Gated Fences

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Gated Fences

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Gated Fences

By

Shaina Gabrielle Hawkins, Bachelor of Fine Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Stephen F. Austin State University
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements

For the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY
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Gated Fences

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“If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.”

– Toni Morrison
ABSTRACT

_Gated Fences_ is set in 1941 America and revolves around the lives of two families: The Hendersons and the Rivers. This novel addresses discrimination that existed among acquaintances, neighbors, friends, and even family members due to the lingering effects of slavery. It tackles issues such as forbidden love, life, and death obstacles, and the harsh realities faced by those who lived in a “separate but equal” society. Readers will learn about the value of family, the importance of friendship, reasoning behind why the characters place their faith in God, and the hope that conquers even in the darkest hour.
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It was the day before her wedding. Everything had been going smoothly until this point. The food would be delivered tomorrow morning, the camera crew had called to confirm, and the flowers were in place inside the church. The cake, the cake stood tall at five tiers. Her dress had been steamed and was hanging up inside her closet.

Everything was ready, except –

“I don’t have my something old!” Hannah yelled as she rummaged through her jewelry box as her mother entered her room.

“Hannah what’s with all the yelling?”

“Mom, I don’t have my something old. I have my something new, my something borrowed, and my something blue. How did we forget my something old?”

Hannah’s mother sighed as she looked around the room, “I suppose we just overlooked it. We were bound to forget something.”

“Mom, this is serious! I can’t get married without my something old. It’s a tradition!”

Hannah’s mother sighed again as she closed her eyes to think. A moment or two passed before she opened her eyes, “Why don’t you go ask Grandma Abigail? I’m sure that she has something old for you to wear.”
Hannah muttered underneath her breath, “If I must.” She slowly exited her bedroom and went down the staircase of her parents’ house. It wasn’t a large home, but it had always appeared big enough for Hannah. She stroked the staircase as she descended remembering the days she would slide down it as she got yelled at and chased by her father.

Soon enough she had approached the guest room her grandmother was staying in for the week. She knocked on the door once, then twice, before it was opened slowly.

Grandma Abigail looked at Hannah as a smile played on her lips. “Have you finally taken time out of your wedding planning to say hello to your grandmother?”

Hannah awkwardly smiled in response as she made her way inside the room.

“That does not surprise me,” Grandma Abigail said as she made her way over to the settee by the window that overlooked a green front lawn and an empty street. “What can I help you with?”

“I was wondering if you had something old that I could borrow for my wedding tomorrow.”

“Something old?”

“Yes. You see I have my something new, my something –”

Grandma Abigail held up her hand to silence Hannah. “I know the tradition.” She pulled out a small jewelry box on the dresser next to her and began to look through the items inside. Some of them had not been worn in years, but behind each piece of jewelry
was a message, a hidden meaning that only Grandma Abigail and the person whom she shared the jewelry with knew. She smiled down at the box as snapshots of memories flew by in front of her, before handing it to Hannah.

“You may look through this and choose whatever you like.”

Hannah took a seat on the opposite end of the settee as she began to look through the earrings, necklaces, and bracelets inside. After she had gone through every piece of jewelry she sighed.

“Thanks, Grandma. But nothing in here speaks to me.”

“I didn’t know that jewelry could speak.”

“You know what I mean. There’s nothing in here that has special meaning to me. I want to wear something tomorrow that in fifty years from now when I’m looking through old pictures I can think. That necklace, or bracelet, or set of earrings . . . it held a lot of memories.”

Grandma Abigail smiled, “You expect a lot out of a simple piece of jewelry.”

“I want tomorrow to be special, that’s all. I want everything to be perfect.”

“Tomorrow is a day, dear. Like any other. It is only the beginning of your life together with your husband. There will be many days after tomorrow that you should be looking forward to.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. What would she know? Didn’t people back then just get married for convenience?
“I know more than you would believe,” Grandma Abigail stated, reading her thoughts.

Hannah stood up from the settee as her shoulders fell, “Well, thanks for the help, Grandma. I’ll go talk to Mom. Maybe she has something I can wear.”

Grandma Abigail nodded as she began to stroke the locket that hung around her neck.

“I’ve never seen that before. Have you always worn it?” Hannah watched as her grandma nodded in response before returning to her seat on the settee. “It’s beautiful.”

Hannah looked at the locket around her grandmother’s neck; it had an oval shaped frame and the front of the locket contained three garnet gems surrounding a small diamond in the middle.

“Could I . . . could I wear that?”

“I don’t think so dear. This necklace hasn’t left my neck since the day it was given to me.”

Hannah nodded in reply, “Who gave it to you? Was it your mother?”

“No. My mother only left behind a simple pair of earrings. My sister is in possession of those now.” Grandma Abigail smiled sadly then turned her gaze to the window and looked out into the distance. Her eyes glazed over and she smiled to herself for a moment before whispering, “This . . .” she said fingering the locket carefully, “was from someone very special to me.”
August 1941
There were days like today when you would find the Henderson children outside enjoying the moments before daylight ended. Chores were finished. Dinner had been cooked and eaten. The animals had all been fed. The children looked forward to the words of their Papa, “Alright you’re free to do as you wish for the next few hours. But be back before dark.” They never went far, but maybe down the road or towards the pond across the field. But it didn’t matter. They loved the feeling of freedom, at least for the next few weeks until summer was over and school started back again.

The sun was high. Clouds dotted the sky. The birds talked to one another in the distance as they flew into the pine trees.

Abigail found her favorite spot on the wooden tree swing her Papa had built for her and her Mama a few years ago. It was the only place that Abigail would be now, since her Mama—no, she would only think happy thoughts today. She let out a deep breath and smiled as she saw Hazel and John Mark standing in the distance talking to Jacob. Jacob had been John Mark’s closest and most loyal friend for as long as she could remember. Hardly a day went by that she didn’t see him. Abigail shook her head as she watched her sister twirl her long black hair around her finger as she tried to get his attention. This was her way. She never gave up. Hazel had been flirting with Jacob for years, but he never seemed to pay her any mind. However, she had to admire her sister’s determination.
Beginning to lightly swing she closed her eyes and allowed the warmth of the sun to shine down on her dark skin. But soon after her eyes were closed she heard the voice of her papa. His voice was deep, worried, anxious, “John Mark! Get into the house quickly.”

She opened her eyes in time to see her brother rush past her. Looking towards Hazel their eyes locked, Jacob nodded his leave, and the sisters rushed inside after their brother.

Dr. Williams came out of the Master bedroom. “I’m sorry, Henri. I wish there was more I could do,” he said. “This has been a very aggressive cancer. I’ve done everything that I can, but it’s only a matter of days now.”

Henri looked down at the floor for a long moment before lifting his eyes to meet that of the doctor. “Thank you, Dr. Williams. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me and my family.”

“I left some medication for pain on her nightstand. I’ve already given her some, so she shouldn’t need any more for a few hours.”

Henri reached into his old and faded overalls, and pulled out his billfold.

Dr. Williams quickly placed a hand on Henri’s shoulder. “There is no need for that, Henri. Your family has become very dear to me. I’m happy to help. I wish I could do more. If you need anything, don’t be afraid to ask. You know how to reach me should anything come up.”
Henri nodded as Dr. Williams waved his goodbyes to the children and walked out the door.

There was a long awkward silence in the small living room that held the remaining family members.

“This can’t be happening!” Hazel yelled breaking the silence. “Get Dr. Williams back here and tell him to fix this! He’s a doctor. That’s his job!”

John Mark avoided the eyes of his sisters only to meet the eyes of his Papa. He couldn’t read him, but he knew that his feelings couldn’t be too far from his own. “I’ll be outside if you need me.”

“Papa!” Hazel yelled, “How could you let him leave like that. He needs to come back and fix Mama!” Tears streamed down her face, “We have to do something! I can’t lose her. I can’t.”

“Hazel,” Henri said letting out a deep breath as he walked over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, “There’s nothing more that we can do. Dr. Williams is only human. He can only do so much. We can only pray that the Lord will heal her. But if he says that it’s her time to go –”

“No!” Hazel tore away from her Papa and glared at him, her eyes red from crying. “No, it can’t be her time. It’s not fair! I won’t let her go. You need to fix this!”

“I’m not God, Hazel. I don’t have that power.”

Henri looked over towards Abigail who was looking at the floor in front of her. She didn’t know what to say. Of course, she knew her Mama was dying. The doctor had
diagnosed her months ago. She’s had her good days and bad days since then. But to know for certain that these few days would be her last, what could she have to say about that?

“You okay, Abigail?” Henri asked.

Abigail remained looking at the wooden floorboards beneath her. She couldn’t think of anything to say. All she could think of was how the day could feel so warm and peaceful one moment and cold and cruel the next.

“Forget Abigail!” Hazel yelled, “What about me? What are you going to do?”

Henri rubbed his eyes in frustration and grabbed Hazel by the arm. She followed behind him as he led her into his bedroom where his wife lay in their bed.

Tabitha raised her head up a little and showed an easy smile, “I thought I heard you yelling, Hazel. Come here. Let’s talk.”
HAZEL

I could only stare at her. Her eyes were so full of life. They were vibrant and alive. If it wasn’t for the memories of the months before, I would never believe that she was dying. This woman . . . dying. How could this be? I always imagined her being there for my wedding. Holding her first grandchild, then her second. Scolding me when I made bad decisions, as I often did. Who would be there for me now? My papa couldn’t possibly do everything on his own. Could he?

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” I heard my Mama ask.

Tears filled my eyes, “I can’t lose you. Not yet. It’s too soon.”

“Hazel,” She took up my hand in her own and looked at me with such care that I had to look away. “Hazel. Who am I . . . who are we to question the will of the Lord? If he says that its my time to go, then all we can do is trust in him.”

“But –” I began.

“I know it’s hard. I know it won’t be easy. But you have to remember that the Lord does everything for a reason. Everything for a purpose.”

“What could possibly be the purpose of this? You . . . leaving us?”

“I don’t know sweetie. All I know is that this will work out for His good.”

She stared into my eyes before letting out a breath, “You have to be strong, Hazel. Be strong for your brother and sister.”
I nodded as a tear slid down my cheek.

“Remember to stay in prayer and read your bible daily. Be there for your Papa and your siblings, but most importantly remember to be patient. Take one day at a time, Hazel. When life feels like it is getting rough and it seems that it never will never come to an end, remember that pain and sorrow do end. It may take a time, but it never lasts for long. It only feels that way.”

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it gently before I leaned over and wrapped her body in mine. “I love you,” I said feeling the bitter salt from my tears wet my lips.

