's just hope he doesn't come up to Colorado, and all of this.... We'll see what happens, if he comes to Colorado we can figure it out then."

"... pray and ask God to show us if Zach and Joanna are right for... We can ask God to keep him from coming to Colorado if he's not."

"Where are they, can you see them?"

"They've gone behind the tent. Joanna, stay where we can see you!"

We scurried back to our seats, hoping they hadn't realized we'd been eavesdropping. We'd heard enough of their conversation anyway.

"You think they'll let us get married when I turn seventeen?"

"I don't know, would you want to?"

"Yes!" She smiled. "Would you?"

"Yeah, if you're ready for it. Your dad wanted it to be eighteen, but I suggested seventeen so we didn't have to wait so long."

"You suggested seventeen?" Joanna eyes widened.

"I know, I couldn't believe how bold I was."

"What did he say? Was he shocked?"

"He didn't like it, but he could see how it would make it easier for us to wait."

"Yeah."

“Your dad is amazing. I think he really understands what we’re going through. He said God had shown him that I was important to your life.”

“Really?”

“I think he actually likes the idea of us getting married.”

“He really likes you.”

“That was so embarrassing when your mom asked us how far we’d gone.”

“I know! It was so bad, but at least good things have come from it. I wish we could have some more time alone though. Tomorrow’s our last night, and we can’t even kiss or anything.” She pouted.

“We could hold hands?”

She smiled and offered me her hand. It felt good to touch her again. She had a pretty hand. I wanted to kiss it.

“Do you still love me?”

“Of course.” I grinned. “I could never stop loving you. You’re too adorable.”

She giggled. “I can’t wait ‘til I’m seventeen.”

“I wish we only had to wait ‘til you’re sixteen.”

She laughed. “I can’t believe my dad’s even thinking of letting us get married. And betrothed, was that his idea?”

“Yeah, he surprised me with that, but I like the idea.”

“Are you as excited about it as me?”

“Yeah! You don’t think seventeen is too young though?”

“I don’t care if we’re too young. I just wanna be with you.”

“Me too.”

“Joanna,” her father called, “come sit around the fire now. It’s getting too dark, we can hardly see you back there.”

We took our chairs back to the fire. I felt a little uneasy around her parents, knowing what they’d just been discussing. I hoped Joanna wouldn’t give away anything we’d overheard. I gave her a warning look hoping she could read my mind, but she just smiled at me. She looked so beautiful in the firelight.

We chatted for a while, and I began to relax around her parents again. We talked into the night. Joanna sang some beautiful songs, and I listened enraptured, captivated, in love.

When I finally said my goodnights, even Joanna’s mother seemed sorry to see me go. Joanna boldly kissed me goodnight in front of her parents. I walked home feeling emotionally warm and happy. *I wish this time didn’t have to end. I love her parents, I love God, and I love Joanna so much.* I was so full of love my heart felt huge, and I felt loved by them all. *They’re such a great family.* I was on an emotional high, but I knew it wouldn’t last. I was at the top of the rollercoaster knowing the stomach dropping plunge awaited me. She was leaving on Saturday morning. But at least we had tomorrow.

That night, as I got into bed, I remembered what Joanna’s father had said about making sure I was meant to move to Colorado. Everything came down to whether I moved there or not. *If I go, we’ll be betrothed, if I don’t...*

“God, you know how much I love Joanna. I can’t bear the thought of losing her, but I need a sign from you to confirm I’m meant to move to Colorado. If you want us to be together, help me get into one of those schools I’ve applied to, but if it’s not your will, keep me from getting in to any of them. This is the sign I ask for, to show me clearly what your will is for Joanna and me. I know you love us, and you know what’s best for us. Your will be done.”

Nine

All I could think about was Joanna leaving tomorrow, and here I was stuck wasting these precious moments working instead of being with her. The desire to go see her was so strong it was driving me crazy.

“Dad, can I have the the day off? It’s Joanna’s last day, and I—”

My dad shook his head. “You’ve taken too much time off lately. You’ve gotta learn, Zach, when you’ve got a job to do, you do it. You can’t slack off whenever you want.”

“I just wanna spend some time with her before she leaves tomorrow.”

He ignored me and went into the back room, banging the door shut behind him.

The day dragged on, and I felt my anger turn to hate, but I knew it was wrong to hate him. I had to forgive him and let it go. *He thinks he’s doing me some good. He thinks I need to learn these life lessons the hard way.*

Finally it was 5pm, and I got out of there as fast as I could. Joanna was so happy to see me. I loved seeing her smile like that, it did something good to my soul.

She danced into my arms. “We just got back from a drive through the forest.”

“Yes, and Joanna made us hurry back. She didn’t want to miss even a minute with you.” Her mother teased.

“I know the feeling.”

Joanna’s father smiled as we joined him around the table. He placed his Bible down beside him. “So, this is our last night together, we’ll be leaving in the morning as soon as we’re all packed up.” He gave me a wistful smile.

“Why do we have to go so early, Dad?”

“It’s a long trip back, and I’ve got work on Monday.”

“How long does it take?” I was curious.

“Well, that depends. We don’t take the quickest route home, we like the scenic routes—just taking our time and seeing the sights. Last time we got to see the Grand Canyon, and the national parks in Utah.”

Joanna rolled her eyes, and I stifled a laugh.

“I’d like to see the Grand Canyon sometime.”

“It’s worth seeing, Zach. I love the diverse beauty of God’s creation. God has such a great imagination.”

“Yeah, like us. We’re his most amazing creation.” Joanna said.

“Yes we are, we’re made in his image, a trinity of body, soul and spirit, and he gave us the same desire to create, and to love, and to know.”

“We’re like a little copy of him.” I smiled. I enjoyed these discussions.

He picked up his Bible again. “I was reading something I think would make a good Bible study for tonight. It’s from first Corinthians chapter six.” He began to read. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh.’ But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in Spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

He stopped reading and looked at us. “When we sin sexually, we make an impure union of flesh that lasts as long as the flesh remains. That’s why the Bible says ‘Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.’ We are meant to be one flesh with only one person. Anything else is impure.”

“What about people who’ve already had sex? Can they get married later to someone else, or is that impure?”

“God is merciful, Zach. Through Christ he redeems us from our old life. We are all sinners when we come to him, and he makes us new creations, the old is gone and the new has come. God has given us an ideal for marriage, but he

knows we don't live in a perfect world, that's why we need his grace and forgiveness."

"Okay, this is probably a dumb question, but what does it mean to be one flesh? I mean, you don't become one person, right?"

"No, that's a good question." He smiled. "It means her body is now yours and your body is now hers, you belong to each other. It doesn't mean you become one person. Here..." He started flipping back through the Bible. "This is what the Bible says: 'Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man.' For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.'"

He finished reading. "See how it says 'for this reason'? It's saying the way Eve was created from Adam's flesh and bone is the reason a man and woman are joined together in marriage. It is a re-joining of what was separated into two—male and female, through a covenant relationship of flesh. The Bible often speaks of the church as being the bride of Christ, and likening it to a betrothal—Jesus paid the bride price for us with his blood, and we are spiritually betrothed to him. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and is coming again for his beautiful bride. That day is spoken of as the wedding feast of the lamb, and Paul speaks of it as a great mystery—the spiritual union of the bride to Christ. Just as the marriage of flesh is a rejoining of the flesh that was taken from Adam to create Eve, so with Christ it is a rejoining of his Spirit that was given to create his church, and we become one in Spirit. How this will be, no one knows, it is a mystery."

"That's pretty cool. So if we get betrothed we're being like Christ and the church."

He nodded. "In the Bible, physical things are often a shadow of a greater spiritual truth."

"But what about gay marriage?" I asked.

"Well, obviously, if marriage is a rejoining of what was separated into two—male and female, as one flesh, that can't include gay marriage. Marriage is a covenant of flesh made before God, not just a legal agreement. If marriage was just something a government authority gives us—a piece of paper that says you're legally married, then let the world marry whoever it wants to marry. Legal marriage is not the same thing God gave us, but most people seem to think it is. They think it's by government authority that we're married, and legal divorce dissolves it, even though Jesus said, 'what God has joined together let no man separate.' So many Christians think we have to protect legal marriage and fight against things like gay marriage, but we're not meant to be fighting for Christian morality in this world, we're not meant to be preventing the world from sinning through political legalism. Our war is for the souls of this world, and we fight with the truth of the gospel. We've been fighting against the people we're supposed to be fighting for, making enemies of the ones we're supposed to love the most."

"Yeah, it's the opposite of what Jesus did, he loved the sinners and hung out with them."

"That's right, Zach. True Christianity is all about love, not outward righteousness. Love is the source of true righteousness. It's a heart transformed by the love of God."

"But why is homosexuality a sin, if it's just something they're born with?"

"All of nature has been corrupted since the fall, Zach, we're all corrupted in different ways. It's natural for us to sin, just as it's natural for us to die. We're born selfish and self centered and proud, but Jesus came to save us from every kind of sin. God let the world go its own way, and gave mankind over to their sins, but now that Christ has come, he requires all men everywhere to repent and be saved from their sins. Some people judge others for certain sins that disgust them, but every sin grieves God, and yet he loves us all and desires everyone to be saved. The sins Jesus was most disgusted by were actually the Pharisee's, with their self righteousness and judgementalism, and hypocrisy. We're not supposed to judge the world's sins, we're supposed to love them by giving them the gospel that set us free."

"Yeah." I nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly with everything he was saying.

"But why do so many Christians not understand what marriage is? They think it's just the legal marriage, not something spiritual God gave us?" Joanna asked.

Her father nodded. "A lot of man-made traditions have grown up in the church over the centuries, including the religious wedding ceremony with vows and priests. People started believing the ceremony made you married before God, and they lost the understanding of the sexual union and the part it plays in making us one flesh. It was no longer celebrated as the thing that makes us married, it became something shameful and unmentionable in the culture, feared for its

passion and power to cause people to sin. But it is a covenant of flesh made before God, which is why its purity is so important to God. Now, of course, our culture has gone to the other extreme—they've separated it from marriage, and from procreation, and even from love. Now it's celebrated in our culture as just a fleshly pleasure. But that's the difference between us and animals—they only have the instinct to mate and procreate, but we have a soul that can love. That's why God made it pleasurable for us, he made it a way of expressing love and enjoying each other physically and intimately as one. God created everything by his love, and in a small reflection of that, this expression of love between a man and woman creates the life of another human being. Love creates. It's one of the most powerful things we humans do."

He paused and looked at Joanna. "I want you to enjoy this beautiful gift in the way he meant for us to enjoy it. You're growing up so quickly, but instead of being afraid of that, I want to help you remain sexually pure and make wise decisions. God has given me the responsibility of looking after you and protecting you, and I'm taking that responsibility seriously."

Joanna nodded.

"These days, most parents entrust their children to the world to go out and find a mate for themselves and be responsible for their own sexual purity, and look what that's done for us—vulnerable girls putting themselves out there like sexual bait to find love, and boys behaving like sexual predators, seeking sex without love or commitment. We live in one of the most sexually impure societies in the world. Our whole culture encourages sexual immorality. I can't change the culture we live in, but I can do what I can for my own daughter." He smiled at Joanna for a moment before continuing.

"God gave fathers this responsibility, but somewhere along the way they gave it up. Now daughters give themselves away, and often cheaply. They don't honor their fathers. They don't need their father's permission to marry, they have permission from the state. There's still a symbolic nod to the father in the wedding ceremony, but he isn't actually giving his daughter away, the state is."

He glanced at his wife, then looked again at Joanna. "At least, if you did get married before you were eighteen, I'd still be legally responsible for you, and I really would be giving you away, not just pretending to."

We were all silent for a while as we took in what he'd said.

"I won't give myself away, I want to honor you."

Her father nodded.

Joanna's mother sighed and got up. "I should make us some dinner. Are you staying for dinner, Zach?"

"Yeah, thanks."

She started busying herself around the camp stove. "This is the last time I'll have to cook with this little stove. It'll be good to be back home again."

"I wish we didn't have to go home." Joanna said sadly.

Joanna's mother smiled sympathetically. "I know, sweetie. Maybe after dinner you and Zach could have a little time alone together."

"Really?" Joanna brightened. "Thanks Mom!"

