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# The straight and narrow: a novella

Rebekah Bovenmyer  
*Iowa State University*

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**The straight and narrow: a novella**

by

**Rebekah Bovenmyer**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Program of Study Committee:  
Mary Swander, Major Professor  
Margaret LaWare  
Constance Post

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2008

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## **Abstract**

Mallory is a young woman who's given her life to her local church, but she finds herself struggling to live up to the group's expectations. When her life doesn't go as planned, she has to decide whether to stay on the straight and narrow or find her own way.

“Is it what I want or what God wants?” Mallory asked, snapping a gnarled twig off a tree covering the dirt path.

“You’ve talked to Rock, haven’t you?” Tim replied, swiveling his head to look back at her.

She watched Tim’s back as he navigated the narrow path, stepping around branches and rocks in the way, the half-set June sun glinting off his dusty-brown hair. “Of course! He’s the one who suggested it in the first place,” she paused, pushed her frizzy brown hair behind her ears. Had she been proud or angry in what she’d just said? *As if Rock had begged me to join the staff of the church*, she rebuked herself. *I’m sorry, Jesus*, she confessed. *Help me to be humble and not self-seeking.*

“So, what’s holding you back?” he asked, rounding a corner.

She spoke slower and quieter, her voice just above the humming and buzzing of the woods, “Of course, there’s nothing else I’d rather do. But I’m not, you know, the most outgoing person. Wouldn’t someone else be better?” She ducked around the bend. The trees cleared, and Tim was a few feet ahead of her, waiting briefly and then walking toward a bench overlooking the ledge. The moon was rising behind her. She looked eye-to-eye to the sun.

“Here, we’re almost there.” The sun and moon disappeared behind the sandstone cliffs, sharp and sturdy. Wave after wave of green shoots of corn surrounded the cliffs in the distance.

“Not that you’re Moses or anything, but that’s what Moses said when God told him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Mallory. That’s why it’s called faith.”

“It’s just such a big job, that’s all, planning outreaches, mentoring college girls, not to mention the support-raising!” She remembered the fundraisers for her high school band trip her senior year. She remembered knocking on a few doors, sweating, and then giving her prepared

speech so fast the homeowners had to ask her to say it over again before they turned her away. She'd spent most of her babysitting money on oranges for the fundraiser her senior year—just so she wouldn't look like she hadn't tried. Alex had spent his lawn-mowing money. She smiled remembering the “buyers” they'd made up on their sheets.

Plus, she was already struggling financially. Luckily, her dad had paid for college, but she struggled to come up with the enough to cover her living expenses—odd jobs during the school year, trying to work enough in the summer to cover the rest of the year. She'd worked a part-time job for awhile, but she eventually had to quit because she didn't have enough time for that, church, and school.

“That's why you trust that God's in control—not you and that he'll use you. If the counsel you're getting from Rock and from other godly leaders is to go on staff, then you should.” He paused, “It's a little something called submission,” he said, raising an eyebrow and smiling.

“I know that,” she laughed but felt a pang of guilt. *Am I being rebellious? Has God shown me his plan, and I'm just being stubborn?* She wasn't sure.

These last four years had seemed like a series of life-changing decisions. It never seemed to get any easier to know exactly what God wanted her to do. When she'd changed her major from music to history, she'd struggled, too. She knew her parents wouldn't understand (but when did they?) and that she'd miss playing the piano. At least she was still playing in the church's worship band, and it was a great hobby. The women in her small group had been proud of her. Her roommate Nina had originally come to college for graphic design but had changed to elementary education because it had taken too much time away from church. One minute she

was heading in one direction, and the next, she found herself on a completely different path going somewhere new. Who knew what could happen next?

Mallory had known that if she wanted to really devote her life to Christ, she needed to give him her time. After she'd switched her major, it had been a relief to not to be stressed about squeezing in piano practicing and to be free to focus on church outreaches and church meetings. In the long run, what was more important? Her own pleasure or other people's salvation? Everyone had been so happy that she could be more involved. She only had one life, after all, and she wanted to spend it perfectly in line with God's plan, not wandering through the brush and lost in the woods.

"Hey, how did you find this place?" she asked, surrounded by the pinks and oranges of the sunset.

"Here, look down."

She craned her neck over the edge, her feet crunching the white rocks beneath. Half-lit shadows played around the firelight, the smoke curling and flying to the breeze before it could reach her. Below, her friends laughed, a small group circled around a guitarist strumming. She knew as the darkness came the songs would slow, and they would sing songs in unison. She breathed it in and thanked God for the life he had given her. She couldn't even imagine where she would be if God hadn't taken hold of her life. It was as if she had been on the edge of a great cliff, and God had swept her up right before she walked off.

She remembered that day she had been saved. Mallory had sat in a cold folding chair next to Nina and Lena under a canvas tent at a retreat center outside of Camden on a Friday night. The slapping of the rain against the tent had emphasized Rock's words to the hundred college students gathered from his churches in the Midwest.

Mallory had imagined a broken and bloody Jesus looking at her from the cross when Rock had said, "Jesus loves you! Think about that. The God of the universe came down from his throne, became man, and let himself be tortured and slain for your sins. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine the kind of love that willingly sacrifices itself for you? And what did you do to deserve it? What did I do? Nothing. Nothing."

She had gone almost numb thinking that her mere existence had required this sacrifice, to imagine that someone could love her so much to die for her. She had leaned forward in the metal folding chair, her hands clasped, spellbound.

Mallory remembered chairs scraping the dirt and rattling as pockets of students all over the room rose to their feet, some crying when Rock said, "Now, if you agree with this prayer, if you want to live your life for God, to serve him, to be his child, if you're ready to give him the reigns of your life and your heart, if you say, yes, Lord Jesus, I give you my life, then please stand up."

She had looked up from her clenched hands. Next to her Nina had already stood up, her hands in the air, eyes closed, head lifted. Mallory had gulped down tears, stood, and raised a timid hand to heaven, feeling the energy of the room, like electricity, pass through her. For ten minutes, twenty minutes, another thirty minutes the crowd stood and raised their hands and faces to the sky. Mallory had prayed, "I'm sorry, Jesus. I'm sorry. I believe. I believe." over and over. On stage, the musicians plucked acoustic guitars and sang, "I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you." Some of the students circling together to pray joined in slowly until the whole tent reverberated with their voices.

Nina had put her arm around Mallory, and Lena followed, praying for her new faith to be strengthened and that the Lord's hand would be on her, guiding and blessing her. Mallory



had felt like she was in a haze, the emotions of love and connection to this group so strong. She didn't want it to ever end. She had wanted to stand there with these friends and pray and sing all day. She had given her life to Christ. Where would she be without him?

Mallory turned and stepped away from the edge of the cliff.

"I come up here every year during the campout. I thought you would like it." He smiled, dimples puckering.

She looked at him, his eyes sparkling. They didn't often spend time alone together. When she first joined the church, they had talked a lot. He helped her understand the faith and the church. If she had a problem, she often talked to Tim about it. The summer after joining the church, she had gone with them to a summer-long conference in South Carolina. One night she had been sitting alone on the beach, struggling to write letters to her mother and father explaining her new life to each of them. Tim had sat down next to her and asked if she wanted to talk. They'd talked for hours, walking on the beach. Mallory remembered sitting on a washed-up log on the beach after a long walk, the clear, bright stars, gently crashing waves, breathing in the warm, salty air. She remembered the way her voice had shaken and sputtered as she told him about Jonathon's death, then how he had put his arm around her saying he was her brother now.

They hadn't gotten many more chances to be alone over the years. She knew they weren't supposed to spend time together by themselves, but she'd never lost that connection with him. He was often in her dreams, putting an arm around her or kissing her. She would wake up aching for him. Tonight she couldn't resist when he asked if she wanted to go on a walk. Now, sitting alone with him again she imagined Tim telling her he'd asked Rock and the other elders for permission to marry her. She would say how long she'd been waiting for this and that she was sure God was leading her the same way.

They would be cheered, just like Lena and Andy had been a few months ago on a cold Friday night at their Alive! outreach service. Andy had whooped “We’re getting married!” prancing toward the front with Lena behind. Mallory, with the rest, had clapped and laughed, feeling the rightness of their union.

“I’ve been so impressed with both of you, with your commitment to Christ and your commitment to purity,” Rock had said, turning toward them. “Andy, you’re a man of God who will lead your family in the ways of the Lord. Lena, you’re a woman of God with a true servant’s heart.” Lena’s cheeks had flushed. “I know God’s going to do great things with both of you—and even more when you’re yoked together, using your family like arrows to reach the world for Christ.” Andy had nodded. “Let’s all pray for their blessing and for God’s continued leading in their lives,” Rock had directed, placing one hand on Andy’s shoulder.

The wedding was mere months later. At the ceremony Lena, wearing a simple white gown she’d borrowed from her sister, told how she’d been interested in Andy for a year. She blushed and giggled when she said she’d tried her hardest to avoid him, not wanting an attraction to him to get in the way of her ministry or her walk with God. She had asked God to take away the feelings she had for Andy. She had just been feeling at peace about not being with him when Andy approached her about considering courting. “When we let go of control of our lives, God has a way of blessing us beyond our wildest dreams!” she had said, eyes shining. Then they’d kissed. Their first.