“I love you, too, sweetheart.”

I drew my body away from hers as Papa took my hand in his and led me away from the room.

“Hazel, would you bring your sister to me? I need to talk to her as well.”

The funeral was five days later. Black was not only the color of our clothes, but the color of the world around us as well. The skies seemed to be darker, the sun was hidden behind the clouds, and sadness was placed upon those who came. Everyone who knew my mama seemed to be here. My grandparents had arrived from Texas, along with my aunt and uncle. Friends from church and my Mama’s job, she was a school teacher, had come to pay their respects. Dr. Williams had showed as well. He was a tall white man. His face showed his age and his hair was beginning to thin. He always smelled like a hospital. I remember when I first met him I liked him instantly. Now, I couldn’t help but
to glare when he walked through the doors of the church. This was his fault. He should have done something. Anything to save her! But he didn’t. I could never forgive him for that.

The service was over before long and then they were placing the body of my Mama into the ground. I had been long out of tears by this point. All I could do was watch. Watch as she was taken away from me once more. Watch as her new home became a coffin instead of a house.

Everyone began to pay their respects to me and my family. I nodded and smiled as my Papa had told us to do. John Mark was handling Mama’s death with silent tears, he only cried when there was no one around to hear him. They had to be strong for my sister and me. They couldn’t let us see them be broken. Abigail . . . I looked over towards her as a few of her friends stopped by to greet her. She smiled at them and waved goodbye before looking back towards her feet. She hadn’t said a word since the day Mama died. Papa said it was normal, and that she would talk again when she was ready. I wondered when that day would come. I missed talking to her.

“Henri, I’m sorry for your loss.” Dr. Williams’ voice boomed.

I turned to face him and Papa.

“Thank you for everything, doctor.”

Dr. Williams nodded, “I wanted to let you know that I’ve contacted a friend of mine. A doctor in Kilgore, Texas. He’s been looking for some help around his house and
I know that you’ve been looking for some work. Especially with the loss of Tabitha. I think he may be able to help.”

“Kilgore?”

“I know it’s a little out of the way for you, Henri, but Dr. Rivers is a good Christian man. I’d never have recommended him if he wasn’t. I’ll leave his address and number. You can decide what to do with it.”

“Thank you, sir. I really appreciate all your help.”

“Anytime, Henri.”

Dr. Williams looked over at me and waved before walking over to visit with John Mark. I couldn’t allow a smile to form on my lips. First he took my Mama away from me and now he wants to take me from my home! Dr. Williams . . . you are on my list.
September 1941
Sleep was not coming easily to Abigail tonight. Like most other nights since her Mama’s death, she was restless. She leaned on her elbow and looked around at her brother and sister. They were sound asleep as usual. They hadn’t seemed to lose a wink of sleep since their Mama died. Maybe it was a welcome relief to the sadness that gripped the family.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the hard wood ceiling. Her Mama was beautiful, and Abigail smiled as she remembered her Papa telling her that she resembled her in her smile, her laugh, her eyes. They both shared a passion for learning new things, reading, and getting their hands dirty.

Her Mama had been a petite woman with mocha skin and jet black hair that she always kept twisted in a tight bun throughout the day, but allowed it to hang loose at night. Abigail remembered her smile which lit up any room she entered. Her Papa had always told her mom that when she smiled he knew everything would be okay. The only jewelry she ever wore was a single pair of brass earrings that Papa had given to her for their fifth wedding anniversary. She remembered the day her Mama had given the pair of earrings to her twin sister Hazel. She always knew that Hazel would be the one to inherit
the only piece of jewelry that her Mama owned. But it broke her heart to know that Hazel had inherited it at such a young age.

She saw a small trace of light coming from the living room. She listened closely for the footsteps that would soon give her Papa away; hearing the slow creak of the rocking chair, she quietly rose from her small bed, crept by the deep snores of her brother and sister and slowly opened up the door that led from their room to the living room. She looked around the small living room for him. He’d placed a candle on the mantle and had turned the rocking chair to face the portrait of her Mama, sketched for her as a wedding gift from her parents. It hung on the bare wooden wall on a single nail. They didn’t have much to decorate their house with, but they made the most of what they had. They had one red and brown rug that lay in front of the fireplace on the wooden floor. There were three plates, cups, and bowls waiting in the kitchen sink ready to be washed, while the last plate, cup, and bowl had not been touched since her Mama’s death.

Henri turned his head when he heard the squeak of the wooden floors give his youngest daughter away. She smiled as she hurried over to him and found a comfortable place to sit in his lap. He smiled and hugged his daughter tight as his eyes drifted back to the photo of his wife. Henri and Tabitha had been married for seventeen years before the Lord decided that it was her time to leave her temporary home on Earth three weeks earlier. Henri missed her every day, but he was more than thankful for his beautiful children that he had. He remained faithful to God daily and continued to be blessed through everything that he did.
After a moment, Henri looked towards his daughter. “What is going through that little head of yours to keep you up at this hour?”

Abigail shrugged and leaned her head against her Papa’s chest.

Henri could feel the sadness in her heart. She hadn’t spoken a word since his wife’s passing. He knew this stage would end, but he missed the sound of his daughter’s voice.

“Well, do you want to know what I’m thinking about?”

He felt his daughter nod into his chest.

“I’m thinking about your mom, my new job, our new home. Things like that.” He looked over at his daughter curiously as her eyes fell on the empty fireplace. “How do you feel about my new job . . . your new home?”

Since the Depression, Henri and Tabitha had lost their jobs and only had their home left in their name. After Tabitha’s funeral Henri looked into the man that Dr. Williams had recommended to him. Dr. Rivers was looking for someone to maintain the stables and animals at this home and someone to look after his five-year-old daughter. Henri wasn’t excited about leaving the only home his children had ever known, but he needed the money and his children needed security. After exchanging letters and messages between Dr. Rivers and Dr. Williams, they agreed that Henri and his oldest son John Mark could work in the fields and garden while his two daughters worked inside the house and watched over the daughter. Dr. Rivers promised a spare house he had on the back of his property. Henri agreed to the offer after praying on it for two days. He would have a nice three-bedroom house for his family, a stable job for himself and his children,
and Daniel agreed to give the Henderson’s a small allowance to help them out with food and other necessities. It was a blessing from the Lord that Henri couldn’t reject on any account.

After a moment of thoughtfulness, Abigail looked up at her Papa with hesitant eyes and a grave expression clouding her face.

“‘I know it’s a new and scary experience Abigail, but I believe that we have been given this opportunity for a reason. I think that God will use this and us for his glory as he always does,’” he said giving his little girl a tight squeeze.

She smiled as trusted in his judgement and returned the loving hug.
Henri stayed up long after Abigail had nodded off. Sleep had not come easily for some time. Even before his wife’s death, Henri would stay up during all hours of the night praying for his wife, his children, their house, their finances, himself, and back once again to his wife. He’d lost many hours of sleep during that time, but God continued to give him the strength to make it through each day still feeling fully energetic. Sometimes he felt that he did not need the food or water of a man, but only the word of his Creator . . . his Maker . . . his Heavenly Father.

He stared longingly at the picture of his wife as he rocked in her favorite chair. He had repaired her chair several times after offering to buy her another one. But her words always remained the same. “Why would I pay to buy a new chair when this one works perfectly fine. All it needs is a new leg and some glue.” He was thankful for the wife that the Lord had blessed him with all those years. An excellent companion and an even better Mama, together they strove to accomplish their mission for the Lord.

He decided that he would bring the chair and her picture along with them to their new home; it would help the place feel more like home instead of a temporary motel. Getting up from the chair he walked into the kitchen to grab his anointing oil from the cabinet where Tabitha always kept it, right beside the cooking utensils. He smiled as he
remembered her sneaking a drop or two into her pan to cook her breakfast in the morning, insisting that she hadn’t touched a drop.

Twisting off the cap he dabbed a small amount onto his index and middle finger and began to pray over the oil. Then he slowly went to each corner of their small house, praying over every crack, crevice, and thought inside. He wanted the place to be well prayed for when the new attendants moved in, in a few days’ time. It was the way he would want it for himself if this was to become his new home. After praying over the kitchen, living room, and his own bedroom, he quietly entered his children’s room and prayed over each of them.

Stopping first at John Mark, his eldest son of sixteen, he prayed for wisdom, guidance, patience, and understanding as they embarked on this new journey together.

He tip-toed over to Hazel, his eldest daughter, two years younger than his son, but two minutes older than Abigail and prayed that she would continue to be slow to speak and quick to listen, that she would be patient with her siblings and be gracious in her new environment.

He lifted his hand from her temple and turned to face Abigail. She was lying peacefully in her bed closest to their window. Only fourteen, but she was years ahead of her siblings. Reaching for her forehead he saw her open her right eye, but only enough so that she could catch a glance of her Papa standing over her. Abigail had always been a light sleeper; it had been that way since she was a baby. Henri watched her close her eyes and nod off back to sleep before he began praying over her. “Lord continue to watch over
my baby girl, give her wisdom with this new family, allow her to break out of this
depression and sadness and use the voice you have given to her, and give her guidance to
know what to do and when to do it, Lord. Amen.”

Walking back to the door of his children’s room he silently watched all of them
sleep and thanked God that he was still blessed through everything.

Soon he found himself back in his wife’s rocking chair, slowly nodding off to
sleep. He closed his eyes, but only for a second or so he thought, because before he knew
it the sun had already begun to rise in the sky and the day of moving had come upon him.
HAZEL

I was the first one up the next morning. Judging from the sun’s location, I predicted that it was only a little after six o’clock. Judging the time by the sun was a trick my siblings and I had learned years ago from our Uncle Robert. I got up from my twin sized bed that lay next to John Mark’s, and quietly exited the bedroom bringing the almost empty chamber pot with me.

Going outside early in the morning had become one of my favorite things to do over the years. I loved the feel that the dew left on my bare feet as I crossed the grass and small yard to reach the outhouse. Every time was inside I couldn’t help but to think of the indoor bathroom that I had heard so many rumors about. Having never used or seen one before I could only imagine that they had to be more comfortable than the outhouse. With an indoor bathroom there probably weren’t as many snakes around and it probably didn’t stink near as bad either. I wonder if Dr. Rivers’ had indoor plumbing. Would we be allowed to use it? Maybe I could sneak a peek at one when no one was around.

I couldn’t help but to wonder what else Dr. Rivers might have in his house. Would he have a mirror? My friend Barbara had a long mirror in her living room. I loved looking at my reflection and the items around me whenever I went over after school. If I wanted to see my reflection I would go out to the pond for a short time. It never changed,
although I always thought it might. But it looked the same, an identical replica of Abigail’s.