"I don't think that's a good idea." Joanna's father objected.

"We can let them go for a little walk, can't we?"

"Please Daddy! We won't do anything. We've learnt our lesson, I promise."

Joanna's father pressed his lips together then sighed. "Alright, but just a short walk."

After dinner, we excused ourselves and set off for the beach. We wrapped our arms around each other and walked slowly.

"Joanna, last night I asked God for a sign to show me if I'm supposed to come to Colorado or not. I need God to give me certainty about it, like he's given you."

"What sign?"

"If I get into college or not. I think it's likely I'll get in to at least one of them, so God will have to stop it from happening if he doesn't want me to go."

"Okay."

I was surprised she was taking it so well. She was being very calm about it.

"It's okay, I understand why you need to know for sure. We just have to pray God's will is done."

I smiled, relieved she wasn't upset.

We got to the beach and instinctively headed for our little cove around the point.

No-one was there, and we sat down on the warm sand and watched the big waves rolling in. She leaned against me, and I put my arm around her. A lone albatrosses floated on the air currents above the point.

She sighed. "I'm gonna miss this place—the ocean, and our cove, and just being here with you like this."

"I'll miss this too."

She lifted her head from my shoulder and looked at me, and I kissed her soft lips.

She smiled. “I feel like I’ve grown up so much this summer. I was like a child before, but now I’m in love, and it’s made me look to a future with you. I’m ready to make decisions for the rest of my life, and I’m not afraid of it.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I was just drifting before, not sure what I wanted to do with my life, but then you came along and changed everything. Now I have hope for us and our future, and hope for what I’ll do for God. It’s exciting. I’m actually excited about the future now.”

She laughed. “Yeah, it is exciting. I feel like I’ve grown spiritually, too. My faith was important to me before, but it’s like it was always in the background of my life. But now I have something real to believe in—I’m believing in God for you. And ever since I got up on stage to sing my song, I feel like that’s what I’m meant to be doing for God. I want to live for him, and I want to serve God together. You’ve given me so much to believe in, and so much confidence. Your love gives me courage...” She choked up and couldn’t speak for a moment. “It’s going to be so hard when we’re separated. I won’t have you to keep me strong anymore. But we have to stay strong for each other. It’s going to be so hard.” Her voice was rough with emotion. “I love you so much.” Tears filled her eyes. “It’s such a deep love, it fills all of me.” Her tears overflowed down her cheeks, and I wrapped her in my arms and held her against me.

“I love you, Joanna, with all my heart.” My voice was rough too, my throat tight with the strain from all these intense emotions. I remembered what her father had said about looming separation bringing out such strong emotions.

“I can’t bear to leave you. I know I won’t be strong enough.” She sobbed into my chest.

My heart was breaking for her. “It’s just for a little while. Come on, let’s not do this on our last day. Let’s cry after we’re separated, not while we’re still together.”

She lifted her head and wiped at her eyes, trying to stop the tears.

I kissed her wet cheeks, and her lips. “Don’t cry. Everything will work out. We just have to trust in God. He knew we’d meet and fall in love like this. There’s a purpose for all this. It’s too powerful to be for nothing. God will make a way for us.”

“I know.” She smiled through her tears.

“Come on.” I stood up, and helped her up. “Let’s carve our initials on the rocks over there.”

I led her by the hand to the sandstone cliffs. There were some initials already carved into its face.

“Look at this.” Joanna ran her fingers over some letters within a heart shape. “This must have been their special place too.” She smiled wistfully.

“Let’s add ours to the stories of the cove.” I picked up a sharp stone and started scraping a ‘Z’ on a smooth part of the rock. She picked up a stone too, and started carving a ‘J’ next to mine. We went over and over them, making them deep enough so they’d last, then I surrounded our initials with a love heart. It was a monument to our love and this time we’d had together. It made me feel nostalgic—we were marking it to remember it by, and soon the best time of my life would be just a memory.

The sun was setting, filling the cove with a gorgeous yellow glow. Joanna smiled up at me, and she looked so radiant, my beautiful golden girl.

“You’re the most beautiful thing that’s ever happened to me.”

She looked up at me with such love in her eyes. “I used to take my beauty for granted, but now I know who I’m beautiful for.”

She leaned against me, and I wrapped my arms around her as we watched the sun set in all its glory—beautiful streaks of pink and orange and golden yellow. The waves turned translucent as the sun gradually disappeared behind them. *Our last sunset together.*

“Beautiful.” I whispered, trying not to break the serenity of the moment. She turned her face up to mine and I kissed her, gently at first then with growing passion, and she twisted around to kiss me with equal passion.

She broke from my lips. “Are we getting too passionate?”

“No.” I kissed her again. She returned my kiss for a moment, then pulled away again.

“But we can’t do anything sexual. Is this sexual?”

“No, but it’s leading to it. We have to stop when we get too passionate.”

“So kissing you like this,” she kissed me gently on my lips, “is okay, but kissing you like this,” she kissed me again, her lips sensually caressing mine for a long time before she broke off, “isn’t allowed?” She stayed there, looking into my eyes.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “That was good ... I mean ... yeah.”

She laughed.

I grinned. "I think we can still kiss like that as long as we don't do it too long. You know where it'll lead if we get too passionate."

"You think we can still kiss like that?" She seemed surprised.

"It would be too sad if we couldn't kiss like that anymore."

She grinned at me, and I leaned in and kissed her lips with lots of tiny kisses.

She sighed. "Those little kisses get me passionate."

"Everything we do makes us passionate!" I laughed.

She pouted. "It's gonna be so hard. I think we're gonna have to sacrifice some things we love doing or we won't be able to last a whole year. Let's try not to make each other too passionate anymore, there's no point starting what we can't finish. It's only one year, then we can do everything."

"Yeah, but we're not betrothed yet." I kissed her again passionately and she responded in turn. We kissed like it was the last time we'd ever kiss like that again. Finally we broke apart, both of us breathing hard.

"Maybe we should go back to the campsite before we get ourselves in trouble."

"It's okay, that was our last passionate kiss until you turn seventeen."

"No, this is." She kissed me again and I could feel the passion rising in me. I wanted all of her.

"We've gotta stop." I gently pushed her away.

"I know." She smiled. "The next time we kiss like that will be our wedding night."

I smiled at the thought of it.

"I can't wait 'til we're married, Zach."

"We'll make love all the time."

She giggled. "We'll end up having lots of babies."

I laughed. "You'll be on birth control I hope."

"I know, silly, I was just joking."

"I wanna enjoy life together for a while before we have any children, and we'll both have college to get through first."

"I'd love to be a mom. I can just imagine a little Zach junior, he'd be so cute."

"If we have a girl who looks anything like her mommy, she'd be the cutest little girl in the whole world."

She smiled. "We should go back. It's starting to get dark."

"I wish we could just stay here all night."

"I know." She sighed. "But we really should go, my parents will be worried about us. This was meant to be a short walk."

"Yeah." I sighed. "We don't wanna lose their last little bit of trust in us."

Reluctantly we got to our feet, and I casually brushed some sand off her bottom.

"Zach!" She giggled, and I grinned.

She took my hand, and we slowly walked back.

Her parents looked visibly relieved to see us, but they didn't say anything or ask what we'd been up to. I guess they wanted to show they still had some faith in us.

We sat around the campfire talking late into the night. I didn't want to leave, and they seemed reluctant for me to go, but eventually we all had to get some sleep. I said goodnight for the last time. When I got home, it was already past 1am, and I fell into bed, glad I was too tired to think about tomorrow.

•••

I woke up and looked at the clock. It was already 9am. I jumped out of bed. *What if they've already left? Would they wait for me?*

I got dressed, grabbed the self portrait, and headed over to their campsite. I didn't need to hurry though, their tents were still up and there was no sign they'd even started packing up yet.

"Good morning, Zach." Joanna's mother was stirring something on the stove. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No."

"Well, sit down then, I'm making some oatmeal. Joanna's taking a shower, and her father's gone to see what's taking her so long." She smiled at me. "What's that you've got there?"

"Just a painting for Joanna."

"Can I see it?"

I held it up for her.

"It's very good." She seemed surprised.

"Thanks." I smiled.

I caught sight of Joanna then, coming back from her shower. She was wearing a light yellow summer dress, her long hair shone golden in the sunlight. She saw me and a beautiful smile broke across her face, as she danced into the campsite and spun around in front of me, making the bottom of her dress float up.

She gave me a little kiss on the lips. “Good morning, my love.” I couldn’t help smiling.

“What took you so long?” Her mom asked.

“I was making myself pretty for Zach.” She smiled at me.

“Where’s your father?” Her mom asked with consternation in her voice.

“I think he’s still in the bathroom,” Joanna said without taking her eyes off me.

“Well, breakfast is ready. You can sit over here, Zach.” I couldn’t take my eyes off Joanna. We were just staring at each other. “Zach?” Joanna’s mother was looking at me with raised eyebrows. “You can sit here.” She repeated.

“Okay.”

We took our seats, and her mom served us breakfast. Joanna noticed the painting, and smiled. “I have something to give you, too.”

Her father arrived and sat down at the table with us. “Good morning.” He smiled. “We haven’t got the early start I was hoping for, but I think we’ll still get on our way before midday.”

“I’ll help you pack up,” I offered. It was the least I could do after keeping them up so late last night.

“Thanks, Zach. You can help Joanna with her tent.”

After breakfast, Joanna and I went over to her tent. I looked through the doorway expecting the same mess I’d seen last time, but she’d packed most of her things already.

It felt weird being in her tent again, like it was a forbidden place. I found the air release on her mattress, and we both lay down on it to squeeze the air out. We stared at each other as we sank into the deflating mattress, and she kissed me softly on the lips before she got up again. We folded and squashed the mattress until it was completely flat, then I helped her move her bags and stuff out of the tent.

We worked together to take the tent down, folding it up and stuffing it into the tent bag. When we’d finished, we just stood there looking at each other, not smiling or saying anything. Everything felt so weird.

Her parent’s tent was already down, and her father was busy trying to fit everything into the trunk of their car. Her mom was packing all their cookware. It didn’t look like we had much time.

Joanna looked into my eyes so intensely. “Promise you won’t forget me?”

“I promise, I won’t forget you.”

“You’ll write to me?”

“Yes.”

“I have this for you.” She handed me an envelope. “It has my address and phone number.”

“I should give you mine too.”

“You can write it in my diary.” She dug into her bag and handed me her diary and a pen. I opened it to the last page and wrote down my phone number, address and email, and I also wrote “I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

She read it as I wrote. “I love you too, Zach.” Tears were welling in her eyes now. “Be strong for both of us, okay? Make sure you don’t lose hope. I’ll be praying for you. Don’t give up on me because I’m so far away.”

“I won’t. I’ll be praying for you too.” The muscles in my jaw and throat ached with all the emotion I was trying to hold in.

She threw her arms around me and we held each other tight, and then we kissed. It was a long passionate kiss. We didn’t care about the rules, or her parents watching us. I didn’t want to stop kissing her, but finally she let go. “You better not break my heart.” She kissed me again, lightly on my lips. I looked around to see her parents standing there, her mom had tears in her eyes, and even her father looked a little emotional. He came over and gave me a hug, patting me on the back.

“We’re gonna miss you, Zach. We’ll be keeping you in our prayers, and we’ll hope to see you very soon.”

I didn’t say anything, just nodded.

Her mother came and gave me a hug too. “You’re a good boy, Zach. I’m sorry for the things I said before.”

I nodded, and looked at Joanna again. She gave me a brave smile through her tears. I just wanted everything to stay like that, staring into each other’s eyes forever, but she was gone. I saw her face pressed against the window, her cheeks wet with tears, as they drove away, and she was gone. I stood there for a moment as if hoping she’d come back to me, then in a daze, I turned and started walking home. My vision blurred and all my emotions caught up with me. I started running, not wanting anyone to see me. I somehow managed to find my way to the shack and fell on my bed. All of me ached for her, and the feeling of loss was unbearable.

I took the envelope out of my pocket and carefully opened it like it was the most precious thing in the world to me. Inside was a ripped out page from her diary. I unfolded it and read.

