

The

White

Sparrow



J.H. Sweet

©2014 by J.H. Sweet

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce
this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Butterflies, Bees, and Cypress Knees

ISBN 978-1-936660-15-5

Unless otherwise noted, quotes from the *Holy Bible* used in
this book are from the Revised Standard Version.

Although sparrows are plentiful, and often strikingly beautiful, they are also inconspicuous...

Contents

Chapter One: Birthdays and Gifts – 7

Chapter Two: The Dime Box – 23

Chapter Three: The Lake Incident – 30

Chapter Four: The Glimpse – 41

Chapter Five: Blooming Madness – 59

Chapter Six: Tea and Horses – 73

Chapter Seven: Dimes and Dreams – 84

Chapter Eight: Like a Rollercoaster – 94

Chapter Nine: Bumps in the Road – 110

Chapter Ten: Hope Surrounds – 132

Chapter Eleven: “...Try Try Again” – 156

Chapter Twelve: Facing the Sun – 177

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion – 187

Chapter One

Birthdays and Gifts

The wild sunflowers in the vacant lot next to Shannon McNay's house were not too picky about facing the sun; in fact, they could often be found obstinately staring at their own shadows outstretched in front of them. And while Shannon's mother often compared her headstrong daughter to these stubborn weeds, she did so more by focusing on the pleasant traits shared by the two such as resiliency, persistence, and effortless beauty. Shannon, of course, had many other qualities as well, not the least of which was good reasoning, which would shortly have a very important part to play in her life.

If Shannon was similar to a sunflower, Jacob Woodbury might have been likened to a moonflower, as he was often awake late into the night, with keen alertness and abundant energy during these times. However, he was not particularly up nights by choice; rather, he had been a worrier for as long as he could remember, and often suffered from insomnia because of this. Jacob prayed frequently about this because he knew that he could trust God to help work out problems. Reading and rereading bible scriptures helped, such as 1 Peter 5:7. "Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you." Proverbs 3:6 was another of Jacob's favorites. "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." But even with praying, reading the bible, and trusting God, it was still difficult not to worry, especially given the current state of the world, and Jacob's family situation, specifically, his parents having divorced when Jacob was a baby, with his father remarrying and moving to another state shortly after the divorce. In only ever knowing life in a single-parent household,

Jacob often worried for his mother, especially the responsibility she carried in raising him pretty much all on her own. Plus, with not getting to spend much time with his father, and because he didn't want to burden his mother, Jacob didn't really have anyone to discuss his troubles with.

In likening people to flowers, Chime Stouffer was not similar to any in particular, except maybe all of them, since she loved flowers and plants of any kind, and had a very green thumb. She was already a budding horticulturist in her spare time, and dreamed of a day when she could make this a career.

While living many miles apart, with Chime even being in a totally different city than Shannon and Jacob, the three had something very special in common. They were all celebrating their birthdays on this particular Tuesday September evening—Shannon at sixteen, while Jacob and Chime were both turning fourteen. They celebrated in different ways, of course, as many families do.

Shannon went out to eat at a Japanese steakhouse with her younger sister, Abby, their parents, and both sets of grandparents. She had received several gifts the previous week such as a new smartphone, clothes, jewelry, and a Yorkshire terrier puppy, as companion for Pumpernickel, the Yorkie she had received for her twelfth birthday. Since the name, Pumpernickel, was quite a mouthful, Shannon most often called her beloved pet, Nicky. Opting for a shorter name this time around, Pickles, Shannon decided to go for matching nicknames, and had already started calling the puppy, Picky. Nicky had warmed up to Picky fairly quickly, and the two were ferociously wrestling with a plush toy together as Shannon and her family left for the restaurant. She received cards and money at dinner from both her parents and grandparents.

Jacob received cards with money too, one from his father, and one from his elderly Aunt Julia who lived in a nursing home across town. He received quite a bit less money than Shannon, but he was nonetheless thrilled because he hadn't

been able to get as many odd jobs, like mowing and window washing, in the neighborhood of late. Jacob was also thrilled with his gifts from his mother that included several hobby tools for building models, new jeans, a science-fiction book, and a history book about the events leading up to the first spacewalk. His mother made his favorite dinner, tacos with all the fixings, and she had picked up an Italian crème cake (also Jacob's favorite) on her way home from work.

Chime enjoyed her favorite meal for her birthday too, homemade macaroni and cheese with lots of bacon on top, and delicious apple pie heated and topped with vanilla-bean ice cream for dessert. From her parents, she received two t-shirts, a dress, a new curling iron (since her old one had burned out two months before), and a mystery book. Her older brother, Gavin, gave her a pair of earrings. A package from her out-of-state grandmother contained a card and a wonderful book on wildflowers. Poring over the pages after dinner, while Gavin brushed Trestle, the family's German shepherd, Chime was fascinated, so much so that she cajoled Gavin into taking Trestle for his after-dinner walk, even though it was her turn, so that she could continue to study the book, which she did until an hour before bedtime.

While she loved the flower photos and interesting details, this was not destined to become her favorite book because she already had a favorite—the *Holy Bible*. In fact, she set aside thirty minutes each night before bedtime to read scripture.

With her birthday winding down, Chime prayed for awhile, to spend a good long time with God, before opening her bible. Her prayer on this night was particularly special to her because she was privately celebrating a second birthday, that of being saved as a Christian, and she felt it was important to thank God earnestly for the awesome gift of His Son. After thanking God for Jesus, she thanked Jesus for loving people so much He was willing to die for them, and for enduring the cross, and for being such a wonderful teacher and an exemplary human being. She

then asked Jesus to help her learn from Him, and be more like Him in word, thought, and deed. Chime ended her prayer the same way she did nearly every night, by thanking God for the multitudes of blessings He brought to her life. After running through a long and ever-changing list of them in her mind, while thinking, *Thank You, Thank You, Thank You*, she finished with, *Please help me be a better girl. In Your name I pray, Amen.*

The fact that her spiritual birthday, in which she was born again into God's family, coincided with her regular birthday made the event easy to remember, even though it had occurred several years past, when she turned nine. The same grandmother who had sent the wildflower book was responsible for this. Living closer to the family then, Granny had made a huge effort to lead both Gavin and Chime to Jesus Christ. It had worked with both of them, even though their parents, at the time, were less than enthused about salvation, or religion at all for that matter. The family now regularly attended church all together. Sighing with contentment over the happy day she had just experienced, and all of the many blessings in her life, Chime gave a special thanks to God for her wonderful Granny.

The morning after his birthday, Jacob prayed too, giving thanks to God for the good night's sleep he had just had. Actually, he had slept fairly well for nearly a week, which wasn't particularly surprising since he currently had a few less things than usual to worry about. School was going fairly well, except for his normal struggles with algebra. He had recently gotten some acne cream, which seemed to be working, so he was less frustrated about that issue. His mother, on the phone with his father each week, seemed to be fussing less about him treating his new wife and two kids better than he had treated her and Jacob. She also wasn't mentioning money troubles as often, largely due to the fact that everything in the house was currently working. With nothing broken and needing to be either fixed or replaced, things were definitely easier for both

Jacob and his mother, who often worried herself into a fit about these sorts of things. Though her job as a caseworker at the local Food Stamp Office had good benefits, such as health insurance and retirement, she didn't earn a huge income by any means, especially to support two people. Jacob's father definitely kept up with his child support payments, but his job as an office manager for a tax preparation firm didn't earn him a large salary either; plus, he had a whole other family to support.

After praying, Jacob refilled the water dish for his cat, Copy, scratching under her chin and around her ears as she came to rub on his shins to thank him. He then had a bowl of cereal and grabbed his lunch bag from the refrigerator while waiting for his mom. Jacob usually rode his bicycle to school, but it was cloudy and drizzling this morning, with distant rumbling thunder, and on rainy days his mother usually dropped him off on her way to work.

After school on the days he didn't ride his bike, he would either walk to her office, which was about a mile from the school, or just take the two-mile walk home. It wasn't a bad walk if the weather was nice because the scenery was pretty, with lots of open fields and trees, and the roads generally weren't too trafficky. Other than things like sports, debate, choir, and drama, the local high schools didn't offer after-school programs like most elementary and middle schools did. However, kids waiting for rides home were allowed to sit in the gym bleachers. Jacob generally only did this on bad-weather days, preferring to walk, as he did on this Wednesday, in order to make it home over an hour earlier than if he had decided to walk to his mom's office, or wait for her in the gym. The drizzle had dried up in the morning, so aside from being a little warm and humid, the walk wasn't bad.

Being home early on this particular day would turn out to be a very good thing because Jacob was about to receive another birthday gift, a very special one in fact, though he wouldn't know it for awhile because it was one of those gifts

that a person had to live with for a time, in order to be able to recognize it, let alone understand and appreciate it.

Arriving home just after four o'clock, Jacob changed into shorts before going outside to do a few chores. Untangling a section of the garden hose, Jacob first filled the birdbath, situated in the center of the front yard, under the watchful eyes of Copy who had come outside to keep him company. He then moved the hose to soak around a couple of bushes along the driveway that were looking a little strained from the heat and lack of rain in recent months. Returning to the hose spigot to turn down the water flow, Jacob knelt to untangle another section of hose, which is when a small movement and a flash of white in one of the trailing rosemary bushes next to the front steps of the house caught his eye. For some odd reason, Jacob had it in his mind that it was a large white grasshopper.

This was not the case as he soon discovered when a small, brilliant-white bird flew from the rosemary tangle to land in the grass only about four feet in front of Jacob, who was still crouched beside the twisted-up hose. This certainly wasn't a dove; doves were much larger. And in this part of the country, they were always a purplish-gray color. Surprisingly, Copy, lazily lounging on the steps, never moved. She did, however, keep steady eyes on the bird, that was gazing steadily into Jacob's eyes. The small size and solid snow-white color made the bird unlike any Jacob had ever seen, and he had seen a lot of birds in his time. But the sight of it wasn't nearly as surprising as what followed. The tiny creature took off and flew for a very short distance to land on the ground slightly behind Jacob, this time about three feet from his left ankle. From being so close, Jacob was able to tell that the shape and size of the bird looked exactly like the many sparrows he often saw in the yard, though they generally didn't have very much white on them. Next, the bird took off in a short spurt again to land clinging to the side of his mother's butterfly house, somewhat near the birdbath. From this sideways perch, the bird continued to watch Jacob. *Okay,*

he thought, *sparrows are tree-clinging birds. So it must be a sparrow, but like an albino one.*

Copy continued to watch the bird, but still didn't move from her spot on the steps. The probable sparrow next flew very low over the still-crouched Jacob to land directly beside him. Jacob held his breath; he had actually felt the breeze from the bird's wings on his shoulders as it passed. The sparrow did this once again, even slightly lower across his shoulders, to land on the other side of him. This time, it was so close that Jacob could have easily touched it with only the smallest reach. He resisted the urge and just watched, fascinated. The bird, it seemed, was also fascinated with him and again stared up into his eyes. After what seemed like a very long frozen moment (which was really only about four seconds), the sparrow flew up to a low branch in the peach tree on the far side of the birdbath. Staying on the branch for only a split second, the bird then took off along the driveway, heading away from Jacob, who stood up to watch as it quickly disappeared over the rooftop of the house directly across the street.

Though the whole event had lasted only a couple of minutes, Jacob somehow knew that it was very important. However, he wouldn't know why for quite some time.

Ten minutes later, sitting on the steps beside Copy, Jacob was jarred out of contemplation of the sparrow and its actions by his neighbor's voice calling to him.

John Emmons had lived next door to the Woodburys since they had bought their house nearly twelve years ago, so Jacob had known him pretty much his whole life. Jacob didn't even remember the tiny apartment he and his mother had lived in when he was a baby; but he did remember Mr. Emmons many times over the years lending his mother tools, jumpstarting her car, and doing other such helpful things.

Mr. Emmons had seen Jacob out of his kitchen window and was coming over to ask if he wanted to wash and wax his car for him. Jacob eagerly agreed. Mr. Emmons paid much better

than some neighbors for that type of work. Not that Jacob did a lot of comparing because he was just happy to get hired; plus, he knew a lot of his neighbors weren't all that well off. Mr. Emmons was a widower without children and was (Jacob guessed) about ten or fifteen years older than his mother. He was a quiet man, preferring to keep to himself a lot; but he did often hire Jacob for chores such as yard work and car washing. One time, Jacob had helped him rebuild a section of fence that had blown over during a windstorm.

After agreeing on the next day after school, with washing before dinner and waxing after, Jacob excitedly told Mr. Emmons what had just happened with the sparrow. "Twice it flew so low, I could feel the breeze from its wings on my shoulders. And it had to be a sparrow because it was the exact size and shape as other sparrows."

"It probably was," Mr. Emmons replied. "You know, I remember reading once that white sparrows are so rare they are thought to be magical, and thought to bring good luck. I saw one once too, years ago, but not nearly as close as you just did." Heading back to his house, he threw over his shoulder, "Well, I'll see you tomorrow then."

Jacob continued to sit on the steps, deep in thought about the sparrow while petting Copy, until he finally remembered that he was running water, at which point, he turned off the spigot and retrieved the hose from where it had been excessively pooling water around the bushes. After straightening kinks and coiling the hose, he went inside to await the arrival of his mother.

Mrs. Woodbury smiled as Jacob related the sparrow incident to her while he was helping to make dinner. "If you see it again," she told him, "I hope you have time to run inside and get my camera. I'd like to see it too, especially if Mr. Emmons thinks it might bring good luck."

Thoughts of the sparrow flitted through his mind during dinner, and even after, as he studied History, diagramed a few

sentences for his English class, then watched TV with Copy purring in his lap. *Was it trying to get my attention, Jacob pondered, or trying to make friends?*

This was certainly something to puzzle over. Jacob actually enjoyed puzzling over little mysteries. And although this type of brain exercise was much better than worrying; unfortunately, the puzzling sometimes kept him awake nearly as much as the worrying. With his mind alert and working, it was hard to relax enough to sleep.

When he was very young, probably four or five, Jacob spent nearly a year puzzling over why Mr. Emmons left ten minutes earlier than he and his mother did for church services on Sunday morning. Always ready for church early, Jacob would wait outside in the carport for his mother, watching birds in the birdbath and fingering the dollar bill for the collection plate that was generally wadded in his pants pocket. Usually ten minutes before his mother emerged from the house, Jacob would see Mr. Emmons, dressed for church, get into his car and leave, often waving to Jacob as he passed their driveway. After not being able to work this out on his own, Jacob finally asked his mother, who told him, “He goes to a church farther away than ours, so even though their service starts at the same time as ours, it takes him longer to get there.” With this answer, it was like something fell into place for Jacob, like the click of an on-switch in his brain. Having that one tiny mystery solved, other things suddenly became easier for him to figure out, pretty much all on his own. The current puzzle over the sparrow might prove baffling, but Jacob was looking forward to trying to work it out.

What Mr. Emmons hadn’t shared with Jacob (though he did know), was that white sparrows are not simply magical in a storybook sort of way, but that they are actually divinely supernatural. In truth, when it comes to spreading the magic of the world, God employs many helpers. And in a manner similar to the way guardian angels are sent to protect human beings

from accidents, white sparrows are sent to bestow useful and sometimes amazing gifts on certain people. Those aware of the true function of white sparrows aren't sure whether the birds simply reveal gifts already present inside human beings, or actually bring new gifts from God. Either way, the tiny creatures are responsible for helping God make some pretty spectacular things happen in the world. The sparrow Jacob encountered had indeed given him a remarkable gift, which he would shortly begin to become aware of.

On Thursday evening, while Jacob was washing and waxing Mr. Emmons' car, Chime was working at a greenhouse four blocks from her home, where she had been volunteering for about four years, mostly on weekends, but sometimes weekdays too, when the owners had something for her to do. Mr. and Mrs. Purcell wanted to pay Chime, but couldn't officially because she wasn't yet the legally-employable age of sixteen. At first, they had simply paid her in veggies and plants, and the occasional pretty yard ornament, bird feeder, or bag of potting soil. After only a few months of this payment-in-kind, they had started paying her as much as they were able in cash under the table, which turned out to be a nice little part time job, earning her just about as much as many officially-employed teens in the area. Chime had mostly been putting it away for college, but did use some for things she wanted, and to buy presents for family and friends on occasion. The money was nice because she got an extremely small allowance, which she didn't at all complain about because she knew it was all her parents could manage on their budget, particularly with Gavin soon to set off to college.

Mr. and Mrs. Purcell were planning to offer Chime an actual job when she turned sixteen, part time during the school year and probably full time in the summers, if she wanted. Chime had decided she likely would accept, though she had some difficulty wanting to be around the Purcells' bratty daughter, Emily, currently age eleven.

Emily had recently caused a mess of an incident at the greenhouse. The Purcells employed a college student, Dolores Whittaker, part time. Emily, who was often allowed to drive her parents' car from behind the house to the front when the family was getting ready to go somewhere, had hounded and hounded Dolores to be allowed to move her car from behind the greenhouse to the front when it was nearing time for Dolores to leave work for the day. The first few times that Emily pestered, Dolores refused. But Emily kept at it, with her usual persistence, and with an extremely manipulative tone. "My parents are nice enough to give you a job," she told Dolores. "And they are very flexible with your hours, even though they don't have to be. So you should be nice to me."

With Emily not willing to take "No" for an answer, and Dolores tired of listening to her, the keys were finally handed over. *What could happen in just a few hundred feet?* Dolores reasoned with herself. *After all, Emily drives her parents' car about the same distance all the time.*

The first time was no problem. Unfortunately, the next week, when Emily drove Dolores' car for a second time, she got distracted and accidentally ran the car into the back of the greenhouse delivery trailer, which was parked awaiting loading near the front entrance. Emily was not harmed, and there was very little damage to the trailer; however, the bumper on Dolores' car was pretty badly caved in, and one of the headlights was smashed.

In slight shock (and in private worries over insurance matters), Mrs. Purcell put on being horrified that Dolores had allowed Emily to drive her car, though she actually had known about the first time and had said absolutely nothing about it. Mrs. Purcell said nothing to Emily about the matter, mainly because she didn't like arguing with her spoiled-rotten daughter and generally just gave in to her demands, letting her do and have whatever she wanted, without limits, and rarely

reprimanding her when she did things that were highly questionable, let alone clearly wrong.

Dolores was genuinely horrified about her car, for which she had only liability insurance. But it's not like insurance would have paid anything for repairs anyway, since she had allowed an underage and unlicensed person to drive her car.

Chime had hoped to stay out of the whole affair, but when Mr. Purcell learned what had happened, and when it looked like he was going to start scolding the tearful Dolores, Chime finally had to say, "Well, Emily pretty much hounded her and hounded her. And you know she pretty much gets her own way all of the time." Chime had decided to risk the possibility of the Purcells deciding they didn't want her to work for them anymore because she felt it was pretty important to stick up for Dolores, who hadn't managed to stand up for herself against Emily, which meant it was unlikely she would be able to do so with her employers either.

Nothing more was said against Dolores after this. Mr. Purcell, who recognized the truth in Chime's testimony, and who evidently had at least a little more backbone than his wife, firmly told Emily that she would no longer be allowed to drive any vehicles until she was much older. Emily was none too happy about this. After arguing with her father over the fact that she had been allowed to drive his car for nearly two years, which got her nowhere, and after glaring at both Chime and Dolores, Emily took to pouting. She also began avoiding the girls working in the greenhouse, which was just fine by Chime and Dolores, who were thankful for the reprieve from her generally unpleasant company. Mr. Purcell ended up giving Dolores a bonus paycheck so that she could afford to have her car fixed, which Chime thought was very decent of him, since he hadn't been directly responsible for the incident. He did feel very badly about the situation; and from that point on, he became determined to set some limits with his daughter, even if his wife refused to do so.

On this particular evening, Emily was again avoiding the greenhouse, and Chime was by herself, happily communing with the plants. Like Mr. Emmons, Chime knew about the true function of white sparrows, though she didn't notice the one sitting on a fence post along the front drive when she went outside to sort through several stacks of planting pots to choose just the right ones for the begonias she was repotting.

Paddy, the Purcells' blue heeler dog, was tethered to another fence post along the drive, which was in the shade of a large pecan tree. He generally wasn't tethered, but was this evening because he had gotten into some mischief inside the greenhouse earlier. He didn't mind being on a lead. The grass was nice and soft by the fence, and he had plenty of cool water in his bucket. Rolling back and forth a few times to scratch his back, he began chewing on a knotted sock, while intently watching the sparrow that was intently watching Chime.

The sparrow was not there to give Chime a gift; rather, he was simply paying her a visit. He didn't need to bestow a gift because she had already been given one by another white sparrow, three years before. The gift involved being able to foretell certain events by way of her dreams. Along with this prophetic insight, Chime had been given the ability to interpret dreams of all kinds, both hers and those of others, including ones that didn't necessarily involve things yet to happen. She also sometimes received messages from bible scripture, but her dreams were the way she received most of the information enabling her to see future events.

Since she was still very young, Chime didn't always understand what these dreams meant, but she was getting better at figuring them out. Quite often, it seemed, they only turned out to be important at a later time, which is why she often kept journal notes of her dreams, so that she would be able to remember the details later.

Though the dreams themselves were often puzzling, Chime did already clearly understand the nature of her gift, and knew

that it was from God. However, she was still working out exactly how to refine it and what she was supposed to do with it. She didn't want to be a sideshow, or simply entertainment, like someone at a carnival, sitting at a table with a crystal ball, wearing a lot of jewelry, and telling people personal details about themselves and their futures. Since the gift was from God, she felt it should be used to serve Him. She had so far reasoned out that the ability to foretell the future could sometimes be used to guide others by giving them certain information that could lead them in the right direction, or help them make decisions that were right for them. Chime also recognized that the gift could be used to help someone avoid danger, or a bad situation. Though she hadn't yet used her gift in this way, to warn someone, she definitely hoped to someday.

Chime was slightly distracted this evening because she was puzzling over a dream she had had the previous night, which had something to do with a lake and a girl drowning. She was confused because, although scary, there was something beautiful about it all, like a supernatural light and warmth of some sort shining through all the scariness. She pondered the possibility that it had something to do with water being able to purify, or baptism, or an angel saving the drowning girl; but those things didn't seem quite right. She had looked in the bible to see if any messages or instructions jumped out at her from scripture, but nothing had seemed related to this particular dream. Sometimes her dreams simply served to explain things going on in her own life. But this one she felt definitely pertained to someone else, and something Chime was eventually supposed to do relating to that person. Since she had no idea whom the girl might be, or when and where the event might happen, she doubted that this particular prophetic dream was one prompting her to intervene, to warn or save the girl. Unable to work anything out at this time, she told herself to just wait, which was often what she was meant to do.

When waiting to be given understanding about a particular dream, Chime often used bible scripture as a reminder to be patient, such as Psalm 27:14. “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the LORD!”

Another one that she liked was Psalm 37:7. “Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him....”

Even if she hadn’t been distracted, Chime might not have noticed the sparrow because, despite being one of the most common birds in existence, people often didn’t notice sparrows. But certainly, if she had glanced his way, even with her mind being intently focused on something else, Chime surely would have noticed the bright white of the bird. She didn’t glance his way before reentering the greenhouse with a stack of pots. However, the sparrow wasn’t disappointed because he was used to not being noticed. Inconspicuousness had its advantages, as people and animals alike seldom bothered about sparrows, even white ones, which allowed the birds to pretty much do as they pleased most of the time.

Late Thursday night, the white sparrow paid a visit to the side yard of Shannon’s house where, from a high limb in an ash tree, he quietly observed her through a window. The soft glow from the corner street lamp very slightly illuminated the tree, and if the woman walking her dog on the street below had looked up, she would have thought she was seeing a tiny ghost. She never looked up. Like many people, she was intently focused on the things of the earth, rather than the things of above.

Snuggled into the leafy branch, the sparrow tucked its head into its wing and fell asleep for a few minutes, until wakened by the loud chattering of a nearby pair of wrens. The sparrow had great difficulty believing that wrens could be such noisy birds, given their small size. With a soft scolding chirp in answer to the chatter, the sparrow gave Shannon a last glance before taking off toward his next destination.

Shannon would shortly be receiving a gift, on the upcoming Saturday morning in fact, but of a different sort than those given to Jacob and Chime. However, although rare and amazing, she would not initially be able to think of what she had received as anything beneficial. But this is often how the best gifts work—though not obvious at first, they can turn out to be the most tremendous blessings.

Chapter Two

The Dime Box

The downtown bakery known as the Dough Box had become the Dime Box nearly six years ago. The baker, Mr. Hugo, still offered a few baked goods that were his particular favorites such as apple strudel, herb biscuits, caramel-coated shortbread cookies, and Italian bread; but he was now mainly in another kind of business—that of collecting dimes from children. He did this by offering a range of merchandise likely to appeal to children ages baby to fourteen. Each item was sold for exactly a dime. Mr. Hugo himself paid the sales tax, so that no one purchasing anything would ever have to pay more than a dime. Age fourteen was the cut-off point, as no fifteen-year-olds or older were allowed in the store, unless they were chaperoning younger siblings or cousins. Somehow, Mr. Hugo could tell exactly how old each child was, even ones that he wasn't familiar with who were visiting from other cities.

Each weekday, excepting major holidays, from the hours of nine to four-thirty, closing only for a lunch break from eleven-thirty to twelve, the store was open for dime purchases. Five children were allowed in the Dime Box at one time, the younger ones with a parent or other chaperone, for ten minutes each; and each child could make only one dime purchase during each visit. The items for sale were of a terrific range and were often tremendously spectacular when considering they were being offered for a dime each. Board games, dolls, toy kitchens, sandboxes, scooters, clothing, best-selling books about wizards and dragons, DVD movies, computer games, remote-controlled airplanes, skates, science kits, volleyballs, jump ropes...just

about anything kids would like, you name it, it was pretty much all there at one time or another.

Occasionally, things were brought out from the back that might appeal to particular children in the store. And Mr. Hugo seemed to have a knack for knowing exactly which child lacked a bicycle. Remarkably, the bicycle was always the right size and color to suit the particular shopper, who would then be allowed to purchase the item for his or her dime. Also remarkably, when bratty kids entered the store, the choices were often much less desirable than when those with more pleasant manners and attitudes entered. It seemed almost magical for the shelves and bins of the Dime Box to be stocked with such good things for good kids and such mediocre things for the not-so-good ones.

In colder times of the year, brand-new coats that were a perfect fit, not to mention being pleasing in colors and styles, were often brought from the back, which parents would either gently or firmly encourage their children to purchase instead of the toy they might be eyeing. For the most part, the kids went along with these suggestions, being smarter and more practical than many grown-ups would have given them credit for.

After purchasing an item, children were allowed back into the store only after sixty days had passed. The rule was firmly posted in the window for all to see, so it had to be adhered to, not only for fairness, but also because it was a policy, kind of like the *No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service* rule that businesses were allowed to set.

Mr. Hugo, it seemed, kept all of these records in his brain, and he was not afraid to scold. “No, Patricia, you were here forty-two days ago. You have to wait. Learn how to count, and mark it on your calendar. Now get out of here; you’re clogging up the line.”

The term “line” was correct, as the store consistently had twenty or more children at once, lined up, each anxiously awaiting his or her ten minutes inside the Dime Box. Mr. Hugo

had an assistant, a fellow baker named Mr. Astwell, who helped to run things and enforce the rules.

The issue of the dime was specific. Mr. Hugo required actual dimes. He did not make change for quarters, fifty-cent pieces, or dollar bills. And he would not accept two nickels, or ten pennies, or a nickel and five pennies. It had to be a dime. This rule, too, was specifically posted in large print in the window of the store, right next to the *No Credit Cards* sign.

Jacob had chosen a coat once, and another time a pair of good-quality tennis shoes. These practical items were fine with him, particularly because he had gotten such a lot of fun things from the Dime Box over the years as well, like a wooden model sailing ship kit. He had looked online after receiving the kit, and the retail price was over six hundred dollars. The large box had had another fairly large box strapped to the top of it containing a magnifying lamp that probably would have cost seventy or eighty dollars on its own. Inside the kit, with all of the bits and pieces of the ship model, were several expensive hobby tools that were not supposed to be part of the kit, but had been added so that Jacob could begin building the model right away, and not have to wait until he could afford to buy some tools. So during that particular visit to the Dime Box, he had gotten several amazing items for one single dime. It had been early summer, not even near his birthday or Christmas, and the ship model with all of its additions had been one of the things brought out from the back of the store.

But how had Mr. Hugo or Mr. Astwell known that Jacob would want something like this, and want it very badly, in fact? And had they also known that he likely never would have been able to get something like this by his own means, no matter how hard he saved up, or that it was something far too extravagant for his mother to have been able to purchase for him, even for a birthday or Christmas? Although this type of occurrence at the Dime Box was a little spooky, since it was also completely wonderful, and not at all dangerous, no one ever questioned

what might be supernatural about the store or the two people running it.

On Friday of the same week that he celebrated his birthday, Jacob rode his bicycle to the Dime Box after school. Although he wasn't yet fifteen and could still purchase items from the store, today he didn't intend to. Instead, he was hoping to talk to Mr. Hugo. After locking his bike at a rack in front of the insurance company two doors down from the Dime Box, Jacob walked slowly to the store to get in line. He didn't want to hurry; in fact, he wanted to be one of the last ones in because he was hoping to ask Mr. Hugo a question without a lot of other people being around.

While he waited, Jacob pondered the mystery of the events at the Dime Box. Most townspeople just figured that Mr. Hugo was eccentric, and they didn't want to question a good thing or the reasons behind the generosity he exhibited. Some speculated that wealthy people in the community made donations to him anonymously, at least anonymous to the townspeople, if not to the store owner. Those who knew Mr. Hugo well and personally knew that he had not only come into an inheritance twenty years back, which had allowed him to open the bakery, and keep it open even when it wasn't profitable; but he had also won a small lottery, which he didn't particularly need to live on because he was already comfortably set. And this was part of the reason he decided to open the Dime Box.

Coincidentally, Mr. Emmons was a distant cousin to Mr. Hugo. Since this was one mystery Jacob had not been able to figure out over the years, he had talked to Mr. Emmons, who had encouraged him to ask Mr. Hugo himself.

However, unlike what most others in town wondered about, it wasn't the generosity that puzzled Jacob; it was the dime. Why a dime? Though he loved mysteries, Jacob definitely had a problem with them because they were constantly waiting to be solved. Other than some of the things God intended to stay as

mysteries, Jacob hated not being able to figure things out; and this particular mystery had been on his mind (and keeping him up) for the past couple of nights.

In only about fifteen minutes of waiting, the line became considerably shorter, with Jacob near the end; and it looked like he would be part of last group in, just as he had hoped. Those waiting were polite and patient, and practically silent in anticipation.

When the second to the last group came out of the store, Jacob had to smile. A father was steering his toddler girl by the shoulder toward the car because she had both arms wrapped tightly around a teddy bear that was nearly as large as she was. Grinning from ear to ear, she giggled as her father buckled the bear into the back seat next to his daughter's car seat.

As he entered with the final group, and as Mr. Astwell was flipping the plaque on the door from *Open* to *Closed*, Jacob approached Mr. Hugo, who immediately told him, "I have something in the back just for you."

"Oh, I don't want anything today," Jacob quickly replied. "I just wanted to ask you a question, if you don't mind."

"But I have something I think you will really like," Mr. Hugo protested. "I knew it was your birthday this week."

Surprised, and slightly suspicious, in a quiet tone, Jacob asked, "How did you know it was my birthday?" This was not a super-small town; actually, it was more of a mid-sized city. So it was odd, and somewhat spooky, how this man could know so much about everyone.

Smiling, Mr. Hugo responded in a matter-of-fact tone. "Your mother mentioned it when I saw her at the grocery store picking up your cake."

"Oh," Jacob said, now somewhat less suspicious.

Since Mr. Astwell, who usually helped with the items from the back, was just reaching a large box down from a high shelf for a younger kid, Mr. Hugo pushed back the curtain separating the store from the back so that Jacob could peek into the hall

leading to the storage area. Just on the other side of the curtain, leaning against the wall, was a huge box that left Jacob speechless for a few moments. It was a foosball table! This was something Jacob had wanted forever. How amazing!

Finally finding his voice, the ever-practical Jacob said somewhat numbly, “But I can’t take this with me on my bike.”

With a laugh, Mr. Hugo answered, “Your mom can pick it up on her way home from work. I’ll call her if you want.”

Nodding, Jacob answered, “Thanks. That would be perfect. It’s all perfect. Thank you so much, Mr. Hugo.”

“You are very welcome, Jacob,” the man responded. “Now, I just need your dime.”

Luckily, Jacob had one amongst the change in his pocket. Since he hadn’t been planning to purchase anything, he hadn’t thought to make sure.