Our face and body figure were identical. We both shared a small round face, a pudgy short nose, high cheek bones, thick black eyebrows, and shoulder length black hair. The only thing that was different between me and my sister is our eye color. Abigail’s’ eyes are a deep brown, mine, however, were hazel, which shows how creative my parents were.

I was known for being the beauty in the family, at least according to my grandmother. I would rather wear dresses, remain indoors throughout the day, sew, and clean the house. Abigail could hardly keep the dresses she wore clean. She preferred to stay in the field with Papa and follow him and help him around the yard as he worked. She was a lot like our Mama in that way. I couldn’t help laughing as I remembered Papa’s words to me, “I’ll have to keep my eye on you, Hazel, as you continue to grow in your years. Boys are already chasing you down now before you’ve even turned thirteen and I don’t believe that it will stop anytime soon. Remember to keep yourself and your body pure and wait for God to bring the right man into your life. Don’t go after any young boy that chases you.”

“What about Abigail?” I had asked.

Papa shrugged, “Abigail is a bit different from you. She has no interest in boys at the moment; she’s still too full of life and adventure. The boy that captures the attention
of my little girl will have to be undoubtedly special and sent from the Lord. But that will be years into the future.”

I grinned knowing that nothing had changed since Papa told this to me two years ago. I was still being chased by boys every day at school while Abigail barely noticed their existence.

“Are you almost done in there? Some of us are waiting out here,” John Mark said from the other side of the door.

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

John Mark had the same problem I did. He was chased down by girls daily at school and church. Mama had said it was because he was a catch and every girl in town knew it. With his short dark curly hair that he could barely manage to tame in the mornings and his dark brown skin tone that complemented his features perfectly, it was easy to see why every girl was after him.

I could only hope that one day Abigail would change and a young man would catch her eye. Maybe then we would finally have more to talk about. Every time I even mentioned a boy from school, Abigail would roll her eyes into the back of her head and they would stay there until I stopped talking or dropped the conversation altogether.

“It’s been a minute,” John Mark said, irritation beginning to sound in his voice, “Now open the door.”

I sighed but reluctantly opened the door for her brother, “There, are you happy now?”
“Yes, my bladder and I thank you,” he said running into the outhouse.

I walked back into the house only to face an empty living room. But I soon caught sight of Abigail making breakfast in the kitchen. This was her routine every morning, even before the death of our Mama; Abigail always tried to have food on the table for her family. It was something she had seen our Mama do and she wanted to do the same.

I walked over to the kitchen and took in the sight of my twin sister. Her hair was twisted into a small bun at the back of her head. She had changed out her blue plaid pajamas and was now wearing a pale blue morning dress that somehow brought out the dark brown color of her eyes. She was barefoot but walked along the floor as if she couldn’t feel the cold touch that accompanied the hardwood floors.

Abigail must have sensed me approaching because she turned her head and offered a smile.

“Hey, did you sleep well?” I asked hoping that she would say something.

She nodded and turned her attention back to the wood stove.

“Well so did I,” I said rolling my eyes, “thanks for asking.”

I looked over at the items on the stove and noticed that Abigail had decided to make biscuits, grits, eggs, and bacon for breakfast. Hoping that it would keep us full long enough to make it through a majority of our trip today.

“Biscuits and grits?” I asked looking into the pan that lay atop their small stove.

She nodded not taking her eyes from what she was doing. She reached for the spatula that was resting on the countertop beside the stove and slid it under the eggs that
she was making and began to scramble them. She smiled at the smoothness of the eggs and quickly began to take them off the fire before they became too hard.

“I’ll take some of that,” John Mark said walking through the front door and heading over to where his sisters were standing. “Here Abigail, let me take over for you so you can use the outhouse while it’s free.”

Abigail looked from her brother to the empty skillet and nodded.

“I’ll take two,” I said to anyone who was listening. They both nodded and I turned and headed back to our room to change into my traveling outfit that I had picked out the day before.
ABIGAIL

Last night I had a dream.

I was sitting on a bench by a small pond, watching the water as it made ripples before me. I heard the birds sing their melody and watched the ducks as they glided and bobbed their heads under the water, then come back up out of the water once more to feel the sun on their face. It was nice to be outside, watching the trees wave to me from across the pond, feeling the breeze that the wind brought my way, and smelling the fresh air. I focused on the tree beside me as I tried to look for shade on a bench. The tree lost one leaf, then another, and another. It was autumn. I saw a young man walk over to my side of the pond. I looked closely at him and asked, “Do I know you?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Hello, Abigail.”

I smiled as he came closer and found a spot beside me on the bench. “How have you been?” I asked the stranger. In my dream I knew exactly who he was; he seemed to be an old friend long forgotten, he appeared only a year or two older than me. It was familiar to be with him and near him. I felt safe.

“I’ve been good. How have you been?” he responded.

“Better than I was,” I said unable to take my eyes off his face.
“There’s no reason to worry or fear about the future and what it holds, Abigail. The future is not ours to worry about. Trust in God to guide your path, trust that he knows what he’s doing.”

“I do.”

“Good. Believe that your future will be blessed with many gifts, much wisdom, hope, love and new friendships.”

“Do you mean with my new home?”

He nodded, “Remember to be at peace and stay in prayer with everything you do.”

“I will,” I said.

“Good, now before I go. May I ask you something?”

I nodded and watched him rise from the bench, stand in front of me, and with a low bow he asked, “Will you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

“I’d be honored to dance with you,” I said smiling as I placed my hand in his.

I stood in front of him and followed his lead as we slow danced together. We listened to the birds singing in the background, offering harmony to our dance and the young man slowly spun me around three times then smiled.

“Beautiful,” he remarked as I fell back into step with him.

He dipped me once, then twice before bringing me back up to him and laying his head on top of mine.

The young man and I danced wonderfully, beautifully . . . peacefully. There was no one around to disturb us as we danced. We danced for no one but ourselves and God. I
could feel his heartbeat beating in perfect rhythm with my own. His breath against my cheek was slow and easy as if he had been waiting his entire life for this moment, as had I.

For a second he and I seemed to stop dancing on the walkway that lay around the pond and were floating on air, I had never before in my life felt so happy . . . so free. I felt as if I was dancing with this young man, but next to Jesus. This is how it must feel when you're dancing with the Holy Spirit, weightless.

“Abigail?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, tearing my gaze away from our floating feet and towards the young man.

“I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?” I asked, laying my head upon his chest.

“Abigail, I . . .”

My dream came to an end when I sensed Hazel rise from her bed and began to head outside towards the outhouse. But it wasn’t her fault that my dream had ended. I had always been a light sleeper and nothing could ever change that. These were the times I missed my mother most, I thought to myself as I combed out my shoulder length hair with a small comb as I stood staring at the hardwood wall in front of me in my bedroom.

My mother said that I had a gift. The gift of prophetic dreams, same as Joseph in the Bible. The only difference between Joseph and me . . . he could interpret his dreams
and I could not. But I believe that that’s why I had been blessed with my mom. That was her gift, the gift of interpreting dreams. She always interpreted for me whenever I had a dream, and I had a lot of dreams. I had anywhere from one to six a night, and I enjoyed every second of them.

I didn’t know why I had the dream that I had, but I believed it was supposed to give me hope for the future life I was about to embark on soon. I prayed that I was ready for this adventure. This new life, this journey. I prayed for peace within our families. It’s hard to think about the future when everything you know is about to change.

Breakfast was over as soon as it began. Papa said that we had to get on the road if we intended to make it to the Rivers’ house before the end of the day. Our family didn’t have a car; like others in our neighborhood we couldn’t afford the luxury of having one of our own. Instead, we relied on our horse Pluto and our wagon for safe traveling. Thankfully, we didn’t have too much furniture or clothing to take with us to our new home and we had finished most of our packing earlier in the week. We were all able to easily fit in the wagon after everything was loaded.

Before we took off I watched Papa take a letter from his pocket and read it over once, before letting out a deep breath. I could only assume that it was the letter he had received from Dr. Rivers a couple weeks ago. Papa had let me read and re-read the letter that I knew what it said without looking at it.
Henri,

I have communicated several times with Dr. Williams. He has explained your situation and after conversing with him he has assured me that you have the character and integrity to take care of my land and animals, as I am away quite often on business. I understand that you have two daughters who could be of great help around the house and assist in caring for my little Katherine who is five years old, as her mother is presently away. If you are willing to accept the position, please communicate with Dr. Williams about my offer and he will relay the information to me. I will direct him to send funds for your travels.

Dr. Daniel Rivers

P. S. - You need not be concerned about living quarters. I have a small house on my property for you and your family.

I wondered what type of person Dr. Rivers was and what Katherine was like? I had never been a care-taker for a child before. I had baby-sat from time to time for our neighbors’ children, but it was never a daily job.

“Papa, how far away is Dr. Rivers’ house?” Hazel asked after we had been riding for about an hour. The road was bumpy and it was hard to get comfortable. The longest
that we had ridden in the wagon was about two hours. But even then we weren’t carrying our belongings along with us, only groceries.

“It’s about a two or three week trip at most. If we keep going at the pace we’re at, hopefully we can make it in two.”

“In that case I think I’ll help myself to a little nap,” John Mark said making a comfortable pillow out of my right shoulder.

I rolled my eyes at my brother but tried not to move too much for him as I looked over to the left of my left thigh and eyed my book, the only book I owned, my bible. I had read and studied this book cover to cover six times that it was starting to show. But as I reached over to grab it, John Mark moved his head on my arm and adjusted his body to become more comfortable in the wagon, so I decided against reading for the time being. John Mark and I had always been close. I always felt closer to my brother than I had with my sister, even if she was my twin. I honestly didn’t know why my sister and I didn’t connect as well as my brother and I did. Sometimes I wished it were different. I wished we were as close and Harriet and Delia, two sisters at my school. They weren’t twins, they were only a year apart in age and somehow they were the best of friends.

I’ve never had that with Hazel. I believed it was because we differed in so many ways. I liked to read while Hazel liked to listen to the latest news on the radio. I liked to cook with my mother while Hazel liked to practice her sewing skills on a sewing machine she had gotten from my grandma for her seventh birthday. I liked to be outside in nature
with my dad or by myself to think while Hazel only liked to be outside to flirt with the boys in our neighborhood.

Maybe John Mark and I were so close because he didn’t have a brother and I was the closest thing to having one. I was as much of a girl as Hazel, but I wasn’t as interested in dressing up and thinking about boys and marriage as much as she was. I was my own person and I liked it that way. Mama always told me that I’d change as I got older, but the older I got; the less I believed her. Although, the dream I had last night kept me wondering. What did it mean? What was the purpose behind it? Because there was one, I could feel it.