Dear Zach, by the time you read this I'll probably be crying my eyes out, but I don't care how painful our parting is, I would bear any pain to have had this time with you. I'd bear any pain to have this love for you in my heart. You are my best friend and my soul mate. You have made me so happy. I will hold onto this happiness while I wait for you to come to me. I pray that God will keep you strong, and it won't be too hard for you, and I pray that also for me. I pray God will make a way for you to come to me soon so we aren't separated for too long. I need you Zach. I will be waiting for you, and even though we are separated by so many miles, I will love you like you are right here with me every day. I won't let my heart forget you. Don't let your heart forget me. Don't let your love for me die, keep it alive in your heart, and come to me when you can. Love with many, many hugs and kisses,

Joanna.

It listed all her contact details below her name.

I slumped back on the bed. My heart ached with love for her, I missed her so much already, how was I going to survive without her? But somehow I felt better now. Her letter was just what I'd needed. She was right, I'd bear any pain to have had this time with her, and to have this love for her in my heart.

I started to pray for her, and my heart just broke open. I poured it all out to God, asking him to be with her because she needed him now, and I asked God to help me too, because I felt so lost without her. I felt a peace come over me, and I knew she'd be alright. I got a pen and some paper and started writing her a letter.

Dear Joanna,

I love you so much. The letter you gave me before you left was so perfect, and just what I needed. I love you for writing it for me. You are so good to me. I hope this letter will cheer you up as much as yours did for me. I am writing it quickly so I can get it out before the mailman comes. I hope it will get to you by Monday. I miss you so much already and you only just left. I will think about you every day and I won't stop thinking about you and loving you. Hopefully I'll hear back from those colleges very soon and we won't be separated for long. God will make a way for us, I know he will. He didn't give us this love for nothing. I love you so much. We'll be together soon and this short separation will be a distant memory that will fade in the light of our happiness together. I will be praying for you to stay strong and remain positive. Just hold on a little while longer. I will come to you soon.

With all my love,

Zach.

Ten

“Zach, phone for you!” My mom yelled through the door. I jumped up, full of anticipation. I knew who it would be.

I followed my mom to the house and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Zach, it’s me!” As soon as I heard her voice all my love for her just washed over me like a wave.

“Joanna, I’ve missed you so much.”

“I miss you too.”

“Did you just get home?”

“Late last night.”

“I’ve been waiting to hear from you. How was the trip back?”

“I cried pretty much the whole way home, it drove my parents crazy, but I’m okay though.”

“Ohh. Did you get my letter?”

“No? You sent me a letter already?”

“Yeah, I loved the letter you gave me.”

“That’s good. I can’t talk for long.”

“I know. Do you wanna chat online?”

“We only have my dad’s computer here, and it’s in his office. He lets me use it but I have to ask him first, and I’m not sure how private it would be. I’d rather just write to you.”

“Oh, okay. How are your parents?”

“They’re glad to be home. I’m not...” Her voice broke, and then I heard a quiet sob.

“Hey, Joanna? Don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry...” Her sobs became louder.

I didn’t know what to say. I just listened helplessly. “Joanna? Please don’t cry. Everything’s going to be okay. We’ll be together soon.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so stupid. I should go.”

“You’re not stupid, you’re wonderful, and I love you.”

There were more quiet sobs. “I better go. Don’t worry about me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” But she’d already gone. I hung up the phone and my heart ached for her.

My mom put her head around the kitchen door. “Was that Joanna?”

“Yeah.”

“How is she?”

“She was crying.”

“Ohh, the poor girl. She’ll get over it eventually.”

“I don’t want her to get over it.” I snapped.

My mom’s eyes widened in surprise, and I turned and stormed out.

It was so emotionally wrenching hearing her cry on the phone like that. *She needs me. I need to be there for her.* It was so frustrating that my destiny wasn’t in my own hands. I had to wait and let events direct me. *Should I just go there? But I can’t, it’s up to God, I have to wait and submit to his will.*

...

Life now consisted of waiting for the mail each day, hoping for a letter from Joanna or one of the colleges I’d applied to. I spent all my time waiting for something to happen, I had nothing else to do, everything else felt empty and useless. When Joanna was here it was so happy and exciting, I looked forward to seeing her every day. Now I had nothing, just a big hole in my life where Joanna had been. I’d been on an emotional high with her, and now I was in withdrawal.

My mom was worried about me moping around all day. I didn’t care though, I just had to wait this out.

On Friday morning the mailman delivered. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was from Joanna. I had to laugh—the envelope had cute little stickers and love hearts all over it. It felt thick too. I took it back to my room to open it.

There were a lot of photos of her, and a letter.

Dear Zach,

I got your letter today. It came on Tuesday so you were only one day off. You made me feel happy again.

I'm sorry I cried on the phone. I promised myself I wouldn't do that. I know it must have been horrible for you. I'm fine though, really. It was just that moment, hearing your voice again and missing you so much. I'm sorry I did that to you. I love you and I miss you but I am happy. I think of you all the time, and I have happy thoughts of our future together. I'm not miserable, just impatient for us to be together again. Will you ring me when you hear about college? I'm trusting in God for everything. He knows what's best for us, even this time of separation. It makes our faith stronger when we learn to lean on him when we need him the most.

I haven't been doing much since I got home. I rang some friends to tell them I'm back, and I told them all about you. I'll probably go see them today, and I'll see them at church on Sunday. You should find a church to go to as well so you aren't so alone in your faith.

I have your portrait on my wall next to my bed so your face is the first thing I see when I wake up. I'm sending you some photos. I wrote on the back of each one where it was and how old I was. I'd love some photos of you too, if you have any you could send me.

I love you Zach. I hope you're ok. Write me back very soon, ok? Love from your girlfriend who loves you more than anyone else in the whole world.

Joanna. xxx

I sighed. I was glad Joanna had her friends to keep her busy. She was right, I needed to get out and do something, I was vegetating here. *Maybe I should try going to church*, but I didn't feel like meeting new people.

I looked through the photos she'd sent me. There was one of her as a cute four year old with very blond hair, and another of her as a baby being held by her much younger looking mother. There were lots of photos of her as I knew her too—a young teenager, always happy and smiling, so photogenic and beautiful.

Then I knew what I wanted to do. I needed to buy some more canvases.

•••

Dear Joanna,

I miss you so much. I went for a walk to your campsite like I used to when you were here, but no-one is camping there now. I started painting again, doing some portraits of you. Your photos inspired me. My mom thinks I'm obsessed with you now, ha ha. I'm sending you some photos of me too.

I haven't heard back from any colleges yet. Hopefully I will soon. I've been practicing my guitar, and even wrote a song about you, though it's really bad and sounds depressing when I play it. I miss you and the fun we always had together. Life isn't the same here without you, it's so boring. I don't want to spend time with anyone else. Life is just sad for me right now, but that's ok, it'll make it all the better when I get to be with you again in Colorado. I can't wait to see you and hold you and kiss you. It's true that absence makes the heart grow fonder. I guess I am obsessed with you, but I'm in love with you so why not? I love you with all my heart and I miss you with my deepest longing. I wish I was there with you already, but I just have to be patient and let God work everything out. I'm praying for you, and for us, that we'll be together soon. I wish I still had you to talk to about things. I'm going to try going to church on Sunday. I don't really want to but I think I should. I heard about one that has a lot of young people that go there, so I'll try that.

I love that you're my girlfriend. You are so wonderful. Your beauty is the outward packaging of the treasure that you are. I'm sorry if I'm sounding soppy at the moment. I know I'm a little obsessed, but how can I not be obsessed with the most wonderful creature on earth? I adore you.

Love from your boyfriend, who thinks he's the luckiest guy on earth to even know you, and who loves you more than anyone else in the whole world.

Zach.

•••

I tore open the package that had just been delivered. I knew it was from Joanna, but what was it? I pulled out a box. It was a video tape. I read the marker pen writing on it, 'A video letter to Zach, with all my love, Joanna.'

I wanted to watch it right away, but the only video player we had was in the house, and I didn't wanna watch it in front of my parents. Luckily, they were both going out.

I pushed the videotape into the machine and Joanna's face appeared close up. "Hi Zach." She beamed. "Umm ... what should I say?" She giggled, and I heard another voice say something to her, then Joanna spoke again. "My friend Emma is helping me make this video. "Turn it around, Em."

The camera swiveled around to show a smiling, young face.

“Hi Zach, I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Joanna’s best friend, and we go to the same church and high school. I can’t wait to meet you. Well, back to Joanna now.”

The camera swung around again and refocused on Joanna.

“Zach, I thought you’d like a video letter instead of a regular letter so you can see me again and hear my voice. I dressed up for you. Do you recognize what I’m wearing?” The camera zoomed out from her smiling face until I could see all of her, and she was wearing the same yellow dress she wore the last day I saw her. She spun around in front of the camera making her dress float up again.

“This is my room.” The camera panned around a feminine looking bedroom with light-purple walls, a lot neater than her tent had been. I saw her bed, and my painting on the wall above it.

“Show him the view from my window,” Joanna’s voice said off camera. The camera bounced towards her window, and I could see her backyard, looking down on it from above. *Her room must be on the second floor.* The camera panned up, showing the neighbor’s house, then over the rooftops, in the distance, the rugged peaks of the mountains.

“Wow,” I whispered to myself.

Joanna proceeded to give me a guided tour of her house, spinning around and walking backwards to talk into the camera, she giggled and chatted as she made her way down the hallway. In the kitchen, she found her mom.

“Say hi to Zach, I’m making a video for him.”

“Oh, hi Zach, I hope everything is well with you.” Her mom smiled.

The tour continued around the rest of the house, then back to her bedroom again, where the camera zoomed in close to Joanna’s beautiful face once more.

“I miss you, Zach. I hope this video makes you a little happier. I don’t want you to be depressed. I love you.” She leaned towards the camera and gave the lens a kiss. The image lost focus, then the screen went blank.

I’d been smiling the whole time I was watching it, and now my face muscles were sore. I rewound it and watched again. I sighed, It was so good to see her again. Photos are too still, they don’t show the life of a person. I loved seeing her bright, happy face, and the way she moved. *I have such a beautiful girlfriend.*

I felt happy for the rest of the day.

•••

Dear Joanna,

Thank you for your wonderful video. I loved seeing your smile and hearing you laugh again. You have no idea how much it meant to me. It made me happy again for the first time in weeks.

I went to church on Sunday. The message was good and the singing was ok, but hardly anyone talked to me the whole time I was there, apart from when they did this greet the person next to you thing, and a couple of people shook my hand. I feel like I can kind of relate to them now, though. I used to see them all as fake, but I realize they’re just trying to work out their faith as best they can, and that can be hard. I still think your dad’s right, though. Christianity is meant to be more than this. It’s supposed to be powerful, and spiritual. It’s not meant to be just another religion with man-made rituals and practices, it’s meant to be something of God.

Your friend Emma seems nice. Tell me about your other friends.

I don’t really have much else to say because my life is so boring without you. I’m just working every day. I’m still practicing my guitar, and I’m getting better at it. I might even be good at it in 2 or 3 years. I’m enjoying it though, it’s like making my own background music to my thoughts.

I love you. You are the only good thing in my life, other than God. I think about you all the time. I can’t wait to be with you again. Hopefully the colleges will contact me soon.

I love you my beautiful, sweet, wonderful girl. You are in my heart.

Zach.

•••

Finally, I got a letter from college. I tore it open and skimmed down—‘We regret to inform you...’ It was a rejection letter. I was surprised more than anything. I’d expected to get in to all of them except maybe my first choice, which I knew was a really hard school to get into. *Stupid college, I didn’t wanna go there anyway.* I crumpled the letter in my hand.

I decided not to tell Joanna about it. Why worry her when there were still three more schools to hear from.

But I got two more rejection letters the following week. I was shocked that I hadn’t got in to any of them. The only one left to hear from was my first choice school, and I didn’t have much confidence in that one. I started praying for a miracle.

•••

I woke up, and the now constant familiar feeling of anxiety returned. I never wanted something so bad in all my life. I hated feeling so tense all the time. I grabbed my gear and headed down to the beach.

Five foot and clean, the waves were just perfect. I saw Josh out the back as I paddled out through the break.

“Hey Josh!”

“Zach! Good to see you, man... picked a good day... some surfing...” The roar of the surf drowned him out.

