

An anatomical illustration of a wishbone (furcula) is centered on a light blue background. The wishbone is shown in a golden-brown color, with its two prongs extending upwards and outwards. Inside the wishbone, a complex network of glowing blue and yellow lines is visible, resembling a neural or vascular network. The text 'The Wishbone Miracle' is overlaid on the wishbone, and the author's name 'J.H. Sweet' is at the bottom right.

The

Wishbone

Miracle

J.H. Sweet

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Butterflies, Bees, and Cypress Knees

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

A miracle waits around every corner...

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Chapter One

The Cat-Leg Funeral

The day after the great horned owl carried off Mrs. Sylvester's cat, something quite extraordinary happened; that is, even more extraordinary than the owl depositing the cat's rear left leg on Mrs. Sylvester's back porch, as a gift, because he was certainly appreciative of the plump cat she had so carefully reared for his culinary enjoyment.

The extraordinary thing happened on a Tuesday evening during the church youth group *Spring Revue*, which had been organized by high school junior, Ricky Halo, and several of her friends who were also some of the main performers.

The banquet hall of the church was packed, with some of the audience seated, some standing. This was a better turnout than the previous year's revue, with even more attending than had come to the *Christmas Jubilee*.

It was during a short comedy skit that the first part of the extraordinary thing happened. Several audience members, mostly from the far-back area of the banquet hall, began interjecting dialogue (along with a few vocal sound effects such as loud sighs and whistles) into the performance in such a way that it seemed as though it could have been planned. Ricky happened to be in the skit, and whenever she paused for emphasis, or in reaction to another character's antics, a far-back audience member would chime in with a short proverb or a quote from Ecclesiastes that always seemed to fit what was happening on stage. Though these interjections slightly disoriented the performers at first, the audience seemed to love the additions to the script.

The same thing happened during the next musical number. Lines of lyrics that perfectly fitted the song in progress (sung by exquisite voices, almost angelic in quality) lilted in from the audience, genuinely adding to the performance.

The final segment of the revue, which ended in a standing ovation with three curtain calls, was equally animated by at least half-a-dozen unknown spectators.

Always one to love improvisation, Ricky was thrilled with the audience participation, so much so that after the curtain calls, she hurried out to the seating area in the hopes of meeting the additional performers. This was when the next part of the extraordinary thing happened. Of the many audience members Ricky was acquainted with, no one could tell her who any of the extra entertainers were. By her recollection, at least ten, or possibly fifteen, unknown people had contributed to the revue; yet, they could not be found, nor could anyone remember who of the church family these people might have been.

After a bit of thinking and discussing, Ricky and her fellow troupe members decided that they were simply happy to have had such inspirational spontaneity from the audience that genuinely helped to get their messages across, so it didn't particularly matter that the participants remained anonymous.

In the dressing room a short while later, Ricky told her friend and fellow performer, Hannah Klein, "It almost seemed surreal, like something from an odd dream."

"I know," Hannah responded with a nod. "The acoustics in the hall made the voices sound really eerie."

"It's not just that," Ricky replied. "I barely caught glimpses of the people, but they almost looked like they were glowing in some weird sort of way. And that's why I couldn't see them very well, because I couldn't see past the light they were giving off."

"Maybe they had something like personal spotlights," Hannah suggested, "so they could be seen by the audience."

“Then why can’t anyone in the audience tell us who they were,” Ricky responded, “or even what they looked like?”

Hannah shrugged.

Ricky would have little time over the next few days to think more about the odd event because she was busy with several projects, not the least of which was helping to plan the Mother’s Brunch set for the following weekend. Ricky often helped babysit during various church activities, and she was singlehandedly in charge of the children’s entertainment for the brunch party, which was completely separate from that of the mothers’ activities, so the moms could have a little break and enjoy exclusively adult company for awhile.

When the brunch day arrived, Ricky was more than ready. No stranger to entertaining children, she led various energetic games and a bible charades contest before settling the kids down for a snack, followed by storytime. Since most of the children were very young, Ricky chose tales from *Thistledown Ridge*, a nature-based story series of her own creation geared to the toddler age group.

Naptime followed storytime; but unfortunately, stubborn little Lucy Wren refused to nap. Undaunted and smiling, Ricky drew the fussy three-year-old into a quiet corner to read *Flower Rabbit*, another of Ricky’s creative writing projects in which a tiny rabbit goes to a wedding cake competition, sneaking into the display hall before the arrival of the judges. When the rabbit tastes a flower from one of the cakes, she can’t understand why it doesn’t taste like the flowers she’s used to. Then she samples another flower, and another, and wonders why they pretty much all taste alike, because that’s certainly not true of the flowers of the field. When the rabbit gets a huge energy rush from all the sugar, she tears around the display hall and ruins many of the beautiful cakes. What a mess! She finally wears herself out and decides to take a nap on top of one of the cakes because it’s all squishy, soft, and comfortable. And that rabbit-topped cake ends up winning the competition.

Lucy loved the story and it seemed she had finally worn herself out because she curled up on her nap-mat to rest as soon as Ricky finished reading.

Ricky's younger brother, Thomas, who was turning out to be quite a good artist, had drawn the pictures for *Flower Rabbit*. Ricky smiled as she replaced the book on the story shelf. The church print shop had printed up fifty copies of the book, as gifts for the children in the church daycare and for Ricky to give to family and friends. It was such a success that Ricky was planning to write a couple of sequels. Already, ideas for *Chocolate Rabbit* and *Ribbon Rabbit* were spinning around inside her head. For the remainder of naptime, Ricky made notes for the stories while tidying up the play areas.

The mothers certainly looked rested as they collected their children. Ricky couldn't quite say the same thing, but she would have no time to rest until much later because she had important plans for the afternoon.

After finishing the tidying, Ricky wolfed down a couple of dainty tea sandwiches and a cherry muffin that one of the mothers had brought her. She then hurried to her car for a trip to the local pet cemetery, which would mark the beginning of an exciting personal project.

Mrs. Sylvester was holding a funeral for her cat's leg, which she had kept in the freezer while she planned the elaborate affair. Ricky was filming the funeral and intended to incorporate footage of the event into a film project, so far entitled *Various Religious Experiences*. She was planning to come up with a catchier title, but she wanted to take her time to make sure the name was just right. She often held off in giving her writing projects titles because she had found over the years that it didn't pay to get too attached to an early title that didn't quite fit anymore once the project was complete. Being flexible would probably serve her well in filmmaking, as it had in writing.

Ricky had inherited her professional film camera from her late uncle, who had achieved quite notable success making sports documentaries, as well as filming historical reenactments for people all over the United States. She remembered fondly her aunt carefully placing the heavy camera into her hands. Ricky was speechless, and thrilled. Now she would have an excellent way to film church performances, family gatherings, and other events. Thomas had no problem at all with his sister getting the camera, particularly because he himself was thrilled with his own inheritance from his uncle—an extensive coin collection.

While waiting at a train crossing, and humming along to a song on the radio, Ricky thought about what had happened at the revue. It wasn't all that odd that the performance had turned out to be interactive; after all, she purposely made some of her children's stories that way, so the kids could contribute and so that the stories could be different each time they were read and not become boring.

As the line of cars began to move, Ricky's thoughts spun off in another direction, as to what she might want to do after high school. A lot of her friends had already decided, and already had definite plans as far as what college they would attend, where they would live, what they would major in, and how many hours a week they would work while going to school. Ricky was still in a holding pattern as far as these things. She knew she was going to need to pick a state school, to be able to afford the tuition; but she didn't have any idea what she might want to study. And she didn't have any idea yet as to what financial aid she might qualify for, so she didn't have a clue as to how much she might need to work. She hoped the assistance might be on the higher end, since her parents weren't wealthy. They weren't poor, but the family had always lived on one income. But even more confusing than how school was going to get paid for was the issue of what to study. Ricky wasn't yet sure if she wanted to be a teacher, or a writer, or

possibly a minister. In thinking of careers, she thought she would love being a motivational speaker. But she knew that motivational speaking wasn't a job people just jumped into because they studied speech or communications in college. She also thought she might want to direct plays or films because she was getting quite good at being in charge of things like the *Spring Revue*. But again, people didn't just jump into these jobs; they often had to work their way up over years and years of doing other things. The idea of being a teacher was definitely growing on Ricky because she was so good at working with the kids in the church daycare. As a teacher, she would be able to continue to write and possibly use her writings in the classroom.

But she also enjoyed engaging in Peer Talks with various church youth groups in the area. Peer Talks were motivational meetings to give young people a chance to share experiences and get advice from other teenagers about difficult subjects like drinking, drugs, and sex. They often had college students speak at the meetings, along with local professionals like counselors and police officers. Ricky led her local chapter for Peer Talks and often gave speeches at the meetings. Though starting in the religious arena, she thought she might eventually be able to branch out and apply her organizing and speaking skills to some type of career in business. Perhaps she would do well working in human resources or managing a nonprofit organization. Since mulling over all of the possibilities fairly made her head spin, Ricky was thankful to have the distraction of keeping busy with other things.

The upcoming summer was going to be extremely busy, with Ricky and several of her friends planning trips to various Christian summer camps for an extension of Peer Talks that would feature variety performances like those they had done for the *Spring Revue*.

Arriving at the pet cemetery, Ricky smoothed her hair and donned a blazer from the back seat. She then retrieved her

camera and tripod from the trunk and set off at high speed for the graveside services. Already, a large crowd was gathering.

Mrs. Sylvester had made quite an effort in tribute to her beloved cat. Flower displays on easels lined the walkways, and Ricky thought that many of the elaborate sprays and wreaths would have rivaled those sent for a funeral for a queen. A mini orchestra was in place on a huge red carpet and was already setting the tone with *Amazing Grace* and Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*.

Living just six houses down the block from Mrs. Sylvester, Ricky had known the somewhat eccentric woman all of her life. Though she had had to endure being fed horrible, hard-as-rock oatmeal cookies for many years, Ricky absolutely adored her elderly neighbor. Sweetie Tweetie-Bird, called Steebie for short, had been Mrs. Sylvester's only companion since her husband had passed away ten years ago.

Because Mrs. Sylvester was a very religious woman, the funeral had somewhat surprised Ricky who didn't particularly believe that there was a place in heaven for pets. Of course, she didn't know for sure that Mrs. Sylvester believed that pets go to heaven. Since Steebie's passing was very abrupt, this was probably more of a way to say goodbye.

What was not surprising about this whole thing was the owl. Ricky's neighborhood bordered a nature preserve and extensive ranchlands beyond that, which provided a lot of habitat for wildlife. The Property Owner's Association had recently circulated emails and fliers warning people about coyotes going after small pets. With this event, they were sure to send out another warning about large predatory birds. Ricky herself had once witnessed a hawk carrying off a squirrel from the back yard. She heard the squirrel crying as he was lifted away. It had been somewhat traumatic to see, not only because Ricky felt sorry for the squirrel, but also because it was hard to believe the hawk could so easily lift an animal well over half its own body size. Through a rear window, Mrs. Sylvester had

seen the owl swoop in and grab Steebie, but she had been powerless to stop it. By the time she made it outside with a broom (the only thing she had handy), the owl and her beloved cat were both long gone.

Mrs. Sylvester began her speech by recounting some of Steebie's more mischievous antics. As Ricky listened, she allowed her mind to wander a little. Scanning faces in the audience, she reminded herself to check with a few people who also attended her church, to see if any of them had recorded the *Spring Revue* and had perhaps managed to catch some of the audience performers on film. Ricky's parents didn't know how to use her camera; plus, they had taken pictures at the dress rehearsal, so they hadn't even brought their small point-and-shoot camera to the performance. Thomas had been helping with props backstage, so Ricky hadn't asked him to film. And she wasn't sure yet how she felt about letting friends use her camera equipment since some of them weren't too careful with their own electronic gadgets. She certainly didn't want anything to happen to her camera because she likely would not be able to get another one, especially one this high in quality.

Ricky smiled, thinking about her uncle. This was how she had gotten her car too, in a roundabout way. Her uncle had given it to her parents several years ago. At the time, the car was completely broken down, not even running. But her dad was thrilled because a 1968 Mustang was a car that could be worked on, since it wasn't all computerized and people could still get parts for it. Ricky and her dad had spent over two years restoring it, and had finished just as Ricky got her driver's license.

Hannah and her mother were also at the funeral. Mrs. Klein had come to lend support to Mrs. Sylvester in her time of grief. Hannah was there more out of curiosity than anything, and she came to stand by Ricky. Hannah had almost choked with laughter to discover that Mrs. Sylvester's cat was named Sweetie Tweetie-Bird. Why not? After all, Steebie was a big

yellow cat. But she giggled as she whispered to Ricky, “I would have thought Butterscotch or Lemon Drop would have been a better name.”

Hannah gave a snorting chuckle as Ricky whispered back, “Are you craving candy?”

Pointing to the camera, Ricky held her finger to her lips. She didn’t want to pick up conversations or extra noise because she didn’t want to have to edit out a bunch of footage. Since she was planning to make a copy of this for Mrs. Sylvester, she didn’t want to have to chop it up. Plus, she didn’t know how much she might want to use for her project, so she didn’t want to lose any of it.

When Hannah giggled again, Ricky elbowed her.

Hannah finally got hold of her giggles and was solemn; it helped for her to focus on the small artificial Christmas tree next to the grave decorated with Steebie’s favorite toys. Mrs. Sylvester was just beginning to relate the story as to how Steebie had grown up from all of his early mischief and had actually saved a neighborhood child from getting run over by a car the previous year. Ricky remembered hearing about the event. The child’s ball had rolled into the street and Steebie had gone chasing after it. The slow-moving car had easily braked for both the ball and cat, and had waited while the child retrieved the toy before slowly moving on. Traffic and speeding were seldom a problem on their quiet, curvy street. Nevertheless, when Mrs. Sylvester went door to door, advertising the incident as being extremely heroic of her cat, everyone in the neighborhood felt obliged to express their appreciation to Steebie for being so helpful. Some even went so far as to bake treats for the cat in proper appreciation of his efforts to keep their street so safe.

As Mrs. Sylvester paused to sniffle into an extra-lacy and overly-large handkerchief, Ricky closed her eyes and said a little prayer that something extraordinary might happen to add something special to her project. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if

the camera could catch a glimpse of an angel's wings, if an angel happened to be looking on? Slowly opening her eyes, the ever-hopeful Ricky scanned the area for any sign of angels. When she didn't see anything, she was still hopeful because she knew that the camera often had the power to pick up things the human eye couldn't see. And even if the eye could see it, the brain wasn't always able to work out exactly what was being seen until later. Again filled with hope, Ricky thought that maybe God would allow an angel to appear on film, for a good cause, because her project was exactly that—a good cause.

Ricky never hid her beliefs and was always extremely zealous in her religious activities. Yet, over the years, when skeptics had asked her why she believed or what proof there was, she always struggled to come up with good answers, ones likely to convince those asking the questions to give faith in God a try. She wanted to be a good witness and give good explanations, but she found this difficult. It was hard to put into words why she believed.

It wasn't just that she had gone to church all of her life and had studied God's word and had sought answers to questions. Certain things had happened over the years that had erased any doubts she may have had early on. Unfortunately, Ricky found it difficult to put into words the series of events that had led her to steadfast belief in God, as well as salvation and a close relationship with Jesus Christ. Many of her experiences were intensely personal; but not only that, the things that had happened had built upon one another over the years. In trying to tell someone else why everything she believed about God and Jesus was real and true, the examples didn't make sense because they often seemed too small and insignificant to count for much of anything each on their own. And most people didn't want to listen to hours and hours of personal examples. Ricky had personally witnessed the power of prayer many times, but explaining to others how prayer had worked in her own life didn't seem to come out right. She had also heard

other people's testimonies and had read a lot of Christian writings. But other than encouraging others to read the writings of experts like Charles Spurgeon and C.S. Lewis, she didn't know what more she could do. So in doing this project, she hoped to find some way to convince others to believe at least enough to do some investigating, reading, and praying of their own.

Ricky's musings were interrupted when someone in the back of the audience added a short cat-themed prayer during one of Mrs. Sylvester's sniffing pauses. This didn't seem to bother Mrs. Sylvester at all, nor was she at all distracted when another audience member interjected several quotes from the prophet Isaiah into her recitation of Rudyard Kipling's *L'Envoi*. Though Ricky would have loved to have caught the extra performers on camera, the tripod was too hard to maneuver quickly. She also didn't want to miss any of Mrs. Sylvester's presentation by turning around.

The impromptu additions happened again during the funeral director's tribute to Steebie, and Ricky was reminded of what had happened during the *Spring Revue*. Still not wanting to miss what was happening on the main stage, she resisted the urge to turn the camera and craned her neck to try to see who in the assembly was throwing out cat proverbs that seemed to fit perfectly into Mr. Baldwin's sermon. In fact, they fit so well into the service that Ricky decided they must have been planned. Ever diligent about obtaining official consent from those she filmed, Ricky was glad she had resisted the urge to capture the audience on camera because she only had about twenty releases with her. She hadn't intended to film a lot of spectators, only those who might come up to present something. But not being able to see into the back of the audience, because of the crowd of people standing just behind the three rows of chairs, was frustrating; and Ricky found herself wishing less people had come. Who would have thought nearly two hundred people would attend a cat-leg funeral?

Elbowing Hannah, Ricky whispered, “Find out who is adding things.”

As Hannah discreetly slipped back to mingle with the crowd, Ricky again focused on the service, currently featuring Mrs. Sylvester’s great niece reciting a lengthy poem about a ghost cat. Upon finishing the poem, she then sang *Wind Beneath My Wings*, which Ricky thought was a little morbid since the owl that had carried Steebie off obviously had very large wings.

Next, in a rather odd contrast to the orchestra music, the visitors were treated to a spunky harmonica and dulcimer duet performance by two of Mrs. Sylvester’s oldest friends.

The final tribute came from one of Steebie’s youngest admirers, Melinda Kay Jones, who was none other than the child whose ball he had chased into the street. She sang the *Cuddle Kitten Lullaby* as two people from the audience came up to deposit flower bouquets beside the grave. Ricky recognized them as neighbors and made a mental note to be sure to ask them to sign releases for her project.

Steebie’s leg was buried in his favorite litter box, which had been slightly modified to have a secure lid.

When the burial was finished, guests leaving were offered kitten calendars and keepsake key chains with a dangling heart containing a photo of Steebie.

Returning to Ricky’s side, Hannah said breathlessly, “I couldn’t tell who they were.”

“But from the voices, there were at least four people,” Ricky whined in frustration. “You couldn’t tell who any of them were?”

“They had stopped talking by the time I got back there,” Hannah replied. “I guess they didn’t want to interrupt the poem and the songs. And I couldn’t tell anything from anyone’s expressions. I asked Mr. Surface and Kelly Terrant if they could tell who was adding stuff. They said they didn’t look so they didn’t see who the people were.”

Mrs. Sylvester was making the rounds to visit with a few lingering friends enjoying refreshments. “No,” she told Ricky, “we didn’t plan any audience participation. But I thought the ad-libs were very nice.”

While getting releases, Ricky was careful to explain that she didn’t just intend to make a video for Mrs. Sylvester but that she planned to include some of the footage in a personal project about different religious experiences. No one seemed particularly to care one way or another about being part of her project, and she had no trouble getting signatures. But she did have trouble trying to find anyone who could remember anything about the audience interjections. *I guess it’s human nature not to notice stuff*, Ricky thought.

Hannah, a short while later, gulping the last of her lemonade and hurrying to catch up to her mother, waved goodbye to Ricky.

As she gathered her gear to leave, Ricky again puzzled over the *Spring Revue*, and now the funeral. It certainly seemed odd for this to have happened twice in a row, with no clue as to who was involved. Ricky smiled as she trudged to the car. She loved a good mystery.

Chapter Two

Writing Spiders

Thoughts of the revue and the funeral had to take a back seat for awhile because Ricky was incredibly busy with school. In addition to studying for the SAT and attending choir practice three times a week, she was helping to plan the Senior Prom.

On a particular Tuesday after school, Ricky was on her way to the Choir Room for practice when she nearly bumped into Melanie Campbell, a former friend. It was a near bump because, though the two were on a collision course in the crowded narrow walkway beside the row of drinking fountains in the courtyard, Melanie did all she could to avoid Ricky by taking a very noticeable detour. She even rolled her eyes as she darted off on an alternate path, as though annoyed at having to do so.

Though she was sorry not to have contact with her friend anymore, Ricky actually had Melanie to thank for getting her started on her project. Ricky sighed as she remembered the conversation that had caused the rift and had given her the idea for the film. It had all happened during an ordinary lunch period.

Ricky had just finished posting fliers announcing meeting times of the school's Devotional Club when Melanie asked to join her for lunch. The two were sitting on a bench eating sandwiches when Melanie mentioned the Devotional Club and said that she had been to church a few times but hadn't gotten much out of it. She then added, "What actual proof is there that God exists? It seems like the stories in the bible could all be made up."

“The *Holy Bible* is a book of history that contains many testimonies,” Ricky began, “and many people consider the testimonies to be proof that the events really happened.”

“But the bible is full of discrepancies,” Melanie countered, “like the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—they don’t say exactly the same things about Jesus and His life.”

“The books don’t contradict each other,” Ricky replied. “They just aren’t identical, which is actually part of what proves the story of Jesus and His life to be true. People don’t always remember events in exactly the same order or remember the exact words that were said. Don’t you see,” she emphasized, “if those witnesses were going to perpetrate a hoax, they would have colluded, to get their stories straight. It’s precisely because the testimonies don’t exactly match up that makes them so believable. If you and I both went to a performance or a lecture, and came back to give a report, we wouldn’t both tell the same story. I would remember things I saw and heard slightly differently than you would. Same thing if we both met someone new and were asked to describe him or her; we would probably have each noticed different things about the person. And people write differently from one another too. Each of the four gospels is a different style of storytelling, so they are naturally different.”

Melanie did admit that Ricky had a point. However, what Ricky said next didn’t have much of an impact. “Anytime I’ve had a big problem, or been in danger, or felt overly troubled, and I’ve prayed, I’ve always been saved. I’ve always gotten help.”

“When?” asked Melanie. “What kind of big problem; what kind of danger?”

Ricky answered tentatively. “Well...that’s personal.”

“So there are no examples, and no proof.” The look on Melanie’s face was full of scorn and skepticism. As she got up and walked away, she threw over her shoulder, “Don’t preach to people if you can’t back it up. You’re a hypocrite.”

Though Ricky was hurt and upset by what Melanie said, she was far angrier at herself for not doing a better job of explaining, especially because Melanie did have a point. If Ricky was unwilling to give personal testimony, why should anyone believe her?

A couple of days after their conversation, Ricky had approached Melanie at lunch intending to give her a slip of paper containing several Christian authors' names. "There are some books in the library..." she began.

Unfortunately, Melanie interrupted quickly with, "Just forget it. I'm not interested."

Ricky sighed again as she climbed the risers to the top of the second-soprano section. Though she was sad about the situation with Melanie, the rift had actually turned out to be somewhat of a good thing, because it made Ricky determined to look for some way to better explain her beliefs and prove that it was all something incredibly worth believing in.

On Thursday night, Ricky set to work on making her prom dress. Since she was rather a slow sewer, she was cutting it somewhat close with only two weeks until the event. Though she was only a junior and it was not really *her* prom, Ricky was definitely going. Not only had she worked hard planning the event, she was in charge of making the Memento Video. She definitely wanted to make the prom something special for the seniors. Plus, the sale of the video would help fund next year's prom, so she wanted to make sure it was a success. Ricky was going with her friend, Justin Milton. The two had known each other since sixth grade. In addition to both being on the Prom Committee, they had recently studied together a couple of times for their SAT. Justin also knew a lot about cameras and had offered to help her film at the prom.

After school on Friday, Ricky helped her mother hang a couple of new birdhouses that her dad had made in trees near the house. They had to dodge a huge spider web in one of the trees, which was not surprising: due to the rainy spring so far,

the spiders were out in droves. With the mild climate, the Southern part of the country often had huge blooms of insects such as katydids and pill bugs. This year it was spiders. Some people might have cringed at the thought of thousands of spiders surrounding the house, but it didn't particularly trouble Ricky because spiders never really bothered her. Plus, their webs were rather beautiful.

But tonight she had other things on her mind to let her thoughts dwell long on spiders. She had been thinking a lot about college, but still hadn't decided on anything. Thank goodness she still had a few months before she would have to start filling out applications. With school being so busy, it had been hard to focus on her project; but it still frequently filled her mind. She still hadn't thought of any possible good titles for her film; but if she didn't have good material, the title probably wouldn't matter anyway. So...how to get some good material...this was what her brain was currently puzzling over the most. It had been hard to get focused without any super-good ideas as a spring board to take off on.

After dinner, Ricky cleaned her room. She and Thomas had to clean their rooms thoroughly once a week, and Ricky had picked Fridays as her scheduled day to clean. But tonight she was not only cleaning because of the rule, but also because Justin was coming over to study; and if the kitchen got too busy or noisy, they might need to study in her room. As long as the door was left partly open, Ricky was allowed to have guy friends in her room.

As she was tossing a hairclip into her keepsake box, Ricky noticed last Thanksgiving's turkey wishbone tucked among her treasures. She had cleaned it up and saved it and was planning to break it with Thomas. Since the wishbone was from their family's turkey, she wanted the granting of the wish to stay within the family. Ricky had kept the bone on her windowsill for the first couple of months before transferring it to her keepsake box. It was plenty dry now, but she hesitated to break

it for some reason. Something was telling her to save it, like a gut feeling. She knew Thomas would be more than okay with this because he wasn't nearly as superstitious as Ricky was about things like birthday candles, sidewalk cracks, and wishbones.

Ricky's musings were interrupted by her father calling to her that Justin had arrived. Hurrying to the foyer, Ricky greeted her friend and hung up his jacket.

With Thomas in his room and Ricky's dad working on something in the garage, the house wasn't too noisy, so they set up at the kitchen table. As they were spreading out their books, Justin said, "Hannah was telling me about your project, and I thought, if you like the way my prom footage turns out, I could help with that too."

Ricky was a little surprised. As far as she knew, Justin didn't go to church. Somewhat slowly, she asked, "Did Hannah tell you it was a religious project?"

"Yes," Justin answered. "And I know you're still getting to know your camera, so it probably wouldn't hurt to have some back up, especially with something this important."

"You're right," Ricky answered. "Thank you. I would be very glad for the help."

Justin had a film camera too, and Ricky knew he had an interest in making films, particularly nature documentaries because he loved to go hiking and camping with his family. His expertise and willingness would likely add greatly to her project.

After an hour of study, while they were taking a break, Justin jokingly mentioned, "I never knew your name was Victoria until I saw it on the Prom Committee list. So you're like a queen," he added. "Maybe you'll be next year's prom queen."

"Doubtful," Ricky laughed back. "But I'll let you in on a little secret. My parents always called me Victoria as a baby;

but when I started to talk, I had trouble pronouncing it. I had something like a lisp or a stutter or something.”

Ricky’s mom had come into the kitchen to make a snack for them, and she chimed in with, “It was a lisp, and just a general phobia of saying long words. But she didn’t seem to like Vicky for short. She started saying Ricky instead, and it just sort of stuck.”

“Well, it fits,” said Justin.

“Yes,” Ricky agreed. “But then my parents were kind of sad they had named me Victoria; and my mom thought they should have named me Frederica, since Ricky truly is short for that.”

“Victoria and Ricky are both fine with me,” her mother answered. “They definitely fit. But my little Ricky was always peculiar about things like this. When she started writing, she preferred putting a *y* on the end of her name, instead of the *i* that is more common with the girls’ spelling of the name.”

After placing a plate of crackers and sliced cheese on the table, Ricky’s mom gave her a kiss on the cheek before leaving the kitchen.

As they were getting back to studying, Justin remarked, “If you ever do become a motivational speaker, or an evangelist, you won’t have to pick a stage name because Ricky Halo is perfect. And it would be perfect as a penname too, if you decide to become a writer,” he added.

“Right now I’m leaning toward teaching,” Ricky responded. “So a stage name or penname probably won’t be necessary.”

On Saturday morning, Ricky was up early to get going to her part-time job of bagging groceries at a local supermarket. On the walk to her car, something caught her eye in the hedgerow lining the driveway. It was a spider’s web into which the spider had woven something that appeared rather odd. Like many people, Ricky had grown up calling garden spiders, writing spiders, because of the interesting scrolling scrawls the insects fashioned up and down the centers of their webs. But

instead of something resembling cursive writing, this particular spun art looked remarkably like a Thanksgiving wishbone.

I must just have wishbones on the brain, Ricky thought, *because of the one in my box.*

However, a little farther down the drive, Ricky paused to look closely at another spider web that appeared to have the word, *prom*, woven into it. *Okay, I definitely have prom on the brain.* “No...wait,” she said aloud, studying the web more closely. “It’s not *prom*, but *promises*. That’s so cool.” *The spiders are sending me messages, or reading my thoughts. It’s actually a little spooky.*

Ricky had always had a fascination for writing spiders and their webs, and she smiled as she unlocked the car. Nature truly held some amazing things. As she noticed a scrub jay making a splashing ruckus in one of the birdbaths in the yard, Ricky felt a little sorry for the talented writing spiders that were probably in great danger from the many birds in the neighborhood. But that was the chief reason her mother put out bird houses and baths, to draw birds near to the house to eat bugs and keep the pests in check.

She would have liked to have taken pictures of the spider web designs, but she didn’t want to be late for work. The light would probably still be good enough when she got home, so Ricky scribbled herself a reminder note on the pad of paper she always carried.

When she got home just before dinnertime, she quickly borrowed her mom’s small camera. However, when Ricky searched for the webs with the wishbone and the word, *promises*, she couldn’t find them. She couldn’t remember exactly where she had been along the hedge; and there were so many spiders making their homes in the bushes right now, especially in the south-facing driveway hedge. Ricky counted more than thirty writing spider webs as she searched. Slightly disappointed, she thought, *Maybe they took their webs apart and spun different ones.*

Hoping to find something else interesting, like the wishbone or another word, she searched again after dinner. Though it was starting to get dark, this time she got lucky. In one of the tinier webs, she discovered the spun image of a perfect cross, and a fancy one at that. Since it was now too dark to take a picture, Ricky committed the exact spot on the hedge to memory.

As soon as the sun was sufficiently up the next morning, Ricky hurried outside with her mom's camera. The web and cross design were both still there. Elated, Ricky snapped shots from various angles before hurrying inside to get ready to go to church. While Thomas and her parents were breakfasting, she searched the hedge again and discovered an actual worded message written slantways in one of the webs. Barely able to breathe, and rubbing her eyes, Ricky could scarcely believe what she was reading. "...the way, and the truth, and the life..."

Realizing this was exactly the sort of project material she was looking for, Ricky hurried inside. With shaking hands, she set her film camera battery in the charger, while kicking herself for not doing it before. She was saving up for another battery because the spare one that had come with the camera wouldn't hold a charge anymore. *This will be perfect for the project*, Ricky decided, smiling, her mind already working out a short narration to give while filming the spider's message. She also decided it would be good to have witnesses, ones other than just family members. With Hannah out of town visiting her grandparents for the weekend, Ricky remembered Justin's offer to help. And along with being a witness, he could do the filming while Ricky narrated. She had already worked out that she was going to have to be in front of the camera at times, as well as behind, so she definitely needed help because a tripod wouldn't always work for the types of shots that she wanted. With her parents and Thomas already heading to the car, Ricky quickly phoned Justin, who told her, "I'll come right after lunch."

Ricky had to admit she was somewhat distracted at church and didn't really get much out of this week's lesson. However, any feelings of guilt were overpowered by her excitement over the spider's message.

"It's definitely from the bible, John 14:6," she breathlessly told Justin when he arrived. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.'""

Unfortunately, Ricky was in for a pretty big disappointment because the morning had been incredibly windy and several leaves had blown into the web, skewing many of the letters and completely wiping out others.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "It's all messed up!" Indeed, only the word, life, was still clearly visible.

As Justin examined the web, Ricky whined, "I should have taken a picture this morning with my mom's camera."

"It's not all lost," Justin said. "The word, life, is pretty special. We can still film that...and...where's the web with the cross?"

Ricky sped down the driveway to show him. Thankfully, it was still mostly intact.

"There!" Justin said determinedly. "We can shoot both the cross and the word, life, while you give your narration."

With Justin's positive encouragement, Ricky felt much better, and she was able to come across on camera with a lot of heart and sincerity. She managed to work in initially finding the word, promises, which led her to search the hedge more thoroughly. "We don't have to look far for God's messages in this world; in fact, they sometimes can be found right outside our front door." Ricky smiled and sighed in relief as she finished her commentary.

"Keep looking," Justin said with a smile as he was leaving. "And let me know if you find any more."

Ricky searched the hedge both morning and afternoon on Monday, but found nothing. However, as she continued to

make a careful search each day, on Thursday morning, she got lucky again. Relating the news to Hannah and Justin at lunch, they were both excited to come over after school to see the latest message.

Looking closely at the web, Justin said, “I don’t think someone could be playing a trick. A person couldn’t do this without breaking the web. It’s too delicate to manipulate.”

Hannah nodded in agreement. “And it’s definitely a bible verse,” she said. “‘Blessed are the meek....’”

“One of the Beatitudes,” Ricky said.

Hannah was incredibly excited. “*Charlotte’s Web* is my all-time favorite children’s book.” Heading to her car to leave, she threw over her shoulder, “I’m going to go home and start reading it again right now!”