I always remembered Mama’s words of wisdom to me, “Just wait for the right man to come into your life, Abby. You’ll see . . . you’ll be begging Hazel for advice on clothes and boys in no time. I only hope I’m still alive to see it for myself and meet this young man who’s going to turn your whole life around. Just wait . . . you’ll see. You’ll see.”

Sometimes I wondered if she was right and if a boy would end up making me act more like my sister. But the more I thought about it, the stranger it felt to me. How could a boy have the power to do that? Plus, I thought as I looked at my brother who was starting to snore as he rested quietly on my shoulder, the only men I needed in my life were in the wagon with me. Why would I want more than that?
We’d been riding for about five hours when we reached a small town. Papa decided to pull over so that we could have a chance to stretch our legs, use the bathroom, and find a few snacks at the service station.

I followed John Mark and Abigail out of the wagon and stretched my arms before looking around at the scenery around me. It was a sparse town. Nobody seemed to be around, except for those who worked there. It was very bleak.

“We need to get back on the road as soon as possible. Girls the restroom is over there to your right. John Mark and I will buy a few snacks for the road and then we’ll head out. Let’s meet back here in twenty minutes. Understood?” Papa asked with a lifted brow.

Abigail and I nodded before turning to our right in the direction that dad had pointed to see a small outhouse marked restrooms. We walked over and approached the outhouse once again glancing upwards at the words that marked each entrance door. The left door read, “White” while the right door read “Colored.” I rolled my eyes and looked over at Abigail who only nodded before opening the right door.

After we left the outhouse we looked around for our dad and John Mark, but they were nowhere to be seen.
“Well, I suppose it’s time to explore our surroundings,” I said letting out a breath. Abigail looked unsure. She never liked to explore things without our parents, because she was afraid of being left behind or getting lost and not being able to find her way back.

“Oh, come on,” I said taking her hand in mine and dragging her behind me, “Don’t let this be a missed opportunity. It’ll be fun.”

She followed reluctantly behind me. We walked a few feet away from where the wagon had been left when we heard a voice call out ahead of us.

“Get your fortune told for only five cents. Find out who you’re destined to marry, learn about a past relative, or find out what is destined to happen in your future. I can even predict what your dinner will be tonight. Come in, come in,” a lady said from the outside of an abandoned looking cottage.

“That sounds like fun. Let’s go!” I exclaimed.

“No! We can’t go to a fortune teller,” Abigail said taking her hand from mine.

“So you can speak . . . it’s about time. I was beginning to think we would never hear your voice again.”

Abigail shook her head, “We can’t go in there Hazel.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun. It’s not like it will mean anything. We’d be going in as a joke . . . only for fun. One day we will be able to look back on this experience and laugh.”
“What about money? Five cents is a lot. Don’t you think we should be saving our money for something, I don’t know, more important?”

“I’ll pay for it. Remember grandma and grandpa gave us some extra change before we left.”

“Hazel, there’s a reason fortune tellers and mediums were cast out in the Old Testament.”

“Exactly . . . the Old Testament. That was centuries ago. We’re no longer living in the Old Testament days, it’s all New Testament from here on,” I said grabbing her arm and pulling her with me.

“Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God. Leviticus 19:31.”

“You know, I think I liked you better when you weren’t talking.”

“Come in, come in. Would you two beautiful young ladies like to have your fortunes told?” The lady said as she led us inside her small cottage. It was dark with only light from the two small windows and the front door letting in daylight. There were four candles lit perfectly surrounding the table where she did her business. The scent of lavender filled the air around us. She appeared to be in her early fifties. She was dark in color and wore a plain laced white blouse that complimented her dull greying skirt. Her hair flowed down her shoulders and there were strands of pieces of green fake hair that had been intertwined within her own. The earrings she wore were pink and in the shape
of a dreamcatcher. There was a faded tattoo on the inside of her right wrist that showed an eagle chasing after the moon intertwined with the sun.

“Which one of you would like to go first?” she asked watching me carefully as I raised my hand. “Ah, yes the oldest. By two minutes I’m sensing.”

“How did . . . how did you know that?” I asked taken aback.

“I beg your pardon. I have forgotten my manners. My name is Madame Chanel Phalange, teller of the past, present, and future. What can I predict for you today?” She sat in a plain black chair that was situated opposite me and Abigail with a small table separating us. “Take a seat, take a seat. Your sister may sit at the other end of the room on that small stool there,” she said pointing across the room.

Abigail looked sick and a quick look at her face showed that she wanted to run out of the room as fast as she possibly could. But the pleading look on my face persuaded her to sit and be patient.

“How did you know that?” Madame Chanel Phalange asked with a strong smile lingering on her lips.

I reached down into the small pocket that was sewed into my dress and pulled out two nickels. Laying them on the table I said, “One is for me and the other is for my sister.”

“Of course, dear,” she said, “Now what is it that you seek? Do you have a certain question or obstacle in mind that you need answers for? Or is this a general reading?”
“Hmmm.” What did I want to know about my future? I had already lived the past and I was currently living in the present, but the future . . . that was a mystery to me. What did it hold for me? Love, adventure, grief, romance? “Will I ever find love? I’m beginning to doubt myself in that area. I need to know for certain that one day (hopefully soon) that I will find love and get married.”

Madam Chanel reached for my hands and waited until my hands were in hers before she nodded her head slowly and forced a smile to form on her lips, “In due time yes you will find love.”

“Thank God! That’s a relief. Will it be sometime soon?”

“It will happen when it is supposed to happen. Not a moment too soon or a moment later. Is that all you wanted to know?”

“Hmm…will my life be filled with adventure?”

Madam Chanel yawned, “Yes, yes, all of this and more will happen for you. But I must warn you that adventure comes at a price. You will not be fully prepared for the adventure that will be placed into your life.”

“Okay . . . I’m not completely certain what that means, but thank you,” I said rising from my seat and withdrawing my hand from hers, “I’m so excited to see what is in store for me.” I looked to my right to see Abigail still sitting in the corner of the room looking uninterested and ready to leave.

“Abigail it’s your turn,” I said walking in her direction.

She shook her head without looking at me.
“I already paid her, so you have to go. I can’t get a second reading. Plus, it’s all good fun. All I did was ask yes and no questions.”

“No.”

I crossed my arms, “The faster you get up from that seat and get your fortune told, the faster we can leave. Or we can stay here. The choice is yours.”

She hesitated for a second before rising from her chair and walking over to Madame Phalange.

Madame Phalange rose from her seat and reached out her hand to Abigail’s.

“I will ask you the same question. What is it that you seek? Do you have a certain question or obstacle in mind that you need answers for? Or is this a general reading?”

Abigail sighed, before taking a seat in the chair I had vacated. “A general reading, I suppose.”

Madame Phalange nodded and reached down beside her and pulled out a bottle of what looked like water. “Please cup both of your hands together,” she said watching Abigail as she did as she was instructed. “What I’m placing in your hands is cleansing water brought over from Florida. Please rinse your hands well with this and then we will begin.”

Abigail turned away from the table as she rinsed her hands, as not to get any water on the table. As she did I could feel the heat of her gaze lingering steadily upon me.
The table that was in front of me was full of knickknacks anyone would assume to see on a fortune teller’s table. She had a crystal ball, a black handheld folding fan, lots of quartz and scarlet, and other various rocks and stones. Closest to me, however, were four large stacks of cards. I could tell by looking at the back of these cards that they were not your ordinary playing cards.

I remained quiet, not wanting to talk to the fortune teller. Mama had always warned us about fortune tellers. She had insisted that it was in our best interest to stay as far away from them as possible. “It was a sin,” she said, “to even think about coming into contact with them.” I believed her words, even though my sister did not. Papa told me that some fortune tellers did have an insight into the future as I had with my dreams. But the difference between me and them . . . I don’t use my gift for profit and I don’t pretend to be someone I’m not.

“Please,” she said gesturing to the four stacks of cards lying in front of me, “Choose a stack of cards.” I chose the farthest one to the left. “Shuffle the cards. The reason I ask you to shuffle the cards, instead of me shuffling them myself, is because I believe that the magic lies within the shuffle and the holder of the shuffle. When you shuffle your energy goes from you and into the deck of cards. Then your heart and energy will tell me what you are truly seeking, even without your knowledge.”
I nodded as I rolled my eyes inwardly. After shuffling the cards five times, I handed them back to her.

“I will now begin to lay your cards into a pyramid. I use a pyramid to signify what will happen last to what has already happened or what is happening currently in your life. The top of the pyramid is furthest into the future and the bottom of the pyramid is the present.”

I watched closely as she placed the first card down. It was picture of a couple holding hands. I wasn’t surprised to see that romance would be the furthest thing in the future for me, boys were the last thing on my mind. The next few cards were a blur to me as she began to speak once again.

“My dear, the cards tell me that you have recently lost someone special to you. Your mother, is that correct?”

I said nothing, but she knew that she was right once she heard a loud gasp from my sister in the far corner.

“I thought so. Listen closely to me, the lessons that your mother has taught you will soon come back into play. Trust your heart and remember that everything you learned from your mother has been given to you for a reason.” She moved past the cards she was referring to as she continued to place more cards in front of me onto the table.

She looked at me with a pale and saddened expression before continuing, “You shall soon be faced with a near-death-experience. You will come very close to death, but you will survive and it will only end up making you stronger.”

She nodded as she pointed to a card that showed a tombstone with a man standing on the outside of it. “This man is Lazarus from the Bible. Are you familiar with his story?” I nodded and continued to look at the cards she continued to fill up the pyramid. “On the journey that you are currently taking you shall be received by many people and they will not only become very loyal friends to you but a close family as well.”

I shook my head. So far, she has said that I will need my Mama’s past wisdom, I’ll basically die and then be brought back to life, and then I’ll have a new family and friends. Fortune tellers were great! No wonder Mama always insisted that we stay away from them.

Madame Phalange pointed to another card. “This card symbolizes confusion. This is the Tower of Babel,” she said pointing towards the card. “Like your sister, you too will find love. But your love life will be far different. It will grow over time, blossoming from a long friendship and a bond that cannot be broken no matter what obstacles come your way.” She glanced at my sister before continuing. “You may not know it when you meet him, but the two of you will have an instant connection. But be careful not to get this young man confused with another. You will have a powerful connection with not one, but two young men. One of them is for you, the other is not. Once you figure out who is not for you, my advice to you would be to run! Not only will he not be right for you, but you will not share in the same morals or interests, although you will believe that you do upon introduction. This young man will not flee from your life easily, but it is your job to sever
all connections with him. Listen to me closely as I repeat, Run! Don’t walk from him, because you will be pulled back easily, you must run. No matter the cost.” I blinked twice. How did she get all of that from one card? Was I missing something? Did the card look different from her angle? I tilted my head for a closer look.