I paddled closer but he'd caught a wave and was gone. He was right though, this was a great day for surfing. I caught wave after perfect wave all morning.

Josh paddled up beside me as I was waiting for the next set. “Best surf of the summer, dude. Glad you didn't miss it. Thought you'd gone all religious on me and given up surfing.” I didn't say anything but he didn't wait for an answer. “Surfing's the one true religion, my friend. We live and we die by it.” And he was off again, catching another wave and leaving behind a bad taste in my mouth. I caught one last wave and rode it in to shore.

Back at the shack, I washed off my wetsuit and hung it out to dry on the back deck. I sat down on the rough wooden deck, and looked out at the ocean. The mail would be here soon. I tried to relax in the sun but I was too on edge.

Please God, let me get into this one college. I was desperate.

The mailman stopped at our box, and somehow I knew today was the day. I went to the mailbox and fished out the single letter addressed to me. It was from the college I was waiting to hear from. I took a deep breath before opening it and skimming for the crucial sentence—“The Admissions Committee has reviewed your application, and we regret to inform you that we are unable to offer you a place in this year's class.”

For a moment I lost all perception, everything darkened around that one sentence. I crunched the letter in my fist. I was so angry—angry at the colleges for not seeing my talent, and angry at God for setting me up like this. *Why did you do this to me? I've lost everything I ever wanted and the one person I ever loved. Why? I just couldn't understand it. Should I never hope for anything good ever? You'll take away everything I want? You have to destroy me before I'm any use to you? Well you have!*

•••

I sank into the deepest depression I'd ever known. The days went by in misery. I had no one to talk to. I didn't want to write to Joanna, I didn't know what I'd say to her. I was alone and so depressed. I tried to hope in God and his plan for me, but there was nothing there to hope for. I had no idea what I was going to do now. Everything was darkness with no light. I felt totally lost.

I got another letter from Joanna, but I didn't even open it.

God no longer felt near to me. If I prayed, I could hardly believe he even heard me. He felt so far away, and I felt like I was losing my faith.

I painted one last portrait of Joanna, her face so pale, almost transparent, her smile like she'd forgotten what she was smiling about. I stood back and looked at the painting. It was Joanna as a fading memory.

Just before daybreak, I got up and went for a long walk along the beach. It was dark and cloudy and looked like rain, which suited my mood.

“I thought you loved me? Why didn't you get me into college? You knew how important this was to me.” I spoke to the sky, and the sky answered with a single drop of rain on my forehead. “Is this some kinda cruel joke you're playing on me?”

I kept walking, ignoring the damp chill. What was I going to tell Joanna. I still couldn't bear the thought of telling her.

“So you didn't want me to marry her? Why did you let us fall in love then? Why did you give us all this hope?”

A chill wind blew against me, and it started to rain. I yelled into the wind, “Do you even care about me at all?” Somewhere, deep down, I knew God still cared about me, but I wanted his pity. I wanted him to feel sorry for what he'd done to me.

I walked all the way to the cove, and there were our initials carved in the rock. I touched her ‘J’ as if it was a part of her she'd left behind.

“I know this is your will for me, but it's just too hard.” I felt a rush of peace come over me, warming me from within. “Am I ever gonna see her again? You

know how much I love her. Take away this pain because I can't bear it. It's too much for me. I don't wanna live without her."

All my plans for the future were gone. All my hopes and dreams were over. But somehow, through all the darkness, I knew God was still with me. I had to trust in him no matter how bad things got. I held on to that last little bit of faith with all the strength I had left, because it was the only thing I had left to hold onto. I fell to my knees in the wet sand. "I trust in you. I will follow you no matter how hard it is. I give it all to you, Lord. Your will be done."

I felt a deep sense of peace for the first time in a long time. It still hurt, but I only wanted his will for my life.

I looked down at the ring on my finger, this thin silver band that represented so much—all our love, all our hope for a future together. Somewhere Joanna was wearing a ring like this one, and she was still hoping and believing in us. For some reason that thought gave me hope too. *She hasn't given up on us yet.*

"God, I know you've closed all the doors, and I accept that, but if there's any way we can still be together..." I felt a sudden surge of hope fill my heart. "You still want us to be together, don't you?"

He'd closed the door to college but maybe he would open another door for me. I just had to hold on to that hope and not give up.

When I got back to the shack, I opened the letter from Joanna. A card fell out and I picked it up. It was a home-made party invitation. 'You're invited to Joanna's sweet 16 birthday party'.

I unfolded the letter that came with it.

Dear Zach,

I'm glad you liked my video. My two best friends are Emma and Crystal. They're crazy and funny and we just have fun all the time. But sometimes it's like they can't turn that off and discuss serious things, which is why I miss you so much. You're the only person I can really be myself with because you're like me. You like to have fun, but you also like to talk about deep things as well. I really love my friends but if I try to have a deep conversation with them, they just turn it into something stupid. It never used to bother me before, I think it's because I've changed so much since I met you—

"Zach!" The shrill voice of my mother intruded. "Phone for you. It's Joanna."

I left the letter and went to the house.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's me."

"Hi me, I was just reading your letter. Sorry I haven't written for a while."

"I was beginning to worry, it's been such a long time since your last letter, is anything wrong?"

I wanted to tell her everything was fine, but I couldn't lie to her.

"I didn't wanna upset you..."

"Why, what's wrong? What happened?"

I sighed. I couldn't see any way around it. "I didn't get into college."

There was a long pause. "Did you hear back from all of them?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. I thought it might be that, or you'd met someone else and fallen out of love with me."

"That could never happen, you should know that by now."

"So what are you gonna do?"

"I'm trusting God. He closed all the doors but he can still make a way for us. I believe he still wants us to be together."

"Maybe you should just come. You don't need a sign if you know in your heart what God's will is. Maybe he's teaching you how to be led by the Spirit instead of signs."

"Yeah, maybe ... but I already asked for a sign, I can't ignore it now just because it isn't what I wanted. And it's such a big thing, if I come to Colorado we'll be betrothed. It's a decision that'll affect both of us for the rest of our lives. I need God to show me clearly that it's his will, and it's what he wants for us. I'm scared of just deciding something like that when it's this important. He knows the future, and he knows what's best for both of us."

"I'm scared of the opposite though, Zach—that it is God's will but it won't happen because of some sign you made up to test it when God didn't even want you to do that. If you know that it's God's will for us to be together then just trust God, you don't need a sign. I'm scared I'll lose you for no reason when I know we're meant to be together. I know without a doubt that you're the one for me. I don't need any sign to confirm that."

"Joanna, God can do anything. It was an easy thing for him to get me in to at least one of those colleges. Why didn't he? Was it just chance that I didn't get in to any of them? Two of them were supposed to be easy schools to get into. I had a good portfolio and good grades. I should've walked in to any of them. I believe in God to open and close the doors and direct me where he wants me to go. If I'm the one for you he will still make it happen, because I trust him to."

“How can it happen now if God has closed the doors?”

“I don’t know. I lost all hope when I got that last rejection letter, and I was so depressed and full of self pity, but I learned today that God doesn’t respond to self pity, he responds to faith. When I gave it all up to him, and just trusted him, he gave me a new hope. I’m believing in God to work things out some other way. I don’t know how yet, but I know he will.”

“Okay.”

“I love you so much, Joanna. This time apart has been a thousand times harder than I thought it would be.”

“Me too. Sometimes I wish we’d just made love already. Then we’d have to be together.”

“Yeah...”

“I’m going to keep hoping and believing for you. Don’t stop writing to me though, Zach. You don’t know what it’s like waiting to hear from you and nothing comes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be afraid to tell me the truth about anything, and don’t shelter me from it. It just makes me worry more and start to think the worst, that you’ve lost interest in me or something.”

“I’m not going to lose interest in you. A love like this doesn’t just go away like that.”

“You can be honest with me and tell me anything.”

“Alright.”

We were both silent for a while, then she spoke in a whimsical voice. “Do you remember sitting on the beach, cuddling up to each other? I miss that so much, just being there with you.”

“Yeah, me too. I miss holding you close.”

“I miss our talks, and your kisses.” She giggled. “Remember our first date? It was so much fun.”

“Everything was fun with you. There’s no fun without you.”

“Zach, if you want me to, I could come back there for the rest of summer.”

“How could you do that? Your parents would never let you.”

“We’ll run away together. It’ll be romantic.”

I realized she was fantasizing, and I decided to play along. “Yeah, we’ll live on a tropical island by ourselves.”

She laughed. “You’ll hunt for food and I’ll cook it for you. You can make me a little house.”

“We won’t wear any clothes, and we’ll go skinny dipping all the time.”

She laughed. “That would be paradise.”

“I’ll be your Adam and you’ll be my Eve.”

“I’ll give you all my love. I’ll make you so happy.”

My heart was starting to ache. “Let’s not talk like this anymore.”

“I know. I better go. I’ve been talking too long already.”

“Hey Joanna, I love you.”

“I love you too. Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Are you still there?”

“Yeah. It’s hard letting you go.”

“I know.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

There was a click and she was gone.

...

“Zach, this came in the mail for you.” My dad pushed an envelope under my door. “It looks important.”

I picked it up off the floor. It looked like another college letter. I ripped it opened.

Dear Zach,

This year we’ve had an overwhelming response to our full art scholarship award. Out of more than 20,000 applicants, we have selected you, along with nine others, as finalists for this year’s program. We will be interviewing each finalist to determine the recipients of this year’s scholarship award. You will need to schedule an interview with us through our office between now and August 11. Please bring original artworks with you to the interview for us to evaluate.

Our college of fine art is considered one of the most prestigious art schools in the country. Our professors and faculty are among the most well known and highly esteemed of their respective fields.

The scholarships will include full tuition for a four-year arts degree program, as well as some living expenses including an accommodation allowance. We reserve two places each year for our scholarship students. If you applied to our college and were not accepted, this scholarship provides you with another chance to gain a place in this year's class.

We heartily congratulate you for being chosen as a finalist among so many of your peers. It is no small achievement, and you can consider yourself to be among the very best of your high school level contemporaries in art. We wish you the best of luck. Further questions can be directed to the office of the Dean of Admissions.

We look forward to meeting you soon.

It was signed by the dean of the college.

I sat there completely stunned. This was my first choice school that I'd just got a rejection from. I remembered something about all applications being included for assessment in their scholarship program.

I was still stunned. I couldn't believe it. This was supposed to be one of the hardest art schools to get into in the country. I thought about ringing Joanna, *she'll be so excited. But maybe I shouldn't tell her yet. What if I don't get it? There are ten people going for two places. I don't want to raise her hopes only to crush them again. But what if I do get it?* I was trying not to let myself get too excited, but I couldn't help it, hope was inflating in me like a hot air balloon. *This is so huge! I have to believe this is God's will for us. This is the very best he had for me all along. Thank you God! Your ways are always greater than ours. You know what's best for us, we just have to trust in you.*

I needed to tell somebody. I ran to the house to find my parents, bursting in on them in the kitchen.

"I'm a finalist for a scholarship to an art school in Colorado! I have to go to an interview and if I get it, it pays for all my tuition and some living expenses as well! It's one of the best art schools in the country."

My parents just stared at me.

"Look." I showed them the letter.

"When is the interview?" My mom sounded overly cautious, which grated against my euphoria.

"I have to ring them and set a date for it."

"How are you going to get there? It's a long way." My mom was quickly squashing my enthusiasm.

"Do you think you could lend me some money for the airfare?"

"What's wrong with the art schools here? Why didn't you discuss this with us before you applied to something so far away?" She genuinely sounded unhappy about it.

"But Mom, this is like the opportunity of a lifetime. It's one of the best art schools, and they'll pay all my tuition for a four year degree."

"This is about that girl I suppose. She's from Colorado isn't she?" My dad spoke for the first time.

"Yeah, that's why I applied there. We'll be living in the same town if I get this scholarship."

"You really care for this girl then, obviously."

"Yeah I do."

He frowned and nodded. "I'll give you the money."

"Really?" I hadn't expected him to be the supportive one.

"It's about time you got off your butt and did something with your life."

I smiled. "Thanks Dad."

"But Son, you do realize there's no surfing in Colorado?"

"Yeah, but they have snowboarding." I grinned.