Riding home a few minutes later, with a smile about a mile wide, Jacob only realized he had forgotten to ask Mr. Hugo about the issue of the dimes when he was putting his bike in the carport locker next to the washer and dryer. However, since Saturday was strictly a bakery day at the Dime Box, with the bakery counter sectioned off from the store, which wasn’t open for dime purchases on weekends, Jacob decided he would go back early the next morning. Just visiting the bakery didn’t violate the sixty-day rule; and he was planning to visit his aunt in the nursing home anyway on Saturday morning, to thank her for the birthday card and money. It would only be a slight detour to stop at the bakery first.

Jacob’s mother arrived home with the foosball table shortly after five-thirty. The box had barely fit in the back of her mini-van; Mr. Astwell had helped her fold down the back seats. Struggling with the mighty box, Jacob and Mrs. Woodbury managed to get it inside. They set it up after dinner and were both thrilled. Though he was planning to ask a few friends over the next week to play, for now, Jacob thoroughly enjoyed playing six games in a row with his mom. She would have

gone for a seventh, but was basically too exhausted from her long day to manage it.

While Jacob did still have the dime issue on his mind, after reading for a bit before bed, he managed to fall asleep quickly, and slept soundly until his alarm woke him at six-fifteen.

Chapter Three

The Lake Incident

Leaving the house early, Jacob made it to the bakery just after seven.

In a rush, he told Mr. Hugo, “I got so excited about the table, which is great by the way, thank you, that I forgot to ask you the question I came to ask yesterday.”

“Go ahead,” Mr. Hugo good-naturedly said.

“I’ve already figured out that you are collecting dimes,” Jacob began. “Can you tell me why?”

Since Mr. Hugo didn’t answer right away and looked somewhat reluctant to, Jacob added, “It’s just that I thought I might be able to help you; like if you’re working on a project, maybe I could help.”

No other customers were in the store at present, so Mr. Hugo decided that he would confide in Jacob. “This is something I’ve been working on most of my life,” he began, “because of a story my uncle told me when I was about your age. He told me about a box that holds answers to many of the world’s problems. Of course, I was skeptical when he first told me because he made it sound like a magical box, like something out of a fairy tale. But I actually found the box a few years ago. Hold on, I’ll show you.”

With this, Mr. Hugo briefly excused himself to retreat to his office. Returning less than a minute later, he placed a smooth wooden box, slightly larger than a shoe box but a bit wider and flatter, on the bakery counter in front of Jacob, who held his breath. Even if Mr. Hugo was spinning him a yarn, it was a very interesting one so far, and Jacob was thoroughly engrossed.

“The box needs a key, which is a particular dime and which I don’t have,” Mr. Hugo further explained. “The dime will have notches on the edges, too small for us to notice; but the notches will act like the cuts in a key and will allow me to open the box.”

“May I?” Jacob asked, before reaching out to touch the box.

“Certainly,” Mr. Hugo answered, actually picking it up and handing it over to Jacob to examine.

The box felt heavy enough to have been solid wood, and Jacob couldn’t discern a lid until Mr. Hugo pointed out a tiny groove along one edge. “There’s a slight widening on this side, at this little spot in the groove,” Mr. Hugo said, showing Jacob, “which is where I think the key will fit, when I find it. I don’t want to try to force the box open, or smash it. Whether magical or not, I wouldn’t want to mess up what’s inside, or outside. It’s a pretty box, cherry wood.”

“It is pretty,” Jacob agreed.

“From what my uncle told me, and in doing a little research,” Mr. Hugo added, “I’ve narrowed the dimes down to four years. The key to the box will be a dime from one of those years.”

“If you tell me the years, I’ll keep an eye out for them,” Jacob said.

Retrieving a pencil and a scrap of paper from beside the cash register, Mr. Hugo wrote down the information. “There you are,” he said, handing the scrap to Jacob who, after glancing at the years, carefully folded the paper in half to place it into his pocket.

Jacob then purchased a dozen caramel-coated shortbread cookies to take to his Aunt Julia.

As Mr. Hugo was taking the money for the cookies, Mr. Astwell came out of the back of the bakery with a cookie sheet filled with slightly-burned blueberry scones. “Oh, just dump them,” Mr. Hugo said with a short laugh, “and get started on another batch.” (This was actually a regular occurrence at the

bakery—Mr. Astwell forgetting to set a timer and burning many of the baked goods.)

“If you’re just going to throw them away, I’ll take one,” Jacob eagerly said. Since he had left home before breakfast, his stomach was now rumbling.

“Let me get a paper bag,” Mr. Astwell told him. “They’re too warm to go into plastic.”

As he was bagging up four of the scones for Jacob, a mother entered the store with her two young daughters, the older leading her much younger sister by the hand.

“Good morning, Gentleman,” the mother said. “I need some Italian bread, and Lucille wants to show you that she’s making good use of her dime purchase.”

Jacob could see immediately what she meant, as the younger of the girls was dressed in doctor’s attire, a white lab coat with a toy stethoscope strung about her neck, and was carrying a large pink-and-black striped bag likely filled with toy medical gear.

“Oh, thank goodness you’ve come,” Mr. Hugo said, rather dramatically. Stepping out from behind the counter, he added, “Dr. Lucille, my knee has been hurting for a full week. Please tell me what to do about it.”

In a very solemn fashion, the three-year-old fixed the stethoscope to her ears, then pressed the end of the instrument firmly against Mr. Hugo’s knee, while stating in a most somber tone, “Take two hairpins and call me in the morning.”

“Will do,” Mr. Hugo stated, in an equally serious manner.

Along with everyone else, Jacob smiled broadly at Lucille’s recommendation. Upon receiving his cookies and scones, and thanking Mr. Astwell, while waving goodbye to Mr. Hugo who was busy packing up two loaves of Italian bread, Jacob left the bakery.

Munching on a scone, which wasn’t bad at all, while carefully packing the cookies and the rest of the scones into one of his bicycle panniers, Jacob soon set off to visit his aunt.

Aunt Julia was actually his mother's great aunt; but since his mom always called her, Aunt Julia, Jacob did too. She was awake, sitting in her easy chair in her room, but wasn't dressed to go to breakfast down the hall, as was her usual practice most mornings about this time. According to the nursing home staff, Aunt Julia had not been feeling well for the last couple of months and had seldom made it to the group breakfasts during that time. Nor had she had much of an appetite, which meant she ate very little from the trays delivered to her room. Consequently, she had lost about twelve pounds, which made her already-thin frame look rather gaunt. And since she hadn't been outside much of late, she was extremely pale.

Jacob pulled up the desk chair to sit next to his aunt. The sight of her looking so skeletal and sickly made him very worried. She had lost weight the previous year too, after getting shingles. Although she had gained most of the weight back, she didn't feel as though she had ever fully recovered from the illness because she often lacked energy and seemed to get sick easily. At present, she was struggling with either allergies or possibly a cold.

"It's probably allergies," she told Jacob. "Most people my age don't get colds because there are only a certain number of cold viruses that exist. Once you've had a particular cold, you can't catch the same one again. So by the time you get old and gray like me, you will probably have caught most of the ones out there. And I don't like to take the allergy medicine," she added. "So whether it's a cold or allergies, I'll just have to muddle through."

In truth, Aunt Julia did have a cold, evidently one of the ones she hadn't yet caught in her eighty-four years of living.

Retrieving an extra box of tissues from her closet for his aunt, Jacob again sat next to her and put his hand on her arm. "I'll walk with you down to the dining hall, if you want to go to breakfast," he said. "It might do you good to get out of your room for a bit."

“No, I really don’t want to this morning,” she responded wearily. “But if you could get me one of the newspapers from the common area before you go, I’d appreciate it. That-a-way, I can keep up with what’s going on in the world outside, even if I can’t be a part of it.”

After he got the paper for her, they pored over the crossword together for a bit, while Jacob told his aunt about a few things going on at school, and about the dime foosball table.

“I use to love to play foosball when I was a kid,” Aunt Julia said.

“Really,” Jacob said, surprised. “I didn’t think they had foosball back then.”

“Of course they did, you silly boy,” she said in a reproachful tone, giving him a light slap on the arm to match. “I’m not *that* old.”

It seemed Aunt Julia was recovering some of her energy and spunk in just talking to Jacob; and it wasn’t long before she got into the bag of shortbread cookies, eating a full six of them, which was actually a record for her in one sitting.

As Jacob was giving her a hug before leaving, she told him, “On second thought, you can walk me down to the dining hall. I suddenly have a hankering for a buttered biscuit, and a couple of slices of bacon.”

After escorting her to breakfast, Jacob gave her a kiss on her forehead while saying, “I hope you feel better soon, Aunt Julia.”

Before unlocking his bike from the rack outside the front door, Jacob stopped for a few minutes to talk to an elderly man sitting on a bench next to the rack. The man, who introduced himself as Bud Hawthorn, was actually in the process of picking a horse to bet on from the listings in the newspaper. “What do you think?” he asked Jacob, handing the paper over to him.

“Well,” Jacob responded, “since I don’t know anything about horse racing, and I’m not old enough to bet, I guess I would probably just pick the horse by name, maybe one that just jumps out at me.”

“Oh, I don’t bet either, not money anyway,” the man replied. “My neighbor and I bet against each other, and we win cups of coffee, fancy ones from the coffee shop down the street here. We walk down there together nearly every day.”

Jacob smiled before helping the man choose a horse named Laughing Wind from the listing. (As it turns out, Laughing Wind did win his race, and Mr. Hawthorn won a lovely fancy cup of coffee from his neighbor.)

The bank clock was just chiming nine as Jacob was speeding away from the nursing home.

Since it was turning out to be a nice day, sunny but not too warm, Jacob decided to take a long detour to ride along the shore of a nearby lake. He often did this on Saturdays when out and about on his bike.

Shannon happened to be at the lake with several of her friends, one of which was drinking. *Yuck, beer for breakfast*, Shannon thought. She actually didn’t like beer, but occasionally had a few sips. Even though she wasn’t supposed to drink, of course, being a minor, she did so fairly often, her preferred drink being wine coolers. She was pretty sure her parents knew about her drinking, but they never said anything to her about it.

Actually, her father rarely said anything to her because he was busy with his job and she hardly saw him. Since he worked late most weekdays, and Shannon was busy with friends on weekends, the two spent very little time together.

Shannon’s mother did talk to her some, but lately seemed to want to be more of a friend than a mother, though she did occasionally hound Shannon about getting a start on college plans, something Shannon would have preferred to wait until next year to worry about. But for the most part in recent years,

her mother seemed to want to be part of whatever was currently trendy in her daughter's life like music, books, movies, and clothes, rather than focusing on more serious things. Shannon had quit twirling the previous year because her mother ended up going with her on every out-of-town band trip. (*How embarrassing to have her mom tag along on school trips.*) Though the school did actively recruit parent chaperones, her mother seemed to want to go every time, and Shannon had finally decided she couldn't stand it anymore. Thankfully, Mrs. McNay was currently busy trying to be Abby's friend too, and was overly involved with Abby's dance and gymnastics activities, which left Shannon a lot of time to herself.

Her grandparents didn't have a hand in talking to her about important matters either, the two pairs seeming most interested in competing for their grandkids' love by buying them as many presents as possible. Though this had suited Shannon and Abby just fine for the past few years, Shannon often found herself wishing she had a grown-up family member to tell her what to do. Life was pretty confusing, and she didn't have a lot of direction as to what she should do, or not do.

Without many limits, pretty much the only rule being the ten o'clock curfew on nights preceding a school day, she frequently found herself in situations that weren't at all healthy, or even safe, for someone her age. And it was difficult to resist things that other teens were actively engaged in when her parents never told her they disapproved. As far as she knew, they never even tried to keep tabs on her on weekends, pretty much letting her do as she pleased. She could have been out robbing people's houses, or drag racing, or whatever, for all they knew.

In a somewhat secluded stretch of the lakeshore, while sitting on a pier with her friends, waiting for another friend who was supposed to bring donuts, Shannon had a few sips of beer. But the alcohol didn't particularly contribute to what happened next. Jumping up when the donuts arrived, Shannon tripped on

a coil of rope, which caused her to topple into the lake where she hit her head on one of the concrete pylons holding up the pier.

In a state of shock, her friends didn't know what to do. Two of the boys did jump into the lake, but had difficulty locating her at first because she was pretty far under the pier and had sunk several feet into the water. Unconscious, Shannon wasn't able to try to save herself and ended up basically drowning, though she would end up being saved from death, not by any of her friends, but by Jacob, who thankfully was riding by just as they pulled her from the water.

Turning off the road, he quickly jumped from his bike, tossing it aside as he ran down to the shore. The boys who had pulled her out had turned Shannon onto her side to try to get her to expel water from her lungs. However, since she wasn't breathing, very little water dribbled from her mouth without coughing or anything else to help it along.

"Move over!" Jacob commanded, kneeling by Shannon and turning her onto her back. The other two boys immediately made room as Jacob bent down and put his ear to Shannon's mouth. Feeling no breath, he next tried for a pulse, though he wasn't sure exactly where on her neck to do this. Since he never managed to find a pulse in the three or four places he was feeling, he immediately began CPR, which he didn't exactly know how to do; but he had studied the instructions in his seventh-grade *Human Health* book, and he sort of remembered the demonstration performed on a manikin by his Health teacher.

Tilting Shannon's head back, he pinched her nose closed while giving her open mouth two deep breaths. Jacob was relieved to see her chest rise and fall with each breath. He then leaned to position himself over her chest where he put the heel of his palm on a spot he thought was probably over her heart. With both hands, he gave compressions, though he couldn't remember exactly how many he was supposed to give; not that

he was particularly counting, since he was busy trying to remember other details of what he was supposed to do. He ended up giving about ten compressions before stopping to give her another two breaths.

One of Shannon's girlfriends, all white and shaky and fumbling with a cell phone, managed to call 911, at which point, she gave details in a frantic and squeaky voice as to what had happened and the location.

Jacob continued alternating between breaths and compressions for nearly four minutes, and had no intention of stopping, except that Shannon, during one round of compressions began gasping and choking, which prompted Jacob to roll her onto her side so that she could cough up a lot of water.

Shannon wasn't able to sit up, but she did try to speak through the coughing and gasping. It was hard to make out what she was saying, but Jacob thought he heard, "Hot...horrible...Paulina. Please, let her stay, please...hot...hot..."

The words didn't seem to particularly relate to anything that was going on, as far as Jacob could tell. Her friends didn't understand what she was on about either, but simply chalked up her ramblings to shock.

Jacob waited by Shannon's side until he saw the ambulance pulling up.

A couple of Shannon's friends had managed to contact their parents, and were waiting for them to arrive. Most of the group were too shaken to drive and would need to wait to leave until someone came for them.

Since professional help had arrived, Jacob didn't see any need to stay. While the EMTs were getting a stretcher for Shannon, he simply got on his bike and rode off towards home, without giving his name to anyone, and without saying goodbye.

Unlike Shannon's friends, Jacob was not particularly shaky or upset, though he did feel somewhat different than he ever had before. It was hard to describe, but the feeling was sort of like the satisfaction he got each time his brain was able to figure out a puzzle, the first example of this probably being when the reason Mr. Emmons left early for church was explained to him. Jacob couldn't tell if what he was feeling was satisfaction or confidence. Whatever it was, it felt pretty good. Come to think of it, he had felt mildly like this earlier in the morning, when he had visited his Aunt Julia. So it wasn't a completely new feeling, just a lot stronger, like magnified maybe about twenty-five times.

While he was pedaling, thoughts of what had just happened ran through his mind. It's like he had been on autopilot. He hadn't needed anyone to tell him what to do; he had just done it, kind of like on instinct. Jacob had always learned things from books easily, such as how to build models, so it wasn't particularly surprising that he had remembered how to give CPR simply from reading about it and seeing a short demonstration.

Jacob still didn't feel nervous or upset about what had happened until he was just about a mile from home, when he suddenly realized that he had been right there when a girl had almost died; at which point, his whole body started shaking, so much so that he nearly wrecked his bike. Thankfully, there was very little traffic this morning so his shakiness and near wreck didn't pose a serious problem.

Pulling off the road, he stopped for a few minutes, to steady himself, before continuing on towards home.

His mother was gone when he arrived, and had left him a note to say she was off to the grocery store and other errands. Jacob was thankful to have the house to himself because he was still slightly shaky, and he wouldn't have wanted to have to explain why to his mother.

After thinking for a good long while, Jacob decided that he didn't want to share what had happened with anyone. He couldn't explain why, not even to himself, but he didn't want anyone to know.

Thankfully, no one at the lake had thought to use their cell phone cameras during the incident, so when a report came on the evening news that an unknown teen hero had saved a drowned girl by giving her CPR, Jacob was able to remain anonymous.

It was also fortunate that Jacob and Shannon went to different high schools; not that she would have known him anyway, he being a freshman and she a junior. Plus, she had only barely glimpsed him when she regained consciousness. But going to different schools decreased the chance that he would ever run into any of her friends who might recognize him.

On the Sunday drive to church with his mother, for some reason, Jacob started thinking about the white sparrow, and specifically how Mr. Emmons had mentioned that the birds were thought to be lucky. Jacob wondered if maybe some of his luck could have rubbed off on both his Aunt Julia and the girl at the lake. Though it might only be considered slightly lucky to feel better from having a cold or allergies, it was certainly a tremendous stroke of luck to be saved from drowning. When he added getting the foosball table into the mix, plus finding out something about the Dime Box mystery, Jacob smiled in thinking that his birthday week had indeed turned out to be very lucky.

Chapter Four

The Glimpse

Shannon hadn't spoken much about her accident since it happened. When her parents brought her home from the hospital on Sunday, she retreated to her room, glad to be by herself; and for the most part she kept silent, not really wanting to talk to anyone. Thankfully, the bump on her head wasn't serious, though her doctors did order scans, which would confirm this; so other than being a little sore, Shannon seemed perfectly healthy.

While her doctors hadn't told her to do this, she stayed home from school the entire week. Her parents agreed, since they felt she was probably still in shock and needed the time to relax and recover from the trauma. Shannon was definitely in shock, but not necessarily about nearly dying. It was more about what she had experienced while unconscious, most of which was deeply troubling.

Shannon may have only barely glimpsed Jacob, but she had gotten an extensive glimpse of something else. Actually, the glimpse was preceded by an experience lasting a lot longer than a glimpse, a horrible experience that seemed to Shannon to span a full day, at least, if not two. Thankfully, the end of the horrible experience turned into the glimpse that would eventually help Shannon figure out how to avoid something in the future that was almost indescribably horrendous, something that was, in fact, pure torture—actual, literal torture. At first during the experience, Shannon thought she had been kidnapped and was truly being tortured by someone. This wasn't the case, thankfully, as she would eventually discover.

But in trying to recall everything, alone in her room, she found that she needed to go back to the beginning, to the point when she remembered gulping water, which was about the same time she hit her head. Starting at the beginning, and reliving the experience exactly as it had happened, was the only way she was going to be able to make any sense of it. Going over everything in her mind was difficult, especially the most painful parts, but she forced herself to because she thought it was important to remember all of the details while they were fresh in her memory. (Unlike Chime, Shannon didn't keep journal notes to be able to refer to later.)

During the week at home, each time she forced herself to recall what had happened, Shannon marveled that everything she had gone through had fit into only a few short minutes of unconsciousness. Even if it was something more than unconsciousness, since she wasn't breathing and didn't have a pulse, Shannon couldn't think of anything better to call it. She certainly wasn't conscious of what was going on lakeside, though she was acutely aware of what was happening in the place in which she was trapped. But she didn't think she had actually been dead, which is why she hesitated to call it that.

With the gulp of water and the knock to her head, Shannon struggled to breathe. But it wasn't water that was keeping her from breathing; it was heat, and a lack of air. But that didn't make sense because there was air all around her—hot, dry air. She just couldn't breathe the air for some reason. She also couldn't move, not one muscle of her body, not even one inch, even though she tried very hard to.

Shannon knew she had fallen into the water, so why didn't she feel at all wet? Instead, she was hot and dry. At first, it was a hot and dry that felt like when her family had visited the Arizona desert on a summer vacation. But there was no sun where she was. There was no light at all. And the darkness surrounding her wasn't like any darkness she had ever experienced. It wasn't like when she had shut herself tightly

into her closet and covered herself with a blanket while playing *Hide and Seek* with Abby. Even with a blanket covering her, the small bit of light from the crack under the door had allowed her to discern shadows. The darkness in this hot and dry place was much darker than that, even deeper than pitch black, and there were no shadows to help her distinguish anything, which completely disoriented her.

After awhile, the hot began to get hotter, and the itching of her incredibly-dry skin became burning, intense burning, which went on and on.

She couldn't hear anything at first. Was someone covering her ears? Was someone making her a part of some terrible experiment? However, after awhile, when the sounds started, she found she couldn't shut them out. What she mainly heard sounded like the wailing of other people being tortured. Though Shannon felt badly for them, she was in too much pain herself to really care; and if she could have gotten free, she probably wouldn't have thought about trying to help anyone else in her hurry to leave this dark, hot place.

Her eyes, nose, ears, and throat soon all began to feel like her skin, horribly itchy and burning hot. It was as though her whole body was being burned by something acid, but a dry acid; and she wondered if there was some powder that could do this, maybe something like the caustic lime they used to sprinkle on bodies in mass paupers' graves.

The horrible burning went on for so long, what seemed like hours and hours, she felt she couldn't take it anymore, and she wished she could just die.

Although she was crying, Shannon found she couldn't produce any tears because there was no moisture at all where she was, not even inside her own body it seemed. So who had dragged her out of the water, put her into a dark oven somewhere, and was torturing her? *Who could be doing this?*

Trying to call out for help, Shannon found she couldn't produce any sounds; she could only hear the awful sounds of

others in agony, screaming and wailing. She thought of serial-killer movies she had watched, and she imagined that this was what was happening—some horribly sick person had gotten hold of her, and a lot of other people, and was torturing them all to death.

Shannon soon realized that even though her skin was burning, nothing was actually touching her. She wasn't being held by ropes, or straps. It was as though she was suspended in midair with nothing holding her. *But how could this be?*

After what seemed like many more hours of the pain, but with nothing actually touching her, Shannon started to long for the touch of something. Even if the person doing this to her started beating her, she would have preferred this, just to have something touch her in this terrible burning place. Perhaps she first thought that getting hit with a belt or a bat would distract from the painful burning of her skin. But the more she thought about it, she decided that this wasn't the reason she was longing for something to touch her. The isolation and loneliness were at least as excruciating as the physical pain she was feeling; and if someone were to hit her, she would at least not feel alone. While she could hear the terrifying cries of others in pain, these people were not actually with her. And she somehow knew that she would never see any of them, or be with any of them, because they were isolated and alone too.

After awhile, she didn't try to cry anymore, even though it seemed the pain was more intense than ever.

Sadly, it wasn't difficult to think. She would have thought that enduring hours and hours of intense pain would have dulled her mind. But the opposite was actually true, and she found herself thinking acutely about all sorts of things.

Maybe she was in a sensory deprivation chamber and her mind was doing all of this to her. But why would someone put her into torture like this? *Who could be this evil and despicable?*

The disgusting smells started next, like a sickening sweet burning sewer overflowing with hot vomit. She couldn't think of any other way to describe it, and it made her gag and choke.

As more time passed, Shannon wondered if she was going to die soon. Unfortunately, she somehow knew with certainty that she was not going to be allowed to die anytime soon. Though horribly painful, the burning was not going to kill her. It would instead go on and on. And since she was so young, she felt it would go on and on while she aged. Or would she age? When she finally realized that she was in some sort of supernatural place where she probably would not age, and therefore would never die, but would go on experiencing the horrific pain and isolation forever, she felt even more pain inside, in the very fiber of her being, than she did out. It seemed her soul itself was now burning, lonely, and so sick it seemed to be dying. But she knew this also could not happen. Deep down, she didn't believe her soul could die, and that it was probably what was actually being tortured. So, now, she had finally come to realize the truth of her situation—both inside and out, she was destined to experience this torture forever.

Her lips cracked and parched, her hair crackling and sticking like needles into her ears and neck, Shannon suddenly had an extremely odd thought. *I forgot to use conditioner last night in the shower. No wonder my hair is so dry. If I could go back and do it again, I would remember to use the conditioner.*

If I could go back and do this day again...I would not go to the lake.

If I could go back and do my life again...I would change things.

What kinds of things? Shannon wondered.

I'm not sure...she slowly answered herself. I'm not sure...but they would be big things...really big things...

It's not like she had really done anything that truly mattered in her short life. Being nice to her sister and taking care of her

pets didn't really count towards anything. She hadn't fed hungry people, or even done any volunteer work since she was in Girl Scouts; and that wasn't much at the time, and she had done it somewhat grudgingly.

As bad as everything Shannon was currently going through in this terrible place, something was about to happen that would change everything.

In thinking about Girl Scouts, Shannon suddenly remembered a time when her troop was planting trees, probably in about fifth grade. With this thought, Shannon saw a faint circle of light break into the darkness, somewhere in front of her, but also somewhat far in the distance. As her mind struggled towards it, the light grew and came closer to her; and Shannon was reminded of the sun on the very day they had planted trees—beautiful, bright, and golden, but not too hot.

She was still in the dark, but could now see the circle of light in the distance more clearly. It was stable and seemed to be coming closer. She suddenly didn't feel as alone, and the burning pain had decreased slightly. She could also breathe somewhat more easily, and the horrible sounds and smells became a little more distant and softer.

Keeping her focus on the light, she was thrilled when it drew even closer. Shannon could see into the light, so it reminded her of a window—a perfectly circular window of light, but without a frame. Focusing on the idea of a window, Shannon thought of how people outside at night could see into a house if someone inside turned a light on.

Please, let the window stay, she thought, *and please don't let anyone turn off the beautiful light.*

What Shannon saw next was confusing, and rather shocking, perhaps even more so than what she was experiencing. A girl named Paulina, who had also been in Girl Scouts and who had also planted trees with Shannon, suddenly appeared inside the window.

What was confusing and shocking was that Paulina had died, of leukemia.

About two years ago now, Shannon thought. *Am I dead too?*

Paulina smiled in recognition as she noticed Shannon. They hadn't particularly been friends (Shannon couldn't even recall Paulina's last name at the moment), but the girls hadn't disliked one another.

The window of light had moved slightly closer, but was still too far for Shannon to have reached, which she desperately wanted to because, even though the area inside the window looked sunny and warm, it obviously wasn't hot like where she was. Instead, Paulina looked comfortable and relaxed.

Even in slightly less pain, Shannon was still hurting terribly. She tried to reach out to Paulina, but found she still couldn't move her arms. She also still couldn't speak or make any sound, though she tried very hard to. But mouthing words wasn't going to help her communicate with Paulina.

After a time, Shannon stopped struggling to reach the window, and stopped trying to talk, which is when she heard Paulina speak to her. All of the other wailing voices suddenly stopped, and she was able to hear Paulina's words very clearly.

Oddly enough, what Paulina told her was pretty mundane, given the circumstances. There was nothing profound in any of it, and nothing that might help Shannon understand what was happening to her, or that might help her get free. Instead, Paulina was mainly just chatting about the smallest of seemingly unimportant things. But although trivial, the words actually comforted Shannon, and she listened carefully. While completely out of context in this horrific setting, the one-sided conversation somehow made complete and perfect sense, though Shannon wouldn't have been able to explain why it made sense.

After a time, it didn't even seem silly to listen to a young girl ramble on about practically nothing. Instead, it seemed

perfectly fine and sane, and exactly what Shannon needed to hear, though she couldn't think of why at the time, especially given the situation.

While quietly listening to Paulina, Shannon suddenly got a bit of a jolt that felt like someone pushing hard on her chest several times in a row.

Thank goodness, someone is touching me, she thought. Even if the person was going to beat her, Shannon was thankful for the contact.

She next felt choking wetness in her throat that was raw and stinging, but somehow felt good.

As she came back to life beside the lake, Shannon saw a boy bending over her that she didn't recognize, before noticing a couple of her friends standing behind him.

Being put on the stretcher and traveling to the hospital was a bit of a blur. But that didn't seem important to remember, so Shannon didn't spend any time trying to recall it.

On Thursday morning of the week she stayed home from school, Shannon's dogs were keeping her company in her room.

She had figured out pretty quickly that calling her pets Picky and Nicky wasn't going to work because the rhyming nicknames sounded too much alike, and the dogs seemed to be having trouble figuring out who she was talking to. So she started calling them by their full names. Nicky didn't mind because Shannon had sometimes called her Pumpnickel anyway. And Pickles seemed to like his name, which was a perfect fit for his personality, as he was a bit sour compared to Pumpnickel's sweetness. It seemed he was full of mischief, while she was mostly well-behaved and eager to please. They were a perfect fit for each other, as far as balance.

Having been awake since about two a.m., Shannon had just finished forcing herself to go over everything that had happened to her in that horrible place in full detail, which marked the fifth time she had made it completely through the whole experience in her mind. This time, she was less sweaty, with much less

shaking and crying, than the previous four times. Even though it was difficult to relive, she wanted to do this, to make sure she had everything right, because she somehow knew it was very important to remember the details. She particularly forced herself to focus on the things Paulina had told her. Although they had seemed unimportant at the time, Shannon felt she might have been wrong about this, and that something Paulina had said might turn out to be extremely important.

Though she had never been religious, Shannon was smart enough to figure out that she had just had an experience—not just a vision, but an actual, physical experience—of being in the place that religious people call hell. But as she relived the hours and hours of darkness, burning, loneliness, and hideous sounds and smells, she found she didn't mind because she knew the glimpse through the window was coming.

During the fifth run-through, Shannon hardly wondered as to why, inside the window, mundane things somehow became important. It didn't matter because those things brought comfort, calm, and peace. Although still in pain, suspended outside the window, Shannon somehow truly did feel at peace while looking at and listening to Paulina.

In thinking back, some of the details eluded her, such as what Paulina was wearing. But perhaps it didn't matter. Clothes probably didn't matter, and this was a thought Shannon had never had (and never thought she would ever have) in her whole life. She did remember that Paulina was wearing a necklace with a small silver cross on it.

As sure as she was that she had experienced a time in hell, she was also sure that Paulina was in heaven, and was happy. While Shannon had not been allowed to go there, she had been given the precious glimpse of it, which actually more than made up for the hours and hours of pain she had endured. It didn't erase them, but the hope that she might somehow in the future avoid hell was intensely strong. The idea of a second chance, the hope in it, was much stronger than the pain had been.

Shannon had heard about Jesus and that He was the only way to eternal life, but had rejected this. Her parents definitely didn't believe. Her mother, in particular, was loudly critical of Christians, calling them ignorant and fools. Shannon herself had agreed with her mother's frequent rants about how what they believed in could never be proven and about how her information on various controversial subjects such as evolution and abortion was based on facts, while theirs was mere fantasy and wishful thinking. Shannon was proud of what her mother had taught her, and even criticized religious kids at school, saying, "My mother taught me to be skeptical," and "You can't deny evolution because it's scientific." Other things she had often spouted included, "Creationist thinking is stupid," and "Arguments that dating practices are skewed are just stupid arguments by non-scientific people who have no actual evidence to back up their claims." In support of the common practice of abortion, she had even gone so far as to say, "A fetus is not a baby," which was also something her mother had taught her.

Never before had she considered, not even for one second, that anything spouted by Christians could be even remotely true. She always thought they had been brainwashed, like taken in by a cult.

Now, after her experience in hell, she began to wonder if maybe she was the one who had been brainwashed, not only by her parents and grandparents, but also by society, and the media. People were constantly bombarded with messages that Satan didn't exist, and that Christian thinking was all a lot of unproved nonsense.

Coincidentally (but perhaps more by divine intention), in flipping television channels on Thursday afternoon, Shannon landed on a program that pretty much proved that the Shroud of Turin couldn't have been faked, that it was completely genuine, and that it was almost certainly related to Jesus, and not some other man. And in reading up on a few things online later in the

evening, relating to Creationism, she discovered something that was incredibly surprising to her—that a lot of the science she had been taught was only just theory, not fact that was absolutely proven, and therefore wasn't particularly any stronger in evidence than Christian beliefs, many of which were also based in science. In fact, she found the Christian arguments to be stronger than many of the school-taught ones because they involved exploring more possibilities when discrepancies were discovered in scientific data, instead of ignoring the inconsistencies, or pushing them aside when they didn't fit particular theories. And despite never having been much interested in anything relating to science, Shannon was fascinated in reading about theories that questioned long-held scientific views such as those exploring the possibilities that layers in sedimentary rocks were laid down much more quickly than previously thought, and that granite rocks were more likely formed in a mere instant, rather than over long periods of time. Also, it seemed canyons were formed much more quickly than scientists originally thought. Shannon was amazed because she had always assumed that the things she had been taught in school were completely proven and true. Now, in reading a lot of evidence to the contrary, it seemed that a good part of what she had previously learned about the formation of the earth and subsequent changes to it probably weren't completely true. She was definitely learning a valuable lesson—that she should investigate things more, especially important things, rather than just dismissing arguments that countered what she had been previously taught.