For some reason, Ricky felt a little shaky, so she definitely didn’t mind Justin taking charge of the camera. Handing that responsibility over to him gave her a few moments to collect herself and think of what she might want to say.

As they were just finishing filming the segment, Ricky’s mother came out of the house to admire the web. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” she said, peering closely not only at the web but at the colorful spider as well.

After a discussion at dinner, Ricky’s father and brother also wanted to see the web writing, so the family all trooped out together to the hedge.

“I agree with Hannah,” Thomas said. “This is just like *Charlotte’s Web*.”

“This is very interesting,” Mr. Halo began, “but I think some of the letters look very similar to one another. The *h* looks a lot like the *k*. Plus, that *e* looks a lot like this *s*, and that *r*, so I wonder if the spider is just repeating patterns and accidentally forming words.”

“No. Not a chance.” Ricky’s mother said, very decisively. “It’s definitely a message from God.”

“What do you think, Thomas?” Ricky’s father asked.

After thinking carefully for a good long while, Thomas replied, “I’m not sure if it’s a message or an accident...but I definitely think it’s really cool.”

Finding no more messages over the weekend, Ricky tried not to get discouraged. “This might be a lesson that I’m supposed to look for other things in other places,” she told her mother. “If people stay in the same spot all the time, they get stuck in a rut.”

On Monday, Ricky ended up in detention after school with four other girls; and she was very frustrated because it was completely unfair. Ricky’s Advanced Biology teacher, Mrs. Berah, had finally gotten fed up with the noisy corner of her classroom, in which several girls were constantly talking about shopping, text messages from boys, and other silly whatnots. Ricky was not even part of this little clique, but she was unfortunate enough to sit between two of the girls.

She grumbled as she trudged up the driveway, not only because she was home late, but also because she had had to make the embarrassing call to home about having detention, and she was sure to get a lecture from her parents after dinner.

The lecture wasn’t bad because Ricky’s parents seemed to believe her when she said she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. *It pays to be a good kid*, Ricky thought, as she meandered to her room after the short discussion.

In searching the spidery hedgerow on Tuesday morning, Ricky was elated to find yet another message. “‘Judge thou my cause,’ from the Book of Lamentations,” she said. Ricky wondered if the message might be related to getting detention unfairly. She had prayed about it, which helped her to see the positive in the situation—the extra study time in a super-quiet place.

Since the morning was rather breezy, Ricky didn’t want to risk waiting until after school to get the message on film, so she sped inside to get her camera. However, with the morning being cloudy and with the web being so fine, Ricky could only

very faintly see the tiny letters through the lens. As she left for school, she prayed earnestly that the afternoon would be sunny and that the web would stay intact until then.

Fortunately, the sun was shining and the web was perfectly fine when Ricky made it home, with Hannah and Justin in tow, since both were anxious to see the latest message.

Having other afterschool plans, Hannah left after only a quick peek; but Justin had made plans to stay to study with Ricky, so they were able to take their time in filming the web.

As Justin took charge of the camera duties, Ricky took a deep breath and collected her thoughts. Having to wait until the afternoon had turned out to be a good thing because it gave her the opportunity to think of few things to say for narration.

“I’ve loved writing spiders since I was a little girl,” she began. “I think God is sending me messages this way because He knows I will be sure to notice. His ways are so far above ours, but I believe He tries to speak to us in ways we can understand. And I’m sure this message is specifically for me. I just had something happen to me that was completely unfair. When I prayed about it, this was the perfect bible verse to fit the situation. I was asking God to ‘Judge thou my cause.’ By placing the matter in His hands, He took care of the problem for me.”

Ricky smiled because what she was saying was completely true. Mrs. Berah had moved and split up the clique which turned the noisiest corner of the classroom, where Ricky still sat, into the quietest one.

After a short pause, Ricky continued earnestly. “Look around you, and find ways that God is speaking to you.”

“Hold on a second,” Justin stopped her, lowering the camera. “I suggest a slight rewording.” Ricky was a little surprised, but listened carefully as he continued. “I remember in English class, Ms. Patterson telling us not to use the word, you, when writing and especially not when writing speeches because it’s too direct and personal. I think she said it’s

presumptive. People don't want others to presume anything about them, or what might be best for them, so they don't want things aimed straight at them. Like, if I said, 'You should eat a hamburger.'"

Ricky was starting to get the idea. After a thinking pause, she responded, "What if I don't like hamburgers? I might react by saying, 'Don't tell me what to eat!'"

"Exactly," Justin laughed as he said, "So I should instead say, 'A hamburger might be nice.'"

Ricky was nodding. "Then instead of getting defensive, my response might be, 'Thanks, but I think I'll have a chef salad.'"

Starting her narration again, Ricky was able to reword and speak to her audience more in general, and not directly at them. "All we have to do is look around to see the ways in which God speaks to each one of us."

In the evening, Ricky had an incredible brainstorm. Scribbling herself a reminder note, she thought, *I doubt I'll forget something this exciting*. The idea was to make her film in such a way that people watching it could ad-lib and interact, like they had at the *Spring Revue*. Frequent pauses during narration would allow for this. Plus, when editing, she could place silent scenes between those with a lot of dialogue. Ricky also made a note to feature the cat-leg funeral at the beginning of her film. An early scene with people ad-libbing in the background might inspire the film audience to do likewise.

Much like the spiders working on their webs, Ricky's mind spun diligently on this idea even as she went to bed. Eventually, her thoughts turned to the spiders. Even without messages, their works were wondrous, so intricate and beautiful. *If that isn't evidence of God*, she thought, *I don't know what is*. Indeed, how could anyone look at a spider web, or a butterfly, and not believe in God? Ricky had been doing some reading lately indicating that many extremely scientific people agree that a Higher Being must have created these amazing things, and that it couldn't have happened simply by

accident or by adaptation and natural selection. *Which reminds me*, Ricky told herself with a yawn before dozing off, *I need to look up more on the concept of Intelligent Design*. She had also seen a program on television recently featuring geologists that agree there is evidence of a worldwide flood in the different rock layers on multiple continents. And she needed to look up more about isotopes in granite rocks. Hannah had tried to explain something called Polonium Halos to Ricky. Unfortunately, not being as scientifically minded as her friend, Ricky had only grasped the basics of the concept—that the rocks had to have been formed in a mere instant, and not over a long period of time. Ricky definitely wanted to read more about this, to be able to understand it better. She could even plan a trip to the Creation Evidence Museum to get some footage and proof. But in thinking, Ricky talked herself out of this idea fairly quickly. *I want to find my own evidence to show to people, not feature what's already been found by others*. But thoughts of rocks and spider webs reinforced what Ricky had already decided—that looking to nature was a good way to find material for her project.

Wednesday morning dawned bright and sunny, and Ricky fairly jumped up and down when she discovered another web message. “Rejoice in your hope....”

The day was already turning off breezy and she worried the writing might not last legibly, so she hurried to film it.

The spider was bouncing up and down with his web, almost as though he were celebrating his work. “It’s sort of like he’s hearing music,” Ricky said quietly, as she filmed. “The music of the wind,” she added softly. When narrating, she remembered to pause frequently, which fit the scene because the pauses seemed like contemplation. “He’s *rejoicing*,” she went on, with laughter sounding in her voice because she was rejoicing as well.

Running inside to have breakfast, Ricky told her mother, “I don’t remember where that verse is in the bible.”

It only took Mrs. Halo a few moments of flipping pages in Ricky's bible to find what she was looking for. "Romans 12:12. 'Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.'"

At home after school, Ricky was elated to find yet another message, this time not in the hedge, but in a web strung across a chair on the back porch. Gathering her camera equipment, she quickly phoned Hannah to come over to have a look.

"It's not a verse," Hannah remarked, "only where to find it. Philippians 4:13."

"It's probably too long for the spider to write out," Ricky replied, as she steadied the tripod. Running inside, she retrieved her bible. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

Slightly lowering the tripod, Ricky told Hannah, "If you could just push the record button for me...."

Not being great with mechanical things, Hannah was a little reluctant. "Where's Justin?" she asked, her finger hovering tentatively over the button.

"Not available," Ricky answered. "He went with a friend to the Chess Club meeting. He's thinking about joining."

Hannah did manage to push the button, and Ricky managed to record a short narrative.

When they finished, Hannah remarked, I thought the verse was, "I can do all things *through Christ* who strengthens me."

"I'm sure you're right," Ricky answered. "But bibles can be very different. My mom's is different than mine. I have my dad's bible from when he was a little boy. It's the Revised Standard Version. I like it because it's easy to understand."

"Oh," Hannah replied, "I think mine is the New King James Version."

Ricky found no web messages on Thursday, which was fine by her because, with prom being only one day away, she needed to put the finishing touches on her dress. Her mother helped her

hem the dress because Ricky's hemming was not nearly as neat as her mother's.

When Friday night rolled around, Ricky spent a full hour meticulously dressing, and taking extra care with her hair and make-up. She had finagled to be off work Saturday morning. Without having to worry about getting up early the next day, Ricky felt she could relax and enjoy herself, with the exception of having to film prom activities, of course.

They were taking her car because Justin didn't have one, and she smiled as she set off to pick him up. Though it didn't get great gas mileage, Ricky loved her car. She did hope to save up for a hybrid someday, or whatever else car designers might come up with that would be better by then. But it was difficult to think about replacing her car in the future, especially given the work and cost of restoring it to its present state. Her parents had paid for new tires. This surprised Ricky because she knew they had already spent a lot, not only to get the engine and other essentials running well, but also for the aesthetics. Her birthday money was not nearly enough to pay for the beautiful powder-blue paint job or to have the butter-yellow leather seats refurbished to original condition; so her parents had done this for her, on condition that she take care of gas, routine maintenance, registration, and insurance costs. Ricky was thrilled with this arrangement because it meant she could have a car, when most of her friends didn't yet have this luxury. Her part-time work more than covered these expenses. And even though the car wasn't super valuable, it was something collectors might dream about, with all of its original handpicked custom items completely restored.

Justin came out of the house just as she pulled up. "I got you one of those wrist thingies," he said, handing her a corsage. "I tried to get something that would work with your dress; you said it was blue, so I thought yellow and pink flowers would look good." He said all of this rather fast and seemed a bit

nervous. Ricky reasoned it was probably just the fancy clothes. In fact, it looked like someone had ironed him from head to toe.

“You look great!” Ricky tried to say this casually, as though they were going out for a burger, but she was dismayed to find her own voice sounding fast and nervous. She tried to speak more slowly as she went on. “All the girls are going to want to dance with you; but remember, you are helping me get footage for the Memento Video.”

“I’m not much of a dancer,” Justin answered, “so you don’t have to worry about me deserting you...except for a few refreshments. I’m starved.”

“Me too,” Ricky agreed.

From then on, things were more relaxed and normal between them.

Even with the responsibility of filming, the prom was a lot of fun—great food, great friends, and good music. The music was actually super loud; but they couldn’t get away from it and still get the footage they needed, so they endured. Ricky and Justin had a picture taken together for their own memento, since they knew they weren’t going to be in the video much, from so often being on the other end of the camera.

As they were driving home, Justin suggested, “If neither of us is with anyone, let’s go to prom together next year too.”

“Good idea,” Ricky said at once. “I had a lot of fun.”

Ricky’s mother had waited up for her, which was a good thing because Ricky found her head suddenly splitting from the loud music and unusually late awake hours. In true motherly fashion, Mrs. Halo gave her daughter two aspirin and a glass of milk before sending her off to bed, which helped Ricky to relax and sleep.

Since she wasn’t due at work until two o’clock, Ricky was pleased to spend a relaxing Saturday morning at home with her family. While their mother was making breakfast, Ricky and Thomas scanned the hedge for more spider messages. Though they didn’t find anything, Ricky was grateful for the extra pair

of fresh eyes because it likely meant she hadn't missed a message.

When they went inside for breakfast, Thomas asked, "Why are you doing this project, anyway?"

"Well...the world is so different than it used to be," Ricky began slowly, as she tried to think of the best answer. "Normal stuff to get people to believe in God and to accept Jesus as our Savior doesn't seem to be working. By normal stuff, I mean like taking kids to Sunday school. They still seem to grow up as skeptics. I've tried talking to people," Ricky added, "but they don't believe or think it's important. They only care about clothes or going to movies or other stuff. When I try to tell them it's about eternal life for their souls, they just laugh it off, like it's unimportant, or like it's something they can worry about later." After thinking a bit longer, Ricky finished with, "I guess I just thought a film about God's presence all around us might help convince some people to believe, and take it seriously, especially because our earthly life is very short, and unpredictable, and people might not have the luxury of waiting until later to find out about eternal life."

"It is difficult sometimes," Ricky's mother interjected, "to get people to believe that *The Greatest Story Ever Told* isn't just a made up story, that it is all true. The events of Christ's life were foretold by prophets hundreds of years before his birth, and were recorded, and were again recorded as written history after they happened. But even though the events unfolded exactly as predicted, and were documented, many people don't believe it. This is true also of the miracles in the bible. There were many witnesses, and the miracles were recorded, but people still don't believe."

"Wouldn't it be neat," Ricky said, "if there was a brand new miracle?"

"And if there were lots of witnesses to it," Thomas added, smiling. "That would make a lot of people believe."

“So that’s why I’m doing this,” Ricky said, also smiling. “I hope to catch something like a miracle on camera, so people will believe.”

“You know,” Ricky’s mother went on, “I remember in college a lot of people trying to prove that God doesn’t exist. And even now, the argument continues. I’ve always believed that those efforts pretty much prove that He does exist. Why would people go to the trouble, otherwise? If something doesn’t exist, there’s no point in bothering with it. So in trying to disprove something that doesn’t exist, they pretty much negate their own argument. They can’t make something out of nothing, so there has to be something there. Therefore, He definitely exists.”

Ricky smiled at her mother’s somewhat disjointed explanation as to what was running through her mind. Even with the muddle of the words, Ricky pretty much got the gist of the argument, and she had to agree.

After cleaning up the breakfast mess in the kitchen, Ricky and her mother set off down the street with a gift basket for a neighbor who had just had a baby.

When they returned home an hour later, upon checking in with Thomas and Mr. Halo who were hard at work on some project in the garage, both Ricky and her mother set to work searching the hedge again.

They got lucky fairly quickly. “...a time to be born...” Ricky stated. “That’s from Ecclesiastes.”

Mrs. Halo was happy to help her daughter film the latest message. During the narration, Ricky said exuberantly, “Praise God! We just got back from seeing a newborn baby girl, just down the street here. So the messages we are finding in the webs are definitely relevant. We just have to think about what’s going on in our lives to have something like this make complete sense. I am sure God is sending messages that relate to things going on around me. And this is so wonderful,” Ricky gushed. “This is more than just reading the bible, praying, and

believing. The events of the bible happened long ago in relation to our lives. But this is something happening today, completely real, and completely from God.”

Afterwards, while helping her mother in the kitchen, Ricky found herself worrying about a particular aspect of her project. “People can always say it’s faked,” she told her mother. “They might say I used toothpicks to move strands of the web around, or faked the webs on a computer. So the messages can’t really prove to others that God exists. And even if I find a lot more stuff like this, people can always say those things are faked too.”

Her mother smiled as she answered. “I think you’ve hit on something important. Your film project is fine, and will appeal to certain people. And it might convince some people. But it can’t be the only thing you do to lead others to God and Christ. I think just talking to people is the best way, and I find it does work.”

“I recently tried that,” Ricky answered, thinking of her conversation with Melanie, “but it didn’t come across very well.”

“You probably just need practice. You’ll get better as you go along. And it’s good to get really specific,” Mrs. Halo advised. “There’s nothing more powerful than personal stories and details.”

“But it’s really hard to share personal stuff,” Ricky said, surprised that her mother had precisely hit on the problematic issue. “The person we tell might share it with others.”

“That’s a risk we have to take,” her mother replied. “True, we make ourselves vulnerable; but it might make an impact, so how can we not? Witnessing to others often involves taking risks.”

“But...it’s personal,” Ricky continued to whine. She was thinking of an experience a couple of years back that she had not even told her parents about—a time when she was in danger

and God had saved her. She was sure He had saved her. But she didn't feel she wanted to share the details with others.

As Mrs. Halo began making lunch sandwiches, she suggested, "If you're not comfortable telling your own stories, you could tell some of mine."

"You wouldn't mind sharing personal details?" Ricky questioned.

"Not at all," her mother answered. "But keep in mind, my stories might not appeal to everyone. Even though they are meaningful to me, other people might not find them terribly exciting. Come to think of it," she added, "getting a sampling from a lot of people, and getting it on film, might have a really strong impact. So your film project probably is the best way to go. There are a lot of Christian films that feature personal testimonies. And having a variety of these mixed in with your other footage might add weight to your message."

"That's a good idea," Ricky agreed. "I wanted my film to be completely different than other stuff out there," she went on, "but it wouldn't hurt to add some traditional things like testimonies, if people are willing to give them."

While the family was having lunch, Mrs. Halo related a personal story she had never shared with anyone.

"You remember when my dad died, nine years ago," she began softly. Ricky nodded. Though she hadn't known her out-of-state grandfather well, she did remember her mother's grief over his death. "Well..." her mother continued, "I didn't go to see my father on his deathbed. Your dad and I left you and Thomas with your aunt and uncle when we went to the funeral; but I didn't see him right before he died, like my brother and sister did."

After a long pause, her mother went on. "A couple of days after we got back from the funeral...it was early morning, and your dad had already gone to work, after making your breakfast and sending you off to school. Thomas was not old enough for school and was still sleeping, which I was very thankful for

because I was feeling pretty down, and sad, and I hadn't been sleeping well. Anyway...I was lying in bed with my arm across my eyes because the light was starting to come through the blinds; and I felt something pushing on my shoulder, like a hand, like someone trying to wake me. But I was already awake. My first thought was that someone had gotten into the house, and I was afraid. But I was more afraid to take my arm off of my eyes to see who was pushing on my shoulder. I remember gasping, little short panicky gasps. I was definitely panicking. All of a sudden, the pressure on my shoulder stopped and I felt something very familiar and comforting in the room."

At this point, Mrs. Halo choked up somewhat, sniffing and wiping her eyes on her sleeve as she continued. "I realized that the spirit of my father had come to say goodbye to me, but he stopped touching my shoulder when he realized I was frightened. I was always a fearful little thing as a child—bad dreams, afraid of dark shadows—and he knew that. So he wanted to say goodbye, but he didn't want to scare me, so he stopped."

"You never told me this," Ricky's father said softly, hugging his wife.

Still wiping her eyes and sniffing, Mrs. Halo answered, "I always felt guilty. He was trying to say goodbye, and I didn't recognize it quickly enough to cherish the moment."

"I'm sure he knows that you recognized his spirit," Mr. Halo replied, "and that you treasure getting to spend those few extra moments with him."

Thomas was thrilled with his mother's story. "So the ghost of Grandpa came to see us?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'm sure he looked in on you too, but you were sleeping."

"Cool!" Thomas answered, with a huge smile.

As Ricky was helping load the dishwasher, her mother said, "So you can think about if you want to use that story; but don't

worry, I won't be disappointed if you decide it doesn't fit well in your film."

"I think it will fit perfectly," Ricky said.

"For me," Mrs. Halo added, "that event reinforced the existence of God. I'm sure it was the spirit of my father, and that God allowed him to come and say goodbye to me before joining Him forever.

"I just thought of something else," her mother went on. "It's not nearly as exciting as a ghostly visitation, but it's incredibly meaningful to me. I don't think you know this, but my father divorced and remarried when I was very young. Although divorce is sometimes bad, especially for children, for me it was a good thing. The woman who gave birth to me was Jewish, but the woman who raised me was Christian. I think there's a reason for what happened. I was meant to know Jesus as my Savior, and to meet and marry your father, and to raise my own children as Christians. It was simply meant to be, and I'm so thankful."

Ricky was surprised to learn that her grandmother, who had passed away before Ricky was born, did not give birth to her mother. "What happened to your natural mother?" she asked.

"We never had any contact with her when I was growing up," Ricky's mother answered. "I know she's passed away now. My brother, as an adult, had some contact with her, but not much."

After another check of the hedgerow, which yielded nothing new, Ricky set off to work.

Ricky had been thinking a great deal about the situation with Melanie. On Sunday morning, she prayed extra hard at church that she might get up enough courage to tell Melanie about the time when God had rescued her from danger. It wasn't something Ricky wanted to tell on film; at least, not at this point. She had never shared the story with anyone, but she had almost made up her mind that she would tell Melanie about it.

When searching the hedge after church, Ricky was excited to find another message. “Fear not, I will help you.” It took her about twenty minutes to find the passage in her bible, Isaiah 41:13. “For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’”

Though the spider had worked very hard on his creation, Ricky decided not to film this one. It was clearly a message to encourage her, but she was not quite ready to share what she lacked courage about.

Finally feeling brave enough to tell someone about the event that had happened to her two years before, in the summer when she was fifteen, Ricky approached Melanie on Monday morning, in the courtyard outside the Choir Room. Unfortunately, despite having finally mustered her bravery, Ricky wouldn’t have the chance to tell the story because Melanie quickly shut her down. “Just quit bugging me!” she stated angrily. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Though she was disappointed, Ricky decided not to get discouraged. Since she had finally gotten up enough courage, she could reserve the story to share another time, when appropriate, perhaps with someone else.

As she trudged to class, Ricky was reminded of an experience her older cousin, Lindsey Graham, had shared with her once, while staying the weekend at their home. It was somewhat similar to Ricky’s story. Lindsey had been in a very bad situation at college and had been saved from it. She told Ricky about it because she hoped it would help her younger cousin avoid the same situation sometime in the future. Lindsey had also said she felt an angel had rescued her. Thinking of this testimony reinforced Ricky’s decision. If her cousin could manage to share something so personal, she could surely share her own experience sometime too.

A flurry of activity marked the final two weeks of the school year. Ricky would be leaving the week after school ended to begin the series of trips to Christian summer camps for

Peer Talks meetings and to give performances similar to the *Spring Revue*. Eleven kids in all from her church were going, plus a few from other area youth groups.

Justin was visiting one afternoon, and trying to teach Ricky to play chess, which she didn't really care for so his efforts were largely unsuccessful. Not only was she disinterested but she was also distracted because she was trying to convince him to go with the group to the summer camps. "We're planning to film all of the performances," she stated, "and I could sure use your help. Otherwise, since I'm one of the performers, I'll have to just set up a tripod most of the time. But it's not only that; I also can't seem to get the knack of it completely. It's probably because the camera is so old," she added, in a frustrated tone. "There are probably lots better ones out there."

"You shouldn't talk about her that way," Justin said, immediately retrieving the camera Ricky had somewhat carelessly tossed onto the couch. "She just needs a delicate touch. And you're actually not right; this is a *really* good camera, a lot better than mine. Anytime you want to trade, I'll be happy to."

Ricky immediately felt guilty, not only for not assigning a gender and personality to her camera, but also for not being appreciative of having such a useful tool. She wouldn't be able to do her project at all without it. And she could definitely understand Justin's perspective because she kind of had the idea that her car was more of a girl than a boy, and she was definitely getting very attached to it.

"You don't have to be a member of our church to go," Ricky said coaxingly. "And no one is going to force you to pray or read the bible or sing hymns. You also don't need to do any of the Peer Talks stuff; that's secondary to the shows anyway, so it's only a few short meetings with hardly anybody there." Taking her camera from Justin and stroking it gently, she added, "Hannah's going too, so you'll have people you know to talk to."

Not having any particular plans for the summer, Justin finally did agree to go.

Ricky took the SAT on Saturday morning before the final week of school, and she felt pretty good about it. However, she was feeling less good about her project, which had not really progressed at all. And she was starting to doubt that it was really a good idea, or that she could make it successful. She had gotten excited about the spider messages, but now she was having doubts, particularly when thinking that people might accuse her of faking things. But even if only a handful of people got something out of the film, it would be worth making because it would have achieved its purpose. She could use it for Peer Talks if for nothing else. Plus, Ricky knew that people often had to try many times to be truly successful. Making the film would be good practice, at the very least.

Both spiders and webs on the driveway hedgerow had dwindled over the past few weeks, which is why Ricky was surprised to find, upon returning home from taking the SAT, what would turn out to be the final spider message. It was simply the word, *patience*. *Who knows where that's from*, Ricky thought, since she knew the bible was full of passages about patience. She could probably find fifty examples if she looked. Smiling as she headed into the house, she decided to do just that, as a separate project. Fifty bible quotes about patience—she would start looking right away.

Chapter Three

Summer Daffodils

Justin would be helping with lighting and props, as well as filming the *Good News Revue* at the summer camps; and never having gone to camp as a kid, he was quite excited as the group gathered in the church parking lot to load the bus and get going.

They would be traveling to three camps and spending a week at each one, giving four performances at each camp. The touring group would not only be getting free room and board and use of the facilities, but they were also going to get paid a little from donation pools set up by each of the camps.

An older church member, who drove a school bus during the school year, had offered to drive them. Mr. Merritt, a widower, didn't have much to do during the summer. Plus, once their gear was unloaded at each camp, he was planning to take off to do some sightseeing. Since the kids didn't need transportation while at the camps, he and the church bus would be completely free to roam wherever they wished. As he helped to load equipment, Mr. Merritt fairly gushed with excitement about his plans to visit a train museum, a glass-blowing studio, and the birthplace of some obscure person in history that Ricky had never heard of.

Ricky was not particularly friends with Arthur Casey, and she was a little sad that he was part of the group, mainly because Art was bit of a shyster and always seemed to be involved in some kind of scheme to make money. For this trip, he had brought a separate suitcase completely full of candy bars to sell to other campers. He admitted to Hannah and Ricky that he couldn't get the job he wanted for the summer, so he signed

up for the tour of the *Good News Revue* in the hopes of earning some money.

It had never occurred to Ricky to do the performances for profit, though she was glad of the money since she wouldn't be working at the grocery store for several weeks.

"Well...you'll earn whatever your share of the pooled money is," she told Art, in somewhat of a critical tone.

He didn't mind her criticism, and he smiled broadly as he replied, "And the money from selling candy."

Ricky had left most of the organization of the show to Michele Arredondo, who had been one of the main performers in the *Spring Revue*. Michele had only to tweak the spring skits to gear them to the summer camp audiences. Several musical numbers were added, which was easy to do with Hannah being so accomplished on the piano. And Marcus Price was clearly a wizard with the keyboard and as a vocalist. He was already part of a band made up of members from several area churches. Plus, he had recently put out a Christian CD of his own called *Pearl of Great Price*. Ricky had bought a copy and loved it.

Most of the revue's segments were easy and light. Since the camp atmosphere was casual, the performers felt the show should be as well. Margaret Laura Dean's violin solos were the exception to this because they were definitely classical and formal. She was only fourteen, but was skilled as though she had decades of practice under her belt. Ricky had been thrilled when Margaret agreed to perform with them.

Margaret's mother, also a musician, came to the second camp and performed three hymns on a beautiful harp for one of the performances. The music was incredibly moving, so much so that the entire audience was mesmerized. In addition to the camp goers, many people from area churches were attending this particular show; and Ricky was thankful that such a large audience could witness this lovely performance.

When Mrs. Dean rose to take a bow, Ricky noticed that she wore a skirt embroidered with pale yellow daffodils. For some

reason, the flowered skirt lingered in Ricky's mind longer even than the beautiful harp music.

As she thought about the skirt again the next day, Ricky remembered Mr. Merritt very carefully and deliberately hanging a silk daffodil on the bus sun visor before they set off. *That's probably why I can't get the flowered skirt off of my mind*, she thought.

Since Mrs. Dean was not one of the regular performers, Ricky remembered to ask her to sign a release before she left for home. As Ricky was heading back to her cabin with the document, she noticed that Hannah and Marcus had Art cornered by one of the tennis court nets and seemed to be arguing with him. "You could get us all into trouble!" Hannah hotly scolded.

"You better stop!" Marcus added, in a fairly fierce tone of his own.

As it turns out, Art had been playing cards for money with other campers, which was totally against the rules. They were allowed to play cards, of course, and could even bet things like t-shirts and candy bars. But playing for real money was strictly not allowed.

Since Hannah and Marcus seemed to have things well under control, Ricky didn't feel the need to add anything.

Art agreed to stop playing cards for money, and he agreed to give back the money he had made in this activity. Supposedly, he had not played cards at the first camp, so this involved only a few people at the present camp that he could track down and reimburse. Hannah, Marcus, and Ricky hoped Art was stopped early enough for their group not to get into too much trouble if anyone official found out. This was evidently true, as the issue never again surfaced while they were there.

As Ricky had predicted, the Peer Talks meetings at each camp were fairly short, and small in attendance, since most people preferred to be doing more active things. On their last day at the second camp, while Justin was off canoeing with

several new friends, Hannah and Ricky gathered with about a dozen other camp goers. This particular group consisted entirely of girls, so Ricky felt comfortable sharing personal things.

At one point, when the talk turned to the power of prayer, Ricky decided to tell the group about something that had happened to her when she was in third grade.

“This was when I first realized that God really does answer our prayers,” she began. “I had seen those CARE commercials on TV to raise money to fight hunger and poverty; and I had been looking at National Geographic magazines that had pictures of starving children with bloated stomachs, some of them with pox and other horrible diseases. Also, our teacher used to read to us every day after recess, to calm us down, and she had been reading us a book about starving kids in some foreign country living on sampan boats, so hungry they were eating grass and dirt.

“I remember I prayed to God and asked Him to take away their pain and give it to me, so they could have some relief.” (Ricky paused.) “I think He did. For a long while, I felt horrible—achy, hurting, in constant pain, tired, sick at my stomach, and sore. I felt so bad I finally decided I couldn’t stand it anymore, and I asked Him to take it all away. And that’s when the pain stopped.”

As Ricky paused again, Carol Johnson stated, “But that was probably all just psychological, like when they give sick people placebos and they get better anyway. They think they’ve had the medicine, so their body gets better, but really they’ve only had a sugar pill. You thought you would hurt, so you did. Then you thought the pain would go away, so it did.”

“I’ve thought about it a lot over the years,” Ricky responded, “and I don’t believe it was just my brain having power over my body. I think it was completely real because the relief happened instantly, so fast in fact that I was shocked at the time. Since the aching and hurting had come on somewhat

slowly, I thought He would answer my prayer by taking it away gradually. But that's not what happened. It only took like, a second, and it was all gone. I think only God would have the power to do that."

At this point Ricky choked up a bit. "But I've never wanted to share this before because I've always felt so guilty about not being able to bear it for longer than I did." As Hannah, sitting next to Ricky, leaned over to give her friend a hug, Ricky added, "I never asked for it to happen again because I felt like I would probably end up giving up and disappointing God again."

"I doubt He was disappointed," Hannah said softly.

Though there were still a couple of skeptics, most people in the group did agree that God had answered her prayers, and Ricky was pleased she had been able to take her mother's advice about sharing personal details.

At the final camp, during the final performance, Ricky was surprised and thrilled when people in the audience began adding things just as they had during the *Spring Revue*. No sooner had Hannah delivered her line of "It's too heavy; I'll fall over!" than an audience member chimed in with a quote from Isaiah.

"I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

In another instance, Art was working one of the spotlights. When he accidentally directed the light at an empty spot on stage, then over-corrected in his flustered state, landing on the camp mascot, Bruner the bulldog, who was sitting next to the stage and scratching behind his left ear, an ad-libber loudly called out part of Matthew 5:16. "“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works...”” Bruner was certainly making a good job of scratching, and he looked very pleased to be showing off his good works.

Laughing heartily, the audience also seemed very pleased.

Nearing the end of the show, while Marcus was performing a song on the keyboard, an audience member with a lovely

voice sang out, “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life....”

Marcus was on the ball, and was a master of winging it during performances. Recognizing the scripture, he quickly added more from Psalm 27. “Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear....”

The audience performer then replied with yet another quote from the same poem. “One thing have I asked of the LORD; that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life....”

From her backstage vantage point, Ricky couldn’t see who was improvising, particularly because this was the largest group of spectators they had had so far. Since a neighboring camp had been invited to the show, the audience situation was somewhat chaotic with some people standing and extra chairs squeezed into aisles, so it was hard to distinguish anything amongst the crowd.

Ricky wasn’t particularly surprised that the people who had ad-libbed couldn’t be found after the performance. And no one seemed to know their identities. Justin had managed to film them, but when they played back the footage, they couldn’t see the people clearly. Being an early evening performance, there had been plenty of light; but the camera had captured the light in an odd way. Instead of revealing certain subjects, the light seemed to be bouncing off them, as though they were reflecting it.

Again, Ricky wasn’t surprised because she believed that the ad-libbers might have been angels, or perhaps angels speaking through people. She had been precisely thinking about angels when the same thing happened at the funeral for Steebie’s leg.

The *Good News Revue* members were invited to stay for a few extra days at the final camp. “You don’t have to pay,” the Camp Director told them. “Just help out with cleaning up in the dining hall after meals, and we’ll call it even. And the rest of

the time, enjoy the pool, the movie den, the tennis courts, the canoes, and everything else. Just have fun.”

Justin, Art, Hannah, and Ricky were able to stay; but the rest of the cast and crew all had other plans for the remainder of the summer. It was decided that Art’s father would pick them up the next week, since he had a van that could easily fit all of them, plus their gear.

When saying early-morning goodbyes to the others, Ricky remembered to ask Mr. Merritt about the silk daffodil.