Finally, she placed the final two cards in front of me. Then she raised her right hand to her lips, and seemed to whisper a silent prayer.

“These last cards indicate death. A family member, a loved one close to you will be taken from you. An event that is not clear to me at the moment will come into place and take this family member away from you and your family. There will be a lot of grief, but in the end, you will know that it was done with the best intentions.”

I looked at her blankly as I heard Hazel approach behind me on my left.

“Is there anything that you’d like to ask me, dear?” she asked with a weak smile.

“No. Thank you for your time.” I rose and began to walk towards the exit.

“Don’t give up, child,” Madame Phalange said, rising from her chair to follow us out. “Remember what your mother used to tell you.”

I stopped in my tracks and slowly turned to face her. How could she possibly know what my mother used to tell me? I shook my head and began walking back to the wagon again. This lady was crazy, of course she said that. All mothers give their daughters wise advice. She probably says that to everyone who enters into her cottage.

“Don’t be afraid, child. The past, present, and future are gifts from God.”

I needed to get away. I closed my eyes and shook it off her words and predictions.
“Let’s get out of here before Papa starts to wonder where we are,” I said.

“Okay,” Hazel said to me before turning to thank the fortune teller. “Thank you for everything. You were worth every cent.”

She skipped to catch up with me, “That was weird, wasn’t it? She knew so much about our lives, past and present. Aren’t you curious to know what she meant by the fortunes she gave to you? I know I am.”

I wasn’t listening. I couldn’t walk fast enough.

“I wonder what love interest will enter into my life. And you get two love interests! That’s not fair. You’re not even interested in boys. Maybe she got our fortunes mixed up. Why should you have two boys chasing after you when I only get one? What’s the meaning of that?”

I rolled my eyes and ran off without her towards the wagon, silently hoping Papa would leave without her.
As I climbed into the wagon I couldn’t stop thinking of the words that Madame Phalange had said, “Remember what your mother used to tell you.” Did she really know, or had she only assumed that my mother gave me wise advice before she died. But if it wasn’t a lucky guess, how could she possibly have known? I laid my head against the thick white canvas cloth that covered the back of the wagon. Had it really been three weeks since my mother’s death? Three weeks without the one person I didn’t think I would lose until I was older, much older. I shook off the thought. “No Abigail. You have to be strong.” I opened her eyes and looked outside of the wagon to find my sister talking with John Mark as Papa fed Pluto an apple. I leaned my head back once more against the canvas as when I remembered the letter in my pocket.

“Mama.” Her letter was the only piece of her that I really had left. Mama had given each of us a letter before she died. I didn’t know the content of the letters that my siblings had received, but I continually wondered what they said. I pulled the letter from my pocket and unfolded the wrinkled letter slowly. I felt the markings on the page and smelled the faded scent of vanilla and spices imbedded into the paper. I hadn’t read my letter since Papa gave it to me; I was waiting until the time was right. I suppose now was that time.
August 13, 1941

My Dearest Abigail,

Before I leave this world, I want to give you a message that may help you on your journey through life. Remember to always keep your faith, hope, and trust in the Lord. He never moves slowly, but instead he always moves at exactly the right speed. Although he might not be moving at the speed we want him to, remember to trust in his timing. Do not rush the Lord or the work in he is doing in your life. Be patient. Take one day at a time Abby. When life feels like it is getting rough and it seems that it will never end, do what I always tell you. Breathe. Hard times will be over before you know it. They never last long. They only feel that way when we’re in the moment. Secondly, remember that when it comes to love, do not follow your heart, because our heart is a fickle organ and can lead us astray many times. Our hearts like our flesh is weak and gives in to temptation easily. Instead, follow the conviction of the Holy Spirit, he will never fail you or lead you astray. Lastly, but most important of all, remember that I love you with all my heart and I have prayed that your journey without me, will be a bearable one. I do not know why my time has come as it has, but I do not question the work of the Lord. Neither should you. Don’t be sad for me, or turn your back on God because of my death. Death will greet us all one day, my time just happened to come sooner rather than later. But I am not dead. I am only sleeping until the day that the Lord returns. Be brave and strong for your Papa, John Mark,
and Hazel. You’re stronger than you know, Abigail. I love you, sweetheart. Don’t ever forget that.

Love your, Mama.

I let out a deep breath and looked at the letter once more before folding it back up and placing it back into my dress pocket. John Mark climbed into the wagon and looked at me with curiosity.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded and smiled as I let out another deep breath.
The roads were rough and getting rougher as we neared Dr. Rivers’ house. Papa had said that we were only about ten minutes away now, and the time couldn’t go by any slower. My legs had grown numb, my back was in pain, and I was plain uncomfortable overall. Abigail had fallen asleep on John Mark’s shoulder. John Mark was almost more anxious than I was. He kept glancing around to the back of the wagon above the luggage to look at the surroundings. Every once in a while he would call out for Papa and ask how long we had left.

“It won’t be too long now,” he kept repeating.

I was ready. I was ready for a new adventure, a new home, and a new atmosphere.

I felt the wagon pull to a stop about five minutes later. Finally, after all the time in the wagon, we had made it!

“Well I didn’t think anyone would be out here to greet us,” I heard my Papa say. You must be Mr. Lawrence.”

“That I am, sir,” the voice replied. “Nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Henderson.”

“The pleasure is mine. Where is Dr. Rivers?”
“I don’t believe he knows that you have arrived. I happened to be brushing my horse when I heard you approach.”

Who was Lawrence? Was he another servant? But he said that it was his horse. I shook my head I couldn’t wait anymore. I needed to get out!

“Then don’t disturb him on my account,” Papa said as he stood and jumped off the edge of his wagon.

I climbed out right behind him and took in my surroundings for only a second before my eyes landed on the most handsome young man I had ever seen in my entire life.

“Hello,” he said, “You must be one of the twins. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Lawrence.”

“Hazel,” I said as I began to brush out the creases in my dress.

I watched as he looked towards the opening in the wagon to where John Mark was nudging Abigail awake.

They both soon exited the wagon. John Mark ruffled his hair a little, and Abigail stretched for a second before taking in the view.

I turned my attention back to Lawrence, but his eyes were on my sister.

Now, since everyone is awake and out of the wagon,” Papa said as he waved Abigail over, “I suppose it’s time to make proper introductions. Children, this is Mr. Lawrence Rivers. He’s the young man of the house.”

“Thank you, but you can call me Lawrence,” he said looking at each of us.
“Very well. Lawrence, these are my children. My eldest, John Mark.”

“Sir,” John Mark said with a nod.

“My eldest daughter, Hazel, and her twin sister, Abigail.”

We both smiled our hellos, but Abigail’s attention was nowhere on Lawrence. Her attention was solely focused on Papa. She took her father’s right hand into her left and looked up at him as if wanting to know what their next step was. I rolled my eyes. Abigail was always the shy one, I wondered when she would finally grow out of that phase, but it didn’t appear to be happening anytime soon.

“So you have a horse?” I asked Lawrence.

“Yes. His name is Dexter,” he said warmly.

“That’s an good name. Our horse is named Pluto.”

“Maybe we can all go riding sometime,” John Mark commented.

“Maybe one day after you have finished all of your work,” Papa intervened.

“We can make a day of it. Maybe I can even get Katherine to join us,” Lawrence said in response to John Mark.

I watched as Lawrence returned his gaze to Abigail. He saw her take a quick glance down at the book that she held in one hand while the other held closely onto Papa.

“You read?” Lawrence asked Abigail.

Abigail looked at Lawrence for the first time and nodded.

“I’ll have to show you our library sometime. I think you would like it.”

“You have a library?”
“We do. Well, it’s mostly for my mother. She loves to read and has begun to collect books whenever she can.” He paused as he looked towards the wagon. “Well, I suppose that you can leave your things out here for the time being. My father would love you all to join us for dinner,” he said.

“Very well then,” Papa replied. “Lead the way, Mr. Lawrence.”

Lawrence smiled at him and turned to head towards his home. I quickly set off to catch up with Lawrence.

“Mind if I walk with you?” I asked smiling.

He nodded as his eyes remained focused on the house up ahead.
The Rivers’ house was known as a Torrington. It was a two-story home with seven rooms, two bathrooms, and a diner. From the outside, it looked like a modern family home. There were seven windows facing the road accented by blue window shutters, a solid oak front door, and white bricks that sculpted the outline of the house. There were five bushes on each side of the house that were starting to bloom orange, red, pink, and yellow roses. They each made their way onto the brown bricked path that led to the front door. Lawrence looked back at each of the Hendersons and opened the door to his home.

Abigail, Hazel, and John Mark were in awe as they turned their gazes to face each section of the household. The ceiling towered high above them and held a chandelier that didn’t come close to touching the head of John Mark, who had already reached the height of six feet.

Mr. Henderson was in as much admiration as his children. The large arched doorway opened into the living room and the dining room was on the right. A fireplace stood at the far distance of the room. A spiral staircase at the far left corner led up to the second floor and the attic. The light brown hardwood floor complimented and brightened up the entire house.

Dr. Rivers emerged from his study that was past the living room and behind a door that was hidden off to any normal eye unless you knew where to look.
“Henri, I’m glad you could make it.” Dr. Rivers said. “I hope the trip was not too bad.”

“Not at all suh. Thank you for having us.”

Dr. Rivers nodded in reply, “These must be your handsome children. Let me see if I can get this right. You are obviously John Mark, unless there’s another young man that Dr. Williams forgot to inform me of.”

John Mark laughed uneasily, “Yes sir. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is mine.” He turned his attention to the twins. “And these two beauties must be Hazel and Abigail,” he said pointing to the two girls in turn.

“Actually,” Hazel said speaking up, “I’m Hazel and that’s Abigail.”

“Well, there you have it. You must be identical; even I can’t tell you apart. I’m usually pretty good at this sort of thing. I’m good with faces. Keep that in mind for the future.”

Hazel laughed. Her laugh caught the eye of Dr. Rivers, “You don’t believe me, Hazel.”

Hazel let out another uneasy laugh before Dr. Rivers continued, “Just you wait my dear. Give me a couple of days and I’ll be able to tell you and your sister apart in no time at all. You both could be wearing the same outfit and I’ll be able to tell who’s who, mark my words.”
“Then you’ll be able to accomplish something that even I sometimes have trouble with,” her Papa chuckled in his deep baritone voice. “Most days I have to look twice to know which daughter I’m talking to.”