Shannon stopped looking at things online when she began to get a headache. She hadn't even scratched the surface in reading about all of the problems with the theory of evolution, which had gobs and gobs of data disproving it. *What a mess*, she thought. *This would probably take me years to get through, to truly understand it. No wonder religious people take a lot of stuff on faith, because who has time to do this kind of research?*

But she did wonder if the people who cried “Phooey!” over Christianity had ever bothered to do any research into it, or did they just automatically distrust, as she always had, especially because schools actually taught kids to do this. *If I hadn't looked this up*, she thought, *I would never have known. I would have just gone through my whole life without knowing the truth.*

Shannon had a horrible, fearful feeling inside that Christianity might *all* actually be true, and that she had been on the wrong path her whole life; and the feeling was growing. The fear, at the moment, wasn't particularly over that she might land in hell for all eternity; it was more in worrying over how she was going to be able to find the right path, after being on the wrong one for so long. Where was she even supposed to start to find the right path? It all seemed overwhelming. But she was determined to do something. She couldn't just live with what she now knew and do nothing about it. If Christianity was all completely real, which she now believed likely, she had to at least learn more about it, and hopefully figure out how to eventually get to where Paulina was.

But what if she had imagined it all? What if everything that had happened was only in her brain? This thought had gone through her mind many times after the accident. After all, her body had never left the lakeshore. If it was hard to convince her own mind at times that it had all been real, how would she ever manage to convince her family, which is something she desperately wanted to do, in order to save them from that horrible fate too. At this point, Shannon didn't know that doubts plague everyone at times, even the most stringent of believers.

Trying to calm her doubts and fears, Shannon reasoned with herself. She had always been intelligent and able to work things out. This time should be no different. In addition to thinking things through, she would do some investigating.

But she would need to do this without letting her parents know, or even her sister, because she knew they wouldn't

approve or understand. If she told them what she had gone through, and that she wanted to prove that it was all real, they probably would have sent her to a counselor, or a psychiatrist, who might want to talk her out of it, or put her on medication, or maybe even put her away somewhere. No...she would need to be careful, especially at first.

Shannon didn't even own a bible, and there was not one in the house, at least, not that she was aware of. However, this was about to change.

But, other than getting a bible, where to begin—that was the immediate question she was pondering. Paulina had told her some very definite things, which, if Shannon could confirm them, would prove the experience to have been real. She would need to come up with a plan, and this might take some time.

On Friday morning, as soon as she was alone in the house, Shannon snuck out on a secret trip to a local bookstore to buy a bible. She had had both a car and her driver's license for nearly a year, so it was no trouble for her to go shopping on her own.

The two clerks in the back of the store couldn't agree on which version of the bible they thought was best, the *Living Bible* or the *Revised Standard Version*, so Shannon bought them both.

When the cashier was taking her money, he asked her, "Do you have a bible concordance?"

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's like an alphabetical reference book that helps if you need to look things up," he answered.

"I'll get one later, if I decide I need it," she responded.

Studying the titles as he bagged the books, he offered, "I favor the *New King James Version* myself."

Resisting the urge to run to the back of the store for yet another bible, Shannon thought, *Oh good grief, what have I gotten myself into?*

The answer would turn out to be something pretty wonderful, and amazing, as she would soon discover.

Sitting on her bed a short while later with both bibles in her lap, Shannon felt very happy and content. *I haven't even read one word yet*, she thought, *but somehow I know this is right*. She also somehow knew that two bibles were plenty. *That's enough for anybody*.

As she changed from her outing clothes to a comfy t-shirt and shorts to lounge around in, for some odd reason, her mind suddenly fixated on clothing, and her previous thought that, since she couldn't remember what Paulina was wearing, clothes probably weren't important in either heaven or hell, which likely meant they weren't all that important on earth either, at least, not in the way most people seemed to want to make them important, as far as having the latest fashion, and having more and more. Most people she knew couldn't possibly wear all of their clothes in a month, even if they wore something completely different every single day; and she suddenly thought what a horrible waste this was. The boxes of clothing her family had in the basement, that were waiting to be donated to the local thrift store, were even more of a waste because they contained nearly new clothing, which had been worn very little but which the family had tired of. *Why would we be so silly as to wear our clothes only a few times, instead of until they are actually worn? Even cheap clothes are made well enough to be worn more than just a few times, so why do we spend so much money on buying more and more when we have plenty already?*

Without realizing that her brain was perfectly in line with the direction she wanted to go, Shannon shook off thoughts of clothing as a distraction, so that her mind could focus on making a plan to find the right path.

As far as the bibles in her lap, she didn't even know where to begin, other than maybe at the beginning of one of them.

The cashier had slipped a booklet into the bag that listed certain bible verses to look up if one was dealing with things like grief, loneliness, anger, or depression. The booklet also gave more verses under general topics such as Hope, Patience,

Faith, and Inspiration. This seemed like a good starting point. The subject of Faith drew her eye and she looked up the suggestion of Hebrews 11:1-3. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.”

After thinking about this passage for a good long time, Shannon felt she could sort of understand it. She thought part of it meant she would have to take a lot of religious stuff on faith, because she likely wouldn’t be able to find the kind of proof that scientific people look for. But did the part about “divine approval” mean that God Himself proves to people who have faith that He exists? After pondering for awhile, Shannon decided, *I’m still going to look for proof that what happened to me was real*. Even though she already pretty much believed it on faith, she didn’t think other people would, her family in particular. And she would need proof to convince them. Plus, God gave her a brain. In using it, this was what her brain was telling her to do—find proof that would not only reassure Shannon herself, but also convince others.

After about thirty minutes more of looking up bible passages, Shannon took a break to let some of the information sink in. She didn’t fully understand what she was reading, especially skipping around so much, but she did know that it made her feel better. And it was nice to think about something other than the accident. She now felt like maybe she could go forward with her life, instead of being stuck in an event of the past, which is how she had felt for a good part of the past week.

When doing some reading online, and in forcing herself to look up a few things involving hell, Shannon found people’s ideas as to what hell might be like to be widely varied. *Would hell be the same for everyone, she wondered, or would each person experience a different version of hell? And would the same be true of heaven; would each person have the same or a*

different experience? In all her research, Shannon never came across another person's account of actually being in hell for a time. Perhaps her experience was unique; or perhaps other people who might have gone through the same thing didn't particularly want to share with others what they had endured. In being brought back from death, since that didn't happen to very many people, Shannon definitely knew she had been blessed; and she didn't intend to waste the blessing by taking it for granted and doing nothing. She couldn't now simply go on with her life as if nothing extraordinary had happened; she had to acknowledge it, and move forward, with purpose.

Shannon hadn't slept at all well during the week, being haunted by the painful memories; but she did sleep well on Friday night, in the peace of knowing she was taking a step in the right direction. Over the next few weeks, when she did recall certain aspects of the event, she found herself less focused on the pain and darkness and more on what she had seen and heard through the window. And even though the glimpse of heaven had been much shorter than her time in hell, Shannon felt it was most important to focus on the brief time she was allowed to see Paulina's home, and not focus on the terrible ordeal she had just gone through. The glimpse, after all, was what was going to save her, and hopefully her family as well.

On Saturday morning, while Jacob was outside waiting for a couple of friends who were coming over to play foosball and watch TV, Mr. Emmons came out into his front yard to water a couple of rose bushes.

Wandering over to say hello, Jacob told his neighbor, "I think you were right about the white sparrow bringing luck, and I think it's the kind of luck than can be passed on to other people." He then told Mr. Emmons about how his Aunt Julia had right away started feeling better when he visited her shortly after seeing the sparrow. After only a brief pause of hesitation, he then launched into the story of what had happened when he

was riding along the lakeshore that same morning. Jacob had sort of wanted to tell someone; but he didn't want to tell his mother because he thought she might tell her friends at work, or maybe some people at church, because she often liked to brag on her son. Somehow, he knew he could trust Mr. Emmons to keep his secret.

"I saw that on the news," Mr. Emmons told him. "The media loves a good mystery. Don't worry; I won't give you away," he assured Jacob.

"I mainly wanted to tell you that you were right about the sparrow being like a good luck charm," Jacob said.

Somewhat slowly, Mr. Emmons responded, "Well...I wasn't completely honest about that, about the luck thing. But I guess it can be considered pretty good luck to have what the sparrow actually gave you." After an incredibly long pause, which had Jacob on pins and needles in wondering what his neighbor was going to say, Mr. Emmons finally added, "I know you and your mom go to church...but do you *really* believe?"

Confused, Jacob hardly knew how to answer, other than with, "Yes, of course."

With Mr. Emmons not saying anything else right away, it took Jacob a few moments to add something, which he did slowly, as he was thinking about the question of really and truly believing. "I know there's a God. I know Jesus died for my sins. I feel the Holy Spirit inside me...the Spirit guides me, helps me, and sometimes makes me feel guilty about stuff I'm thinking or doing. I believe the stories in the bible. I try to read the bible as much as I can...and I pray. And I do my best not to break the commandments in the bible...all of them, not just the first ten."

When Mr. Emmons still didn't speak, but just eyed Jacob thoughtfully, Jacob finally had to ask, "What could any of that have to do with the sparrow?"

Smiling, Mr. Emmons finally answered, "Because white sparrows give gifts from God. But it didn't give you luck.

From what you've told me, I think the sparrow gave you the gift of healing.”

Chapter Five

Blooming Madness

Jacob wasn't sure if he believed Mr. Emmons, or if he believed what Mr. Hugo had told him about the box either for that matter. For all of the magical stories he was hearing lately, he might have been four years old again, with his mother reading him *The Brave Little Tailor* or some other fairy tale. He genuinely wondered if they were simply making up tales, like old men sitting together over a game of checkers and coming up with fanciful stories to tell their grandchildren. Jacob could almost imagine that Mr. Emmons might next tell him that a lumberjack as large as a three-story house, along with a giant blue ox the size of an apartment building, were just around the corner. Likewise, Mr. Hugo might suggest that if Jacob would just say, "Open Sesame," some magical door (or box) would open, and lead the way to some incredible adventure. Did they really think he could be that gullible?

Or did they actually believe their own stories; in which case, could what they were saying be true? As if his insomnia wasn't bad enough, Jacob was certainly being given a lot to puzzle over lately, which was destined to keep him up, wondering, for the next few nights at least.

Even if Jacob didn't wholly believe it yet, what Mr. Emmons told him was actually true, not just about white sparrows bestowing gifts from God, but also that Jacob had been given the gift of healing. The moment he touched his Aunt Julia's arm, she was healed of her cold, allergies, and the remnants of shingles. And it wasn't CPR that had brought Shannon back. In truth, Jacob had actually done it somewhat wrong. He was getting air into her lungs, but the compressions

were not nearly hard enough to start her heart. They were also in the wrong spot, slightly too low, because he had subconsciously been afraid to touch certain areas of her chest, so he hadn't put his hands in exactly the right place. Of course, CPR might have revived her some other time, if performed correctly; but in this case, Jacob's gift was what had actually healed her and brought her back. And although it had taken longer to happen than it had with his Aunt Julia, several minutes as opposed to instantaneously, Jacob's touch was effective because it was not quite Shannon's time to go. God has a plan for every life, even the lives of nonbelievers, especially because He hopes they will eventually come to Him and accept the gift of His Son before the end.

Pondering over everything for the next couple of nights, Jacob began to think that what Mr. Emmons had told him might be true; but it was a lot to take in. And if true, it was definitely going to take some getting used to. Jacob also would not fully understand his gift for a very long time, particularly because there was a lot more to it than just being able to heal with a touch. The whole thing was going to be a lot more complicated than that, as he would soon discover.

Aunt Julia called early in the week to invite Jacob and Mrs. Woodbury to Bingo Night at the nursing home on Thursday evening.

"Go pick the best pot of violets from the windowsill," Jacob's mother told him, as they were getting ready to go. Aunt Julia loved African violets, and Mrs. Woodbury currently had eight of them, which was quite a crowd for the small kitchen bay window, so the remaining seven were definitely going to enjoy the breathing room.

Jacob picked the biggest and healthiest-looking one, and they set off.

As it turns out, Aunt Julia had been the one to organize the Bingo Night, which wasn't a common event at the nursing home. She had rounded up a large assortment of donated prizes

from a variety of sources such as stores in town, relatives of those living at the home, and other such benefactors. Even Mr. Hugo had donated several board games, along with a whole case of boxes of playing cards, so that everyone attending the event could have a door prize.

When Jacob and his mother arrived, one of the nursing staff took them aside, as she often did, to give them a little scoop on the latest nursing home goings on and gossip. This time, the news was all about Aunt Julia. “You might be surprised,” Nurse Finn began, “but your aunt has become something of a tyrant in the last week or so, a loveable one, of course. She’s definitely feeling a lot better and seems to have a lot more energy, not to mention good ideas for everyone, residents and staff, whether people want the ideas or not.”

Jacob and his mother hardly knew how to respond, particularly because they weren’t all that surprised. Aunt Julia had always been something of a force of nature, and often didn’t like taking “No” for an answer. Add exuberant energy (when she was feeling good) to her fierce persistence and stubbornness, and it was no wonder that she got her way most of the time.

“Anyway,” Nurse Finn added, “I just wanted you to know she’s pretty much running the place now, kind of like a queen.”

After greeting Queen Julia, who was just coming down the hall with a load of prizes in her arms, and after depositing the pot of violets in her room for her, Jacob returned to the common area to help set up for bingo. The residents and staff actually didn’t need any help, as well organized as they were, so while his mother was visiting with a few people, Jacob visited the refreshment table for cookies and punch.

During the day at school, he had started thinking about the upcoming trip to the nursing home. Since a lot of people living there had ailments, he wondered if he was possibly meant to heal some of them. Should he touch a few people? Was that

what he was meant to do? If his gift was real, was that how he was supposed to use it?

Jacob was trying not to be nervous at the home; but in all of his ponderings, he had pretty much talked himself into the idea that he was going there for some very important reason, likely to help the sick. Did God mean for him to run around and heal people? If so, he would of course need to do this in a nonchalant way. He couldn't just go about feeling on people; they might think he was crazy, or, if not crazy, then maybe trying to do them harm.

Trying to figure out what he was maybe supposed to do, or not do, sort of made his head hurt, so he decided to stop thinking about it. *If it's meant to be, it will happen*, he decided, *like what happened at the lake*.

Jacob's musings were interrupted when Bud Hawthorn came up to the refreshment table and asked Jacob to pick another horse for him. "You were lucky for me last time," Mr. Hawthorn said. "I won a caramel macchiato with extra whipped cream. They have the Saturday races listed already," he added eagerly, handing Jacob the newspaper.

Mr. Hawthorn had narrowed the choices down to four—Porcelain Dawn, Flambodie, Zinnia's Rage, and Awl-to-Awl.

After studying the names for a couple of minutes, Jacob told Mr. Hawthorn, "Porcelain Dawn is a prettier name, but I think Zinnia's Rage is going to win."

"That's good enough for me," Mr. Hawthorn responded.

Jacob had decided that he didn't much feel like playing bingo (since it wasn't particularly his thing), so he offered to help hand out prizes instead, which was just fine with the nursing staff.

His mother won a jigsaw puzzle, and Mr. Hawthorn won a set of pottery coffee mugs. A young woman named Isabelle Wright, who was visiting her grandmother, ended up winning the big prize—a hand crocheted afghan with a daisy motif. Jacob ended up touching her arm as he handed it to her; thank

goodness, because she had lupus, and had been experiencing a lot of symptoms in recent months. Unfortunately, lupus was one of those tricky diseases, very difficult to diagnose, and her doctors hadn't yet been able to do so. There was also, as yet, no cure. So although Jacob wouldn't know it, this was the reason he was supposed to be at Bingo Night—to heal Isabelle, who would never be bothered by lupus again in her entire life. He also wouldn't know that two other people he touched were not healed, one of a bladder infection and the other of diabetes. This would turn out to be one of the most mysterious aspects of his gift—why it worked sometimes and not others.

Isabelle ended up giving the afghan to her grandmother. And Jacob's mother ended up giving the jigsaw puzzle to Aunt Julia's next-door neighbor. (Jigsaw puzzles were not something Mrs. Woodbury particularly enjoyed, or Jacob either for that matter.)

As they were getting ready to leave, another of the nursing staff told Jacob and his mother more of Aunt Julia's recent endeavors. "You know we already have several exercise classes," Nurse Mills said, "but your aunt has rounded up a slew of ladies, and a couple of gentleman, and reserved the vans, to take them all to the water aerobics classes at the Senior Center on Tuesdays and Fridays. It's definitely a good thing, as long as the doctor approves everyone who's going. And she's organized movie nights," the nurse added. "We've already seen *Cocoon* and *Batteries Not Included*. Next week we're set for the whole original *Star Wars Trilogy*."

After church on Sunday, Jacob and his mother took Aunt Julia to a greenhouse in a neighboring city so that she could buy some plants. "I just started thinking about flowers," she told them, when they picked her up, "I guess because of the violets, and because Bud Hawthorn said you picked Zinnia's Rage as a winner. By the way, he said to tell you he won a large frozen mocha this time. Anyway," she went on, "I want to use a little of my mad money to bring some blooming madness to the

home. Get it, *blooming madness*—*mad* money, and we're on our way to get some *blooms*?"

Neither Jacob nor his mother actually got to respond because Aunt Julia, being rather talkative today, was on a roll. "Fall is a great time of year for things like asters, mums, and zinnias. I really want to spruce up the nursing home; it's been looking a little dreary lately. And, surprisingly, my allergies haven't been bothering me at all, which leaves me free to embrace all kinds of flowers and plants and trees, if I want."

The whole time Aunt Julia was chatting, Chime was at work, waiting somewhat nervously. She was expecting someone important to arrive, someone she had never met before. She didn't quite know who it might be because the dream that had foretold this event had been somewhat confusing, mainly because it featured two people; but Chime was fairly certain that one of those two people would end up showing up.

This was the case, as Chime immediately recognized Shannon, visiting the greenhouse with her grandmother on her mother's side, when she arrived. Bending down to pet Paddy, who was not tethered today because he was behaving himself very well, Shannon had no idea that someone was actually expecting her.

Shannon's grandmother was there to buy birdseed, while Shannon, who wanted to fancy up both the front and back porches of her home, was there to buy some fall flowers. She ended up picking both mums and alyssums, several pots of each, along with two new ceramic planters to complement others the family already had.

Waiting patiently until Shannon was separate from her grandmother, Chime somewhat reluctantly approached. She had an important message to give to Shannon, but was reluctant because, in her experience, people sometimes didn't want the messages. Although Chime embraced her gift, she often found it difficult to do what God was directing her to do. She had

been called “crazy” on several occasions, and had once been told, rather forcefully, “Don’t butt into other people’s lives!” This type of reaction, of course, was the result of other people not being able to embrace God’s will for their lives. But Chime had to persevere; she was determined to use her gift for its intended purposes.

Not long after having the dream about the girl drowning, Chime had had another prophetic dream in which she was standing in a steamy bathroom in front of a mirror that was thickly fogged over. The bathroom was so steamy that the pages of a calendar hung on the wall beside the mirror were actually curling up. The third Sunday in September was circled in red marker, which is how Chime knew when to expect the visitor. She also felt the flower theme of the calendar meant that the meeting would take place at the greenhouse. As usual, she was correct in her interpretation.

As Chime gazed into the mirror, a name appeared in the steam near the bottom of the glass, as though someone had written it with a finger. Wiping away some of the steam from the center of the mirror, Chime might have expected to see her own reflection. This was not the case, as she instead saw a girl staring at her that she didn’t recognize, but who she assumed belonged to the name she had just read—Paulina. Behind Paulina in the mirror, a familiar scene was playing out—that of someone pulling a drowning girl from a lake. (This was familiar because it was the same girl Chime had seen in her previous dream.) But the girl hadn’t drowned, thank goodness. Instead, she stood up. As she did so, four white horses appeared on the horizon behind her. Snorting and tossing their heads, the horses next galloped up to the girl, where they began running in slow circles around her. Without looking behind her, to see either the girl or the horses, Paulina raised a forefinger to the mirror and wrote the name, Shannon, in the steam that was left at the top edge of the mirror. She wrote it reversed, of

course, from her side of the mirror, so that Chime would be able to read the name easily. The dream ended exactly there.

The dream was slightly tricky to interpret because Chime had no way of knowing which of the two girls would show up at the greenhouse, and her brain had been pondering over both possibilities. However, when she saw that it was Shannon, she did finally understand what the dream meant and what she was supposed to do. Since the girl who showed up was the girl in the background, with horses running around her, and not the girl staring at her from the forefront of the mirror, Chime wisely discerned that Paulina wanted Chime to give Shannon a message. And since Paulina couldn't see Shannon in the background, because she never turned around, Chime decided the message probably was that Shannon was supposed to go see Paulina. *Paulina must want to see Shannon, Chime thought, but she hasn't been able to for some reason. And she wants Shannon to know something about the four horses.* Often, dream interpretation was exactly that simple, and Chime had learned over the years not to overcomplicate things. She also had a good feeling in her gut that what she had decided was right, and it often paid to listen to her gut. She believed it might actually be more accurate than “nine times out of ten” as that old saying goes.

When Shannon's grandmother was looking at trowels, and was some distance away from Shannon, who was picking out a planter, Chime sidled up to the pallet of ceramic planters and simply said, “If your name is Shannon, I have a message for you from Paulina.”

Turning somewhat pale, Shannon slowly rose from her crouched position of checking the underneath of one of the heavy planters for cracks. After staring at Chime for a few moments, Shannon said quietly, “I'm listening.”

“I think you are supposed to go see her,” Chime said. “She wants you to go see her. And there's something about four white horses running in circles that you're supposed to know

about. I just think you're supposed to know that for some reason."

After a long pause, while she carefully considered Chime's words, Shannon simply said, "Okay, thank you. This is going to be very helpful, I think."

Relieved that Shannon seemed receptive to what she had told her, Chime smiled and responded, "It's just that I get messages sometimes, in my dreams, and I'm supposed to give them to particular people."

"Well, you definitely found the right person," Shannon said, smiling back. "And I needed to hear this before doing something I was planning to do."

"Good," Chime answered. "Oh, and I'm glad you're okay," she added. "I'm glad you didn't drown."

Shannon turned pale again, but was relieved to hear this because it reinforced that what she was being told was for real, and not just something from a trickster. But, of course, it couldn't have been a trick. Shannon hadn't told anyone about seeing Paulina, so no one could possibly know. And she had never met Chime before, so there was no way this stranger could have known that Shannon had almost drowned. The news reports hadn't released her name; neither she nor her parents had given them permission to. Unless this girl was somehow acquainted with one of Shannon's friends, or a close family member, there's no way she could have known about the near-death experience.

No, this has to be real, Shannon thought, especially because no one knows that I saw Paulina. Shannon was also sure that this was another divine intervention, and it made her more determined than ever to follow through with what she had planned, which involved first proving that her experience had been real, then finding a way to take the right path, the one to salvation. Once firmly on the path, she hoped she could then convince her family to follow, so they could all be saved.

Their brief conversation was interrupted when Shannon's grandmother approached, prompting Chime to go back to her task of watering azaleas. Since Shannon didn't want her grandmother to think anything was out of ordinary, after a quick smile of farewell to Chime, she went back to checking the bottom of the planter for cracks.

When Shannon and her grandmother were loading their purchases into the car, Chime noticed something that utterly spooked her. A dense patch of wild sunflowers grew in a spot very near where the car was parked. As Shannon was placing two of the pots of mums into the trunk, the forty or so sunflowers in the patch all slowly turned to face her. Shannon didn't notice, and neither did her grandmother, who was hoisting one of the planters onto a towel spread across the back seat. Chime had only noticed because she happened to be bringing the second, heavier planter out on a cart for them.

Having witnessed quite a few supernatural things in the past few years, Chime wasn't sure why this one unsettled her. Perhaps it was because she was sometimes afraid that these types of occurrences might be from Satan, and not from God. After all, Satan was a supernatural being as well, though he was not anywhere near as powerful as God. She often prayed that she would always have the ability to discern between the two, particularly because she knew that Satan was very clever, and could easily deceive and manipulate people.

Paddy, who often supervised the loading of purchases and who was very near the car, also observed the sunflowers turning in unison to face Shannon. Since he remained his usual happy and waggy self, Chime decided that the actions of the flowers were probably something good, and not bad. The sunflowers turned together again, to follow Shannon's movements, when she closed the trunk and went to help her grandmother load the second planter. Again, only Chime and Paddy noticed.

Shannon had a lot to think about on the way home. She couldn't actually go to see Paulina herself, other than maybe

visiting her grave. But she didn't think that was what she was meant to do, at least, not at this time. Shannon more felt that the message from the girl at the greenhouse meant that she was supposed to go through with what she had already planned, which was a visit to Paulina's mother. That was pretty much as close as Shannon could get to seeing Paulina on earth, seeing her closest living relative. And now, thanks to hearing from Paulina again, Shannon knew exactly what she was meant to say, and look for, which would confirm that her whole experience had been completely real.

Smiling both inwardly and out, Shannon was happy to have heard about the horses because it coincided with something Paulina had told her. However, in the extremeness of the situation (hanging in pain outside of the window while listening), and even in reflection, Shannon hadn't been able to fully understand the importance of the horses. In recently reading something about the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Shannon had almost feared that Paulina had been speaking to her cryptically, about something related to the apocalypse. Now, she understood that Paulina had been completely straightforward, which was of course typical of Paulina's personality and, indeed, of the core of her being. Pretty much all things related to Paulina were simple, almost mundane; and yet, were also completely beautiful. Again smiling, Shannon found herself looking forward to the visit to Paulina's mother.

Meanwhile, at a different plant nursery, while helping his Aunt Julia pick out flowers, Jacob couldn't help but notice how much better she looked, and obviously felt. She definitely had more energy, and was moving around better than Jacob could ever remember. This pretty much reinforced what he already knew deep down—that he had indeed been given the gift of healing. And in starting to really believe it, he found his mind bombarded with confusion and questions.

Was he meant to touch people only in certain places in order to heal them, like on the upper half of the body? What if

he touched someone and they weren't healed? Did that mean he had done it wrong? And how was he even supposed to know if they were actually healed, since he might not ever see them again?

Jacob's current questions didn't even scratch the surface of the complications involved with this particular gift because, just as human beings are individuals that are uniquely different, certain gifts themselves were often uniquely different from one individual possessing them to the next. For instance, some people given the gift of healing did not even have Jacob's ability to heal by touch. Rather, they ended up healing because they had a lot more natural curiosity and problem-solving skills than other people, which enabled them to do research more effectively to find treatments and cures for diseases. Another person with the gift might be able to tell if someone had been misdiagnosed. Or perhaps the gifted person would be able to discern that a particular treatment would be much better than another for a specific patient. Still others might simply be given the intense desire (along with the means to follow through) to become a nurse or doctor, or some other type of healer.

Jacob's confusion was natural, but wasn't destined to go away anytime soon because more questions would soon be added to his ponderings, such as why his gift would not always work exactly as it had with Shannon and his Aunt Julia. As with anything new and unfamiliar, the complexities would not be easy for him to understand, not only at first, but also for a very long time.

Aunt Julia was still talkative as they stopped at a restaurant for hamburgers after their visit to the plant nursery. "Some of the nursing home staff don't believe that the 'old people' will be able to handle the excitement of the *Star Wars* movies," she said, with scorn in her voice. "They think we'll keel over from the phasers, or lasers...."

"Light sabers," Jacob interjected.

“Whatever,” Aunt Julia responded. “It’s all nonsense—the idea that movie special effects are going to give old people seizures or heart attacks. That’s just silly. So I put my foot down when Nurse Hopkins suggested *On Golden Pond* instead. I just flat out told her, ‘No.’”

Stopping at the house before going to the nursing home, Jacob was utterly surprised when Aunt Julia beat him at foosball, quite handily, two games in a row. Even though he knew she was feeling better, it was hard to believe she could beat him so easily. Aunt Julia actually loved foosball so much that when Jacob had told her about his table, she immediately ordered one for the rec room at the nursing home. Since this was where they normally held exercise classes, there was plenty of room for a foosball table too, and Aunt Julia felt there were plenty of residents who would enjoy using it.

In truth, the “blooming madness” was not just in relation to plants—Aunt Julia herself was blossoming with vigor, and possibly a little craziness with regards to some of her ideas and antics. And she was not alone in her ventures because she had woken up Alicia Desmond, a woman who hadn’t been out of her room much in the last two years. Now that Aunt Julia had managed to get Mrs. Desmond out of her room, the two were destined to reign together, taking the nursing home by storm, as loveable tyrants presiding over all others. Indeed, over the next few years, many people, residents and staff alike, would have difficulty keeping up with them, not to mention keeping tabs on them.

When Jacob and his mother got back from dropping off Aunt Julia with her ten pots of flowers, they talked about being slightly disappointed in that particular greenhouse, which didn’t seem to have as much variety as they thought it should, for as large as it was.

“There’s another one the girls at work talk about, a better one,” Mrs. Woodbury said. “It’s a little farther drive, but I’ll

ask the name of it and get directions, and we'll go there next time."

Chapter Six

Tea and Horses

Shannon was unloading pots of flowers at home before she realized she hadn't even gotten the name of the girl at the greenhouse. But at least she knew where she worked, so she could go back and talk to her some time.

Thankfully, Shannon had finally remembered Paulina's last name, Chilton, so she was easily able to look up her mother's address and phone number. Now that Shannon had finally mustered her full courage, and felt confident in going forward with her plan, she phoned Mrs. Chilton on Tuesday evening. After briefly explaining that she had known Paulina from school and Girl Scouts, Shannon asked if she could come to see Mrs. Chilton at her home, whereupon, they agreed on the upcoming Saturday morning.

Visiting three flower shops after school on Friday, Shannon finally found exactly what she was looking for—two dozen dark purple tulips, which the clerk wrapped in fancy paper.

Placing the flowers into the refrigerator at home, Shannon answered her mother's questioning look with, "A school friend of mine died a couple of years ago, of cancer. I'm going to see her mother in the morning."

Grabbing her car keys in order to leave to pick up Abby from dance class, Mrs. McNay shrugged half-heartedly in acceptance of her daughter's explanation.

Mrs. Chilton was a widow, having lost her husband in a car accident nearly four years before Paulina died. With no other children, and no pets, she lived entirely alone in her small, bungalow-style home.

Shannon arrived promptly at eight-thirty on Saturday morning.

Accepting the bouquet of tulips, Mrs. Chilton said, “Oh, they’re beautiful; let me just get them into a vase.”

Following Paulina’s mother into the kitchen, Shannon hadn’t been nervous until this very moment, and she suddenly found it difficult to go on with what she planned to say.

Sensing Shannon’s nervousness, Mrs. Chilton tried to put her young guest at ease by smiling broadly, as she said, “Purple tulips were Paulina’s favorite flowers.”

“I know,” Shannon answered, smiling back. “Paulina told me.”

As Mrs. Chilton filled the vase with water, Shannon somewhat hesitantly added, “The thing is...she told me somewhat recently....”

With Mrs. Chilton looking at her quizzically, Shannon had trouble finding the right words, and she stumbled a bit as she went on. “That’s...um...sort of the reason I wanted to see you...well, part of the reason anyway...it’s a little hard to explain....”

Again trying to make Shannon feel more comfortable, Mrs. Chilton said, “Let’s go into the living room, and sit, so we can talk.”

After depositing the heavy vase of tulips on the kitchen table, Mrs. Chilton led the way into the living room where an elaborate tea was already laid out on the coffee table. In addition to fragrant orange tea with lemon wedges, the spread consisted of mini vanilla-bean scones with a raspberry jam dipping sauce, dainty layer cakes, and an assortment of colorful macarons.

Taking a seat next to Mrs. Chilton on the sofa, Shannon took a deep breath and said, “I know this might be hard to believe, but I sort of saw Paulina recently.”

With nothing more than polite curiosity showing on her face, Mrs. Chilton calmly poured Shannon a cup of tea before

passing her a plate and napkin so she could begin to partake of the goodies.

When Shannon seemed reluctant to continue, Mrs. Chilton smiled encouragingly, and said in a soothing and motherly fashion, “Well, I’m not shocked, or even very skeptical, if that’s what you’re worried about. Please, go on.”

