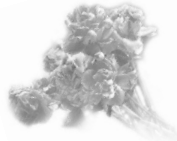




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recapping senior year

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Payton fell back into her mattress with a moan.

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

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

“Why would you think that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Laurel Shadrach."

"That sounds familiar."

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

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

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

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

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

"That's great."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What did they do?"

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

"How did they get that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," I admitted.

"How come?"

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

"I understand," she said with a nod.

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

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

She gasped.

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

"How?"

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

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

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

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

“Oh, no!” she cried, her eyes wide.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s my favorite apparatus,” I said.

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

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

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

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

Her parents fought constantly whenever they were

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

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

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

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

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

"I do," I assured her.

"Then keep practicing," she advised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No biggie.”

“No, I really appreciate it.”

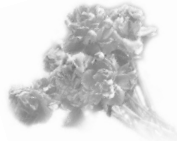
“I’m going to go get dressed,” she said.

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

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

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

t w o



wishing for harmony

you shouldn't have worn that," Jewels said to me at our first day of sorority rush.

I looked down at my floral print dress. I had on a Ralph Lauren outfit I'd bought only two years ago. I thought it looked nice on me—not too tight but not old-fashioned. The fuchsia and pink flowers set off my brown eyes and long light-brown hair nicely, in my opinion. But Jewels said the colors made my skin look too red, like I was breaking out in hives or something.

Jewels had made poor Anna, her roommate, change five times before she approved of her outfit. I never saw any of the options; I just heard the two girls bickering through the bathroom door. When I did see Anna, her dress was adorable. The short-sleeved brown suit complemented her larger frame. And pinning her curly strawberry-blonde hair up with bobby pins gave her a classy look.

Jewels wore a sky-blue dress that looked great with the

red hair that flowed down her back. Her super-short skirt showed off her shapely legs. She'd told me once that she took dance lessons for fifteen years. It certainly showed. I wished my years in gymnastics had carved my body so well.

Jewels strutted down the sidewalk like a peacock. Anna and I followed her to the coliseum, along with hundreds of other freshman girls hoping to find a sorority home.

Though I didn't want to admit it, I started to feel self-conscious about my outfit. Jewels's comment about my skin looking like hives weighed heavily on my mind. As we walked through the oak double doors of the coliseum, I actually started scratching.

Jewels and Anna and I took seats in the middle row on the left side of the coliseum. I looked over at Jewels and whispered, "I think my outfit is cute."

"So do I," she said, apparently forgetting what she had told me earlier. "You look great," she added in a sincere tone.

Her assurance made me feel more confident. I hated that her opinion meant so much to me, but Jewels seemed to know what the sororities were looking for. Her sister, Julie Anne, was president of the Alpha Gamma Delta sorority, which I'd heard was the best one on campus.

At Jewels's prodding, I had skipped my early morning gymnastics practice so I'd be fresh and well rested for my sorority appearances. I felt guilty about breaking my promise to Nadia, and I wondered how the missed practice would affect my athletic abilities. But getting into a good sorority was almost as important to me as gymnastics.

As we waited for the program to begin, I reread the pamphlet I'd received from the student affairs office about the sorority selection process. Basically, there were three rounds to go through. In round one, we'd visit all the sororities to get an overall feel for what they were about and decide which ones we wanted to join. It was important to make a good impression so the houses we liked would

invite us back. According to the pamphlet, it would take two days for us to visit every sorority house on campus.

A few days after the end of round one, all prospective members would receive a list of the houses they were welcome to visit again. I'd heard that some girls didn't get any invitations to return, while others were asked by so many sororities they had to choose which ones to go back to, as there was a maximum number allowed for the second round.

While the first round allowed up to thirty minutes per visit, each second-round visit lasted one hour. It involved more meeting and greeting and hopefully making more positive impressions. Following these visits, each girl would submit her top three choices to student affairs. At the same time, each sorority sent in a list of the girls they wanted.

In the last round, the school computer matched everyone up, and each student would be given a card with the names of all the girls who'd been accepted into that sorority.