“One of the things that you will quickly learn about me Henri . . . I have a keen eye for detail.”

“Yes, suh, I’m sure that’s important in your line of work.”

“And what about you, dear,” he said looking at Abigail, “don’t tell me you’re always this shy and quiet.”

“Until she warms up to her surroundings, she is. Don’t be offended by it. That’s just her way,” Hazel said.

They were continuing their introductions when the Rivers’ maid, Honey, stepped into the room, “Dr. Rivers, your dinner is ready to be served.”

“Thank you, Honey. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m famished,” he said with a sly wink towards Abigail.

There was a table in front of them that could seat ten people. It had been lined with a long white cotton table cloth that had laced dollies embedded throughout. Honey had placed the Blue Castle patterned china on the table with all of the accessories.

“Honey, where is Katherine?” Dr. Rivers asked.

“Joy went upstairs to fetch her suh,” Honey replied with a solid nod.
“Thank you, Honey,” Dr. Rivers said as he took his seat at the head of the table, “Henri would you be kind enough to take a seat by me.”

Henri nodded and went to his place beside Dr. Rivers. Abigail followed closely behind her father and took the seat next to him.

Hazel and John Mark followed in the seats beside her, while Lawrence took the seat across from Abigail.

“There’s a blue house on my plate,” Abigail whispered over to Hazel.

“I know there’s one on mine, too,” Hazel whispered back.

Dr. Rivers noticed the girls admiring the plates before them and said, “Yes, these here plates, ladies, were some of my wife’s favorites. She has others but whenever we have guests over she always prefers to lay these out.”

The girls shushed themselves and nodded as Dr. Rivers turned his conversation over to Henri. Hazel watched Honey as she stood at the door that led to the dining room waiting for young Katherine and Joy to arrive. As she watched her gaze landed on Lawrence. She hoped that he would eventually catch her eye, but his eyes steadily remained on his plate only looking up every now and then to steal a peek at Abigail.

“Ah, there’s my lovely daughter,” Dr. Rivers said as Katherine walked through the door and found her seat beside Lawrence at the table. “I’d like to introduce you all to my daughter Katherine. Abigail, Hazel, when you return home from school in the evenings it will be your job to watch and care after my little bumble bee here.”

“Yes, sir,” the girls nodded in reply.
“When are we going to get set up in school, Papa?” Abigail whispered.

“We will see about that first thing in the morning.”

Hazel elbowed Abigail, “Why did you have to bring up school? He might have forgotten and then we could’ve gotten out of it for the rest of the year.”

“Trust me Hazel, I wasn’t going to forget,” Henri said giving his daughter a stern look.

“You have met Honey,” Dr. Rivers continued, “but this young lady beside her is her daughter, Joy. Both are a blessing to have in this household.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Henri said from where he sat at the table.

“Well,” Dr. Rivers said clasping his hands together, “Now that all the proper introductions have been made, I suppose it’s time to start our supper. Henri, would you pray over our supper for us this evening?”

“Yes suh, it would be my pleasure,” Henri said as he stood up from his chair, “Dear Heavenly Father –”
HAZEL

My mom used to tell me that I was very forward when it came to boys. When I was around the age of six she said to me, “Hazel don’t be running after that young boy over there. If he wants to play with you, he should be the one to approach you first. If you continue to chase after him, all that’s going to do is scare him off.”

“But I want to play with him, so I’m helping to speed things along.”

“Listen to what I’m saying, Hazel. A mother knows. No young man wants to be chased. He wants to be the one doing the chasing.”

When I saw Lawrence as I got out of our wagon upon arriving, those words from my mother were brought back to my memory. But for some reason they didn’t stick with me, because in my mind I wasn’t chasing after Lawrence. No, not chasing, I was only giving him a light nudge in my direction. Although there was no mistaking our racial differences, I had been brought up to not look at color. My mother always tried to remind us that even though the world around us may place us into a category of our own, we were not allowed to do the same. God had made us the color we were for a specific reason. However, she also reminded us to be careful. Because although we may become attracted to someone of another race, that didn’t mean we would get the happily ever after. More so than not, we would get the other end of the stick. But that never stopped me, I always like a challenge.
After dinner, I decided that I would continue with my plan to nudge Lawrence into the right direction – towards me – before my family and I unloaded our luggage. That’s when I noticed that he was talking to John Mark. They were both sitting down on one of the large tan sofas in the living room. Lawrence seemed to be showing John Mark some playing cards or something that he owned. I couldn’t exactly make out what they were saying.

I couldn’t but to be a little jealous. John Mark always had the upper hand when it came to boys, because he was one. He didn’t have to wonder if someone liked him or not. He was a lot like my dad in the way: open, friendly, charming. A lot like me, except less pushy.

Lawrence was about three inches taller than Abigail and I. He had light blue eyes that sparkled in the chandelier light. He had a light brown hair color that was lit up by the accented blond in his hair. He had a perfect smile, slight dimples, and an absolutely contagious laugh.

“Well it looks like John Mark has already made a new friend. Do you think he’ll replace Jacob?” Abigail asked.

“No way. John Mark would never let anyone replace Jacob. Not even someone as cute as Lawrence.”

I let out a small sigh as I watched him show John Mark his deck. Abigail rolled her eyes and sat on the floor.
I looked over at Lawrence for another minute before joining her on the floor. “Do you remember what Madame Phalange said to me? That I would meet the guy that I was supposed to marry sometime soon.”

“I don’t believe that’s exactly what she said, Hazel…”

“Minor details. Well, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“Lawrence,” I said starting to get annoyed; “don’t you think that he could be the guy she was talking about?”

“But he’s white,” Abigail whispered.

“Obviously, Abigail. I’m not blind.”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

I shook my head and looked towards John Mark and Lawrence through the slight opening between the sofa we were situated behind and an end table. He was so handsome. He had to be the boy that Madame Phalange was talking about. There was no mistaking it. Plus maybe this was the adventurous journey she implied as well. Being with someone of another race . . . what’s more adventurous than that?

Abigail and I both noticed Papa and Dr. Rivers enter into the living room at the same time with Katherine closely following behind them. We both stood from where we were seated.

“Children,” Dr. Rivers said approaching the chair closest to him, “Henri and I were talking and we decided that after you have unloaded your things, you are welcome
to come back and join us for a late-night bible lesson. This is a part of our nightly ritual and you are each welcome to come and join us whenever you like.”

We all smiled and nodded as he continued. “Hazel and Abigail, your sleeping arrangements will be different from that of your father and John Mark. While they will be sleeping in their new home in the back, you are both welcome to either join them or stay in the room we have prepared for you here. Since you will be caring for Katherine, I thought it appropriate for you to share a room that is located inside our house, in case, she needs to reach you or you her. Does that sound fair?”

Abigail met my gaze and we both nodded. I knew she was thinking the same thing I was, “We get to live in the house with the Rivers’ family . . . when can we see our bedroom?”

“Both of you will have the option of living with your dad or in your room in this house whenever you like. There will be no pressure from me. I have arranged for Honey to show you girls to the room that will be yours after she has finished putting away the dishes.”

“I can show them, dad,” Lawrence said standing up from where he had been sitting on the sofa. He looked over Abigail and smiled before turning his gaze to me, “I can show them, I don’t mind.”

“Are you sure, Lawrence?” Dr. Rivers asked, taken aback.

“Yes, sir.”
“Very well. Lawrence will show you two ladies to your room and I will show Henri and John Mark their new home. Lawrence, when you have finished showing the girls their room please escort them to their house out back.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Take Katherine with you, so she can become more acquainted with them. Sound good? Excellent!” he said without waiting for a response from the rest of us. “Henri,” he said as he headed towards the front door with Henri and John Mark close behind.

We watched as each of them left through the doors and closed the door behind him before Lawrence turned to us.

“If you ladies will follow me, I will show you to your new room. Katherine,” Lawrence said as he waited for his little sister. Katherine ran over to him and grabbed hold of his right hand as she smiled back at us. He began walking up the staircase hidden behind a door to the right of the sofa he had been sitting on with John Mark. I followed closely after them while Abigail ran to catch up with me.

“This is exciting isn’t it? We have two rooms to ourselves!”

“Yeah, and if we ever decide to split up each of us can have our own room.”

“Why would we do that?” she asked, studying me closely.

“No reason. I’m just saying in case we ever wanted to see what life would be like on our own. This would be the best way to experiment. Don’t you think?”

Abigail shrugged, “I suppose.”

“So what do you think of Lawrence?” I asked leaning over to her.
“I don’t know anything about him. Neither do you.”

I rolled my eyes, “You’re always so hesitant when it comes to white people. Loosen up a little.”

Abigail stopped in her tracks and looked at me with a serious expression, “Hazel, we are not in Louisiana anymore. We are on new territory, surrounded by new people that we know nothing about. We need not only be careful, but wise. The people around here may not be like the people from where we’re from.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t know. You keep looking at this as some sort of joke…or challenge. But life is not that way Hazel. The world is cruel and so are the people involved in it. So we have to watch what we say, what we do, and how we treat them. Not only for our sakes, but Papa’s as well. He needs this job. So please, don’t do anything stupid.”

“Ladies,” Lawrence said interrupting our conversation as he stopped in his tracks and turned to us, “This is your room.”
ABIGAIL

My grandmother likes to refer to my sister as the beautiful one, between the two of us. Of course, she considers me beautiful too, only not when it comes to comparing me to Hazel. “Why don’t you wear your hair up like Hazel from time to time? Why don’t you try wearing a different color from time to time, that blue makes you look so pale? Why don’t you get rid of those old shoes and wear an old pair of Hazel’s, they look so good on her.”

I admit that it bothered me whenever my grandma came over; I always wondered how she would compare Hazel to me this time. Eventually, I stopped caring; my dad came up to me one day and said,

“I don’t care what your grandma says. You and Hazel are completely different. You might share your looks, but your personality is different from that of your sister. Don’t change for anyone, especially your Grandma. Because the only person you can truly be is yourself. Always remember that.”

I did remember that, or at least, I tried. It’s only that Hazel always sees herself as better than me. She’s not much older than me, only two minutes, but she might as well be years older from the way she treats me. I respect Hazel in the way that sisters should, but the truth is that sometimes she takes my respect for her, as a lack of courage.