“Daffodils were my wife’s favorite flower,” he replied. “This is my good-luck charm, so I always keep it on whatever bus I am driving.”

Through Hannah, Art had found out about Ricky’s project. As soon as the bus left, he told her, “One of the counselors told me about some rocks that mysteriously move around. Maybe you could film them for your project.”

Though a little surprised that Art was taking an interest, Ricky thought his idea was a good one.

“It’s not that they move around,” the counselor said. “The stones are on a hill, and they form nearly a perfect cross that we can see from a distance. But when we climb the hill, we can never find them. The stones must be large, because we can see them so well from far away, but we can never actually find them to see them close up.”

Even if the rocks didn’t move around, Ricky was very intrigued, as were Hannah, Art, and Justin. This was exactly the sort of thing Ricky was looking for to add to her project.

The counselor lent the group a pair of binoculars and a set of walkie-talkies to use while exploring the hilly countryside of the camp property. When Ricky looked through the binoculars to view the distant cross, she saw patches of daffodils dotting the hillside, particularly thick around the stones forming the cross. She felt this must be a sign, because she had found herself frequently thinking about the harpist’s skirt and Mr. Merritt’s good-luck charm.

They all four climbed the hill the first time, where they found many patches of daffodils and quite a few scattered large stones, but none that formed the shape of a cross. So the second time, Hannah and Art stayed below while Ricky and Justin made the climb, all the while the pairs keeping in touch on the walkie-talkies.

The pair below could clearly see both the cross and the climbers through the binoculars; but for some odd reason, Art and Hannah couldn't manage to lead their friends to the correct stones.

"You are so close!" Hannah squealed over the walkie-talkie.

"Let me have it!" Art said, yanking the device away from her. "About two feet from your knee!" he barked. "That round gray stone is only about eight or ten feet from the rock at the very bottom of the cross!"

"No, the other knee!" Hannah yelled, grabbing the walkie-talkie back. "Go left, LEFT!"

"Turn completely around!" Art shouted, again having a turn with the walkie-talkie and binoculars. "No, not a three-sixty turn! Just face the other way. Perfect. You are now facing the top of the cross," he told Ricky. "Just walk straight ahead!"

The problem was that Justin and Ricky couldn't just walk straight ahead because the terrain was too rough. They had to dodge large bushes and skirt steep rock ledges, which meant frequent detours. Plus, with Justin carrying the camera, he had to be extremely careful not to drop it, catch it on brush, or trip with it.

At one point, Ricky shouted back at Art in aggravation. "We can't go that way because of the branches, and the dip! Stop barking at us!"

Although they continued to yell directions, Art and Hannah only succeeded in further confusing their friends.

Both Ricky and Justin were frustrated when they came down from the second climb. As they looked through the

binoculars, they couldn't believe they hadn't been able to find the cross. "It's clearly made of boulders," Ricky said, "so why couldn't we find it?"

Hannah and Art made the next climb together, while Justin and Ricky stayed below, watching through the binoculars and giving directions via walkie-talkie.

Though Ricky and Justin had taken the camera with them to look for the cross, this time, the camera stayed below so they could distantly film Art and Hannah on their search.

This climb ended up being nearly an exact repeat of the previous one—the same walkie-talkie grabbing and yelling below, the same fruitless searching above. After nearly an hour of hunting for the elusive stones, Hannah and Art descended in pretty much the exact state of frustration that had plagued Justin and Ricky.

The searchers were all exhausted, and hungry, no wonder since they were nearly an hour late for lunch.

The food improved their moods somewhat as they discussed their tiring morning.

"It's like some kind of optical illusion," Justin said.

"I think we're not meant to see it close up, but only from a distance," Hannah remarked.

Nodding, Art added, "Some things are not meant to be found. They are supposed to remain a mystery."

Ricky agreed. "A lot of God's ways are very mysterious."

"We'll just have to keep looking for more stuff like this," Justin said, "things that can't be explained but are probably from God."

"Like statues that cry or bleed," Art suggested. "Things like that are always in the news."

"Yeah, but sometimes they are hoaxes," Ricky responded. "I think people use chemicals; then other factors like temperature and humidity end up making the statues react."

"I don't know what people hope to achieve when they pull stunts like that," Hannah remarked, shaking her head.

“Since the hoaxes end up discrediting genuine miracles,” Justin replied, “I’m guessing it’s the work of the devil.”

Art agreed, saying, “Even when God is obviously reaching out to us, clever and devious people under Satan’s influence will always try to make us doubt.”

Feeling guilty about getting frustrated and being short-tempered during the climbing and searching, Ricky said extra evening prayers to ask for forgiveness and to give thanks. *I know that I am not meant to understand everything*, she told God. *Thank You for the beautiful cross of stones, and for letting us see it, if only from a distance.*

They climbed the hill several more times during the remainder of their stay. Though they never found the cross, Ricky did get great footage for use in her film. And she was extremely pleased. “A mystery involving a cross,” she bubbled to Hannah. “Pretty neat, if you ask me.”

When they were riding home together, Art mentioned the idea of Ricky selling her film to make money. Ricky wasn’t at all surprised that he brought up profit. But now being better friends with Art, and being used to his talk of money-making schemes, she didn’t criticize. Instead, she simply told him, “I don’t plan to sell it. I just want people to be able to see it, for free.”

However, Art’s mention of profit did get Ricky thinking about the possibility of making copies of her film for sale. Marcus made money selling his music CDs, so why couldn’t she make a little something from her project? After pondering the issue for awhile, she said a little prayer about it. *Dear Lord, if I ever make anything from this, I promise to give half to the church, and put the other half toward college. Amen.* Since she had felt a little guilty in thinking about making money, the prayer made her feel better.

When Ricky made it home late in the evening, she was met not only by her happy-to-see-her family, but also by an

invitation from Mrs. Sylvester to come over to meet a new addition to her family.

Early the next morning, Ricky happily trudged down the street, camera in hand, to meet a fuzzy, bright yellow kitten in the process of digging up daffodil bulbs. Mrs. Sylvester had a lovely and extensive bulb garden consisting mainly of tulips, crocuses, and daffodils. She had once grown irises as well, but the variety she had grew out of control easily, so she didn't grow them anymore. Ricky remembered a time when she was in middle school carrying a load of iris bulbs home to her mother when Mrs. Sylvester thinned them. The Halo family loved the purple irises, but did have to be diligent in keeping them thinned and contained.

Mrs. Sylvester was trying to train Sweetie Tweetie-Ballerina, Steebina for short, not to dig. "I've ordered a multilevel playhouse and more toys to keep her entertained so she won't dig so much. But that was one of Steebie's favorite places," she added, with tears in her eyes. "He used to love to lie in the daffodil bed. So it's kind of endearing. Steebina probably senses him there."

Ricky started filming right away in order to catch as many antics as possible of the adorable kitten.

Most cats liked to stay clean, but Steebina was obviously an exception. After a few minutes of scampering around, she arrived on the back porch with extremely dirty paws and whiskers, looking like a complete rebel and completely proud of herself for being such a mess.

"I've been reading up on the internet about keeping pets safe from large birds," Mrs. Sylvester told Ricky. "I've already bought a plastic owl," she added, pointing to a corner of the yard which did indeed sport a fake owl sitting on a large metal perch. "Supposedly," she went on, "another owl won't want to come into this one's territory. I also put out three windsocks because the movement is supposed to confuse birds that may be hunting."

“They’re beautiful,” Ricky said, admiring the bright colors of the fluttering socks.

“But I can’t live in fear,” Mrs. Sylvester continued in a firm manner. “A life lived in fear is no life at all. Steebie wouldn’t have wanted me to lock Steebina away. But he was always a bit slow as far as his gait, and she streaks around like lightning. I feel pretty good about this. I think she’s probably safe, as quick as she is.”

At this point, Steebina ran right up to Ricky (who was crouched down to get a close shot) and playfully batted at the camera, taking Ricky by surprise and leaving a dirty paw print on the lens.

Laughing, Mrs. Sylvester gently scolded her kitten. “You bad little girl.”

Ricky was also laughing. “That’s okay, I’m pretty much done filming.”

However, the camera was still recording, and as Ricky got a last shot of Steebina streaking away toward the daffodil bed, she noticed something pretty incredible. “Oh my gosh, look at this!” she said, handing the camera over to Mrs. Sylvester so that she too could see a perfect cross made of dirt in the exact center of Steebina’s paw print.

“I wonder,” Ricky added, “does she have a cross-shaped indent or ridge on her paw?”

Mrs. Sylvester retrieved the squirmy Steebina from the daffodil bed so they could examine her paws which, though dirty, looked completely normal, with no unusual indents or ridges.

Ricky was thrilled with the event and decided it would be perfect for her film. Since it was so unexpected, and she had nearly dropped the camera, it would be hard for people to say it was faked. Steebina had been frolicking on camera just prior to batting at the lens. So if someone had put dirt on her paws in the shape of a cross, it wouldn’t have stayed so perfect.

“I’ll get the lens cloth that I use for my glasses,” Mrs. Sylvester offered. “That should work until you get it home to clean it good.”

When the lens was properly wiped, Mrs. Sylvester helped Ricky film a short narrative.

Cuddling Steebina, who managed to control her squirming, Ricky told the camera, “The dirt must have been caked up on her paws just right to form that cross. I’d say that’s proof that God is everywhere, sending us inspiration, and reminders about the importance of salvation.”

When she got home, Ricky discovered a single daffodil growing in the middle of the iris bed in the back yard. The bloom was strikingly bright yellow amongst the sea of purple irises.

“I wonder if Steebina is doing more than just digging,” Ricky told her mother. “I think she might be sneaking out around the neighborhood and planting too.”

Chapter Four

Thanksgiving and Christmas

The fall semester got off to a smooth start for Ricky who was so busy that the weeks sped by like lightning, and she was surprised to find Thanksgiving approaching in two weeks.

Along with all of her other activities, she had completed and submitted two college applications for state schools, but had left her major as Undecided since she still didn't have a clear idea as to what exactly she wanted to study.

She was still working on her project and had quite a lot of footage, though she was a bit muddled as to what exactly she needed to do with it in order to begin making it into an actual film. With Justin again helping her, they decided that the editing software she had inherited from her uncle was not quite up to par with what was available at school, so they got permission to use the computers in the Journalism Department. This was how Justin had made a short nature film about his family's trip to Glacier National Park two summers before.

Staying after school several days in a row to work on this, Ricky and Justin got a bit of a jolt on Thursday evening when another student, Robert McAllister, interrupted them. "You are not supposed to have religious stuff in schools," he said bluntly. "You can work on it at home, but not here." Robert had been working on an article for the school paper and had sort of been eavesdropping on Ricky and Justin, neither of which had an immediate reply for him. Sensing their flustered state, Robert seemed very pleased with himself as he returned to his computer to continue working.

The Journalism teacher, Mr. Billinger, happened to have overheard Robert's comment, and he came over to Ricky and

Justin to quietly tell them, “You *can* continue to work on your project in school, don’t worry.”

However, the next week, Robert raised an even bigger fuss, telling Mr. Billinger, “I’ll get my parents to sue, if you don’t get this religious stuff out of the school.”

“Your parents can certainly sue if they wish,” Mr. Billinger flatly answered, “but it will be a pretty big waste of their money and time because they won’t win.”

Even though the teacher had sided with them, Ricky was very upset. Justin tried to reassure her. “Mr. B knows what he’s talking about. Don’t back down. You’re always saying Christians have to stay strong and stand up for what they believe in. I’ll keep helping you no matter what.”

Ricky felt much better, and a big hug was certainly in order for her longtime friend. In fact, over the past few months, Justin had become Ricky’s best friend, and she was certainly thankful for this blessing in her life.

In discussing the situation at home, Ricky’s mother told her, “Your teacher is right. This same issue came up when I was in high school. They tried to ban the Devotional Club. But Christian civil rights are the same as those of all other people—they have the right to free speech, and to gather peaceably together. If you’re not using the school equipment for something illegal, like planning or promoting terrorism, then you should have the same opportunities as other students. If Robert comes at you again, just be polite, but ignore him.”

“Mr. Billinger did offer to let Robert use the school equipment for any film project he wants to work on,” Ricky stated, “but he evidently doesn’t have any particular thing he wants to do right now.”

Ricky’s father also had a few words of advice. “Just pray about it, stay strong, and everything will be okay. Trust in God. With Him on your side, you can’t fail. And if you have a setback, it’s probably meant to be, to test you, or to teach you something, or because the timing isn’t right. That’s how we

learn patience and persistence, and how we grow stronger. And how things work out the way they are meant to be.” After giving Ricky a kiss on the cheek, Mr. Halo trudged off to the garage to work on a new birdhouse for her mother.

Though things had gone her way, Ricky was still grumbling a little. “I’m not preaching to people, and I haven’t even told very many people what I’m doing. We were just minding our own business, and Robert saw what we were doing and for some reason felt a need to comment.”

“As Christians,” her mother answered, “we have to expect a certain amount of persecution. It’s just something we have to endure. Satan is everywhere, making his plans, trying to discourage us and draw us into his realm. He’s constantly trying to get us to doubt ourselves and our faith and our Father’s promises to us. We can’t let him wheedle his way in. Just keep your chin up, pray about it, and stick with friends you know you can trust to help and support you.”

“Robert’s parents are very political,” Ricky offered after a few moments’ thought.

“Well, that might explain why he felt the need to challenge you,” her mother answered. “But come to think of it, Christians need to be a lot more political. We should speak out in that arena a lot more. Unfortunately, when Christians speak out and when what we say isn’t thought to be politically correct, we are often called bigots. So, evidently, free speech doesn’t always apply to us. They call us intolerant, but I think it’s really the people that don’t like our beliefs that are being intolerant, if they persecute us for expressing them.”

Maybe I should be a politician, Ricky mused. She quickly shook off the thought. She had too many career ideas already; adding more to the mix would just add to the confusion. Being a teacher was still the frontrunner, and when Ricky remembered that Jesus was a teacher, warmth spread through her and tears came to her eyes. *I’ll have something in common with Him.*

When Ricky's father came in to ask her mother what size she would like the entrance hole in the birdhouse to be, Ricky thought, *Jesus was a carpenter too. I guess lot of people have things in common with Him. But for sure, we all do, since He died for our sins. He loved us so much, He died for us, so that we could be part of His family forever.*

Her mother's mention of the Devotional Club had given Ricky a good idea, to ask their club sponsor, the French teacher, Ms. Winslett, if the film could be shown at one of their meetings.

"Of course," Ms. Winslett answered.

And this wasn't nearly the end of Ms. Winslett's involvement because, as Ricky found out after Thanksgiving, Ms. Winslett had begun planning for an even larger audience than just the Devotional Club attendees. "We can use the auditorium and have an evening viewing sponsored by the Devotional Club," she told Ricky. "I've already checked with the principal. We can make it an open-invitation event, or call it optional attendance, so it won't impinge on anyone's rights. Just let me know when you are finished with your film, and I'll reserve the auditorium."

"It probably won't be until late spring," Ricky said, a little flustered at the thought of a deadline.

"That's fine," Ms. Winslett responded. "There are plenty of evenings in spring that the auditorium will be available."

Ricky had thought her film would only be shown to Peer Talks audiences, and possibly a few other youth groups in the area. With the project now on the path to being much larger than she originally imagined, Ricky's stomach was set all aflutter. What had started as something somewhat casual, now seemed incredibly important; and Ricky resolved to work super hard, to do her absolute best to make it as meaningful as possible.

Arriving home from school, Ricky happened to notice a cloud in the sky shaped exactly like a wishbone. Rushing

inside to retrieve her camera, she hurried to film it before it broke apart or drifted away. As she steadied the camera, Ricky thought about the wishbone in her keepsake box. Over a year old now, it was certainly ripe for breaking; yet, somehow she felt it still wasn't the right time. At present, she felt blessed enough, and not really in need of having a wish granted. Thomas seemed content too at this time, busy as he was with soccer and band and various other hobbies, so he probably didn't need a wish to come true right now either.

With wishbones firmly on the brain, Ricky wrote a Christian children's story called "The Wishbone Miracle" for her Creative Writing class at school.

Ricky was very disappointed when her teacher gave her a C on the project, so she decided to ask Mrs. Vaughn about it after class.

"In the interest of free speech," Mrs. Vaughn began, "we have to give creativity free rein, unless it's dangerous, which this clearly is not. But I personally don't think this type of writing belongs in a school setting."

Ricky was not particularly surprised to hear this because she had heard Mrs. Vaughn say several times that she was an agnostic. "So that's why you gave it a C," Ricky questioned, "because it's Christian?"

"No, I was just expressing an opinion," Mrs. Vaughn replied. "It got a lower grade because it's not nearly as good as your other work. You're capable of much more than this. It's somewhat creative, but not crafted very well. You seem to have been in a hurry."

Ricky had to admit this was true.

"Your handwriting is improved though," Mrs. Vaughn said thoughtfully, "that's why it's a C+." (Mrs. Vaughn gave Ricky a wink and added the plus sign to the paper as she said this.)

Ricky smiled. Mrs. Vaughn encouraged all of her students to hand write because she felt handwriting was becoming a lost art. In fact, fifty percent of their assignments had to be

handwritten. Mrs. Vaughn definitely saw the benefit of using computers; but she didn't want handwriting, particularly legible handwriting, to become obsolete.

Several stories each week were shared with the class. Since "The Wishbone Miracle" was not one of the top grades, it definitely would not be one of those read aloud or pinned to the bulletin board. Ricky usually showed her writings to her parents. This time, because of the low grade, she simply tucked the story away in a folder in the back of the file box in her closet. *Maybe I'll rework it someday*, she thought. *Mrs. Vaughn was right. I did it in a hurry and didn't do a very good job.*

Ricky smiled as she thought of another good policy of her teacher. Mrs. Vaughn encouraged a lot of sharing and a lot of discussion in her classroom because she felt people needed to interact more in person. She felt there was so much communication going on these days that was not face to face, that society was in danger of losing the ability to connect well with other human beings.

Listening to an owl hooting down the chimney one evening gave Ricky an idea for another children's story, featuring a secret society of owls that helped Santa prepare for Christmas Eve each year by checking chimneys. Once the checking was complete, the owls would throw a Hootfest to celebrate. However, during one particular Christmas season, the chimneys in a certain neighborhood got missed during owl inspection and were not working properly, so several owls had to forgo their Hootfest celebration to find creative ways to help Santa deliver presents. Never fear, because Santa, thankful for their help, ended up throwing a separate party for the heroes that was ten times better than the traditional Hootfest.

Not only did Mrs. Vaughn give "The Best Hootfest Ever!" an A, she put it in the shared stack for the week.

Real life events such as the hooting owl often inspired Ricky's stories. For instance, "No Dogs in Church" had come

about after Ricky saw a dog playing on a slide in a playground before running to a church and sneaking in through a propped-open side door. Another time, after a trip to the zoo with kids from church, Ricky wrote two stories, one about a porcupine who became best friends with a balloon, and another about a crocodile wanting to be helpful but whose efforts were often destructive because of his sharp teeth and long claws. After a series of dilemmas and dangers, obtaining a long string for the balloon ended up being the answer as to how the porcupine and balloon could safely spend time together. And the crocodile ended up finding a perfect career, as a gift wrapper and topiary maker at a local department store. The stories were left somewhat open so that when they were read aloud, the listeners could add things and decide some of the details. A short set of questions was added to each ending to inspire conversation and creativity such as, “If you can’t hug someone (like the porcupine), how else might you show someone how much you like them?” and “What kinds of bushes do people use to make topiaries and what shapes can they prune the bushes into?”

Shortly before Christmas, a sophomore girl Ricky barely knew asked her to go to an animal rights protest with her on the weekend. “It’s going to be downtown, outside that research lab on Union Street,” Katie Morgan said.

Ricky had heard a lot in the news lately about the organization that was staging the protest, and a lot of their attention-getting methods seemed very radical to her. “I don’t think so,” she responded.

“Don’t you care about animal rights?” Katie said in a demanding tone, shoving a flier at her that listed various atrocities committed against animals in the name of medical research.

Having lunch with Hannah and Carolyn Sanchez, who had also been invited to the event, Ricky offered her thoughts on the protest. “The problem is that these people don’t just stand around with picket signs. They yell at people and throw things

and break windows and vandalize cars. It's like they're fanatical and dangerous, and I don't see how that does much good."

Hannah agreed and said, "Plus, I'm not sure animal research is all that bad. That's how they find cures for diseases."

Carolyn didn't agree. "I think they should test on volunteer humans, not on animals. It's not fair because the animals don't have a voice, or a choice, but people do."

"I see your point," Hannah said, "but I doubt they would be able to get enough people to volunteer."

"If they paid money they probably would," Carolyn said.

In hindsight, Ricky realized she probably should have stopped giving opinions on the subject because what she said during the rest of the conversation got back to Katie (via Carolyn) right away. "I've heard all this before," she said, indicating the flier. "These people are just spouting stuff that's already been said by someone else, and wasting their time going to protests."

"It probably makes them feel good to be a part of something that they think is a good cause," Hannah offered.

"But they aren't really accomplishing anything," Ricky answered, "so it makes me wonder if they do it just to be the center of attention. Why else would they choose to be ineffectual loud-mouths instead of putting their energies into more productive things, like finding ways to do medical research without using animals? Imagine if they could put their brains and time into that, they might actually do some good."

Ricky immediately regretted certain of her words. Unfortunately, once said, they couldn't be taken back.

Even though Carolyn told Katie pretty much everything that had been said, what Katie basically heard was that Ricky had called her an ineffectual loud-mouth who liked to be the center of attention. In retaliation, Katie ended up spreading ugly and untrue rumors about Ricky. One of the worst was that the high-

and-mighty Ricky, being oh so pious, had gotten pregnant and had had an abortion. Supposedly, because Ricky hoped to keep the whole thing secret, she hadn't even considered the adoption option, which made her an incredible religious hypocrite. The whole story was, supposedly, completely true and had been confirmed by someone whose mother worked at the free clinic downtown.

The Christmas Break came at such a good time, giving Ricky an opportunity to get away from the high-school scene so that she could pray and refocus, and lean on family and friends.

Justin and Hannah were a great source of support for her during the holidays.

"Most people don't believe the rumors," Justin told her. "The people who know you and care about you definitely don't believe them. So try not to worry so much. Things are already starting to blow over. Nobody's even going to remember by the time school starts again."

Hannah's words were also very helpful. "I've told enough people that Katie was just being malicious because you wouldn't support her radical animal-rights protest. By the way," she added, "we were smart not to go. They arrested about fifteen people that day. Now, I'm inclined to agree with you. Fanatics like that do no good; but if they put their energies to better use, they might."

Ricky was glad school was out because she had actually entertained fantasies about somehow getting back at Katie. But praying and reading the bible helped dispel these ugly thoughts. She particularly found wisdom and strength reading Romans 12:14-18.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of

all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.”

As the days passed, Ricky was thankful that she had prayed about the situation and had not done anything rash, especially because it was likely that the whole thing would die down over Christmas. With a little time, Ricky found she was able to forgive Katie and pray for her. And the more she thought about the situation, Ricky realized that she had used a poor choice of words that had probably hurt Katie’s feelings and offended her. In fact, Ricky probably should have apologized. If given the chance in the future to talk to Katie, Ricky decided she would do just that.

Hannah and Justin went with Ricky to a neighboring town on Christmas Eve to film a living nativity scene. Though very moving, so much so that Hannah actually cried, nothing unusual happened that might add something to her project. However, Ricky was hopeful that the camera might pick up something their eyes had missed, like a visiting angel, so she asked Justin to help her film a short narration sequence with the nativity scene in the background.

Afterwards, as they stopped at a yogurt shop, Hannah remarked, “Your narration sounded really funny this time. Why did you take so many pauses? Were you trying to think of what to say?”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound unnatural,” Ricky answered, “but I meant to pause between some of the sentences.” With this, Ricky explained that she wanted to make the film in such a way that audience members could add things, and interact, if they wished. “Like they did at the *Spring Revue*, and like what happened at the last summer camp.”

“That’s been done before in film,” Justin said, “in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.”

“Everything’s probably been done before,” Ricky replied. “But this will be much different because it is a religious film.” After a pause, she added, “But it still needs to sound natural, so

I may have to edit out some of the stuff that doesn't come off so good. I probably won't use the nativity scene anyway unless something shows up on the footage that we couldn't see with our eyes."

"I think you're right that it will definitely be different," Justin stated, "because I don't think they originally intended people to add things to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I think it just kind of happened. And it was a play before it was a film."

"I haven't seen that movie," Hannah remarked.

"I saw it at a sleepover at Holly Welles' house when I was in middle school," Ricky said. "We weren't supposed to watch it; I think it's rated R. Her parents didn't know because they were asleep and we kept it quiet."

"It's actually pretty mild compared to a lot of stuff out there," Justin interjected.

"Since I never saw it in a theater," Ricky said, "I have no idea what the people from the audience add to it."

"Costumes, props, and a lot of dialogue," Justin stated. "They also act out some of the scenes."

"We could look it up online," Hannah suggested, "to find out the specifics."

"We could..." Ricky mused. "But I probably won't. I wouldn't want to take too much inspiration from something that's already been done. I want this to be my own."

Justin and Hannah both agreed with Ricky, that her film should be as unique as possible, and not be overly derivative of someone else's work.

On the day after Christmas, early morning, Ricky was putting her gift from Thomas, a new pair of earrings, in her keepsake box. Fingering the wishbone, her mind all awlirl about superstitious things like four-leaf clovers and horseshoes, she was surprised, and thrilled, when Hannah called to invite her to visit her uncle's horse farm for the afternoon, with the idea that Ricky might find something good to use for her film.

“It’s about forty miles from here,” Hannah told Ricky. “I can buy you a tank of gas for driving us.” (Hannah’s car didn’t always run reliably, so Ricky frequently drove when they went places together.)

“No, thanks for the offer, but that’s okay,” Ricky responded. “How about just helping with the filming, if we see anything neat and I need to be in front of the camera to narrate?”

“It’s a deal,” Hannah replied. “But I will buy our lunch burgers, since you are basically doing me a favor in taking me to see my uncle.”

“Sounds good,” Ricky answered.

Four hours later found the girls full of bacon cheeseburgers and chocolate milkshakes, and happily winding country roads toward the farm.

“Ricky, this is my Uncle John,” Hannah said, in introduction, when they arrived.

“John Wilkerson,” he replied, shaking Ricky’s hand before giving Hannah a big bear hug.

As Hannah handed her uncle a Christmassy bag from her mother, she said, “The usual—homemade fudge, raspberry jam, Baltic cakes, and I think a handknit scarf and hat.”

“Perfect,” he answered enthusiastically. “I’m all set for New Year’s, and beyond. I have a couple of chores to finish,” he added, “then I’ll meet you at the large corral.”

As Ricky and Hannah set off toward the rear of the farmhouse, Hannah said, “Aunt Meg passed away two years ago, just after Christmas. We always like to check on Uncle John around this time of year, to make sure he’s okay.”

“He seems so,” Ricky replied.

“And the farm seems to be doing pretty well too,” Hannah observed, as they passed a dozen or so hogs, in a huge pen next to one of the barns, that were all happily lounging in fresh piles of hay.

It was quite a long trudge to the huge, oval corral that looked nearly as large as a football field. As she leaned on the pipe fence encircling the corral, Ricky struggled to catch her breath. “I guess I need to exercise more,” she wheezed out a couple of minutes later.

Enjoying the cool breezes and the beautiful countryside, the friends were silent for some time.

When Ricky began filming the horses in the corral, it only took a few short minutes for something quite extraordinary to happen. Hannah and Ricky were situated about midpoint along one of the long sides of the corral, and they both noticed the amazing thing, which so astounded them, neither girl found she could speak.

They counted eight horses altogether that had separated themselves into two groups of four at one end of the corral. First, two horses from one group ran a race against each other, the full length of the corral. As the pair slowly trotted back to where the race had begun, the next two horses of their group ran a race against each other. Then, the winners of the two pairs raced each other. While the first four horses rested and watched, the next group of horses did exactly the same thing: two pairs racing, with the winners of each race then racing each other. Finally, after a short rest, the winners of each group ran a final race against each other, with what seemed like near-lightning speed. What followed was a gathering of all eight horses in a playful jumping frenzy that included a good deal of neighing, snorting, and nuzzling of one another’s necks in what seemed to be congratulatory happiness, or possibly good-natured condolences.

Finally finding her voice, Hannah asked, almost in a whisper, “Did you get all of that?” She was afraid that Ricky had forgotten to push the button and had missed the whole amazing thing.

“Yes, I got it,” Ricky replied, also in a low voice. “It’s incredible. They were completely organized.”

“It’s almost scary,” Hannah said, again quietly, “how smart they are.”

When Uncle John drove up a few moments later, the girls rushed to tell him what they had seen.

Chuckling, he responded, “I’m not surprised. Horses are not only smart, but scary smart, especially the boys, and these are all boys getting their afternoon exercise.”

As he took the girls on a driving tour of the farm, Uncle John told them stories about how some of his smarter and more mischievous horses had learned to open gates with complicated closing mechanisms, and about how a couple of his most steady horses had once helped other animals get to safety during a storm.

Ricky and Hannah saw nearly a hundred more horses during their tour, along with a herd of angora goats and countless fields of crops.

“The corral footage might not be right for my film,” Ricky remarked, “but it certainly shows how smart horses are.”

“I think it’s perfect for your film,” Hannah argued. “It was miraculous! And they are God’s creations.”

Hannah had such a great love for horses, even to the extent of having a huge collection of horse figurines and toys such as a four-foot stuffed Clydesdale, Ricky wasn’t surprised she would push for horses to play a part in her film. Ricky wasn’t sure she thought what they had witnessed was on the same level as a miracle, but she did agree that it was something really neat that she should somehow try to work into her film.

“It reminds me of something I saw on TV once, an incident at a horse race,” Hannah gushed. “They couldn’t pull the starting gates out of the way after the race started because the tractor broke, and the horses were coming around the track so fast, they weren’t going to be able to stop by the time they saw the gates. They were surely doomed to die,” Hannah said very dramatically. “But a couple of the training horses came running out, and they raced down the race horses and diverted all of

them into the center of the field. They were such heroes!” she added elatedly, with a huge and happy sigh. “It was so wonderful! Horses are so amazing.”

One would have thought the training horses did this all on their own, without any riders to guide them. According to Hannah, that was pretty much what had happened. The riders were incidental, and it was the hero training horses that had saved the lives of the race horses and the jockeys. And the question of horses not needing guides launched a now emotionally-tearful Hannah into a heartwarming story about a Korean warhorse named Reckless. “She worked with the Marines and didn’t need a guide to carry supplies over long and dangerous routes to them.” Hannah followed with a story she had read in a magazine once of how a mustang on a ranch had saved a rancher when they got lost in a blizzard. “The rancher couldn’t guide the horse in the horrible flurry, so he just loosed the reins and wrapped his arms around her neck, and she found home for them and saved their lives.”

“Horse sense,” Uncle John replied with a nod. “It’s not just a myth.”

The group next visited a barn to meet two older, friendly mares that Uncle John basically considered to be part of his family. He cut up a couple of apples for the girls to feed to the bigger girls. After being nuzzled by the horses in thanks for the treat, Ricky filmed some hoofprints in the mud outside the barn, in the hopes that she might find something interesting in them when later examined. Reentering the barn, her attention was drawn to a spider and its web tucked into one corner of the structure next to two feed bins. Looking closely at the web, she saw nothing unusual, but decided to film it anyway, in case something might show up later. She panned away from the spider to catch Uncle John pouring huge buckets of grain into each feed bin for his girls’ afternoon meal. Ricky went back and forth for awhile to catch both the spider and the feeding. She particularly wanted to get the horse closest to her on

camera because she was snorting loudly and tossing her head while eating. The breath coming out of her nostrils was a nice sound effect, and the flying mane provided good movement and color.

At one point while filming the spider, Ricky was startled, and she jumped, when the horse suddenly jostled her arm. Laughing as she tightened her grip on the camera, Ricky focused on the horse again as Uncle John called his big girl over to the next feed bin. “Come over here, Lady Hope. The young lady needs a steady hand, and you’re not helping. You and Charity Belle can share for a bit while she gets her film shots.”

Her gaze through the lens briefly dropping to the remaining grain in Lady Hope’s feed bin, Ricky was astounded; and she fairly choked on her words as she tried to call Hannah over while steadying the shot with her now sweaty and shaking hands. “See, here...see, look...come over here...quick!” she sputtered.

Hannah gasped, and even Uncle John was left speechless for some time, to discover the word, HOPE, clearly spelled out in the now-leveled and spread-out pile of grain, as though someone had written the word with a finger.

Lady Hope, munching contentedly beside Charity Belle (who didn’t at all mind sharing), seemed completely unconcerned over the discovery.

Ricky was the first to find her voice. “What else might she have spelled out, if we hadn’t moved her over?” she said.

“This is so amazing!” Hannah gushed. “So horses are not just smart, they’re literate!”

“I guess gusts of her breath spelled out the letters,” Uncle John speculated.

“Yes,” Ricky replied, and quietly addressing Hannah, she added, “I’m sure Lady Hope is really smart, but it’s not that she can read or spell her name. Something else made this happen, like the exact something that I’ve been looking for.”

Ricky finally had to stop filming because she had been gripping the camera so tightly that her hand was cramping. Taking a deep breath and wiping her sweaty palms on her jeans, she sought the security of a bench until she could regain control of her now-shaky legs.