On pledge night the girls would go to their new sorority houses. The brochure indicated that this was a grand celebration. I looked at the photo showing a group of attractive girls hugging and celebrating in front of their sorority house. As I imagined myself in that scene, hope filled my heart.

My musings were cut short when a short man stood on the raised stage and tapped the microphone, causing feedback that made everyone wince. "Good morning, ladies," he said in a high-pitched voice, having assured himself that the mike was working. "I am Walt Kimbrough, vice president of student affairs." We gave him a polite round of applause.

"I am pleased to announce that there are three thousand freshmen women enrolled here this year. One of the largest classes we've ever had." This time we applauded more enthusiastically.

"Every one of you young ladies is deserving of a sorority, and I am certain you would each be a tremendous benefit. However, about one-third of you won't make it into one. And although being in a sorority is a fun and exciting expe-

rience, we have lots of other activities you can be involved in as well.”

I knew Mr. Kimbrough had a point. I really wanted to make it into Alpha Gamma Delta. But every girl there had her hopes, and not everyone’s dreams would come true. I prayed that God would give me peace, no matter what happened. Even if I didn’t get into any sorority, my joy was in Christ, not the things of the world.

After Mr. Kimbrough’s speech, a bunch of buses took us all to the beautiful sorority houses on Milledge Avenue. I’d seen them when I first came on campus, when I was deciding whether or not to go to Georgia. They were breathtaking. Row after row of large, new buildings with lush green lawns perfectly manicured, bright flowers popping up everywhere.

“Come on, Laurel,” Jewels said in a bossy voice. “We’re going straight to the Alpha Gamma Delta house. I want to be the first person they see.”

“Why?” Anna asked.

Jewels rolled her eyes. “Because they’re the best, of course.”

“You’re just saying that because your sister’s the president of that sorority,” I said.

Jewels crossed her arms across her chest. “That’s one reason they’re the best!”

“You go ahead,” I said. “I’m just going to start with the first one on the block and work my way up. Whichever ones I don’t hit today I’ll get to tomorrow.”

Her mouth dropped open and her eyebrows rose, like she thought my idea was totally stupid.

“I’m going to stick with Laurel,” Anna announced.

Jewels took several frustrated breaths. Finally she said, “No one should go up to a sorority house alone. It’s a sign that they’re unfriendly. Guess I’ll just stick with you guys.”

Anna gave me a look that told me she wished Jewels would have gone on without us. I entertained the same thought for a minute.

We started for the Tri Delta house. A sorority member came out and greeted us, found out our names, then introduced us to our guide, Opal. We toured the sorority house and met several members, who were all really friendly. We enjoyed some cheese, crackers, cookies, and punch, chatting with people until we felt we'd learned what we needed to know.

"This is going to take a long time," Anna said as we walked back outside.

"Just keep smiling," Jewels said, hurrying toward the next house.

I grinned from ear to ear just because Jewels told me to. "Why should we keep smiling?"

"Opal is grading us," she said as we strolled down the sidewalk.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"How do you think they narrow down who they want?"

"I thought they weren't supposed to do any narrowing until the second round," Anna said.

"Oh, Anna, you know nothing about this," Jewels said. "It's a good thing you've got me. Now, stop walking with your shoulders hunched over. Stand up straighter. You're making me look bad."

Anna looked like she was about to cry. I felt bad for her. Jewels didn't have to hurt her feelings like that. But I didn't say anything. They were roommates. I figured it was best if I stayed out of their little spats.

We visited ten sorority houses that day. By five o'clock my feet were killing me and I suggested we call it quits.

Jewels fussed all the way home. "I can't believe we didn't see the Alpha Gams today. We have got to go to their house first tomorrow, no matter what."

Part of me wanted to tell her to hush up already. But to keep the peace, I just let her get tired of hearing herself. Anna and I finally consented that our first stop the next day would be the Alpha Gamma Delta house.

I hadn't been particularly impressed by any of the places I'd been that day. And from the way Jewels had raved about the Alpha Gams, I was actually looking forward to seeing what they were about. Besides, that had been my mother's sorority, and I knew it would make her proud if I became an Alpha Gam too.