Eleven

We were due to land, and I was getting more and more excited and nervous. I hadn't told Joanna I was coming, I wanted to surprise her. I'd set my interview date for the same day as her birthday, and I was just going to show up to her party afterwards. *She's gonna be so surprised to see me.* I almost laughed at the thought of it. *I can't wait to see her.*

The plane landed, and I got my bags, checking that my paintings had survived the trip okay, before catching a taxi to the college.

I had to wait in the lobby outside the dean's office. I was so nervous now, my whole future rested on this interview. *God, give me peace and confidence, and help me to say the right things.* I took a deep breath. *I just have to be myself and let him do the rest.* I took another slow, steady breath. *I just hope I don't say the wrong thing and ruin everything.*

Finally, the receptionist called me. "Zach, you can go in now." I stood, and my legs felt a little wobbly. I left my bags with the receptionist, and gathering my paintings, I walked through the door. *Don't say anything stupid,* I chanted silently to myself.

There was no one in the room, and I wondered if I'd come to the right place. Then a door opened at the far end of the room, and a tall, distinguished man came through it.

"You must be Zach, pleased to meet you. I'm Dean Randle." We shook hands, and he ushered me towards the door he'd come through. "I'll introduce you to the others."

I followed him into another room. There was a large desk with a man and woman seated at it. "This is the director of our fine arts program, Professor Harris." He indicated the other man. Professor Harris stood up and shook my hand. "And this is Professor Langstrom, who lectures in art history and portraiture." She stood and shook my hand as well. "Take a seat, Zach."

I sat down, feeling very small behind that big desk and before such academic luminaries.

"Well Zach, we were very impressed with the slides you sent us of your work completed during high school. Do you have anything more recent we could have a look at?" Professor Harris glanced towards the canvases I'd placed beside me.

"Yes, I brought ten originals, all of them were painted this year." With shaky hands, I placed my unframed canvases on the desk in front of them, and they held them up one at a time to examine them.

"This is amazing work for someone so young." One of the men said, not directed at me. "Look at this." He passed the painting on to the woman professor.

"This is very interesting, Zach. Can you tell me about this one?" She turned the painting so I could see it. It was the painting of Joanna as a fading memory.

"That's a portrait of my girlfriend in a moment of doubt about our future."

"Really? This is so interesting. You made her face extremely faint, as if you have no real idea who she is. At that moment you just don't know. The eyes and mouth are especially wonderful. Is she smiling or scowling? But what you do know is that she's staring at you, studying you intently, because she's asking the exact same questions of you. You are both a mystery to each other. Your painting captures that moment perfectly. It's a classic painting of human experience."

I didn't know what to say. It wasn't the meaning of what I'd painted, but I wasn't about to tell them that.

"You've painted this young woman quite often, I see."

"Yes." Several of my paintings were of Joanna. She looked at me curiously as if waiting for an explanation. "Uh, she's ... I'm ... we're ... I ... love her." I felt embarrassed.

She smiled. "Yes, I see that coming through in these other paintings. But this one is so fascinating to me." She pointed again to the fading Joanna.

"I agree, it is a fascinating portrait," Professor Harris spoke. "The shape of her face is similar to the African masks that had such an influence on early 20th

Century art, such as Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, and Derain and Braque. The enigmatic look on her face I can only compare with the *Mona Lisa*. It's one of the better expressionist paintings I've seen in the time I've been here. These paintings show a far greater maturity and emotional depth than your previous work, Zach."

I was beginning to feel embarrassed by all this high praise being heaped on my painting. Especially when I hadn't meant to reference anything or make it mean what they thought it did. I'd nearly decided not to bring that painting with me, it was so personal of how I felt at the time. It was me saying goodbye to Joanna and to all hope for our future. I only included it to show some variety in my work.

"So, Zach," The Professor spoke again, "What is your philosophy when it comes to your art?"

"My philosophy?"

"Yes, why do you paint what you paint? What is your art for?" He prompted.

"Well, I guess I'm trying to capture something ... something perfect that's beyond my reach ... but my art is more than just striving after beauty, I want it to mean something. To paint something that can communicate a thought or feeling. I don't want to create things that have no meaning, that are random or instinctual. I like to paint with my rational mind, placing meaning into it that is meant to be there. So I guess my philosophy is that art is an expression of the soul, and in my view, the soul expresses itself with purpose and rational creativity."

Professor Harris's eyebrows furrowed. "You don't believe the soul can create things instinctually, or add subconscious meaning that the rational mind doesn't know or understand?"

"Well, I know many people believe the soul can express itself subconsciously in art, but I think this belief that art magically allows your soul to express itself unconsciously has meant a lot of art is random and actually has no meaning. It leads to this whole idea that the meaning of art is whatever the viewer thinks it is. But I believe the true expression of the soul is when you consciously express something purposefully. And truly creative people use their imagination and creative intelligence to conceive and create. That is a true representation of the soul, not some random thing that you have to try and interpret later, but something that has real meaning and has been created with the purpose of expressing it. When the viewer is the one who finds meaning in the art rather than the artist placing the meaning in it, there is no room for art to speak a message and communicate ideas. I believe we should, as artists, speak to the world through our art, and communicate real meaning in our art, or else our medium is wasted and thoughtless and powerless."

"What about the communicating of emotions?" Professor Harris asked again.

"Randomness can't communicate anything in my opinion. It could be a random attempt at creating beauty, but it isn't expressing emotions. The soul can express emotions rationally, isn't that what poetry is? The rational expression of the heart? You don't see a poet randomly write down words and letters to express his emotions."

All three of them were just staring at me.

Then the dean spoke. "Well, you certainly have some strong opinions, which you'll be able to explore more fully in a course of study like this one. Higher learning gives one the opportunity to gain a broader understanding and widen ones narrow view."

I caught the whiff of condescension in his voice.

"I understand what you're saying, Zach," the woman professor now spoke, "and I thank you for speaking with such honesty about your artistic philosophy. I think what you need to understand, though, is that art is naturally instinctive. When you paint, you instinctively choose the color and where you place it on the canvas. You know how to make that paint look the way you want it to. When someone paints abstract art it is not mere randomness, they paint instinctively, placing each color and each drop of paint where they instinctively want it to go. In your art you paint instinctively as well as rationally, because you wish to portray meaning in your art, and I think this is what you are trying to say about your philosophy, that you paint with meaning and not just instinct."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I do paint with an artistic instinct, you're right."

She smiled at me. "I think you'll really enjoy the intellectual discussions we have in our art history and philosophy classes."

"Does anyone else have any further questions for Zach?" The dean looked at the other professors. "No? Is there anything you'd like to add, Zach? Do you have any questions for us?"

"No." I shook my head.

“If you could step outside for a moment, I think we’ll be able to give you our decision right away, as we’ve already interviewed all the other candidates. You’re our lucky last one.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Yes, just step into the other room. We’ll call you when we’ve finished deliberating.”

I went back out to the other room and closed the door behind me. I wasn’t expecting this, I didn’t think they’d give me the verdict instantly. I was shaky with nerves. *Man I was stupid saying all that stuff about my philosophy. What was I thinking? They already liked my paintings, I just had to keep it simple and say the right things and I was in.* I swallowed. *Please God, make them favorable towards me.*

“Zach, you can come back in now.” The dean called from the doorway.

That was quick. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I came back into the room and took my seat.

“We’ve decided to offer you the scholarship, Zach. Your artwork is outstanding, and, quite frankly, you’re our first choice for the scholarship. The second place is going to be a lot harder to decide.” The dean said, and the others murmured in agreement. I sat there completely stunned.

The woman professor smiled kindly. “The discussion about your philosophy helped us see the passion you have for your art. You obviously think deeply about things. We also could see you were able to listen to other viewpoints, and learn from them, and add that to your own perspective. That’s what we like to see in our students. And, of course, your portraiture work shows great promise. We’re looking forward to seeing where we can take you with that.”

I was still stunned. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I think he’s been struck dumb.” One of the men joked and the others laughed, which helped snap me out of my daze.

“I can’t believe it, I really didn’t expect this, thank you so much.”

“Congratulations, Zach, I’m sure you’re going to make a fine addition to our school. We look forward to seeing you in the fall.” The woman professor was so nice.

Each of the professors congratulated me and shook my hand.

“Thank you.” I collected up all my canvases.

“We’ll send you an official letter and some information about the scholarship, including all the requirements.” The dean said as he walked me to the door.

“Requirements?”

“Yes, you’ll have to keep up certain grades and class attendance. You’ll have a choice between living on campus or finding your own accommodation with a stipend to defray the costs. There’s a lot more information, and we’ll be sending it out to you in the mail.”

“Okay.”

“Well, congratulations again, and we’ll see you in the fall.” He smiled, and shook my hand.

I was still stunned as I went back to the receptionist to get my bags. I showed her Joanna’s birthday invitation to get directions to her house, and she said her street was only five blocks away, pointing in the direction I should go.

I walked out of there feeling so relieved and happy. *Just imagine what Joanna’s going to say. I can’t wait to see her.*

I carried my bags, one was small and heavy with clothes in it, the other was big and light with just my canvases and some padding in it. I walked in the direction I’d been told, breathing in the fresh mountain air. It was all starting to sink in—I was going to art school. I was gonna move to Colorado. I was going to marry Joanna! *Wow.* It was so immense. Life had just changed completely in a moment. “Thank you God!” I said out loud. Life was so good. I was about to see my beautiful Joanna and give her the biggest surprise and best news ever. *She even lives close to the school, how good is that? We’ll be able to see each other all the time.* I was feeling so good I wanted to leap in the air.

Twelve

Imagining the look on Joanna's face when she opened the door and saw me standing there, I strode the five blocks full of anticipation.

It was strange being in the mountains instead of surrounded by ocean. It felt enclosed, like being in a room without a window.

I found Joanna's street and started down it, looking for her house. It was a beautiful, tree lined street with elegant, old houses. A few blocks down, and I was standing in front of their house. It was a stately, two-story house painted blue, with a pretty flower garden in the front yard. I walked up the path and up the steps of their porch, feeling so many emotions at once. I put my bags down, took a deep breath, and pressed the doorbell. *Wouldn't it be an anticlimax if she wasn't even home.*

I heard someone coming, and the door opened. Joanna's mother stood there blinking at me.

"Zach! We weren't expecting you."

Before I could say anything, I heard a scream, and Joanna came running. "Zach!" She leaped into my arms. "You're here! I knew you'd come."

I was stunned, but as I looked again upon the beautiful girl I was so in love with, her eyes dancing, her beautiful young face radiant with joy. All the love I'd ever felt for her flooded over me, filling me to overflowing. I couldn't hold back my emotions, tears filled my eyes as I tried to wipe them away. Joanna was suddenly kissing me, and I pulled her to me. We just stood there kissing in the doorway. Her mother cleared her throat in an obvious attempt to remind us she was still there, but we didn't notice, we were too busy wrapped up in each other to care about anything else.

"Hey, you two, if you're gonna do that you should at least come inside. Our neighbors can see you." There was an amused, happy tone to her voice.

We walked into the house arm in arm. Joanna's mother brought my bags inside for me, since I'd completely forgotten about them, I was floating, my emotions were beyond anything I could comprehend. Joanna was so happy and excited, she was just bubbling with joy.

"I was praying you'd come. I can't believe you're here! You're the best present ever. I'm so happy you came. You didn't even tell me! Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" She was talking so fast I had to laugh. I felt so happy my laughter brought me close to tears again.

We sat down on the sofa in the living room, still clinging to each other. It was like we had to keep touching each other to make sure it was real, and our long separation was finally over.

"Joanna, guess what? I've got something amazing to tell you."

"What?" She looked like she was about to burst.

"One of the colleges I got a rejection from had a scholarship program, and all applicants were eligible—"

"Did you get in?"

"Let me tell you!" I laughed. "They chose me for an interview. I didn't wanna tell you about it and raise your hopes up, but I went to the interview today—"

"And you got in?"

I laughed. "Yes! I'm moving to Colorado! I'm going to art school here, and the scholarship will pay for everything!"

Joanna squealed. "Zach! Oh my goodness, I can't believe it. Mom!" She shouted, "Zach is moving to Colorado! He got a scholarship!"

Joanna's mother came into the room. "You're moving here, Zach?" Her mother's face was expressionless, I couldn't tell how she felt about it.