Mallory watched the fire—the smallest wisps of flame flying up toward her then disappearing in the wind. She tried to snuff out any expectation. That wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. She was supposed to focus on God—not Tim.

She turned from the fire below and sat on the rain-beaten bench, tucking her hands under her thighs, knuckles pressed into the splintered wood. Tim sat down next to her. She could feel his warmth. He was wearing basketball shorts and a t-shirt, the kind of thing he always wore. Even when it got cold he would make a show of wearing shorts and a t-shirt. He rested his hands, slightly bent, on his knees, round and muscular. He had the thick thighs of a wrestler. His nails were bitten low on his fingers. She wanted to lean in and put her head on his shoulder. Instead, she angled her body just slightly closer to feel his warmth. She started to sweat, and she wondered if it would be immodest to take off the heavy cotton sweatshirt she wore over a t-shirt. She didn't move.

“So, what are you thinking?” Tim asked, his voice low in dusk.

*That you're perfect.* “Um, well,” she stammered, “Do you think I have the right gifting to go on staff?”

“I don't know if I can say what your gifting is, but you have a real servant's heart, you're teachable, you're a good organizer, and, I know Rock could really use some help getting things done behind the scenes.”

Mallory nodded her head. He hadn't said it, but she knew he was thinking she wasn't good at what a lot of the “higher-ups” were: reaching people with the Gospel. She made friends more slowly than a lot of the other leaders in the church. Nina and Lena picked up friends everywhere they went. They were talkative, outgoing, and fun to be around. Mallory wasn't shy, but she struggled to make the first move with strangers. Every night she prayed that God would change her to be more useful to the kingdom of God.

There was a sermon that Rock gave a year ago about the grace and love of God, how God loves her just as she is, that we all have a role in the body of Christ, and it's our job to find

out what that role is. She had wept at that message but still felt inadequate because everyone else around her had the gifts that Rock and the other elders looked for.

“Besides, I think we’d have fun working together.” He folded his hands and leaned over his knees, turning his neck to look at her.

Maybe there was a place for her after all. She was probably just being envious and selfish, wishing for the greater gifts, when hers could still be a great help. They sat until the sun slipped fully behind the cliffs. He talked about his ministry team—the guys he was worried weren’t digging in enough, had too many ties to outside of the church. He talked about the worship team, his plans for the fall. Mallory imagined this was something like what it would feel like to be married to him. She had heard so many leaders talking about how marriage is a ministry partnership. Many had weekly meeting with their wives, discussing the week’s schedule, directing their wives’ priorities. In a way he was leading her now. He clearly wanted her to go on staff and serve the church full-time. How better to prepare for marriage than to practice submitting to her leaders now? Isn’t that what they always preached?

Mallory followed Tim back down to the campsite, barely seeing the trail in front of her, the light from his flashlight blocked by his body. She kept her hands outstretched to feel for any trees or branches covering the trail, trusting that Tim would tell her if a log was blocking their way. The narrow path was so much more dangerous in the dark.

That night cocooned in her sleeping bag, the whispers and giggles of her friends quieting as they fell asleep, a gentle wind whistled through the top of the vinyl tent, and Mallory replayed the conversation over and over in her mind. He hadn’t asked her to court, but she saw their future all the same. *I’m sorry, Lord, for not trusting you and for doubting the plan you have for my life. Help me to not be so self-centered.*

She closed her eyes and breathed “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you.” How true that verse felt tonight. She would be staying with her friends, with her church. She closed her eyes and presented herself to God. She imagined standing before the gold throne and lying down on the high wooden altar in front of it. Compared to other people, she didn’t always feel like much, but it was all she had.

## 2

“But, Mom, you don’t understand,” Mallory said, clutching the phone between her shoulder and ear so she could fold the laundry.

“All I’m saying is, what are you going to do if you can’t find enough people to give you money? It’s charity you’re living on, you realize that, right?” her mother said. Mallory could imagine her mother’s eyes squinting, thinking of her daughter living on other people’s hard-earned money.

“Yes, Mom,” Mallory said, rolling her eyes and trudging up the stairs with her laundry basket squeezed against one hip like a baby.

“I don’t think it’s very smart to trust other people for your monthly income, that’s all. What if something happens, and they can’t afford to keep their donations up?” Mallory heard water and knew her mother was washing dishes, wiry hands plunged into hot water, whisking the dirt away without a wasted movement.

“I don’t know! I’ll do something else, I guess. But I don’t think I have to worry about that. God’s gonna provide for me. He really is. I know you don’t see it, but just trust me, okay?” Mallory tried to keep her voice calm, tried not to yell at her. There was so much her mother didn’t see.

After Mallory's brother Jonathon died fifteen years ago, her mother had sharpened. Her anger was quick and unremorseful. Mallory didn't remember her as being especially patient before Jonathon's death—she was always scolding him to obey and do his chores. But then she would pat his head or hug him after he obeyed, offering a silent apology. His death took her softness with it.

The day he died Mallory, only seven, had been playing under the willow tree in front of the house. That morning, Mallory had stood on a chair next to her at the sink. Her mother washed the white ceramic plates and handed each one to Mallory. She would set the hot plate on the gold-speckled linoleum counter and dry it with the thin, stained dish cloth. She had held onto those dishes so tightly, watching them in her hands like a ball she caught in her glove. After a few dishes her mother had laughed a little and told her to just go and play. She could finish faster without her.

“Go play with your brother. I'm sure he quit helping Pa hours ago,” she'd laughed, her lips thinning slightly.

She had run out of the house, out to the pigs, then to the creek, and finally to the willow tree where she'd spent the hot afternoon shaded by the long feathery branches. She'd fallen asleep in the soft, cool grass. Her father shouting for help woke her. She was awake but couldn't move. She felt cold all over, closed her eyes, and covered her ears. She heard him race into the house and shouting for her mother, then a scream, and then toward the corn crib.

“Well, you can't move back in here if it falls through. I've already turned your room into a sewing room, and I'm not going to turn it back.” The water stopped, and Mallory imagined her standing with one hand on her hip, brown eyes blazing.

She wasn't a child anymore, but the thought of her mother coldly packing away all her old things and stuffing them in the basement filled her with rage. Jonathon's room had become the farm office almost immediately after he died.

"Don't worry! I won't!" she said, punching the off button before her mother could say good bye, throwing the phone in the middle of the bed. The towels and socks, dried for too long, crackled when she pulled them apart. She wrestled the tangled laundry into orderly piles, then shoved the stacks of towels and piles of socks into drawers and closets, slamming the doors as she went.

When her rage was spent, she dropped on the bed. She was supposed to be reaching out to her mother, showing her how Jesus had changed her life, not rolling her eyes, yelling, and slamming the phone down on her. Mallory prayed for forgiveness. She took her journal and well-worn Bible from her bedside table, a gift from Nina at her baptism. It was clear she needed to spend more time in the Word, the way she was acting, especially now that she was going to be a leader.

Downstairs in the cramped kitchen Nina was starting supper for the weekly leaders' meeting at their house. Tim would be there, along with Rock and Cindy and Andy and Lena. The oppressive heat hadn't taken over June yet, so they would be able to keep the air conditioner off and open the screen door in the dining room and feel the summer breeze as they ate.

Nina had shoulder-length raven black hair, thick and shiny. Today she had let it air dry and crunched it in curls that stuck to her red shirt. Nina was curvy with a heart-shaped face and pale skin. Her lips glistened with gloss and her perfume smelled faintly of baby powder. Mallory often found herself watching how Nina dressed and trying to find similar things in her closet. It

never worked out as well. Mallory still felt awkward with her large chest and small frame. Once she had worn a turtleneck on stage at the Sunday service in an attempt to feel pretty and feminine. A pastor rebuked her, saying a man had spoken to him about how her shirt made him stumble. She threw it away and stuck to baggy t-shirts and jeans.

Nina was flipping through a faded and stained cookbook for something new for them to make. Last week was quiche and a pear and walnut salad. She had pulled out lettuce, carrots, mushrooms, green and red peppers, and tomatoes from the refrigerator and lined them up on the counter.

“What do you think about pasta, Mallory? Do you think everyone would like that?” Nina asked, barely looking up from the book.

“Who wouldn’t?” she replied, opening the plastic cherry tomato container with a crack and popping one in her mouth.

“I just got off the phone with my mom,” Mallory said.

“And?” Nina said, looking up from the peppers she had begun slicing.

“I hung up on her,” she said, twisting her fingers. She repeated the conversation. Nina and Mallory joked that Rock’s wife, Cindy, was their adopted mother.

“You know, my mom didn’t really understand when I decided to switch my major to history,” Mallory said, chopping carrots for a salad. “I mean, she was glad I wasn’t a music major anymore because she really didn’t understand that either.”