When I got back to my room, I found it empty. I was kind of relieved. I really liked my roommate, but after being surrounded by girls all day, being alone was a blessing.

I tossed my heavy bag of sorority flyers into the corner chair and put on my favorite country western CD. I turned the volume up, higher than I knew Payton would have liked. Then I sank into the chair, propped my feet up, and just enjoyed my space.

As promised, Alpha Gamma Delta was our first stop the next day. It was a two-story building made of taupe stucco, with little windows near the ground that indicated it had a basement. Four wicker rocking chairs sat on the porch surrounded by four big columns. I couldn't wait to go in.

As I stood on the lawn gaping at the sorority house, I heard a voice call out, "Laurel Shadrach!"

I turned around and saw a brunette girl about my height headed toward me. I immediately recognized her as the Alpha Gamma Delta pledge master, whom I'd met at the block party. Her sweet, welcoming spirit had made my heart soar. Even though we were only in round one of the pledge process, and we had four more days left, none of the other houses had made me feel so at home.

"Liza, right?" I guessed.

"Yeah!" Her face lit up. "I was praying I'd get to show you around."

"Really?" I asked, amazed. "You were praying about me?"

"I checked on your background a little, and it turns out

we have a lot in common. I used to live in Conway, Arkansas.”

“No way!” I cried. I’d grown up in Conway and moved to Georgia just before high school.

“Our grandmothers were sorority sisters at the University of Arkansas,” Liza continued. “They were Alpha Gams there too!”

“You’re kidding.” I was thrilled that I had so much in common with this nice girl.

Liza grinned. “With all the things your mom and your grandmother told me about you, I’m sure you won’t have any problem getting in here.”

A sour thought suddenly hit me. “I don’t want to get into Alpha Gamma Delta just because of my ‘connections.’ I want to make it on my own.”

Liza laughed. “That makes me even more excited about having you here.” She put her arm around my shoulders and led me into the beautiful house. The hardwood floors, spiral staircase, and formal living and dining room areas made me feel like I had stepped into a miniature castle. Everything was decorated in burgundy and forest green, the Alpha Gam colors.

“Your mom said our grandmothers were really good friends back in their college days,” Liza said. “Your grandma was a year older than mine, and they had a lot of fun together.”

“And you’re a year older than I!” I exclaimed.

“That’s right!”

I was amazed at the similarities in our lives.

“Even though I’m just a sophomore,” Liza said, “a lot of the older gals here really like me. And I plan to use my favor to get you in here . . . and not just because your mom asked me to. So, why don’t you let me introduce you to some folks around here? This really is the best sorority on campus.”

The tour was only supposed to last for thirty minutes, but Liza showed me around for almost an hour and a half. Jewels tagged along the whole time.

When I finally said good-bye to Liza, and Jewels and I stepped outside, I started to wonder what had happened to Anna.

“It’s about time,” Anna hollered from across the street. “I went to two other houses while you were in there.”

“That’s not good,” Jewels whispered to me as Anna waited for traffic to clear so she could cross over to us.

“It would be nice if we all ended up in the same sorority,” I said.

Just as Anna joined us, a pretty girl with short red hair came out the front door of the Alpha Gamma Delta house and squealed at Jewels. When the girls hugged each other, I saw a definite family resemblance and figured this must be Julie Anne, the big sister Jewels had bragged about so much.

My suspicions were confirmed when Jewels introduced us.

“Hey, I’ve heard a lot about you from Liza,” Julie Anne said to me. “She thinks very highly of you.”

“Really?” I said, thrilled that the pledge master had mentioned me.

“You know,” she said, leaning in close and speaking softly, “as president of the Alpha Gams, I pull a lot of weight when it comes to deciding who gets in and who doesn’t.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“I definitely plan on putting in a good word for you.”

Having the president of the sorority talk to me with such interest made me feel really special. But the glare in Jewels’s eyes filled me with apprehension. And Anna’s sad expression made me wish she hadn’t heard the glowing words being said about me.

“There are going to be three frat parties tonight,” Julie Anne informed us. “Get to the KA party. A lot of the Alpha Gams will be there, so you’ll get a chance to meet more of us.”