Hannah, almost in tears, joined her friend in sitting. As Ricky suddenly gave in to her emotions and started to cry, Hannah gave her a hug and said, “God is everywhere, and especially with you right now because your project is going to change lives.”

Having eaten all of Charity Belle’s grain, both horses moved to Lady Hope’s bin to finish their meal together. When they were done eating, the horses paused only long enough for the visiting girls to stroke their soft noses before heading outside to roam in the small corral surrounding the entrance to the barn.

“I’ve got some fresh eggs for you to take back to your mothers,” Uncle John told Hannah and Ricky as he led them up to the farmhouse.

“Come again anytime,” he urged a short while later, as they were leaving, “and bring some friends. I like visitors.”

Discussing the events at the farm on the trip home, Hannah voiced thoughts that had also been running through Ricky’s mind. “People might say you spelled out the word in the grain ahead of time.”

“I thought of that too,” Ricky answered. “But I filmed your uncle pouring the grain into the bin; then I cut to the spider. Then I went back and forth a couple of times to catch the horse with her snorting and head tossing, but I never stopped filming and we were talking normally. If I don’t edit the scene,” she added, “I think it will all look as it was, perfectly natural and completely real.”

“I hope so,” Hannah said. “I would hate for people to say it was faked, when we both know it was all totally real.”

“I’m anxious to look really closely,” Ricky explained further, “to see if the footage shows any of the letters actually being formed. I hope I caught that. If so, there won’t be any doubt that the horse did it all, and that it wasn’t manipulated.” To please Hannah, she added enthusiastically, “And I think I can use at least part of the races too. The clouds in the background were really beautiful. I remember thinking that one looked like an angel’s wings.”

The visit to the farm made Ricky feel a lot better. The last part of Christmas Break was definitely turning out to be better than the first. The situation with Katie and the rumors was causing her less and less worry as the days progressed. Of course, she had been praying a lot, which always made things better no matter what the problem. By the end of her vacation, Ricky was both ready and excited to be going back to school.

Chapter Five

Halos, Holes, and Hoaxes

As she had hoped, and as her friends had predicted, when the spring semester started, Ricky was pleased to discover nothing left of the malicious rumors; and she wasn't at all surprised because whenever prayer was involved, troubling things always ended up sorting themselves out. Ricky definitely forgave Katie, especially when she reminded herself that Satan's influence on people was often what caused them to say and do hurtful things, and that the people themselves were not necessarily bad or evil. Unfortunately, the events were still too fresh to forget entirely, and she occasionally still had some ugly thoughts about the matter.

She knew it was wrong not to forgive others, not only because God had forgiven her many times, but also because she had seen firsthand the devastating effects on the lives of others who refused to let go of injustices. Often, these people had no trust in others, not even close friends or family, so they had no worthwhile, comforting, or helpful relationships. They were also often angry and explosive for no seemingly-good reasons. A host of physical ailments seemed to plague them, along with constant emotional turmoil. And they seemed to struggle with way more problems than the average person. Whether they were behind in paying bills, had lost their job, had car troubles, whatever, they couldn't seem to escape bad things happening. They just ended up being basically all-around miserable and unhappy people, and at the root of it all seemed to be complaints about how they had been mistreated by others. From these observations, and to Ricky's way of thinking, the only way to avoid becoming miserable and unhappy herself was

to forgive, completely and wholly, and move on toward a future full of more positive things, including peace of mind in knowing that this is what the Father truly wants—for His children to forgive one another as He also is willing to forgive.

Fortunately, prayer helped considerably to lessen the anger and feelings of hurt, and Ricky felt sure she was on her way to completely putting the whole thing behind her. And as determined as she was to forgive, Ricky was equally determined to be genuinely as kind as possible to Katie. The whole incident had been a good learning and growing experience for Ricky. Perhaps it would be for Katie as well, and she would find it in her heart to be kinder to others in the future.

However, oddly enough, another situation presented itself during the second week of January where Ricky once again found her powers of forgiveness tested. An old friend, Nancy Randall, resurfaced, after betraying Ricky and ditching her as a friend in the sixth grade. Nancy had transferred schools in the summer before sixth grade when her family moved across town and into Ricky's neighborhood. Having left all of her friends behind, Nancy befriended Ricky. The girls spent a lot of time together over the summer and got to be good friends. When school started, they decided to pretend they were cousins. To make a long story short, Ricky impulsively wrote an anonymous note to a boy she liked, confiding in Nancy, who not only told everyone that Ricky had written the note, but then also denied that she and Ricky were cousins.

Ricky felt embarrassed, betrayed, and terribly hurt, especially because Nancy never apologized or explained why she did this. The nearest her thoughts could come to an explanation was that, since summer had ended, Nancy now had plenty of friends to choose from at her new school and no longer needed Ricky.

Without knowing exactly what to do, Ricky took to avoiding Nancy and the girls never spoke to one another again, until now. Ricky was incredibly surprised not only to be

approached but also to be fawned over by Nancy who told Ricky that she wanted to do a duet with her in choir so they could try out together for the school talent show. Nancy also said she wanted to come to a Peer Talks meeting with Ricky. In an effort to be nice, Ricky tried to be polite and obliging toward Nancy's friendliness. However, inside, she felt incredibly wary. It was hard to forget the past treachery.

Sure enough, as Ricky soon discovered, it was all a ruse. Hannah pretty much always had the scoop on the school gossip, and she told Ricky, "Nancy likes Justin; that's why she's being all superficially sweet and hanging all over you. She wants you to put in a good word for her."

Ricky was glad that Hannah had given her the heads up about Nancy's motives, so she was ready when Nancy cornered her after the Peer Talks meeting. "I thought Justin would be here," she told Ricky.

"He doesn't go to this church," Ricky calmly replied. "In fact, I don't think he goes to any church right now."

"Oh," Nancy said, in somewhat of an ugly and demanding tone. "I thought he went with you on your summer camp tour last year."

"He did," Ricky answered. "But a lot of the people that went aren't from this church and don't come to Peer Talks."

Ricky wasn't at all surprised when Nancy changed her mind about doing the duet and completely ignored Ricky after this.

When ugly thoughts resurfaced about what had happened with Nancy in sixth grade, Ricky prayed very hard about it.

In reading the bible, she found Romans 12:19-21 particularly helpful.

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the LORD.' No, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

“Never heard of her,” Justin said one lunch period, when Ricky briefly told him about her latest dealings with Nancy. “I can’t even put a face with the name.”

“Good,” Ricky answered, with satisfaction.

Justin smiled as he said, “So I assume you don’t want me to have an admirer because you are looking forward to our prom date as much as I am.”

Ricky had almost forgotten about the Senior Prom. Pausing to consider, because it was sometimes hard to tell when Justin was joking, she then replied with a nod, “Exactly. I don’t want you to take Nancy Randall to the prom; I want you to take me.”

“Looking forward to it,” Justin answered, as he rose to place a kiss on the top of her head before heading off to his afternoon classes.

Talking to Hannah later in the afternoon, Ricky said, “Do you think it’s odd that I don’t go on dates and haven’t done much of that for the whole of high school? I mean, there were just those couple of times, movies and pizza with Bill Henderson in tenth grade...and that’s it.” Hannah was about to answer when Ricky interrupted with, “Justin doesn’t date either, at least, he hasn’t been out with anyone in the last year, not that I know of, anyway. Has he told you about any dates? Surely he would have told me. We must be just really odd people. You at least go out with Carl Foster.”

“I don’t think it’s all that odd,” Hannah said, when finally able to break into Ricky’s one-sided conversation to answer the original question. “And it’s only been a few dates with Carl, and it’s really nothing. I wouldn’t want to get too attached. He’s likely going to college out of state. By the way,” she added, “it’s decided; I’ll be starting at the community college, then I’ll transfer after I get the basics out of the way. Since I’ll probably be getting a master’s degree, I’ll need to live at home for awhile to save as much as possible so I can make it that far. Plus, that will give me time to check into schools with good master’s programs in Chemistry.”

Ricky truly admired Hannah's aptitude for science and math. Since she herself struggled with subjects like biology and algebra so much, she never even wanted to tackle anything like chemistry. Hannah's dream was to do research, possibly medical research.

"I thought you were going to be able to get that special funding for women in the sciences," Ricky remarked.

"There are several programs that I can probably qualify for," Hannah replied. "I think my grades are good enough. But it doesn't cover everything. Living expenses alone are going to be high, even with roommates." After a short pause, Hannah asked, "What about Justin; is he still all over the place about college, like you are?"

Ricky smiled because Hannah's assessment of Ricky's indecision was accurate. "Last I heard," Ricky replied, "it was mostly between Business Management and Film Making, but he was also looking into Hospital Administration. But I don't know which schools he's considering."

The discussion with Hannah started Ricky thinking. The time was soon coming when she would have to make the firm decisions about college. She was still leaning toward studying Education so that she could teach. As far as which college to attend, she would have to wait and see which schools accepted her.

The end of January found Ricky still indecisive about the title of her film as well. However, unlike the college dilemma, she was confident that a clear solution would reveal itself at some point, particularly because the project seemed to be building toward something. And even though that something was as yet unknown, it didn't feel like a problem because the mystery of what might happen was very motivating for Ricky. After the extraordinary events at the horse farm, she couldn't imagine what else might be out there, just waiting to be discovered. It was somewhat difficult to wrap her mind around it, but she could almost liken what she was doing to setting up a

line of dominoes, but without any intention of ever knocking them down because she wanted to continue to add to them, to build toward something that wouldn't be resulting in an ending, but rather a beginning.

Still focused on nature for material, Ricky was thrilled when her friend, Amy Conroe, invited her to spend the weekend at her home in a brand new subdivision bordering a large river. With most of the acreage lots still for sale, and only a few houses built, the neighborhood was fairly teeming with wildlife. Amy was always coming to school with stories of raccoons, skunks, and snakes; and the prospect of getting some unique material for her film really excited Ricky.

She had arranged to have Saturday off work, and she took her overnight bag with her to school on Friday, so that she could drive with Amy to her house as soon as afternoon classes let out.

The girls spent Friday night watching two movies.

On Saturday morning, they went swimming in the subdivision's indoor heated pool, which was an incredible treat for Ricky since her subdivision didn't have a pool and she rarely got to go swimming. In truth, she had never been swimming in winter before.

With the afternoon cool and breezy, the girls bundled up in sweaters to lounge on the large back deck at Amy's house. The view from the deck was splendid, and Ricky took some footage just of the magnificent landscape of trees, hills, and the distant river. Other than a few birds and squirrels, no other wildlife showed itself. Ricky wasn't disappointed; she was enjoying relaxing and talking with her friend. However, she did make sure to keep her camera at the ready.

Taking a stroll through several nearby empty lots before dinner, the girls got somewhat lucky to see a group of female white-tailed deer munching in earnest on bushes and low tree limbs. The girls stayed back so as not to disturb them and Ricky immediately began filming their feast. At one point,

when she thought she saw something unusual, Ricky snuck closer. She was right. One of the deer had what looked like a crown or halo of ivy encircling her head as she nibbled on the leaves and berries of a dense clump of prickly bushes. The doe was tucked well into the clump, and getting a good shot proved difficult. Amy stayed back as Ricky snuck even closer. The deer didn't seem to mind her presence, even when Ricky stepped noisily on dry twigs and small branches. She ended up making even more of a racket as she tripped on a stone and cried out as she lurched forward. Thankfully, she didn't fall or drop the camera. Also thankfully, the doe seemed unconcerned, and Ricky was able to get a good shot of the deer with the leafy crown. However, when Amy gave a small sneeze, the whole group of deer bolted, their tails flashing brilliant white as they leapt away.

"Sorry," Amy said, arriving at Ricky's side. "I've noticed that about deer," she added. "We can make all kinds of loud noises like running the mower and moving gravel with a wheelbarrow, and they don't seem to care; but the minute you give a small sneeze or cough, they take off as though a pack of lions were after them."

Ricky had noticed that the deer she had been filming, as it bounded away, had lost its crown. As she examined the clump of bushes where the doe had been grazing, Amy warned her, "Be careful, that's an agarita bush. It's very spiny and sharp."

Amy was right: Ricky was immediately prickled and scratched as she edged into the clump slightly. "Ouch!" she exclaimed.

"What are doing?" Amy asked. She couldn't imagine anyone desiring a close encounter with a cluster of agarita bushes.

"Look at this!" Ricky excitedly replied. One of the long prickly agarita branches had grown itself into a near-perfect circle, which had been resting on the head of the deer as she

grazed. Being as careful as she could, Ricky pulled the branch out slightly to get a good shot of the unusual growth.

As the girls strolled back to the house, Ricky rubbed the itchy scratches on her arm where she had gotten pricked.

Noticing, Amy told her friend, "If you're looking for more nature punishment, we can see what is in that hogplum cluster over there. I think I still have scars on the back of my leg from my tangle with it over Christmas."

"No thanks," Ricky good-naturedly replied.

Later, as the girls were playing a game of backgammon, Amy said, "I'm sorry you didn't get more stuff for your film."

"What I got was perfect," Ricky replied, "a deer basically wearing a crown of prickly leaves." Even if it wasn't biblical, or magical, the sight was very sweet, and Ricky was thrilled to have caught something this special to add to her film.

Amy's mother had been outside pruning trees. Very suddenly coming into the house, she hurriedly rooted through a kitchen drawer in search of antiseptic and a bandage. "I got a puncture," she said, showing the girls her left palm, which had droplets of blood oozing from the center. "There's not much blood from puncture wounds," she added, "but I can really feel it down deep. Ugh, it hurts."

While a deer wearing a prickly crown may not have been biblical, a bleeding palm certainly was. However, Ricky felt it probably wasn't right for her film, particularly because there wasn't much of a story behind it. Mrs. Conroe had simply been pruning a madrone tree, which had long spines on its branches. Now if an evil demon working for Satan had caused the accident, and if Ricky had been able to catch the demon on camera, that would have been perfect. Shaking off her wild thoughts, Ricky remarked, "You certainly live in a wild place. My neighborhood is practically calm compared to this."

"Are you sure you don't want to meet a hogplum tree while you're here?" Amy joked in reply.

“Which reminds me,” Mrs. Conroe stated, “the cacti are blooming. Do you want to catch that for your film?”

There was still enough light as the girls hurried outside, and Ricky was pleased to catch not only prickly pears blooming fabulously orange and yellow, but also four mockingbirds in something of an unusual state. Having feasted heartily on the abundant fruit of several prickly pear cacti, the faces of the birds were bright purple from the juice of the fruit. The mockingbirds not only looked unusual, but slightly angry, and Ricky decided they might be angry with her and Amy for disturbing their meal.

Leaving early Sunday morning to make it home in time to change and go to church with her family, Ricky decided that the weekend getaway had been perfectly splendid. Though she didn't get anything as good as the horsefarm footage, Ricky was very happy to have filmed the deer and mockingbirds. And she was still incredibly motivated and hopeful; she just needed to continue to be patient.

Her patience and hopeful spirit paid off the second week of February when she got some of her most exciting footage yet.

After going to the early church service on Sunday morning, Ricky and her friend, Elaine Purcell, were watching the toddler group in the church daycare. Ricky was surprised when Jane Hartfield, a college student who regularly volunteered to watch the group of babies, came rushing into the room. “Hurry,” she told Ricky, “take your camera and go to the baby room. Mrs. Marlow is waiting for you. I'll stay with Elaine until you get back.”

Though very confused, Ricky couldn't ask questions because Jane was fairly shoving her out the door. “Hurry,” Jane again urged.

Arriving breathless at the baby room a few moments later, Ricky was greeted at the door by Mrs. Marlow, holding her finger to her lips. “Very quiet,” she whispered, stepping back

slightly so Ricky could see inside the room. “Just look,” she added.

At first, Ricky couldn’t see anything unusual. However, having just been uprooted from the toddler room, and having run down two hallways, she knew she needed to calm her mind and her breathing. Slipping quietly into a classroom desk near the doorway, she scanned the room. In less than a minute, she noticed what Mrs. Marlow wanted her to see; and after a small gasp, Ricky wasn’t able to breathe. One of the babies in a nearby crib had a very distinct halo of light visible around her tiny head.

About a minute later, finally able to take a breath, Ricky found Mrs. Marlow whispering in her ear. “They all have them.”

Slowing standing up, to get a better view inside all nine of the occupied cribs, Ricky discovered this was indeed true.

“Your camera!” Mrs. Marlow whispered urgently. “Quick, before they disappear.”

Though hastening, Ricky managed to stay calm; thus, she was able to get a shot of each glowing child.

Finishing the individual shots, she backed up to a corner to get a wide shot of the whole room.

Joining her, Mrs. Marlow quietly said, “If you want to use this for your project, I’ll help you get releases from their parents. I doubt we’ll have any trouble. Most parents would love to have their kids looking so angelic in a documentary, and especially one about something so important.”

Ricky was a little surprised that Mrs. Marlow knew about her project, since she had never talked to her about it.

“I saw something exactly like this once before,” Mrs. Marlow said, “as a girl, when I was babysitting a set of newborn twins. But I talked myself out of it at the time. I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. Now I know it was real.”

Ricky smiled. She had no doubt that it had been real.

“And it can’t be the lighting in the room,” Mrs. Marlow added. “It’s too dim to be reflecting off their bald little heads. Plus, the ones with full heads of hair have halos too.”

Ricky smiled as she whispered, “Babies in daycare all napping at the same time. That might be a miracle in and of itself.”

Nodding, Mrs. Marlow answered, “We’re lucky today for it to be slightly less hectic than it normally is. An eighteen-month-old that usually keeps things stirred up is out with a cold. He should have already moved up to the toddler group, in my opinion, but his mother is reluctant, as many mothers are, to let their little ones grow up.”

A few minutes later, as a couple of the babies suddenly stirred and woke, all of the little halos faded. Within seconds, Ricky and Mrs. Marlow were left with simply normal waking babies in cribs, about half of them needing some sort of attention, which spurred Ricky into a quick return to the toddler room so that Jane could get back to help Mrs. Marlow.

Early Monday morning found Ricky in the Journalism Department of school working on editing her film. Her most recent narrations were better than some of the earlier ones because she was not focusing so much on pausing. Hannah had been right—her speech at the living nativity sounded funny and unnatural. Even without adding pauses, people would have plenty of room to supplement if they wanted to because the nature scenes contained very little narration. Plus, there were already a lot of natural pauses in segments like the cat-leg funeral and the hikes up the hill looking for the cross of stones.

While having lunch with Justin and Art, Ricky mentioned, “I wonder if anyone will protest my film being shown in school.” (She had been thinking about Robert’s objections to her use of the school equipment.)

“I wouldn’t think so,” Justin replied. “It’s something people are going to be invited to; it’s not like they’ll be forced to see it. Plus, I thought Ms. Winslett was reserving the

auditorium for an evening, so it won't even be during normal classroom hours. And some schools let community members use their facilities. If you remember the flood about eight years ago, one of the local churches was damaged and the congregation held Sunday services at Brighton Elementary for several months."

"If it becomes a controversy, it might be good publicity," Art interjected, "like a promotional stunt. But it's the kind of stunt that's okay, if we're promoting something good, like God."

"He's right," Justin agreed.

"If someone raises a stink, we can raise one too," Art said firmly.

Ricky smiled; she hadn't really even counted on much support from Art.

A local news story broke on Saturday morning, and it was so huge in the community that Ricky and her coworkers followed the news at work on their breaks. A seven-year-old boy had gone missing on his way to a friend's home and was believed to be abducted. His bicycle had been found four blocks from his home, but the police had no other clues as to what had happened.

The older brother of the missing boy evidently didn't believe he had been abducted. "His bike was parked," he told a reporter, "with his helmet just sitting on the seat. There were no signs of a struggle, so he wasn't just grabbed. Plus, he's too smart to let someone lead him off somewhere."

A lot of speculation occurred over the next several hours; but as it turns out, the older brother was right. Late in the evening, the boy was found, actually by his brother. He had fallen into an old septic tank, in a vacant field, near to where an old farmhouse had once stood. During an interview, the brother told a reporter, "I just couldn't believe anyone took him, so I went back to where his bike was found, just outside that big field on Magnolia. The police hadn't searched the field because

it's flat, and they could see all the way across it. But there's a rock pile way off, and I remembered he likes to look for rocks. Sure enough, when I got back by the rock pile, I started calling, and he answered me. We think he might have been unconscious part of the time, but when he did call for help early on, no one was close enough to hear him. Other than a broken ankle," the brother added, "he's fine."

The owner of the field evidently hadn't known about the old septic tank, which was now going to be filled in.

Ricky, among many others, was very relieved the boy had been found, and had suffered no worse injuries than a broken ankle.

On the last Sunday in February, Hannah helped Ricky film one of her storytimes with the toddler daycare group. The kids did a marvelous job of adding things, which is what Ricky always wanted and encouraged. The story of *Tinsnip* wasn't at all biblical, but to Ricky's delight and surprise, many of the children ended up adding snippets of prayer and lines of lyrics from Sunday school songs. Tinsnip was a scrawny alley cat who got his name when the owner of a downtown hardware store threw a pair of tinsnips at him thinking he was a rat. Tinsnip ended up living in and being the mascot (and supervisor) of the hardware store. When not engaged in mischief, he and his fellow downtown mascots (especially Buckles, the bulldog from the western wear store) liked to help human beings solve mysteries and fix problems.

The kids were even more animated during the adventure of *Crazy Eights*, who was a dog born with the markings of a figure eight on his tummy. A prophet had heard tale of a dog with just such markings, and how that dog was destined to make an important contribution to the world. However, the forces of evil, always hoping to thwart good, were after the important little pup—in particular, a man named Smarmy Crust, who had been told by a palm reader that a dog with markings like Crazy Eights would be his undoing. In an effort to save the dog, the

prophet put him in a box with a blanket and food and stashed him in an open train car to send him as far away as possible.

In a far-off city, a family with two children, Albert and Daisy-Belle, lived very near a set of train tracks. In fact, they lived so near that their small house and all of its belongings tended to shake, rumble, jumble, and jump whenever a train passed by. During their family game night, Daisy-Belle happened to be looking out the window when a train slowed to round a curve, and she saw something jump from one of the cars. Crazy Eights had ridden the rails for nearly a thousand miles before a small voice in the back of his head had told him to *Jump!*

Racing outside, Daisy-Belle and Albert discovered the little dog making big hopeful eyes at them. When they noticed the eight on his tummy, they decided that they were meant to find him because they had been playing the card game *Crazy Eights*. Their parents, of course, let them keep the dog.

Meanwhile, Smarmy Crust had found the prophet and had made him tell what he did with the dog. Hot on the trail of Crazy Eights, he followed the train. But he was fuming the whole time because he couldn't believe a dog with the markings of an eight could be his undoing. Mr. Crust was a very superstitious man who loved the number eight because it had always been very lucky for him. "The number eight made me who I am today," he told a woman on the train. "I started with eight Horrible Houses, which I flipped and made great profit on. Then I bought eight Shopping Strips, then eight Condo Complexes, then eight Fancy Factories."

Mr. Crust ended up kidnapping Albert and asking for the dog in ransom.

To make a long story short, Crazy Eights did cause Mr. Crust's undoing by leading him on a chase to a spot where eight police cars were all parked in a row, but not in a perfect line with one another because they had been parked in a hurry, in somewhat of a messy fashion. As superstitious as Mr. Smarmy

was, he found he had to move all of the cars into a perfectly-straight line, which gave Crazy Eights time to rescue Albert and lead the police to Smarmy Crust.

Mr. Crust's many properties ended up being made into things like soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and free medical clinics to help the poor. And Albert, when grown up, contributed something really important to the world.

After the story, the kids discussed what Albert might have done that was important.

"Maybe he found the cure for cancer," one child said breathlessly, with large eyes.

"He runs the homeless shelters," another speculated.

The children also talked about what Crazy Eights might have been up to throughout the years.

"He became a shepherd dog."

"Maybe he's like Tinsnip, and he's a mascot in a store, maybe a toy store or a game store."

"I bet he's a helper dog for people who can't see."

"Or he works on a fire truck with a spotted fire dog."

As wonderful as storytime had been in the morning, Ricky was even more looking forward to the events following a delicious pot-luck lunch in which many church members of all ages would be gathering to plant forty trees. In a four-acre field adjacent to the church, the congregation was making a playground, a picnic spot, and a prayer trail. Tables, benches, and equipment had already been built and installed; but the church property, having once been cleared farmland, lacked shade. The trees and a truckload of good soil had been donated by both a local nursery and several members of the church family. According to Mr. Schulenburg, who was supervising the project, late winter was the best time to plant trees in this part of the country.

The children were absolutely thrilled to help. The smaller ones wielded tiny shovels; some only had their sandbox spades and buckets. All were wearing old clothes since they were sure

to get dirty and even muddy when watering the trees in. Parents were prepared with either changes of clean clothes, or loads of old towels to line car seats for the rides home.

After helping to dig for awhile, Ricky started filming the project, and she happened to notice that kids in a particular spot started finding money, very regularly. Most seemed to be finding dimes and nickels; however, two kids in particular, a brother and sister, somehow ended up being much luckier than the rest. Not only were the coins they found always quarters and fifty-cent pieces, they started finding paper money as well—three ten-dollar bills, a twenty, and four fives, to be exact. This was amazing! However, after only a short study of the scene, Ricky backed away in order to film somewhere else because she figured out what was actually going on.

The two children finding the larger sums were from somewhat of a poor family, which meant they probably didn't get much, if any, allowance. Mr. Schulenburg was the one splitting the kids up into little groups and putting them in particular spots. At one point, Ricky could have sworn she saw him bending down as though he were rather carefully dropping something. Another time, she thought she saw his teenage son also planting something other than a tree in a particular spot.

Ricky smiled as she stopped filming altogether to help dig once more. Though she thought it was wonderful that Mr. Schulenburg and his son were so generous, and that they had found a way to help someone without making the charity obvious, she didn't want to risk giving the do-gooders away by catching them on film. However, as many kids continued to find money, Ricky wondered if the money-giving might be serving a double purpose. The digging gusto increased dramatically each time a child found money. Smiling again, Ricky thought, *Mr. Schulenburg is not only generous; he's also a very smart man.*

When the project was wrapping up, and Ricky was heading inside to pick up her pot-luck dish, she noticed that the two

children who had found the most money were putting some of it, bills included, into the church donation box.

Ricky decided she would never tell her friends about what she had seen, not only because people who were truly doing good deeds didn't want their activities advertised, but also because she knew that Hannah would never be able to keep something like this to herself. As overly eager and hopeful as she was sometimes to find and share good things in the world, she would surely want to tell the story of Mr. Schulenburg's kindness, which would likely totally countermand what he was trying to do.

The next week marked the State UIL Choir Competition, and Ricky was pleased to place fourth in solo sight-reading. The Choral Choir she was part of placed third overall, which was a wonderful step up from their previous year's fifth-place finish.

Though the competition had gone extremely well, unfortunately, something happened on the bus ride home that significantly dampened Ricky's spirits. Chatting with Penelope Sanchez, Ricky happened to mention that her dad was going turkey hunting at a local farm during the upcoming weekend. "It's the same farm where he goes deer hunting every year in the fall," she told Penelope.

A strong opponent of any type of hunting, Kimberley Bealles happened to be sitting behind Ricky on the bus, and she immediately began ranting about how everyone should be a vegetarian and how no one should hunt animals. "People should be killed, rather than animals," she said.

Ricky always hated discussing anything with hotheads who had strong opinions, but who never did any kind of research to find out more about the subject in question. "Keeping the numbers of animals in check is a good idea," she told Kimberley. "It helps keep them healthy."

"How can killing them keep them healthy?" Kimberley responded with a derisive snort.

“An increase in farming in our country over the years has caused an increase in certain animal populations because they have more to eat,” Ricky replied. “But then there’s less food in the wintertime, so the animals can end up starving and getting diseased.”

Ricky had to admit that she didn’t know a lot about the exact benefits of hunting to the animals; but she did remember seeing a nature special that showed wasting disease that occurred when numbers were too high, and the horrible suffering of the animals.

“That’s a poor excuse for cruelty,” Kimberley said.

“The hunters aren’t cruel to the deer or turkeys,” Ricky countered. “And they always eat the meat, so it doesn’t go to waste. Plus, the sales from hunting and fishing licenses help fund conservation efforts.”

Kimberley was shaking her head, and glaring at Ricky.

Feeling it was probably futile to discuss the issue further, Ricky decided not to say anything else on the subject. Taking a deep breath and folding her hands in her lap with the intent to pray silently, Ricky’s mind suddenly flew to a conversation she had had with Kimberley in fifth grade.

Both Kimberley and Ricky had been in Girl Scouts the previous year, and Kimberley asked Ricky if she was still going to participate in fifth grade too.

“No, I won’t be able to be in it this year,” Ricky replied.

Without waiting for an explanation, Kimberley responded with a sneer, “No wonder no one likes you.” Smiling smugly, she then sauntered off to talk to someone else.

Ricky had been taken completely off guard by the comment and had been unable to respond.

Hoping for a strong reaction to continue the argument about hunting, Kimberley told Ricky, “Well I hope your dad shoots himself, instead of a turkey.”

Again, Ricky was speechless, taken completely by surprise with Kimberley’s words, which were much worse than those of

fifth grade. Obviously, she hadn't changed at all over the years, other than becoming even more horrid.

Most people on the bus were simply ignoring Kimberley. However, Ricky noticed a few people who disapproved of Kimberley's words shooting sympathetic glances her way.

Deciding not to respond, Ricky did resort to prayer, which made her feel better.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief getting off the bus an hour later. She was very thankful the trip was over. Ricky usually loved choir and competition, but the ride home this time certainly had not been much fun.

Ricky's father did not get a turkey on his trip to the farm; in fact, he never saw any. "They were all hiding," he told his family on Saturday evening.

"Or they were in plain sight," Thomas said, "and you just couldn't see them because they blend in."

"That's definitely possible," Mr. Halo responded. It had certainly proven true on many of his previous hunting experiences, especially with deer.

Prayer and focusing on her project helped Ricky put the incident with Kimberley behind her. On Sunday after church services, she set up her camera in the baby daycare room to film an interview with Mrs. Marlow.

"I just looked up from my knitting," Mrs. Marlow explained, "and I saw the halos. I got it into my brain that angels were looking down on the babies, protecting them, or maybe giving them good dreams, and I just had this wonderful warm feeling of happiness and contentment. Then I remembered that you often have your camera with you, and I thought this would be the perfect thing to record."

Of all of the material so far, Ricky felt the baby halos were probably the best; and all of the parents had agreed to let their children be part of her film. However, she did worry that people would say it was just a lighting trick.

The following weekend, she particularly found herself feeling down and doubtful because of something that had happened on Thursday evening. A girl from her World History class, Andrea Balfour, offered to let her come to her home to film something odd and spooky happening in her swimming pool. Evidently, an elaborate painting of a lotus flower would sometimes appear in the bottom of the pool, but would then disappear. Supposedly, the appearances and disappearances of the flower were very unpredictable.

Ricky was suspicious even before she arrived, and rightly so. Watching the flower appear, she saw through the trick right away. When the heater of the pool was turned on, the lotus appeared. When it was turned off, the flower disappeared. Ricky was reminded of a doll she had had as a child. Hot water made her hair and dress change colors, then cold water put her back to her original state again.

Trying to stay calm, Ricky told Andrea, "I'm not sure why you wanted me to see this. There's nothing here that's religious or significant."

"You can tell people that the painting magically appears," Andrea responded. "They don't have to know that it is heat activated."

"This wouldn't fool anyone," Ricky answered, much less calmly. "And I don't want to fool people. Everything in my film has to be completely real. This is just like a stupid carnival trick, and not a very good one."

Andrea looked hurt and disappointed, as she muttered, "I really did want to help. I thought this was something you could use for your project."

Realizing Andrea hadn't meant any harm, Ricky said, "I'm sorry I got upset. But I don't want anything that's smoke and mirrors. I need real things, so that people will really believe."

On Monday, Ricky was still feeling down and discouraged about the pool incident, and it grew in her thinking. She barely

spoke to Justin and Hannah at lunch, and her friends could definitely tell something was wrong.

“Is there something you want to get off your chest?” Hannah asked coaxingly.

“It’s just that I don’t think I have enough overall yet to make anything significant of this project,” Ricky whined. “I guess I’m afraid it will become one of those unfinished projects, like good intentions that never go anywhere.”

“I thought you had some really good stuff to work with,” Hannah replied, specifically thinking about the horses and baby halos. “What started this downward spiral?”

After briefly telling the story of the lotus painting, Ricky said, “It just doesn’t feel like anything is really good enough because most everything could be questioned. Even though it’s genuine, people could say the footage is doctored. I don’t think I have enough to prove that God exists or to get people to turn to Him. With what I have, how can I prove to skeptics that it’s all real?”

“I thought the point of faith is that you don’t have to have proof, but you still believe,” Justin answered.

“True,” Hannah replied. “But I think there is proof; we just have to look for it. And we can’t ignore it when it happens. A lot of people think there are still real miracles going on, but that they get overlooked because we’re a society of skeptics.”

“And I don’t just want to prove that God exists,” Ricky stated. “I want people to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. So how do I do that with my film? It’s all so overwhelming.”