"Yeah, I got a scholarship to the school just down the road."

"Oh, that's a very good school. Where will you live?"

"I don't know yet. I can live on campus or find my own apartment."

"I'll help you find a place. I'll ask my friends to help, too." Joanna was almost jumping with excitement.

"Where are you staying tonight, Zach?" Her mom spoke with motherly concern.

"I'll find a hotel around here, I guess."

"You're welcome to stay here tonight. We can pull out the sofa bed for you."

“Thanks, that’d be great.” I was surprised she trusted me that much. Joanna squeezed my arm in excitement.

Her mom went back to what she’d been doing, and Joanna and I cuddled on the couch. It felt so good to be with her again. I breathed her in, I’d forgotten how good she smelled. I felt so warm and contented, like everything was the way it was supposed to be. I closed my eyes and just enjoyed this feeling of being with her. *This is what they mean by bliss.* I just wanted to stay like this forever.

Joanna spoke quietly, “Zach, you know what this means? We’re going to be married. God’s shown you it’s his will for us.”

I smiled at her. She was so pretty, and so joyful. I loved her so much. “You’re my gift from God, Joanna. I never even imagined he would bless me like this. I’m so happy.”

“Me too.” She beamed. “God is so good. It’s like that verse, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you.’ You put God first in your life and didn’t try to gain everything for yourself, and now God has given you your heart’s desire.”

I was suddenly filled with so much joy and gratitude to God. My God who loves me.

We stayed cuddled up on the couch for hours, just talking quietly, murmuring little things in each other’s ear. Joanna’s mother gave us our privacy, leaving us alone the whole time.

“I have to get ready for my party soon. They’re coming at five.”

I’d forgotten about the party. I didn’t feel like meeting all those people, I just wanted to keep cuddling like this forever.

“Is there anything I can get you? We have lots of food.”

“Yeah, actually I am a little hungry.” I’d hardly eaten all day.

“Okay,” Joanna smiled, as if pleased to be able to do something for me. “I’ll get you something.” She untangled herself from me and stood up, then bent down to give me a kiss on the lips. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

I watched her go, admiring her slim, athletic grace. I’d forgotten how good she looked.

She brought back a plate of assorted party food and a soda. “I’m gonna go get ready now. If you need anything else—”

“Can I help you get ready?” I didn’t wanna be left here by myself.

She smiled. “I wish you could, but I’m gonna take a shower and get changed.” She giggled.

“Oh, okay.” I smiled.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be long.” She flashed me a smile as she left the room again.

After I’d eaten, I leaned back on the sofa and relaxed for the first time since the rush to the airport early this morning. It felt good to rest in the goodness of life. I felt so contented. The excitement was over and a blissful feeling remained.

“How do I look?” Joanna came into the room and spun around in front of me. She was wearing a sleek, long dress that looked so elegant on her. It reminded me of our first date.

“You look amazing. I forgot to say happy birthday to you before. You’re sixteen today!”

“Am I old enough for you now?” She tilted her head and smiled at me.

“Yes.” I grinned. “I have a present for you. You wanna open it now or later?”

“What is it?”

I laughed. “I’ll get it for you.” I went fishing through my bag, and offered her the neatly wrapped package. She ripped into it, finding the small jewelry case first.

She opened it and smiled with open mouthed delight. It was a gold necklace with a heart shaped locket. She opened the locket and saw the photo of us inside.

“Ohh, I love it. Thank you!” She kissed me.

She turned around, holding her hair away from her neck so I could put the necklace on for her, and I kissed her bare neck and shoulder while the opportunity presented itself, making her giggle.

“There’s more too. Did you see...?”

“Yeah, what is it?” She grabbed the package again and pulled out a photo album. Flipping it open her face lit up. I’d got copies made of all the photos we’d taken of each other, and I’d also taken some photos of places that were special to us—the cove, and the shack, and even the restaurant we’d gone to on our first date. I had photos of some of my paintings in there as well. She turned the pages looking at each one, some made her laugh, and some made her smile whimsically. She looked at the photo of our carved initials in the rock at the cove. “These are such good memories, it was a special time for us, but now you’re here and we can make new memories.” She smiled up at me. “I can add

some of our photos to the album, too. We've got some from the talent contest, and before we went on our first date. You wanna see them?"

"Sure."

The doorbell rang, and Joanna ran to answer it. She squealed and hugged whoever it was at the door, and I heard their excited chatter. It sounded like there was more than one, and sure enough, two girls were invited in. "Zach, these are my best friends, Emma, and Crystal."

"Hi." I smiled at them.

"We've heard sooo much about you."

"So when are you guys getting married?" The girls giggled.

I looked at Joanna, and she blushed.

"Come and look what Zach gave me for my birthday." Joanna redirected.

The three girls were soon hovering over the photo album. They talked so fast, punctuated only by giggles. Every now and again, Joanna would look at me and smile apologetically.

More people arrived, and soon there was a small group of young people mingling in the living room. The music was cranked up, and party food was put out on the table. Joanna flitted around talking to everyone. I moved my bags out of the way, and stayed out of the way myself, content just to look on.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Joanna's father. "Hey Zach, it's really good to see you again." He grinned.

"Hi, yeah, it's good to see you too."

Joanna's father looked around at the party goers. I followed his gaze. Joanna was surrounded by giggling girls. I could hear her voice above all the hubbub even from across the room, "I know, I'm so lucky." She was bubbling with excitement, enjoying all the attention.

"She seems so different when she's with her friends."

He laughed. "I know, but she's still the same Joanna we know and love." He looked at me and smiled. "Come on, let's go into the kitchen so we can talk."

I followed him down the hallway and through a door. The kitchen was large and had a small table and chairs, where we sat down.

"I just got home. I was surprised to see you here."

"I had an interview today. I've been offered a scholarship to the art school down the road."

"Really? That's excellent. I'm glad for you, Zach. I'm really glad you made it." He grinned and gave my shoulder a slap.

"Did Joanna tell you what happened with getting into college and everything?"

"Yeah, she told us you hadn't got in."

"I made getting into college a sign from God. I wanted God to show me clearly if it was his will that I come to Colorado, and everything. So I applied to four colleges but I didn't get in to any of them, and that was the hardest time of my life, but somehow I still found the faith to trust in God. And then I got this scholarship—out of all the thousands of people who applied to that college, they chose me for a full scholarship. I know it was God that did it. He didn't do it the way I thought he would, he did it his way, and his way is so much better. It's so amazing, and it just happened today."

"It is amazing. It sounds like God really tested your faith, and you learnt to trust in him despite the circumstances. It reminds me of one of my favorite verses in Proverbs, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths.'"

"Yeah, he did direct my paths. He made a way for me."

"So it has confirmed to you that you and Joanna are meant to be together?"

"Yeah, definitely." I looked at him, "Don't you think?"

He nodded. "So I take it you still want to be betrothed then?"

"Yeah." I smiled.

He smiled too. "We can discuss that later, when we're all together."

Just then, Joanna's mother came through the back door carrying some bags of groceries. She saw us sitting at the table. "Could you two help me bring some things in from the car?"

"Sure." We both jumped up.

The back door from the kitchen led to a garage, where their car was parked with its trunk open.

"I haven't seen this car for a while."

"Yeah, she's a good car for long road trips. It's amazing how much stuff you can fit in there. That's the one I drive." He pointed to a battered old sports car parked off the driveway, and I laughed.

We each grabbed a load of grocery bags, and he closed the trunk.

"When are you moving here then, Zach?"

"I don't know. School starts in September, so I have to get a place before then. It doesn't leave me much time, but Joanna said she'd get her friends to help me find an apartment."

"You're welcome to stay with us until you find a place."

"Really? Thanks."

We came back to the kitchen and unloaded our bags on the counter.

"Enjoying the party, Zach?" Joanna's mother smiled at me before turning her attention back to the cup of coffee she was making.

"Parties aren't really my thing."

"No, nor mine. This is the first one she's been allowed to have here. She's invited mostly people from church and a few of her friends from school, so I'm not too worried about it." She sipped her coffee.

Joanna's father sat down at the table again. "Zach has been telling me about his scholarship. He's going to be starting school here in September."

"Yes I know. It's good news isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

She gave me a serious look. "You're gonna have to earn our trust though, Zach, before we let you date again. But I know you love each other, and I'm happy that you're here."

Joanna burst through the door. "There you are! They all wanna meet you." She grabbed my arm, pulling me up and out the door.

"Here's Zach," she yelled to the room. All eyes turned towards me. There were even more people there now.

"Hi." I smiled awkwardly.

"Hi Zach!" Some girls greeting me, giggling.

"So you're the infamous Zach." Some guy shook my hand.

"Yeah, hi."

He continued to hold my hand in a strong grip. "You're a lucky guy, Zach. Joanna's a very special person." I escaped his clutches and moved away through the crowd.

I saw some stairs, and decided to make my escape. Upstairs, I recognized the hallway from Joanna's video, and opened a door, immediately recognizing her bedroom. There was my painting on the wall. I felt a little intrusive being in her room, but I walked over to the window and looked out at the distant mountains.

"Hey," a voice said behind me. I swung around to see Joanna standing in the doorway. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just needed to get away from all those people for a while."

She smiled sympathetically and came and put her arms around me, and I pulled her close.

"I missed you." She looked up at me with those big, beautiful eyes, and we kissed. I felt that old familiar feeling of desire rising up in me, as our bodies pressed against each other.

I pulled away. "We have to be careful. What if your parents saw us in here? I don't wanna wreck everything now."

She gently pulled me back into her embrace. "I know, but we need this. We haven't held each other like this for so long."

We held each other close without kissing, just enjoying the feeling of being in each other's arms again.

"Why have you got teddy bears on your bed?"

She laughed. "I like them, they're cute and soft and cuddly. You think they're too girly?"

"No, they suit you. You're cute and soft and very cuddly."

She giggled, and I kissed her again on her cute, soft, lovely lips.

"You should go enjoy your party. I'll be fine."

"I wanna stay here with you. It's my party, I can do what I want." She grinned at me.

"We can't do everything you want, but maybe on your next birthday." I raised my eyebrows suggestively, and she laughed.

"You better go downstairs before you're missed."

"Come with me, then."

"Alright." I sighed.

She beamed. "Good, 'cause I was just about to play some of my songs for everyone." She let go of me and pulled out a guitar case from under her bed. We went downstairs into the living room, and she went and turned the music off.

"Who'd like to hear me play some of my songs?"

Everyone thought it was a great idea. Joanna sat down on the sofa and gave her guitar a quick tune. When she started to play, everyone became very quiet. It was a simple, sweet melody, then she added her voice to it, and it was so beautiful. I saw her parents come in and stand at the back listening to their daughter sing. It was a song I'd never heard before, and her guitar playing was

so good. I think she was wowing everyone, they all seemed stunned by her performance. When she finished, no one moved or even clapped, we all just stood there. Joanna wasn't fazed by that, she started in on her next song, one beautiful song after another. It felt so intimate. She closed her eyes and worshipped God like no-one else was there watching her. It was fantastic.

When she finished, she opened her eyes and looked around at us in surprise as if she'd forgotten about us, or maybe because we were all so quiet. Then everyone started talking at once.

"That was amazing."

"Never heard anything so beautiful."

I smiled at Joanna and she smiled back at me.

"I think this would be a good time to give you your birthday present from us." Joanna's father stepped through the crowd, pulling an envelope from his pocket, and handed it to Joanna. The people near her huddled around to see as she opened it. She read it silently and everyone started asking what it was.

"What is this Dad? I don't understand it."

"It's time at a recording studio. We've paid for you to record an album, with a professional producer and everything. We'll get your songs recorded and see if we can get a music label interested in you."

Joanna placed her hand over her mouth to stifle an excited squeal. "I can't believe this! Thank you Mom and Dad." She blinked as tears formed in her eyes. She looked at me. "This is the best day of my life!"

Thirteen

The party gradually wound down, and I helped Joanna and her parents clean up the mess. I asked if I could call my parents to let them know what was happening, and they, of course, said yes.

“Hello?” My dad answered.

“Hi.”

“Is that you Zach?”

“Yeah. I got offered the scholarship.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I thought they’d take a while to decide, but they said I was the last person they had to interview, so they made their decision right then while I waited outside. They said I was their first choice, they really loved my art, they were raving about it.”