“Sounds like fun,” I said. “Thanks.”

Julie Anne gave me a conspiratorial grin. “You rated really high today. So if you come to the Kappa Alpha party

tonight, you can suck up a little bit. Hand out a compliment here and there.” She winked at Jewels. “Tell her how it’s done.”

“Will do,” Jewels agreed, not sounding particularly excited about it.

“I’ve got to go back in. Wouldn’t want it to look like I’m showing favoritism!” Julie Anne winked at us and headed back to the house.

“Looks like you’re going to get into Alpha Gamma Delta for sure,” Anna said to Jewels as we walked to the next house.

“Yeah, probably,” Jewels grumbled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, trying to draw her out.

She hesitated. “I don’t want my sister to just write my ticket.” She looked up at me. “You know what I mean?”

I knew exactly what she meant. “But you do want to get in, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, then, tell me what we need to do at that party tonight.”

She smiled. We were finally connecting.

“Hey, I want to get in too,” Anna whined, stepping between us.

“Then why did you leave the tour?” I asked.

Anna looked at the ground. “Nobody was really talking to me, and my guide escorted me out pretty quick. I didn’t even get to tell you guys I was leaving. So I just went to some other houses.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Jewels said. “I didn’t want to say anything earlier, but you’re not really Alpha Gam material.”

Anna’s head dropped. The rude words had cut her deeply. Suddenly the connection I’d felt with Jewels died. Her insensitive manner made me not want to be around her at all.

“You two can go to more houses if you want,” Jewels

said, “but I’m worn out. I’m going to go home and rest up before the party.”

Jewels took off without another word. I wanted to cheer Anna up but didn’t know what to say.

Anna and I visited a couple of other houses, and then we returned to the dorm too.

When I walked into my room, Payton was listening to rap music and painting her toenails. I couldn’t stand rap music. “Could you please turn that down?”

“Why?” she said in a snotty way. “It’s not that loud.”

“It’s irritating to me,” I said.

She snorted. “It’s better than that country stuff you listen to.”

“Yeah, well, when you ask me to turn it down, I do. So have some common courtesy, OK?”

“Well, isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black,” she said.

“Look, Payton, I’m really tired. I don’t want to fuss with you.”

“Then don’t,” she replied as she went back to painting her toenails.

I walked over to her side of the room and turned off her stereo.

“Don’t touch my stuff,” she growled, standing.

I stood my ground. Her attitude didn’t scare me.

We yelled at each other for a few minutes, and Payton finally stormed off into the bathroom and slammed the door.

I immediately regretted my harsh words. I dropped down on my knees.

Lord, please help us. I know we have our differences. Help us find some middle ground. Right now I think our only common thread is You.

Exhausted from my long day of walking, I crawled onto the bed and continued my prayer.

About thirty minutes later Payton came back from the bathroom. “I’m sorry,” she said in a soft voice. “I should have turned down my music when you asked me to.”

“I forgive you,” I said right away.

“Want to go down to the café and get something to eat?”

I smiled. “That sounds good,” I said, inwardly thanking my heavenly Father. He had changed Payton’s spirit. And mine too. I was grateful for the power of prayer.

As we walked to the café, we talked about our argument. We both admitted it was stupid to fight about something so unimportant.

“I’m glad we’re able to laugh this off,” I said as we reached the cafeteria building. “I don’t want any tension between us.”

“Me neither,” she said, heading for the buffet line.

“You know, while you were in the bathroom, I was praying that God—”

“I was praying too,” she said.

“Well, He sure answers quick sometimes.”

“He sure does,” she said, and we hugged each other.

“You look pretty with your hair up like that,” Payton said to me as I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

Payton had never seen my hair pulled up in a ponytail since I usually wore it down and straight. But I wanted to do something special to go with my red dress, which was fitted at the waist and flared out at the bottom. Black sandals and a matching purse completed the look nicely, I thought.

I thanked her for the compliment, then added, “You look nice too.” She wore an adorable casual outfit of blue jeans and a sassy top.