Hannah was shaking her head as she responded, “I don’t think you’ll find anything to film that will specifically lead people to Jesus. That comes from reading the bible, understanding, believing, and praying. When we develop a relationship with God, and allow Him to guide us, that’s when we are firmly led to Christ and salvation, and how we develop a firm understanding of what it means to be part of Christ’s family.” Hannah leaned forward and grabbed Ricky’s arm to

emphasize as she went on. “What you’re doing will start people on that path. They first need to believe in God. So this is the seed you are planting, like a way to open the door for people to discover. And I truly believe this will convince some skeptics. Then they can start looking into it, asking questions and praying. Then they’ll find out about Jesus.” Hannah’s face shone as she said this, and Ricky could almost imagine God speaking through her friend.

“Don’t put too much pressure on yourself to make this so specific,” Hannah further counseled. “Just lead people in the right direction, and trust God to do the rest. He will. He can and will work wonders in the lives of those who are receptive to Him. He will bring people to His Son. Plus,” she added, “your film needs to be easy to watch and interesting. Think about the spider webs. They are beautiful and amazing; but we don’t need to know exactly what the silk is made of, or exactly how strong it is, or exactly how long the spider took to spin the web. If it becomes too specific or too scientific, it might turn a lot of people off.”

At this point, Justin chimed in with, “I agree. You should start simple. If it’s too complicated or if people feel pressured, they will shy away. Better to draw them in slowly. You know how you yourself feel about zealots. They turn you off, and you don’t think they do much good. Well, I think you run the risk of coming across like that in trying to make this so specific. Just get people in the door, as Hannah said. Then let them explore the building themselves.”

“Maybe a sequel can focus on the good news of Jesus,” Hannah suggested. “But, in fact, that story has already been told, and told well, many times. People just need a reason to listen to it, read about it, or watch a movie or a play about it. Your film will give them a reason. Think about what I’m saying, pray about it, and trust in God to guide you.”

Ricky felt really good and upbeat after this. However, the feeling wasn't destined to last long because Art approached Ricky after school with a totally unsavory suggestion.

"I thought we could use the sand volleyball court," he began excitedly, "and put finer sand over coarser sand. Then we can use a fan or a leaf blower to blow away the finer sand to expose something like a cross or footprints in the sand. If we film it, while it's in the process of being exposed, it will look totally supernatural."

Unable to keep from getting angry, and to keep from scolding, Ricky strongly replied, "I can't believe you would suggest something like this! It's shameful!" After a short pause, she added, "Nothing in the film should be faked or manipulated!"

"But people always want more," Art responded. "I would think you would want to make this as strong as possible, so people will believe."

Trying to calm down, Ricky answered, "I'm not trying to make something for Hollywood, or a soap opera. And this is exactly why people *don't* believe, because others lie, manipulate, exaggerate, or stage things." Sighing heavily, she added, "There are real things out there. The halos were real, the spiders did write words, the cross rocks couldn't be found."

After a brief moment of thought, Ricky's suspicion monitor kicked in. "Wait a minute. You were the one who suggested hunting for those rocks! Was that faked somehow? Did you and that camp counselor collude, then you lead us astray?"

"No! Of course not!" Art answered defensively.

"You were talking us through the climb on the walkie-talkie," Ricky pressed. "Did you purposely lead us away from the rocks, so we couldn't find them?"

"How could I have done that, Hannah was right there?" Art replied. "She was with me the whole time. She saw what I saw. No, I didn't manipulate anything. I wanted to find the rocks as much as you did. I searched as hard as you did."

“Okay.” Ricky was finally convinced that Art hadn’t been up to any tricks on their searches for the rocks. However, because of his suggestion to fake a cross or footprints in the sand, Ricky felt she really couldn’t trust him. “I don’t want you to be part of my project,” she said. “Just keep your suggestions to yourself from now on.”

Chapter Six

The Mystery Mansion

Ricky was glad when Friday arrived because she was very frustrated and felt in great need of a weekend, to get away from the school scene. As she sat down to lunch with Hannah and Justin, she said exasperatedly, “Unbelievable! It’s one trick after another.”

“What?” Hannah demanded.

“You know Kent Dowelling,” Ricky answered, “the brother of that boy who fell into the septic tank?”

Justin and Hannah both nodded.

“Martin Rapsard tried to get him to say that he got a divine message that helped him find his brother.”

After tracking down Ricky between morning classes, Martin had told her he had a great idea for her project. He then led her to the Woodshop Building where Kent and a couple of his friends were hanging out.

“So you got a message from God that led you to your brother?” Ricky questioned.

“No,” Kent answered, “I just saw the rock pile and thought he might have wanted to look for fossils or quartz or whatever. He’s a real rock hound.”

“But you said you’d be willing to say you got a message from God?” Martin said excitedly, nodding vigorously at Ricky.

“How much money will you give me?” Kent replied. “I’ll say anything for the right amount of money.”

“Unbelievable!” Ricky again fumed to Hannah and Justin. “I can’t trust anyone, except you guys.”

When Ricky had cooled down somewhat, and had had a few bites of her sandwich and apple, Justin said, “With the kind

of morning you've had, I'm not sure I should mention it because you might think it's gimmicky; but I had an idea. You're still looking for footage, right?" (Ricky nodded.) "I know of a local mansion where spooky things happen, like ghost sightings and things moving around mysteriously, and I don't know why those spooky things couldn't be from God."

"You're talking about that Mystery Mansion," Hannah said. "I've heard of it too."

"Some locals call it the Mystery Mansion," Justin responded, "because that's what the caretakers were trying to do to make money, host Mystery Weekends. But people are afraid to go there now because so many unexplained things have happened, things that were not part of their planned mystery-solving experience. They rent the mansion out now for anything, like reunions and wedding receptions, since it's not much used for mystery parties anymore."

"I don't know," Ricky said, somewhat skeptically. "You're right, I don't want gimmicks."

"But it would be fun," Hannah countered, "even if you don't get any good material for your project."

"The reason I mention it," Justin added, "is because my dad is doing some electrical work there, revamping the wiring, and he said he could either get us a super discount, or he might be able to get us in for free."

Ricky found the idea suddenly growing on her. "Okay," she said. "But I don't want this to be like *The Blair Witch Project*. I don't want it to be scary, or sensationalized. I wanted it to be entirely religious. I want to keep it all real and geared to God."

"We know that," Hannah said, with a sigh. "You can trust us, remember?"

Ricky smiled.

"I believe ghosts are in the religious realm," Justin said. "They're like the spirits of dead people that can be seen or can contact us in some way, like crossing between worlds

somehow. And lots of people think ghosts are real. So if you are trying to get some of those people to believe in God, and not just ghosts, this might be the way to do it.”

“We might not get anything on camera that anyone would really believe,” Ricky said.

“If we don’t, that further illustrates the point of faith,” Hannah said. “We have to believe without proof, without seeing.”

“But there is proof, if we look for it with the right eyes,” Ricky said, thinking of the spiders, baby halos, and the audience ad-libbers. “Or listen for it with the right ears.”

“Or feel for it with the right kind of heart,” Justin added earnestly, to which the girls turned to stare at him somewhat in disbelief.

Chalking it up to no other guys being around, for him to be able to voice such a sensitive and intuitive thought, Ricky and Hannah smiled as they finished eating.

The more Ricky thought about the Mystery Mansion, the more she felt it was a good idea. She was definitely missing some sort of Wow Item for her film. A trip to a spooky mansion might be a good way to get something that would wow audiences. It was worth a shot, anyway.

Justin called early Saturday morning to catch Ricky before she left for work. “The mansion isn’t reserved for anything next weekend,” he enthusiastically told her. “We can stay Friday and Saturday nights, and it won’t cost us anything. We just have to bring our own food. My dad will chaperone,” he added, “so be sure to tell your parents that we will be supervised.”

After getting a few more details, Ricky had a quick discussion with her parents, who had no problem giving permission for the weekend stay at the mansion. Ricky found herself getting really excited about the prospect of getting something spooky on film for her project.

Hannah was also excited, and came to Ricky's house for a visit Saturday afternoon. "Justin said only the caretakers will be there that weekend, Mrs. Birtwhistle and her grown son," she told Ricky. "They don't have other staff there like caterers or housekeepers unless they have large events scheduled like wedding receptions. There's a movie library, games, and the kitchens are fully equipped. I'm making a grocery list," she added excitedly.

"Don't get anything too complicated," Ricky cautioned. "We don't want to spend all of our time cooking."

"And we have to clean up after ourselves," Hannah answered, "so we don't want to have to do a lot of that in the kitchen either."

"Even if we don't get anything spooky for the film," Ricky said, "I think it will be a fun getaway."

"It also might be good to track down some of the people who witnessed some of the spooky things," Hannah suggested.

"Maybe," Ricky replied, "but let's see what we get on our own first."

"And wait to see what the caretakers say about it," Hannah answered. "It might all just be nothing. I mean, if chairs or potted plants move around, maybe it's just some person moving them."

"And there might be some explanation for when people think they see ghosts," Ricky added, though she was hoping that the ghosts were real and that some of them might actually be angels.

Hannah and Ricky were still talking and making plans at lunchtime on Monday when Justin and Art joined them.

Justin had encouraged Art to talk to Ricky, which he did by starting with an apology. "I'm sorry I suggested the trick with the sand," he began. "And I *really* want to help with your project, because I think it's really important." Art seemed very sincere, and he looked very hopeful.

Ricky's thoughts about Art had softened somewhat since their heated conversation the previous week, and she agreed. "Okay, you can help with the project," she said, giving him a hug. Ricky felt it was not only important to give people second chances (and sometimes third and fourth), she also felt it was good for Art to have friends like her, Justin, and Hannah. Justin had certainly been a good influence on him, it seemed.

"We will have to clean up after ourselves in the kitchen and bathrooms," Justin stressed, when going over a few rules about the upcoming weekend. "No alcohol, and the inside curfew is midnight. No one is allowed on the grounds outside after midnight because that's when the caretakers retire for the night."

After a brief interruption by Hannah to remind everyone to chip in twelve dollars sometime before Thursday for her food-shopping trip, Justin continued. "We check in Friday anytime after four, and check out Sunday by two; otherwise, we can do whatever we want. Mrs. Birtwhistle's son, Michael, is in a wheelchair. He's in his early twenties. I think he was hit by a drunk driver on his bicycle when he was in high school, and it left him paralyzed."

"That's terrible," Hannah interjected.

"Michael came up with the Mystery Weekends idea," Justin went on. "He writes the scenarios. He and his mom have been the caretakers of the mansion for about three years. They are somehow distantly related to the person who owns the property but who lives in Europe. Anyway, the owner lets them live there, and he lets them do whatever they want to make money off the place. But since the mysteries didn't do so well, they are getting some of the rooms renovated so they can start a bed and breakfast, that is, if they can get people to come with all of the spookiness."

"It will probably help business," Art suggested.

“You would think so,” Justin replied. “I would have thought it might attract business for the Mystery Weekends, but it evidently scared people away instead.”

“Imagine if you will,” Art said, rather dramatically, “the creaking wheels of the wheelchair, that sound just like someone pushing a gurney loaded with dead bodies.”

“Or the old elevator, that clatters and grinds, like a ghost dragging his massive chains,” Hannah said, very much catching Art’s enthusiasm for the hopefully spooky atmosphere of the mansion.

At lunch on Thursday, after going over the grocery list with her friends, Hannah asked Ricky, “Have you thought of a name for your film yet?”

With Ricky shaking her head, Art chimed in with, “*Ricky Halo’s Promotional Stunt*, that’s my suggestion.”

“No,” Ricky quickly replied, somewhat defensively, but also good-naturedly. “It’s not a stunt,” she explained. “It’s promotional, yes, but not a stunt.” This was the second time Art had called her project a stunt. Though Ricky didn’t really like the word, she appreciated his enthusiasm.

With Art in the discussion, the talk was bound to turn to money or profit at some point. (Sometimes people can’t completely change their spots.) Sure enough, he said, “This might be something you can sell and make money from. Reality stuff is really hot.”

Though no one was surprised that he broached the subject of money, Art’s friends were very surprised by what he said next. “I think a religious reality film is really needed. With all the unwholesome stuff out there, something about God and doing good in the world is really needed. And we can promote it by putting snippets on the internet. And maybe we can contact the Christian television networks,” he added excitedly. “I think there are four or five of them at least that most people get with their basic cable packages. I think they might really be interested in showing something like this. And probably

interviewing you to find out how the whole thing got started, and what your inspiration was.”

Ricky completely agreed and had nothing contrary to say in response to Art’s words. “As far as the money thing,” she said, “when I started this, I decided that if it ever made money, I would give half to the church and save the other half for college. I prayed about it, and I promised God that’s what I would do.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Justin said.

“I still plan to give half to the church. However,” Ricky added with a smile, “I don’t mind splitting the other half four ways, so we can each make something from this, if it ever makes money.”

Art looked very excited, and even Hannah looked hopeful, at Ricky’s words.

“No,” said Justin, firmly. “This is your project, not ours.”

Hannah and Art both looked a little crestfallen, though they definitely agreed; but they both perked up considerably when Justin added, “However, if you make a lot of money, maybe you could agree to give us each five or ten percent of your half for helping you.”

“Agreed,” said Ricky. “After half given to the church, ten percent of what’s left to each of you, and I’ll keep the rest for college expenses.”

“What if it’s a lot of money?” Art asked. “Will you still use all of it for college?”

“College is expensive,” Ricky replied. “And I can’t imagine I’ll have a surplus of money. But if I do, I’ll give it to my parents to save for Thomas. He will need money for college too.”

At home in the afternoon, Ricky was watching the end of a Christian program on television featuring a personal testimony. The house was fairly quiet because Ricky’s father had not yet arrived home from work, Thomas was doing homework in his

room, and Mrs. Halo was in the kitchen starting something for dinner.

Religious testimonies usually didn't have much of an impact on Ricky, and she rarely found them something to cry over, unlike Hannah, whose personality was much different and who tended to tear up over just about anything that was even the slightest bit touching. However, today, something in the woman's story held her interest; and she listened to every word, instead of flipping channels as she might have on other occasions. The testimony was followed by a piano recital by the woman that was absolutely mesmerizing. Ricky was reminded of how the harpist had held everyone spellbound at the summer camp. By the end of the three piano songs, Ricky did choke up and cry a little. Tied to her story, the pianist's performance was profoundly moving.

Ricky felt a little guilty about tuning out other testimonies over the years because she felt she had probably missed some important messages by doing so. Muting the television, she said a little prayer that she might be a better listener, especially to God, but also to others. *Also, Dear Lord, please let me be more teachable. Please help me stay strong and continue to believe. And I know I shouldn't ask for this, but please send me some kind of sign that I should keep going with my project, and that it will mean something and make a difference.*

Though she knew that God always answers prayers, Ricky hadn't expected the sign to come right away, and she was somewhat shocked upon raising her head from prayer to see a small flash of light suddenly appear, then disappear, across the room. The light was nowhere near the lamp or television, and it wasn't like when a person comes into a dark room after having been in bright sunlight and then sees spots or flashes while their eyes adjust. It was more like something bright, but invisible, had winked at her, and Ricky held her breath as she imagined it to be an angel, or some other messenger from God. She didn't think it was God himself because she remembered reading

somewhere that God couldn't let people see Him because the experience would be so intense it would kill them, or blind them. God had only allowed Moses to see His back, and had shielded Moses' eyes to protect him from seeing His face.

The sign had been brief, but Ricky had no doubt it was real. Smiling, she inwardly thanked God for His reassurance. She had heard other people talk about these types of supernatural occurrences, but she had never witnessed anything like this personally. Crediting it to earnest prayer, Ricky took a deep breath as she again thanked God for His sign to her, and for all of the many blessings He brought to her life.

Flipping channels a few moments later, Ricky was surprised to discover the program she had just watched being repeated on another Christian network; and she thoroughly enjoyed watching the testimony and piano recital a second time.

Talking to her parents and Thomas at dinner, Ricky was bubbling with excitement about the upcoming visit to the mansion.

"I hope you see lots of ghosts and angels," Thomas told her.

"If my dad were still alive," Mr. Halo said, "he could tell you a few spooky stories from his younger days."

Full of interest, Ricky asked, "Like what kind of stories?"

"Well, I remember one in particular," her father responded. "He was a truck driver, before he joined the army, and he was on some country road in Ohio. He rounded a corner and saw a big box in the middle of the road, and he thought to himself, *I'll just run it over; it's not going to hurt the truck.* It would have been much harder to miss it because he would have practically had to run the truck off the road. So he was about to hit it, when he suddenly heard a loud voice in his head say, *Swerve!* So he did, and he almost had a wreck. But he managed to miss the box; and when he steadied out and looked in the rearview mirror, he saw two tiny kids playing inside the box."

"That's amazing!" Ricky exclaimed. "Their guardian angel must have been the one to tell him to swerve."

“What happened to the kids?” Thomas wanted to know.

“Your Granddad stopped and took them home,” Mr. Halo responded. “And he was none too happy with their parents for not supervising them better.”

“Remember how we used to play in the washer and dryer boxes when we were little,” Thomas said, elbowing his sister.

“And the dishwasher and treadmill boxes,” Mrs. Halo added. “You used to set them up like a fort to play in them.”

“I didn’t even know Granddad was a truck driver,” Ricky said. “I bet he could tell some pretty neat stories about his travels.”

Mrs. Halo smiled as she told her husband, “I remember your mother telling me how your dad used to cook a roast on the engine of that truck. She said he just wrapped the roast up in foil with some seasonings, and put it on the engine during long hauls. The meat was evidently perfectly cooked by the time he got home all those hours and hours later.”

Early Friday morning, Ricky picked up Hannah before school and helped her load her suitcase and grocery bags into Ricky’s car because the girls were planning to drive straight to the mansion as soon as classes ended for the day. They made a brief stop at Justin’s house on the way to school because Mr. Milton was taking the perishable grocery items with him to work at the mansion, so the girls wouldn’t have to worry about how to keep them cold during the day.

Justin rode with Art after school, which was good because trying to crowd all four of them into one car, plus suitcases and groceries and camera gear, might have made for an uncomfortable trip.

When they arrived at the mansion, Ricky and Art both took the lane around to the back to park in the rear where deliveries were often made and where temporary staff usually parked.

Gathering their gear, Ricky and Hannah followed Justin and Art up the long and curving path to the service entrance of the house. Passing a large drained swimming pool in one of the

rear gardens, Ricky noticed that the pool had a painting in the bottom—a garden scene with cherubs. She was slightly reminded of the lotus painting; however, she got a very different feeling when walking past this pool, like something almost eerie. Shaking off the feeling, she chalked it up to the anticipation of possible mysterious happenings at the mansion.

After being introduced to the caretakers, Hannah and Ricky got settled in a room four doors down from Mrs. Birtwhistle's room.

"It's *soooo* nice," Hannah gushed. "Oh, and we have our own bathroom," she added, peeking inside the spacious lavatory filled with fancies like marble counters, embroidered guest towels, and bowls of scented soaps.

The girls were in one of the newly-renovated rooms, whereas, Art and Justin were in a room in another wing that wasn't quite as nicely done up. And they would be sharing a bathroom with Justin's dad, who was staying next door to the boys, across the hall from Michael's room.

As Ricky was unpacking, she started thinking that maybe the incident with the lotus pool was like foreshadow, and that maybe she was supposed to look more closely at the pool behind the mansion. In trying to be receptive to the ways in which God might be speaking to her, she didn't want to ignore any possible signs or messages. So while the others were in the kitchen unloading grocery bags and having a snack, Ricky went outside with her camera.

A little water lay in the pool from recent rains, but not so much as to hinder the small piles of leaves in the bottom from blowing around with the stiff afternoon breezes. Hopeful that the leaves might be about to form words or significant shapes, Ricky filmed them moving to and fro. Though she saw nothing of importance, determined to exercise patience, Ricky filmed the movement of the leaves for nearly fifteen minutes before returning to the mansion kitchen to rejoin her friends.

Michael took them all on a tour before dinner so they could see the whole mansion, which was utterly filled with unique objects from many parts of the world. A colossal pair of foo dogs guarded the doors to the main library, which contained among other things an enormous globe, a Grecian statue of a woman that somewhat resembled the *Venus de Milo* because she was missing her arms, and an old motorcycle of German manufacture. The rest of the mansion contained similar treasures such as a huge room filled with Mexican pottery, replica paintings of several of Degas' dancers, and three glass display cases filled with a collection of tramp-art whatnot boxes. Oddities also abounded around every corner, it seemed, and the group was fascinated by a taxidermy hall containing a polar bear, a jackalope, two wild hogs, an axis deer, and an entire wall of various fishes.

Visiting the enormous attic, the group discovered it filled with odds and ends of furniture, old dressmaker manikins, and antique trunks containing vintage clothing. "There are several more dress-up trunks downstairs," Michael told them. "People were using the clothes as costumes during the Mystery Weekends."

As they were heading back down the stairs, and as they were passing the hall containing the taxidermy specimens, Ricky ventured a comment. "Some of the stuff in the house could certainly serve to unsettle visitors. I wonder if that's all that the spookiness really is, people just uncomfortable with their surroundings, so their imagination gets the better of them while they are here."

"This does sort of seem like a place Scooby Doo, Shaggy, and the rest of the gang might find themselves in," Art joked.

Meeting Michael at the doors to the elevator on the ground floor, Justin told him, "We mostly came to get some footage for a film project, but we might want to play one of your mystery games too while we are here."

“The games are better with six or more people, but four can work,” Michael answered. “If you decide you want to play, just look in the cabinet in the library. Just pick a saddlebag, and it should have everything in it you’ll need. That was the idea behind the game,” he added. “People visiting an old mansion would find a mysterious saddlebag. Inside, they discover clues to a mystery of the past like an incredible theft, the kidnapping of an heiress, or the murder of a priest. In order to solve the crime, they become the characters living at the mansion and in the community at the time; hence, the costumes and props. If it ever took off, I was going to call it the Saddlebag Mysteries.”

“It sounds really interesting,” Hannah said.

“And lots of fun,” Ricky added. “I can’t imagine why it didn’t take off.”

“I wish it had,” Michael responded, smiling. “This would have been the perfect place for it, with old tunnels and secret doors and spooky cellars. You know nuns used to live here; and they had tunnels made from the mansion to the barn, stables, and smokehouse for use in bad weather. If you explore any of the tunnels,” he went on, “the one to the smokehouse is blocked off. It needs repair and it’s not safe. The other two are fine. You can go anywhere you want; nothing is off limits except the one tunnel.” Handing Art a couple of maps, he added, “I made these up for the games; they should help you find everything.”

After Michael left, Hannah said in a slightly dejected tone, “His wheelchair doesn’t creak at all, it’s practically silent.”

“The lift didn’t make much noise either,” Art remarked. Heading down to the kitchen to make dinner, both he and Hannah were noticeably subdued and disappointed.

When nightfall arrived, they found the mansion to be extremely well lit, which also didn’t lend to a mystery atmosphere at all.

After poring over the maps for a bit, the group decided they felt more like watching a movie than anything else. They

would have the whole day tomorrow and tomorrow evening for exploring, so they didn't feel a need to hurry.

They went to bed directly after the movie, just after ten o'clock. Justin's father was already asleep because he would be rising early the next day to travel to a neighboring town to bid on another electrical job. He would be returning in the evening, but they wouldn't see him at all during the day on Saturday.

Mrs. Birtwhistle knocked on the girls' door at about ten-fifteen to see if they had everything they needed. She also told them, "My room is just down the hall, and I sleep like a feather."

Hannah smiled as she said, "We know the rule about not going to the boys' room, if you're saying you're going to keep tabs on us."

"No, that's not what I mean," Mrs. Birtwhistle good-naturedly responded. "There's just a lot of strange stuff that goes on here, and I wanted you to know that I'm nearby."

"We also know about the inside-by-midnight curfew," Ricky said.

"It's not just an inside curfew," the caretaker replied. "I suggest no wandering about after midnight at all. Didn't you wonder why there are no other guests?" she added, rather dramatically. "People are afraid to stay here. There are ghosts and odd things happen. One time, I went down to the kitchen after midnight, and all of the cabinets were standing wide open. And there were four dinner services and four wine glasses sitting on the counter, lined up like they were ready to serve four ghosts."

The girls reasoned that Mrs. Birtwhistle was probably trying to spook them; however, because she was speaking so emphatically, she was coming off more comical than serious.

"I can't imagine we'll need to leave the room after midnight," Ricky assured her.

"Good," Mrs. Birtwhistle replied. "Well, sleep well."

"You too," Hannah answered.

Just after eleven, the girls heard strange sounds coming from the hallway, something like scratching, along with a soft cooing noise like that of a dove.

Cautiously opening the door, Ricky and Hannah peeked out. The hallway was dimly lit by sconces, so they didn't need flashlights or candles to see, or explore.

Stepping out a few feet, Ricky found a small white feather.

Following more scratching sounds and cooing down three long hallways, the girls found several more feathers. The trail of feathers ended at a balcony overlooking a room containing a pool table and several large divans, which they were able to see from moonlight streaming through the large windows. Though they could feel a draft of cold air, they saw no open windows, nor did they see any birds.

Since they hadn't discovered anything important, Ricky didn't chide herself for forgetting to bring her camera on their excursion.

When they made it back to their room, Hannah speculated, "Mrs. Birtwhistle said she sleeps like a feather. I bet she put those feathers out, like maybe as a reminder that she was keeping watch if we decided to do some late-night exploring."

Ricky had to agree. "But it's still before midnight," she said with a smile, "so we didn't break her rule."

Chapter Seven

The Contents of the Saddlebag

By the time the girls woke and made their way downstairs the next morning, Justin's dad had already left for the day; and they didn't expect him back until sometime in the evening.

The boys had had a fairly uneventful night. Both Justin and Art had read for awhile before going to sleep. Neither had heard anything unusual in their wing of the mansion.

After breakfast, Ricky decided to film the pool again because the light was much different than it had been the afternoon before, and the day was even breezier, which made the leaves in the bottom of the pool fairly dance. Though she filmed their lively gyrations for some time, she never saw anything out of the ordinary.

For the rest of the morning, the group rooted around in the cellars, looked through many of the bedrooms, and explored the tunnels to the barn and stables. They did find an old rosary in one of the tunnels, which greatly excited Hannah. "A beautiful relic from a bygone age," she said with a blissful sigh. Art and Justin managed to open a secret door in one of the bedrooms that was marked on one of Michael's maps; but it revealed only an empty chamber, about the size of a large walk-in closet, behind it. They speculated that the room might have been built for someone to hide in if the house was being broken into, or possibly as a storage place for treasures.

Time had fairly flown by, and it was well after one by the time the group of visitors gathered in the kitchen to have sandwiches for lunch.

Showing the rosary to Mrs. Birtwhistle, and trying to give it to the woman, Hannah was astounded when the caretaker said, "You can keep it if you want, as a memento of your stay here."

"Thank you," Hannah breathed. "It's lovely." In truth, the rosary was dirty and cracked; but the sentiment behind it was definitely lovely, and the possession of it made Hannah very happy.

Tired of exploring, the group decided to try out one of the Saddlebag Mysteries after lunch. About fifteen bags occupied the large cabinet in the library. The one Art chose was very light in weight, which added to the mystery as to what might be inside.

Ricky was somewhat tired of lugging the camera around, having done so all morning, so Justin offered to take over camera duties for the afternoon, and he started filming as soon as Art chose the bag.

The saddlebag contained only two small objects. As Art placed them on the table, Ricky nearly fainted with shock. Good thing Hannah was right by her elbow; she managed to catch Ricky and help her fall into a chair instead of on the floor as her legs gave way beneath her. With her face drained of all color, and her body shaking, Ricky was unable to speak for fully two minutes.

As Art rubbed Ricky's hands, which had turned as white and bloodless as her face, Hannah put her arm around Ricky's shoulders and frantically asked, "What's wrong. What can I do?"

Though also concerned about Ricky, Justin stepped back to continue filming. He sensed something important might be happening, and he didn't want to miss catching whatever it was on camera.

Wisely discerning that Ricky's reaction was due to the contents of the saddlebag, Art said, "Take a deep breath, and tell us why this pocket watch and wishbone are important."

One might have thought that Art was Ricky's father; he was so calm and firm in his tone.

As Hannah ran to get a glass of water for her friend, Ricky managed to wheeze out, "Find Michael."

Art sped away as Hannah was returning with the water.

Ricky had more color and had managed to find more of her voice by the time a very confused Michael arrived with Art in tow.

"I thought you might have gotten bit by a snake," Michael said, in relief at seeing a nearly-normal Ricky. "When Art said you found something that turned you all white and shaky, I thought the only way something dangerous could be in one of the bags was if it had crawled in. Thank goodness you're okay."

"But we still don't know what's wrong," Hannah pressed.

Instead of answering, Ricky addressed Michael with a question. "Why did you put these two items in this bag?"

"It was kind of odd," he answered, somewhat slowly. "Around Christmastime, I had this weird dream where I was making up one of the mystery games, and I started with a wishbone and a pocket watch as two of the clues. The next day, I didn't think much about it; but when I was rooting through a desk in the library in search of a pen, I found this wishbone and pocket watch. Remembering the dream, I shoved them into a saddlebag, intending to make up the scenario later; but I never got around to it."

In what seemed to her friends to be a rather lame explanation, Ricky told Michael, "The wishbone reminded me of something; I was just surprised to see it."

Shrugging slightly, and without questioning, Michael left the library to head outdoors to enjoy reading in the gardens for while, since the afternoon was turning off pleasantly mild and sunny.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Ricky excitedly told her friends, "It's not just the wishbone. Last year, I wrote a story

for my Creative Writing class about two young boys, brothers, and a wishbone and a pocket watch. The story takes place around Easter time, and the boys and their baby sister are staying with their grandparents because their father is very sick in the hospital and their mother is keeping vigil with him. The younger brother is particularly upset over everything, not just about his dad being sick, but also because his older brother always seems to be getting his own way, and his baby sister always seems to be getting all of the attention. The grandparents try to compensate by giving the kids gifts,” Ricky added. “They give the older boy a wristwatch and the younger a toy car, which doesn’t make him very happy because he feels his older brother has gotten a much better gift. The grandparents can tell that the boy is unhappy, so they give him a Thanksgiving wishbone they have been saving. The extra gift still doesn’t make the boy happy, so his grandfather sits down with him and gives him a pocket watch that once belonged to his own grandfather. This finally makes the boy happy, but only for a short time because he discovers that the watch doesn’t work when it is wound. However, his grandfather assures him, ‘It does work. But it’s a magic pocket watch, and it will only work if you do *all the right things.*’”

Ricky paused for a sip of water before going on. “The boy is pretty smart, and he figures out that he has not been doing ‘*all the right things*’ lately, particularly when it comes to getting along with his older brother. So he decides to be nice to his brother, and helpful to his grandparents. The boys end up working on things together like mowing the lawn, emptying the dishwasher, cleaning their sister’s highchair, and fetching things like baby powder and diapers for their grandmother. When not doing chores, they keep busy entertaining their sister and playing games together. They end up solving twelve little puzzles, each one leading to the next, that they think have been set up by their grandfather, but that are actually a test from God to keep them getting along with each other. Each time they

solve one of the puzzles, the pocket watch advances one hour. In the end, the puzzle trail leads them to the wishbone and they figure out that they need to break it together. They both wish for their father to get well, and God grants their wish.”

With a somewhat sheepish smile, because she recalled that the story wasn’t as good as others she had written, Ricky finished with, “I called it ‘The Wishbone Miracle’ but I didn’t get a very good grade on it.”

“Who cares,” Hannah replied. “It’s a sweet little story.”

“My favorite miracles in the bible are the healing ones,” Art told his friends.

“I think this is a sign,” Hannah added, “and maybe a test, like in the story.”

“I agree,” Art replied. “I think we are being directed to solve twelve puzzles that lead to a miracle.”

“Can’t we just break the wishbone while making a wish for a miracle?” Justin asked.

“That would be too easy,” Art responded.

Ricky agreed. “The wishbone is connected to the pocket watch somehow. They were in the bag together. I think we will have to take the steps; no shortcuts.”

Fingering the wishbone and the pocket watch, Hannah said in an amazed tone, “It’s like you were given a vision of something that would come about later.”

Ricky smiled upon realizing that she had been right about the issue of foreshadow; however, it was not related to the pool, but to a story she had written. “But I wonder if anyone will believe this is all happening spontaneously,” she said. “Even if some kind of miracle happens, will anyone believe that it wasn’t set up, and that it’s not a trick? How could I even prove I wrote the story before coming to the mansion? Or *is* this some sort of trick?” Ricky added after a few moments’ thought. “Could someone have set this up knowing I wrote a story about it?”

It seemed the issue of trying to prove that things relating to her film were real and not staged was always on Ricky's mind. But since her whole project was about trying to prove somehow that God exists, and she hoped so much to find indisputable proof, it was probably serving her well to think like a skeptic.

"Did you tell anyone about the story or did anyone other than your teacher read it?" Art queried.

"No," Ricky replied. "I just filed it away. I didn't get a good grade because I did it in a hurry and did a cruddy job on it. So I didn't share it with my parents. They usually like to read my stuff, but I didn't want them to read something I got a C on."

"Did you give a copy of it to someone at church?" Hannah asked. "I know you share your stories at church sometimes."

As Ricky shook her head, Hannah also shook her head, while saying, "Then I can't believe you are being so skeptical. This is God setting this up, not some person. Why do we try to talk ourselves out of things like this?"

"It is human nature to be skeptical," Art replied. "And we sometimes have good reason to be, like if someone shows up at the front door claiming to be Jesus and asking to come in. Jesus wouldn't be stopped by a locked door. If He wants in the house, He can get in. In fact, invite Him in without opening the door. If He really is Jesus, He will come in. But don't be stupid and let a stranger into the house just because he claims to be Jesus. That's how people get killed. The bible warns us about false prophets. And hopefully parents warn kids about strangers."