“Oh, I know!” Nina exclaimed, rinsing off the lettuce. “My mom wanted me to keep doing graphic design, but I told her the elementary education major was something I could really use when I had my own family. She said the way I was acting the feminist movement hadn’t



done any good. I told her it hadn't." They laughed. Nina's mother was an architect. They didn't talk much anymore.

"I know you want to honor her, Mallory, but you can't let her keep you from following God," she said.

"I'm so sick of her second-guessing me and making me doubt God," Mallory said, tearing up the lettuce for a salad.

"I know," Nina said, putting an arm around her. "I just have to keep telling myself that God is my real father, and my real family is here?" Mallory nodded. "Just don't let her get you down and make you doubt you're doing God's will because you are. You know you are," Nina said, her voice rising.

It was a lot like the conversation they'd had the night Mallory broke up with Alex late in her freshman year. After learning how God brought couples together through the help of leaders and courtship, Mallory had been convinced she needed to break up with Alex. How could she be unequally yoked with an unbeliever when all she wanted now was to serve God? And she didn't think Alex would understand if she wouldn't kiss him anymore. And then, what if she couldn't say no? Then she'd just be living her old life, which was exactly what she shouldn't be doing as a Christian.

She had practiced what she'd say for a week, and Nina had helped her plan what to say: "Alex, I'm a different person now. I care about you as a friend. I just really want to spend all my time learning and following Jesus. I wish you the best in your life."

She should've done it over email like Nina had suggested because talking to him had been so much harder. He kept saying, "Don't do this, Mallory. Don't do this. I love you. You're my best friend." They were both crying when she finally just said good-bye and hung up.

Mallory had immediately called Nina and told her through choked tears. She had come over to her dorm room with chocolate.

“You did the right thing. You’ve given your life to Christ now,” Nina had said, sitting down next to her on the futon. “I’m sure he’s a nice guy, but he’s not the best.”

Mallory had felt a stab of pain to hear Nina say Alex wasn’t the best. She had felt like she should defend him, but then, at the same time, if she had believed he was the best, she wouldn’t have broken up with him, right? So she had said nothing and chewed her nails.

Each time she had made a decision that brought her closer to the church—broken up with Alex, changed her major, and now going on staff—Nina and others had reassured her it was the right thing and that she was following God’s plan. A couple of months later she was lonely one night and called him. She had known Nina wouldn’t be happy if she found out, so she didn’t tell her. She had tried to explain to him how she was changing for the better, but he wouldn’t see it. She didn’t call him after that and ignored his calls until they finally stopped.

She wished Jonathon was here to talk to. He had been so sure of himself, so brave. She remembered him flying over the creek in the tire swing and catapulting himself into the water, splashing her. Then he would wade over to her, saying “It’s okay, Mal, there aren’t any snakes in here. Get in, I’ve got ya.” He waited for her to put her socks and shoes safely on a flat rock, then practically tiptoe over the grass and sticks to the edge of the creek. She’d put one toe in to test the water. “Come on! It’s fine,” he would say, holding out his long arms to her. He let her get comfortable in the waist-high water, then splash her a little. Then, before she knew it, she was chasing him down the creek, laughing and squealing, all fear of snakes gone.

What would he think about her life now? Would he be proud of her for leaving their small town? What would he think about the church? She couldn't imagine him there. Somehow he seemed too wild, too big for it. But where else could she go?

Before everyone arrived, Mallory ran upstairs and changed into a dark brown shirt that matched her eyes. If Tim was going to talk to her about courting tonight, she wanted to be ready. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and glided on some lip gloss. She liked the way she looked. Her skin had started to tan a little, so her freckles didn't stand out too much, and the gloss made her feel pretty and feminine.

She heard a knock on the door downstairs, and her heart rate quickened. Maybe tonight was the night. But then she prayed, closing her eyes in front of the mirror, "Lord, your will be done. You know I love Tim. I've been trying not to, but you, who know all things, know that I do. Please protect my heart. Please help me to protect my heart. If Tim isn't for me, then please let me know. Thanks, God," Mallory prayed and opened her eyes. She put her hand over her heart and felt it beating, feeling each beat as a tiny prayer for herself, for Tim. She stayed a moment more, willing her heart to slow down. She breathed deeply and noticed the light in her eyes in the mirror, the slight blush on her cheeks.

She skipped down the steps and smiled at Tim talking to Nina in the living room. The stereo was playing. Andy and Rock joked in the dining room. Mallory thought about joining Nina and Tim or talking to Cindy who was always so cheerful, but she went into the kitchen. She would talk to Cindy later.

They all sat around the table together. "So, Mallory, how's support raising?" Rock asked, twirling spaghetti and then slurping it off his fork.

“I have a meeting with the Hendersons and Coopers this week,” she said, taking a drink of lemonade and seeing Tim smile out of the corner of her mouth. She had made herself sit a few chairs away from him so she wouldn’t seem to be chasing him, but she still couldn’t stop herself from noticing each movement.

“That’s good. I would expect those two families to give,” he said. The church had both a college group and a “community” side with families. “What percentage are you at now?”

“I’m at about ten percent,” she said, looking down at her food. She knew that was bad. How was she possibly going to raise all the money she needed? She felt like she’d been banging on doors and calling strangers for weeks now. Now her heart was beating fast—not because of Tim but of the thought that she might have to live on \$200 each month if she didn’t start getting more support. Most people in the church were already giving money to a staff person or two, and she wasn’t like Tim, someone who’d grown up in the church, so it was harder to find people. She got all nervous and sweaty just thinking about calling someone she didn’t know to ask for a meeting about giving money to her. Her mother was always in the back of her head, looking shocked.

“I really want you to be at least fifty percent supported by the end of the month. I need your help getting our outreach started, and I don’t want you to be distracted by money trouble,” he replied.

Mallory nodded, but she couldn’t help feeling a glow of anger. *Too late for that.* She’d already had to start putting the electric bill on her credit card—not to mention the plane ticket and registration fee for the fundraising conference next month. She told them her father had paid for her plane ticket and conference because she knew how much the group loathed debt. It

was a sign of something being wrong in your personal and spiritual life if you couldn't manage the money God gave you. So, she just never brought it up.

“Ok, let's go around the table and talk about your small groups,” Rock announced. Mallory shifted in her seat. What was she going to say? Hers, again, wasn't going that well. The girls weren't getting very involved—just attending Sunday morning services and life group. They didn't help with church fundraisers, lead dorm Bible studies, or even always show up to their small group meeting. Only one of the four was thinking about the summer-long conference. When it was her turn, she repeated who had shown up, what they said they were struggling with, and some of their prayer requests.

“Well, I think you need to prioritize your time. Invest in the one who's thinking about this summer's conference. You don't have time to get close to everyone. Not everyone is cut out for this movement. If some of your girls aren't ready to plug in, then don't waste your time on them,” Rock said.

Mallory nodded and was glad when she wasn't the center of attention anymore. Her hand shook a little as she picked up her fork to finish eating. She felt kind of sick inside. She had to find a way to raise money and get her small group on track. First the fight with her mom and now this, failing at her support raising, failing at her small group, and being smothered by fear and anxiety. Where was her faith? She wouldn't blame Tim for not wanting to marry her. What was she good for anyway?

### 3

Mallory sat in a folding chair in a large, open room. Picture windows overlooked a hill and fields. Orange and red trees dotted the view. Today it was sunny, but she knew that the dark, cold winter was coming. Fall had been slow coming this year. Summer hung on. The trees

stayed green through September and then through part of harvest. Finally, the temperature had dropped enough to turn the leaves a color that matched the golden corn. Last year at the fall student conference, they had gone to Nebraska. This year, they were hosting.

“Check, check,” Tim said into the microphone. “Check, checkcheckcheck. Yeah, I think that sounds good. Mal, what do you think? Sound good?”

Luke on bass guitar and Derek on drums. They could never be quiet or serious. They played ‘80s riffs or made up their own stuff. Luke and Derek had grown up together in the church. So had Tim.

Mallory envied them their strong, big families who all went to church together. Luke had six siblings, Tim had five. She imagined all laughter and games at their houses coupled with morning prayer and Bible study. Their parents were all Christians and had raised them in the church. In fact, their parents had helped start the church back in the ‘70s. Many of their parents’ friends had moved on to plant other churches in Nebraska, Colorado, Ohio, and Minnesota.

“It’s clear. No buzzing. Seems like it will be loud enough,” she said.

“Guys, check this out,” Luke said, “I think we should do this for ‘Open your eyes’ instead.” He played the song three times as fast in a key several octaves higher, rock ballad style. Derek caught up and played along, laughing the whole time. Tim laughed at first but then Mallory could see him getting angry as the song went on and on and on.

“Come on, guys, knock it off. People are going to be coming in here soon,” he said.

“Mallory, let’s do a sound check for the keyboard now.”