My roommate and I were both getting ready for a party, but we were each planning to attend a different one. I was going to the KA frat party to meet more Alpha Gams. Payton was going to a party sponsored by the Student Government Association for African-American students.

As I checked out my appearance in the mirror, all I could think about was the party I’d gone to with my high

school girlfriends Brittany and Meagan, where we ended up being the entertainment for a bunch of drunk fraternity guys. I hoped this party wouldn't turn out like that one.

I chose a dainty fake-diamond bracelet to wear with my red dress, but I dropped it twice trying to put it on. Payton shook her head and offered to help me with the latch.

"Guess I'm pretty nervous," I admitted.

My parents and my brothers had always urged me to stay away from parties . . . except Lance, my middle brother. He was a party guy. He also had a problem with alcohol and gambling. Not the kind of lifestyle I wanted to emulate.

I wanted to become an Alpha Gamma Delta but at what cost? My mom had pledged a long time ago, and my grandmother even longer. Things were probably a lot different back then.

I pulled my hair down in one quick yank of the scrunchie. "I'm not going."

"What do you mean?" Payton asked. "You were all excited a minute ago."

I flopped down onto the bed. "You go on to your party. I'll be fine. I just kind of feel like Christians shouldn't."

"Shouldn't what? Party?"

"Yeah," I said, my convictions growing the more I thought about it. "Parties usually involve alcohol and dancing real close and loud music, all in the dark. Christians are supposed to walk in the light."

Payton sat on the bed beside me. "I didn't realize you felt that way."

"Neither did I," I said, "till just now."

Payton stood. "If you don't think you should go, then you shouldn't. But I believe I can be a light in the darkness. I mean, I'm not going there to witness to anybody," she admitted. "But I can have a good time without losing my faith."

I looked up at my roommate. "Are you saying you think I should go to my party too?"

“If you really think God is telling you to stay home, then that’s what you should do. But are you sure you’re hearing right? I know what happened to you at that frat party over the summer. Maybe you’re just afraid, and saying that God doesn’t want you to party makes everything sound all spiritual.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Laurel, the only way to handle your fears is to face them. You won’t be going alone. You’ll have those crazy girls on the other side of the wall with you. As long as Jewels isn’t planning to stay all night or anything—”

“I know she’s not,” I said, “because she said pledges aren’t supposed to stay out late.”

“Well, there you go.” She laughed. “You might beat me home because I’m not pledging anything.”

The door that led to the bathroom we shared with Jewels and Anna bumped, and the knob jiggled. “Why is this door locked?” Jewels complained from the other side.

“I’m out of here,” Payton said, standing. “I don’t even want to talk to that girl.”

“Be careful,” I called out to my roommate before she shut the door to the hall.

“Are you ready, Laurel?” Jewels asked through the closed door.

I unlocked the door, and Jewels barged in wearing cream-colored silk pants and a pale pink button-down blouse. Before I could tell her how cute she looked, she said, “Wow! That dress is a killer. I wish I had one just like it.”

As we drove to the Kappa Alpha house, I thought about Payton’s words. I sure hoped she was right. I didn’t want to walk in fear. Maybe I did need to test myself. My faith should be bigger than my circumstances.

On the other hand, I still believed that Christians shouldn’t put themselves in compromising positions where they knew they would be tempted.

I sat in the backseat of Jewels’s Mustang convertible and looked up at the stars, trying to seek guidance. But Jewels’s

shrill voice kept interrupting my meditation.

“You should prepare yourself for the probability that you won’t make it into a sorority,” she was telling Anna. “If you didn’t get any warm, fuzzy feelings from anyone earlier today, then probably no one’s going to want you.”

Jewels’s logic was way off. Many times, I’d heard, sororities didn’t want to let a girl know they were considering her until they were finished rating her. Today had only been the first round. But I could tell from her silence that Anna was buying what Jewels was selling.

I wanted to say something but decided to wait. It was too hard making my voice heard over the Mustang’s engine and the breeze blowing over the windshield.

When we pulled up to the frat house, the first thing I noticed was that there were no cars in the parking lot and no people milling around. “Are you sure this is where they’re having the party?” I asked.