I knew that when Hazel set her eyes on something, nothing could stop her. Even the colors of people’s skin, which would be her biggest obstacle, if she tried to go after
Lawrence. She didn’t seem to be taking that into consideration. She never did, my sister is known for always being in the moment. I was the one who analyzed every situation and thought years ahead. But it’s all I could think about . . . race. I had heard stories about things that were going on in different states because of the color of one’s skin. I prayed that we would be safe from it all. But I couldn’t help but think that one day it would catch up with us. The weird thing was though every time I saw Lawrence look in my direction I couldn’t help but hear the fortune teller’s words in my head, “You’ll know it when you meet him. The two of you will have an instant connection.” I’ve never believed in fortune tellers and I remain bound to that decision. Still . . .

“So, what do you think?” Lawrence asked as we entered the room.

It was nice, but any room that belonged to me was nice. It was bigger than our room back at our old house but smaller than our living room. It had a small window in the top right corner of the room that allowed in a decent amount of moonlight at this late hour. There were two twin size beds and mattress on either side of the room along with a small nightstand. The mattresses were covered with a thin layer of blankets and one solid quilt.

I didn’t know how to respond to Lawrence’s question, the room was far more than I could have hoped for. I was in awe.

“I love it,” Hazel said looking over at Lawrence, “I might be able to make a small curtain out of some clothes to cover up that window. Maybe Papa will let us use one of the pictures we brought to decorate the room with, but otherwise I love it. What do you
think, Abby? Do you mind if I take the bed with the blue quilt?” She took a seat on the bed and smoothed out the quilt.

“Do you like it?” a voice beside me asked. I was drawn out of my amazement for the room and looked towards the voice of little Katherine standing to my left.

I bent down so that I could make eye contact with her, “I do. Did you help decorate?”

She nodded and let out a small smile. “I told Honey to put the green quilt on that bed,” she said pointing to the bed Hazel had left for me, “That was my favorite quilt before I got a new one earlier this year. I thought whoever got the bed would like it.”

I smiled and looked up towards Lawrence who was smiling down at his little sister. His eyes met mine and I turned my gaze away from him and back to Katherine, “I love the quilt, Katherine. I might have to let you help me and Hazel finish decorating.”

“Really?”

“Really. I think we could use all the help we can get.” I reached out my right hand for her left and looked up towards Lawrence. I had a feeling his eyes hadn’t been far from mine while I talked with his sister. “Well, I guess we had better go see our other home.”

“If you’re finished looking around I can take you out there now,” Lawrence said.

“Lead the way,” Hazel said getting off the bed and following close behind him as he turned to leave the room.

I closed the door behind me and Katherine as we walked hand in hand after them. They walked ahead of us on the brick path that led from the house to the field but
Lawrence looked back often to watch after his sister. His eyes met mine every time he did. He had kind eyes . . . soft . . . familiar; they were darker in the moonlight, but as bright as the sky when the sun was out. I admired the fact that he was nice to my sister. He never left her or ignored her once, even though it was easy to see that he would rather be hanging back with Katherine and me.

I watched as my sister continued with her pursuit of Lawrence. It made me smile watching them together. Her laughing as she tossed her dark brown hair from side to side and him nodding as he listened to the conversation that was happening between them.

I smiled because even though Hazel pushed me to the side and always treated me as if she were better than I was. I always remembered what Mama had told me. “Abby honey, Hazel needs to understand that both of you are equally beautiful. But sometimes boys and young men will find one of you more attractive than the other.”

“But we’re twins.”

“Yes, but when a young man is really attracted to you. That won’t matter. In his eyes, one of you will always be more beautiful than the other.”

I knew that one day there would be a guy that would want me over Hazel. A young man who would put me first, someone like Jacob in the bible, who would be willing to work for fourteen years just to make me his wife. I only prayed that when that day came and when the guy entered my life, I would be ready.

“Do you think you’re going to like it here?” I heard Katherine ask.
I looked down at her. Her long curly brown hair came down to her waist. She was tall for a five-year-old, taller than the ones I knew. She had brown eyes in comparison with her brother’s blue. She was missing two teeth from the bottom row, but she smiled as if she had the best smile in the world. “I believe so. My family is here and I couldn’t ask for more.”

She smiled as if satisfied with my answer and continued to hold my hand as we followed our leaders. There was a full moon tonight. Full, big, white, and bright. I wanted to reach out and touch it if there was a way that I could. The air smelled like a farm, but I knew that it was because we were approaching the stables that were semi-close to where our new home was to be located. But the rest of the air felt light, I could feel the flowers trying to leave in time for the autumn weather. This was always my mom’s and my favorite season. Seeing the flowers wither away and watching the leaves on the trees fall to the ground. The air was full of so much hope and promise. “Wedding season,” she always said, “Everyone wants to get married either with the new flowers or the cooler weather. New flowers . . . new season . . . new love . . . new adventure.” If winter didn’t start off every year I could almost believe that every year started off with spring.

I inhaled the air around me deeply as Lawrence turned to face us again. He glimpsed over at Katherine who was fingering the outline of her pink dress, then turned his attention to me. Seeing me breathe in the deep air he said, “It’s amazing, isn’t it? The way the air smells and the way the Earth feels when it’s the start of autumn.”
I nodded as I saw my sister turn to face me with an annoyance in her eyes. “Yes” I thought, “it is my favorite season. Well, this and winter. What’s yours?” He seemed to be reading my thoughts as I remained silent, “It’s one of my favorite seasons, spring. Well that and fall. I love the transition from fall to winter.”

He smiled at me once more before turning his attention to the ending road in front of him.

We started to head to the right of the Rivers’ house and past the stables. I could see our new home coming into a closer view as we continued our walk towards it. It wouldn’t be much longer.

“So you like my brother?”

I looked down at Katherine and frowned. Her question had caught me off guard and interrupted my thoughts, “I don’t know him very well yet. But yes, I’m sure that I will grow to like him.”

She looked up at me puzzled but continued, “I think he likes you. He never talks to girls. Even our cousins when they come into town. He never says one word.” She looked towards her brother and began to pull me along behind her as she started to make a sprint for my house.
The house was bigger than I imagined it to be. It was the picture of a small log cabin. I knew immediately that Abigail would fall in love with it. Granted it was still small in form, but it contained a porch, a living room, a kitchen, one outhouse, a small dining room/kitchen, and three bedrooms. Dr. Rivers had set up a few lanterns and candles in each room so that we could see the house. He kept one lantern with him as he took Papa from room to room. I couldn’t help but to miss our small, run down home. Our old home still had the lingering scent of my Mama drifting throughout the household. I missed her. I missed how she used to wake me up with a hundred tiny kisses on both my cheeks. I missed how Abigail used to wake up early in the morning to help her cook whatever breakfast they could find in the kitchen. Honestly, I missed the sound of her voice, whether she was yelling about something, praying, or singing, I longed to hear it. If only one more time. I still couldn’t help but to wonder why the Lord had decided that now was her time to leave. How does he decide these things anyway? Why did it have to be now instead of later? I knew that we would soon be making new memories here, but it was hard thinking about making new memories without the one person I never thought I would make them without.

I sensed Papa felt the same way. I watched him walk from one room of their home to the next nodding his head as Dr. Rivers showed him what he believed to be the
important features. He looked in my direction as if wanting my approval. I did everything I could to help my father feel as though this decision was for the best, which it was. I nodded my head at Papa every time he looked at me as if to say, “Yeah, this new home is great, we will learn to love it and make it our own in time.”

I knew that Hazel and Abigail would be happy to finally have a room to themselves. Abigail always insisted that she didn’t mind having to share a room with me, but I always promised myself that if the opportunity ever became available for my sisters to have a room to themselves, that it was my responsibility to give it to them. They needed to have a room of their own. Unintentionally, however, they now had two rooms to themselves.

I could hear voices coming from beyond the walls. Hazel and Lawrence were the first to enter through the front doors followed by Katherine. I nodded to each of them as I kept my focus on the front door awaiting the presence of Abigail. But the longer I waited, the more impatient I was starting to become. I looked over towards Hazel, flashing her eyelashes at Lawrence. It always amused me how Hazel could be so set on going after a young man who had absolutely no interest in her. But that’s what appealed to her; at least, it was for as long as I could remember. I turned my gaze away from Hazel, knowing that she was of no use and headed outside to find Abigail.

I found her lying on the grass between two large oak trees. They were standing at a perfect distance between the River’s home and our new home. I began to wonder how it
was possible that I could find her so easily in the darkened night sky, but I silently thanked God for allowing me to do so.

“Why didn’t you come inside?” I asked when I approached her.

She said nothing but patted the grass to the right of her. I found a comfortable spot and laid down next to her.

“Remember when we use to watch the stars with Mama?” she asked.

I nodded as a smile crept on my face, thankful for his sister to be talking again.

“She always seemed to know the constellations like no other.”

“That’s because she made over half of them up.”

I laughed heartily. “That she did.”

“You can see the stars a lot better out here than you could back home.”

“Fewer trees, I suppose.” I looked up at the black sky and saw what Abigail sister saw. The sky was lit up by so many bright specks that they almost seemed to be brighter than the moon.

“I wish I could take a picture. That way I’ll never forget what it looks like. What it feels like.”

I leaned on his right elbow and looked over at her, “What does it feel like, Abby?”

“Change.”

“Change is good. Sometimes we need it to help us become the people we’re supposed to be.”
She was quiet and closed her eyes in response to my statement. I lay back down on the grass after she had her eyes shut for a few moments and I began to wonder what was going through her mind.

“Do you think we’ll ever forget her?” she asked without opening her eyes.

“No, I don’t. I think she’ll always be with us. In our minds, our hearts, in what we do daily. We’ll never forget her.”

“I’ve already forgotten what she looks like. I can’t see her face clearly in my mind anymore. But every once in a while she visits me in my dreams and then I remember her all over again.”

“You’re the lucky one then. If I dreamt as much as you did, I’d probably see her in my dreams from time to time myself.” Abigail was the only one of us who had dreams every night she went to sleep. It was surprising to us if she didn’t have a dream to tell us about when she woke up. Hazel had a few dreams a month if that’s what the Lord allowed. But my dreams (if I ever had any) came at random times. I was lucky if I had three in a year. However, with my dreams, whenever I did dream they always revealed something about the future. It was something everyone paid attention to.

“No, I’m not. Seeing her only makes me miss her that much more.”

I nodded knowingly. She had been so strong since Mama died. I can’t remember seeing her cry once. Not before or after the funeral. But I knew that she missed her as much as any of us. “Are you ready to see the house?”
“No,” she said getting up from where she lay and bringing her legs to her chest as she sat on the grass, “I want to stay out here for a while longer.”