She went on stage and did her sound check, banging on the keys, listening to the monitors. Derek and Luke were trying to hold in their laughter as they mimed the rock ballads instead of actually playing. Practices were always like this. The guys were funny, and she usually

laughed along and occasionally joined in with her own power chords on the keyboard, but inevitably, it went sour. Tim would get mad, and she would feel like a child who misbehaved. Or she would try to mother them, shushing and pleading with them with her eyes to say, Please stop before there's any yelling.

Of course, they never paid any attention to her. She could say, "Guys, come on, settle down" all she wanted, but they were on a roll and, really, she didn't think they cared whether Tim was angry or not. She would sometimes catch Tim's eye and roll her eyes, telling him she was on his side. He would smile. Sometimes he would wink, smile, and then put on his serious voice, "Ok, guys, let's just move on to the next one. I think we have this one down," and the guys would cheer.

Today, Mallory wanted to be done with this as soon as possible. She had a million things to run around and do—coffee, snacks, room scheduling, prayer times. Plus, she had invited a friend, Wendy, and she wanted to go check on her and make sure she was having a good time. She left her with Nina.

The weather was so beautiful that she couldn't help but feel that this might be the weekend Tim proposed courting to her. After the sound check, she went to find Nina and Wendy. They were sipping hot chocolate out on the front patio. Good, she seemed to be having fun. The wind had picked up, and it cooled her flushed face. The other girls were huddled on the steps, cheeks red, hands wrapped around white mugs of hot chocolate. She sat down next to them and said hi.

"Yeah, I've been seeing Ben for about a year," Wendy said.

"Are you guys thinking about getting married?" Nina said, her voice edgy.

“Oh, I don’t know. We have fun together, you know, but I’m just not sure. It’s been kind of a rough year so I haven’t wanted to really deal with it,” Wendy said, looking down.

“Well, it sounds like God wanted you here then. Maybe after this weekend you’ll have more of an idea about what God wants for your life,” Mallory said, looking her in the eyes and smiling. “Trust me. It can be quite a ride!”

The room was packed when they got back. Mallory went to a side room where the guys would be goofing off and then praying before going on stage.

“Mallory, we’re going to do a punk version of ‘As the deer’ this time, so just, uh, play along, ok?” Derek said, drumming the carpet with his sticks.

“Riiight,” she said, sitting down next to Luke, his long legs spread out in front of him. “So, should we pray?” Mallory asked, looking up at Tim.

“Yeah, let’s get this show on the road,” Derek said.

They circled together, their arms draped over each other’s shoulders, and prayed for the worship they would be leading. Sometimes she would try to stand next to Tim, but she usually tried to avoid, knowing all through the worship, instead of pointing her thoughts toward God, she would be feeling the weight and heat of his arm through her sweater. *The Bible says to turn away from sin—not leap towards it, so I’ve got to stay as far away as I can*, she thought.

Mallory felt a jolt of energy and, she didn’t know if it was the bad kind or not, but of pride to be playing keyboard for the worship. She still got nervous and went over the songs in her head. She didn’t want to be that weak link.

After the worship, Mallory sat down next to Wendy. They had played well. People had been closing their eyes, lifting their hands, swaying in worship to God. She imagined God looking down from Heaven and smiling at their songs and prayers rising to Him like incense.



Wendy had sung along and seemed to be enjoying it so far. It didn't sound like she'd been to church much lately, and, growing up in a more traditional church, Mallory could only imagine how much more fun and alive this worship would seem than what she was used to.

Rock got up to speak. He had a wrestler's build, short and compact, with red hair buzzed. He wore a polo shirt and jeans. He wasn't young, Mallory's father's age, she imagined, but the differences between Rock and Mallory's father were too many to count. He had an intensity when he talked, a forcefulness of character that drew all the attention in the room to him. Surely, this is a man of God who was sent to do great things. She felt honored to be learning the faith from a man like that.

Rock often told the story of how God had shown him that Davis College was where the church was supposed to be started. He had been driving across the Midwest looking for where God would lead him to stop and plant a church, a church different from his parents' and grandparents' churches. He drove his broken down car all night with only his Bible, a duffel bag, and a map on the seat next to him with a red circle around the middle of the country. As the sun was coming up, he prayed again for God to show him where to stop. He'd heard the voice of the Lord when he saw the sign for Camden.

Rock followed the signs to the campus and stood in the spot where the sidewalks intersected between the four corners of the campus. The sun had risen, and he raised his hands, praying for God to start a great work there in the city. Then he walked the periphery of the campus shouting like the Israelites bringing down the walls of Jericho.

She thought of all the people who had gone before at New Life Community Church. She imagined the women circled and praying with their head scarves (they didn't wear them now)

and then standing and singing to the Scripture songs Rock had written and played on the acoustic guitar.

He usually recounted some of the stories of the early days, how they would meet every day at least once to pray and study the Bible. He said in their zeal, many would decide to quit college altogether and leave to plant a church in Omaha or Kansas City. “We made our mistakes, but they were mistakes of passion and zeal. We loved Jesus and wanted to follow his every commandment.”

Mallory wished she could have been in the group then when they shared everything in common and lived like Jesus’s return was only days away.

“Guys, we’re a family. We’re soldiers fighting this war together. We’re supposed to commit to this body of believers for life. This is your home! This is your family!” Rock said, pacing the front of the room. Today, surrounded by her brothers and sisters in Christ, Mallory would take her place in the “company of saints” who had fulfilled Jesus’s call to preach the Gospel to every nation.

“Brothers and sisters, choose today to be a committed member of this church family. God has put you here for a reason. He says to take up our crosses and follow him! We’re in a war, and we’re in it together. Don’t live your life just for yourself.”

When Nina had invited her to her first New Life event, Mallory had been so excited. It was a party at the house she was living in now—only some guys from the group were living there then. It had been packed like the couple of high school parties she and Alex had been to. Only this party had a root beer keg and lots of pop and chips. It was the first time she had met Tim. Even when she was still dating Alex, Mallory had noticed him. He had a strong presence and talked to everyone.

Mallory remembered him talking to her when she was grabbing some food. He had smiled so broadly at her and asked her questions about where she was from, what her major was, where she lived. He listened so intently to her answers. In high school, the popular jocks in her small school had ignored her. She hadn't been singled out for ridicule, but she certainly wasn't popular either. She and Alex had been on the outside together, laughing at them. Tim was so different from those jerks she had known.

And it wasn't only Tim. Everyone talked to her. Nina introduced her to Lena, who was so interested in her and wanted to get to know her. She had never been in a group like this before. The pretty girls and the cute boys didn't just pair off together. In fact, it hadn't seemed like anyone was dating. No one was making out or fighting. They all just seemed like good friends who had fun together. These were people she wanted to get to know, that she felt good to be around.

Now Mallory wanted to make other people feel as special and comfortable as she had felt when she first entered the group. In leaders' meetings, Rock often talked about how they shouldn't be selfish and spend their time at church with their friends. It was their duties to expand the circle and the group—not to just enjoy the friendships they had. Mallory was happy she lived with Nina. Otherwise, she wasn't sure she'd ever see her. A couple of friends had moved on to different small groups or teams and she only saw them on Sunday mornings or at the Friday night outreach when she couldn't spend time talking to them. She missed them, but she knew God had them in different places for a reason.

She hoped Wendy would be part of her small group. She didn't admit it to herself, but she knew bringing someone in like Wendy who was outgoing and pretty could be just the boost she needed to feel like she wasn't failing at the church's mission. The girls in her group were still

sort of outsiders, and she knew Rock wasn't happy with their commitment. She wondered if he was unhappy with her as well. Tim hadn't asked her to court yet, and her fundraising was still going slowly. She'd had to open another credit card account and wasn't sure how she would make all the monthly payments. If Wendy joined her group, Mallory would take it as a sign that things were turning around, that God hadn't forgotten her. *Please, God, please make Wendy want to turn her life to you and join my group*, she prayed and raised her head to heaven.

#### 4

Mallory paused in the open door, balancing a large tray of brownies. She tried to count the heads in the dark room. Rock stood with candles on tables on each side, pacing back and forth, speaking with so much energy and passion that he barely needed the microphone clipped on his black turtleneck.

She had spent the afternoon and evening getting the lecture hall turned into an appropriate atmosphere for their Friday night Alive service. She had brought in several silver standing lamps and threw a red cloth over the top to soften the light. Candles were also clumped on a table toward the front. She had swept the dusty wood floor, moved out the desks, set up the forty rows of folding chairs, hung black curtains over the original portraits, and set up a separate room for food afterwards.

“Desire can only be fulfilled when it's left in God's hands. God has good things in store for you, and when he fulfills that desire it's better than anything you could have imagined,” Rock said.

“Believe me! I'd slept with girls before, but when I met Cindy, I was a believer then, and we felt God calling us together. You've seen my wife. She's hot, right?” Everyone laughed and a few clapped and hooted. “Cindy, stand up, would you, please?” She was slender with short hair

that spiked out in the back. She wore tight jeans and a jacket that emphasized her slender waist. She twirled and waved, winking at Rock before sitting down.