With this prompting, and after fortifying herself with a couple of bites of a macaroon, Shannon briefly launched into the story of how she had recently nearly drowned and, while unconscious, had seen Paulina. She left out the first part of the experience, of course, since it would have been too much to tell at the present time, not to mention too personal and difficult to share with a stranger. Basically skipping to the part when she first saw the window of light, Shannon mainly tried to relay that, while her spirit was somewhere other than the lakeshore, Paulina had talked to her, had helped to calm her, and had basically made her feel a lot better.

When Shannon paused to have a few sips of tea, Mrs. Chilton, who had been smiling with happiness the whole time while listening, said, “I’m not surprised. She always was a good comforter. You know, sometimes when I’m feeling a little blue, I think I can sense her spirit. And it’s not just in the things she left behind, like her stuffed animals, or her quilt, or the pictures she drew. I sometimes think I can feel her presence aside from all of that.”

After sampling one of the dainty cakes, Shannon said, “Speaking of things left behind, I wanted to ask you about something. If I could confirm something Paulina told me, it would help me believe that it was all real, and not just a dream. I guess it might seem a little selfish...I probably should just tell you about seeing your daughter...but I do so want to find out if it was all real...I mean...if I can.... (Shannon was starting to feel nervous again, and her speech was starting to show it.)

Again, in a motherly manner, Mrs. Chilton said, “Just take a deep breath. It’s all going to be okay. Ask me anything you like.”

Immediately feeling calmer, Shannon did take a breath, and another sip of tea, before going on. “When Paulina was in the hospital the last time, just before she died, you ordered a jewelry box for her. She said she never saw it because it didn’t even come in the mail before she died. But she evidently knows about it now; she described it to me. She said that she had always kept her jewelry in a cigar box, so she was very surprised that you got her such a fancy jewelry box. She knew it was very expensive, and that surprised her too.”

Mrs. Chilton, after only the briefest moment of trying to remember, was smiling and nodding as she said, “I was planning to give it to her for her birthday.”

Also smiling, Shannon continued. “Paulina told me it’s an eight-sided white porcelain box, and it has a little prop-like thing to hold it open, kind of like a piano. And when it’s open, four white porcelain carousel horses pop up from the center and turn in a circle, and they are surrounded by the little jewelry compartments. She was so happy that you didn’t get a ballerina jewelry box because she loves the carousel horses, especially that they are such beautiful white porcelain.”

With slight confusion creasing her brow, and a small shake of her head, Mrs. Chilton responded, “The horses are crystal, not porcelain.”

“Oh,” Shannon said, also in confusion. “But she described them so specifically to me. She said they are shiny white horses with the trim of their saddles all painted in metallic red, blue, and green paint. And she said their hooves and manes are shiny gold.”

“Let’s look at it,” Mrs. Chilton said, rising from the couch. “The box is definitely porcelain, but I’m pretty sure the horses are made out of crystal.”

With the help of a step stool, she proceeded to lift down a fairly good-sized box from an upper shelf of the hall closet. The jewelry box was still packed inside its shipping box, which had never been opened.

“I never looked at it when it arrived,” Mrs. Chilton said, retrieving a box cutter from the kitchen, “because I was busy with funeral arrangements and dealing with the bills at the hospital. So I just put it away.”

After getting through the outer packaging, and a good deal of bubble wrap, Mrs. Chilton carefully removed the jewelry box from its silk-covered collector’s storage sleeve.

Holding her breath, as Shannon did likewise, Mrs. Chilton slowly lifted and propped open the lid.

The horses were exactly as Paulina had described them.

Mrs. Chilton was very surprised. “I could have sworn they were crystal, from what I remember about the description, and the picture in the catalog.”

Looking closely at the horses, Shannon told her host, “Look, there are little crystals set into the bridles and saddles. Maybe that’s what you remember from the description.”

“It must be,” Mrs. Chilton replied, nodding. “I didn’t keep the catalog. But it doesn’t matter; it’s a beautiful box.”

As they both continued to admire the horses, Mrs. Chilton added, “It’s a music box too, and that’s what turns the horses.” After closing the box, and winding it from underneath, she then carefully reopened it, whereupon, it played Beethoven’s *Für Elise*, the horses turning in slow circles the whole time.

When the song ended and the horses stopped turning, Mrs. Chilton told Shannon, “I want you to have this.”

“Oh no,” Shannon said, very firmly, “I couldn’t. This belongs here, with you. I’m sure of it.” Shannon was not about to take the beautiful box, but she was happy that it was out of the closet and out of its wrappings.

After a few moments of thought, Mrs. Chilton said, “You know, I think I’ll use it. I don’t have a lot of jewelry; this would be just about right to hold what I have.”

“I think Paulina would be happy about that,” Shannon responded. “She would have wanted you to use it and enjoy it.”

“But I do want you to have something of hers. Hold on a sec,” Mrs. Chilton said, rising and leaving the room for a couple of minutes.

While she was gone, Shannon stood up and moved across the room to examine more closely an intricately-carved wooden crucifix hung above the fireplace mantle. It was hard to explain, but the beautiful image of Christ on the cross made her feel both sad and happy at the same time. In reflection, Shannon would come to realize that she couldn’t have the one emotion without the other when contemplating the incredible gift of salvation.

When Mrs. Chilton returned, she presented Shannon with a lovely silver and turquoise bead bracelet.

Shannon tried to resist. “But I didn’t even know Paulina all that well; we were in Girl Scouts together, but we weren’t super close friends. I don’t deserve to have any of her belongings.”

“You may not have been close friends,” Mrs. Chilton replied, “but she mentioned you, a couple of times. I specifically remember one time she said that when some other kids were picking on her, or teasing her, you were nice to her. I don’t think she had another friend named Shannon, so I’m pretty sure she was talking about you.”

“I don’t even remember that,” Shannon answered.

“Well, I do,” Mrs. Chilton stated. “She didn’t have a lot of friends, so when people were nice to her, we both remembered it. Maybe that’s why she came to you, at the window, because she remembered you fondly.”

When Mrs. Chilton insisted that she take the bracelet, Shannon smiled and, with tears in her eyes, said happily,

“Actually, I love it. It’s perfect, and exactly something I would have picked out for myself. Thank you.”

As they were enjoying more of the tea spread, feeling a lot more comfortable in talking with Mrs. Chilton, Shannon asked, “Did you always really believe, like from when you were very young, in God and Jesus, and everything in the bible?”

After considering for a few moments, while she swallowed a bite of a scone, Mrs. Chilton answered, “No, it was when I was in college that I started to believe. But it wasn’t all that clear to me at the time, and I’m ashamed to say that I didn’t make it as important as I should have. For everything that happens in our college years, we should make a lot more of an effort to put God at the center of things. We’d be a lot happier if we did, and things would go a lot more smoothly. But,” she added, “to answer your question. I started to believe in my college years; that’s when I was baptized and when I started going to church. And even though I didn’t understand everything, and I didn’t commit as much to being spiritual as I should have, my faith grew from there. By the time I was married and had Paulina, it was a lot more pronounced. Thank goodness, or I never would have made it through losing first Paulina’s father, then Paulina. Prayer, trusting in God, and His comfort, and His plan—that’s what got me through some really tough times.”

As Mrs. Chilton choked up a little in thinking of her husband and daughter, Shannon instinctively took her hand and said earnestly, “Paulina’s happy. I could tell. I wasn’t allowed to see much of where she is, but I know she’s happy, comfortable, and at peace. She’s in the very good place, not the bad one.”

Smiling, and wiping away tears with one of the tea napkins, Mrs. Chilton carefully considered Shannon’s words. As a fairly shrewd woman, Mrs. Chilton could easily tell that there was a lot more to Shannon’s near-death experience than what she was sharing. She also thought that Shannon might want to share

more of what happened to her, but that she might need a little prompting to do so.

After collecting her emotions, and thoughts, for a couple of minutes, Mrs. Chilton decided to do exactly that—prompt. “You said you weren’t allowed to see much,” she slowly began. “But you knew she was in the good place and not the bad one.” After a very long pause, because she was a little worried about upsetting Shannon by going on, Mrs. Chilton decided to take the plunge, and finished with, “Do you know something about the bad place?”

Now, it was Shannon’s turn to cry. With Mrs. Chilton leaning over to hug her tightly, Shannon hardly knew how to answer. But she found herself wanting to tell someone, very badly, at least a little of what she knew. However, with the huge lump in her throat, and hot tears streaming down her face, she could only managed to spit out, “It’s a horrible place...just horrible.”

The hugging helped, and Shannon felt better, at least enough to stop crying within a couple of minutes.

“Just breathe,” Mrs. Chilton urged, “and have another scone.”

The food helped, making Shannon feel even better. However, she suddenly found she didn’t want to say anything more about her experience in hell, at least, not at this time.

Mrs. Chilton didn’t prompt again; instead, she said, “Well, you’re safe now, thank goodness, and you have a chance to change things, so you won’t end up there again.”

“Exactly,” Shannon responded earnestly, a little surprised by her host’s insight. “I’m grateful for the second chance, and I want to change things. I bet not many people actually get a second chance.”

“True,” Mrs. Chilton agreed. “I think you’ve been given a very special gift.” After refilling the teacups, she went on. “As far as what you asked before, about believing, the trick at first is to start to believe. God has given every person a measure of

faith, and he expects us to exercise it. In fact, he commands us to have faith. When we do, even if only a small amount, that's when things start to happen. I promise you. God will show you things and make things happen, and help you understand how you can trust Him, and trust in the teachings of the bible, more and more."

After sipping tea for a few moments, Mrs. Chilton told Shannon, "So what you went through was sort of like the story in the bible of the Rich Man and Lazarus."

"I'm not familiar with that," Shannon replied.

"It's about a poor man and a rich man," Mrs. Chilton answered. "When they die, the poor man goes to heaven and the rich man ends up in hell; but he's able to see the poor man in heaven. And I think the rich man asks the poor man to help him in some way. I don't remember all of the details, and I don't want to get the story wrong. I also don't remember where it is in the bible, but you could look it up online. That's probably the best way to find out about it, so you can read it for yourself."

"I will," Shannon said, committing the name, Lazarus, to memory. "I've been reading a lot in the bible lately. But some of it's confusing, and it's good to have some direction."

Nodding, Mrs. Chilton responded, "I remember being a little confused early in my walk as a Christian. But as far as direction, since it happened, I mean your experience, have you taken the first steps?" she questioned. "Have you done what you need to do to be saved? Or do you even know what you need to do to avoid ending up in the really bad place?"

"I'm not exactly sure..." Shannon somewhat hesitantly admitted.

"It's pretty simple," Mrs. Chilton assured her. "Accept Christ. He is the Son of God, and He died for our sins. Jesus came to earth to save us, to basically heal the breach created by Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God and were cast out of the garden, which is something God had to do—He had to cast

them out in order to be true and faithful to His word. Thankfully, although this affected all of their descendants, including us today, God had a plan to save us. He sent His Son into the world, and Jesus endured the cross, and died, as full payment for our sins. This gift is sometimes called grace. It is by the grace of our loving God that we are saved. We can't earn our salvation because He gave it to us willingly, as a free gift. When we accept this gift, we are accepted into His family and can begin to have a personal relationship with Him. When we come to know Jesus, we are saved from the pit, or hell, or whatever you want to call the bad place."

As Shannon was thinking everything over, and munching another macaroon, Mrs. Chilton urged, "Do it soon. The sooner you accept Christ, the better. We don't know when Jesus will come back, but we do know He's coming, for certain. And the end times might be near. Jesus could come tomorrow. I think it says in Thessalonians, '...the day of the LORD will come like a thief in the night.' For sure, He will come sometime, and take His family with Him. So you need to make sure that you are part of His family; that is the only path to eternal life."

At home that evening, Shannon tried to recall all of Mrs. Chilton's words, because she felt they were all extremely important.

Just before she went to bed, she prayed earnestly to God. *Dear God, I do believe in your Son, and that He died for my sins. Please, help me learn more, and help me convince my family. Amen.*

After this simple prayer, almost instantly in fact, Shannon felt different inside than she ever had before. It was sort of like being filled with more air, more calmness, and more happiness than she had ever felt at any other time in her life.

Early Sunday morning, when she looked up the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus online, and in the bible (Luke 16:19-31), Shannon realized that what she had experienced when she nearly drowned was very much like the story because, just as

the rich man wanted Lazarus to help him, she had wanted Paulina to help her. Also similar was the fact that Shannon wanted to somehow warn and help her family, which is what the rich man had been desperate for as well.

Outside later in the day with Pickles and Pumpernickel, Shannon took a stroll through the vacant lot next to her house. Just like the ones outside the greenhouse, the wild sunflowers all turned their faces to follow her movements.

This time, Shannon did notice; but it didn't spook her as it had Chime. Instead, she felt happy, and she took it as a sign from God—that He was pleased with her and that He had indeed accepted her to be part of His family. Right there, in the sunshiny field, Shannon said a prayer of thanks to God. *And thank you too, Paulina*, she remembered to add. *Thank you for caring enough to help me.*

Chapter Seven

Dimes and Dreams

On the same morning as Shannon's visit to Mrs. Chilton, Jacob rode his bicycle to the bakery super early to give Mr. Hugo five dimes he had collected.

Instead of standing, as usual, Mr. Hugo was seated on a stool behind the bakery counter. "It's gout, in both my feet," he told Jacob. "When you get to be my age, things start to get a little creaky."

Setting the dimes on the counter, Jacob replied, "You might need to get Dr. Lucille back here to have a look at you."

"Yes," Mr. Hugo responded, wincing as he rose from the stool to hobble the four steps to the cash register. "I guess a few more 'hairpins' might help."

"Please, just take them," Jacob said, when Mr. Hugo set two quarters on the counter in exchange for the dimes. "It's not like a hundred dimes, or anything."

When Mr. Hugo insisted, Jacob reluctantly pocketed the quarters.

"But I should tell you," Mr. Hugo said, "I'm a very superstitious man, and I only try my luck with the box on the eighth day of each month. That's my luckiest day. I actually found the box on the eighth day of a month, June it was."

"I didn't expect you to try to open it with me here," Jacob responded. "But if you do ever manage to unlock it, I hope you'll let me know what you find inside."

"Will do," Mr. Hugo agreed.

Indicating a tray of brownies sitting on the counter, Mr. Astwell told Jacob, who was turning to leave, "Hold on, I want to wrap up some of these up for you."

“I don’t need any baked goods today,” Jacob answered. “And I have to get going. We’re picking up my Aunt Julia this morning to take her to a plant nursery.”

“But they’re burned, and I’m just going to throw them out,” Mr. Astwell said.

“They don’t look burned,” Jacob said, peering closely at the tray.

“Oh they are,” Mr. Astwell insisted, “look at the edges, burned to a crisp. Since they’re chocolate, it’s hard to tell; but they’re definitely burned.”

Deciding not to argue further (because free brownies were free brownies), Jacob gladly waited the two minutes while Mr. Astwell packed up a dozen of the brownies.

After shaking hands with Mr. Astwell, and thanking him, Jacob reached over the counter to shake hands with Mr. Hugo as well.

“I hope your feet feel better soon,” Jacob called as he was leaving.

Mounting his bicycle, Jacob was rather pleased with himself. He had been trying to think of a way to touch Mr. Hugo, in order to heal his feet; and he thought himself very clever to have found a way to do just that. It had all seemed very natural, to Jacob anyway, after thanking Mr. Astwell with a handshake, to then shake Mr. Hugo’s hand as well.

Riding home quickly, Jacob found his mother just getting her shoes on and scrambling for her car keys. When Jacob showed her the brownies, she grabbed napkins as well so that they could enjoy the treat on their trip. Jacob had a brownie right away; but since it wasn’t safe to drive and eat at the same time, his mother waited to have hers until Jacob was running inside the nursing home to get Aunt Julia.

As Aunt Julia, too, had a brownie immediately upon entering the car, she told Jacob and his mother the latest goings on at the nursing home, in particular, how much she and her friends had enjoyed the original *Star Wars Trilogy*. “So we’re

set to watch all three of the prequel *Star Wars* movies next week,” she said. Aunt Julia also had a lot to say about a recent outing to an aquarium. “Sixteen of us went; it’s a huge place, with all kinds of pools and tanks filled with strange sea creatures. It has a splendid gift shop too; I got a t-shirt. And we stopped at that chicken-wing place on the way back. Ooh...they were spicy,” she added.

Mrs. Woodbury had gotten directions to the Emerald Acres Plant Nursery from her coworkers, who promised that the large selection was well worth the thirty-minute drive to get there.

As soon as they arrived, they could tell that this greenhouse was much better than the one the family had gone to the previous weekend, not only because it was obviously larger, but also because of the many items sitting outside, which included a huge variety of plants, decorative pots, stone garden ornaments, cedar benches, rain barrels, and the like.

This happened to be the nursery where Chime worked; and Paddy, again behaving himself so as not to be put on a lead, greeted the new arrivals in a polite fashion as they entered the greenhouse.

Jacob’s mother immediately headed for several seed racks because she was thinking about doing a garden in the spring. Mr. Emmons had a backyard garden and was always bringing them vegetables, so Mrs. Woodbury thought she might like to try her hand at gardening as well, as a hobby.

As Aunt Julia drifted toward a bench filled with angel wing begonias, she told Jacob, “You look really tired.” This was true, as Jacob hadn’t slept well for several nights in a row.

“I had a weird dream last night, and it woke me up,” Jacob replied. “Then I couldn’t get back to sleep for thinking about what the dream might mean, but I never could work it out.”

“Well, I can’t be of much help to you there,” Aunt Julia answered. “I’ve never been any good at figuring out dreams.”

When Aunt Julia moved off to join Mrs. Woodbury in exploring the rest of the greenhouse, Jacob decided he was

interested in looking at the windsocks and birdhouses on the other side of the begonia display.

Dolores, nearby, happened to have overheard Jacob's and his aunt's comments, and she told him, "You should talk to Chime; she can tell you what your dream means."

Jacob was surprised, but didn't have time to say anything because Dolores was already gesturing to her coworker, who was also nearby. "Come over here," Dolores called, "another strange dream for you to interpret."

Though Jacob was a little reluctant, he was trying to get better at talking to girls. And since his mom and Aunt Julia had just set off to explore, he definitely had time. Dolores also set off as Chime approached, leaving Jacob feeling even more comfortable. After all, talking to one girl was much easier than talking to two at once.

After introducing himself to Chime, who was gazing at him politely and inquisitively, Jacob proceeded to describe his weird dream.

"I was walking up a hill full of big rocks and trees, but also some open spaces, and I suddenly saw a ghostly skeleton, the size of a tall man, walking down the hill towards me. He was glowing pale green, like a Halloween skeleton. We were both walking in the same line, heading towards each other exactly on the same path. And we were surprised to see each other, but we couldn't stop or avoid colliding because it was too late. We saw each other too late." Jacob took a deep breath before going on. "But I didn't really collide with him. I walked through the skeleton, and I could actually feel him, but there wasn't much resistance, and I made it through really easily. Then we both kept walking and neither of us looked back. Even though I didn't look back, I somehow knew he didn't either. And I'm pretty sure the skeleton was a man, and not a woman. As soon as I made it up the hill, the dream ended."

Chime only took a slight pause to consider before telling Jacob, "Passing through the skeleton with no problem means

that you are destined to go through something surprising and possibly scary, but you'll come out okay. The uphill part means that whatever you are destined to go through is good, like you are making progress or working toward something good. And you made it up the hill, so that means you will make it to whatever you are working towards. You will definitely reach your goals."

What Chime said made a lot of sense, given the current goings on in Jacob's life. And it all sounded very positive. He had almost been afraid the skeleton might mean someone was going to die, or worse. Smiling, Jacob thanked Chime for the interpretation.

Also smiling, Chime answered, "You're welcome. Any other strange dreams you want me to interpret?"

Though Jacob was a little hesitant, he said, "I did have another strange dream, maybe a week or so ago, and it was a lot scarier than the skeleton one."

When he took a long pause, Chime, in somewhat of a cheering-him-on manner, said, "Go ahead."

"I had moved into a haunted apartment. I live with my mom; but for some reason, I moved into an apartment on my own. And it was really scary, not just spooky, because it had stuff that could really hurt people, sort of like things we see in really scary movies—monsters, demons, and people with fingers like slashing knives. The scary things were not right there in front of me, but somehow I knew they were coming, and that they definitely had the power to hurt me. I don't know why I moved in. Anyway, the apartment started off empty, but then furniture started appearing out of nowhere, all around me. I remember thinking, *Thank you. I'm still scared, but I need some furniture.* Then, a small chalkboard appeared on the wall in front of me with my mom's name on it, her full name, Ellen Woodbury, and I thought, *Oh great, all the monsters and slashers know who she is and they are going to hurt her too.* Then all of a sudden I woke up."

Chime didn't even need to pause to consider this time. "Oh this is a simple one too," she told Jacob, "and really similar to your skeleton dream. Something unsettling is happening in your life, but everything will be okay. And it's not that the monsters or slashers were going to hurt your mom. Instead, someone that you know well, and that has the power to comfort you, was the exit to the scary situation, or the help for you. It also means that when you move on to something in the future, like college or whatever, your mom will still be there for you, and everything will be okay. So you shouldn't worry."

Jacob was nodding and smiling, not only because this interpretation, too, was very positive and upbeat, but also because Chime's confident manner of speaking truly made him believe what she was saying. He listened closely as she went on.

"But there's something you should know about names in dreams—they don't always mean exactly the person who is mentioned, especially if the dream pertains to the future. If someone in the future is destined to help you, but you haven't even met that person yet, then you can't know their name. So the name in your dream might be a substitute. You do know your mom, and you know that she has the power to help you. But if the chalkboard surprised you, and you weren't particularly expecting the person named to help you out of the scary situation, then your mother's name might be a substitute for another person, who will eventually end up helping you with something in the future." Smiling, Chime added, "So while your dream could be interpreted with slight variations, it's still a good dream, not a bad one, even if it was scary."

Since she needed to be getting back to work, Chime was turning to leave when she remembered something else she wanted to tell Jacob. "Oh, and the part about worrying that someone will hurt your mother...that just means you are a worrier. But don't worry. Someone will always be there to

help you. And you don't need to worry about your mom because someone will always be there to help her too."

After thanking Chime, and setting off in search of his mother and aunt, Jacob suddenly found strange and buoyant thoughts running through his mind. *She's more than just a pretty girl; she's really smart and confident and upbeat, like a fountain of positivity. I wonder if that's even a real word, positivity. And I wonder if I could take her home with me, and keep her in my pocket, for any time that I'm worried or need cheering up.*

Even aside from the unfamiliar and carefree thoughts, Jacob felt really good, like he was walking on air. *So that's what that saying means, and feels like...hmmm...pretty neat.*

Catching up to his mom and Aunt Julia, Jacob found them loading a cart with about a dozen pots of flowers and houseplants destined for the nursing home.

"Can you really afford all of these?" Mrs. Woodbury asked.

"Oh, don't worry," Aunt Julia replied, "a couple of my friends are pitching in."

Aunt Julia paid cash when they checked out, and Jacob asked if he could check the years of the two dimes she received with her change. "I'm collecting dimes from certain years," he told her.

One happened to be a year he was looking for, and when Jacob offered to trade another dime for it, she said, "No, just take it. And remind me the next time you visit, I have a whole roll of dimes in my room to give you."

With Paddy overseeing, Jacob and his mother carefully packed the plants into the hatchback area and one of the rear floorboards of the mini-van.

After they left, Chime couldn't help thinking that Jacob looked familiar; but she couldn't quite remember where she had seen him before. She didn't think he was someone from school; it was somewhere else. (Her brain, at present, couldn't associate him with her dream about Shannon drowning because

Shannon had been the focus of that dream.) Being outside of their normal settings, people that seemed familiar at the greenhouse were often hard for Chime place. Since she was struggling to recall, which made her feel disoriented, Chime shook off trying to remember where she might have seen Jacob in lieu of focusing on watering mums and asters. *If I'm meant to remember, she thought, it will come to me.*

Aunt Julia insisted on paying when they stopped to fill the car with gas. She also bought burgers and milkshakes for them all at a drive-in restaurant. "Don't worry; this isn't going to make me strapped for cash," she assured Mrs. Woodbury. "I'm just spending some of my mad money."

When Chime got home from work in the late afternoon, her mother surprised her by taking the both of them out for burgers and shakes. Since Gavin and Mr. Stouffer were out running errands together, this was a good opportunity for a little mother/daughter private time.

They walked to their nearby drive-in, taking Trestle with them because the restaurant allowed pets in their picnic area, as long as they were well behaved, which Trestle always was, even though he looked longingly at his humans until they each shared a small bit of burger with him. After the two bits, he was simply content to sit and watch other patrons from his spot in the shade by Chime's feet.

After asking Chime about her day at work, and hearing that she had interpreted two dreams for a boy about her age, Mrs. Stouffer told her daughter, "That reminds me; I wanted to tell you that I haven't had the falling elevator dream since you told me what it meant. And it's nearly two years now."

"Oh, that's great," Chime answered.

Mrs. Stouffer had once been plagued by a dream in which she was standing in front of a rickety old elevator that she knew was going to fall when she got in, but she would still get in anyway. She had had the same dream over and over for several years; and even though she would always wake up when the

elevator started to fall, it was still a very frightening experience. Chime had simply told her mother that because she sometimes expected bad things to happen, they ended up happening; but that if her mother would stop expecting the worst, good things would happen instead. Whether it was correct or not, as soon as Chime gave the interpretation, Mrs. Stouffer stopped having the dream. And from that point on, she tried to heed Chime's advice on expecting good things to happen, instead of bad ones, which had proved to work well for her. Things did end up going more smoothly most of the time. She especially found that people had the power to pleasantly surprise her, when she didn't automatically assume the worst about them. When she gave people the benefit of the doubt, and more credit, they often ended up exceeding her expectations, instead of disappointing her.

Sipping her strawberry milkshake, Chime was happy that her mother had shared this with her because it reinforced that her gift was being used properly, to truly help people. Having positive feedback once in awhile also gave her confidence. Chime did indeed feel that she had interpreted her mother's dream correctly, and she felt sure that she had given Jacob a correct interpretation of his dreams as well. Scratching behind Trestle's ears, she decided that, overall, it had been a pretty wonderful day.

That very night, Shannon had a dream in which hundreds of sunflowers were watching her, and turning to follow her movements. But unlike Jacob or Mrs. Stouffer, she didn't need an interpreter to know what it meant. The sunflowers pertained to the light that Shannon was now part of, instead of the darkness that was her past. And although some people might have been frightened by something like flower heads following their every movement, Shannon had no intention of avoiding sunflowers in the future. She had always been one to confront the unknown, explore mysteries, and look for answers. Plus, she was pretty sure she knew the answer to this unknown. This

was God, sending her a message: *As the sunflowers are following you, continue to follow Me.*

I will, Shannon responded in thought, *and gladly.*

Chapter Eight

Like a Rollercoaster

On Wednesday afternoon, Jacob found out from Mr. Emmons that Mr. Hugo was in the hospital. “Mr. Astwell is running the Dime Box alone this week,” he told Jacob.

As it turns out, Mr. Hugo did not just have gout, but also rheumatoid arthritis, which had gotten so bad that he couldn’t even walk early in the week. According to Mr. Emmons, Mr. Hugo had evidently had this type of arthritis for years, but was reluctant to take medications because of the side effects, and possible damage from taking certain medications long term. Since there was no cure for his condition, it was likely that he would have to take meds for the rest of his life; therefore, he didn’t want to take them unless he absolutely had to.

Stunned, Jacob felt as though someone had just let the air out of him, and he had a little trouble getting his words out to respond. “But...but...I touched him. On Saturday...I shook his hand.” Shaking his head in disbelief, he added, “So why didn’t it work? If I have the gift of healing, why didn’t it work?”

With a large sigh and a long pause (because it was a complex subject to address that would likely require a complex answer), Mr. Emmons began by saying, “There are a lot of opinions on the reasons for illnesses and suffering to exist, and I can only tell you what I personally believe. First of all, we are meant to share in Christ’s suffering; therefore, some suffering is meant to be. And He didn’t just suffer on the cross, and the events leading up to the crucifixion, He suffers even now. Since the Holy Spirit dwells within us, He hurts when we hurt. He’s also sometimes grieved by us and suffers when we don’t

live godly lives. We're meant to become more like Him during our time on earth so that we can be fit to be part of His family in the hereafter. When we rebel, when our thoughts and actions are not in line with what's good and pleasing to God, He hurts. He is our Father, and He hurts in the same way a parent hurts when a child goes astray. So it's only right that we should share in some of the hurting."

Since what Mr. Emmons was saying made sense so far, Jacob listened carefully as he went on. "We also can't know what God's plans are for other people's lives. God's thinking and ways are so much higher than ours, and we can't always know His purposes. It's almost like making a wish for someone. We may think that what we are wishing for is something good, but what if it's not in the best interest of that other person? We can't know the whole picture of that person's life. Think about how complicated your life is. I can't know everything about you. So if I wish something for you, it might not be what's truly right for you. Like if I wish for an elderly person to have a big house, and then he or she ends up falling down the stairs. In that case, the tiny one-floor apartment the person used to live in was actually a better fit for that person. I know it's kind of a lame example, but you get the drift.

"Also," Mr. Emmons continued, "I think some people are meant to learn something, or do something, before their suffering ends—like if someone drinks too much, they probably have to stop before they can be healed of whatever is ailing them. Or another person might just need to learn patience. I remember I had a foot injury a few years back that lingered for eighteen months. I did everything I was supposed to do as far as balancing rest and exercise, and it should have healed in six to eight weeks, but it didn't for some reason. But while I was staying inside and off my foot, I ended up learning patience; and I got a lot of stuff done inside like replacing a leaky faucet, reorganizing drawers, and cleaning out the attic. So I think it was meant to be, to teach me something. If nothing else, it

taught me that I'm getting older and I have to be more careful about overdoing it outside in the yard, which is what caused the injury in the first place. I think sometimes He allows us to go through something painful, instead of delivering us from it, so that we can learn and grow. If something will ultimately be for our good, we might have to endure the bad that leads to the good."

After a short pause, Mr. Emmons finished with, "And sometimes we simply have to trust in God. So on some occasions, that might be a reason why the gift of healing won't work. Maybe we don't have enough trust that it will work."

Jacob had a lot to think about after this. Most of what Mr. Emmons had told him sounded right; but the last part, about trusting, was somewhat confusing. Did Mr. Emmons mean that Jacob needed to have full trust in God that his gift of healing would work, or did he mean that other people were supposed to trust that God would heal them? After considering everything for a good long time, Jacob decided that both ways of looking at the trust issue were probably correct. If Jacob himself didn't have enough trust in his gift, it probably wouldn't work. Likewise, the people needing healing were probably supposed to have enough trust in God in order to actually be healed.

Thinking about the trust issue made Jacob realize that he shouldn't be so wishy-washy in acknowledging for certain the wonderful gift he had been given. Having tried, several times, to talk himself out of the fact that he had the gift of healing, he realized his brain shouldn't be back and forth on this issue. Instead, he should completely trust that he truly had the gift of healing—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. And since he couldn't possibly know whether or not those he hoped to heal had trust in God, he couldn't let that aspect affect his actions or thoughts either. He would simply have to do the best he could and hope that others would do the same, namely, trust in God because He is not only all powerful and can accomplish anything, He also always, *always* has our best interests at heart. He always wants

the best for us, and He can *absolutely* be trusted to work out all things for our good, if we only learn to trust and rely on Him.

In thinking about this further, Jacob looked up one of his favorite bible passages that he loved reading again and again, Jeremiah 29:11, because it just made him feel so good inside. ““For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.””

Though he felt somewhat more settled, Jacob couldn't seem to get everything settled in his mind, and he ended up sleeping poorly during the night and being somewhat distracted at school the next day. After his long hours of puzzling, he had felt pretty good about everything because what Mr. Emmons had said made a lot of sense. However, several other questions had popped into his brain since that time, and he was starting to realize that the whole thing was a lot more complicated than simply why some people were meant to bear an affliction and would therefore not be healed by his gift.

What was currently troubling him was the question of exactly how the gift of healing was supposed to fit into his future. He didn't want to be a sideshow, like someone in a big-top tent advertising the gift, then running around touching people with one hand while asking for donations with the other. That might be right for some healers, but Jacob was pretty sure it wasn't what he was meant to do. And he already felt very strongly about this; he just somehow knew deep down in his soul, and even in his bones, that he shouldn't use the gift for profit.

So what exactly was he supposed to do with his gift? And what if he did something wrong? And what if he did succumb to the temptation to use healing powers for profit? Using a gift or talent for personal gain might be hard for any person to resist, even if they didn't intend to use it in that way and tried very hard not to.