Hannah was still shaking her head as she told Ricky. "I can't believe you are trying to talk yourself out of this."

"You're right," Ricky replied. "I shouldn't doubt."

"We all do sometimes," Art said. "But we have to push past it and go on."

“When this is all done with,” Hannah said, “just get your Creative Writing teacher to say that you turned in the story before all this happened.”

“Do you think she will?” Art asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Ricky answered. “It’s the truth.”

“Then that will be all that’s needed to prove this was foretold and from God,” Hannah said.

“Never mind proof right now,” Justin interrupted, somewhat impatiently. “Let’s get on to solving the twelve puzzles, so we can get on to the miracle.”

In truth, he was not only anxious to move forward, he was also worried about the camera battery. They had three batteries, so they were fine to continue. However, since Ricky had filmed so much in the morning, and because Justin didn’t want to run out of power during something important, he quickly popped out the battery, replacing it with a fully-charged one.

Art and Hannah were also anxious to get moving.

“The watch is not running, but is set to noon,” Hannah said, “so it’s like it’s ready to go.”

“What do we need to do?” Art asked Ricky.

With all eyes on her, Ricky slowly replied, “Well...I’m not exactly sure. I never went into detail about the puzzles. The whole story was only a little over three pages long, handwritten. I thought I might rewrite it sometime to add more details, but I never did.”

“You said they were ‘little puzzles’ to solve,” Art prodded. “What did you think the puzzles might be like?”

“They had to be pretty simple and easy, since these were very young boys,” Ricky replied. “I guess I imagined things like if they found a twenty-five cent postage stamp with a picture of a sailing ship, they would figure out they needed to look on page twenty-five of a book that had a sailing ship on the cover. Then a picture of a window on that page, maybe with yellow or plaid curtains, would lead them to open a window with similar curtains. Then that particular window would show

them something or lead them somewhere. Each time the boys would take a step in the right direction, the pocket watch would advance, until it made it fully around to twelve again.”

Though the examples sounded somewhat lame to Ricky’s ears, they also sounded right, as though the whole thing could be nearly this effortless. *But could something this straightforward really lead to a miracle?*

“With any luck, this will be simple and easy for us too,” Art said hopefully.

“Just take your time and think,” Hannah encouraged. “There must be something you can think of to get us started.”

While Ricky was thinking, Justin stopped filming briefly to locate an electrical outlet, into which he hurriedly set the spent battery to charging.

As it turns out, he needn’t have rushed because Ricky was engaged in the longest brain lock of her whole life. In fact, it seemed to her that her thought processes had completely frozen, and she couldn’t remember ever feeling this lost or unsure about anything. *What was she supposed to do next?*

Chapter Eight

Twelve Puzzles

While her friends watched and waited, silently expectant and patient, Ricky wandered the library, hoping it would help her to think. Noticing a bible on one of the bookshelves, she closed her eyes and said a short prayer. *Dear Lord, please help me get started. I want to walk Your path, please lead me.*

Opening her eyes, Ricky experienced something she had never felt before, almost like an invisible tug or a gentle push toward one corner of the room. Taking a deep breath, she confidently walked in that direction to discover a card table with an assortment of used nametags spread over it. Since the Mystery Weekend guests often didn't know one another when they arrived, Michael used to host icebreaker get-togethers at the start of each weekend. The somewhat dusty nametags were from the last group to attend, nearly two months before.

Not immediately able to figure out why they might be important, Ricky murmured, "Eight of them, regular size, blue and white, names written in red marker."

Hannah, Art, and Justin (who had started filming again) moved to peer over Ricky's shoulder. Gazing intently at the nametags, still nothing struck her until Art started reading the names aloud. "Hi, I'm Julie; Hi, I'm Phillip; Hi, I'm Manuel...."

"I'm Manuel," Ricky repeated.

As Hannah leaned forward to look at Manuel's nametag more closely, Ricky said again, "I'm Manuel."

"What?" Hannah said. "I don't understand."

"I'm Manuel...Immanuel!" Ricky replied elatedly.

“I thought it was spelled with an *E* for the first letter,” Art stated questioningly.

“I’ve seen it spelled both ways,” Hannah answered. “But what does it mean?”

“Immanuel means *God with us*,” Art said, “referring to Jesus, but specifically God coming to us in the human form of Jesus; therefore, He is with us.”

“Yes, He definitely is,” Hannah replied. “But other than encouragement, or a sign, what does it mean *here*, on the nametag?”

In just looking at the nametag, Ricky couldn’t tell what might be significant about it; however, when she picked it up, she discovered the word, lamp, written on the back. And Manuel’s nametag was the only one that had something other than a name written on it.

Ricky was somewhat surprised that Justin was the one who came up with a bible quote, from Psalm 119. “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Ricky thought about getting the bible from the shelf to read more of the psalm when Hannah suggested, “Maybe it means a real lamp, not a bible quote.” Given Ricky’s story examples of simple puzzles, this made more sense than searching the bible for the next clue.

Three floor lamps occupied the room; but in scrutinizing them, they found nothing significant.

However, in a more careful search of the library, Hannah found a small table lamp sitting on the floor under an upturned wicker laundry basket. “I think there’s something in the Gospel of Luke about a lamp and a basket,” she said.

Ricky had retrieved the bible from the shelf, and she read aloud from Luke 11:33. “No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a bushel, but on a stand, that those who enter may see the light.”

Next to the basket sat a short stool, upon which Hannah set the lamp. Straightening the cord, which was plugged in, she switched it on.

The lamp didn't give off much light when lit, primarily because the shade was made of a somewhat dark material. But as the group peered hopefully at the lamp, they noticed a small tear in the shade, which allowed a beam of bright light to escape. The light beam fell on a newspaper occupying the seat of a nearby armchair.

In picking up the newspaper, Ricky was elated to discover the title to be *Good News*. "That means gospel," she said excitedly, "the good news of Jesus and His life, and His reason for coming to us."

"I think the lamp quote in Luke means that we're supposed to share the gospel," Hannah offered. "And newspapers are still a good way to spread news, though they are not as popular as they used to be."

As Ricky handed the paper to Hannah so she could get a better look, Art suddenly said in surprise, "The watch just moved!"

The others were as startled as he was.

"I actually saw the hand move from one to two," Art added. "It must have moved once before, from twelve to one, but I didn't notice." (Art had picked up the pocket watch earlier, when Hannah set it down, but he hadn't been keeping an eye on it.)

"It probably moved when we picked the right name tag or turned on the lamp," Justin suggested.

"The nametag got us started," Ricky said, "but I think finding and turning on the lamp was probably first in the sequence of steps that we have to take toward the miracle."

"I'll keep a closer eye on the watch," Art said.

Handing the paper back to Ricky, Hannah was extremely excited. "The newspaper feels right as the next step. I think we are on the right track."

“I think so too,” Justin agreed.

“So what is the newspaper going to lead us to,” Ricky mused as she examined it, “something to do with *Good News*?” However, she soon discovered that the next item they were seeking had nothing to do with the title of the paper, but with two words circled halfway down the front page. It’s hard to make it out,” she said. “I think some water got spilled on the paper.”

“It says *horse state*,” Hannah said squinting somewhat as she peered over Ricky’s shoulder.

Smiling, Ricky agreed. “But what does *horse state* mean?” she asked.

“That would be Kentucky,” Art said.

“Are you sure?” Justin asked. “I would have thought maybe Tennessee, or Oklahoma.”

“It’s definitely Kentucky,” Hannah chimed in. She, of course, knew a lot about horses, including where many of the best could be found. “Lexington is considered by some to be the Horse Capital of the World, and think about the Kentucky Derby.”

Justin had been zooming in on the paper. “I think it says *horse statue*, not *horse state*,” he said. The words were somewhat smeared, and the paper somewhat crinkly.

“But the second word looks even longer than that,” Art countered. “What if it’s *horse statute*?”

“Where would we even look up horse statutes?” Justin replied.

“Well, we *are* in a library,” Hannah answered.

Ricky was shaking her head. “I think we might be getting sidetracked,” she said. “What if the second word isn’t important at all? What if it’s the *horse* part that’s important?”

In answer to this, Art was thrilled to tell everyone, “The watch just moved to three!”

“So we’re looking for a horse,” Hannah said, her eyes scanning the room.

However, even with all four of them searching the library, they found no horse of any kind.

“I would have thought there would be a painting or a figurine, at least, in a room like this,” Hannah said, somewhat disappointedly.

“Maybe it’s a book,” Ricky suggested, staring intently at one of the bookcases.

Justin was standing by a bookcase full of games and jigsaw puzzles. “What about a puzzle or a game?” Hannah immediately came over to look through them, since it would have been difficult for Justin to do so while handling the camera.

After only a couple of minutes of shuffling boxes, she pulled a large one off of a lower shelf and said with satisfaction, “A Noah’s Ark play set!”

It would certainly seem to fit; surely there would have been horses on Noah’s Ark.

Bending down, Art and Ricky helped the now-seated-on-the-floor Hannah rifle through the contents of the play set.

About eighty animals occupied the box, some looking as though they had been adopted, rather than belonging to the original set. Hannah laughed as she held up a poodle and an orangutan that were both obviously the wrong size to fit with the original occupants of this particular Noah’s Ark.

They did find a horse, but not a companion one, and they couldn’t tell that there was anything significant about the creature.

As his friends were puzzling over this, Justin suggested, “The horse clue was probably just meant to lead us to the Noah’s Ark set, with all the animals. Just like the nametag and the lamp, the horse probably isn’t important anymore. So what might be next?”

Ricky agreed. “I think he’s right. We shouldn’t get stuck on one item; we need to keep moving forward to other things.”

“Maybe look for a dove?” Art offered. “A dove returned to the ark with an olive branch; that’s how they knew that the waters were going down and that there was dry land somewhere.”

“Or it could be a rainbow,” Hannah interjected. “That was the sign of God’s promise not to flood the earth again.”

For some reason, Ricky was drawn to a wolf in the play set that looked like one of the adopted animals. As she examined the wolf, Hannah, for some reason, instinctively picked up a lamb, which led Art to quote Isaiah 11:6. “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb...” He was keeping an eye on the pocket watch.

When nothing happened, Ricky said, “The next part of that verse pairs a leopard with a goat.”

In rooting through the pile of animals, they found neither; however, Justin happened to notice that a pair of leopards and a pair of goats were pictured on the front of the box. Not only that, but the creatures were also standing on the gangplank to board the ark. “Find the gangplank,” he suggested. “Maybe it’s important.”

They found no gangplank in the box; however, they did find a ladder.

“What’s the ladder for?” Art queried. “Most animals can’t climb a ladder.”

“It would be for Noah and his family,” Ricky answered.

“But there are no people figures in this set,” Hannah replied. “And none are pictured on the box.”

“The ladder is something out of place in this set,” Justin wisely discerned, “more so than the odd animal additions. So it might be the thing that will lead to the next step.”

In fiddling with the contents of the box, Art had forgotten to keep an eye on the watch. “Yes!” he proclaimed. “It’s definitely the ladder. The hand has moved to four.”

“Oh, I should have realized,” Ricky stated. “When we first found the horse, its leg was stuck in the ladder.”

As they examined the ladder and found nothing significant, Justin again urged the group not to get stuck, but to move on. “Remember, each object has been like a clue leading us to the next, so this ladder probably isn’t important anymore.”

“Just like the horse in the newspaper led us to another horse, we should look for another ladder,” Hannah suggested.

“Right,” Art agreed. “And maybe we’re supposed to climb a ladder to reach something.”

One would have thought a large home library would have a ladder. Not so, as this particular library had only stepstools to climb to reach high-up books.

It took nearly an hour for them to search the rest of the mansion, with no luck, unfortunately, so the group returned to the library.

“I can’t believe a house this size doesn’t have a ladder!” Hannah exclaimed, frustrated.

In all of their searching, they never came across Michael or Mrs. Birtwhistle in order to ask the location of a ladder on the property.

“I think Michael is outside somewhere,” Art said, “or maybe having a nap. In which case, it wouldn’t be good to disturb him.”

“Mrs. Birtwhistle is out running errands,” Hannah offered. “Remember, she asked us at lunch if we wanted anything from the grocery store.”

“We’ll probably have to look in one of the outbuildings,” Ricky said with a sigh.

“Does your dad take his ladder with him every day?” Art asked Justin.

“He would have taken it today, since he’s out bidding another job,” Justin answered. “He has to climb into attics all the time. Plus, sometimes he just has to get up high to look at fixtures, wiring, whatever.”

“Can we make a ladder, I wonder?” Ricky pondered.

Tired from running up and down stairs in their search, Hannah had plopped down on the couch, and was playing with a red string she found on the coffee table. Tying it into a loop, of a proper size to play string games, she made a teacup out of it, then a star. Her brow furrowed as she next attempted a more complicated design that had been one of her childhood favorites. Smiling with satisfaction a couple of minutes later, she held her creation up to her friends, while in the same moment realizing what she had just accomplished, and exclaiming loudly, “Maybe it’s a Jacob’s ladder!”

Ricky was elated because she thought Hannah was probably right.

“What exactly is a Jacob’s ladder?” Justin asked.

“It’s a ladder to heaven,” Ricky responded. “If I remember rightly, Jacob had a dream in which he saw a ladder to heaven with angels going up and down it.”

“But how would it lead us to the next thing?” Art questioned.

“Maybe look for something that goes up and down,” Justin suggested, “like the elevator, or stairs.”

“Or a dumbwaiter, or a dustbin lift, or a coal lift,” Hannah added. “They surely have one or more of those things in a house like this.”

“And maybe look for an angel,” Art pondered, “since angels were going up and down in the dream.”

It didn’t sound quite right, and Ricky was about to look in the bible to try to find out more about Jacob’s ladder when her brain stopped her. “I think this might be simpler than that,” she said. After a pause to consider, she added, “On our quest for a miracle, Hannah was somehow inspired to play a string game. String games are most often played by children, so I wonder if we might need to look for something to do with kids.”

In their early exploring, and in their recent search for a ladder, they had noticed a room down the hall that had once been a kid’s playroom. Though in the process of being

remodeled, it still sported teddy bear wallpaper. The room also contained a toy trunk and a tricycle, along with an assortment of child-sized furniture such as a desk and chair set, art easel, and rocking chair.

They were elated to find a door in the back of the room upon which hung a large plaque featuring a fire truck with several ladders. Not only that, but several stickers of fire trucks with gleaming gold ladders were stuck to the door. However, the door was odd in that it had no knob or handle. It also appeared that no hole had ever been cut into it in which to place a knob.

“It’s probably a closet or a bathroom,” Hannah speculated.

“But how strange that it doesn’t have a way to open it,” Art said, giving the door a soft push to see if it had something like a quick-release latch. “It’s like a trick door.”

“...knock, and it will be opened to you,” Justin said, quoting Matthew 7:7.

As Ricky reached out to gently knock on the door, and as the door swung open inward a few inches, and as the pocket watch advanced to five, Art fairly squealed, “We’re on the right track!”

Without particularly thinking, Hannah asked, “Who set all this up?”

To which Art derisively replied, “You had the answer earlier—God. With God, all things are possible. He can do anything.” Softening his tone, he added, somewhat theatrically, “He is the magic of the world.”

“But it almost seems too easy,” Hannah said.

“When God’s blessing is upon it,” Ricky answered, “anything can move at the speed of lightning.”

“He breaks down doors,” Justin added, “and clears a path.”

Suddenly nervous over what they might find, Ricky somewhat tentatively pushed wide the door, behind which they discovered a large closet containing a single object—a Christmas tree, approximately six feet high and thoroughly

bedecked in its seasonal finery. With no electrical outlet in the closet, the lights of the tree were not currently on; but that hardly mattered to the splendor, as shiny and glittery as the other decorations were.

Not knowing what it might mean to their project of trying to produce a miracle, they simply stared at the tree for a few moments. Of course, the whole of Christmas was a kind of miracle; but they hadn't even reached six on the pocket watch yet, so they couldn't expect anything exceptional to happen in this closet.

Ricky had almost hoped the tree might suddenly light up on its own, or start spinning, or something. But, although beautiful, the tree was pretty much an ordinary Christmas tree, and therefore couldn't perform any tricks.

Hannah was the one who finally noticed something out of the ordinary. "It doesn't have a topper," she said. "Lights, ornaments, tinsel...it has everything but a topper."

"So should we look for a star or an angel to put on top?" Art asked.

Due to limited light in the closet, from only one dim overhead bulb, Justin repositioned himself to get a better shot, which is when he noticed something shiny hanging on the wall directly behind the tree. Smiling, he motioned to Ricky, who discovered a silver-tinseled halo that looked as though it might have belonged to a child's angel costume.

"Perfect for the top of the tree," Justin remarked.

However, when Ricky reached up to gently set the halo in place on the top of the tree, the pocket watch did not advance.

As the group pondered what else they might try, Art noticed his stomach rumbling and suggested, "Let's take a break to clear our heads, and get something to eat. I'm starved."

"We can start again fresh after dinner," Hannah said, since she also was hungry.

Though Ricky didn't want to stop, she had to admit this was a good idea.

Justin fully agreed, particularly since his arm needed a break from holding the camera for so long.

In the kitchen, they cooked spaghetti, ate, and cleaned up, all the while pondering what the next step might be.

“We should move the tree out of the closet to get a better look at it,” Art suggested, “and to plug it in so it will light up.”

Ricky was reluctant to move the tree, in case they might disturb something important that they were supposed to see, or possibly break ornaments in the process.

“We could find an extension cord so we wouldn’t have to move it to plug in the lights,” Hannah said.

Heading back to the playroom after dinner, they heard a dog frantically barking outside, somewhere behind the mansion. “I don’t think the caretakers have a dog,” Art said in a questioning tone.

Since the group was curious as to what the dog might be on about, they were determined to investigate; and the French doors in the library offered the quickest way to the back lawns from their current position. As they were crossing the library, Ricky again felt an invisible pull, toward the back doors, as though she was being led in that direction. Smiling, she hurried outside with her friends.

Justin scrambled to get the camera up and running as they crossed the large deck to scurry down a wheelchair ramp leading in the direction of a specific clump of oak trees where a Jack Russell terrier was basically going nuts, barking crazily and jumping up and down as though his little paws contained super-charged springs.

The terrier appeared to be barking at something high up in one of the largest trees. However, when Ricky and her friends arrived at the base of the tree, they couldn’t see anything significant, partly because it was getting fairly dark, which was not surprising since the days were much shorter in the spring. Time hadn’t yet sprung forward to make sunset an hour later,

and the half moon was currently obscured by clouds and too low to provide much light.

“Quick,” Ricky urged Art, “run inside and turn on the floodlights!”

Art raced back to the mansion as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, the floodlights, being installed in such a way as to mainly illuminate an area closer to the mansion, provided very little light.

Undaunted, the group continued to scan the tree with hopeful eyes. A few moments later, Hannah was the one that noticed a squirrel in a slightly smaller oak, adjacent to the large one the terrier was fixated on. “He’s barking up the wrong tree,” she said, smiling because she hadn’t realized that she was spouting a cliché until it was already out.

Completely ignoring the people, the dog continued to bark and jump, and with extreme gusto, as though neither his batteries nor his enthusiasm could ever dim.

“Could this be a message,” Art said, “to tell us we are barking up the wrong tree, namely, the Christmas tree in the closet?”

“So we got off course, somehow,” Hannah said in agreement, her brain trying to work out what they needed to do to get back on track.

Though his friends had drifted toward the tree with the squirrel, Justin had wisely kept the camera on the larger tree. “Actually,” he said somewhat quietly, “at this moment, I think we’re barking up the right tree.”

Hurrying back to his position, Ricky thought she saw movement near the top of the tree, something like a pale gray shadow drifting along one of the larger outstretched limbs.

Hannah also thought she saw something. “It’s like a flutter,” she whispered, “like wings moving back and forth.”

Unable to see anything himself, Art again raced back to the mansion in search of a flashlight. Locating one in a drawer in the library, he hurried back to his friends. Unfortunately, by the

time he arrived, the shadow in the tree had disappeared and the flashlight revealed nothing.

The terrier, it seemed, had finally lost interest in the tree and had ceased his barking and jumping in order to sniff a few clumps of grasses before trotting off toward his home on a neighboring estate.

“Do you think it was a ghost?” Hannah asked. She was excited about the prospect of proving the rumors of the Mystery Mansion spookiness to be true.

“I’m more hopeful it was an angel,” Ricky said. “Whatever it was, I hope the camera picked up something that we can use for the film.”

The flashlight Art had brought proved handy as Ricky, on a sudden impulse, or perhaps a childlike whim, decided to climb the tree. Shoving the flashlight through a belt loop in her jeans to leave her hands free, she hoisted herself up onto one of the lower limbs. “I want to see if there’s something up here that we can’t see from the ground,” she said.

Ricky felt safe climbing about halfway up the tree, where she stopped in order to search the limbs with the flashlight. “I don’t see anything unusual,” she called down to her friends.

As she climbed just a little higher, Justin said somewhat loudly, “A Ricky Halo in a tree!”

Hannah got the gist of what he actually meant. “There’s a halo in a tree, so it’s just like the one inside the mansion,” she said, giving Art a questioning look.

Scrambling for the pocket watch, he peered at it hopefully, only to shake his head a mere second later to indicate the watch hadn’t advanced.

Not feeling safe to go any higher, Ricky started to make her way down, where she discovered a small object in a crook of the tree. Picking it up, she said, “It’s a piece of a jigsaw puzzle.”

Art had continued to keep an eye on the pocket watch, and was elated when it advanced to six. Practically shouting, he announced, “It moved forward!”

Dropping to the ground from a lower limb, excited and breathless, Ricky said, “We’re halfway there!”

As the group was heading back inside, Hannah was so excited she basically couldn’t stop smiling. “What do you think will happen if we make it to the end?” she asked. “I mean, what kind of miracle do you think it will be?”

“Good question,” Art said.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Ricky answered. “There are all kinds of miracles. Some have to do with nature, like stopping a rockslide in mid-slide to save someone’s life. Other miracles have to do with healing, or restoring life, like bringing a person who drowned back to life after they for sure would have been dead from such a long time under water.”

“Some miracles have to do with overcoming demons,” Art said, “if there are any demons in the area.”

“I didn’t get the idea that the ghost sightings here are anything bad like that,” Justin remarked.

“I don’t get that feeling either,” Ricky said. “Nothing here feels bad, quite the opposite, actually. The mansion more feels comfortable and safe, like it’s being watched over and protected.”

“I guess it could be something as simple as water turning into wine,” Art offered.

Hannah’s enthusiasm was obviously undimmed by the suggestion of the miracle being something less than full of fireworks. With a blissful sigh and a huge smile, she told her friends, “Whatever it turns out to be, I’m sure it will be completely wonderful.”

Ricky smiled too. It was difficult to imagine all of the possibilities, since the power of God was almost too awesome to comprehend; but she definitely agreed that any miracle, even a small one, would be completely wonderful.

Inside, the group headed straight for the shelf of games and puzzles.

“Which one...?” Hannah pondered.

Discovering a jigsaw puzzle on a totally different shelf, full of books and knickknacks, Art suggested, “What about this one over here, on its own?”

Ricky felt he was probably right. “It must be set apart for a reason,” she said.

The picture on the front of the box was an outdoor scene featuring a window with several flowerpots, along with a gardening trowel and gloves, sitting on the sill. Below the window, a small yellow cat was curled up and contentedly napping on a small bench next to a seed caddy and a watering can.

Opening the box, they discovered that the piece Ricky had found looked similar in size and in color scheme to fit well with the puzzle.

Hannah hurried to put two card tables together for a larger surface, upon which Art dumped the contents of the box. Groaning as he read the side of the lid, he said, “Three Thousand Pieces. I hope we don’t have to put the whole thing together; we’ll be here until next weekend.”

As Hannah, Ricky, and Art pulled up chairs and began piecing the puzzle, Justin circled the table to vary his angles and get some close-up shots of their efforts. As it turns out, jigsaw puzzles were one of Art’s favorite things to do, and he was very good at them. Hannah too seemed to have a knack for finding just the right pieces. At one point, she and Art were working so fast and feverishly that they actually bumped heads when both rising and reaching across the table from opposite sides at the same time. “Ouch!” they exclaimed in unison.

Though Ricky was less adept at puzzles, she was a keen observer; and she happened to notice that they were all three finding pieces that seemed to fit in one particular part of the puzzle, which is why they were making good progress on a

large section of the picture. At a time when Justin had the camera focused on her, she stopped hunting for pieces to give a short narration. “Anyone who knows anything about jigsaw puzzles,” she began, “can tell us that the process usually doesn’t go this quickly. We just dumped all of the pieces out of the box in a jumble; yet, here we are finding pieces quite easily that seem to fit all in one spot, which looks to be the cat at this point. And it’s not just picking out certain colors, because one of the flowerpots and part of the window frame are the exact same color as most parts of the yellow cat. See,” she added, pointing to the lid of the box. “So I’m convinced this must be divine help, because we’re getting way more done than even someone expert in jigsaw puzzles would.”

When the section they were working on formed the full cat, Ricky suddenly had an idea. “Because this came together so quickly,” she said, “I think this is probably our next clue—a cat.”

Art had been so busy with the puzzle that he had forgotten to keep an eye on the pocket watch, which had advanced to seven. “You’re right!” he exclaimed.

As they rose from the table, Art offered to take over filming duties, even going so far as to try to take the camera from Justin. Grappling with Art, Justin sharply jerked away while giving his friend a short push and a snap of a retort. “No! I’m fine! Stop it!”

“Man, you’re not going to be in any of the shots!” Art replied. “I was just trying to help.”

Softening his snap, Justin replied, “Sorry. I just think I’m the best person for this, and it’s too important to trust to anyone with less camera experience.”

“Well, I agree with you there,” Art said smiling and giving Justin a slap on the back.

With a short gasp, Hannah suddenly remembered, “There’s a stuffed cat on a table in the taxidermy hall! I particularly

noticed it because I thought it looked out of place with all the wild animals.”

The stuffed cat turned out to be a yellow cat, which led them to believe they were on the right track. Its collar had a heart-shaped tag with the name, Ziv, inscribed.

“I think it’s creepy that some people stuff their pets,” Hannah said.

Reminded of Mrs. Sylvester, Ricky smiled as she thought, *She probably would have stuffed Steebie, if she had been able to recover him whole.*

Justin happened to notice that the cat was sitting on a four-year-old wall calendar. When he pointed this out, Art said, “Doesn’t the word, Ziv, have something to do with the Hebrew calendar?”

“I don’t know anything about the Hebrew calendar,” Ricky confessed.

“It’s something about April or May,” Art said. “I heard the word, Ziv, once, and I thought it was unusual and interesting, so I looked it up.”

Upon looking in the calendar under April and May, they found nothing significant. However, the cat hadn’t just been sitting on a calendar but also on an old refrigerator manual, which Hannah felt might be important. “The calendar thing sounds too complicated, like we’re getting sidetracked,” she said. “Let’s take a look at the refrigerator.”

The others agreed, and they all trooped downstairs to the kitchen.

Though they had all looked at and handled the refrigerator during their visit, they hadn’t noticed anything odd, until now. A jumble of alphabet letter magnets, of the same kind used by kids to spell out words and sentences, occupied the door of the appliance. But, of course, that wasn’t what was odd since a lot of refrigerators sported letter magnets.

“They are all the same color,” Ricky said. “That’s unusual, isn’t it?”

“Blue,” Art replied with a nod. “Yes, they are usually all different colors. I didn’t even know you could buy a same-color set.”

“So is it the color that’s important?” Hannah questioned.

Ricky wasn’t sure, but she thought it was a good suggestion.

Art, however, had a different idea, mainly because a word had jumped out at him from the jumble. “CHARRING,” he said. “I think maybe we are supposed to find a message in this.”

The others agreed. “But it probably doesn’t include CHARRING,” Hannah said, rearranging letters, from which she came up with CHARITY.

“That sounds good,” Justin offered, as he reached in to form the word, ROOM, from the mix of magnets.

“This is a good start,” Ricky said.

However, going on with the word game proved more difficult, mainly because they were convinced that the first two words were correct and they didn’t want to borrow any letters from them.

While they were working, Justin took the opportunity to again switch out camera batteries.

After a time, it almost seemed as though they were working on this longer than they had the jigsaw puzzle. Frustrated, Ricky had just about decided that there were too many heads and hands trying to solving this puzzle when Art got two more words, BOXES and DINING.

That just left the word, FOR, to be made from the final three letters.

Rearranging the words a couple of times, Art read aloud. “BOXES FOR CHARITY DINING ROOM or DINING ROOM BOXES FOR CHARITY”

“Which is it?” Hannah asked.

“Either way works!” Ricky exclaimed as she sped into the dining room adjoining the kitchen where she indeed discovered

several boxes containing items earmarked for the local thrift shop.

“The watch moved to eight!” Art said, as he raced to catch up to her.

Four boxes of household items, mainly kitchen and dining by theme, sat along one wall of the room.

“Potheolders, a blender, saucepans, coffee filters, utensils, toaster...” Hannah recited, rooting through the first box.

Examining the contents of the second box, Ricky said, “Waffle maker and a mix of plates, bowls, and saucers from several sets, with a few tea towels thrown in to separate the breakables.”

“Mainly glasses and coffee cups wrapped in newspaper,” Art said, rising from a crouch beside the third box.

Hannah had moved to explore the final box. “Oh,” she said, with a note of sympathy in her voice. “Everything in here has cracks and chips.” Indeed, the fourth box contained items that were still very usable but that weren’t in as pristine condition as the contents of the other boxes.

“But this is absolutely beautiful,” Ricky gushed, gently lifting a porcelain vase from the box, “even with the crack.”

“This is pretty too,” Art said, holding up a crystal fruit dish. “You can barely notice the chip on the edge.”

“These are things that may be flawed, but that can be reused,” Justin remarked. “So what do we make of that in relation to our project here?”

“Many people would want to get rid of these things,” Ricky mused, “even though they are beautiful and still useful.”

“But with all of the emphasis on being green,” Hannah said, “people are repurposing old dishes to make things like jewelry and mosaic art.”

“And they recycle glass to make countertops and tiles, and a lot of other things,” Ricky remarked.

Though the speculation about recycling and repurposing sounded good, from the moment he saw the contents of the box,

Art's brain had gone in a different direction. "These look like antiques," he said. "They're old."

"Yes," Ricky said, not quite sure of what he was getting at.

"A broken golden bowl, a snapped silver cord, a broken water pitcher, a broken wheel..." Art said.

"Those things aren't in this box," Hannah stated.

"I know," he said, "but they equal old age." Art had been reciting things he remembered from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 12. "The things in the box are just like the things mentioned in Ecclesiastes that describe old age."

"So we are looking for something having to do with old age," Ricky said.

It sounded right, and as it happened, the answer was staring directly at them, from a portrait hung on the wall above the box in question.

The subject of the painting was an elderly woman, dressed in her Sunday finery and sitting in a rocking chair on a porch surrounded by blooming Sterling Silver rose bushes. She smiled serenely at them as they studied her.

Ricky was looking closely for something important like a piece of jewelry or a pattern in the woman's lacy collar when Justin urged, "Remember to move forward; don't get stuck."

Nodding, Hannah thought for a moment before suggesting, "Maybe the roses are important."

"The watch!" Art practically shouted. "It just moved to nine!"

"There's a huge patch of roses in the garden beside the pool!" Ricky remembered.

Hurrying to the library to turn on the floodlights and grab the flashlight, they rushed out to the garden. The flashlight wasn't particularly needed because the floodlights were perfectly set to illuminate the pool and garden area. The half moon had also risen higher.

Sure enough, the roses were Sterling Silver roses, whose delicate blossoms gleamed steely lavender in the pale light.

The rose garden itself was situated next to a child's play fort, complete with a slide and climbing wall, set in a large area of sand.

While Hannah and Art were admiring the roses, Ricky drifted toward the fort. On instinct, Justin followed her. Tall grasses grew along the edges of the sandy play area forming something of a mini hedge. For some reason, Ricky was reluctant to step over the grassy hedge; instead, she stayed fixed at the edge of the sand, staring up at the stars, while taking in the refreshing evening breezes.

As the wind stiffened and swirled, the grasses fairly lashed against Ricky's shins and knees, surprising her. Glancing down, she was surprised by something else. Bent by the wind, the tips of the grasses were making interesting patterns in the sand as they dipped and whirled into the play area. Looking closely, Ricky saw one grass tip draw a near perfect circle. Making her way slowly along the low hedgerow, with Justin closely following her movements, she continued to watch the grasses make patterns in the sand. Bending down, she studied one particular grass moving so slowly that it appeared to be drawing its sand picture with meticulous intent.

Quietly, Art and Hannah approached to see what Ricky was finding so fascinating.

"Is it writing something?" Hannah asked softly.

"I'm not sure," Ricky murmured, as she switched on the flashlight to get a better look at the grass, bent by the will of the wind, still slowly scrolling something in the sand.

As the breeze suddenly lightened, the grass tip suddenly ceased drawing and popped up out of the sand, where it stood nearly still, with only the slightest sway left over from its endeavor.

"It's a fish," Art said, amazed, "with eyes and scales and everything!"

"It's beautiful," Hannah breathed. "What a talented blade of grass."