“We’re just early,” Jewels stated confidently as she strode up the walkway. “It’s only nine o’clock. Things won’t get cranking till about ten.”

“Maybe we should come back later,” Anna suggested.

“There’s nothing wrong with being early,” Jewels said. “It’ll work in our favor. Proves we’re really interested.”

“I don’t like being the first one to arrive at a party,” I said, “unless I know most of the people there.”

Jewels rolled her eyes at both of us. “I’m sure some of the sorority girls are in there already.”

“Then where are their cars?” I asked.

“They probably walked,” Jewels huffed. “Why are you making such a big deal?”

Against my better judgment I followed Jewels to the front door, where she rang the doorbell. We were greeted by two upperclassmen who probably weighed two hundred pounds each. Both of them reeked of alcohol. One picked Jewels up and grabbed her bottom. When he put her down, she punched him in the shoulder. He laughed like a buffoon.

The second guy stared at me like I was his dinner. “Tonight,” he said to me, “I’m gonna have my way with you.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, taking a step back. I peeked around the guy’s hefty arm and saw the place was full of guys. Not a single girl.

“I’m not going in there,” I whispered to Anna, turning around.

Before I could take two steps, the big upperclassman grabbed my arm and jerked me inside. “Now, wait a minute, baby. There is definitely going to be a party here tonight. Crank up the music, Scooter!”

“Please let go of my arm,” I said, starting to feel panicked. When the guy didn’t release me, I repeated my request, louder, and without the *please*.

The guy let go of my arm, but he grabbed my behind with both hands and squeezed me close to him. I struggled to get out of his grasp.

I heard a loud smack and my captor suddenly let me go. He reeled away and went sprawling onto the floor. When I realized he’d been socked in the mouth, I turned to see who’d rescued me. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“Branson!”

He stood there, flushed, rubbing his knuckles on the red-and-white barbecue apron tied around his waist. That gorgeous blond-haired stud still made my heart race, even though we were no longer together. His bright blue eyes made me want to take him in my arms and never let him go.

The big guy on the floor yelled, “You’re finished, Price. You’re never gonna make this fraternity. Get your things and go.”

Branson untied the apron and threw it on the angry upperclassman. “Suits me just fine, Craig. You guys are a bunch of wimps anyway.”

Before I could thank Branson for coming to my rescue, a guy in a white cotton shirt, khaki pants, and a red-and-black tie came up to us. “Come on,” he said, nodding to a

couple of his friends, “get this loser out of here.” It took three guys to escort my assailant out of the room, struggling and hollering obscenities the whole way.

The newcomer turned to us. “I’m Bill,” he said. “I’m the president of this fraternity, and I want to tell you ladies how sorry I am for Craig’s behavior.”

I nodded in appreciation of his concern. Jewels batted her eyes at him, practically flirting with the guy. Anna headed quietly for the refreshments table.

Bill slapped Branson on the back. “Hey, that was impressive. I like seeing a guy stand up for a lady like that. We could use someone like you around here.”

Branson beamed. “Thanks,” he said.

Bill placed his arm around Branson, and they walked toward the crowd of guys who’d been watching from a distance. They all cheered, and Branson soaked up the attention like a dried-up sponge.

My heart cheered for him too. He had risked his opportunity to be in the fraternity for me. Did that mean we had a chance of being together again? Was this the start of something new and even better for the two of us?

Suddenly I felt someone bump me hard in the arm. I turned, ready to scream for Branson’s help, but just saw Jewels and Anna standing there.

“Hello,” Jewels said in an irritated voice, nodding at the two cups Anna was holding. “We brought you some punch.”

“Oh,” I said. “I’m sorry.” I felt terrible for paying so much attention to Branson that I’d totally neglected my girlfriends. “Thanks, Anna.”

As I took a sip of the refreshing drink, I wondered if I should wait for Branson to come to me or make the first move. I had to do something. I couldn’t let this opportunity pass by. Deep in my heart I wished we were back together again. I wanted things to work out for us. I was wishing for harmony.