Jacob had been thinking that he might want to be a doctor, which is something he had wished for when he was about

Lucille's age. Seeing her at the bakery had reminded him of his early hopes and dreams. He hadn't thought about becoming a doctor for many years, mainly because he had some trouble in school with subjects like science and math. However, he had started thinking about it again, especially in the last few days, since Chime had told him that making it up the hill in his dream meant he would be able to accomplish his goals. In these recent ponderings, Jacob had even entertained fantastical thoughts about being a super successful doctor, in being able to heal with just a touch. But, if he couldn't always count on the touch thing, where did that leave him? With so many questions running through his brain, Jacob wasn't sure now how he felt about having the gift of healing. With a lot of pressure to do the right thing, it didn't seem like much of a gift, not for him anyway.

Instead of feeling excited and happy, or blessed, Jacob felt more confused and afraid. He definitely wanted to use the gift as God intended, which he felt sure didn't include personal gain such as a lot of recognition or profit. But becoming a doctor would mean some profit in the form of income, which he guessed he could always devote to good causes, in addition to supporting himself, and possibly a family if he should ever get married and have children. He could always do volunteer work as a means of using the gift for good—that would probably be pleasing to God who was making everything possible.

After school, and after finishing his homework, Jacob decided to work on one of his model airplanes. His mother was baking something in the oven for dinner, which meant they would be eating slightly later than usual, so he had plenty of time. With Copy sitting on his desk to supervise, Jacob set to work adding decals to the plane. However, with all of the thoughts about healing, suffering, the future, and everything else running through his mind, he wasn't making a very good job of it and ended up messing up a couple of the decals. In order not to ruin any more of them, he stopped work, deciding

instead to watch TV with Copy until dinnertime, which was much more relaxing.

Jacob desperately needed to relax, not just because of the questions plaguing him, but also because the emotions accompanying his thoughts were very overpowering. Only a week ago, he had felt like he was on top of the world. Now, instead, he felt drained, weighted down, and even a little helpless. Life, of course, was often confusing and unpredictable; and Jacob could almost compare the ups and downs to the highs and lows one might experience riding a rollercoaster.

Shannon was on something of a rollercoaster ride in her thinking and emotions as well. She had briefly chickened out about talking to her family. *I can still believe without having to confront them*, she thought, *because I know it's going to be really hard to convince them of anything*. But just like the chickening out some people experience before getting on a rollercoaster, Shannon was able to overcome her fears by reasoning. Paulina's bracelet encouraged her, along with reading the bible. She was thrilled when flipping pages to chance upon a passage that she felt was meant just for her in her present situation, Matthew 5:14-16, which would end up becoming one of her all-time favorite quotes. "“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.””

I have to share the good news, Shannon thought. *It would be selfish to keep it to myself. And I am now part of the light; it would be wrong of me not to try to rescue others who are still in darkness.*

Again flipping pages, Shannon was led to something in the Old Testament that she felt also exactly fit her situation—the story in 2 Kings about the lepers exploring outside their

impoverished city and finding the empty soldiers' camp, still full of supplies though the soldiers had left. The lepers needed to go right away to share the good news with the people starving in the city. *My family is basically spiritually starving*, Shannon reasoned, *and I need to share the good news with them as quickly as possible.*

Shannon often felt she needed help in understanding the lessons in the bible, and she sometimes had to think them through for a very long time to truly get their meaning. She had even had to look up explanations of a couple of Jesus' parables online, to find out exactly what they meant from the experts. But in this case, she had understood right away that food starving also meant spiritual starving. *Funny how something from so long ago in history can pertain exactly to me, right here and now*, she thought.

Once again flipping, Shannon next landed on Isaiah 52:7, which she thought was absolutely beautiful, and also perfectly suited to her situation. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"

So I shouldn't delay, she thought. *I should get moving on this.* Shannon was reminded of something Mrs. Chilton had told her—that we don't know how much time we have. Since Jesus could come back at any moment, it was right to worry about not moving quickly enough. And although she didn't feel quite ready, at this exact moment, she resolved to get moving soon. Reading and learning from the bible was definitely preparing her for something; she could just feel it, as she was turning the pages, though what she was feeling was hard to describe. It was almost as if she was absorbing not only the knowledge and wisdom from the bible, but also soaking in something like an energy and determination that simply couldn't be stopped, or even smothered, because it was destined to roll along, building toward something important and exciting.

And if someone tried to stop or smother it, they wouldn't be able to, because the whole thing would end up growing and building anyway, and possibly in such a way as to actually turn into an explosion, not necessarily a dangerous one, but more like one that would add something beautiful and wonderful to the world, like something amazing being born.

In deciding which of her two bibles she preferred, Shannon felt the *Living Bible* was probably easier to read. However, whenever she was confused about a passage, looking it up and rereading it in the *Revised Standard Version* somehow made it easier to understand. *They're both good*, she reasoned, as an incredibly odd idea popped into her brain: That the different versions of the bibles were like potatoes—mashed, French fried, baked, tater tots, hash browns—they're all good, but one usually ends up being a person's favorite. *Tater tots*, Shannon decided firmly. *So I wonder which bible will end up being like tater tots for me.*

By coincidence, Shannon next ended up reading the exact same passage in Jeremiah that Jacob had just read; however, different verses ended up speaking to her, Jeremiah 29:13-14, as though God was speaking directly to her, giving her reassurances. "...You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you...."

This already seemed to be so true for Shannon. Reading more and more, with her whole heart seeking, was helping her to believe more and more. Praying, too, was helping her stay on track.

And looking online, when unable to find answers in the bible, also proved very helpful. For example, Shannon had been very confused about the time thing, in particular, how everything she had experienced while unconscious by the lake had fit into just a few minutes of time. When she looked it up online, the answer ended up being the same as how God manages to spend time individually with each one of His children, when there are so many of them: God is outside of

time, and is therefore not in any way limited by it, as human beings are. One of the websites Shannon looked at actually used a quote from the bible to illustrate this point, 2 Peter 3:8. "...with the LORD one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

For all of the things Jacob was currently confused about, time wasn't one of them; in fact, time was actually helping to even out his rollercoaster ride somewhat. By Friday evening, he felt more like he was on the little kids' rollercoaster, instead the grown-up one; the emotional swings and dips were evening out some, with the highs and lows in his thinking not being as extreme either.

After dinner, Jacob played several games of foosball with Kevin Ambrose, a friend from down the street.

Later, in the quiet time before bedtime, Jacob again turned to the bible for his own answers and encouragement; and he was able to find something specifically relating to gifts, Romans 12:6-8. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." Reading this gave Jacob a few more things to think about. Fortunately, on this night, the extra thoughts weren't enough to keep him from sound sleeping.

On Saturday morning, Jacob helped Mr. Emmons rip out two overgrown pittosporum bushes along his front drive. While they were taking a break to have some iced tea, Jacob mentioned, "I was looking up gifts in the bible last night, and I found in Romans where it talks about gifts of prophecy, service, teaching, showing mercy, and a couple of other things; but it didn't say anything about healing. So I've been wondering if maybe the sparrow gave me a different gift. Or maybe he didn't give me a gift at all; maybe he was just passing through."

“They could hardly list all of the gifts given to us by God,” Mr. Emmons responded. “There are so many, both gifts and skills, even many aside from the ones handed out by white sparrows. In fact, the Holy Spirit gives us many of our gifts. Maybe healing falls under mercy or ministering to others.” With slight confusion crinkling his brow, he added, “But I think there are several places in the bible that talk about the gift of healing; there’s at least one that I remember in particular.” Running inside to get his bible, Mr. Emmons flipped pages until he found what he was looking for, 1 Corinthians 12:27-31. He passed the book over so Jacob could read it for himself. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

So healing *was* listed, which meant he probably did have this gift. Again, Jacob privately chided himself for ever doubting, unaware that everyone has doubts at some time or another, particularly with regards to things that are new and unfamiliar, and that we have to get used to in order to truly understand and accept them.

Jacob had lot to think about as he set back to work on the bushes.

At home later, working on his airplane model again, Jacob felt much more settled, and he didn’t mess up the decals again.

However, despite feeling better about his gift, he was in a slight state of worry because he knew his mother was currently worried about a few things. She tried not to show it, but Jacob could tell that she was worried. Both car insurance and registration were due to be paid, along with a dental bill, and her budget was very tight.

Jacob helped by clipping coupons and praying about it. He knew excessive worrying was considered a sin, and he often asked forgiveness for this, but somehow he couldn't seem to help it. Even the smallest things sometimes caused him to worry.

As before, reading his favorite bible passages helped, such as Philippians 4:6. "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

1 Peter 5:6-8 was also one of Jacob's go-to verses. "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour."

Reminding himself that it was sometimes the devil that caused people to worry, Jacob quoted part of Matthew 16:23 aloud. "..."Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men."..."

He instantly felt better, a lot lighter and freer, and it almost seemed as though there was more air in the room than there had been before. Suddenly remembering what Chime had told him at the greenhouse, about how he would always have help and that he shouldn't worry, he felt even less worried.

Maybe not worrying just takes practice. He had gotten into such a habit of worrying, he probably now just needed to break the habit. *And I don't need to have her in my pocket after all,* Jacob further thought. *I can just think about what she said, and come up with more things like that on my own.*

On Saturday afternoon, Jacob's mother got a call from the manager of a local grocery store who told her she had just won a five-hundred dollar gift card for use in his store from a drawing she had entered.

Mrs. Woodbury was stunned as she put down the phone and related the news to her son. "This will go a long ways for two

people; it will get us all the way through Christmas, and beyond.” Smiling somewhat sheepishly, while shaking her head slightly, she stated, “I almost didn’t enter because of something that happened when I was in college. I was working at a sandwich shop and one of my coworkers got a call from a cousin of hers who was a manager of a local grocery store. They had just had a drawing for a hundred dollars in groceries, and some woman from a small neighboring town had won. Well, the manager didn’t want to give the prize to someone from out of town, so he offered it to his cousin. I was sick inside, imagining that poor woman driving into town every week to buy her groceries from them, then getting gypped out of her prize by them. That’s why I hardly ever enter drawings; I’m convinced they are fixed. This’ll teach me to doubt,” she added. “I should have more trust. And I’m so glad I entered. Now we have a little breathing room in the budget.”

As he went to bed, Jacob thanked God in his prayers, before looking up something in the bible that he remembered, about God providing for all our needs, Matthew 6:26-32.

“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.”

This was truly one of Jacob’s all-time favorites, and he always felt better after reading it. In fact, he felt as if he was on

top of the rollercoaster again; and that this time, he might actually stay there.

Just before falling asleep, Jacob started thinking about an odd dream he had had just the night before in which he was walking in a large subdivision not far from his home that was, as yet, not very built up. In fact, many of the one-to-three acre lots were still for sale. It was strange for him to be walking in his dream because he usually rode his bicycle. But that, of course, wasn't the oddest part of his dream. As he was walking, ahead of him a short ways, he saw eleven coyotes walk across the road, in a single line. Somehow, Jacob knew he was in no danger; they weren't going to hurt him, even though they saw him, and saw that he was alone, while they were in a pack.

Even in his drowsiness, while thinking back, Jacob realized that this dream meant nearly the same thing as his skeleton dream. He was going to go through something unsettling and possibly unexpected, but was still going to be okay. The only part that confused him was the number of coyotes. *Does it maybe take eleven years of school and training to become a doctor*, he wondered. *Or, what else could the number eleven mean?* Whatever it meant, Jacob decided it was probably something good; and he fell asleep a short while later with a huge smile on his face.

Chime, by nature and personality, spent most of her time on top of the rollercoaster. However, this weekend was turning out to be an exception. In fact, she had left work early on Saturday, and had cried nearly the whole walk home because of something that had happened in the afternoon. The cash register at the greenhouse had come up sixty dollars short, and Chime had been working the greenhouse and the register entirely alone since the money had been checked just after lunchtime.

When questioning her about the shortage, Mr. Purcell had said, "I'm not saying you took it, but maybe you messed up in

giving change. You were the only one here for the last two hours.”

Chime couldn't imagine what had happened. She was always very careful with money at the greenhouse. Most people paid with credit cards; but of the two people that had paid with cash after lunch, Chime only remembered handling one twenty dollar bill while accepting the payment. And she hadn't gotten a fifty dollar bill from anyone for over a month. Could she have accidentally given someone twenties instead of one dollar bills for change? Could she have made such a careless mistake? It seemed almost impossible. Or had she turned her back on a customer, who then stole from the register? That seemed nearly equally farfetched because she always kept an eye out for that sort of thing. Plus, very few people visiting the greenhouse would ever do such a thing, even if given a clear opportunity.

Chime's parents offered to talk to Mr. Purcell for her. Though it would have been nice to have her parents' help, especially given how upsetting this situation was, she declined. This was something she would have to work out for herself; and she was scheduled to work again on Monday after school, which Chime decided was soon enough to talk to Mr. Purcell again because it would give her time to calm down and think things through. She had actually cried at the greenhouse, and she wanted to get a better handle on her emotions before discussing the issue again with her employer. But it was hard to calm down because, in the back of her mind, Chime wondered if Mr. Purcell might be thinking that she was a thief, even after knowing her for so long.

Dolores happened to be away from the greenhouse, working on a landscaping project all afternoon. When she found out what had happened, feeling in great need to stick up for Chime, she offered to make up the sixty dollars herself, though Mr. Purcell had never suggested that anyone should do this. But as it turns out, no one was going to need to make up anything

because Mr. Purcell had found out what had happened. Henry Heiner, another greenhouse worker who most often drove the delivery trucks, told Mr. Purcell that Chime had, in fact, not been entirely alone in the greenhouse during the time in question. “I was unloading pallets out back, and I saw Emily go into the greenhouse through the side door,” Henry said. “I didn’t see her come out because I left to deliver that load of pea pebbles. But she was definitely in there. I guess Chime just didn’t see her.”

When her father confronted her, Emily admitted that she had taken the money.

Just after dinner, both Dolores and Henry came to Chime’s house to report the news to her. “Mr. Purcell wanted to come himself,” Henry said, “but he’s dealing with Emily.”

“She shorted the register, just to try to get you into trouble,” Dolores told her. “Ever since the car incident, she’s wanted to get back at us. And she’s so jealous of you because people like you so much better than they do a brat like her.” After giving Chime a hug, she added, “I’m quitting in December when I graduate, and I’m so glad.”

“You don’t have to work there,” Chime’s father told her, as the family all sat down together with the visitors to have cookies and fruit punch.

“I could probably help you find enough odd jobs in the neighborhood, like babysitting and yard work,” Gavin offered, “to supplement your allowance nearly as much as you make from the Purcells.”

Henry also had a suggestion. “When you turn sixteen, I’m pretty sure I can get you on at that botanical research facility. They study flowers and herbs for making medicines and products like shampoos and lotions. I make soil and gravel deliveries there all the time, and I know a couple of the managers really well. They’ve asked me before if I know anyone who might want a job. And they’d be flexible with your hours, just like the Purcells.”

“What a good idea,” Chime said.

“I know it’s all the way across town,” Henry added, “but maybe you can get a car by then. Plus, if you’re serious about making plants your career, you’ll probably learn a lot working there.”

“Very true,” Dolores said. “If you want to be a botanist, or an herbalist, or whatever, that would be the ideal learning spot. By the way,” she went on, “Emily is grounded. She can’t go anywhere with her friends; she’s not allowed in the greenhouse unless her father is with her. She gets no allowance for two months, and she has to do extra chores. Not that she had many before, other than picking up her room once in awhile, but this will be a big change for her, having to do cleaning and laundry and stuff.”

Chime had a lot to think about for the rest of the weekend.

Emily apologized to her on Monday afternoon; and since she seemed halfway sincere, Chime sincerely accepted the apology.

Mr. Purcell also apologized, for not investigating more before talking to her, and for upsetting her. And he absolutely assured her he knew she had not taken the money. In the heat of the moment, he just couldn’t figure out what had happened.

Chime decided she would keep working for the Purcells, for the time being, while saving up for a car so she could possibly get a different job when she turned sixteen. In addition to liking her present job, for the most part, Chime wondered if her being there might possibly be helping Emily, to learn and grow up some.

Chapter Nine

Bumps in the Road

After school on Tuesday, Shannon again went to the vacant lot next to her house with Pickles and Pumpernickel. As of late, she had found it very cheering to visit the sunflowers and watch them turn to follow her as she strolled about. In addition to cheering, she was steeling herself for what she was planning to do after dinner, which was talk to her family for the first time about what had happened when she nearly drowned, and most specifically about seeing Paulina, because that was what had proved the whole thing to be real. She also wanted to stress that she had since learned some things about God, and that she planned to take steps to learn even more. Shannon had picked this particular evening because she knew her dad usually made it home early on Tuesdays. After first talking to her parents and Abby, she would then move on to her grandparents, to try to save them as well.

Shannon's parents and sister were very curious as to why she had called a family meeting, and they imagined it must be something important because Shannon had asked them all to turn off their phones. Her mom and dad actually thought she might have some big school news to report (like when she had told them she was joining the National Honor Society), while Abby hoped Shannon might be about to ask for a raise in allowance, which would benefit Abby because hers would then be raised as well. This was one thing Abby truly admired about her sister—her successful persuasiveness with their parents.

Shannon began by telling her family that she had gone to a service at the Methodist Church on Sunday morning, and that she thought the message was really good. "They are having a

speaker tomorrow evening at the Lutheran Church over on Graycastle,” she added, “and I’m planning to go to that too. Then, this coming weekend, I’m going to try out the Baptist Church by the park. I want to go to different churches for a while, until I find the one that feels right for me.”

Taking a deep breath before going on, Shannon then said, “I’m telling you this because I also want to tell you what happened to me when I nearly drowned, because it wasn’t that simple. Yes, I nearly drowned, but I also nearly died. And when I nearly died, something happened to me, something really important. I’m ready now to tell you about it, or at least part of it.”

Suddenly feeling nervous, Shannon paused to collect her thoughts before saying, “When I was unconscious I had a very intense experience, and I got to see some things, things that were confusing at first, but then I understood them. And I understand even more now that I’ve done some reading, and thinking, and some research.”

She was trying not to ramble, but her thoughts were rambling somewhat, and what she was saying was coming out slightly disorganized.

Forcing herself to focus, she said, “When I drowned, I saw a friend of mine who died a couple of years ago, Paulina Chilton, the one whose mother I went to see. Paulina was in heaven, and I was looking in on her, like looking into a window.”

(Because Shannon wanted to focus on Paulina’s part of the story, she had decided that she would wait to tell her family that she had actually been in hell, while looking into heaven. She would have plenty of time to go into gory details later, after relating what she thought was most important.)

For the most part, her family was listening politely. Her father had a questioning look on his face. Abby, who had been keenly listening at first, had started fidgeting; and she now had an annoyed look on her face. Shannon reasoned that her sister

was probably annoyed at having to spend time doing this, instead of reading, watching TV, or practicing gymnastics. But it couldn't be helped, because Abby needed to hear this, along with their parents. Her mother's expression was one of concern. Unfortunately, it would not turn out to be the type of concern Shannon might have hoped for during a discussion about heaven and seeing a friend who had passed away—concern for the eternal life of her family's souls. And as her daughter started to go on with her story, Mrs. McNay suddenly found she couldn't listen to another word before saying, "Wait a minute, this is absurd."

Her mother's statement threw Shannon for a loop because she hadn't yet reached the part in her story about having proof from Paulina and Mrs. Chilton that the experience had been real. She had just been about to tell her family this when her mother interrupted; and since she hadn't managed to get that far before meeting resistance, Shannon felt completely deflated, as though she had already failed.

Addressing her husband, Mrs. McNay said, "I think she's fallen into a cult."

"Now that's absurd," Shannon stated. "If I've fallen into a cult, why would I be talking about visiting different churches? Cult people don't go to different churches."

"It's all a bunch of hooey," her mother countered. "Religious stuff is all just made up, wishful thinking. And it's intolerant of others, and their differences. It condemns people, even good people."

"You haven't even heard everything I have to say," Shannon said, in an extremely frustrated tone. "I have lots more to tell you, and it's important, so you should listen."

Unfortunately, Mrs. McNay was similar to Jacob's Aunt Julia in being something like a force of nature. She was also the person from whom Shannon had inherited most of her stubbornness and persistence. Shaking her head, she told her daughter, "I'm not listening to any more of this."

“But I’ve been doing a lot of reading lately, and it all makes perfect sense,” Shannon said, in a pleading and somewhat desperate tone. “If I could just tell you some of the things I’ve learned. Plus, I have proof that my experience was real because of something Paulina told me. It was something no one could have known, that was completely secret and private. Then I checked with her mother, and what she told me was true. This was something only her mother knew about. But Paulina told me about it when I saw her in heaven. This was the way I found to prove that what happened to me was real. And I need to tell you a lot more about that, if you’re willing to listen.”

Sadly, at this time, her mother was not. “Someone’s got to her,” she told her husband, “and influenced her. None of this is real; she’s making it up.”

Fortunately, Shannon’s father didn’t mind hearing more. Responding to his wife, in somewhat of a chiding tone, he said, “Why would she make this up?”

“Because of what that Mrs. Hansen told us,” Mrs. McNay answered. (Shannon’s parents had briefly talked to the high school counselor, Darlene Hansen, during the week Shannon was absent from school because they were anxious for someone to keep an eye on their daughter when she returned to school the following week.) “She said that some people who go through traumas are different afterwards. They have something like an epiphany. Shannon thinks something is real, when it’s not, and it’s grown in her thinking. Her brain is making it up, like a fantasy.”

“Mrs. Hansen never said anything about people making things up,” her father countered. “I think she simply meant that some people are changed from experiences like the one she had.”

Shannon was very pleased that her father was sticking up for her, but she was very surprised by what he said next. “What if it is real, and we just can’t see it for some reason, but she’s been gifted in some way and can?”

In listening to his daughter, Mr. McNay had been reminded of a couple of people he worked with who were very religious. For some reason, they always seemed to be a lot happier than other people. And he had found himself wondering, on more than one occasion, *What if they have it right and the rest of us have it wrong?* He certainly thought it was possible. Before now, he had always shaken off those thoughts, mainly because of his upbringing in an atheist family, but also because he always felt too busy and stressed to do any deep thinking, let alone investigating, on the subject of religion. But maybe now was the time to make time for it. His daughter now seemed to believe, and she had never been prone to believing without proof. Shannon had always questioned. Smiling inside, he remembered how hard it had been when she was a toddler to convince her that the tooth fairy, Easter bunny, and Santa Claus were real. She just wasn't one to believe without proof. Of course, on her current path, she might well begin to believe in Santa Claus, without any kind of evidence, because that seemed to be a common characteristic of religious people—to believe without having concrete proof.

Her mother was still shaking her head. “She’s not going to these churches,” she said. “I don’t want them influencing her.”

“She can go to church if she wants to,” her father stated, very firmly. (He was, frankly, astounded that his wife had said such a thing.) “You can’t keep a person, not even your own daughter, from participating in religious activities if she wants to. She’s not talking about doing something radical, or dangerous, like snake handling. She simply wants to go to church. And I’ll make sure she can do just that, whenever she wants to.”

Abby had kept very quiet during all of this; but instead of looking annoyed, she now looked a little scared. It was unusual for her parents to disagree, and she couldn’t ever remember hearing them argue. Plus, her father’s current serious and forceful demeanor was a little frightening.

As Mr. McNay took a deep breath, his manner softened somewhat, primarily because his wife didn't argue back. Stunned by her husband's words, with a stoic expression on her face, Mrs. McNay simply sat, for the moment.

Having had a little time to calm down, while her father was talking, Shannon also tried to soften her manner. After all, she had just sprung this on her family, completely out of the blue. She shouldn't expect them to accept everything she was saying right away, all at once, and without questioning it. Shannon herself had questioned, again and again, before she fully believed.

In as soft a tone as she could manage, Shannon said, "I'm telling the truth, and it is all real." She then proceeded to relate the whole story about the carousel jewelry box to her family. "You can ask Paulina's mother about it. She would have no reason to lie. And I wouldn't have even thought to seek her out if what had happened with Paulina wasn't real. God showed me something, and I'm trying to tell you about it so you can find the answers I'm finding, so we can all be saved."

So steeped in atheism, Mrs. McNay, at his point, couldn't even begin to wrap her mind around what her daughter was trying to tell her. "Why on earth would you want to be controlled by some unknown powerful force?" she asked.

"Because He is in control, whether you like it or not," Shannon responded. "And I'm not being controlled, not like you are thinking. I have free will. I can make my own choices. But He is definitely all powerful, and I know enough now to fear and respect Him." Her mother was shaking her head again, as Shannon added, in an imperative tone, "I want our family to be saved from something horrible. I want eternal life, not endless agonizing torment, and I can't believe you wouldn't want the same thing."

Unfortunately, going up against mother was like going up against a mountain. They had butted heads before, many times, but never over something this important. Realizing how hard it

was probably going to be to convince her mother, Shannon felt doom creep into her bones, and she felt a good deal less calm than she had only moments before. She also felt as though she might cry at any moment.

Rather than risk breaking down, or getting angry, or possibly saying something she would regret later, Shannon decided to retreat to her room. She hadn't brought her bibles to the discussion which, upon reflection, was probably a mistake; and she suddenly felt in great need of the comfort of them. Hurrying to her room, she grabbed both of them up and hugged them tightly to her chest. With her insides all in turmoil, she felt too worked up to actually read anything. Fortunately, just holding them helped her to feel better.

However, even when her insides started to settle, Shannon felt let down, incredibly disappointed in herself, and was unable to recognize that she had just done an incredibly brave thing; and she did end up in tears.

After crying for awhile, she prayed, for a very long time, until she heard Pickles and Pumpernickel scratching at the door to come in at around nine o'clock. Since they could tell that Shannon was upset, and not in the mood for play, the dogs settled fairly quickly on their little pillow beds to go to sleep.

Shannon was happy that she had her own bathroom attached to her bedroom, so she could get ready for bed without encountering any members of her family. They didn't disturb her, alone in her room.

In thinking over what had happened, she had at first been angry that her mother hadn't listened, and that her family didn't get to hear everything about her experience. But she did wonder, if she had had the chance, exactly how much she would have been able to share about the time she spent burning in hell. It still upset her to think about the ordeal, and she wasn't at all sure she would be able to talk about it without crying.

Praying again, Shannon felt calmer; and she could feel God with her, comforting her, and encouraging her.

Maybe I just need to try again, she thought. Things like this probably take practice. People often need to be persistent to be successful. And life is unpredictable. No matter how well we plan, we must expect the unexpected. With this, an old saying popped into her brain: *“The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.”*

Shannon was definitely having some strange thoughts lately, strange for her anyway; but pondering over a proverb wasn't nearly as oddball as comparing bibles to potatoes. Shannon smiled in deciding that her ways of thinking were likely improving, since proverbs generally held a lot of meaning.

And I not only need to have persistence, she told herself, I need to have patience too.

Just before going to sleep, she looked up something she had read recently in the bible that mentioned patience, Galatians 5:22-23. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control....”

The next day, Shannon's mother called Mrs. Hansen, who told her that it was not uncommon for people who have near-death experiences, or trauma from an accident, to have spiritual awakenings, or to imagine they have, and to become religiously fervent.

“Don't worry,” Mrs. Hansen advised, “it will probably pass, once she gets back into normal teen things.” Unfortunately, this type of attitude was common in school settings; and it seemed many adults would have actually preferred children to be involved in things they deemed normal, things that were actually harmful like drinking and sex, than to see them part of something a lot better for them, namely, religion.

Mrs. McNay had been hoping for a different answer, one that would specifically support her in keeping her daughter out of church. To her way of thinking, this type of influence and teaching would end up doing Shannon a great deal of harm. Exercising her own persistence and patience, she immediately

began searching for a private therapist, in particular, one that would support her view.

Chime, coincidentally, had just read the same bible quote mentioning patience as Shannon because she was currently feeling a need to be both patient and persistent regarding a couple of challenges in her own life. What she was presently dealing with wasn't nearly as bad as the Emily-setting-her-up thing; but she was feeling a little down, mainly because it was hard sometimes not to catch the pessimism of others.

It started Thursday afternoon at the greenhouse with Dolores telling her about a recent dream. "This is about the third time I can remember having it," she said. "I'm in this big empty building, like a high school, and I can't find a place to go to the bathroom because all of the toilets in every bathroom are overflowing, with all of the nasty stuff that goes into toilets. All of the seats are dirty and nasty; even the walls and floors are messed up. I keep searching, because I have to go, but I can never find a clean toilet, and not even a partially clean one that I can wipe down and make do with."

This was a fairly common dream that Chime was more than familiar with. Dolores, as of late, had been dealing with a lot of stressful things, like finishing a difficult class that she had received an "Incomplete" on the previous semester. Her boyfriend had recently dumped her. Even her upcoming graduation was a source of stress. Often times, the good things in people's lives, like milestones and big events, tended to cause at least as much stress as some of the bad things, which is why so many people ended up getting sick on vacations or just before their own weddings. Dolores had also been watching too much television news lately featuring stories about devastating tornadoes, plane crashes, and abused kids.

The dream simply meant that the world is sometimes a pretty crappy place—nasty and not fair. Chime sighed in thinking about her conversation with Dolores because she ended

up having to give her friend something of a tough-love talk, rather than a cajoling one.

“You’re basically thinking that the world is a giant cesspool,” she told Dolores, “a bad place, not even safe for doing things you have to do, like going to the bathroom. But it’s actually a good thing that you couldn’t find a place to go to the bathroom because if you had, you would have contributed to the nasty stuff in the world; and that’s something we should avoid doing, even in our dreams. In your real life, you need to stop watching so much news. And stop thinking about your boyfriend—he wasn’t the right one for you anyway. Stop procrastinating; get your stuff done to finish that class because it will make your life easier, and you’ll probably make your professor pretty happy too, since she can then get you off of her to-do list. And start imagining that your glass is half full, instead of half empty.” Since her words might have seemed somewhat harsh, Chime finished on a more positive note. “You’re about to graduate and go on to bigger and better things. You’re bright, creative, and pretty. You have a car, and your parents paid for your school so you’re not in a lot of debt. You have a lot going for you, so start counting your blessings instead of your misfortunes...Oh, and you should also pray and read the bible more.”

Without even taking any time at all to consider Chime’s words, Dolores hugged her and said, “Thank you, this is just what I needed to hear. You are wise beyond your years, Chime Stouffer.”

Even if the negativity didn’t rub off on her, Chime sometimes felt weighted by the cares of others, not just because of what they were going through, but because it often reminded her of former things, some, not so pleasant.

Chime herself had once had the overflowing toilet dream, but this was before she was saved and before being given her gift. At that time, she was regularly picked on by other kids, she wasn’t happy with her looks, she worried a lot, and she

struggled with school. However, everything changed when she got right with God and started counting her blessings. Now, with few exceptions, things tended to go much more smoothly for her. Plus, with more confidence, she was better able to stand up for herself; and she wasn't bothered nearly as much when people were mean. It helped knowing that God was always with her. After her discussion with Dolores, Chime said a silent prayer, thanking God for letting her be part of His family, and asking Him to help her always be a good member of His family.

Though she felt it was her responsibility to use her gift for the benefit of others, and it was in her nature to help cheer people up, Chime was a little surprised at how pessimists just seem to flock to her sometimes. Shortly after the toilet-dream discussion, Chime found herself once again needing to work on her mother's negativity.

Mrs. Stouffer had confided in her daughter that she had been eyeing a pretty piece of pottery on one of those online auction sites. With her birthday coming up, she had almost decided to order the pot, since it was reasonably priced and had an option to purchase, rather than bid for the item. Unfortunately, she had had a dream about the pot that changed her mind. "In my dream," she told Chime, "I had bought the pot. But when it arrived, it was a different one than I ordered. And it wasn't nearly as pretty; in fact, it was kind of ugly. Then, when I went back online, they had changed the picture of it to the one they sent. So they had pawned off an ugly piece of pottery on me, when I thought I was buying a pretty one."

Chime recognized her mother's mistrusting nature immediately. And some of the mistrust was valid because Mrs. Stouffer had experienced betrayal, even by some very close family members and friends, many times in the past. Plus, she had recently lost out on a promotion at work because of nepotism. But instead of pointing out to her mother that she was feeling cheated with regards to a few personal experiences

in this sometimes unfair life, Chime decided on actions instead of words. Getting together with Gavin, they went online, found the pot on their mother's auction-site wishlist, and secretly ordered it, as a birthday present from both of them.

When it arrived in the mail three days later, and was perfectly beautiful, and exactly what Mrs. Stouffer had been admiring, Chime said, "I wanted to prove to you that you can, in general, trust people. This is from Gavin and me, for your birthday. We had to use your account to pay, so it's going to show up on your credit card bill, but here's the money for it." Her mother was pleased, and not at all angry that they had done this behind her back. In fact, she was thrilled that Chime and Gavin were both so proactive in helping to cheer her up.