“I waited for two years just seeing her at Bible studies and waiting for a word from the Lord about her. Then, even after praying about it, I talked to my elders for another year before even speaking to Cindy. The Lord is good, and, of course, she’d been praying about me for that time too. We were married two months later, and the sex has been better than anything I’ve ever had before! But that’s part of the privileges of marriage. This is what you have to look forward to if you wait.”

Mallory looked for Wendy but didn’t see her. She was disappointed. Only one girl had come from her small group. She sighed. Nina sat with a group of girls she had brought from her classes. Over the past month, Nina had been inviting a few over to the house and cooking meals for them or taking them shopping if they didn’t have cars. Mallory had been so busy running errands and support raising, she hadn’t met anyone new. The few girls she saw when she went with Nina to the dorms had either become more attached to Nina or hung around the edges and didn’t seem too open to coming to a church event. It was probably for the best, Mallory tried to reassure herself. She wouldn’t have had a minute to spend with them even if they had come. She was so bone tired she didn’t think she had the energy to be lively. And she would have to stay late to put everything back together after it was over. Not much time to invest in people.

As she stood listening to Rock, she saw Tim sitting with his friends. He was so together, so on effective and on fire for God. She prayed again for God to make her worthy of a husband like him. It was winter now, six months after their summer hike. Almost every day she waited for him to say something to her. They worked so closely together. He knew her faults, but he seemed to like being with her. He encouraged her in her faith, and she knew she could trust him

with her life. Sometimes she thought she would burst if she couldn't tell someone how she felt God was leading. Rock often said to keep that to yourself, but if it got to be too hard, then you could tell your mentor. She had been praying and praying for God to take away these feelings she had for him, but they just didn't seem to be getting any different. She avoided him as much as possible and tried not to think about him. It was hard, of course, when they were in the band and on staff together. Wasn't that a sign that God was leading them together? She knew he would be extra careful about the wife he chose. Only one who was truly committed to using their family to forward the Gospel would be considered. He was a man with a purpose.

But perhaps he didn't make enough money yet to support a family with only his staff salary. She felt like she was going crazy trying to figure out if God was leading them together. But if she was truly doing God's will, she wouldn't even be thinking about him. She needed help. She would have to talk to someone. It would be safer to talk to Lena because she was already married, so there wasn't any worry that she might also be praying about Tim. Her heart skipped a little thinking about sharing her desire with someone. At least she was doing something about it. She just couldn't handle all of these feelings by herself anymore. With a smile and a firmer step, she slipped into the refreshments room and arranged the brownies in straight, even rows on the trays like Lena and Cindy had suggested.

\*

Mallory wrapped her scarf around her mouth, nose, and throat. January was bitingly cold. Snow stayed piled on the ground. Temperatures hovered around zero, wind chills making it even colder. She only went outside when she absolutely couldn't avoid it. She ran outside to start her red rusty car. The cold stung her eyes, and the packed snow crunched under her heels. Ice topped the snow like burnt sugar on crème brulee.

The engine sputtered before kicking in. She cranked on the defrost and grabbed the snow and ice scraper under the rear seat. It hadn't snowed last night, but a thick layer of ice crystallized on her windshield. She hacked and chipped the ice away, clearing a spot to see out the window.

"Mallory?" She heard a man say as he knocked on the ice-covered window. She couldn't see out, so she cracked open the door and peered out.

"Alex!" He was wearing the same navy pea coat he'd had in high school. He was grinning his wide, open smile. Dark curls stuck out under his red stocking cap.

"Mallory! I was walking to campus and thought that was your old car. How is that bucket still running?"

She was hugging him without realizing how she ended up in his arms. He smelled exactly like he used to, that sweet, musky smell. He was still chubby and his brown eyes still reminded her of chocolate chips in cookie dough. She remembered how nice it had been to kiss him, blushed, and took a step back.

"I ran into your mom a few weeks ago, and she said you were still living here." he said. "I'm back in school. Thought I'd give it one more try."

"Wow. That's great. I'm working for the church. Just started a few months ago," she said.

"Really?" But she saw the light fade in his eyes. They both shifted uncomfortably on their feet. She wondered what he was thinking.

"You should check it out some time. We have this cool service every Friday night if you're free," she said, looking him in the eyes. They hadn't really talked since the night she'd broken up with him. What did they have to say to each other? Her leaders were afraid he would

be a bad influence on her, so they told her just to let him go. She shouldn't try to keep a friendship with him. Relationships just didn't work like that, they said.

Now when she saw him, she reminded herself that he wasn't anyone special to her anymore. She would treat him just like anyone else in her life. She would invite him to the church, encourage Tim and the others to reach out to him, and let it rest at that. She dug in her purse and gave him a card with the time and place. He held it between his short, thick fingers. He was still biting his nails, she noticed. Then he pulled out the wallet he'd had as long as she'd known him and stuck it in.

“Ok. Well, I better get to class,” he said, pulling his backpack on.

She watched him go. She could still feel the heat of his arms around her. No, she wasn't going to think about that. She was forgiven. She would not remember that. She was forgiven. She was cleansed. She was white as snow now. Why should she be embarrassed? Standing in the snow, for a moment, she remembered who she used to be and shuddered.

Maybe it was better if he didn't come on Friday. She knew that was wrong, too. She was sure if he came to Christ, everyone would love him. He'd be a great evangelizer. He would add so much to the group, and he would feel like he belonged somewhere, too, like she did. Plus, it would feel good to bring someone into the church who really plugged in—even if it was a boy and not someone she could personally disciple. Then she and Alex could be friends again. That would be nice, she thought. Mallory scraped off the rest of the ice on the windshield and drove to Lena's for their meeting.

Lena and Andy lived in an apartment close to campus. Both graduated from college but were still entrenched in the college ministry. They still wanted to be active in reaching the world with the Gospel. Besides, they could show the college men and women they mentored what a



God-honoring marriage looked like. Lena did some freelance accounting at home so she could still meet with women throughout the day and prepare for their first baby to be born.

Andy worked as an engineer and met with Rock at 6:30 every Wednesday morning, had leadership training every Saturday morning at 7:00, and hung out in the dorms at least once a week with the guys he led in his small group. He spoke some Friday nights and had leaders' meetings Sunday nights. Saturday nights were their fellowship team meetings, and Monday night was their date night. He was probably going to be promoted to pastor soon.

Lena had a cup of hot chocolate waiting for Mallory when she knocked. Lena seemed to be able to make everything she touched beautiful. She had recovered the second-hand couch in a bright red fabric, stripped and varnished a coffee table she'd picked up on the side of the road, and made yellow and orange paper lanterns to hang from the living room ceiling. Their wedding picture and dried wedding bouquet wrapped in ribbon hung over the couch. Even in the middle of the day, the lighting in the room was calm and muted. Today Mallory wanted to yank the heavy drapes open and let the light in.

"So, how has everything been going?" Lena asked, sitting in a worn armchair across from Mallory on the couch. Lena's Bible lay open on the coffee table. She wished she could stand or pace or do something rather than sit across from Lena like she was at a psychiatrist. Or maybe she was. Every week in the silence that followed Lena's question, Mallory rambled and divulged more than she wished. She wanted to be calm and cool and at least look like she wasn't a complete wreck, but the silence and Lena's piercing look forced everything out of her.

"I feel really confused all of a sudden. I wanted to talk to you about something kind of important and then I ran into an old boyfriend on my way over here, which just made me feel

really..." Mallory trailed off and swirled her hot chocolate, keeping her voice as quiet as she could.

"Oh, I know, being reminded of who we were before is never fun! I'm sorry you had to see him again."

"I invited him to Friday night church. Was that wrong? He gave me a hug, and I just blurted out the first thing I thought," Mallory said, her voice getting louder and sounding more upset. "I know we're supposed to turn away from our past. I haven't talked to him in years, but he really could be a great guy."

"I don't think there's anything wrong in inviting him," Lena said slowly, "but you should try to avoid him as much as possible. Recruit Tim or some of the other guys to hang out with him, and don't spend any time alone with him. Satan loves to attack our weaknesses."

"I won't," Mallory promised, feeling even more foolish for hugging him than before. How easily she got swept away! Mallory hoped Lena had forgotten that she said she wanted to talk about something else. She was sure Lena would think her hopelessly silly and easily distractible if she knew how long Tim had been on her heart. The pain in her stomach increased knowing that she would be telling Lena her deepest, most precious secret.

"I'll be sure to pray for you and..."

"Alex," Mallory supplied.

"Alex," Lena repeated. "I'll ask Andy if he would look for him on Friday, too."

"Thanks," Mallory said.

"What was the other thing you wanted to talk to me about?"

This was it. Her heart beat. Her hands sweated. Her cheeks flushed. "Well, I've had feelings for someone for a long time. I keep praying they'll go away, but they haven't. I haven't

told a soul. Could I tell you?” Mallory spoke quickly, her voice sounding harsh and her breathing heavy.

Lena rested her hands on her belly and told her she could—if she felt like God was leading her to.