“That’s good. When are you coming home?”

“Well, school starts in the fall, so I don’t have a lot of time to get settled here. I need to find an apartment and get some furniture and stuff. So I was thinking I should probably stay here and get myself situated.”

“What about all your things?”

“I can just buy some more clothes and stuff.”

“So you’re not coming back?”

“I’ll be back for Christmas or something.”

“Oh, well ... I’ll let your mother know. You take care.” My dad’s voice cracked a little like he was getting emotional. I hadn’t expected that from him.

“Hey Dad, thanks for the money and everything. This is a real turning point in my life.”

“Yep, alright.”

“Tell Mom I love her. I’ll ring again soon and let you know how I’m settling in.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks Dad. I love you. Bye.”

“Bye Son.”

It felt weird saying I love you to my dad. I hadn’t expected this phone call to be so emotionally heavy. I was just glad I didn’t get hold of my mom instead, that would’ve been even worse.

I went back into the living room. Joanna and her parents were sitting on the sofa watching TV.

“Come and join us, Zach. We’re watching some old home videos of Joanna when she was little.”

I sat down next to Joanna, and we cuddled up together. We watched the cute little toddler on the screen, wobbling along on unsteady legs.

“It doesn’t even feel like it was that long ago. It’s amazing how fast it goes.” Joanna’s father spoke wistfully.

Her parents started reminiscing about the funny things Joanna did as a child. We watched as Joanna grew up on the TV screen—a cute little three year old, then a precocious five year old. She was adorable. When the video was over, her father got up.

“Who wants to see the video of Joanna and accompanist performing at the campground talent contest?”

We all laughed.

“It’s too late for that tonight,” Joanna’s mother protested. “We should all be going to bed.”

“Can I take Zach out and show him around the city tomorrow?”

“Is that a sneaky way of asking to go on a date?” Joanna’s father raised his eyebrows at his daughter.

Joanna gave him a cute smile, and he laughed.

“Well, since it’s Saturday tomorrow, I guess I could drive you around.”

Joanna looked at me, her eyes sparkling. “And you’ll be here for our home group meeting on Monday night. We have it here, usually about eight people come to it, and we have Bible study and a time of prayer and worship.”

“Sounds good.” I smiled.

“Yeah, they’re a great group of people, Zach. They all love the Lord and wanna live for him. It’ll be good for you to be part of that.” Joanna’s father pulled the tape out of the machine and switched off the TV. “We better go to bed and let Zach get some sleep. I’ll help you pull out the sofa bed.”

I kissed Joanna goodnight, and she gave me a hug. Her mom looked on with a concerned frown.

“I don’t want either of you going near each other during the night, okay? Joanna that means you too. Don’t come down here for any reason.”

“I won’t.”

I lay in bed thinking about Joanna in her room right above me. Was she awake and thinking about me too? *I wish I could be with her. We wouldn’t do anything, we’d just hold each other. That would be so nice, cuddling up with her in bed. We could go to sleep in each other’s arms.* I sighed. This was gonna be harder than I thought. I rolled over and tried not to think about anything.

I was awoken by Joanna coming into the room. “Good morning. Did you sleep alright?” She whispered.

“What time is it?” I whispered back.

She sat down on the edge of my bed. “It’s seven o’clock. Did you need more sleep?”

“Nah. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Same. I was too excited.”

I rubbed my eyes and looked her over. She was wearing a white towel robe. “Are your parents up yet?”

“No.” She smiled mischievously.

“What are you wearing under that robe?”

She stifled a laugh. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

I put my arms around her, then suddenly started tickling her. She squealed and tried to push my hands away.

“Stop, you’ll wake my parents.”

I stopped tickling her, and she grinned back at me. She glanced towards the doorway.

“If you wanna see what I’ve got under here...” She stood up and untied her robe, flashing it open. I got a glimpse of a matching pink t-shirt and shorts with love hearts on them, very cute.

“Nothing too exciting.” She giggled, retying her robe.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you last night. I was tempted to sneak up to your room.”

“I was kinda hoping you would, but I probably shouldn’t say that. We’ve got to be careful now, Zach. We’re going to be tempted more than ever.”

“I know. I don’t wanna do anything to lose your parent’s trust.”

Joanna crouched down next to the bed and kissed my lips. “We just have to try our hardest not to give in to temptation.” She kissed me again then stood up. “Did you want me to make you some breakfast? I could make some pancakes.”

“Sure. I’m gonna take a quick shower. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll have your pancakes ready for you when you get out.” She smiled and went off to the kitchen.

After my shower, I dressed and went to the kitchen. Joanna’s parents were up now, and her father was reading a newspaper at the table. Joanna was cooking pancakes for everyone.

“Good morning.” Her mom greeted me with a smile. “I hope you slept alright on that old sofa bed. Was it comfortable enough for you?”

“Yeah, it was fine, thanks.”

“Joanna’s showing off her cooking skills this morning.” Her dad teased.

Joanna laughed. “Watch out dad, or yours might end up a little crispy.” She grinned at me and I grinned back. She served up the pancakes, and we all ate.

“We’ve been discussing things,” Joanna’s father indicated his wife and himself, “and we need to sit down and talk about your future ... and since we’re all here, we may as well do it right now, over breakfast.” He looked around at each of us, and there was an immediate feeling of expectation in the air.

“Joanna, how do you feel about being betrothed to Zach?”

“It’s what I want more than anything. We love each other, and God has shown us we’re meant for each other.”

“So you feel you’re ready for this kind of commitment?”

“Yes, I am.”

“What about you, Zach? Do you want to be betrothed to Joanna now, or do you want to wait a while first?”

“I don’t want to wait. We’re both sure.” I was feeling all tense and nervous. I knew this was one of those big moments in my life.

“Well, we discussed this last night.” He indicated his wife again. He looked at her, prompting her to speak.

“I’m not exactly keen on the idea of you getting married at seventeen.” Her mother’s voice was full of strained tension. “I think it’s far too young, I think it should be eighteen at least, and I’d prefer it if you waited until Zach has a job and you’re in a better position to support each other.”

I glanced at her father, and he smiled reassuringly.

“But mom, my age doesn’t—”

“Wait, I’m not finished.” Joanna’s mother held up a hand. “I know what you’re going to say, and you don’t need to say it. I’ve talked about this with your father, and he thinks this is what’s best for you, so I’m going along with it. But, I have a few conditions of my own. After you get married, I’d like it if both of you lived here in this house until Joanna is at least eighteen, and preferably until Zach has a fulltime job.”

“You mean after I finish college? That’s four years from now.” I was a little shocked. I didn’t mind living here for a while, but four years was a long time.

“Yes.” Her mother continued. “There’s a lot of responsibility in getting married, and there’s the very real possibility of you having a baby in that time, too.” Joanna’s mother looked at her husband, then her daughter. “I’d feel a lot better about it if you were living here rather than out there on your own without any support.”

“The thing is, Mom, the whole idea of marriage is about leaving your parents and going out on your own. If we aren’t responsible enough to live on our own and take care of ourselves, then we aren’t responsible enough to get married in the first place. You can’t get married and still be taken care of by your parents like children. We have to take responsibility for ourselves and each other. That’s what marriage is. You’re saying you’ll let us get married, but not let us have all the responsibilities of adulthood until you think we’re ready.”

“Well, yes, that is what I’m saying, because I don’t believe you’ll be ready to get married at seventeen. Zach won’t have a job or an income. You’ll still be in high school. You’re just not ready for marriage. This is a compromise to let you marry before I think you’re ready.”

“Well, Joanna is right, though.” Her father cut in. “Getting married is about leaving your parents and taking responsibility for yourselves and each other. I have to hand over to Zach all responsibility for Joanna. I don’t think we should put that kind of condition on them after they’re married. It reminds me of Jacob when he tried to leave his father-in-laws’ house. He had to take them and escape in the night because his father-in-law didn’t want to give up his daughters.”

“Yes, but part of his bride price was agreeing to stay and work another seven years for Rachel after they were married. A betrothal can have all sorts of conditions to it.”

“His father in law tricked him into that.”

“What exactly do you mean by being able to support ourselves?” I brought the conversation back from its theological sidetrack. “While I’m a student, my apartment and some living expenses will be paid for by my scholarship, and a student loan will pay for the rest. I can get a part time job, too. Joanna and I could live there, and I’d be able to support her.”

“And I can work part time as well. Zach isn’t the only one that has to support us.”

“I’d still prefer it if you lived here with us ‘til you’re at least eighteen. You’ll still be very young, and it would be better for both of you if you lived here. We could help you and support you in your relationship. We’d respect your privacy, and we’d treat you like adults.”

Joanna almost snorted. “You’d treat me like an adult?”

I spoke up again. “It’s not really treating us like adults to say we have to live with you until she’s old enough. It’s still treating her like a child. I think if you’re willing to give your daughter to me, you shouldn’t be trying to keep hold of her like this, you need to let go. It’s like you’re giving her to me but wanting to keep her at the same time.”

“That’s right. I feel she’s too young, and this is a compromise. You have her as your wife and we have her as our daughter for a little while longer until she’s old enough. I just want to make things easier for you, so you get a good start in life and don’t have to struggle to survive.”

“But we need our independence, Mom. We need to learn to live on our own and take care of ourselves. We’ll get by, and we’ll always have you to come to if we need you.”

Her father nodded. “Yes, you need your independence, and if you choose to stay here until you’re better able to support yourselves, that should be your decision, not something we force on you. But I can also see why your mother feels this way. You’re not an adult yet until you turn eighteen. We’ll have to give our permission for you to marry while you’re legally still a child, and we’d both feel better about it if we could see a way to make sure you’re cared for and not thrust out into the world prematurely to face life’s hardships.”

“That legal age thing is just an arbitrary age the government came up with. Every country is different, in Canada it’s only fifteen. It doesn’t really define who’s an adult and who isn’t.”

“Well, it’s the only way we have to differentiate an adult from a child. We don’t have a measure of maturity we can use.”

“You can measure Joanna’s maturity, though. You know her—”

“I do know my own daughter, Zach, a lot better than you do.” Joanna’s mother raised her voice. “And I feel she isn’t ready for marriage yet. That’s why I want her to live here with us until she’s old enough. You get what you want and we get to take care of her until she is an adult.”

“I don’t wanna be taken care of by my parents, I want to be taken care of by my husband, and I’ll take care of him. I want him to be responsible for me. I know Zach will look after me, and I know God will help us through the tough times. I don’t expect everything to be easy, but we’ll stick together through everything. It’s not good for us to be treated like children and cared for by my parents after we’re married. We need to be on our own. I’m sad that you don’t trust us to take care of ourselves. I can handle a lot more than you think. I’m not just a child anymore, and I definitely won’t be a child when I marry Zach. I’m a young woman, and if you gave me the chance, you’d see that I’m a lot more capable and mature than you think.”

“We love you, Joanna.” Joanna’s mother spoke in a calmer voice. “We just want the best for you.”

“You don’t want us to get married at all.”

“Yes, I do, actually.”

“You do?” Joanna looked surprised.

“Yes. I like Zach very much, and I realize you truly love each other. I just want you to be happy.” Her mom signed. “Alright, I won’t make you have to live here after you get married if you don’t want to, but I hope you’ll still consider it, at least until you find your feet and get established.”

I felt relieved. I smiled at Joanna’s mother and she gave me a resigned smile in return.

“Okay, so we won’t make that a condition of betrothal, but this home is always available to you for as long as you need it, and we’re happy to have you live here with us if you choose to.” Joanna’s father looked like he’d enjoyed all this hammering out. He smiled at me. “So you’re willing to pay the bride price, Zach? Nothing sexual at all until the day we give her to you as your wife?”

“Yes ... but I think it would be good if we could define it more clearly, because two people in love are always touching each other and kissing and cuddling. We should define when it becomes sexual.”

“If we try to define it, it will leave loop holes you can exploit. If there’s even the slightest thing sexual about it, don’t do it.”

“I think that might be a little harsh.” Joanna’s mother surprised us. “We should let them do the normal romantic things a young couple do without worrying about it breaking the rules.”

“Well how do you define normal romantic things?”