Trestle was very interested in the pot, and Chime speculated that it might have come from a household with a pet. "He's probably sensing or smelling another dog, or a cat, or maybe a guinea pig." She also told her mother, "I especially wanted you to have this because you are always looking at pottery from North Carolina online, and drooling over it, but you never order anything. So now you have a genuine piece of North Carolina pottery, which is obviously some of the best in the world, if I'm any judge of pottery, which I'm not; but it sure is pretty."

"I love it!" her mother responded. "Thank you, Sweetie, and your brother."

Chime's mother had also had a dream once in which she won tickets to see a *Dr. Who* musical, but the tickets ended up accidentally being given to someone else. This was similar to the pottery dream in that it related to the mistrust issue. When discussing that dream with her mother, Chime had asked, "Is there even a *Dr. Who* musical?"

"Not that I know of," her mother responded, admitting she was fretting over something that was completely impossible. "But wouldn't it be wonderful?" Both Chime and her mother loved watching *Dr. Who* episodes, especially the older ones from the '70s and '80s. They also loved musicals, of all kinds,

their favorite being *The Sound of Music*, which had actually premiered the same year that Mrs. Stouffer was born.

On the same day that her mother received the pottery gift, which was Wednesday, Chime received a gift from Dolores—a lovely dream-catcher antler, meant to be hung like a mobile above her bed, to catch bad dreams. With Gavin’s help, Chime hung the antler up right away. Strung with silver string resembling a spider’s web, the dream catcher was laced with amber-colored beads that caught bits of moonlight streaming in through her bedroom window, and the soft glow of the beads above helped to lull her to sleep.

Due to the nature of her gift, Chime was bound to feel down sometimes when hearing about upsetting dreams. Getting fresh air and sunshine while admiring the fields, hills, wooded areas, and creeks near her home usually made her feel better. Walking Trestle after dinner on Friday, Chime noticed a large cloud of bright blue butterflies hovering over a clump of bushes in a rolling field filled mainly with autumn grasses that were swaying about with the evening breezes. As she and Trestle moved closer to get a better look, the butterflies organized themselves into a long, undulating string. Smiling, Chime was reminded of the ribbons used by rhythmic gymnasts, especially when the string of butterflies started moving away, twisting and scrolling in a spiraling fashion.

Following the bright blue ribbon, Chime and Trestle were led into a shallow ravine bordered by tall elm and oak trees growing thickly on either side of the narrow, rocky gulch. Winding through large boulders and fallen branches, the pair continued to follow the ribbon until the butterflies suddenly streaked upwards through the tree limbs, where they quickly disappeared into a small patch of blue sky directly above Chime and Trestle.

Sensing that the butterfly ribbon was not the only remarkable thing she was destined to see on this particular evening, and somehow knowing that she had been led to this

specific spot in the ravine, Chime sat down on a boulder and waited patiently. After yawning once, Trestle lay down beside her feet to also wait patiently.

The waiting paid off in less than two minutes when a white sparrow flew in to land on a large stone directly in front of Chime. Even in the shadows, the bird was bright white, almost sparkling in his brilliance. After gazing into Chime's eyes for only a moment, the bird flitted to land on the ground just inches from Trestle's front paws. Ears perked with interest, Trestle eyed the sparrow only briefly before losing interest and laying his head on his paws to again wait until Chime was ready to go.

Holding her breath, Chime watched the sparrow, who continued to watch her. She knew that white sparrows bestowed gifts from God, but she didn't expect this one to give her another gift, or at least not the same kind of gift she had already received. Perhaps this was more like the gift of God letting her know that he was pleased with her. Taking it as a sign, Chime did indeed feel very reassured. Bowing her head, she prayed. *Thank You, God, for the gifts and skills that You've given me. Please help me find ways to use them to serve You. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

Chime didn't think it likely that this was the same bird that had given her the gift of prophecy. This was the third white sparrow she had seen over the years. Getting a look this close up, this one seemed a tad smaller than either of the other two she had seen. *There are probably lots of white sparrows, she reasoned, because there are lots and lots of sparrows. But since people often don't notice regular sparrows, they likely don't see the white ones either. That's probably a good thing, she decided, after a moment's thought. Something this wonderful should be low-key, not only for the safety of the sparrows, but also because good deeds really shouldn't be advertised.*

A mere moment after Chime had this thought, the sparrow took off, nearly straight upwards, to follow the same path as the

butterflies had taken. She lost sight of the bird in less than two seconds.

Trestle rose with his mistress; and together, they picked their way through the boulders and fallen tree limbs to eventually climb out of the shady gorge and into the slanting evening sunshine.

As she strolled, Chime pondered a small mystery.

Neither of the other two sparrows she had seen had spent as much time with her as this one had. What had this one been doing? If one of his counterparts hadn't even taken that long to bestow her gift, what had this one been up to? Again, Chime reasoned that the bird was giving her God's approval. *Like a little messenger*, she thought, feeling very warm and fuzzy inside, and tingly all over. *I wish he could have stayed longer.*

Of course he couldn't stay, she right away answered herself, *because he's busy giving out gifts. He had to be on his way, naturally. Silly girl, silly Chime.*

Coming across a small patch of sunflowers, still in full fall bloom, Chime remembered the ones at the greenhouse, following Shannon's movements. These weren't moving, not even with the slight breeze, but they were all facing in the same direction, which was not towards the sun. Chime, of course, couldn't know it, but the flowers were actually facing Shannon's current location, at her home about twenty miles in the distance.

Marveling at the beauties, intricacies, and magnificence in nature, Chime wondered if this was one way in which God was allowing human beings to see something of Himself, through His wonderful artistic creations—something like a divine glimpse, but one quite different than Shannon's glimpse of Paulina in heaven.

Of course, when it came to seeing something of the artistry of God, nature was not the only example because man and all of his amazing achievements were also entirely from God, as were things such as miracles and answers to prayers. God had once

revealed Himself directly to human beings, in coming to live among us as Jesus. However, while we still have His words and descriptions of His actions, Christ's life on earth happened long ago in relation to those of us living today.

We have difficulty comprehending Him because He is such a different Being, Chime thought. But I think He wants to help us understand Him, to a point. So perhaps we're being given examples of what He is like in the glories of nature. The rest is left to mystery, of course, likely for our own good and so that He can freely work His wonders and shape our destinies, and occasionally test our faith, because we must have faith to come to know Him at all. He wants us to see part of Him but, of course, He can't actually show Himself to us because we couldn't survive an experience like that in our present state. (Chime was thinking of God allowing Moses to see only His back, while shielding his eyes, to protect Moses from the intensity of His Presence.)

In thinking about God in connection to nature, Chime suddenly remembered reading in the bible, in the first Chapter of Ezekiel, the description of Ezekiel's vision of God on a sapphire throne—a figure in human form of gleaming bronze, having the appearance of enclosed fire and a brightness like that of a rainbow. Even in just imagining God in the likeness of fiery bronze, lit up like a rainbow, sitting on a huge throne of sapphire, and looking so shining and magnificent, warm and beautiful, and full of the light of all eternity—she was filled with emotion and wonder, and tears came to her eyes. If this picture was in her mind simply from Ezekiel's description, imagine what glory and amazement it must be to actually get to see Him, eventually, in the hereafter.

On Sunday morning, Shannon got up super early, excited about going to church. Though her mother didn't try to stop her, as she hadn't on Wednesday evening either, she did take the opportunity to talk to her daughter while Shannon was having a bowl of cereal for breakfast.

“I really think you’ve been brainwashed by that Mrs. Chilton,” Mrs. McNay began, “and I’m really surprised because you’ve always known your own mind. And you’ve always had such good reasoning.”

Shannon tried to stay calm when responding. “Yes, I’ve been brainwashed, but not by Mrs. Chilton. I only talked to her that one time, to tell her I had seen her daughter when I was unconscious. I’ve been brainwashed by you!” she said, rather forcefully. “And *‘I’m really surprised’* because I know how smart you are. Your bachelor’s diploma in the office says *summa cum laude* on it. I looked it up. If you graduated with highest honors, you must be pretty smart.”

“It’s exactly because I’m educated that I don’t believe all this nonsense,” her mother responded.

It’s not nonsense,” Shannon insisted. “C.S. Lewis was highly educated, and he was a Christian. I’ve started reading one of his books, and it makes sense. He actually proves Christianity to be true. It’s all completely logical, like a math problem. He even talks about math and science. He gives really good examples, using math and science as part of his arguments for people to believe, because it’s all true. It really is. If you would just open your mind to it, even a little, you might begin to understand some of what I’m talking about. And if you or anyone else were to actually read the words of C.S. Lewis, I don’t believe you could deny the truth in his arguments. I’ll pass the book over to you when I’m done,” she added. “Please, read it. It makes a much better argument than I’m making in telling you about seeing Paulina and confirming with her mother that what she told me was true.”

“Instead of reading it myself,” Mrs. McNay replied, “I probably just need to screen and limit what you’re reading.”

Shannon couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “And that’s the mark of an educated, intelligent woman,” she said scornfully, “to censor books, or keep me from reading Christian books. Sounds like the Dark Ages to me.”

While Shannon was rinsing her cereal bowl, her mother posed a question to her. “Why would a good and loving God allow the horrors of the world to exist—poverty, disease, abuse of children, and other things like that? That’s a big part of the reason I could never believe in the things religious people tout. I could never make sense of that part of it.”

Shannon was shaking her head. “That goes back to free will again, and personal choice. With their greed and selfishness, many people choose not to do the right things. If human beings were living the way God intended, we wouldn’t have poverty and hunger, and people would be too afraid to abuse other people, for fear of what God would do to them. Aside from pure evil, which is from Satan, not from God, a lot of this bad stuff can be chalked up to people themselves making bad choices. Some of them build gold-plated swimming pools and rent private islands for twenty-five thousand dollars a day. They are choosing to spend their money on those things, instead of helping to solve the big problems of the world. There are people in the world, not me personally, but others, who have the brains to figure out how to get clean water to people in remote, poverty-stricken areas, and who can teach them how to grow nutritious foods, and how to build schools, and create jobs. And the people with the big brains, who can figure things like this out, could do it all, without infringing on people’s cultures; but they need resources, in other words money and physical items, from the wealthy and super wealthy if possible, so they have enough to do some real good.” After a short pause, she added, “But I’m at fault too because I’ve bought designer clothing, when just regular clothes would have been fine; and I’ve bought tickets to concerts, so I’ve helped make wealthy people wealthier. And some of those people aren’t socially responsible, and don’t use their money for the greater good.” With a sigh, Shannon finished with, “I don’t have all the answers, but I do know the world doesn’t have to be this way. The problems you mentioned could be solved, if human beings

were living the way God intended, which to me is a true, Christian way of life.”

Shannon’s mother had an almost-amused expression on her face, which practically infuriated Shannon because she had been talking about things she felt were incredibly important, and serious, and that were not in the least bit amusing. “What are you afraid of?” she challenged her mother. “That Christianity is all true? Well, it is; and I want you to be saved, and be a part of God’s family, like I am. And I want Dad, and Abby, and everyone else in the family to be saved too. Don’t think I’m going to stop. I can be just as stubborn as you.”

With a great sigh, her mother muttered under her breath, “Actually, more so.”

Leaving for church a few minutes later, Shannon felt remarkably calm. Though she did feel a little guilty about being critical of her mother, she felt she had handled herself better this time than she had during the first conversation with her family. And with the calmness came a measure of confidence that told her she could make plans to talk to them all again. Shannon had been right in her thinking; she just needed more practice, and perhaps a little more ammunition. After learning more, and with better information, she would probably be more successful in convincing her family. Her plan in going forward, to learn more and prepare herself better, so far included going to church regularly, studying the bible more, and talking to fellow believers. At least now she didn’t need to sneak around; she could do all of this out in the open, which was a relief. *Setting a good example is another important part of the plan*, Shannon decided. *If I’m living a Christian life, maybe my family will think about following, or at least do some investigating, like I did at first.*

Along with Chime and Shannon, and pretty much the rest of the population of the world, Jacob was not immune to hitting a few bumps of his own in the road of life. One such bump

occurred on Monday after school, just as Jacob was unlocking his bike from the bike rack.

Kyle Foster, a notorious bully, had finally picked a physical fight with exactly the wrong person, a boy Jacob didn't even know, but who evidently could manage to look after himself, which he did by giving Kyle not only several punches back, but also a hard enough shove to knock his tormentor to the ground where Kyle hit his head on the concrete curb bordering the street. Blood oozing from his temple, Kyle lay unconscious and unmoving.

The incident had occurred very near the bike rack, allowing Jacob to witness the whole thing. As a couple of other students ran for help, Jacob inched nearer the scene. The boy who had fought back was kneeling beside Kyle, shaking his shoulder. However, this did not revive Kyle who remained motionless.

Two teachers and the school nurse arrived fairly quickly, the nurse pushing several others aside to check for breathing and a pulse, which were evidently present, because CPR was never started.

For the next five minutes or so, until the ambulance arrived, Jacob resisted the instinct to edge in and touch Kyle, telling himself, *It serves him right for being such a bully. Plus, the adults have things under control; they don't need me.*

Jacob remembered well being bullied himself by Kyle, in the seventh grade, and these memories added to his reluctance to help by using his gift of healing. So instead of trying to help Kyle, Jacob just looked on, letting things happen normally, until the enormity of the situation hit him, just after the ambulance pulled away.

Riding home, Jacob felt as though he had a brick in his stomach, sick at himself for not doing what he knew he should have done. Even the boy who had fought with Kyle had tried to help. *So what was my problem?* Jacob scolded himself.

Late in the evening, Jacob's mother found out from a coworker, who knew Kyle's parents, that although Kyle had

regained consciousness, his condition was still very serious; and it was unknown what lasting effects the injury to his head might produce.

Wracked with guilt, and tormented by thoughts of how he could have helped if he hadn't been so stupid and petty, Jacob slept barely two hours that night. And he not only felt guilty, he was horribly mad at himself, and feeling like he didn't deserve to have such an incredibly special gift, if he couldn't even be counted on to use it properly. What an awesome blessing a gift like this was, but what an awesome responsibility as well.

In the morning, still with a heavy stomach, but now also feeling constantly like he needed to throw up, Jacob couldn't eat breakfast. He also had a lot of trouble concentrating during the day at school.

His emotions and thoughts were difficult to understand lately. He had been feeling so good the last week or so, but now this whole thing put him right back into doubt and confusion again.

There was only one small bit of good news from all of this—plenty of witnesses had come forward to say that the other boy, Mark Stugarten, had been defending himself against attack, so Mark was not going to get into serious trouble over this.

After school, instead of riding his bike straight home, Jacob rode to the hospital to see Kyle. Though he felt like he was the proverbial “a day late and a dollar short,” Jacob wanted to try to make this right, if he could. According to Kyle's mother, who was keeping vigil by his bedside, he was doing a little better, but they wouldn't know much for awhile.

Kyle was sleeping when Jacob arrived, which made it easier for Jacob to do what he needed to do. Quietly sneaking up to the bed, while Kyle's mother refilled his water pitcher and his younger brother went to get a magazine from the waiting area, Jacob simply put his hand on Kyle's forearm, which was something Kyle would have probably found very odd and might

not have allowed if he had been awake. Even a handshake would have been incredibly awkward, since Kyle and Jacob had been anything but friends.

Though he had managed to touch Kyle, Jacob worried that it had been too late. Guilt and confusion mixed with the worry to form something almost like a poison in Jacob's mind and body, which made him feel incredibly hurt and depressed, and as though he had somehow managed to take about twenty steps backwards, in his understanding of his life and its purpose, in a single day. And since it had taken him years to take those twenty steps in the first place, he didn't see how he was ever going to make enough progress in life to truly be grown up, or evolved, or to contribute anything worthwhile to the world.

As disappointed as Jacob was to learn his gift hadn't worked to heal Mr. Hugo, he felt about a hundred times more disappointed in himself for delaying in trying to help Kyle.

However, even as many of our thoughts and actions are difficult to understand, let alone live with, some of them can end up having unexpected outcomes. Jacob would never know it; but, while at the hospital, he healed Kyle's brother, James, of tetanus, by patting James' shoulder as he was leaving. James had recently cut his leg on a dirty and rusty piece of old farm equipment, but hadn't told anyone because he had been someplace he wasn't supposed to be, doing something he shouldn't have been doing, namely, stealing tools from a neighbor's shed, in order to sell or pawn them. If Jacob hadn't been at the hospital, attempting to right his wrong, James would not have been healed and might well have died, or at the very least have suffered horrible symptoms and the pain of extensive, hospitalized treatment.

Although Jacob didn't know that a positive had come out of his negative, he still managed to sleep better than he had the previous night; but this was mainly due to exhaustion because the thoughts and feelings plaguing him would do so for quite some time before he would eventually find some relief.

Chapter Ten

Hope Surrounds

Jacob used to think that Mr. Emmons was retired because he seemed to be at home most of the time, but he actually worked from home as an architect. He unexpectedly came to the Woodbury's house on Wednesday evening and presented Jacob and his mother with exclusive all-access passes to the Hope Surrounds Conference—a gathering of many Christian speakers, teachers, and entertainers—taking place during the upcoming weekend. Since the convention center hosting the conference was only about twenty-five miles from their home, Mr. Emmons hoped they would be able to make use of the tickets, if they didn't already have other plans. “I was looking forward to using them myself,” he told them, “but I have to go out of state this weekend. The owners of a house I drew a few years back are doing a large addition, and I need to meet with them and the builder before I start working on the plans. Plus, I'm doing a landscape plan for them too, for nearly two acres that includes things like a prayer trail and a pond, so I want to see the place in person, to make note of all of the trees and boulders, and not just rely on the topographical survey.”

Mrs. Woodbury hardly knew what to say. The tickets were something pretty special that she and Jacob likely wouldn't have been able to afford on their own.

“I went to last year's Hope Follows Conference, and it was wonderful,” Mr. Emmons added. “This one promises to be even better. It's being put on by the same people, so it should be at least as good.”

“What about the person you were going with?” Jacob asked, indicating the two passes.

“Oh, I mainly bought two just to support the conference,” Mr. Emmons explained. “I was planning to give one to a friend at church, but it turns out he had plans this weekend already. So I was just going to go on my own, and I thought I might give the extra one to someone there who maybe hadn’t been able to get an all-access pass. But if you don’t think you’ll go,” he went on, “maybe you could find someone to give them to who might enjoy the conference. I’m actually leaving tomorrow for my trip, because I’m driving instead of flying, so I don’t have a lot of time to try to figure out what else to do with them.”

“We’ll definitely plan on using them ourselves,” Mrs. Woodbury assured him. “Thank you for thinking of us, John.”

As he was leaving, Mr. Emmons told them, “In case you hadn’t heard, Mr. Hugo came home from the hospital, I think around the middle of last week. Anyway, he’s now on medication, though he’s still reluctant to take it, and he’s doing much better.”

“That’s such a relief,” Mrs. Woodbury replied, “and a joy to know that our prayers have been answered.” She had indeed been praying for Mr. Hugo to get out of the hospital and to feel better.

Each of the conference passes was accompanied by a large packet stuffed full of brochures and fliers about a lot of the events, plus extras such as pens, note pads, a mini flashlight keychain, and a lapel pin.

In looking over the program, Jacob and his mother could see what Mr. Emmons meant about the conference promising to be pretty great. The schedule included comedy acts, numerous musical performances, several one-act plays, ten workshops, a Saturday-night concert, and various speakers, including two evangelists who were actually quite famous. With five or six events going on during any given block of time in the schedule, the conference seemed likely to appeal to a variety of both youths and adults.

The conference would open with a revival meeting on Friday evening, span the full day and evening on Saturday, then wrap up with a few additional workshops and speakers on Sunday afternoon. Since Saturday was an all-day affair, the passes included lunch tickets for a barbeque, and several additional coupons to trade for concession snacks and drinks.

In studying the program, and reading through many of the brochures, Jacob and his mother both found themselves getting very excited about going.

“I’ll probably only go on Saturday, and maybe Sunday afternoon for a little while,” Mrs. Woodbury said, “but I can drop you off on Friday, then pick you up after the revival meeting.”

Jacob agreed this sounded like a good plan. When he mentioned that he probably only wanted to go Friday and Saturday, his mother said that she might ask Aunt Julia to go with her on Sunday afternoon. “I’ll stop by the nursing home tomorrow after work and give her some of the literature,” she told Jacob, “then she can decide if she wants to go and let me know.”

On Thursday, in an effort to make the upcoming weekend more fun for Jacob, his mother offered to give him both passes for Friday and Saturday, so he could invite a friend from school or church. “If you want,” she said, “I could just drop you guys off both days, then I can go with Aunt Julia on Sunday.”

“But I thought you for sure wanted to see two of the speakers and one of the plays on Saturday,” Jacob countered, confused as to why his mother suddenly didn’t seem to want to go.

Though she enjoyed spending time with Jacob, because he was a pretty great kid, Mrs. Woodbury was always leery about making him into too much of a Momma’s Boy; and she didn’t want to make him feel like he had to hang out with her at all during the day on Saturday.

“No, I want you to go too on Saturday,” he added, sincerely, after guessing her motives. “Plus, I don’t offhand know anyone who might want to go as much as we both do.”

“You’re right, I do want to go,” she replied, smiling at Jacob’s response. “And it’s not like we’ll be tagging along with each other. There are so many things for us each to choose from; you go your way and I’ll go mine; we can both do whatever we want. Then we’ll meet up afterwards.”

“Good,” Jacob replied. “I like the idea that we each pick our own things, so we don’t cramp each other’s style.”

On Friday, Mrs. Woodbury still didn’t plan go to the revival meeting because she had been invited to play bunko with her coworkers. Since this was the first time they had invited her to join their group, she didn’t want to miss it. Dropping Jacob off at the convention center, she told him, “I’ll pick you up right here at nine-thirty.”

Jacob enjoyed the music, speakers, and prayers, but he was most fascinated near the end of the meeting by a man who came out into the front of the audience to heal others by touch.

Most people were standing, and Jacob was pretty far back, but he could see what was happening. For the most part, the man touched the audience members by placing the heel of his hand on their foreheads and by laying his hands on their shoulders. Having heard about fake healers before, Jacob found himself desperately hoping that this one was for real, and that the hopeful people who were coming forward really would be healed. Jacob even had a brief thought about trying to make his way to the front in order to touch the same people the healer was touching, so that there would be a backup, of sorts, in case the healer’s power wasn’t genuine, or didn’t work for some other reason. He talked himself out of this rather quickly, realizing that it would seem strange for someone to be following the healer and laying additional hands on those who had been touched by him.

However, suddenly becoming aware that the middle-aged woman standing next to him was shaking, almost violently so, and crying, he instinctively took her nearest hand in both of his. “God bless you,” he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze before letting it go.

She stopped shaking and crying the moment Jacob touched her, and with a small sniff, she said quietly, “Thank you.”

The woman, who had recently been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, had been thinking about making her way to the front to try to get the healer to touch her. Being somewhat shy and nervous, and struggling to muster enough bravery, she had doubted she could manage to actually move her body forward. Thankfully, the moment Jacob touched her, she no longer felt she needed to. Instead, she suddenly felt incredibly calm and that, somehow, by some miracle, everything was going to be fine. She could almost hear God whispering to her, in the depths of her soul. *You don't need to go forward. Everything's going to be okay.*

This was true, as Jacob's touch had indeed healed her, a fact that would be confirmed by her doctors in a mere two weeks' time.

Waiting for his mom outside, Jacob felt pretty good. However, though the meeting had served to lift his spirits, he was still feeling guilty over what had happened with Kyle. And he found himself worried about another matter as well, relating to the trust issue he had puzzled over before. What if his doubt over whether or not the revival-meeting healer had been genuine ended up causing the people not to be healed? Could the doubt of one person in the auditorium, or even a few people, negate the healing?

Surely not, he decided. *If the people being healed believed, that's probably all that mattered.*

Confident in his reasoning, Jacob felt slightly more settled, and less troubled. However, even with more reason to hope than to fear regarding issues of trust, Jacob was still troubled

over the situation with Kyle; and he almost felt like it was all too much pressure, and too much responsibility. What if he made other poor choices in the future? Jacob had recently found himself wondering if he could somehow give the gift back, just to be relieved of the pressure, responsibility, and worry. Maybe God could then give the gift to someone else, who might do better with it than he would. This was certainly a lot for Jacob to think about.

Chime's Granny had surprised both Chime and Gavin with all-access passes to the Hope Surrounds Conference. Chime didn't go on Friday because she was working at the greenhouse, but she was definitely going on Saturday. Other than giving her a ride back and forth, Gavin wouldn't be seeing very much of his sister because he had made plans with friends who were also going.

Excited about the event, Chime rose super early on Saturday. Getting ready to go, she puzzled over a dream she had had the previous night. She had been taking a walk with Trestle, and they came across a bushy juniper tree containing three bird nests perched in a low limb, so low in fact that Chime and Trestle could both see into the nests. Chime was surprised that she was taking such an interest in the nests, even in her dream. Generally, she was so focused on flowers, shrubs, and other greenery, she often didn't notice things like pretty stones, spider webs, or bird nests. Yet, here she was, completely fixated on the nests, almost as though she expected them to perform tricks like transforming into flying carpets, or shooting off fireworks, or something equally spectacular. However, as Chime and Trestle would soon discover, the nests themselves were not destined to perform any tricks because that honor would belong to the occupants of the nests, namely, three eggs, one in each nest, nestled deep within the downy-soft linings.

Snuggled securely into bits of moss and lichen, the eggs were each of a different, distinct color: one of an earthy golden yellow with a slight greenish tinge, another that looked like a

brilliant blue sky shrouded in a thin layer of deep purple clouds, and one of dark red with hints of orange similar to a breathtaking sunset. Other than the colors, the eggs, which were roughly the size of large chicken eggs, appeared fairly unremarkable.

As Chime and Trestle watched, the eggs performed their tricks by cracking simultaneously and hatching out three fully-grown birds, each about the size and shape of a common house sparrow, and each matching the color of the egg from which it had emerged. The birds then took off in unison from the nests to land together on a juniper branch slightly higher up than the one occupied by the nests. As the branch bounced lightly with the weight of its new occupants, the birds warbled and twittered with the joy of the movement, and in meeting one another for the first time. Even as the sway of the limb ceased, the lilting twitters, chirps, and gurgles continued, presumably in continued celebration of their newfound togetherness.

Chime woke as Trestle whined, somewhat loudly, both in her dream and on his giant pet pillow next to her bed. It seemed Trestle had wanted to wake early on Saturday too, for his scheduled walk with Gavin.

Putting on a necklace and brushing her hair, Chime pondered the meaning of the nests and eggs. Though the dream had been shortened by Trestle's whine, Chime definitely had enough to work with to be able to interpret its meaning. She thought it unlikely that the dream had anything to do with sparrows or other birds. It was also improbable that the number of birds had anything to do with the Trinity or other biblical threes. Instead, she felt the dream was probably meant to foretell three of something, likely people, coming together for the first time. And since the birds seemed happy, Chime felt this was probably an indication that the three people were destined to become friends. She also reasoned that the hatching part of the dream likely meant the three people were in a time of

change in their lives, or at least destined to soon undergo some sort of transformation.

If one of the birds was supposed to represent Chime herself, she felt it was probably the yellow one, because of the hints of green in its feathers. Green had been her favorite color for many years, pertaining mainly to the greenery she so loved and adored, but also because it was simply a beautiful color. She also loved the color yellow, particularly sunny yellow since, after all, the sun was responsible for growing everything green.

Unable to make anything else of the dream, other than what she had already decided, after making a couple of notes in her journal, she allowed it to slip to the back of her mind, in lieu of the more fun thoughts of anticipating the events of the conference.

Jacob and Mrs. Woodbury left home at about the same time as Chime and Gavin.

Even though it was fairly early, by the time Jacob and his mother reached the convention center, they had to park pretty far out, due to the crowds of people who had already arrived.

After making sure Jacob had enough money for dinner, though she thought it likely they would both probably have enough to eat with the barbeque and the snacks they could choose in exchange for their concession tickets, Mrs. Woodbury said, “If you decide to go to the concert, and I can’t find you near the main entrance at six-thirty, I’ll go see the presentation by the Turnbells and probably get something to eat after. But then be sure to meet me at ten o’clock, right here.”

“Okay,” Jacob answered, noting the exact spot in the parking lot—Section 19, Space 65.

His mother was so excited to be off to the workshop she had picked as her first event, she was fairly skipping in her stride, and she easily outdistanced her son in their trek through the parking lot. Jacob smiled as he watched her disappear into the convention center a full two minutes ahead of him. Checking the map from his packet as he entered the building, he

made his way to the location of the one-act play he had chosen to see first.

For being a religious show, it was wildly funny, and Jacob found his sides literally aching from laughing so much.

Afterwards, while exiting the auditorium, he happened to see Chime, who had picked the same first event as Jacob, from across the lobby. Though he was surprised to see her, he was in an odd way not surprised that she should be here. Jacob wasn't sure if he should try to talk to her, or even say hello. What if she didn't remember him? Fortunately, his uncertainty wouldn't end up being a factor because no sooner had Chime caught sight of Jacob, whom she remembered right away, than she eagerly came over to greet him.

Next turned up another surprise for Jacob—that talking to Chime ended up being just like talking to an old friend. He had never felt comfortable with girls before, especially not girls his own age, and definitely not ones this pretty. But it turned out to be an incredibly easy thing, to converse comfortably with Chime. He even found that he wasn't at all worried about his acne, or any other issue of his appearance. And from the moment they started talking, they somehow both understood, without words, that they would hang out together for the rest of the day.

As one of their first activities together, Chime led Jacob to a specific vendor booth so that he could get a free tote bag full of swag, as she had done before attending the play. Thankfully, the vendor still had plenty of them, filled with goodies like a drink cozy, a music CD, a sewing kit, bags of candy and chips, lip balm, and a t-shirt. They ended up swapping t-shirts because Jacob had gotten a yellow one with green lettering that Chime seemed to want very badly, while her bag contained a blue one with purple lettering, which Jacob preferred anyway.

So if I'm the yellow bird of my dream, he must be the blue one, Chime thought. I wonder who the red bird might be.

A couple of weeks before the conference, Chime had finally remembered why Jacob seemed familiar when she saw him at the greenhouse. But although she recognized him from the dream she had had, in which Shannon nearly drowned, she didn't tell him.

They decided to go to one of the music performances next, which ended up being like a mini-concert. Running into Gavin afterwards, Chime introduced Jacob to her brother, who didn't stay to chat, as he wanted to be off quickly to meet more of his friends.

After going to see a motivational speaker, the pair went to the barbeque together. As they were eating, Jacob told Chime about his coyote dream and his interpretation of it.

"Yes, you have it right," Chime confirmed. "It's roughly the same as the skeleton dream and the scary apartment dream. But the number eleven might not mean years, and it might not even pertain to an actual number at all." Taking a napkin, she wrote the number eleven, numerically, as simply two straight lines, without adding the fancy tops and bottoms to the side-by-side ones. "What do you see?" she asked Jacob.

"The number eleven..." he answered.

She then proceeded to extend the lines of the ones, making them much longer, as she said, "...or the beginning of a path, a fairly straight path."

"Oh," Jacob said, as what she was showing him made perfect sense.

"I think you are beginning a journey," Chime said, "and your path will be fairly straight, with minimal obstacles. So you don't need to worry so much."

Marveling at Chime's intuitiveness, he said, "This is so amazing; you are so talented." Without thinking, he added, "I wish I had a gift like yours." Realizing immediately what he had just spouted, Jacob quickly said a little silent prayer to God. *Sorry, I didn't mean that. And I do know how very much I have been blessed.*

Having a bite of potato salad, Chime didn't respond right away. However, the pause was not particularly because her mouth was full, but more because she could instinctively tell that a small space of quiet contemplation was in order, for both her and Jacob.

After several more bites of lunch, Chime said, "It's not just that I can interpret dreams; I sometimes see things pertaining to future events in them." Taking a small pause, she added quite simply, in a matter-of-fact tone, "A white sparrow gave me the gift, because white sparrows help God by distributing special gifts to particular people."

Although Jacob didn't particularly need confirmation that what Mr. Emmons had told him about white sparrows was true, here it was, confirmed by a second person, and a person he was reasonably certain had no connection whatsoever to his next-door neighbor.

Since Jacob didn't respond right away, nor did he seem surprised by what she had said, but seemed to be thinking, Chime went on by saying, "There's something about you, and I don't meant to pry, but I think you have a gift of some sort too. And you almost seem like you want to tell me something about it, or ask me a question."

When Jacob still appeared to be contemplating something, and again didn't reply immediately, Chime posed a question of her own. "Have you seen a white sparrow, by any chance, and was it *recently*?"

"Yes," Jacob replied, again in a marveling tone.