“It’s Tim.” Lena nodded but didn’t smile. “I know a lot of women would love to marry him and so why should I think I deserve him?” Mallory looked at her hands. “Believe me, I know I don’t, but ever since we first met I’ve felt this connection to him. He’s been like a brother to me, and I just can’t stop thinking about being his wife. No matter how much I pray or how hard I try, he’s always there. I can’t help but hope and pray that that means God really is leading us together. I mean, we’re on the worship team together, we’re on staff together. He’s a major part of my life.” Mallory made herself stop talking. She knew she sounded ridiculous and not at all like a mature woman of God was supposed to sound when she talked about the way she felt.

She couldn’t look at Lena when she asked, her voice quiet, “What do you think? Do you think God has been leading me?”

Lena didn’t say anything for a minute or two. Mallory’s breath slowly came back to her, and she wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans.

“You know, Satan loves to control us through our emotions. Tim is certainly a worthy man of God, the kind of man that a woman should want to marry,” Lena said, pausing to drink some water. “But I think you should forget him.” Mallory’s throat went dry. “Love isn’t about feelings,” she continued. “God puts two people together who can do more together for the Gospel than they can apart. Now, maybe that’s you and Tim and maybe it isn’t. I don’t know. It just seems from hearing you talk about him that your heart is way too involved.”

“I’ve been trying...” Mallory squeaked.

“Now is the time to focus on loving God, putting all your emotions and energy toward serving and loving him. One day, God will want you to serve and love a husband, but for now you should treat all men in the church equally and not try to put yourself forward with Tim.”

Mallory only heard a little of this advice. Her ears were ringing now.

Lena’s eyes shone brightly and she leaned over as far as she could but still spoke in the same calm, quiet voice she always used. “If this is too hard for you, you should tell Rock it would be better if you quit the worship band and gave your service somewhere else.”

Mallory nodded but was still only hearing bits and pieces. Her cheeks were bright red, and she sat stiffly on the couch, leaving her hot chocolate untouched. If she didn’t move, maybe she wouldn’t cry.

## 5

On Friday, Mallory didn’t try to look pretty. She wore her favorite overalls and a baggy t-shirt, pulled her frizzy hair back in a tangled bun, and didn’t even think about lipstick. She started to sweat hanging up the long black curtains and dragging the metal folding chairs into the big lecture hall. She didn’t care if she looked or smelled awful. No one would have a reason to fault her if she did her duty, and she knew she would stay away from Tim looking like this.

She was still stung by what Lena had said a few days before. She hadn’t told Nina. It was too embarrassing. Plus, if she told her, then she would have to explain that she was interested in someone without telling her who that someone was. It was all too exhausting.

Alex slipped in the back door and stood next to Mallory in the dark. The room was full. The band was on stage, but she was not. She had begged out of the worship band for tonight, saying she was too busy with set up this week. She hadn’t wanted Lena asking her next week

why she hadn't followed her advice. Her eyes were closed but she wasn't singing. Alex stood close. Again she recognized his scent and opened her eyes. She slid a little farther away but smiled weakly at him.

"I didn't really think you'd come," she said, leaning in to make him hear her.

"Me neither," he said, "but I thought I should see what's been keeping you away all these years."

Mallory tried to read his face and voice in the dark. He was smiling. He didn't sound sad or angry—just teasing.

"It's good to see you," she said.

The band played the rest of the songs. Mallory tried to watch Alex out of the corner of her eye to see if he was enjoying it. She hoped he was impressed. When the band left the stage, dance music pumped out of the professional quality speakers. All the regulars jumped out of their seats and rushed to meet people they didn't recognize. People who had brought friends pulled them by the hands to introduce them to others. Mallory scanned the room for Tim. He was laughing with some new girls Nina had brought. Andy was joking with some new guys a few rows behind.

"Hey, Alex, I have to finish setting up some stuff during the message. I can introduce you to a few of my friends that you can sit with if you want."

He gave her a look, the same look he'd given her at the school dance in junior high when she'd suggested he actually go dance with Julie Stevens instead of pretend to ignore her.

"Nah, that's okay. I'd rather stick with you." All through junior high and high school it had been the same. After that night of extreme discomfort at the dance, Alex and Mallory went

to the socials and dances together. They never asked each other officially. They just knew they'd rather hang out together.

Since she felt too embarrassed to march up to Tim or Andy with Alex in tow, too, she decided it would be easier just to stay together. So he followed her into the back room with the boxes of cookies and brownies that needed to be put on trays. They talked about what they'd been doing the last few years. She felt awkward at first, laughing extra loudly at any joke and saying the first things that came to her mind so they wouldn't have any silences between them. He asked about her work. She asked about his family.

Tonight she was sick of the straight rows of cookies and brownies, so she and Alex placed them in concentric circles, then played with Z's and W's. Mallory laughed, really laughed, for the first time in a long time, and she felt the adrenalin from creating something herself—even if it was only desserts on trays.

The work was done, but they were still talking.

"I was engaged a couple months ago," he said, putting down one of the black plastic trays but not looking at her.

"Oh! Congratulations!" she said.

"Well, 'was' is the operative word there. She called it off last month," he said, pushing his black frame glasses up.

"I'm so sorry," she said, walking closer and trying to get him to look her in the eyes. He didn't look up. She didn't know what else to say, so she asked if she'd given a reason.

"Not really. She just said she didn't think she could marry me. She'd changed her mind." His brown eyes looked twice as big behind the thick frames, like a child. "I was so happy. I mean, we were good together, you know?"

Mallory put her arm around him. “It’s nothing you did. I’m sure it was nothing you did. You’re a great guy. Anyone would be proud to be with you,” she said, seeing his eyes water.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.” He was trying to hold back the tears but couldn’t. She’d forgotten how easily he cried, how open he was with his feelings. His big shoulders were shaking, and she held him as close as she could, burying her cheek in his wool sweater. “Why does this always happen to me?” he gulped.

The door swung open and music pulsed through.

“Mallory?” Tim stood in the doorway, his mouth open. Mallory leapt away from Alex, who stared at her in confusion. “Lena asked me to come look for you,” he said, the words trailing off.

“Ah, yes, this is Alex, an old friend of mine. I was hoping you could meet him. We were just finishing up in here. Alex, this is Tim, my co-leader.” Mallory talked quickly, her voice full of the confidence she didn’t feel. How bad did it look? What was he thinking? She smiled reassuringly to let him know nothing bad had been happening—just two old friends hugging. Tim’s eyes kept flicking back and forth between the two of them. She wondered if he noticed the wild trays.

“Why don’t you two come out here and mingle with the rest of us,” Tim said firmly.

“Sure!” Mallory chirped, practically running out the door. “I can’t believe we missed the sermon. There must’ve been more cookies that we realized!” She could hear the fakeness in her voice but couldn’t stop trying to ease Tim’s mind about what had been happening. Alex followed more slowly, still looking confused.

Mallory was glad the band was still playing and the lights were down. She was sure she had turned magenta. The three of them stood together in the back. For once she wished to be as

far from Tim as she could be and couldn't wait until the singing ended and she could slip back to the refreshments room and serve the treats without having to talk to anyone. Lena and Nina were getting up to serve the food during the final chords of the song, so Mallory made her escape, too.

"Was that Alex standing next to Tim?" Lena asked, finding a spatula. She didn't say anything about the treats, but Mallory thought she saw her purse her lips and raise her eyebrows slightly.

"Yeah, I was surprised he came. Thanks for telling Tim to look for him," she said, undoing the bun and pulling her hair back into a ponytail. She didn't mention how Tim had found them and hoped Tim wouldn't either.

People started to file in for coffee and cookies, so Mallory took her position behind the coffee pot, letting the other girls walk through the crowd with trays. Mallory saw Tim, Alex, and Andy talking in a circle. Alex shifted his weight and kept adjusting his glasses. She gave him a quick smile but kept her attention on the coffee.

As the college students eventually started to leave, Mallory found ways to keep busy. She ran back and forth folding up chairs in the main room, then coming back and taking the crumb-filled trays to the women's bathroom for cleaning. The less time she spent in that room, the better. Each time she breezed back in, Tim and Andy were talking to Alex. She heard him laugh a little and heard them invite him to their place for an after-party. He shook his head no and stood alone against the wall with a small red plastic plate of chips. Instead of going over to him like she knew she should, she continued cleaning, hoping someone else would talk to him. Most everyone else had left already, though.



She was drying the newly clean coffee pot, avoiding his eyes, when he finally came up to her.

“I think I’m going to head out,” he said, smiling faintly.

“Oh! Are you going over to Tim’s?” she asked, knowing the answer.

He gave her that squinty-eyed look again and said no.

“Well, it was good seeing you. Do you think you’ll want to come next week?”

He looked at her for a few seconds and didn’t say anything. He scrunched up his mouth, turned, and walked away.

She sighed and tucked the coffee pot away in its box.

The next morning was an early leader’s meeting. They sat in Rock’s spacious living room. She tried to catch Tim’s eye to say that she was sorry about last night, to let him know the hug hadn’t been her trying to get back into a relationship with Alex, that that was the last thing she wanted. But he didn’t look at her. Not once. She sat quietly in her chair, barely listening to the conversation around her. She was supposed to be taking notes, and twice Rock had to say, “You got that didn’t you, Mallory?” with a stern gaze. She hadn’t but nodded her head and scribbled furiously in the notebook.