“The thing I’d be worried about is any nudity or touching of private areas, even through clothing. Other than that, kissing and touching each other should be alright, as long as it doesn’t get too heated so you lose all self control.”

“Okay,” Joanna’s father looked amused. “I think that’s a workable definition. Do you agree with that, Zach?”

“Yeah, it makes it clear enough.”

“Wait, I think you should define what is a private area, because we might be cuddling, and Zach might accidentally touch my breast or butt or something.”

We all laughed, and Joanna blushed. “Well, it’s just that some areas might be harder to avoid when we’re doing the normal romantic things.”

“I guess we can give them that one.” Her father said, still laughing. “Alright, so no touching each other under clothing in private areas, and no touching each other through clothing in the genital area. Is that specific enough for you, Joanna?”

Joanna nodded and smiled.

“So you agree to this as your bride price, Zach? Do you solemnly promise to us that you won’t do anything sexual with Joanna until we give her to you as your wife?”

I took a deep breath. “Yes, I promise.”

“And you promise to be honest with us about whether you’ve kept your word?”

“Yes.”

“Then I agree to give my daughter to you in marriage on the day she turns seventeen. Let’s shake on it.” He stood and offered me his hand. I stood up and we shook hands over the kitchen table. “Congratulations, you’re now betrothed.”

He smiled, and I smiled too, though the full weight of his words were still sinking in.

“We’ll go out tonight and celebrate. This is a happy occasion.” He grinned and slapped me and Joanna on the back, then went out of the room. Joanna’s mother gave us a resigned smile, and quietly excused herself from the table.

I looked at Joanna, my betrothed, and she gave me the most beautiful smile.

“I can’t believe it, we’re actually betrothed. We’re gonna be married. Can you believe it Zach? It’s really happening.”

“I know. I can hardly believe it either. He’s actually given you to me.” The immensity of it started to hit home as I realized what a huge thing Joanna’s father had done. *He’s given me his only daughter.*

“One year from today we’ll be waking up in each other’s arms. We’re going to be so happy, Zach.”

“I love you, Joanna.”

She smiled up at me. “I love you too, my husband.”

Fourteen

I applied some aftershave to my face, and looked at myself in the mirror. It felt so weird getting ready for this, knowing I was going to be making love for the first time in a matter of hours. I'd thought about this moment so many times, and now it was actually happening. It was surreal. We'd been waiting for this day for so long, and now it was finally here at last.

I wondered how Joanna was feeling. Her parents had thought it best for us not to see each other the last few days before our wedding.

I took a deep breath, grabbed the car keys, and took a last look around the apartment—everything was ready for her.

Driving to her house, I was feeling so on edge. I tried to stay calm, taking nice steady breaths. Every part of me was tingling with anticipation.

I knocked at the door, and Joanna's mother let me in. She looked nervous and excited and emotional all at once.

"Joanna's still getting ready." She smiled.

Their house was decorated for our celebration party tomorrow.

"The house looks great." I smiled. I felt awkward, not sure how I should act around her.

She pulled me into a big hug. "You're part of our family now, Zach." She started tearing up. "I'm sorry, I've been overly emotional lately." She pulled out a hankie and dabbed her eyes.

"That's understandable." I smiled.

She recovered her composure. "We've invited everyone we can think of to your wedding celebration tomorrow. Your parents said they'd be here."

"Hey, Zach."

I turned to see Joanna's father arriving home. He smiled as he came through the door. "How're ya feeling?"

"A little nervous." I admitted.

"Yeah, I bet." He grinned. "Where's Joanna?"

"Still getting ready." Her mother pointed at the ceiling. "I'm gonna go up and help her. I'm sure she'll be down soon, Zach." She gave me a smile as she passed me to go up the stairs.

Her father and I went into the living room and sat down on the couch to wait. He seemed very relaxed, which made me feel a little more at ease. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"This is a great day, Zach." He grinned. "It's been such a pleasure for me watching the two of you grow and mature in your faith over this past year. I'm really proud of you. I couldn't have asked for a better husband for my daughter."

I just smiled, I didn't know what to say.

"You've been like a son to me already." Joanna's father wiped at his eye. "Now I'm getting all emotional." He laughed. "This is such a big day." He smiled as he tried to compose himself. "I don't even need to ask you if you've kept the bride-price."

"I want you to ask me."

He laughed. "Okay, Zach, have you kept the bride price and not done anything sexual with Joanna since you were betrothed?"

"I've honored my promise to you, and with God's help, I've paid it in full."

Joanna's father smiled and nodded. "Good man." He patted my shoulder.

I was starting to feel all jittery now. My heart was racing and my breath was becoming a little unsteady.

"Are you okay, Zach? You're not gonna be sick are you?"

"No, I'm fine." I took some deep breaths.

He gave me a sympathetic smile. "Remember, it's not just about the first time, you're going to have her for the rest of your life."

"I know."

"This is God's gift to us, Zach. He gives us the gift of her beauty, and her love and all the delight that she brings us. And you are God's gift to her, your strength and your love and care. Be blessed and enjoy it."

"She's ready." Joanna's mother called down the stairs.

“Come on, let’s go see your bride.”

We got up and went into the hallway. She appeared at the top of the stairs, and for a moment I forgot to breathe. She was wearing a long white dress, her hair tied up in a special way, with little wisps hanging down to frame her face. She smiled at me so happily, a pink glow to her cheeks. I stood there breathless, in awe. I blinked the tears away, not wanting to see her as a blur, as she floated down the stairs towards me. I held out my hands to her, and she took them in hers as she stepped off the last stair, and we stood face to face, her eyes shining with excitement.

“You’re so beautiful.” I barely whispered.

She didn’t say anything, she just smiled, and my heart overflowed with love.

“Happy birthday.” I said hoarsely. I had a big lump in my throat, I was so happy for her, and for us.

Her mom had come down the stairs behind her, holding a camera in her hand.

“Let me get some photos of the two of you together.”

“Getting a before and after shot?” Joanna’s father joked.

She took some photos, then her parents ushered us towards the front door. At the doorway, Joanna turned to her mother with tears in her eyes.

“I love you, Mom.”

“Oh sweetie, I love you too.” They hugged, her mother’s face flushed with emotion. She fixed a stray wisp of Joanna’s hair and smiled lovingly at her daughter. “My little girl’s all ... grown up ... and ... what a wonderful woman you’ve become.” Tears rolled down her face. She kissed Joanna on the cheek.

Joanna’s father had tears in his eyes too. He hugged his daughter and said some quiet words to her. Then he turned to me. “I’m giving you the most precious thing I have in this world, Zach, and it’s my pleasure to give her to you. Look after her, and be blessed.” He smiled and shook my hand. “Go and enjoy each other. We’ll see you tomorrow at your wedding celebration.”

I opened the passenger door for Joanna, and she got in carefully, keeping the bottom of her dress from touching anything. Her father brought her bags, and I helped load them into the trunk. He gave me a hug before I got into the car, and he closed my door for me. Her parents stood arm and arm on the driveway waving to us as we backed up and drove away.

We were both silent as I concentrated on the road, taking only little glances at Joanna as I drove. She looked at me and smiled, and I gave her a shy smile.

I parked in front of our apartment.

“We’re home.”

She grinned. “Are you gonna carry me over the threshold?”

“Sure.”

We both laughed.

I unlocked the door and put her bags inside, then I picked her up and carried her, giggling, across the threshold. I kicked the door closed behind us, and gently placed her down in the middle of the room. We stood there looking into each other’s eyes, my love for her overwhelming everything else I was feeling. I drew her into my arms and we kissed. She smiled up at me, blinking back tears.

“I’m so happy this day has finally come.”

“Me too. I love you... so much...” I was feeling overly emotional and a little giddy.

“You wanna go to the bedroom?” She asked meekly.

“We don’t have to yet if you don’t want—”

“I want to.”

My heart surged. “Okay, wait here a sec, I mean a sec.”

I went into the bedroom. This was the most exhilarating feeling ever. All of my senses were heightened and my heart was beating so fast.

I started lighting the candles I’d placed around the room. My hand was trembling as I lit them, and I had to steady the lighter with both hands. When I went back out to Joanna, she was standing exactly as I’d left her, waiting for me, her cheeks slightly flushed.

“Are you nervous?”

“I’m shaking.” She smiled, “But I’m not scared, just excited.”

“Same.” It wasn’t scary, it felt so natural doing this with her, my best friend and soul mate, the one I loved more than anything else in the whole world.

I took her by the hand and led her into the bedroom. She looked around in amazement as she took in the four poster bed I’d bought for us, with its white lace canopy, the candles surrounding us adding their warm, sensual glow to everything.

“It’s beautiful.” She whispered. She looked at me with an unreadable expression.

I combed a wisp of hair from her face, and her breath quickened at my touch. She closed her eyes as my fingertips caressed her soft cheek and lips, and down her smooth neck, to her bare shoulders. She opened her eyes again and looked at

me with such desire. My fingertips lightly traversed the delicate skin of her cleavage, before slipping beneath the thin strap of her dress, lifting it gently from her shoulder. She was breathing harder now, and I kissed her parted lips as my fingers moved to the other strap, easing it off. Her dress fell away, crumpling at her feet.

She was wearing lacey lingerie and I could see her through it. I saw a tie holding the top piece, and with shaky hands, I started untying it. It slipped from her, and she stood there topless, her smooth skin shining in the warm glow of candle light. She was exquisite. I kissed her bare shoulder as my fingers traced the firm softness of her breasts, her body trembling with each gentle caress. This was so good, even better than I'd imagined. She was so beautiful, and every caress of her was pure delight.

My hands traveled down her body, reaching the bottom piece of her lingerie, my fingers slipping beneath its band, sliding it down over her hips until they dropped away, falling down around her ankles. She shuffled them off and stepped out of them, completely naked.

My eyes swept over her. She was even more beautiful than I remembered.

She smiled, and my heart overflowed with love and desire. She took my hand and stepped back towards the bed. "Come make me your wife."

She let go of my hand as she sat down on the edge of the bed. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I loved every bit of her.

I started taking off my shirt, while she undid my belt buckle. I helped her, pushing my pants and underwear off and kicking them away. I stood naked before her, my whole body trembling with anticipation. I was breathing so fast, everything felt so heightened.

She reached up and gently touched me, my body tensing at her soft caress, her hands moving slowly, feeling all of me.

I eased her back on the bed and she lay prone beneath me. She touched my face as I maneuvered over her, lowering my body to hers.

She breathed out a deep sigh, and we were one, moving slowly, gently, as she moaned. I watched her face as she closed her eyes, biting her lower lip. We were one, and it was amazing. Her body felt so good, and I loved her so completely. We moved together in quickening rhythm, as her moans became a beautiful song. I felt a deep joy within me, growing and filling me, gaining intensity until it broke forth in pure ecstasy, my soul rejoiced.

We lay there entwined. I felt so close to her now. She knew all of me and I knew all of her, so intimately. It was such a beautiful feeling lying in each other's arms after making love. A feeling of profound peace and contentment washed over me. *Thank you Lord!*

"We're one flesh now, Zach. We're married before God." Joanna spoke quietly, almost reverently.

"I know." I stroked my fingertips across her beautiful skin. "How do you feel? Did you like it?"

"Yes, I loved it." She smiled. "I love making love to you."

"It didn't hurt?"

"A little, but I hardly noticed after a while. Did you like it? Did it live up to your expectations?"

"Yes, it exceeded them all. Not just because of what it felt like, but the feeling it gave me, you know what I mean? It was wonderful."

She smiled so lovingly. "I'm glad. I want to please you in every way."

"You do please me, in every way. You please me with your love and your beauty, you satisfy my soul and my body. You make me so happy." I kissed her petal soft lips. "I'm so happy you're my wife."

"I love you, my husband." She smiled and looked into my eyes. "You wanna do it again?"

I laughed. "Okay."

Joanna slept, her head on my shoulder, her leg curled over mine. I gently stroked her lower back and hip with my fingertips, lost in contented bliss, letting all the happiness flow over me. *My sweet Joanna, so lovely, so joyful and beautiful, I can't believe you're mine.*

I closed my eyes and I could feel all of heaven open above us and the presence of God surrounding us. We were laid bare before him, naked but unashamed.

And God looked down upon us, and he smiled.