"Then that means your gift is new," Chime said with a knowing nod, "and you probably have about a zillion questions. If you're not ready to talk about it, I understand. But if you want to, I'm all ears." No sooner had she said this than she felt slightly self-conscious, because that's one of the things other kids used to make fun of her about, having ears that stuck out a little. Chime knew that she shouldn't fixate on her looks because, of course, it was the person inside that was important,

not the outer shell; but it was hard not to be self-conscious about certain things given how much importance society tended to put on appearances. Not that it should have mattered, but Chime had discovered that keeping a slightly shorter hairstyle, which had more bounce and fluff on the sides, helped to conceal her ears. Waiting for Jacob to respond, in as casual a manner as possible, Chime fluffed the hair around her ears with her fingers.

Despite being uncomfortable with her appearance sometimes, Chime wasn't at all shallow, and Jacob could tell this. She also wasn't at all conniving or manipulative, like some girls he knew from school, and even church. And he felt so comfortable talking to her, he decided rather quickly that he could trust her. While they were having bowls of cherry cobbler, topped with vanilla-bean ice cream, Jacob told Chime that he had been given the gift of healing. He also confided in her some of his concerns, in particular, the worries that had come upon him after realizing that the gift hadn't worked with Mr. Hugo.

"It's hard to understand why God allows bad things to happen," Jacob said, "and why he allows them to remain, even in devoted believers' lives."

"I think the devil created disease and death," Chime answered, "God didn't. That's not what He originally intended for mankind, when He created the garden, and Adam and Eve. But, you're right; He allows disease and death in some cases. It's hard for human brains to understand why because His thinking and ways are so far above ours. Maybe the ill person is supposed to experience the illness for some reason," she went on. "God's ways are mysterious. And if Satan is the one causing an illness or injury, you know he's supernatural and powerful, so maybe a gift can't always counter what he causes."

A lot of what Chime was telling him was in perfect line with what Mr. Emmons had said. Again, it made sense and sounded right.

“Some people might be healed by your gift,” she added. “But God heals in many ways, sometimes through prayers, sometimes through doctors. Maybe some people are supposed to go to a doctor, instead of being healed just by your touch. And who knows why, maybe the timing just isn’t right. We may never know.”

Jacob had to agree. Except for someone who might get a direct message from God, human beings couldn’t possibly know His exact plans and timing.

“Plus,” Chime continued, “I believe God would allow someone to be afflicted if it’s necessary for their growth as a Christian, or to get their attention, or for some other reason. Certain passages in the bible say that some suffering is actually good and necessary. I can think of a couple right off the bat, in Isaiah.”

Pulling her bible from her tote, she first looked up Isaiah 38:16-17, pertaining to King Hezekiah being ill and recovering, part of which she read aloud to Jacob. ““Oh, restore me to health and make me live! Lo, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness....”” Even this ancient king had recognized that his suffering ended up being a benefit.

Flipping pages, she next read from Isaiah 66:3-4, which had to do with the consequences of not worshiping God properly. “““These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose affliction for them, and bring their fears upon them....”””

Jacob was nodding because he was familiar with the passages she had read, and he understood her point.

“Also,” Chime went on, “I wonder if some suffering of others is a test of the rest of us, to test whether or not we will help, if we can. Like, do I choose to buy a fancy car, or do I buy one that will work but isn’t so fancy, then donate the rest of the money to a good cause—like maybe someplace where they need to build a clinic and stock it with medicine, or drill a well so people can have clean water? Or, in another case, God might

be testing to see if I would be willing to care for someone who is sick, to help ease their suffering.”

Her comments were kind of hitting somewhat close to home with Jacob, in his guilt over not helping Kyle; but he didn't want to share that part of his story with her, at least, not yet.

“It's just hard to understand what I'm supposed to do with my gift,” Jacob said, “especially if it isn't meant to help everyone, or if some people are supposed to bear affliction.”

“I can only tell you my own personal experiences,” Chime replied. “And my gift is much different than yours, so it might not help. But I think I've figured out how I'm supposed to use what I've been given. Prophecy can be used to help people, to guide them. It can also be used to prove God exists. If I tell someone something about themselves, either a future or past event, that I couldn't possibly have known, then that person hopefully will be more likely to believe in God, unless they think I'm a witch, which I hope they don't.”

“But how will I even know if my gift is working, or if I'm doing it right?” Jacob asked.

“I think you have to live with the gift for awhile to be able to understand it,” Chime answered. “It's like something you have to get to know. Then when you get to know it better, you'll better know what to do with it. And if you pray about it, and ask God to help you, I'm sure He will guide you. But as far as knowing whether it's working, you might not have assurances of that very often, because you can't know all of the details of other people's lives. I think you just have to trust, and go on your instincts.”

Jacob smiled and nodded. Here, again, was the trust issue. There must be a reason it seemed to come up so often. He felt likely this was direction for him (possibly directly from God speaking through Chime), and he needed to heed the advice.

“And you might make some mistakes,” Chime said. “Unfortunately, I had a dream of warning once; but I was mad at the person it pertained to and I didn't warn them. They ended

up in a bad situation, one that I could have helped to prevent.” Because she felt ashamed, her voice held its guilty tone as she went on. “And even though I’ve prayed about it, and asked for forgiveness, I’m still troubled by it sometimes. I definitely learned a lesson, and I don’t ever plan to make that same mistake again.”

Jacob almost couldn’t believe what he was hearing because it was absolute perfect timing. He absolutely needed to hear this with regards to his situation with Kyle.

As they were finishing their desserts, Jacob said, “Just since we’ve been talking here, I’ve been wondering. You’ve had your gift for a long time, but I just got mine. I wonder why that is—why I wasn’t given mine earlier.”

“It’s so much responsibility,” Chime responded, “maybe even more so than my gift. Maybe God didn’t think you were ready until now. Or maybe He didn’t want to burden you, if you had other things going on in your life. His timing is always perfect, even if we don’t understand it.”

Jacob had to agree. As much as he was struggling with the weight of his gift now, he likely wouldn’t have been able to handle the responsibility of it at all a couple of years ago. In addition to trusting that God would guide him, he also needed to trust in His perfect timing.

Next, the new friends attended one of the workshops.

Afterwards, they decided to just hang out. They definitely wanted to go to the concert later; but for now, they both felt more like relaxing than going to see another play or a speaker. They chose a pretty courtyard, somewhat isolated with not too many people passing through, in which to sit and talk.

By both coincidence, and divine design, Shannon was also attending the conference, not only because she wanted to learn more, but also in the hopes of finding some resources that might help her to better convince her family. For most of the morning, in addition to attending various events, she had been gathering books, DVDs, and other such educational and

entertaining materials. Attending the conference was also part of Shannon's new resolve to spend her money on better things, less frivolous and with more meaning, than she previously had.

Passing through the same courtyard where Jacob and Chime were seated at a stone picnic table, Shannon paused to deposit her overflowing tote and her purse on a bench. She had dressed in layers, in anticipation of the day's warming, and she suddenly felt the need to peel off her sweatshirt. Feeling much better, she decided to sit on the bench for a few moments to further cool off. Glancing around the courtyard, as she attempted to stuff her sweatshirt into the already overcrowded tote, Shannon immediately recognized Chime from having met her at the greenhouse.

With Chime engaged in conversation with a boy, Shannon wasn't sure she wanted to interrupt. However, when Chime happened to also catch sight of her, and waved in recognition, Shannon happily lugged her purse and tote to the picnic table to say hello.

Chime smiled not only in greeting, but also in satisfaction because Shannon was wearing a red t-shirt featuring a picture of an orange sunset, which meant not only that the gathering of red, blue, and yellow friends was now complete, but also that Chime had interpreted her own dream correctly.

Jacob also recognized Shannon, but he didn't say anything as she approached to stand by the table and deposit her gear on the bench next to Chime. He simply nodded hello as Chime introduced him, after giving Shannon her name since she hadn't done so when seeing her at the greenhouse.

"You look familiar," Shannon told Jacob, scrutinizing his face. "But I don't remember you from school...it must be somewhere else."

When Jacob smiled somewhat uncomfortably, Chime leaned over to nudge him in a gentle but encouraging manner, while saying, "You should tell her who you are, I mean, where you've met before."

This completely flustered Jacob because, despite having discussed Chime's gift in detail, he couldn't imagine how she could possibly know not only that Shannon had nearly drowned, but also that he had been the one to give her CPR.

Despite the nudge, Jacob was reluctant to tell Shannon because, other than telling Mr. Emmons, he had wanted to keep his actions of that day completely secret. However, he wouldn't have a choice in owning up to being the boy who had saved her because Shannon suddenly realized exactly where she had seen him before. With the color at first draining from her face, she said somewhat slowly, "Oh...I do know who you are...I remember now...."

Her color returning, Shannon nearly knocked Jacob off of his bench as she flew at him to give him a big hug, while exclaiming, "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"It's a small world," Chime said, though she was anything but surprised at this meeting.

"I didn't want anyone to know," Jacob said, somewhat sheepishly.

"I understand," Shannon responded, sitting next to Jacob on the bench. "At least, I think I do. And I won't tell anyone. But I want to keep in touch with you, both of you," she added, nodding to Chime. "I think there must be some reason why we all met here today—like I think God led me into this courtyard. I could just feel that He was leading me because I wasn't sure where I needed to go next, and I ended up here, with you two."

Shannon was very much looking for new friends. In her new life, it had become somewhat difficult to spend time with her old friends. For one thing, she no longer wanted to drink and do other stuff they were involved in. In no longer holding the same views as many of her former friends, she found being around them somewhat awkward, particularly because she hadn't yet figured out how she might witness to them, to get them to reconsider some of their beliefs and hopefully adopt some Christian ideals and behaviors.

A recent encounter with Patrick Fuller, one of the boys who had pulled her from the lake, was a good example. He, like Shannon, had been raised an atheist, and was prone to supporting certain social and political trends such as the woman's right to choose. He had been bragging about being out with his parents and how they had actually measured that the Christians outside of an abortion clinic were staying far enough back from the entrance to the clinic while protesting. He and his parents were adamant that these "ignorant fools" should follow the law, which they were doing at the correct distance, and in a peaceful manner, mainly by offering literature and suggesting that those entering the clinic might also visit the Choice for Life office located half a block from the abortion clinic, so that they could get all of the facts, health and otherwise, before making their final decisions. This outreach program from a local church offered free sonograms, checkups, health information, and information on all options relating to pregnancy, including adoption. Patrick went on to say that he and his parents were thinking about staging their own protest outside the Choice for Life office. "If Christians can harass people going into the clinic, we should be able to harass people going into that church office."

As it turns out, Patrick's mother had once had an abortion, some years before Patrick was born, at a time when it would have been inconvenient for her to have had a pregnancy and a child. Patrick, evidently, had been planned, not unplanned, which seemed to make him feel very special.

Though she didn't say it, Shannon was thinking, *I guess it's a good thing that you weren't the one that your mom got rid of.* And she felt badly for the people Patrick was criticizing outside of the clinic because she truly felt some people were led by the Holy Spirit to try to counsel people against this practice. And, if they were only able to convince one person not to have an abortion, who knows, that person might give birth to a baby who could possibly change the whole world, maybe by curing

cancer, or coming up with some amazing plan to end poverty in the world, or something equally fabulous. Shannon also felt it was important for people to get all the facts first, before deciding. From everything she was reading online about the issue, there were definitely some health risks, not only immediately, but also later, because abortions had been known to cause problems with later pregnancies. And it wasn't just physical health issues that were at stake because the suicide rates were higher for women who had had abortions compared to those who had not. So, obviously, there were mental and spiritual issues involved as well.

Shannon felt intensely sad in listening to Patrick's boasts and criticisms, which he evidently didn't see anything wrong with. Indeed, in his manner, he could have been talking about something as mundane as the weather, or what might have been showing at the local movie theater.

In addition to making a mental note to pray for Patrick, and his parents, she thought, *It's so sad that he doesn't have an older brother or sister.* She also found herself wondering, *What if it had been inconvenient for Mom and Dad to have me? Then Abby wouldn't have an older sister. Or, if they hadn't wanted another kid when Mom got pregnant with Abby, I wouldn't have a little sister. Then even if they decided to have another baby later, it wouldn't have been Abby.* Shannon almost couldn't bear the thought of either she or Abby not existing in the world at all, and she felt sick inside, almost to the point that she thought she might need to throw up. In reading the bible, she had definitely figured out that unborn children were actual babies, knitted and formed in the womb by God Himself, and not simply something made of human tissue and called fetuses that didn't matter to the world.

Though she planned to keep in contact with her old friends, and if possible share the good news with them after getting in a little more practice with her family, Shannon definitely wanted

to be around more people with similar beliefs, from whom she could learn and fellowship with, in order to grow as a Christian.

After exchanging phone numbers with Jacob and Chime, Shannon confided in them that she was at the conference mainly to get extra information to help convince her family to believe in God and Jesus. “As a fairly new believer, I’m afraid I wasn’t very successful on my first try at convincing my family,” she said.

“Well, you know that old saying, ‘If at first you don’t succeed...’” Chime responded encouragingly.

“My thoughts exactly,” Shannon replied. “I need to be persistent. And I know I need practice; but I want to have plenty of ammunition too, before I try again.”

Consulting her watch, Shannon realized that she needed to get going, in order to catch the next speaker she wanted to see. “I’ll call you both,” she said, as she was leaving. “Maybe we can all get together for a burger sometime in the next couple of weeks.”

After Shannon left, Chime told Jacob, “I’m sorry I pushed you to tell her. I should have just let you decide. But I thought she should know because I agree with her—I sort of feel like we all came together today for a reason.”

“No, it’s okay,” Jacob responded. “But how did you know?”

“I saw it in a dream,” Chime answered.

“Of course,” Jacob said, realizing that he should have known. “This is all just so new to me. It surely takes some getting used to.”

“But as far as not telling very many people,” Chime said, “that’s probably a good thing. I try to keep my gift low-key too. I usually just let people know that I can interpret dreams, and I don’t tell them that the dreams sometimes contain information about future events. If people knew, they’d probably want me to pick their lottery numbers for them, or steer them toward their future husbands or wives; and I don’t

think my gift should be used for those kinds of things. So, sort of in the same way, you should probably be careful who you tell. Otherwise, people might try to exploit you; and others might call you a quack, for various reasons, but probably mostly to try to discredit God and His genuine healing miracles.”

Agreeing wholeheartedly with what she was saying, Jacob added, “Plus, we’re really not supposed to advertise good works. And I don’t think people genuinely doing good works could do them very well in a spotlight.”

“Good point,” Chime said, smiling and nodding.

Jacob and Chime next decided to catch the last half of a comedy act before using a few of their concession tickets to have sodas and snacks while waiting for the concert to begin.

Though the music was a bit loud, and they both ended up with a slight headache, Chime and Jacob thoroughly enjoyed listening to the various artists.

“I won’t be coming tomorrow,” Jacob said, almost apologetically, as he walked Chime to the spot where she was supposed to meet up with Gavin. “My mom is using my pass to bring my Aunt Julia to see a couple of the speakers.”

“I have to work tomorrow after church anyway,” Chime answered.

“It’s too bad we live so far apart,” Jacob said. “It’s a little too far for me to ride my bike to your house. I don’t have a car; plus, I’m too young to drive.”

“I walk to both school and work,” she responded. “I’m saving up for a car, so I can get one as soon as I get my license. But Gavin sometimes drives me when I need to go places. Maybe I can come over sometime.”

“Great,” Jacob replied. “I just got a foosball table.”

“I love foosball, and I’m pretty good,” Chime answered. “Our church has a table in the youth rec room.”

“I’m not so good,” Jacob admitted. “Even my Aunt Julia beat me, and she’s like in her eighties.”

“Maybe I can give you some pointers,” Chime joked.

As they saw Gavin waiting in the distance, Jacob said, “I’ll look forward to it. I’ll call you soon.”

“Good,” Chime replied.

Jacob waved goodbye and smiled as he headed off across the parking lot to meet his mother.

Gavin, it seemed, had enjoyed the conference as much as his sister; and he was fairly bubbling with excitement to tell her about one of the workshops he had attended. “It was about how we sometimes need to go backwards in order to eventually go forwards, so that we can fix some of the problems in the world.” He next quoted to her from Jeremiah 6:16. “‘Thus says the LORD: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’” This happened to be one of Chime’s favorite bible verses, and she smiled as her brother went on. “There’s a whole movement—not just Christians, of course, but we should definitely be a part of it—that involves getting back to basics when it comes to things like farming, gardening, fishing, and hunting, and not doing things on such a large scale with so much tech stuff and so many shortcuts. A lot of people want to know exactly where their food comes from, including the meat, and they want to be more involved in keeping it natural and simple. And all of this needs to be even more comprehensive than the current focus on things like antibiotic-free meat, organics, free-range animals, and natural pesticides. The whole workshop made me think of you, and what you might do in the future with your plants.”

On Sunday evening, upon returning home from her outing with Aunt Julia, Mrs. Woodbury baked a huge batch of chocolate chip cookies for Mr. Emmons, which Jacob took over to him Monday after school upon noticing that his car was back in the driveway.

After thanking Jacob for the cookies, and mentioning that he had had a good and productive trip, Mr. Emmons asked, “Anything exciting happen here while I was gone?”

Shaking his head, Jacob responded, “No, just the conference, which was really great, by the way.”

Accepting the invitation to have cookies and milk, Jacob sat down with Mr. Emmons at his kitchen table.

As they enjoyed the treat, Jacob mentioned that he had seen a healer at the conference. “But I don’t particularly want to do that with my gift,” Jacob said. “I’ve been thinking I might want to be a doctor, which is something I thought about some when I was a kid.”

“You’re still a kid,” Mr. Emmons said with a laugh.

“I know,” Jacob answered, smiling, “but I’m grown up enough now that I have to start thinking about things like a career. I wonder if my grades are good enough to get into a college premed program. And I’ve always had trouble with math and science, so I wonder if I’m even smart enough.”

“You’re definitely smart enough,” Mr. Emmons said. “And you’re thinking about this early enough to improve your grades, if they aren’t good enough. For the math and science, you might just need a little tutoring.”

“I doubt that’s something my mom could afford,” Jacob replied.

“I’m pretty good at math,” Mr. Emmons told him, “so I could probably help with that, for no charge. Or if you feel like you need to pay, you can just wash my car or help me paint my shed, in trade. As far as the sciences, the local university has a free tutoring program for subjects like chemistry. Junior and senior college students volunteer because it looks good on their resumes. Plus, some of them just want to put their talents to good use.”

“This all sounds really good,” Jacob said. “But then there’s the issue of how school would get paid for. What if I don’t qualify for enough grants and loans?”

“There are plenty of creative ways to fund college,” Mr. Emmons assured him. “And you have a little time to start

planning and saving up, especially since you're thinking about it early."

Chapter Eleven

“...Try Try Again”

Jacob surprised himself that he didn't chicken out on calling Chime; but part of that was his mom encouraging him when she found out that he had made a friend at the conference, and that it was the same girl he had talked to at the greenhouse. He called her Tuesday evening, and they arranged that she would come over after school on Friday to play foosball, have dinner, and maybe watch a movie or play a board game, whatever they decided to do for fun. Gavin would be dropping her off, and Mrs. Woodbury would then drive her home afterwards.

Shannon was being proactive herself on this Tuesday evening, attending a bible study class at a local church. During a time of sharing after the lesson, she discovered that the class contained several fairly new believers, which made her feel very comfortable in talking and asking questions.

During the discussion, one of the other newbies, a girl in her early twenties, contributed something Shannon thought very insightful, and helpful.

“I know I'm on the right path and making progress because I've started to feel some of the things I've heard others talking about. Like lately, when praying, I've felt the energy and comfort of the Holy Spirit inside me. Plus, when I hear about something horrible happening on the news, I feel a sadness that I probably wouldn't have felt as deeply before, also because the Holy Spirit is in me. And it's the same when I hear about something good; I feel happy and motivated, and full of good energy. Before I came to Christ, I wasn't affected in the same way; I was usually only mildly sad or happy. And I'm ashamed to admit I was often indifferent to anything having to do with

strangers, whether good or bad. With the Holy Spirit inside me, I now feel things differently. And it's especially helpful when I briefly slip back into my old ways. Whenever I start having ugly or selfish thoughts, or start getting angry, or coveting something my neighbor has, or anything that is a sin against God, I can feel the Holy Spirit inside me, convicting me of my sins. Then I automatically know that I need to repent, pray, and try to do better."

A boy of about Shannon's age, who was also a new believer, followed with, "I feel the Holy Spirit inside me too, and specifically when I'm reading the bible. I can tell that the Spirit is helping me to understand what I am reading, and not just in interpreting the words, but also in figuring out how to apply what I'm reading to my own life."

Thinking about how she was starting to understand things better, like the story of the lepers finding the empty soldiers' camp, Shannon recognized the truth in what he was saying—the Holy Spirit was also helping her to understand the bible, and figure out how parts of it could apply to her own life.

Shannon herself had a question to ask the group pertaining to a booklet she had picked up at the conference that described one person's idea as to why human beings are here, basically, the meaning of life. In a nutshell, the author was saying that human beings are on earth to learn to love God, and to become more like His Son before joining Him.

"According to this booklet," she began, "part of the reason Jesus came to earth was to show us how to live, to set a good example for us. He was the only sinless Person to ever walk the earth, and we are supposed to try to be more like Him. So if He's letting us be part of His family, forever and eternally," she went on, "and I want to be a good member of His family, what are some specific things I can do, other than coming to church and praying and reading the bible, to become more Christlike during the time I have here on earth?"

This opened up an extensive avenue of sharing in which many people contributed their ideas as to what things could help her grow as a Christian. Shannon found the suggestions very helpful, and several really stood out, such as studying the parables that Jesus taught, doing various types of volunteer work to find the ones best suited to her individual skills, reading The Proverbs and The Psalms regularly, listing the many commandments in the bible while looking for ways to employ them in this modern life, taking communion, and making a list of God's promises in the scriptures and exploring ways to claim them. A couple of the group members had suggestions as to how to recognize when Satan was drawing near with temptation and sin, so that he could be pushed away as quickly as possible.

This was all incredibly helpful to Shannon, especially as a new believer, and she took notes feverishly as the conversation progressed.

The elderly man sitting next to her suggested that if she hadn't yet been baptized, to consider doing so, because Jesus himself was baptized. The man then shared his own story of being in college, deciding he needed to be baptized, asking a friend to show him bible scriptures relating to baptism, and the same friend helping him track down a local minister to baptize him. Laughing, he added, "I remember that the baptismal tank at the minister's own church wasn't clean, so he took me to another church about twenty miles away to get me dunked. He said it had to be a dunking because a sprinkling just wouldn't work. He was very specific about that. I don't remember his exact words before baptizing me but it was something along the lines of asking me if I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and if I believed that He died for my sins, and if I repented of my sins. I remember the minister had me dress in a special robe to be in the water tank, and I held my nose while he tipped me backwards."

Another topic discussed was the issue of exactly how we should pray. Some churchgoers mainly seemed to like to recite

well-known prayers. While many people in the bible study group agreed that some use of traditional prayer was good, especially the Lord's Prayer given to us by Jesus Himself, most also felt it was most effective to speak to God personally and directly. And while there was no set formula, most people agreed that praising God, thanking Him for our many blessings, asking forgiveness for our sins, and asking Him to help us do better was a good basic template to use when praying. Adding personal details to the prayer then became an intimate exchange with the Almighty, giving us an opportunity to become closer to God, and opening up an avenue for Him to respond to our specific needs, hopes, temptations, desires, questions, or whatever.

One of the group members, a middle-aged woman, actually had her formula for prayer written down, which she shared with the group, writing out a few key points on the chalkboard as she spoke.

"I begin by praising God, and asking Him to forgive my sins. Then I ask Him for strength, wisdom, and help in understanding His will and plan for my life. I then ask Him to help me be a productive member of society, and to share the good news whenever I can, and to help me recognize opportunities where I can do this. I also ask Him to open my heart and mind to achieving a greater understanding of Him, of what I am reading in the bible, and of the needs of others. Then I ask Him to help others in need. And, finally, I thank Him for both the blessings and the trials in my life, since the trials are how I learn and grow the most in my relationship with Him."

As Shannon scribbled in her binder, the woman wrapped up by saying, "Of course, I add a lot of personal details, and specific names of people I am praying for, but that's the basic pattern of my daily prayers." In noticing that several people were taking notes, she finished with, "But I try not to make it too rigid because, just as our lives are ever changing and flexible, I believe the things we say to God should be too."

In thinking everything over at home later in the evening, and in looking over her notes, Shannon tried to focus. Important subjects such as how to pray and baptism could be complex, and a lot to take in all at once. Since they deserved more attention individually than Shannon was presently able to give them, she decided to concentrate exclusively on her original topic and question—why she was here on earth, and how she could be a good member of God’s family. This, plus the list of suggestions from the group, was enough to work on for the time being, so that she wouldn’t get too confused or feel pressed to learn too much at once.

She felt at least part of the reason that she was on earth was that she was supposed to make some sort of a difference, and make the world a better place for those who would continue to live here even after she was gone. Since human beings couldn’t possibly know when the end times would be, either just around the corner or millennia from now (or something in between), she felt she should be conscious of how she spent her time, using as much of it as possible to make the world as wonderful a place as possible for future generations. People also couldn’t know how long they might live, which made it especially important for them to make good use of their time.

Topping the list for Shannon, as far as making good use of her time, was the commitment to share the good news of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible, in addition to her family. She also planned to do volunteer work, as suggested by several group members, and had already signed up for a few things such as cleaning up a local park, and working in the kitchens of a large church that offered free meals on certain weekdays, and that also would be hosting several additional free meals over the upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas Holidays.

In following the advice to study the parables taught by Jesus, Shannon discovered one she felt was probably her favorite so far, Luke 15:8-10. The story was about one lost

coin, and the woman who had lost it sweeping for it, finding it, and rejoicing over it; and about how the angels rejoice over one lost sinner who repents and is saved.

God swept for me, and found me, Shannon decided, and now the angels are rejoicing over me.

Just imagining angels rejoicing over the lost Shannon being found made her feel incredibly warm, yummy, and happy inside, as though a piece of sunshine was growing inside her.

If my family could only know what this feels like, Shannon thought, they would surely come to believe.

In her freshman year, as part of her drama class, Shannon had been in the play, *Lilies of the Field*. She had had a small part as a nun, and only had a handful of lines. But in truth, though it was an incredibly religious play, Shannon had never thought of it as being so. Coming across the bible passage mentioning “lilies of the field” in Matthew 6, she rooted through her closet to find her old script, which she read entirely through before going to bed. Finally understanding the meaning, she found it odd that the director had never mentioned it. *I wonder why he picked this particular play, if he didn't want the actors to know what it was really about.* However, upon reminding herself that she hadn't even read the whole script at the time, because she had had such a tiny part, Shannon ended up blaming herself for not grasping its meaning until now. *He probably thought we'd read the whole thing, and understand it ourselves, without anyone having to explain it to us.* She then resolved to seek out more Christian entertainment to learn from.

After school on Wednesday, she rented and watched the movie, *Brother John*. Then, late in the evening, she asked her father to help her buy tickets online to see a touring company's version of *Godspell*, which would be coming to a nearby theatre the first week of December. She bought three tickets because she wanted to ask Chime and Jacob to go with her.

Shannon had invited her father to go to a Sunday church service with her, as he had said he would like to go sometime; but he had been out of town traveling for business meetings for the past few weekends and had not yet been able to do so. Undaunted, and recognizing that church attendance by any members of her family was a pretty farfetched thing to hope for at the present time, Shannon continued to rack her brains for creative ways to try to get them to at least begin to believe.

As part of her efforts to influence her family, Shannon had taken to quoting bible scripture, whenever possible. With her father busy at work, and her mother and Abby attending several out-of-town gymnastics competitions in a row, Shannon hadn't yet found a good time to sit down with all of them again. Plus, she was still working out a good game plan. In the meantime, she was determined to take small steps, such as quoting from the bible, whenever she could.

As the family was getting ready to go to one of Abby's gymnastics competitions on Thursday afternoon, Shannon stopped by her sister's room to help her gather some of her gear to take to the car. Abby seemed a little nervous, as she often was before a competition. Noticing that Shannon had one of her bibles with her, so that she could read in the car, Abby halfway jokingly said, "Maybe you could put in a good word for me with the Man Upstairs; please pray for me to win."

Shannon responded by saying, "I always pray for you before a competition, that you won't get hurt and that you will do well. I will pray the same this time, and hope that whatever is meant to happen will happen. You won last time, so it might be someone else's time to win." However, after thinking for a few moments, she added, "Actually, I *do* hope you win. Proverbs 13:12 says, 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.' If winning will make you satisfied, full of life, and happy, I can go along with praying for it to happen."

“Thank you,” Abby said, with a happy smile, hugging her sister.

Abby did win in her best event, uneven bars, which thrilled her because she had never before won two competitions in a row. And she placed third in balance beam, which also seemed to satisfy her.

That evening in her prayers, Shannon thanked God for helping Abby to do her best. She then prayed a prayer she had been praying nearly every night for the past two weeks.

Dear Lord, please open the hearts and minds of Mom, Dad, Abby, and all of my grandparents, and help them come to know You. Please bless their lives in such a way that they know the blessings are from You, so they can come to know You, love You, be a part of Your family, and serve You. Also Lord, I ask the same for my aunt and uncle and cousins in Minnesota, and my uncle in Louisiana. In Your name I pray, Amen.

Despite the family’s recent busyness, Shannon found both of her parents and Abby at home and in the living room when she returned from an after-school bible study on Friday, whereupon, rather elatedly and in a slightly theatrical manner, she announced, “I’m going to be baptized!”

After only a brief moment of silence, as the statement sunk in, her mother very firmly replied, “Absolutely not!”

In shock over the response, and not realizing that her mother didn’t know very much about baptism, and was thinking of it in terms of something radical like a priest drenching a person in animal blood while chanting, Shannon sarcastically retorted, “What are you going to do, lock me up?”

Again, Shannon’s father stood up for her, feeling it was important to butt heads with his wife when it came to something important, such as their daughter’s religious beliefs. However, instead of having the discussion in front of the girls, Mr. McNay called his wife into the privacy of their bedroom.

After calming her down, and assuring her that baptism wasn’t anything like what she was picturing, he told her,

“Fortunately, we live in a country where we have religious freedom. Even if we didn’t, I’d think it was pretty important to allow people to make their own choices when it comes to religion.”

“But she’s going backwards in her thinking, not forwards,” Mrs. McNay emphatically responded.

“I’m not so sure about that,” her husband argued. “Have you really listened to some of the things she’s been saying? They actually make a lot of sense.”

“Oh, don’t you start,” she replied, in an exasperated tone.

“What if Abby wants to go to church with her sister?” Mr. McNay asked. “Are you going to prevent her?”

Very upset over the discussion so far, and feeling that two-thirds of her family was turning against her, and against sound reasoning for that matter, Mrs. McNay said nothing, for the moment.

For the rest of the evening, tightlipped, Mrs. McNay tried to think of what to do. No matter what her husband or Shannon decided to do, she was determined to protect Abby from their influences, which she genuinely thought unwise and definitely not in her family’s best interest. Indeed, her current view of religion was one of persecution and punishment. To her view, Christianity was devoid of intellectual involvement, denied personal choice, and could be likened to the evils that occurred during the Spanish Inquisition. Mrs. McNay had managed to find a therapist that she felt she could trust to counsel Shannon against her current religious zealotry. Unfortunately, he had informed her that she couldn’t force her daughter to be in therapy unless it was court ordered. But even if she couldn’t force Shannon to go, she could at least take Abby, so the therapist could explain and reinforce that Shannon was on the wrong track.

At Jacob’s house on Friday evening, after several games of foosball, of which Jacob and Chime each won an equal number of times, and after a delicious dinner of baked chicken and rice

with green beans on the side, Mrs. Woodbury asked Chime's advice on a few things involving her African violets and several outdoor plants. Chime's expertise was very much appreciated, particularly in helping to pick out the best spot in the back yard for Mrs. Woodbury's planned spring garden, based on the position of the house and trees, so that the garden would get plenty of sun but would still be somewhat protected from the harsh western light in the afternoons. She also suggested a good spot for a compost pile, if Mrs. Woodbury wanted to do that as well.

Back inside the house, admiring and marveling over several of Jacob's models, Chime told him, "I can't believe you have so much patience. Everything is so tiny; I can't imagine being able to do things with so much fine detail."

"I imagine there's a lot of detail in what you do at the greenhouse," Jacob replied.

Shaking her head, Chime answered, "Propagating and pruning plants takes some skill, but I've never done anything as intricate as this. I doubt my fingers could even manage it, least of all my big green thumb," she joked.