“With God as the artist, of course it’s beautiful,” Justin replied.

Art suddenly realized that he had had a foreshadow experience too, when he thought of making a cross or footprints appear in the sand of the volleyball courts. Of course, this was different than Ricky writing a wishbone story featuring future events because, to his accustomed way of thinking, he would have needed to finagle something to make a sand picture appear. Yet, here it had appeared, with no finagling, and no human manipulation at all. It was simply amazing. In the quiet setting, surrounded by his friends and the beautiful garden bathed in soft light, Art said a silent prayer of thanks to God for His miraculous works and His many blessings.

“Is it supposed to represent the Christian fish symbol?” Hannah asked.

“It doesn’t really look like the symbol,” Ricky answered.

“It looks like a goldfish to me,” Justin said.

Art was smiling because the pocket watch had just advanced to ten. “We’re moving forward,” he announced, “a goldfish it is.”

The center of the garden featured a small pond that had once held koi fish but was currently empty excepting several leaves, a few insects, and numerous patches of stringy moss. Despite its lack of fishes, the pond was exactly what they were looking for because the strings and clumps of moss had grown in such a way as to clearly spell out a message.

“Instead of bronze I will bring gold...” Ricky said.

“That’s from the Book of Isaiah,” Art said. “And the watch just moved to eleven!”

“We’re almost there!” Ricky said excitedly.

Hannah almost couldn’t contain her happiness as she gushed, “It’s all happening so quickly!”

Deciding that they needed to look at the full passage in Isaiah, the group hurried inside to access the bible.

As they entered the library, Art asked in a hopeful voice, “Could that possibly be the miracle? Is God going to turn something bronze into gold?” If any miracle could have been perfectly suited to Art, this certainly would have been it.

“We’re not to the end yet,” Hannah gently reminded him. “Since the watch still has to go to twelve, the miracle will probably be something else.”

“Plus, I don’t think that’s what that passage in Isaiah means,” Ricky said.

“I know,” Art responded. “But wouldn’t it be amazing for something bronze to turn to gold?” (He was still incredibly upbeat about the possibility, and he wasn’t going to let the girls’ reasoning bring him down.)

Justin smiled as he sided with Art. “It would work for me, as a pretty spectacular miracle.”

While Ricky was looking in the bible, and reading aloud from Isaiah, Chapter 60, Hannah wandered the library. As she passed the shelf containing the games and puzzles, an electroplating kit caught her eye.

“Maybe this is what we are looking for,” she suggested, removing the box from the shelf. “This has to do with gold and bronze.”

Art scrambled to clear away the jigsaw puzzle from the two card tables so Hannah could have a place to examine the kit. Ricky soon joined them.

Strangely enough, the box didn’t contain the components of an electroplating kit, but an old Scrabble board game instead, complete with board, trays, tiles, and a Scrabble box lid. Hannah’s brief moment of confusion and disappointment turned quickly to elation when she realized that this was probably what they were meant to find. And just like the refrigerator magnets, she felt they were probably supposed to make a message from the letters.

Rifling through the tiles, Art remarked, “It looks like someone put two games together. There are too many letters here to be from just one Scrabble game.”

As with the magnets, they began shuffling letters around to try to make words and sentences. However, this proved to be difficult because there seemed to be at least ten times more letters in the box than had been on the refrigerator door.

Musing over the steps they had already taken toward the miracle, Hannah found herself thinking that what they were doing wasn’t going to lead them forward because there were too many letters. Any number of sentences could be made from this quantity of tiles. She suddenly felt bogged down and, as with the calendar, she felt they had gotten sidetracked into something more complicated than it ought to be. Sitting back in her chair, she perused the rules on the inside of the Scrabble box lid.

One particular thing drew her attention, and she pointed it out to her friends. “See here, the number 3 is circled.”

“Lots of religious things come in threes,” Justin offered. “The Trinity, for instance; and the Ark of the Covenant contained three items.”

Hannah was nodding as she said, “The number three is very prominent in the bible.”

Scrambling with the bible, Ricky quickly looked up something she had read quite recently, Matthew 12:39-40, and she told her friends, “When Jesus spoke of the sign of Jonah, and Jonah being in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, He then referred to Himself being three days and three nights in the heart of the earth before resurrection.”

“What does that mean here?” Justin questioned.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ricky confessed. “It’s just a lot of threes in one place in the bible, and I was thinking about Jonah because of the fish picture in the sand.”

Hannah again had the feeling that this was all too complicated. “I think we are spinning our wheels, and missing something simple,” she voiced.

Unfolding the Scrabble board, Art smiled as he agreed with Hannah. “You’re right, and I can’t believe we missed this before. There are three tiles stuck to the center of the board in a vertical line.”

Glued would have been a more accurate term because he would have had to rip paper from the board to remove them.

“J K H,” Hannah mused.

“J could stand for Jesus,” Ricky suggested.

“And K could stand for King,” Justin added.

“But what would the H stand for? Hannah questioned. “Happiness, Hope, Humility...?”

The mention of humility reminded Art of something. “J K H,” he said. “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. It’s what the Lord requires.” Taking the bible, he flipped through it to find the right verse.

Ricky was surprised that Art was so familiar with the bible; but, then, a lot of things about Art were turning out to be very surprising, in very good ways.

“Here it is, Micah 6:8,” he said. ““He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?””

Scrabbling with the Scrabble tiles, Art and Hannah spelled out the phrases, DO JUSTICE, LOVE KINDNESS, and WALK HUMBLY. Smiling and sitting back with satisfaction, Art peered hopefully at the pocket watch. However, it did not advance.

While the group was thinking about what they might try next, Hannah suddenly remembered, “It’s on a plaque on the wall in the conservatory! Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly. I saw it when we took our tour with Michael.”

Tearing out of the room, they raced down three hallways, and down a short flight of stone steps to reach the sunken conservatory.

“But the watch still hasn’t moved forward,” Art said, as they ran. He was confused because he felt sure they had gotten it right when they matched the bible phrase with the letters stuck to the Scrabble board.

“I think we’re on the right track,” Ricky assured him, as they reached the conservatory. Not only did it feel right in her gut, she had again felt the invisible pull, which had fairly whisked her down the halls as though she was light as a feather.

“Maybe the last puzzle takes longer to solve for some reason,” Justin suggested, trying to catch his breath after the sprint.

The conservatory was in the same state as it had been when they visited it on their tour, slightly forlorn and neglected, with fewer plants than one might expect in a room made mainly for greenery, and with many of the resident plants in desperate need of a little TLC. Indeed, if Hannah and Ricky had had longer to spend in the mansion, they would have wanted to roll up their sleeves to prune, water, fertilize, and whatnot in order to perk things up a bit in the conservatory.

“It looks like they use this room mainly for storage,” Art remarked, also feeling a bit gloomy about the atmosphere.

Indeed, the room was filled with all sorts of things such as odds and ends of furniture, catering delivery crates from events that had been held at the mansion, stacks of empty flower pots, bins filled with knick knacks and children’s toys, and a few piles of things that should have probably been stored in a garage.

“If I had a room like this,” Art said, “I’d plant an indoor herb and veggie garden.”

Despite being cluttered, the conservatory was still beautiful, particularly the intricate Moroccan-style tiled floor. The design caught Ricky’s eye, and especially several tiles that didn’t quite

seem to fit with the others because they were inset with words instead of colorful geometric shapes. Her mind mused over the words—*truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, Spirit*.

In the back of the conservatory, on a stack of folding chairs, sat two horse blankets upon which a helmet that looked as though it belonged on a suit of armor was perched. A shield and sword were propped up against the pile of chairs.

As her brain put these objects together with the tiles on the floor, Ricky asked Art, “Where in the bible does it talk about the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation?”

“Ephesians,” Art responded. He had brought the bible from the library with him.

While he was flipping pages, Hannah remarked, “I’ve never heard of a religious conservatory. It seems strange in a house like this.”

“Not so strange,” Justin replied. “Remember, nuns used to live here.”

Art had found the passage. “Ephesians 6:13-17,” he said. ““Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.””

“So if this is another puzzle, maybe we need to match the objects up with these tiles on the floor,” Ricky suggested.

“But there isn’t a breastplate, or a girdle, or anything that can shod feet,” Hannah countered.

As they looked through the bins and piles and crates in search of these items, Hannah again had the same feeling she had had with the calendar and the jumble of Scrabble tiles—that it was all too complicated. Returning to stare at the plaque on

the wall, on impulse, she reached up to take it down. On the back was simply written the word, patience.

With this discovery, Ricky's brain scrambled to remember all she could about patience in the bible. She had gotten pretty far on her list of references to patience in the bible; but in the heat of the moment, it was difficult to recall anything tangible.

As it turns out, her brain didn't need have scrambled, because Art announced with satisfaction, "The watch just moved to twelve."

"So *patience* was the final thing that we needed to find," Hannah said, with both relief and a small note of unbelief in her voice. (She was surprised that they had made it all the way to twelve with so little effort.) "Is it an instruction?" she asked.

The others didn't know.

After a few moments of thought, they decided to return to the library, where it all began, with the saddlebag, so they could think things through. The library also seemed a good place to try to relax and exercise patience, if this was indeed an instruction to them.

Back in the library, despite engaging in only calm activities such as reading and talking quietly, they were all basically too excited and had difficulty sitting still and being patient.

Justin's father arrived a half-hour into their patience exercise. After chatting with them for a couple of minutes, he headed to the kitchen to get something to eat.

Afraid he might miss something that might occur unexpectedly, Justin continued filming during the lull in their project, though he did take one short break to again switch batteries.

Art, in telling himself to settle down and be patient, quietly quoted Psalm 46:10. ""Be still, and know that I am God.""

Continuing to twiddle their thumbs and wait, they felt like children told they could have ice cream, but not until a certain time. Though a little confused by the command to be patient, Ricky was confident that they were doing the right thing. *Trust*

in God, she thought serenely. He will reveal Himself in good time.

However, Hannah's brain was winding in another direction. She couldn't understand why nothing had happened when the pocket watch had reached twelve; and the longer they waited, the more she felt they needed to do something. It wasn't just that she felt like she wanted to crawl out of her skin, which made her squirm when sitting and wander the library when standing. It was more the feeling that they were missing something. After a good deal of squirming and wandering, her brain finally hit on the answer, and she told her friends, "We're completely forgetting about the wishbone."

This was completely true; they had just left it sitting forlornly on the shelf beside the empty saddlebag.

"So are we supposed to make a wish, then break it?" Art questioned. "Could it be that simple?"

Ricky felt royally stupid that she hadn't thought of this because it sounded like the right answer. After all, it's what the boys had done in her story. Perhaps, being patient simply meant slowing down and using their brains. They had been running around like mad people for quite some time. Maybe they were supposed to calm down and think before making the wish. Making a wish would require thoughtfulness, for sure.

Carefully taking the wishbone from the shelf, Hannah gently placed it on the coffee table.

Everyone, of course, felt Ricky should be one of the two people to break the wishbone, though deciding who should break it with her would likely take some debate. And then there was the matter of figuring out exactly what to wish for, which also might take some deliberation, and time.

However, they were not going to have the chance to discuss these things because something quite unexpected happened next.

The wishbone, from its serene and undisturbed place on the table, suddenly, on its own, with no one touching it, snapped into two pieces.

Chapter Nine

The Miracle

Justin had managed to catch the event on camera, thank goodness.

Taken completely by surprise, they didn't know what to think, or do.

"Did we do something wrong?" Ricky asked, almost in a whisper, because she was almost afraid this was true. Despite trusting in God and trying to do the right thing, people often made mistakes, particularly in matters of the unknown.

Both Art and Hannah were speechless.

"What else should we have done?" Justin questioned.

Shaking her head, Ricky softly replied, "I don't know. I honestly don't know."

She was on the verge of kneeling down to pray, because it was the only thing she could think of that might help her understand, and find an answer, when they heard movement on the deck outside.

Throwing open the French doors, they switched on the porch light and floodlights to hurry outside where they discovered Michael emerging from the shadows by one of the windows at the far end of the deck. He skirted a small table-and-chair set as he slowly walked towards them.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked, looking somewhat dazed.

At first glance, it didn't quite register what was odd; then Justin nearly dropped the camera.

"Is this a dream?" Michael demanded again.

Ricky shook her head, but she couldn't yet find her voice. Hannah, Art, and Justin were all completely speechless as well to see Michael out of his wheelchair and walking.

Unknown to the group outside, Mrs. Birtwhistle had entered the library carrying a tray of snacks for the guests. Noticing that the back doors were open and seeing movement on the deck, she joined them.

She saw the empty wheelchair first. “What happened to Michael?” she asked. (He was slightly behind his mother’s position, and she initially saw only the visitors.) When no one answered, in a voice full of panic, she said, “*Where’s Michael?*”

“Mother,” he answered, bumping into the barbeque grill as he hastened towards her.

Reminiscent of what had happened when Ricky first saw the contents of the saddlebag, now it was Mrs. Birtwhistle’s turn to almost faint. Hannah and Art struggled to keep her from hitting the deck as she lost both her color and her ability to stand.

“Mother...” Michael said again, as he reached her and attempted to help support her. He didn’t get anything more out, as his mother, recovering somewhat from her initial shock, grabbed him and held him so tightly that his breath was fairly squeezed out of him.

No longer white and fairly well able to stand, Mrs. Birtwhistle led her son inside, with the visitors in tow.

Everyone was too excited to sit down, especially Michael, who was receiving so many tight hugs from everyone, he still couldn’t breathe properly. And no one, at first, could think of what to say, so the communication was mainly in smiles, happy tears, and expressions of wonder.

When the realization of what had just happened really hit her, Ricky found it difficult to stand or breathe, so she finally did sit down on the couch.

Hannah, who had been crying with happiness since entering the library, soon joined her.

Trying to steady his shaky legs, Justin kept filming. The reactions to the miracle were certainly important to record.

Art was off by himself, his hands folded and head bowed in silent prayer.

Catching a shot of Art, Justin himself felt a need to pray; but he didn't want to miss anything with the camera, so he decided to wait until later.

As he finished praying, Art dragged a card-table chair over to the couch in order to sit nearer his friends, only to have Justin, who felt a great need to steady his legs, sink into the chair. When Art dragged a second chair over, intending to sit, Justin encouraged Michael to take it. Upon repeating the chair action once more, Mrs. Birtwhistle was then seated with the group. As Art dragged yet another chair over, he looked around to see if there were any others needing to be seated. Justin's father entered at just that time. However, when Art offered the chair to him, he declined, and chose a comfortable armchair instead, though he sat for less than a minute before jumping up in excitement when he was told the news that a miracle had occurred and that Michael could now walk.

Heartily shaking hands with Michael, Mr. Milton warned, "Don't overdo it at first." Declining Art's second offer of a chair, he told Ricky, "I'm very surprised, but not particularly shocked. From what Justin's been telling me about your project, I can believe that anything is possible." He then retreated to the armchair to read the evening paper.

"I'm still shocked," Michael confessed. "And I still think I might be dreaming."

His mother then pinched him on the arm to prove it wasn't a dream.

"Ouch," Michael said good-naturedly. "You used to pinch me when I was a kid and I hated it."

Mrs. Birtwhistle smiled, as she pinched her son once more, for good measure.

Everyone was a little more relaxed at this point, especially Michael, who told the group, "I was just getting some air, and I suddenly felt like standing up. So I did." Rising to

demonstrate, he added, “I’m surprised my muscles don’t feel weak; in fact, they feel just like they did when I used to play soccer.” As he pulled up the legs of his sweatpants, the group could see that Michael’s calf muscles were full and healthy looking.

Hannah had finally ceased crying. “Did you make a wish?” she asked Ricky.

“And was the wish for Michael to walk again?” Art added excitedly.

Ricky started to answer but was interrupted by Mrs. Birtwhistle. “What’s this about a wish?”

Since Michael was also confused, Ricky, with a little help from Art and Hannah, did her best to explain the events that occurred after they discovered the wishbone and the pocket watch in the saddlebag.

Halfway through her story, Mr. Milton abandoned his paper to pull up a chair and listen closely to the rest.

As she came to the end of her story, Ricky said, “I didn’t make a wish. But I did say a prayer last night for the Lord to keep Michael and Mrs. Birtwhistle safe, happy, and healthy. I often pray that, for people I first meet, and sometimes if I just happen to be thinking of someone.”

“I guess the prayer might have counted as a wish,” Hannah said, “but I think it’s more likely God just chose this as the miracle He wanted to perform.”

“Actually,” Michael told them, “I probably stole your wish, because I’ve been wishing for this since I had the accident.”

“I can’t think of anything better that I might have wished for,” Ricky told him, “so you’re more than welcome to have used the wish for yourself. Plus, it was actually your wishbone. I shouldn’t make any claim to it.”

“And it all worked because we followed trustingly,” Art offered. “That’s all it takes for great things to happen. Just trust in God.”

“I need to call Dr. Lewis!” Mrs. Birtwhistle suddenly exclaimed. (Dr. Lewis was Michael’s primary doctor.) “He’ll want to know about this.” Leaving the library to use the telephone in the kitchen where she kept his number, she returned a few minutes later, laughing, and said, “He threatened to charge me ten thousand dollars if this is a hoax. He doesn’t usually make house calls, but he said he would for this. Oh, and he said he’ll have me put away in a mental institution if he finds out I’m hallucinating it all. I think he said, ‘Wishful thinking can be very powerful, but people shouldn’t let it take over.’”

While they were waiting for the doctor to arrive, Art took the opportunity to pray again, after which he spelled out a message on the Scrabble board, which Justin caught on camera. THANK YOU LORD

Dr. Lewis was incredibly surprised; however, just like Justin’s father, he wasn’t shocked. “I saw something like this once before, when I was in med school. And it’s what kept me going when I was thinking of dropping out. I credit that medical miracle for me becoming a doctor.”

After thoroughly examining Michael, the doctor gave the same advice as Mr. Milton. “Don’t overdo it at first.” He then set an appointment for Michael to have a more thorough exam, along with lab work and various other tests.

“It has to be a miracle,” Mr. Milton said. “His legs looked all twiggy and skinny yesterday.”

“I agree,” Dr. Lewis replied. “I examined him barely a month ago. There’s no way he could have gained this kind of muscle mass in that time without supernatural help. And, he was permanently paralyzed, with no chance to gain leg function again. There was no question about that.”

When Ricky’s project was briefly explained to the doctor, he agreed to give testimony for her film, as long as Michael agreed to sign a medical release allowing the doctor to disclose information about him. Michael had no problem with this and

signed immediately. Dr. Lewis then gave Ricky his card so that she could schedule a time with him to do the interview.

Mrs. Birtwhistle, of course, wanted to give testimony as well. “Whatever you need to help with your project,” she said earnestly. In tears, she added, “I had such a good feeling about you coming here.” Hugging, they agreed to set up a time later for Ricky to come back to the mansion, when everyone was less flustered over the miracle.

Late in the evening, after saying her prayers, Ricky was too excited to sleep, so she prayed again, thanking God over and over for His miracle. With everything running through her mind, she was basically too distracted to do more in her prayers than simply thank God. Hopefully, she would be calmer in the morning and better able to focus.

She was eventually able to fall asleep around four a.m.

Ricky had already made plans to go to the later service at her church on Sunday, and she wasn’t due at work again until Tuesday after school, so it didn’t matter that she slept a little late, along with most of the others staying at the mansion.

With everyone else still asleep at eight-thirty in the morning, Justin’s father phoned Ricky’s, Art’s, and Hannah’s parents to let them know that they might be getting home slightly later than expected. He didn’t go into specifics, but simply told them that something really exciting had happened relating to Ricky’s project. He wanted the kids to be able to surprise their families with the good news and details of their weekend themselves.

Chapter Ten

Putting It All Together

At home, Ricky was elated to relate the whole story to her parents and Thomas. Indeed, so much had happened, to be able to go over all of it again in detail helped her to make sense of it.

Over the next few days, Ricky tried to curb her excitement in order to better settle back into her usual routine. On Thursday evening at home, in reviewing some of the film footage from the mansion, Thomas brought something incredibly important to her attention. They were looking at her shots of the pool. “See!” he said, pointing excitedly. She couldn’t quite make out what he was noticing, so he had to spell it out for her. “That cherub was on the other side of the pool in your first shot! Now he’s over here!”

Thomas was right. “Oh!” Ricky exclaimed. “This is amazing!” She was set to go back to the mansion on Saturday afternoon to interview Michael and Mrs. Birtwhistle, which would give her another chance to examine the pool.

“Can I go with you?” Thomas asked.

“Of course,” Ricky said, nodding.

She had some difficulty waiting for Saturday afternoon to arrive, and was so distracted at work on Saturday morning that she accidentally packed ice cream and cold milk in the same bag with a hot rotisserie chicken.

Ricky, Thomas, and Michael had a look at the pool first thing and were surprised to discover that the cherub in question wasn’t there at all! Ricky was filming as Thomas and Michael climbed into the pool and scrutinized the bottom closely.

“No one can say that we erased a cherub,” Michael said. “The paint is too old and stained, and there’s too much dirt

down here. Scratches or chemical cleaning would show up, stand out, in fact.”

“Maybe he is a real cherub that likes to hang out in the garden,” Thomas suggested, “and he has to hide in the painting when people are around.”

“But he can’t always remember exactly where he hides,” Michael took up Thomas’ story, “so he ends up in different spots.”

Thomas was nodding as he added, “And now he’s off doing good works somewhere.”

While Ricky was interviewing Mrs. Birtwhistle, Michael took Thomas on a tour of the house and grounds of the estate.

Later, when the interviews were finished, Ricky and Thomas gladly accepted the caretakers’ invitation to have dinner with them at the mansion.

“I never could make anything out of the footage up into the back tree,” Ricky told their hosts. “I guess there just wasn’t enough light. But we definitely saw something fluttering and sashaying about, like an angel.”

“I always knew that what was happening at the mansion was not just run-of-the-mill spook stuff,” Mrs. Birtwhistle said. “I always thought it was more divine than just plain ghost sightings. I was right; it is cherubs and angels, and God Himself passing out miracles.” She choked up at this point and couldn’t continue, which wasn’t surprising because she had cried a good deal during the interview and was still very emotional.

When editing the mansion footage, Ricky decided to add very little narration to the discovery of the wishbone and pocket watch, and running around after to make the watch move forward. It simply wasn’t needed, as their impromptu words and actions told the story without the need for explanation. Deciding what to edit out was the difficult part because it all seemed so important. Watching it full length, just as it happened, was the most believable. But, of course, she would

have to cut a lot of it; it was simply way too long. So she would need to add short segments of transition narration, or written phrases, to explain the progression of each scene to the next. Despite the complications of deciding what to leave in and what to take out, Ricky was thrilled to have so much material to work with. It was much nicer, she decided, to have too much than too little.

Mrs. Vaughn was happy to give testimony that Ricky had turned in “The Wishbone Miracle” story before her visit to the mansion. And not only did Mrs. Vaughn swear that she had no connection to Michael or the mansion whatsoever, she also assured Ricky that she had never shared anything about the written story, not even the title, with anyone.

In addition to her mother’s story about the visit of her father’s ghost, Ricky decided on a couple of other testimonies to add. Ricky’s cousin was happy to give her testimony about the time a guardian angel helped save her from a bad situation, particularly because she hoped her story might help to serve as a warning to others.

Clearing her throat and fidgeting a little, because she was nervous in front of the camera, Lindsey began.

“I basically got myself into trouble at college by being careless when I went to a party. But thankfully, a guy named Martin, a former classmate of mine that I borrowed notes from one time, and that I barely knew, was also there. He wasn’t even supposed to be there, but his car broke down and he couldn’t go home for the weekend like he planned. And he never went to parties because he didn’t like to drink, but he went this one time with his roommate because he knew that his roommate often got drunk and drove. So he wanted to make sure he had the keys to his roommate’s car to be his designated driver. Well, Martin saw me and thought I was acting weird, like I was really drunk, so he decided to take me home. By the time we got there, I was like nearly passed out, and he could

barely get me up the steps and into the house to hand me over to my roommates.”

Lindsey took a deep breath and exhaled loudly as she went on. “I woke up really sick the next morning. When I went to the infirmary, they took some blood work and it turns out I had been drugged. I knew something was wrong because I only had one drink at the party, and I hadn’t even finished it.” After a pause, she earnestly added, “I feel like God sent an angel to break Martin’s car, just so he would be in the right place at the right time. It was a crowd of drunken college guys, and at least one of them drugged me. I think something really bad would have happened if Martin hadn’t been outside of his usual comfort zone. I would encourage everyone,” Lindsey said intently to the camera, “to pray that if you are ever in a bad situation, for God to look after you and send someone to help you, like He did for me. I’ll never forget this, and I’ll always be grateful. And I am sure that God arranged for my safety.”

At lunchtime at school on a Tuesday, Ricky accidentally made Hannah cry. Art and Hannah had been discussing how some things in films and even in commercial advertisements were manipulated, to make people believe certain things. When Justin mentioned that even scientists manipulate their findings sometimes, Ricky remembered an article she read once about scientists studying lemmings. The scientists were so determined to prove that lemmings would walk off a cliff for no reason that they actually drove the lemmings over a cliff.

Ricky instantly regretted telling this to Hannah, whose natural sensitivity kicked in, causing her to cry for nearly fifteen minutes. Wisely, Ricky decided not to tell Hannah that she was going to have to cut some of the horse footage from her film. *Best not to upset her further*, Ricky thought.

“Why do people always feel they have to *prove* things?” Hannah choked out in her distress. “It’s so mean!”

“Well...” Ricky responded, “I’m basically trying to prove something with my film.”

“That’s different than driving lemmings over a cliff,” Justin answered.

“It’s different, but it’s somewhat the same,” Hannah sniffled, “because our determination to prove things can be bad. And I firmly believe that having faith means not having to prove anything. People are supposed to believe without being given concrete proof. Proof comes after we believe, when God shows us things and tells us things, reinforcing what we believe to lead us into deeper understanding.”

Though Ricky agreed with Hannah, she was still determined to finish her project in the hopes that it would prove something to skeptics—that God is all around us, in spider webs and in old mansions, we just have to look for Him.

Even with meticulous editing, her documentary, which she decided to call *The Wishbone Miracle*, was turning out to be as long, if not slightly longer, than a full-length epic movie, partly because she did decide to keep most of the horse footage after all, not just because of Hannah, but because it was pretty wonderful. In putting on the finishing touches, Ricky carefully chose scenes in which to leave the date and time feature on, in order to show that certain events preceded others, such as the sighting of the wishbone cloud predicting the miracle at the mansion. She also felt sure the word, patience, written in the spider web was foreshadow to the instruction they discovered on the plaque in the conservatory.

Ms. Winslett had gotten a Saturday evening showing at the school scheduled for the weekend after prom weekend. The deadline, though somewhat stressful, was good because it forced Ricky to get the project finished. Ricky herself scheduled a showing in the church banquet hall for Sunday afternoon on the same weekend. It crossed her mind to talk to her Peer Talks contacts at other churches and at the summer camps, which is what she had originally planned to do; but this could wait. As busy as she was, it was difficult to think about doing more at this time.

As far as the ending credits of the film, Ricky initially suggested that she, Art, Hannah, and Justin simply be listed as Production Staff, since their roles in making the documentary were somewhat muddled. For example, Ricky and Justin had done most of the camera work, but even Hannah had helped with this. And they had all had a hand in promoting and coordinating things. Editing had been done mostly by Ricky and Justin, but Art had also helped. Most aspects of the production had been done collaboratively, the exception being the music used in the film, which had been performed exclusively by Hannah. “No, I don’t need a separate credit for that,” she said obligingly. “You can just list me under Production Staff.” But the more Ricky thought about it, she talked herself out of lumping them all under one title. For one thing, it seemed a lazy thing to do, not giving credit where credit was due. So she did eventually break it all down under separate listings, remembering also to give Thomas a consulting credit, since he was the one who drew her attention to the moving cherub, and her mother a camera operator credit since she had helped with filming on a couple of occasions. The *Special Thanks To* list in the ending credits was complex and extensive as well: Mrs. Sylvester, Steebina, Mr. Merritt, Hannah’s uncle, Mrs. Marlow, Amy and her mother, Ms. Winslett, Justin’s father—the list kept growing as Ricky remembered all who had helped, led, and inspired her. After much effort in breaking it all down, Ricky breathed a sigh of relief when adding the opening credits, which included simply the names of the four main participants after the title of the film.

When prom rolled around, Ricky was happy not to have to be part of organizing it or filming it, and she was looking forward to just going and enjoying the experience. Justin had recently gotten a used car as an early graduation gift from his parents, but Ricky told him, “I’ll drive this year again, if it’s okay with you.” She had recently given her car a name, Daffodil (Daff for short), because of the color of the seats, and

because the daffodil was turning out to be her favorite flower. “Daff wants to go to the prom too, just like last year. While we’re inside dancing, she’ll have her own little party in the parking lot, with the other cars, under the stars.”

“You should write a children’s book about her adventures,” Justin suggested.

Since Ricky had been so busy of late, her mother surprised her by finishing her dress for her. Ricky was thrilled, primarily because her mother was a much better seamstress than she.

Hannah went to the prom with her friend Carl, while Art went by himself. Going stag seemed quite the trend this year, and Art was kept quite busy dancing with many of the girls who had come by themselves. In fact, he was such a ladies’ man, his closest friends hardly saw him. By the end of the evening, they all agreed this year’s prom was much more fun than the previous year’s had been.

The whole of the next week Ricky was so nervous about the upcoming weekend premiere of her film that her friends had a time calming her down. She was relieved when Saturday evening finally rolled around.

Art had been working extremely hard in promotion of the film for the past three weeks. He had surprised Ricky with his efficiency and zeal, with posters and fliers not only all over the city, but in neighboring towns as well. He had convinced the local radio station and newspaper to advertise the showing free of charge, which was pretty easy to do since the show itself was free, and because Art could pretty much talk anyone into anything. *The Wishbone Miracle* was also stringently advertised in local church bulletins, on youth group billboards, at the library and senior center, at a local tennis training center, and anyplace else Art could think of.

The grocery store where Ricky worked had helped to advertise her film by posting fliers and posters in its chain of stores. Hannah had a few connections at a nearby college and had been able to get an article in the college paper, as well as

the Christian Campus Ministries newsletter. Justin had been busy as well, mainly helping Art, who was not only good at marketing but was also good at bossing people around in order to get things done. Justin didn't mind mainly being Art's helper because salesmanship wasn't particularly his strong suit.

Ricky arrived nearly two hours early to the auditorium, to coordinate with Mr. Billinger who had kindly offered to run the projection system for them. A couple of his sophomore students were helping.

Justin and Art arrived shortly after Ricky with a huge surprise for her. They had had tiny wishbone pins made up to pass out with the programs. Ricky was speechless. "They weren't too costly," Art assured her, waving off her thanks. "We had them done at a place that specializes in event pins, mugs, hats and other types of mementos."

There were also four huge boxes of t-shirts. This, Ricky had been aware of, though she had made Art promise to follow the same terms that applied to the film—half of the profits from anything sold would go to the church, with the rest divided as they had previously decided on. He happily agreed with this. And, as two tables were set up for the t-shirts, he also happily bossed about four freshmen from the Devotional Club who had volunteered to take care of the sales.

Ricky was chiding herself for not arranging refreshments for after the show. "I just didn't think of it," she fretted. Though it had completely slipped her mind, she was soon relieved to discover that Art had this under control as well. Apparently, several of the parents of the halo babies had asked him if they could help in some way, other than just spreading the word to get people to come to the show. The parent group had baked what seemed to be about two thousand cookies and brownies, and would also be providing coffee and lemonade for a mixer celebration in the lobby after the film.

Time sped by and the auditorium was soon filled. Sweating and a little shaky, Ricky gave only a brief introduction before

taking a seat next to Hannah in the front row. “I wanted to find some way to prove to skeptics that God exists,” she told the audience. “In this documented journey of searching for proof, I hope I accomplished this.”

Justin had been planning to throw in a few extra lines of dialogue from his position in the back of the audience, in the hopes of getting other people to improvise and add things. But as it turns out, he didn’t need to. Perhaps taking their cues from the cat-leg funeral, or the footage from the final performance at the summer camp, quite a few audience members did ad-lib, basically participating in the show, just as Ricky hoped they would.

The last shot of the film was the Scrabble board, spelling out Art’s message of thanks to God, which remained while the credits ran.

Ricky was almost embarrassed and cringed slightly in her chair at the weight of the applause, which seemed never ending. She was only able to smile and wave to the audience when her parents and Thomas came to the front of the auditorium to hug her and present her with a bouquet of flowers. As Art announced refreshments in the lobby for anyone wishing to stay, Ricky’s father escorted her to the after-show mixer, partly because he was so incredibly proud of her, and partly because he wanted to help protect her from the crowds.

Ricky was happy to see Melanie in the lobby and was even happier when Melanie smiled at her from across the room.

Mrs. Sylvester was incredibly pleased that Ricky had added the words *In Memory of Steebie* to the opening of the funeral segment. “He would have been so happy,” she gushed, hugging Ricky tightly.

Ricky couldn’t even get close to Michael, who was being mobbed. They did manage to wave at each other from opposite sides of the lobby. Art, Justin, and Hannah were all off with their families and assorted friends, so Ricky couldn’t really get

close enough to talk to them either. They were all keeping busy signing programs for people.