She lingered after the meeting was over to try to get a minute alone with Tim, but he slipped out while she was in the kitchen. She walked back into the living room to grab her coat and leave. Rock sat on the couch and asked her to stay a minute. He had something he wanted to talk to her about. Heat rushed to Mallory’s face. So Tim had told Rock. When did he have time? He must have come early to the meeting or called him last night. She tried to breathe slowly and deeply, sending a quick prayer to heaven like an emergency flare. She sat down in the overstuffed chair across from him. She felt him watching her, his eyes squinting to read her body

language and expression. Had he already decided she was guilty? Her feet barely touched the floor when she sat in the chair, so she slid forward, resting her hands in her lap, meeting his gaze.

“I’m sure you know what this is about,” he said quietly.

“Um, I’m not totally sure,” she said, wanting to hear the accusation from his mouth and sure she would stutter and sputter if she tried to say anything more.

“Tim told me he found you hugging an old boyfriend alone last night during the service.” She didn’t speak or move. “He said Lena had told him this guy might be coming and he should make him feel welcome. But instead of letting him hear the message and be influenced by God’s Word, you had taken him into a room by yourself where Tim found you two in a tight embrace.” Rock spoke coldly, his eyes piercing Mallory.

She didn’t know what to say. It sounded so horrible, so indefensible. She moved her mouth to speak but Rock stopped her.

“Don’t try to explain. I don’t want to hear any excuses. I think you should go home and listen to my message this afternoon. I want the best for you, Mallory. That’s why I strongly suggest you cut off all contact with this guy. If he tries to call you or come to a service again to see you, immediately send him to Tim or Andy. He is obviously too much of a temptation for you,” Rock said, folding his hands over his knees.

Mallory nodded but couldn’t speak. She was too stunned.

“With your small group in shambles and your support barely trickling in, I think you need to seriously reconsider your life and your heart. Are you really giving God your life? Are you truly living all-out for him? Because looking at your life right now I’m not sure. Take this as a much-needed reality check.”

She nodded, then rose slowly to her feet and left. Driving home, when the shock had gone, she felt a small white flame of anger in her heart. She wanted to talk back, to explain, to make him understand, but she couldn't. She tried to imagine what she could have said or should have said, but she couldn't imagine a different ending. He was always angry with her, always disbelieving her innocence, always seeing the worst. Her anger blazed, and she stormed up to her room, slamming the door.

Slowly, she talked herself down. Yes, he didn't give her a chance to explain, but he wanted the best for her. He didn't want her to fall into temptation. He treated her like his own daughter. Love requires discipline, and she deserved to be disciplined. What she'd done was against the rules. She should have made him stay and listen to the message and gotten Tim or Andy.

But what about the rest? She was doing everything she could to work with the girls in her life group. She was calling complete strangers to ask for money. She had given up everything for the church, and it still wasn't enough. She wasn't sure how long she'd be able to hide her debt at the rate she was going, so this was only the beginning.

A part of her still felt the injustice deeply and flamed with anger, but a deep feeling of helplessness and hopelessness was also beginning to appear.

February was windy and cold. The snow was browned with dirt and mud, and the empty fields were frozen and black. Gnarled trees stood stoic and naked. In the country, where the land was flat and featureless for miles except for a weather-beaten farm house here or the low-lying hog confinement buildings dotting the land, they waited for another snow to whitewash the land. In town, the white and colored lights on houses glowed against the darkness, and the college students and townspeople were buffered against the bleakness of the countryside.

But even the lights on the houses seemed wasted to Mallory as she walked the neighborhood praying. She walked and walked and walked, whispering “Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus” with each step. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and it took all her strength not to sit down on the next stoop she saw and weep. The wind whipped around her, but she was numb to the cold.

Mallory had been playing the piano earlier in the evening, practicing a new song for church a time or two, then bursting into Chopin and Mozart, playing all the songs she could remember. She had felt almost trance-like, hearing the music in her head, and letting her fingers fly. She hadn’t played, really played, in a long time. After she exhausted her memory, she started writing her own.

After Jonathon’s death she had sat at the piano and lost herself in the keys. Before she and her mother moved to town, the piano had been in a room of its own. Mallory would shut the door and make up songs for hours after school. She would try to remember the little riffs that Jonathon had taught her and then add to it. Her mother had eventually consented to bringing the piano with them to town as long as it was squeezed into her room. Her mother didn’t want to hear her playing when she was trying to watch TV after a long day at the diner. One of the happiest days during those sad years was when her mother had given her piano lessons for her birthday. She would practice, imagining sometimes that she was playing for crowds of clapping people and other times that it was for Jonathon, smiling and clapping loudly.

Tonight, sitting down at the out of tune piano, she had played and forgot the distrust she saw in Rock’s eyes, forgot her ever-rising debt, and forgot Tim. The last few weeks had been so difficult. She struggled to stay upbeat, to believe God was working in her life.

Mallory had wished that she got to play the piano more often, but there were always people over, and she felt like she would be drawing attention to herself pridefully, vainly, if she played. Also, she was usually needed in the kitchen, or it was a prayer meeting or Bible study where any playing would be distracting and inappropriate. But this evening she hadn't gone to the outreach. She had felt mildly sick all day, like she was coming down with a fever, so she had stayed home, giving instructions to Nina, alone in the house for one of the first evenings she could remember, relieved to not try to live up to anyone else's expectations.

When Nina got home, Mallory was still playing the piano. Time had disappeared. Nina had tapped her on the shoulder and then sat down next to her on the piano bench, smiling slightly.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe what just happened!"

Mallory had stopped playing and turned to her friend. "What? What just happened?" she had said, her own face breaking into a grin to match her friend's.

"It was after the service. Tim stayed to help me clean up after everyone else had left. I went back out into the main room to stack chairs, and he had taken the votives from the tables and put them all on the stage."

"Uh huh." Mallory's face was frozen into a smile, but her heart had stopped.

"So, I went up there and he was just looking at me. I thought he was just being funny or something. I didn't expect anything. But then he got this serious look on his face and told me he'd been praying about me and wondered if I'd consider courting him. I was so shocked. I had no idea. So I told him I'd pray about it and talk to Rock and some other people and let him know next week. What do you think? What should I do?" Nina finished, twisting her fingers in

her lap. “I mean, he’s a great guy. I know that, but is he the one God has for me? Is he the best?”

At first, Mallory couldn’t speak. “Let’s pray about it, okay,” Mallory choked, thankful for a reason to shut her eyes. “Why don’t you start?”

After Nina had gone to bed, Mallory threw on several layers and snuck out quietly. She needed some air. How did this happen? Was God punishing her for Alex? Did Rock and Tim think she wasn’t ready because of Alex? Or had she been forcing feelings and situations that God hadn’t encouraged? She replayed those well-worn memories to see if she could find anything new.

That amazing night on the beach when they’d first really talked, sitting on the washed up log telling each other everything. She remembered telling him about Jonathon, crying, and he had put his arm around her. Could that have been just a friendly guy helping a girl in need? But what about that night this summer? Why had he taken her up there if he didn’t feel God leading them together? He even said that they would have fun working together on staff. She had to stop and cover her face with her hands and cry. *Why, God, why didn’t you take those feelings away when I begged and begged?* God was so distant. Her chest ached with her sobs. The worst had happened. The thing that she hadn’t even let herself imagine might. Tim didn’t love her. God didn’t answer her prayers. The thought was terrifying. She felt abandoned. She was on the brink. Surely she would fall off.

Was there any other option? Her crying subsided as she tried to think. A question moved from deep down in her heart: Had she really meant it? Had she really wanted God to take those feelings away? Her stomach tightened with fear and she stopped crying altogether. She walked

briskly trying to sort it out. God wouldn't leave her. He wouldn't abandon her or break a promise. She believed that with her whole being. If it wasn't God, then it must have been her.

She let that thought turn into feeling. It was her fault. What if she had been so sure they were meant to be together that she hadn't actually expected God to take those feelings away and had then taken the lack of change as a sign. It was her fault. Somehow, this feeling of failure, of disappointing God was more familiar, even comforting in a way. It was better to blame herself than to be abandoned. *What a fool*, she told herself. Feelings are deceptive. Look where they got her! Her own sin had taken her directly to the heartbreak the church had tried to protect her from. Even while she was accusing herself, another part of her rebelled. *No, no, I did everything they said. Why didn't it work for me?* She was torn.

She had walked several blocks around the neighborhood and was starting to feel weak and cold. She hurried home, wanting to be safe again in her own bed. She felt so confused. Sometimes she had a deep sense of her own folly and chided herself for being led astray so easily. Other times anger raged in her of being robbed once again of someone she loved so completely. She lay awake, the bitter wind rattling the windows.