They decided to play a board game, instead of watching a movie, which they would save for some other time when she could come earlier and stay longer. With Mrs. Woodbury outside watering few plants, then deciding to read a book on the screened-in back porch, Jacob and Chime had a little privacy for conversation at the kitchen table. As they played Yahtzee, Jacob mentioned that he was feeling weighted by the responsibility of having the gift of healing. And though he didn't go into detail, he also confided that he had already experienced a difficulty similar to Chime's failure to warn someone.

Not judging, or pressing for particulars, Chime mainly just listened, which was as helpful if not more so than giving advice because it calmed Jacob, to have someone just listen to his concerns, and confession.

“So, since I’m afraid I won’t measure up,” he added, “or use the healing for good all of the time like I’m supposed to, I’ve sometimes found myself wishing I could just give it back. When I think about it too much, it all seems overwhelming, and I kind of wish it would all just go away.”

Chime could definitely empathize. “There have been times when I felt that way too, especially in the beginning, and when I let myself down.”

That very night, Chime had a dream in which she saw the same little blue bird from her dream of the three nests. Even in her dream state, she knew instantly that the dream pertained to Jacob. She also somehow instinctively knew that the dream was going to be important, so she tried to pay close attention to the details.

The bird was inside of an enclosure like a large chicken coup that was fenced on all sides, even from above. With no openings, the blue bird couldn’t get out. However, as Chime watched the scene from a short distance away, a gate suddenly appeared in the fencing at the exact moment a white sparrow landed on gnarly cedar stump just outside of the enclosure very near the gate. The sparrow was carrying a twig which, for the size of the sparrow, was incredibly large, nearly three times as long as its body, and fairly fat. One end of the twig was forked into two; the other end, which the sparrow was holding, simply formed a thick stem.

Chime smiled at the odd sight, thinking, *Well, it is a dream, and pretty much anything can happen in a dream, even a smallish bird carrying a rather largish twig.*

With a mighty effort, the sparrow tossed the heavy twig onto the ground just outside the gate which immediately swung open.

Upon landing, one of the forks of the twig pointed to the sparrow, while the other pointed off into an open field that was kind of misty. Peering in that direction, Chime couldn’t clearly see what might lie in that direction, other than mist and grasses

and a few distant trees. If the thick base of the twig was pointing to anything, it was at the blue bird inside the enclosure.

As Chime continued to watch, both birds stayed still, for the moment, the white one waiting to see which fork of the twig the bird in the enclosure would chose as far as direction, the blue one deciding whether to join the sparrow, or go off into the misty field.

The dream ended exactly at that point of waiting, and Chime suddenly woke, gazing at her dream-catcher antler above her, seeing the little glints from the beads in the moonlight, like soft twinkles winking sleepily at her.

Since she was working all morning, Chime called Jacob Saturday afternoon, not only to tell him about the dream but also to invite him to a youth group picnic the following weekend, on Sunday afternoon. “If your mom can drop you off,” she said, “Gavin says he can take you home afterwards.”

After describing the dream, and telling Jacob that the blue bird represented him, Chime then told him that she thought it meant he didn’t have to keep the gift he had been given. “I won’t try to influence you either way,” she said. “It’s a really big decision, and it has to be all your own. But I think you will only have until you see a white sparrow again to make the decision. At that exact moment, you will have to decide. And I assume taking a step toward the sparrow will mean that you keep the gift and taking a step in another direction means you will give it back. Either way, from that point on, you will be free. The gate will remain open. I don’t think it will disappear or close, and I don’t think you will feel trapped or weighted anymore, whatever you decide. I don’t know exactly how I know this, but I firmly believe it.”

With Jacob thinking over everything she had said, Chime added, “If you are having trouble deciding, I can only suggest that you pray about it. But it could happen at any time. You could see another white sparrow today, or tomorrow. I saw one recently, and I was very surprised. So try to be prepared.”

Mulling over everything his friend had told him while riding his bike to the nursing home to visit his aunt later in the afternoon, Jacob desperately hoped he wouldn't see a white sparrow along the way, and end up having to make the decision before having time to think and pray about it.

Though Chime's dream had been a surprise, Jacob wasn't at all surprised that God was giving him a choice; after all, God created free will, Jacob reasoned mainly because He didn't want his children to be robots, or robot-like followers. He wants our love and willing submission to Him, which allows people the freedom to make their own choices, including that of not following Him—a choice, in Jacob's opinion, that was incredibly unwise. However, while the choice to follow God was an easy one to make, choosing whether or not to keep the gift was going to take some incredibly serious thinking.

Jacob was not only visiting his aunt to pick up the roll of dimes she had mentioned, he also wanted to try using his gift again. Even in his somewhat short life so far, he had learned that all things take practice in order for people to become good at them. And he reasoned that this might even be doubly so of his gift of healing.

Even if he decided not to keep the gift, he couldn't be afraid to use it while he had it. Brushing aside worries as to whether or not he would do everything right, he also resolved not to worry about times when it didn't work to heal someone, since he couldn't possibly know if it did in every instance. He also decided that he couldn't let his mistake with Kyle deter him from trying again. He shouldn't be so easily sidetracked when it came to something this important.

Since his Aunt Julia was showering when he arrived, Jacob hung out in the common area for awhile, which is where he met Bud Hawthorn's neighbor, Mr. Lafosse, who had heard through the grapevine that Jacob was something of a good-luck charm and who asked Jacob to pick a winning horse for him. Trying

to be obliging, Jacob scanned the paper and picked a horse named Endless Dusting.

Thinking it likely that Mr. Lafosse had an illness, since people living in a nursing home generally had some sort of ailment, if not multiple ones, Jacob intentionally touched Mr. Lafosse's hand when passing him back the paper, which ended up curing him of two health issues, prostate cancer and dementia.

Because the type of cancer he had was generally slow growing, and because he was already advancing in years, Mr. Lafosse had chosen not to have aggressive treatment. However, the disease would still have ended up causing him significant problems because he was destined to live a fairly long life. Now, thankfully, he wouldn't have any of these problems. He also wouldn't have his current dementia symptoms, or show any additional signs of the illness, during his remaining years.

Being healed, of course, was a much better gift than winning a coffee. Mr. Lafosse also won a coffee—a large vanilla latte. And since Bud Hawthorn hadn't seen Jacob in the nursing home that day, the win wasn't the slightest bit suspicious.

However, Jacob had just about decided that he was done picking horses. For one thing, he didn't want to cause any friction between friends. Plus, he wasn't sure it was all that fair. If he somehow had a knack for choosing winners, he didn't think it would be fair to use this for gain. It would be like knowing the numbers of a lottery jackpot early, and robbing others of their chances to win. He had started thinking about this when Chime mentioned picking lottery numbers with information from her dreams, which was something she was adamant about not doing.

Plus, Jacob wasn't sure how he felt about gambling, whether on horses, cards, lotteries, whatever. He didn't particularly think it was all that wholesome, or a good use of money, which was ultimately from God. He reasoned that if he

ever had excess money, he would be able to find far better things to do with it, like feeding hungry people, or helping someone who needed a job to buy some slacks and a nice shirt so that they could present well in an interview. His mother was always directing people to their church for those kinds of things; and a couple of times that Jacob was aware of, she had bought interview clothes for someone herself, and a bus ticket on another occasion, so a person could go see a family member who was ill.

Something slightly odd happened in the hallway just outside of his Aunt Julia's room. Jacob accidentally tripped over his own feet, and an old man passing by grabbed his elbow to help steady him. Jacob would have thought he would have been more secure in his footing than the man hobbling by with a cane, whose name turned out to be William Mason. It was fortunate that he had touched Jacob because, only moments before the encounter, Mr. Mason had caught tuberculosis, not from having been recently exposed to the highly contagious disease, but because he had dormant tuberculosis bacilli (spore-like bacteria) in his lungs, and one of them had just burst. The contact with Jacob had occurred quickly enough after the bacilli burst so that Mr. Mason would not become ill, and would not spread the disease to others.

At home later, Jacob felt better, but still had some fears that he would let himself, and God, down again. *Of course, we're all destined to make mistakes, and hopefully learn from them,* Jacob thought, *but do I want to risk making a really bad mistake again, like I did with Kyle?* Since Jacob had tried to make it right afterwards, he wondered if he was maybe being too hard on himself. After all, Chime had said he would need to live with his gift for a while to be able to better understand it and to learn its nuances. But he definitely didn't want to trivialize what had happened with Kyle because he knew he had been petty and selfish.

And although Jacob tried not to fixate on it, there was still the mystery as to why some people were healed instantly, like his Aunt Julia; while others were healed more slowly, like Shannon; and still other people not at all, like Mr. Hugo. It was hard not to think about this, even though he knew he may never find an absolute answer to the question.

After praying for a while before dinner, Jacob randomly opened his bible and ended up reading the story of the Ten Lepers, Luke 17:11-19, which spoke directly to the question he had been pondering. Jesus did not heal the ten lepers instantly, as He had others. Instead, He sent them off to show themselves to the health inspectors, and they were healed along the way. It seemed Jesus wanted them to demonstrate faith in Him before they were healed, and He even said this to the one who returned to thank Him. "...your faith has made you well."

Smiling, Jacob realized that God had led him to this exact spot in the bible, which was amazing, though not surprising. After all, God was capable of anything. But it was somewhat spooky, realizing that God knew his every thought. Jacob could often feel God with him, but sometimes it startled and unnerved him—to be with his Maker, and Father, who was the Father of everything. Jacob smiled in thinking how thrilling and amazing it was that the Father had so much time for each of His children individually.

So in the case of the Ten Lepers, here, once again, was the issue of trust, though it was expressed as "faith" in the story. Finding at least part of the answer to his question in scripture was great reinforcement of what he had already reasoned out, from talking to Mr. Emmons and Chime, and from puzzling over everything himself. *Faith and trust are crucial*, he reminded himself, *and not only with regard to my gift, but probably with just about everything else in life too.*

Related to the trust issue, Jacob next looked up something he remembered reading only a few weeks before, Proverbs 3:5-8. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on

your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”

How perfect, given his current situation, to have trust and healing mentioned in the same bible passage.

Though feeling good, and empowered, Jacob still wondered if giving up the gift might be best because it would end up making life a lot simpler; and the easy way out was very tempting. But was it right?

Of course it would make life simpler, his brain told him. But I might end up being even more of a disappointment, both to God and to myself, if I give up such a blessing, and don't make use of this amazing thing God has given me. If I give it up, will I regret it...and will I always have the regrets?

Shannon called Jacob that evening to invite him to lunch after church the next day. Chime would be going too; and Shannon would pick both of them up, since she had a car.

After picking up Jacob first, then driving to Chime's house, the friends all agreed on a lunch spot in Chime's neighborhood because they all felt like pizza and Chime knew where a good pizza parlor was nearby. As they decided on the lunch special, which was two medium pizzas and a pitcher of soda, Jacob tried to pay because Shannon had refused the offer of gas money from both Jacob and Chime and was hurriedly pulling a twenty out of her purse. “No,” she told Jacob, as she handed the money to the cashier. “I invited you. We can go Dutch some other time. This time, I wanted to treat you.” Shannon not only wanted to pay because she had invited them, she also pretty well knew that neither of her new friends got as large of an allowance as she did and, therefore, didn't have as much spending money as she did. So she really wanted to pay for things, if they would let her.

Since the bill was nineteen dollars and fifty-eight cents, quickly digging in his pockets, Jacob did manage to pay the

fifty-eight cents so that Shannon could receive a full dollar back in change, which she placed into the tip jar by the register.

While they were waiting for the food, Chime invited Shannon to the picnic at her church the next weekend. “Oh, I can’t,” Shannon regretfully replied. “Next Sunday afternoon, I promised to help out at a garage-sale fundraiser at the Church of Christ near my home.” Despite not being able to go to the picnic, Shannon did hope to visit Chime’s church in the near future, along with Jacob’s, while doing her exploring for the right church family.

Shannon said grace when the food arrived, after which the talk turned to college plans while they enjoyed their meal.

In truth, though they were two years younger, Jacob and Chime had done more thinking on the subject than Shannon had in recent months. “My mom has been on me a lot lately about college,” she said, “and she’s right to push me because I don’t have nearly as much time to set goals and make plans as you both do. I’ve been procrastinating.”

Both Chime and Jacob seemed to have firm plans as far as what they wanted to major in, Botany and Premedical Studies respectively, while Shannon hadn’t yet decided, though she was toying with the idea of Marketing.

They discussed various schools, financial aid, and other aspects of this endeavor.

“I’ve been trying to figure out how I’m going to pay for a vehicle, as well as college,” Jacob admitted. “You’re lucky you already have one,” he said to Shannon. “And you have a plan for one,” he added to Chime. “But I haven’t come up with a plan for that yet, and I doubt my mom will be able to help much. As soon as I turn sixteen, I’ll get a job; but I’d like to start saving up even before then.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about a car, if I were you,” Shannon wisely advised. “I’d focus on grades first, rather than working to pay for a car, because you might not even need a car when you start college. A lot of kids don’t have one when they

start college, and they don't absolutely *need* one. If you go to college in a small town, you can walk places you need to go, or take school trams. If you go to school in a big city, you can use public transportation. Either way, a car might actually be a burden, financially. Good grades are much better to focus on, to better your chances for good scholarships, and for getting into the right program. And without a lot of extra income from a job, you might actually qualify for more financial aid."

Though Jacob hadn't thought about the issue in this way, Shannon was completely right. He wouldn't *need* a car with things like buses and trains available. Plus, he could always bicycle places he needed to go. They even made light kits for bikes, powered by pedaling, so that people could safely and legally ride them at night.

"Thanks for the advice," Jacob said, in a slightly awe-filled tone, upon realizing that Shannon was probably just about as clever and smart as Chime. And he almost couldn't believe that he had made two such good friends, both girls, in just the last month.

"Well, when you've lived longer," Shannon joked, referring to her two years of seniority over Chime and Jacob, "you'll have good advice to give the 'youngsters' in your life."

As they were finishing off the last slices of pizza, Chime asked Shannon, "Have you had any luck so far in convincing your family?"

"Well, my dad's planning to go to church with me sometime," she replied, "if he can ever tear himself away from work. And I'm trying to set a good example for my sister. I wouldn't want her to turn out like a lot of girls I know, and like how I almost turned out. But as far as my mom," she added, with a huge sigh as she went on, "I'm afraid I haven't made any headway yet. And, I still don't quite feel prepared enough to have another family meeting. I'm still sorting through all of the stuff I've gathered, and it's all a little confusing. I'm starting to

think I won't ever come across anything that will really make a difference to her way of thinking."

"Personal testimony is really powerful," Jacob advised. "There's nothing like hearing other people's stories to make a difference. But we don't all have those moving stories like we see on TV, like the people who get rescued from horrible situations, or turn their lives around after being at the bottom. For one thing, some of us haven't lived long enough," he added, with an impish smile and an elbow jab to reinforce Shannon's elderly state among them.

As Shannon was laughing and half-heartedly jabbing Jacob back, Chime said, "My suggestion would be to trust in the Holy Spirit to lead you to say the right things to your family. Pray about it, and I believe God will lead you. And the answer might be simpler than you think. I wonder if you might be overcomplicating things with all of the stuff you are gathering, like getting bogged down, when something simple, familiar, and even close at hand might be the answer. It might even be something right in front of you."

At dinner with her family that evening, while they were having dessert, Shannon's father asked her if she wanted him to go with her when she got baptized.

"Yes!" Shannon answered happily. Eagerly going on, she told him, "The more I read about baptism, the more excited I get about it. God commanded us to be baptized, and He expects us to follow His commands. Jesus was baptized, and He was not even a sinner like the rest of us. But He did it as an example for us to follow. We're supposed to become more Christlike while we're here, so we can be good members of His family when we eventually join Him in heaven. So we should try to follow His examples whenever we can."

Noticing that her mother and Abby were listening closely to what she was saying, Shannon tried to calm her tone, so that she could come across as perfectly even-tempered and rational. However, as excited as she was about the prospect of getting

baptized, she had a hard time containing her enthusiasm, and her tone still held a fair amount of zeal as she went on. “I’m planning to get it scheduled soon, even if I haven’t figured out which church I feel most comfortable at. Several friends have told me that I don’t have to be a member of a church to be baptized. There are plenty of pastors and ministers willing to baptize anyone who wants to be baptized. I don’t want to wait too long. In fact, Acts 22:16 encourages us not to delay. “‘And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’””

Rising in the middle of her daughter’s last sentence to begin clearing the table, Shannon’s mother now appeared to be ignoring her.

Abby, while she hadn’t interrupted her sister, immediately said something to her father about her most recent dance class, before taking her next bite of key lime pie.

Shannon wasn’t perturbed. She hadn’t expected her mother to support her, and she remembered well being fixated on other things when she was Abby’s age. Actually, the fact that they had listened to her at all thrilled Shannon; and she felt very hopeful about the future prospect of convincing her family.

Chapter Twelve

Facing the Sun

Jacob had been sleeping better and worrying much less as of late. On Tuesday after dinner, he went to Mr. Emmons' house for a math tutoring session. This was the second session, and the result of the first one had been that Jacob had aced his last algebra test. Factoring was so much easier after Mr. Emmons explained it, and wrote down a few simple steps for him to follow when working the problems. They were starting on word problems this time.

After an hour at the kitchen table, Jacob had made a good amount of progress, so they stopped working and scheduled the next session for the following week.

"Do you want me to wash your car this weekend, in payment for the tutoring?" Jacob asked.

"No," Mr. Emmons replied, "how about just shake out that rug by the door for me and sweep the back porch before you go? Since my shoulder has been sore from pruning the ash trees, I let some of the little stuff go this week."

Jacob gladly complied, as this was less than ten minutes of work, which seemed not much of a payment against a couple of hours so far of math tutoring. When shaking out the rug from the corner of the back porch, Jacob admired the glowing orange sunset which, strangely enough, wasn't as glaring as usual, but almost seemed to be smiling at him instead.

Mr. Emmons was unloading the dishwasher when Jacob reentered the house.

Replacing the rug in front of the kitchen door, Jacob happened to notice the label underneath. "*Hand-knotted, Persia, 1937,*" he said. "Wow, this was handmade? It must

have taken forever for someone to finish.” Indeed, the 4x6 rug was very intricate, made with extremely tiny knots.

“It was my mother’s,” Mr. Emmons told him. “She visited that part of the world when she was a little girl, with her uncle I think, and she got to pick the rug herself.”

“I can’t imagine the work that goes into something like this,” Jacob marveled, running his hand over the soft woolen surface.

“Well, your model ship probably took a lot of the same kind of effort,” Mr. Emmons replied.

“But I’m sure this took a lot more time to make,” Jacob answered.

Before leaving, Jacob also admired a large basket, obviously handmade as well, sitting on Mr. Emmons’ hearth in the living room.

“It’s a willow basket,” Mr. Emmons said. With Jacob taking a closer look, he added, “And willow trees are related to healing.”

“Really,” Jacob replied, now taking even more interest.

“From what I remember reading on the subject,” Mr. Emmons replied, “going all the way back to ancient Greece, and our own history with Native Americans, people have used willow bark as a pain reliever for all kinds of aches and pains, and to reduce fever. And I think the salicylic acid that they put in acne treatments comes from willow bark.”

“Wow,” Jacob answered. “I probably should do some reading myself on the subject, since I want to be a doctor.”

“I actually thought about giving this basket to your mother,” Mr. Emmons said, “since she collects baskets.”

Smiling, Jacob responded, “She’d love it. She loves anything handmade, especially baskets. I remember she actually cried a couple of years ago when my Aunt Julia bought her one of those Longaberger baskets.”

When Jacob returned home, his mother greeted him with some news she had just heard from one of her coworkers—that

Kyle was out of the hospital and was doing much better. “He still has to do some rehab, cognitive therapy I think, but will likely have very little long-term damage from the head injury. Hopefully, he learned something from this,” his mother added.

His mother’s words reminded Jacob of something Mr. Emmons had said, that people might need to learn something before they can be relieved of an affliction. Jacob had certainly learned something from the experience—he was definitely not planning to make the same mistake twice—and he hoped this would be true for Kyle as well, specifically, that he would stop making the mistake of bullying people.

After school on Wednesday, Jacob stopped by the Dime Box to drop off six dimes he had collected.

“If you can come early on Saturday,” Mr. Hugo told him, “I’m going to try to open the box. Saturday is the eighth day of the month, my lucky day, so I’m going to try out my latest dimes before I open the bakery.”

Thrilled to be invited, Jacob eagerly replied, “I’ll be here!”

Early evening on Thursday, Shannon happened to be gazing out of her bedroom window when she saw a small, pure-white bird taking a bath in the birdbath in her side yard. She couldn’t imagine what kind of bird it was, since it was a lot smaller than a dove or a seagull or any other white bird she could think of such as swans or geese. Whatever it was, it was perfectly lovely, and she imagined that this was another sign from God, that she was on the right track, particularly with regards to the issue of getting baptized, since the small bird seemed to be doing such a good job of getting himself completely drenched.

How did I not notice special things like this before? Shannon wondered. *Things like the sunflowers too?*

As Shannon continued to watch, the bird finished his bath and shook off on the birdbath rim, whereupon, he took off west, in the exact direction of the setting sun.

Plopping down on her bed, Shannon’s mind answered her own question. *I guess I had to have that small amount of belief*

to start with, just like Mrs. Chilton said. Then, it doesn't just rain, it pours.

Reminded of the sunflowers, and thinking of the sunset, Shannon was convinced she was now firmly facing the light, and following the path in the right direction.

After saying a short prayer, she put away all of the stacks of stuff she had been collecting from various churches and the conference, and settled down to read one of her bibles. *Chime's advice was good*, she decided. *I was getting bogged down, and even more confused. It's time to simplify.*

She was just about to flip open the bible when it suddenly hit her. Both of her new friends had been right because Jacob's advice was good too. Put the two together, and the answer was staring Shannon right in the face.

And her mother, father, and Abby were all currently at home—what a blessing!

Hurrying to her window once again, Shannon breathed a sigh of relief. Being already November, she was worried that the sunflowers might be nearly gone. But the vacant lot still contained many clumps still in bloom. Though less than half of what had been blooming just a few weeks before, there were still enough to accomplish her plan.

With Pickles and Pumpernickel in tow, Shannon tracked down her family and literally dragged them over to the lot next door.

Chime had been so right in telling Shannon that the answer might be closer than she thought. And, in fact, it was literally staring right at her, in the form of big brown eyes framed with silky, bright yellow lashes.

“Stand right there, and stay still,” Shannon commanded her bewildered family, who didn't argue but stayed put, exactly where she told them to stand. (The dogs stayed put too, not daring to oppose Shannon's authoritative tone.)

“Just watch,” she added, as she proceeded to move slowly around the lot, with the sunflower heads obediently following her every move.

Just as Shannon hoped, her family, noticing right away, was completely mesmerized, and astounded.

After several minutes of the meandering stroll, she came to stand by her mother, where she quietly said, “This is supernatural, and God is supernatural. This is from God. It’s not a trick. I didn’t invent a sunflower magnet. God is making this happen, and I think He’s doing it because He wants you to believe me. This is real, and what happened to me was real. I didn’t make it up, and my mind didn’t subconsciously make it up.”

Next, leading her speechless family back to the house and into the living room, Shannon followed Jacob’s advice and gave her testimony, telling her family the entire story of what had happened to her when she nearly died.

It was difficult for her to make it through describing in detail the time she spent in heat, pain, and darkness; but she managed to get through it by focusing on what was coming, namely, the all-important glimpse into heaven, which was the part she hoped would convince her family, because it had certainly been what had convinced Shannon herself.

Remarkably, though she talked for nearly an hour straight, during which her family remained completely quiet and attentive, Shannon made it through the entire story without crying.

A few moments after finishing the story, when her emotions finally got the better of her, Shannon did cry. Sitting next to her on the couch, her father held her as he fought back tears of his own. Her mother and Abby, sitting on the couch opposite, were also crying, though both seemed more in a state of shock than anything else. And this was how the McNay living room remained for the rest of the evening, in a state of shock and tears, with no one talking, not even when Shannon’s mother

briefly left the room to go to the kitchen to make hot cocoa for everyone.

On Friday night, Chime had a most unusual dream, in which she was standing in a huge field, very early in the morning, walking toward several greenhouses in the distance, two of which were absolutely enormous; and she wondered, *Are these in my future, and are they the greenhouses I'm meant to own and care for?*

Peeking inside the first small greenhouse she came to, she found it filled with a sea of red and white poinsettias, the red all being on one side of a wide center aisle, with the white on the other.

The next building she came to was obviously being used as a laboratory. In addition to equipment she was familiar with, such as microscopes and bell jars, the lab was filled with a lot of tools and devices that Chime didn't recognize, many of which looked very sleek and futuristic.

A large table work station near the entry held a phone and a computer, also sleek in form, along with papers, folders, pens, and other such office whatnots. Two rolling stools were tucked neatly beneath the station. The wall beside the table held two things, a calendar and a small picture frame displaying a single dime set against a blue velvet background. On the calendar, of which the month and year were hidden behind several stick-on notes, the date of the nineteenth was circled, twice, once in orange pen and once in green. *It must be a pretty important date*, Chime thought, *for it to be circled twice.*

In addition to a lovely heart-shaped glass paperweight, Chime's gaze was specifically drawn to another item on the table—a smooth wooden box about the size of a shoe box, but a bit flatter and wider. Trying to open the box, she was unable to find a lid, let alone open it. *It must need some kind of key*, she reasoned, though she couldn't particularly see a keyhole in her brief examination of the box.

Wandering around the lab, Chime noticed several large pots containing a type of plant she didn't recognize, with bluish, heart-shaped leaves that were elongated and fringed with tiny, light blue flowers. Holding her breath, she resisted the urge to touch the plant, so as to be careful not to disturb something this important and special. Though it wasn't labeled as such, Chime somehow knew it was very important, and she wondered if she was maybe supposed to develop this plant in the future. *And what might it relate to,* she pondered, *nutrition, medicine...something else?*

Again not wanting to disturb anything and feeling the need for fresh air, Chime wandered outside where she just managed to catch the beginning of the sunrise. Huge patches of wild sunflowers in a field adjacent to the lab were turning to face the rising sun. Since Chime knew this was somewhat unusual for wild sunflowers, she wondered if Shannon was somewhere in that direction, and if the flowers were turning to face her. Heading that way, Chime vaguely wondered if she might run into Shannon in her dream.

Moonflowers thickly covering a metal trellis on the side of the lab building hadn't yet shut themselves to sleep for the day, but Chime reasoned that they soon would because the beautiful golden ball of the sun was already rising higher and becoming warmer.

In passing between the two largest greenhouses, Chime discovered four wind turbines, a series of rain-water collection tanks drawing their water from the greenhouse roofs, and a long row of solar panels smaller than any she had ever seen. *Hopefully, solar panels will become smaller in the future,* she thought, *and more affordable.* Beyond the greenhouses lay several huge vegetable and flower gardens.

Strolling through the gardens, Chime noticed a house in the distance, and she somehow knew that this was her home. *It's a nice size,* she thought, *not too large, so it will be easy to keep*

clean, and one story, which will be nice in old age, in case I have trouble climbing stairs.

The dream ended just as Chime started walking toward the house, but she did manage to see a man coming out onto the front porch of the house just before she woke. The man was too far away to see clearly, but Chime thought he somehow looked familiar; and she wondered if this was his home too, or if he might just be visiting.

Smiling, as she rose and went to her window to peek out at the first rays of the real-life sunrise, which looked very similar to the one in her dream, Chime cautioned herself not to be too sure that everything she had just seen in her dream would really come about. *It might, she thought, but it might also have just been one of those fantasy dreams.* Whatever her future held, she was certain it would be pretty wonderful. Instead of concentrating on the things in the dream, she decided to focus on the sunrise in front of her. *That's a better idea,* she told herself. *After all, it's what God wants—for us to be focused more on the things above, and less on the things here on earth. When we focus too much on the things of the earth, we tend to miss the blessings from above.*

At the exact moment Chime was looking out her window on this lovely Saturday morning, Jacob was setting off on his bike toward the Dime Box. Since it was still somewhat dark, he seriously reminded himself that he needed to look into getting one of those bicycle light kits that was powered by pedaling.

Jacob arrived just as Mr. Hugo was propping open the door to the bakery, which he liked to do on nice days, not only to get some breeze inside, but also so that passersby could smell the bakery goods, and hopefully increase their desire to buy them.

However, today, the first of the bakery smells was that of burned sugar because Mr. Astwell had this time well and truly burned something, namely, two trays of Baltic cakes.

Jacob thought the burned sugar actually smelled kind of good. Mr. Hugo agreed, though he was good-naturedly

complaining, as he was prone to do whenever Mr. Astwell burned something.

Accepting the offer of both a napkin and a Baltic cake, Jacob sampled one, which he found very tasty, even with it being burned.

As Jacob added a dime to the pile of about sixty on the bakery counter, Mr. Hugo retrieved the box from his office.

Though he was offered a stool, Jacob was too excited to sit, so he stood by the counter as Mr. Hugo started trying the dimes by carefully sliding them into the little slot in the side groove.

After going through a little over half of the pile, Mr. Hugo was still patient and smiling.

Imagining how many times he must have done this over the years, and how many dimes he must have gone through, Jacob marveled that Mr. Hugo had never given up. Suddenly remembering how many times the bible mentioned having patience and not losing hope in God, a specific quote came to Jacob's mind, from Isaiah 49, where God said, "...I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame."

At Mr. Astwell's urging, Jacob was reaching for his third Baltic cake, while not particularly expecting anything exciting to happen, mainly because Mr. Hugo was nearing the end of his pile of dimes, when he heard a small noise that was something like a tiny snap, but with a slight musical sound to it, which might have been likened to the lilt of a songbird, but with the song of the bird consisting only of one short note.

With the sound of the musical snap, the lid of the box popped up, ever so slightly.

Nearly dropping a tray of donuts, Mr. Astwell turned pale. Though Mr. Hugo never doubted he would finish this project in his lifetime, Mr. Astwell had never imagined that his friend would actually find the exact dime that would open the box.

Mr. Hugo had turned pale as well, and they all held their breath, as he slowly lifted the lid.

Mr. Astwell and Mr. Hugo were both speechless to discover a small white sparrow inside, very much alive and well, and looking as healthy and pristine as any white sparrow ever had.

Though surprised, Jacob was not particularly shocked, and an odd thought popped into his mind...*When the mundane becomes extraordinary*. This was something Chime had said during their conversation at the conference. They had been talking about sparrows of all kinds (not just the white ones) being low-key and inconspicuous, but so completely wonderful as well, and incredibly important to the world.

And what a wonderful gift to the world this one was likely to be, in distributing gifts from God.

Hopping out of the box and onto the bakery counter, then flying a short distance to land on a small display table about six feet in front of Jacob, the sparrow fixed his gaze firmly on Jacob, and seemed to be waiting for something.

Jacob wouldn't need to make the bird wait because he had already made his decision.

A mere moment after receiving Jacob's answer, the sparrow flew to exit the bakery through the open front door.

Hurrying to the door, Jacob barely caught a last glimpse of the bird heading away fast in the direction of the rising sun.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Did Jacob choose to keep his gift?
2. Was Shannon successful in convincing her family?
3. Does Mr. Emmons have a gift, and what is it?
4. Which character (if not all of them) is most like the white sparrow?
5. What might the plant in the future greenhouse be, and what might its purpose be? And was the man on Chime's future porch, Jacob?
6. Is the wooden box in the future greenhouse the one Mr. Hugo opened, which he then gave to Jacob, or could there be more than one box? And do magical objects like the wooden box really exist?
7. The characters of the story pondered a great many questions that may never have concrete answers. What are some things God intends to remain as mysteries, and why might those things be better left to the unknown?
8. Does Chime have multiple gifts, and what might they be?
9. Does Mr. Hugo have a gift, or possibly more than one? And did he keep the Dime Box store open after completing his project?

10. Was the bird in the box the whole time, waiting patiently, or did God just put him in there the moment before the box was opened?
11. According to Mr. Hugo's uncle, the box held answers to many of the world's problems. Since it contained a white sparrow, capable of giving gifts from God, what exactly does that mean in relation to solving many of the world's problems?
12. What four years of dimes was Mr. Hugo looking for? The numbers indicating the years are hidden in the story. Also, which of the four years opened the box? The answer is also in the story.



About the Author

J.H. Sweet is the author of *The Fairy Chronicles*, *The Wishbone Miracle*, *The White Sparrow*, *Foo and Friends*, *Juan Noel's Crystal Airship*, *The Time Entity Trilogy*, *Cassie Kingston Mysteries*, *The Gypsy Fiddle*, and *The Heaviest Things*. She lives in South Texas and has a degree in English from Texas State University.

jhsweet.com