Unaware that the turnout had been so large that some people were standing in the back of the auditorium during the film, Ricky was surprised when Ms. Winslett elbowed in to tell her, “We need to schedule a second showing.” (Since the church showing on Sunday afternoon already promised to be packed, Ricky felt this was probably a good idea.) “I should be able to get the auditorium next Friday evening and Saturday afternoon for a matinee, if that’s okay with you,” Ms. Winslett added. “Nothing else is scheduled here, as far as I know, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Ricky happily agreed.

Sunday’s showing at the church banquet hall was packed, and the audience seemed to enjoy the film as much as those at the school had.

Art had run out of t-shirts on Saturday, so there weren’t any available for the church showing. He rushed to have more made up during the week, not only for the Friday and Saturday shows, but also for Sunday because it was arranged for Ricky to have an evening showing of *The Wishbone Miracle* at another local church, in the auditorium of their seminar building, which had three times the seating capacity of the banquet hall at her own church.

The local radio station and newspaper were advertising the additional shows, and as many as possible of the fliers and posters were being modified.

Art was putting short segments of the film various places online, and already these snippets were generating considerable interest in coming to the encore shows. He also made several DVD copies of the film, four of which he sent to different Christian television networks, along with a letter briefly explaining the project and describing its initial showing success. Since he had no idea exactly how these things worked, instead of trying to sell it to them, or offering it for free showings, or

trying to get a feel for how much they might charge to show the documentary, he simply asked them to reply if they might be interested in adding an airing of the film to their programming.

If he didn't get a positive reply, Art wasn't particularly worried. Already, the buzz about the film was generating interest in even more showings and was looking worthwhile to have DVDs made up to sell. He felt opportunities were bound to abound, no matter in what direction they might lie.

On Thursday, after Creative Writing class, Ricky found out that Mrs. Vaughn had attended the Saturday show. Asking Ricky to stay for a few moments after class, Mrs. Vaughn told her, "Thanks to you, I am rethinking a few things. And I think you'll be pleased to know that I am going with my grandmother to church this upcoming weekend."

Ricky was pleased and smiled, even when Mrs. Vaughn sternly added, "But if that miracle was a hoax, it's not very nice to deceive people. And from what I understand so far about God, you could be in for some very bad consequences if it was faked."

"Nothing in the film was faked, or even embellished," Ricky strongly assured her. "We didn't manipulate anything. We were very stringent about that."

"Good," Mrs. Vaughn replied.

On Sunday morning, Ricky was surprised to see Justin and his little sister at the early church service. Ricky had seen Marianne a few times at Justin's house, but had never really spoken with her, other than quick hellos and goodbyes. For some reason, in seeing them, she suddenly felt more nervous even than when she had introduced her film for the first time. After the service, though she tried to act casual, Ricky ended up a little flustered in greeting them. Nine-year-old Marianne turned out to be rather shy, which actually helped calm Ricky's nerves as they chatted. "Our dad is working out of town this weekend," Marianne said quietly, "but he and my mom both are planning to come to church with us next weekend."

Quickly feeling more comfortable, Ricky attempted to draw Marianne out of her shell by introducing her to a few girls her own age. A short while later, Justin and Ricky were pleased to see her happily troop outside with a couple of her new friends.

Chapter Eleven

What a Hullabaloo

Sitting in the stadium at graduation and waiting to be called to receive her diploma, Ricky found herself thinking of all the things that had happened in just the last two weeks, since the first round of showings of *The Wishbone Miracle*. The online viewing of the snippets had become huge, and people were clamoring to know where they could see the whole film, or buy the DVD.

Art had a list of churches from all over the state who wanted to show the film, with many offering to pay to do so. The owner of a drive-in theater in a neighboring town had requested to show the film five weekends in the summer, with an offer of giving twenty percent of the ticket sales to Ricky. Art had wisely negotiated a percentage of the concession sales too. He had also had many more t-shirts and pins made up, with the pins now also being for sale.

Eight showings had already happened in neighboring towns at places such as community centers and libraries with large meeting facilities. A large hotel with an attached convention center had sponsored one of the showings. Art had organized the selling of concessions at each of these places, which had generated a good deal of profit. Even with paying people to run the stands, they were making a hefty profit, more than Ricky would have ever imagined. But this was what Art was good at. And he got very creative, coming up with clever names and shapes of the foods to fit with the theme of the film. Some of his biggest sellers were Steebina's Daffodil Cookies, Wishbone Cloud Cotton Candy, Horseshoe Pretzels, Missing Cherub Pool Pickles, and Spider Writing Funnel Cakes.

At the showings she was able to attend, Ricky was thrilled with the enthusiasm and cleverness of the many audience members who decided to actively participate in her film; and she found herself keeping journal notes of some of the wittier ad-libs and antics.

Ricky had been interviewed by a reporter for a large newspaper. In describing her film she told him, “God is everywhere, all around us, looking after us, guiding us, giving us direction, inspiration, and hope. But we often ignore Him, or deny Him, or just don’t notice Him. If we just look around, and open our hearts and minds, we can see Him.”

“If people are still skeptical after seeing the film,” the reporter asked, “what would you tell them?”

“I would tell them to look for things on their own, if they don’t believe in the things that I found. And if there’s the slightest chance it could all be true, why not investigate? What would someone have to lose by looking into it? They would have much, *much* more to gain,” she said firmly.

Ricky had been very nervous about the interview, mainly because she didn’t particularly trust the media, especially reporters who often seemed to want to sensationalize things, find scandal, or incite people with their stories. And since this was a religious film, and news articles often seemed to criticize religious people and their ideals, she was particularly worried that her film would be presented as the work of a fanatic. She also, always, had in the back of her mind that people would say the whole thing was faked, since there were so many clever computer ways to manipulate things these days.

Surprisingly, the article didn’t attack or criticize. And Ricky’s words in print ended up being exactly what she said, not some slant of the conversation. As it turns out, the reporter had seen her film, the whole thing, and had loved it.

Again thinking back as she waited to graduate, Ricky realized there had been no objection at all to the showings at the

school, at least, none that she had heard of; and it surprised her that no one had made a fuss over it.

With Ricky's go-ahead, Art had had discussions with executives from two of the Christian television networks. Ricky and Art had originally hoped to have it aired on one of the networks either for free or at a very low cost to generate interest in people purchasing DVD copies and items such as t-shirts and coffee mugs. But with the growing interest and the opportunities, Art basically felt this was a good chance to make money for the church and for the four filmmakers. And since two networks were involved, competition for the rights to air the film naturally arose, naturally fostered by Art and his expert skills. He was truly an incredible salesman, and Ricky had to admit it was great to have him on her team.

Smiling, Ricky closed her eyes and folded her hands in prayer to thank God for the blessing of Art, and for the blessing of Mr. Burton, a member of her church who was an attorney specializing in media and intellectual property. As part of his tithe to the church, Mr. Burton often donated his time and expertise in assisting the church with legal matters. With the church getting half of the proceeds from her film, impressed by Ricky's generosity, he offered free legal services to her personally to help protect her interests as well as those of the church. She had gladly accepted because she definitely needed help, particularly with complex matters such as how to arrange for the money owed to Art, Justin, Hannah, and the church to officially be paid to them. Ricky also thanked God for Mrs. Harrison, the church accountant, who had offered to advise Ricky, Art, Justin, and Hannah on the rules for paying taxes on their earnings, so they wouldn't end up in trouble with the IRS and owing back taxes and penalties.

One of the two networks wanted exclusive rights to the film long term, so they ended up going with the other network, even though the money was less. With Mr. Burton's expertise, the contract did a good job of protecting Ricky's interests. The

network obtained the exclusive right to air her film three times within a ninety-day period, with an option to expand to three more showings in the ninety days following if they paid for the option within a certain timeline. No editing would be allowed, so as not to harm the artistic integrity of Ricky's work. The network could sell DVDs only during the six-month period of the contract, with Ricky getting royalties, and with all rights for these sales reverting back to her at the end of six months so that she could either negotiate again with the network or expand her channels for the sales of DVDs, whatever she wanted to do at that time.

The rights to sell t-shirts, coffee mugs, jigsaw puzzles, etc. would all stay in Ricky's hands for the time being, and she could make full use of these rights throughout the duration of the contract. Art and Justin were already setting up a *Wishbone Miracle* website which, in the future, would include links to purchase merchandise listed with large online retailers. They had decided this was the best way to handle the volume of sales, since all of them would likely soon be heading off to college and wouldn't have time to run a retail website themselves. The development of most of these products would also be left to others with expertise in this type of merchandise. Sharing profits didn't seem like a bad idea to save them time and headaches, and to take the most advantage of the many avenues of expansion, which would ensure the greatest chance of success. Even Art, with his love for profits, thought that putting things related to sales into the hands of experts was the best way to do business.

Her mind focused on Art, Ricky smiled at one of their most recent conversations, the subject of which was *typical* Art.

"But it's going to be a lot more money than you thought," he had started off saying. "You only need to tithe ten percent to the church. That's what's standard. Fifty percent is excessive. If you take it down to ten percent, our part will be much larger and we'll all have more money for college."

Ricky had stayed calm when responding. “When I first started this, I made a commitment to God for half of everything made to go to the church. What if that’s the reason this has been successful? What if the money ends up being really important to the church? What if without it, they can’t feed hungry people? Or send coats to cold places? Only half of this is ours because I believe God is making this possible. He will have what I promised Him.” After a brief pause, she added. “There’s a place in the bible that says to pay what you vow to God and not to delay in paying a vow.”

Art quickly responded, “That’s in Ecclesiastes, Chapter 5, I think. ‘When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.’”

“How do you do that?” Ricky said, again amazed at his knowledge of bible verse.

“I read the bible a lot,” Art replied. “And, believe it or not, I tithe ten percent of everything I make.”

“I do believe it,” Ricky replied.

“So I just wanted to run this by you,” Art said. “And I originally didn’t think of it as being a vow, just earnings. Now I understand, and I agree with you. Plus, it’s not the money rolling in that I find satisfying about all of this. It’s setting up the things that make it possible for the money to roll in—those things are the most fun.”

As she finished musing about her money conversation with Art, Ricky noticed Melanie, who had been sitting two rows in front of her, rise with the others in her row to make their way to the graduation platform.

One of the best things to come of her film was a long conversation with Melanie during which Ricky had managed to share the story of what had happened when she was fifteen, how she had been in a very dangerous situation and how God had saved her.

Ricky was tearful and shaky when describing what had happened. After getting out most of the details, she added, “When I was younger I used to freeze up when I got panicked.” (Ricky was remembering a time when she was ten when Thomas broke his arm falling from a tree, and she found she couldn’t react. She had just stood there, dazed, until their mother came running out of the house.) “But even though I was shaky afterwards,” she told Melanie, “I wasn’t panicky at the time. I think God sent an angel to calm me down and help me think. But I wonder if maybe I wasn’t given the ability at the time to recognize exactly how much danger I might be in, so that I wouldn’t panic and would be able to figure out what to do to get to a safer place.” After a moment of contemplation, Ricky added, “I also usually have my head in the clouds and don’t always notice things like I should. But for once, I was able to stop daydreaming about flower rabbits and talking centipedes, and notice what was going on around me, so I was able to recognize the danger in the first place. In looking back, I’m just so thankful God was looking after me, and I’m sure He was.”

“I believe you,” Melanie had replied, while giving Ricky a hug.

Watching Hannah get her diploma, Ricky started thinking about going away to college and seeing her friends less often; and this set her mind awhirl on all of the decisions she would soon need to make about college and careers.

The problem had actually gotten more complex and more confusing in the last couple of weeks because Ricky had received several job offers, which astounded her. For having not even set one foot in college yet, she was being offered real, paying jobs.

Her own church had offered her the job of Youth Media Director working with both the Youth Programs Director and the Music Director, with the goal of better expanding their children’s programs. They agreed to work with Ricky on her

college plans, but this would limit her education options to basically two nearby colleges, and Ricky wasn't sure she wanted that.

Through her Peer Talks connections, she had also received an offer from a large church for a full scholarship to their sponsored seminary, if she agreed to become a minister for their church. She would have an opportunity to travel several months of the year for missionary work, because the ministers of the church did rotation for that. The church had assured her that they would be very flexible, so that she could also continue to make films, if she wanted to.

For the upcoming summer, Ricky had received an offer to be the Assistant Director at one of the summer camps she had visited the previous year. The temporary job of nine weeks was very tempting. Not only would the experience look good on a resume, she would be able to make more money than working at the grocery store.

Justin too had been receiving offers. Marcus had asked him to film his band's next music video. And the Christian network that they had not selected to air *The Wishbone Miracle* was so impressed with Justin's work they offered him a fulltime job as a camera operator. He could always do online college, but then he would miss having a traditional college experience. However, this was not his only reason for declining. Shortly after he got the offer, he spoke to Ricky privately.

"I've been kind of waiting to find out what you are planning to do for college, so I can make my plans too," he told her, somewhat nervously. "I think we make a good team, and I want to continue to partner up with you so we can do more good things in the future."

"I'd like that too," Ricky replied, giving him a hug. She definitely wanted to take Justin into account when making her decisions. He was her best friend in the world. But aside from that, she sometimes found herself wondering if it could possibly be something more than that someday.

“I’ve narrowed my choices down to either Business Management or Hospital Administration,” Justin added, “and I can do either at any of the colleges you’re looking into.”

“I’m still working it all out in my brain, but I promise to make the decision soon, so we don’t miss any of the deadlines,” Ricky assured him.

Rising with her row to head to the platform, Ricky thought how similar the career situation was to film editing. Just as it was better to have too much footage to work with than too little, it was far better to have too many career options than too few. With so much to think about in the next few weeks, Ricky decided to put everything to do with college and future jobs out of her mind in order to enjoy the rest of the ceremony and the graduation party she was going to afterwards at her church.

Chapter Twelve

A Thousand Wishbones

Two days before school ended, which was the final day of school for seniors because they were allowed to skip the actual last day, Mrs. Vaughn asked Ricky to stay after class again.

Ricky had forgotten that her teacher had asked to look at “The Wishbone Miracle” story again. “I made a photocopy of one paragraph of it,” Mrs. Vaughn began, “and I sent it to a friend of mine out of state who is a handwriting expert. I’ve done this a few other times to get his impression of the writers. One time I sent him a sample from each of two brothers. What he told me was that one was musically inclined and the other was a math whiz. He was dead on in his analyses, and he’s been right most other times too. By the way,” she added, “I made sure the page I sent didn’t have your name on it, or even the title of the story. And that particular paragraph didn’t have anything about the pocket watch or the wishbone, so even if he had heard about your film, I don’t think he would have connected it to the writing sample. Anyway, I wanted to let you know his conclusion about your handwriting.”

With this, Mrs. Vaughn handed Ricky the paragraph she had sent to her friend. Stapled to the top of the page was a small sheet of pale blue stationery containing four words in fancy cursive: *Written by an angel.*

“This, along with seeing your film,” Mrs. Vaughn told her, “has definitely made me want to investigate more.”

Ricky smiled as she replied, “I’m not an angel, but maybe an angel helped write the story. In which case, I wish I had done a better job. The angel was probably pretty disappointed with the C.”

After their conversation, Ricky was more determined than ever to revise the story.

During the first weekend of summer, Ricky's youth group held a picnic on Saturday afternoon in a grassy area near the playground of the church. Ricky was sitting on a blanket with Art, Hannah, and Justin as they watched toddlers playing in the distance on the monkey bars and slide.

Ricky had been doing a little thinking about her project and the success of it, and it made her feel a little guilty. "What if someone else made something like this," she told her friends, "but that person doesn't have a big cheering section like I do? It doesn't seem fair."

Art chimed in with an answer right away. "God set up your cheering section. He would do it for another worthy person too, no matter what their circumstances, whether they have friends ready to help out or not. He would send them a smooth-talking, superstar salesman, just like me," he added with a laugh. "Remember... He is the magic of the world."

Marcus was sitting with friends on a blanket nearby and overheard the last part of what Art was saying. "Can I use that in one of my songs?" he called to Art. "'He is the magic of the world.' I really like it."

"Perfectly fine by me," Art replied. "But if it sells a million copies... (Ricky was sure Art was going to demand a cut, but she was in for a big surprise.) ...I want you to promise that you will give half of the proceeds to charity."

Smiling, Marcus agreed.

The next day at church, Art told Ricky that Marcus had talked to him after the picnic and had asked him to help manage and promote his band over the summer.

Art felt a little uncomfortable talking to Ricky about this. "I'll still be able to work on more stuff for *The Wishbone Miracle*, and I plan to be available to help you with future projects too. But I thought I might like to expand a little."

“Of course you should expand,” Ricky encouraged. “God gave you such a wonderful gift, you should spread it around. And since I have no idea what my next project might be, you shouldn’t just wait around. But I can assure you,” she added earnestly, “if I ever need an official manager or an agent, you’ll be the first person I’ll ask. Of course, by then, you might be too busy managing famous people, because you will certainly be in demand.”

“I’ll never be too busy for you,” he told Ricky, giving her a happy bear hug. “And I like the idea of being a personal manager, or an agent.”

“Those would be perfect fits for you, as far as careers,” Ricky answered.

Ricky had been thinking about doing another project; but so far, no brilliant ideas had come to mind. She had continued filming things even after completing *The Wishbone Miracle*. So far, she had some beautiful evening footage, taken in the nature preserve near her home, of swarms of fireflies engaged in synchronous flashing. And she had stopped at a field one morning on the way to work to get footage of raindrops on the grass that were giving off colorful glints like jewels in the slanting sunshine. As far as she was concerned, these things were further proof of God, who was, among other things, such an Amazing Artist. In fact, she was convinced that nature was one of the ways in which God was allowing people to see something of His character. And although clever people had worked out some of the intricacies involved in nature, such as why monarch caterpillars eat poisonous milkweed plants, some details were still a mystery, like why and how the same families of monarch butterflies, generations later, end up in exactly the same places upon completing their epic yearly migration. Ricky felt this was truly part of the nature of God. Some things He would allow and even help human beings to understand; but some things must always remain a mystery, likely for our own good.

On Tuesday afternoon, Ricky somewhat nervously drove to church because her pastor had asked to meet with her. She was nervous because Pastor Arnold's assistant, who had scheduled the meeting, hadn't said why he wanted to talk to her.

"Sit down, sit down," Pastor Arnold urged, as he led her into his office. Plopping down in his own chair, he said, "The money is already starting to come in from your film; and since it looks like it's going to be quite a lot, I wanted to ask for your input as to how the church might spend it."

Ricky was relieved that this was what the meeting was about, and she felt very flattered that he wanted her ideas.

Since she was taking a long pause, Pastor Arnold started with a few of his own suggestions. "We had already made plans to start a school and a weekday daycare. Using some of the money, we could get those programs off the ground sooner than we planned. Once started, they usually become self sustaining from fees and sometimes from donations, so they shouldn't need additional funding in the future. I had also thought we might supplement what's going on with our missionary work."

Heartily agreeing with his ideas, Ricky smiled and nodded.

When she still didn't say anything, Pastor Arnold prompted again. "But we think there's going to be enough money to do even more, which is why I wanted to hear from you."

After thinking for a few moments, Ricky was finally able to find her voice. "How about a few more trees; there's plenty of room for more in the church acreage. And maybe we can start a community garden so more people can grow healthy foods."

Ricky was almost hesitant to bring up the idea that had first popped into her brain. Taking a deep breath, she decided to take the plunge. "Can we either send as many kids as possible to Christian summer camps, or help fund struggling Christian summer camps, or possibly build a camp associated with the church?" On a roll, she rushed to continue. "I had such fun

going to camp, and it's so good for kids, but I know a lot of kids don't get to go because of the expense."

Pastor Arnold was smiling broadly. Sitting back and swiveling in his chair, he said, "It's funny you should mention this because we just had eighty-seven acres of land donated to the church from an estate. The property borders public land, so the area for camp activities would be even larger than the donated property. I think it's a wonderful idea. We will start looking into it; and depending on the income from your film, we'll start planning for it. There are a few buildings on the property already, so we won't totally be starting from scratch." After a few moments of smiling and nodding in a contented manner, Pastor Arnold added, "Now, I don't want you to get too excited, because the final decision hasn't been made yet, but I think Camp Halo would be a good name for this endeavor."

Thrilled, Ricky's reaction mirrored the happy and contented smiling and nodding of her pastor, though probably about ten times magnified.

"And I know you were offered the Youth Media Director position," Pastor Arnold continued, "but I think Camp Director might be an even better fit for you, especially while you are going to college, since the most time-consuming activities would be during the summers. You could still coordinate with the Youth Media Director, if you wanted to, to do films and books." Rising from his chair, he added, "Just something for you to think about; no hurry in deciding."

With Camp Director now added to the mix, Ricky was again speechless as she contemplated her many career options. She gave only a slight nod in response to Pastor Arnold's expectant expression.

Thinking the meeting was done, Ricky rose to shake hands with her pastor. But before letting her go, he said, "By the way, the church is getting a lot of mail for you." As he showed her three enormous stacks of letters, Ricky was overwhelmed and became flustered. "The church would be more than happy to

handle it for you,” he continued. “We can get a few of the youth group volunteers to screen it, and we can set up a mailbox for you in the office for anything the screeners think should be passed on right away. And we can reserve everything else for whenever you feel like looking through it.” Ricky had never even thought about mail. She was plenty happy to have someone else handle it, for the time being.

At home in the evening, with Thomas away at a friend’s house for a sleepover, Ricky had a quiet dinner with her parents. As they were eating, she asked their advice on donating some of her earnings to the two kids at church that she had observed finding money during the tree-planting event. “I’m still planning to work while in school to help pay my way, and we’re getting a head start on saving up for college for Thomas,” she told her parents. Ricky was careful not to tell her parents about Mr. Schulenburg’s actions; instead, she simply said, “We’re so very blessed, I was hoping we could direct some of my share of the film money to a fund for them, for their college.”

“That’s so sweet of you,” her mother replied.

“But I don’t know exactly how to do it,” Ricky answered. “I want it to be completely anonymous. I just read in the bible, Matthew 6:3-4, about not advertising good deeds. ‘But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’” (Taking inspiration from Art, Ricky was trying to get better at memorizing bible verses.)

“Mr. Burton could probably set that up for you,” her father suggested. “He’s been so helpful already, he probably won’t mind. And even if you have to pay some legal fees for his time and the paperwork, it would be for something worthwhile.”

Ricky hadn’t thought of this. “That’s a good idea,” she said. “And I’ll ask him to put the money in a fund for education

in general, in case they'd rather go to a trade school instead of a regular college."

After swearing her parents to secrecy, she added, "And please, don't tell Thomas. He's such a blabbermouth sometimes, and I don't want him to give me away."

Because Ricky was doing something good, her mother didn't scold her about criticizing her little brother, as she might have on another occasion.

With school ended, Ricky had been putting in most of her work hours on weekdays, and she was thrilled to have all of Saturday free, the start to a wonderful, leisurely weekend.

Except for helping her mother make bread, she spent most of the day reading.

Mr. Halo had left early, taking Thomas, to go to the farm where he usually went hunting. The farmer, Mr. Bentwood, had recently hurt his foot, and they were planning to help with chores on weekends until he healed. When they returned in the late afternoon, Thomas was bubbling with excitement. He was going to get to have a summer garden, and they had fenced the area in the morning to keep the deer and rabbits out. "It's a fifteen-by-twenty plot," he told Ricky in an animated tone. "That's plenty big enough for our family. We'll till and plant most of it next weekend."

Ricky's father had a surprise for her—eleven turkey wishbones from the farmer's wife who had been saving them from dinners she prepared once a week for a local homeless shelter. "Mrs. Bentwood said she wanted you to have them," her father told her. "She said she hopes to hear about you in connection with more miracles in the future."

Speechless as she accepted them, Ricky carefully carried the treasure to her room where she placed the wishbones amongst tissue paper in an old cookie tin. Michael had naturally wanted to keep the wishbone associated with his healing miracle. Ricky had been fine with this, especially since she still had her original wishbone at home in her keepsake box.

She had planned to save it, in the exact hopes that God would use it in some way for something miraculous. Now, with twelve wishbones, she felt almost unstoppable, as though the possibilities were almost endless as far as future miracles. *Maybe that could be my profession*, she mused, *Miracle Hunter*. *I wonder what you study in college to achieve that.*

On Monday, after returning home from working all morning and having an afternoon meeting with Mr. Burton, Ricky was met by her mother at the front door with a surprise. The local newspaper had published Ricky's tale of "The Story Quilt" in conjunction with covering a Quilting Exhibition at the local Civic Center. The story was about an orphan girl who carried her grandmother's quilt around with her for twenty years, and the story the quilt told in its patches eventually helped her find other members of her family such as cousins and uncles.

Since she had not had much of her creative work in print in anything other than church-related publications, Ricky was so pleased. She had sent one of her *Thistledown Ridge* stories to a children's magazine, but had received a rejection slip about the size of the paper fortune from a fortune cookie. After this, she had pretty much decided not to waste money on postage. But an editor of a newspaper in a neighboring town, whose Sunday edition included a large children's section, had noticed one of her *Thistledown Ridge* stories in the church youth paper and had asked to publish it as a serial. Three of the nine stories she had sent them had come out so far. And the same editor had expressed an interest in printing "The Wishbone Miracle" story too when she finished revising it. It seemed all kinds of good things were happening all at once, like a flood of them.

Accepting an invitation from Michael and Mrs. Birtwhistle, Ricky paid a visit to the mansion on Tuesday afternoon. She was thrilled to see the pocket watch and broken wishbone, framed in a small collectible glass case, displayed prominently in the foyer.

Michael was thrilled to tell Ricky that, thanks to the publicity of the miracle, the Saddlebag Mysteries were once again taking off. The mansion was no longer being called the Mystery Mansion but was being called the Miracle Mansion instead. Michael had been holding bible study there and was planning to give the Saddlebag Mysteries a Christian theme. "I'm already taking reservations for weekends in July and August," he told Ricky.

However, telling her the good news wasn't the only reason for inviting her to the mansion, and Ricky was completely surprised when Mrs. Birtwhistle showed her four large boxes of wishbones that had arrived c/o the mansion but specifically addressed to Ricky Halo.

"They are from two large hospitals in another state," Mrs. Birtwhistle said, handing Ricky a note that had come with the boxes. "They evidently heard about the medical miracle and set out to collect wishbones for you, as tools to use when asking God to perform more miracles. And they hope and pray that He'll send some of those miracles their way."

"I guess since the mansion has a business address, they thought it was best to send them here," Michael said, adding, "I counted one of the boxes and I think, altogether, you probably have about a thousand wishbones."

"I don't even know what to say," said a still-astounded Ricky.

"We can keep them for awhile for you, until you decide what you want to do with them," Michael offered. "There's plenty of storage room here at the mansion."

Ricky gladly agreed since, at this point, she had no idea what she might want to do with a thousand wishbones.

On Wednesday morning, Ricky received a call from Bonnie Phillips, a mother of one of the children Ricky often watched in the church daycare. Apparently, one of Bonnie's college roommates had become a Christian book publisher and was interested in having a look at some of Ricky's work. "I

told my friend about you,” Bonnie began, “because Amanda can never stop talking about Tinsnip; and we’ve read *Flower Rabbit* to her so many times she sits with it in her lap and recites the whole book from memory, pretending to read. Anyway, her name is Megan Snow, and she said you can either just email her some files, or call her, or both.”

After receiving the contact information, Ricky did indeed both call Megan and send files by email. In addition to several *Tinsnip* stories, she sent *The Horse Who Climbed Stairs* and *Ribbon Rabbit*. Megan was particularly interested in developing interactive books, which was turning out to be Ricky’s forte, so the possible partnership seemed promising.

Art called Ricky on Wednesday afternoon to tell her that she was scheduled to appear the following Wednesday on a talk show on the Christian network that was going to show *The Wishbone Miracle*. It needed to be that soon because they planned to air the film the first time the following week. Art also told her that an executive from the network wanted to meet with her afterwards to discuss the possibility of Ricky working full time for them, making films specifically for their network.

Ricky was relieved to have a full week to arrange for time off work and to make travel plans. Upon discovering that the studio was actually less than three hundred miles from her home, Ricky thought she would probably drive, instead of flying, particularly since airports were so difficult to navigate these days. For all of the time people spent waiting at airports, she felt she might actually get there more quickly by driving. Calling Hannah to report the news, Ricky was thrilled when Hannah offered to go with her and split the cost of a hotel room. Since the taping of the show was in the afternoon, staying the night was a good idea, so the girls wouldn’t have to drive back in the dark. The pair thought they might sightsee some the next morning before coming home.

After finishing her talk with Hannah, Ricky took a deep breath and prayed for awhile; then she went outside to kick a

soccer ball around with Thomas before dinner. As she played, Ricky thought about the events of the week so far. She had been right about the good-things flood; it seemed there was no end to it. And with everything that had happened just in a few short weeks, since the first showing of her film, what might happen in a year? It was staggering to think of the possibilities.

Ricky was in for yet another surprise on Thursday when one of the church secretaries called to give her the contact information of another publisher who wanted to talk to her about writing a book to correspond to her film, so she could tell the story of her journey in making it. With this latest query, it was starting to look as though being a writer, which was one of Ricky's original career ideas, was going to be a real, viable option. *Since the writing thing seems to be coming at me hard and heavy*, Ricky pondered, *why does being a teacher still sound so appealing?*

On Friday, Ricky woke up early, very determined. After praying and reading the bible, she resolved to set a firm deadline of one week to make a final decision about college. She didn't want to hold Justin up on making his own plans, and that date was still two weeks before the first college deadlines.

As the decision still weighed on her, Ricky did so envy Thomas. Because he was so good at drawing, he was dead set on studying art in college, and he already had a pretty good idea as to where he wanted to go to school. He had been talking about it for over a year, and it looked as though the decision was probably going to stick.

If Ricky decided to accept the seminary scholarship to become a minster, the decision of where to go to school would already be made for her. But if she decided to do something else, even if she started as an Undecided Major, it was still difficult to figure out where to go to school. The immediate job offers were tempting too, which would put a totally different spin on things because she might not end up *going* anywhere at all. Though she had declined the Assistant Director position at

the camp, opting to stay close to home for the summer, if she decided to accept either the Youth Media Director position or the Camp Director position at her church, she would probably live at home while attending school somewhere nearby. And if she went with the network's offer of making films, she would likely end up doing online college, while still living at home, for the most part because, even though filmmaking would likely necessitate travel, she would still need a home base. Likewise, if she focused on writing children's books, she would probably pick a school nearby and still live at home.

No matter how much she thought about the choices, nothing jumped out at her as seeming more right than anything else; and thinking about the problem never seemed to get any easier because the choices were considerably more now than what she had already been puzzling over for the last year or so. *This is even more confusing than what to do with a thousand wishbones*, Ricky thought. She wanted to make the best possible decision because she knew it would have a great impact on her future. Prayer was the immediate answer to her dilemma because it helped to calm her.

After praying, Ricky calmly marked the one-week deadline on her calendar.

Late in the morning, Ricky was in her room getting organized for an outing the next day. Hannah had planned another trip to the horse farm, and they were going to actually get to ride the horses this time. Justin and Art would be going too, and Hannah had provided everyone with instructions and a list of things to bring.

"You have to wear shoes with a sturdy heel," Hannah had told Ricky firmly. "If you don't have shoes like that you'll have to borrow something because it's not safe to put your foot into a stirrup without a good heel. I told the guys too. No tennis shoes. They have to have a heel like on a work boot or a cowboy boot. And no shorts," she added. "You can't ride a horse in shorts; that's just silly. You have to protect your legs."

Smiling at Hannah's fastidiousness, Ricky consulted the list she had been given and packed sunscreen, bug spray, and two bottles of water. They were also taking food. Though Uncle John was going to feed them, according to Hannah, they were to bring drinks and snacks. Ricky and Justin were both also bringing their cameras, of course.

With things duly organized, Ricky read the bible and again prayed. *Dear Lord, Please help me continue to trust in Your plan for me. Please continue to guide me and help me to follow. And please help me make a good decision about my future that is truly in accordance with Your will. In Your name I pray, Amen.*

Just before lunchtime, Ricky was surprised when the postman rang the doorbell and handed her a package addressed to her. The box was approximately the shape and size of an ordinary shoebox, but was slightly wider, which is why it hadn't fit in the mailbox.

With no one else around at the moment, the house was quiet (almost eerily so) as Ricky opened the package. Staring at the object inside, she felt an instant flood of relief, as though someone had washed out her insides with contented feelings and pleasant thoughts, and had turned on a light in a dark room in which she had been stumbling around for quite some time.

God had answered her prayer. This was just the thing she was looking for to help her decide what to do.

Ricky smiled and took a deep breath, the first deep and peaceful breath she had taken in many weeks. After a short prayer of thanks to God, Ricky breathed a huge sigh of happiness. She wouldn't have to make Justin wait a week. She could tell him her plans right away. And she was sure she had made the right decision.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. What dangerous situation might Ricky have been saved from? Has anything like that ever happened to you?
2. Ricky prayed regularly, but especially when hurt or troubled. When and how often should we pray?
3. Though it may have seemed like something small, in writing the short story, Ricky's original good intentions were what propelled her on toward a much greater and more glorious outcome. What are some things we can do that might seem small, but which might lead to something with a great impact?
4. Have you ever found your powers of forgiveness tested? When the words or actions of others hurt us, what can help us fully forgive and move on?
5. What was in the box, and what did it mean to Ricky's decision?
6. Have you ever witnessed anything so remarkable or magical, you were sure it came directly from God? If yes, please share the experience.



About the Author

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