## 6

Winter hung on. February turned to March with little change. Mallory rolled over, one leg outside the rumped white comforter, and stared out the window. Thick gray clouds blocked out the sun. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen the sun. Every day was cold, the wind whipping the bare trees. Today looked no different.

All she wanted was to stay in bed, to hibernate until she didn't feel like this anymore. It took all her force of will to pretend like nothing was wrong, to go on playing in the band, working with Tim, living with Nina, lead her small group, raise support, and just be normal. She

absolutely dreaded going over to Lena's house now for their weekly meetings. She performed extra strongly for her. Their meeting the week after Tim and Nina's courtship announcement, Lena had asked how she was doing. Mallory had smiled as brightly as she could, looked her straight in the eye, and said she'd been spending lots of time alone with God, she felt sure this was exactly where God wanted her, and she was happy to have that distraction taken care of. Lena had nodded and said she was glad to hear it. They spent the rest of the meeting planning the spring concert outreach.

Mallory had driven home, tears clouding her eyes, feeling bent and burdened. The lie had taken all her strength, and all she could do was go home and lay in bed. She hadn't cared if her roommates or Rock or Tim wondered where she was. She would just say she'd needed some extended time with the Lord.

That was weeks ago. Why didn't she feel stronger yet? Why was this such a big deal? When would she feel close to God again?

She had no one to talk to. She couldn't bear what she knew Nina and Lena would say—hadn't she heard it from Lena already? They would blame her for loving him and exhort her to give her heart to the ministry instead. They would say he hadn't been the one, that God obviously had someone else for her. Is that how we know God's will? Just by what happens to us, she wondered.

Her mother, too, wouldn't understand. "Well, there are other fish in the sea," she would say. "What did you expect? He never said he loved you, did he? You read too much into things, Mallory. You always have."

It used to be so simple: pray, wait, do everything you can to get rid of those strong feelings, and God will bless you. Now she didn't know what to think or believe. She couldn't



stop thinking about it. She repeated the past over and over in her mind. What had she missed? What had she done wrong? Was God punishing her? Why couldn't she accept God's will for her life—if this was it?

She was starting to question everything. She couldn't sit through a sermon now without wondering if what Rock said was true. He made so many promises: give until it hurts and God won't let you go hungry. Submit to your leaders and God will fulfill his perfect will in your life. Give up your dreams, and God will satisfy you in ways you never expected. Don't pursue love, and God will give it to you. Then why didn't it work for her?

The way she saw it, she had three options: Rock was right, and she had broken the rules of love while desperately trying to keep them. Or she had followed the rules, and God hadn't fulfilled his part of the bargain. Or, and this was the scariest, love, life, and God didn't work like Rock said they did. Or, okay, one more: she was totally off and missing something completely.

The pain from Rock's rebuke stayed with her, running into and deepening her grief about Tim. Nothing had gone the way it was supposed to. One day soon she knew Nina would get home before her, find one of her credit card bills, and open it, believing as one of her mentors she had the right to know what was truly going on in Mallory's life. Then she would be exposed, rebuked, pushed aside.

This morning she didn't know if she could take another day alone with these thoughts and fears. It was too hard to get out of bed right now. Maybe she could just stay in her room today. She didn't know if she could pretend that her life and her faith were still intact, to put on that act. She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling fan. Her mind drifted. Her eyes fluttered. She was almost asleep again. In that space between awake and asleep she saw her first day of school after Jonathon's funeral. She had wished for invisibility. She had wanted to hide in

bed. Would everyone look at her funny? She couldn't cry in front of everyone, but how could she be normal?

She had moved so slowly that morning, hoping her mother wouldn't make her go to school, would let her stay home with her. The house had been dark and silent. She had crept down to the kitchen, finding it empty and cold. Then she'd heard her mother's voice from behind their bedroom door. "I'm not staying here! I'm not!" Mallory had run up the creaky stairs again, afraid to get caught in the middle of her parents' yelling.

Mallory's eyes flew open, and she sat up in bed. Her heart raced. She had pushed that memory deep inside. Why did she think about that now? She couldn't lay here and relive that lonely, scary time. She jumped out of bed. The year of Jonathon's death was like a gray haze in her mind. She remembered the willow tree vividly, its greenness, the soft, vine-like branches covering her.

Mallory yanked up the blinds. Patches of blue sky peeked through the clouds. A few students with backpacks walked down the streets. They weren't bent and huddled against a bitter wind. They strolled leisurely, talking on cell phones. Small puddles pooled where ice had been. The thaw had begun. She got ready, hurrying to get away from these memories. She took her journal but left her Bible.

Mallory walked quickly, her calves and thighs burning from little use. She unbuttoned her coat and let the air in. She walked and walked and walked. The trees dripped, and she sloshed through puddles. Thinking about Jonathon's death was easier when she moved. She couldn't shake it. Her chest was tight, the pressure building and building. Her eyes burned. She couldn't walk anymore and realized she was in the middle of an empty arboretum. She hiked on

the muddy gravel path deep into the trees. She was alone. She sat on a cold, wet bench and opened her journal.

“DON’T CRY!!!” she wrote.

“Why not?” she wrote back. Tears blurred the words on the page.

“Because it’s weird, and people will look at you funny.”

“Who cares? Arguing with myself in my journal is weird too.” She smiled, and a tear plopped on the paper. “I just feel so sad and so alone. I can’t go any farther. I need to deal with this. Did I ever really cry? I know. It was too hard then. It was all I could do to survive. I needed to act like nothing was wrong. I couldn’t stay in my bed all day, but now I’m an adult. Can I cry now?”

She hesitated, then covered her face with her hands and wept. As she cried, she saw herself as a little girl, standing alone in the middle of darkness. Gradually she became aware of a mother figure—but it was Mallory as an adult—watching the child. Mallory as an adult knelt down next to her and wrapped her arms around the girl. She patted her hair and told her how much she loved her, that it was sad all the things that happened to her. The girl gradually looked up at the mother and dried her eyes. The mother told the child how proud she was of her, that she was a good, strong girl.

Mallory felt the love of the mother for the child. She saw all the pain she’d carried after Jonathon’s death. She saw how hard she’d tried to please her mother, how hard she’d tried to go on. She saw all those things that her real mother hadn’t seen. The love Mallory felt pulsed through her, reaching every shadowy corner. She sat there on that bench, loving, seeing, healing the wounds she’d carried for so long.

Her crying slowly stopped. For the first time, she saw her life clearly from the outside, like she was still the adult looking at the other. It hadn't been only the past she was weeping for. Before this year she had been mostly happy. She enjoyed the busyness, the activities, growing in her faith. There had been challenges before, days when she'd been discouraged. But she'd always kept the belief that if she only worked harder, gave her life more, then everything would be better. Now she saw that she had given everything but the reward passed her by. Who had she really been giving everything to? God? Rock? the church? The three were inseparable in her mind.

Her life now was so narrow—all around the church. She didn't have time for anything she enjoyed, and she didn't really feel like the work she was doing made the kind of difference she had wanted. The busyness had become exhausting and the pressure overwhelming.

*Maybe it's time to take a step back*, she thought, remembering with a smile Rock's call for a reality check. *Yes*, she thought. *That's exactly what I need*. She had been relying on other people's opinions about her life for so long, but what did she really think? What did she want? She couldn't imagine racing around like this for the rest of her life. She wanted to play the piano again. She wanted a job she didn't hate. She wanted to love someone and be loved in return. Was that too much to ask? Was that so wrong? Perhaps she wasn't cut out to save the world. Right now she felt like she could leave that to Nina too.

She wasn't good at raising support, and she didn't like it. Never had. She wasn't sure she liked being on staff. It certainly wasn't the satisfying, life-giving job she had imagined. She was an overworked, underpaid, behind-the-scenes secretary. Tim had hurt her badly. Rock had treated her unfairly about Alex. With a shudder, she remembered her own cruelty to Alex last

time she'd seen him. Her credit cards kept her up at night. She had spent most of the last year either trying to copy Nina or hiding her true feelings. No, she couldn't keep this up.

Mallory sat on the bench and let these new thoughts and feelings sink in. She laughed thinking what a mess she looked as she wiped her face with her sleeve. She breathed deeply and closed her journal. Her soul was still soaking in the love she'd just given, easing the pain of these realizations. They were the truth, and she couldn't deny it anymore.

Instead of taking her usual path through campus to her house, she turned in the other direction, looping around the campus to admire the partially snow-covered trees and melting snow. She moved slowly, enjoying the changing world around her. As she walked, she continued loving and feeling deeply loved. She felt compassion for herself now as she thought about how much she'd cared about Tim. This, too, was something she must grieve.

What was she going to do now? She couldn't stay where she was, but she couldn't leave everything she knew yet either. The path she was on opened up, circling trees and bushes, crossing bridges, the usually still creek water rushing over rocks and around bends. The wind had a southern, earthy smell, and Mallory knew soon the grass would be green. Trees would blossom with pink and white flowers, fragile green tulip shoots would poke their heads through the mud, sending the gray and brown winter world away. And she would be part of it, body and soul.