“I won’t leave until you’re ready,” I said reaching over to take her hand in mine. I held onto it tightly as I watched her let out a deep breath, before allowing her head to rest on her knees. “I’m not going anywhere.”
I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t stop thinking about the events that our first full day in a new city and state would bring. Would John Mark, Hazel, and I like our new school? Would we make friends? What about our old friends . . . would they forget about us? I was curious to know why type of person Dr. Rivers was. He seemed nice upon our first meeting him, but I had known white men in the past to change their ways after some time had passed. Grandma always says, “Keep your eyes down when you come into contact with white men. You don’t want their women thinking that you’re tempting them in anyway. You don’t want to stir up no trouble. Keep your eyes down when you’re talking with the women too. Mind your business so trouble don’t follow you. Know your place, don’t ever start thinking that you’re on their level. Because you’re not. No matter how they might treat you, you’ll always be five steps lower than them.”

Mama used to say that it was a three tier hierarchy: 1) White men, 2) dogs, 3) Niggers. She told us to never forget our place.

I always heard their words echoing the back of my head. Now I could hear them as clear as day. I remembered Dr. Williams. He seemed nice enough, but I never talked to him. I kept my head low and let Papa do all the talking. I only talked to him if he approached me first. Never the other way around. Dr. Rivers . . .
Lawrence . . . I couldn’t help but to wonder what type of white men they would be. I prayed that God wouldn’t place us into a working relationship with men that would try to take advantage of us. It was me and Hazel that Papa was worried about. Being alone in a house with two white men. I could remember him praying for us on the long drive here.

No. I had to have faith that nothing would happen to either of us. But what about Hazel? She hasn’t listened to a single word that anyone has said. She never keeps her head down, but raised and eyes focused straight ahead. She’s never understood why the color of our skin made any difference and she doesn’t seem to care. And now she believes that Lawrence is the man that she’s supposed to marry. Even if that were the case, white men don’t marry black women.

I was beginning to see a strand of light peek out from behind the clouds when I decided to close my eyes for a moment. But there was no use now. A new day was beginning. I lit the candle on the night stand that separated mine and Hazel’s twin bed and headed outside to the outhouse. I quickly returned to the kitchen to wash my face and hands with water from the washing pan and dried off with a rough towel.

“I heard you get up. You know . . . you’re not the quietest person in the morning,” Hazel said from behind me as I folded the towel.

“I apologize. I couldn’t really sleep last night.”

“I know. You were tossing all night. Then when I looked over at you, you were staring up at the ceiling. What was on your mind?”

She looked around the almost empty kitchen that I was standing in. It was only stocked with the supplies that we had brought with us and a few that Dr. Rivers had supplied.

“I like the change of scenery. And I love our new room.”

“It’s different.”

She rolled her eyes, “I forgot who I was talking to. You don’t get excited about anything.”

“That’s not true,” I remarked.

“Whatever you say. Let me go use the bathroom and then I’ll be back to help you start breakfast.”

I nodded as I headed over to the stove and began to load it with a few logs.

After Hazel and I soon finished making oatmeal and biscuits for breakfast. John Mark and Papa woke up as they always did when they began to smell the fire burning in the stove. We all sat down to breakfast after we had finished our morning chores.

“I’ll drive the three of you to school today and get you settled in with your teachers.”

We all nodded in silence as he continued, “John Mark, be sure that you wait after school to walk home with your sisters. I don’t want them walking home by themselves on the first day.”
“Papa, Abigail and I aren’t children anymore. We don’t need John Mark protecting us,” Hazel said.

“Hazel you are in a new city and a new state. Despite what you may think, this isn’t New Orleans. Maybe tomorrow or Wednesday you can walk home alone. But not today, understood?”

Hazel seemed to mutter a “yes sir” under her breath as she shoved a spoonful of oatmeal in her mouth.

After we had finished breakfast, it was time for school. Papa had heard from Dr. Rivers that the closest school for black students was a ten minute walk up the road. Papa said that today he would take us to school in the wagon, so that he could come back to the Rivers’ house quickly and begin his duties for the day. But at the end of the day we would be walking home.

We were walking out of our house when Papa heard the voice of Dr. Rivers. We all paused and took a step back, Papa immediately redirected his attention.

“Oh. Go-good morning suh.”

“Morning Henri. Looks like you have all of your children in line there. I’m sure they’ll have a blessed first day of school.”

“Yes, suh.”

“I, uh, wanted to thank you once again for being able to come out here on such short notice to begin your work. After we lost Robert, our last tenant, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to find someone else willing to put in the long hours with my children and the field.
But thank God that he hasn’t forgotten about me and has blessed me with your lovely family.”

Papa smiled, “It is I who should be thanking you, suh this has been a huge blessing in my life as well as to my family. After I lost my job due to the Depression and then my wife, Tabitha. This job that you’ve given us more than I could have ever asked for.”

“Don’t mention it, Henri. If you ever need anything, don’t be afraid to ask.”

“Yes, suh.”

Dr. Rivers turned to leave but caught himself and spoke once more, “Oh and I want to apologize for my wife Josephine. We thought that she’d be back by now. But she’s still off visiting her sister in Georgia. Her sister Caroline is pregnant and according to Josephine’s last telegram, there seems to be some trouble with the pregnancy. So she’s decided to stay down there until the baby comes. But you’ll love Josephine once you meet her. She’s got some French in her blood, so you may not always know what she’s saying, but she’s the best woman I’ve ever met. I love her to death.”

“Understood, suh.”

“Well, I’ll let you head out and get your children to school. I don’t want to cause them to be late on their first day. And don’t work yourself too hard out there today, Henri. The field isn’t going anywhere. I’d be more worried about the animals than the yard work first if you know what I mean.”

“Yes suh, I’ll start with the animals as soon as I return.”
“Don’t forget that Honey is serving lunch at noon. Take a break and help yourself. You and your family are always welcome at my table.”

Papa nodded and watched as Dr. Rivers took one more look at the small house.

“Hee free to fix up the house if you like. I know it’s not much, but it’s yours now. Do with it as you like.”

Papa nodded once more as he watched Dr. Rivers turn to leave. I cleared my throat hesitantly, before Papa seemed to remember what he need to ask, “Uh, suh?”

“You can call me Dr. Rivers, Henri. What is it?”

“Would it be okay if I built a swing for my children? After we caught them outside under the stars last night I noticed that both oak trees are an equal distance from each other. I was thinking that I could get the tools and wood to make a swing that everyone could use. I made my wife one at our old home. Abigail and she loved it.”

“Of course. If you can get the supplies to build it, I won’t stop you. I’m glad to hear that you’re so good with your hands though, Henri. I may be needing you on one of my medical excursions,” Dr. Rivers said with a wink.

“Uh . . . yes . . . Dr. Rivers,” Papa hesitated.

“I’m only joking Henri. There’s no need to panic. I save the hard stuff for my second in command. Anyway, I need to be heading out. I’m already running early. I’ll see you later Henri, don’t work yourself too hard.”

“Yes, Dr. Rivers,” Papa said as he watched him walk towards his car.
Papa smiled and turned back to us before walking towards the wagon with us following close behind.

“Papa,” I asked, “What do you want us to do about lunch? Do you want us to come home like we used to at our old school?”

“I’ll leave that decision up to the three of you. You may make some friends that you’d like to join for lunch.”

“I know I will . . . John Mark probably will too. I’m not so sure about Abigail though. Her shy nature can be such a burden. To everyone,” Hazel said with a laugh.

“That’s enough Hazel. I don’t want to hear another word out of you,” Papa said.

And we didn’t hear another word out of Hazel, until we reached the school a few minutes later.
HAZEL

There were a lot of kids standing outside the school when we arrived. The school was bigger than our old school and the amount of kids that were present showed that. Some of them were playing basketball, jump rope, hopscotch, and tag. A few were standing around and talking amongst themselves. We walked behind Papa until we reached an elderly black woman. She had on a large pair of glasses, a long black skirt, a white puffed blouse, and her hair that was beginning to gray was placed into a bun. She reminded me a lot of my grandma in a way. But I felt a sternness in her nature that I had never felt with my grandmother.

I looked around at a lot of the other students that lingered around us. They seemed to be studying us like we were a new species. And I suppose in a way we were.

“Hi, I’m Henri Henderson. We moved in yesterday at Dr. Rivers’ a little ways up the street there. These are my children, John Mark, Hazel and Abigail,” Papa said to the lady.

“Pleasure to meet y’all. I’m Mrs. Johnson. I’m the principal of this school.” She looked at each of us for a moment before turning her attention to John Mark. “What grade did you attend at your old school?”

“I was in the twelfth grade ma’am,” John Mark replied.
Mrs. Johnson nodded, “You’ll be having classes in the small building over to your right. Your teacher will be Mr. Sims.”

“Thank you ma’am.”

She turned her attention to Abigail and I next. “Hazel what grade were you in?”

“Abigail and I were in the ninth grade at our last school.”

“Then you shall have classes in this building in front of us. Your teacher will be Ms. Hilburn. You each still have about ten minutes to yourselves until the bell is rung. Mr. Henderson,” she said turning to face Papa, “Could you please follow me. I have a form or two that you will need to fill out for your children.”

Papa nodded before looking at us with a don’t get into any trouble today look on his face.

We watched silently as Mrs. Johnson disappeared inside the school with Papa. John Mark left us soon after and began walking to the school where he would be having classes. I saw a group of girls around my age and walked over to introduce myself.

“Hello,” I said as I felt Abigail sneak upon me.

The group of girls eyed me slowly, looking me up from top to bottom. They couldn’t figure me out. They wouldn’t be the first.

“You know it’s only nice to respond after someone says hello,” I replied before walking away.
“Wait . . . Come back,” one of them said. I turned around and looked at her. She was tall, almost the same height as John Mark. Her hair was placed into a pony tail and tied up with a single red ribbon. “What’s your name?”

“Hazel. What’s yours?”

“I’m Bridget. This is Harriet to my right, and Evelyn to my left. It’s nice to meet you Hazel. You have to forgive us. Most of the new kids stay to themselves.” She glanced past me at Abigail, who was busy taking in her surroundings. “Your sister, I’m guessing. Or do you happen to have a best friend who looks like you?”

Harriet laughed as I rolled my eyes. “Yes, this is Abigail,” I turned my attention to my sister, “Abigail, say hi.”

Abigail looked from me to the three girls, she gave a quick wave before turning her attention back to the surroundings around us.

“You have to forgive her. It takes her a while to warm up to people. She’s shy.”

“It won’t last long at this school. Miss Hilburn won’t allow anyone to keep to themselves if she can help it.”

“Our teacher?” I asked.

“Yes. She’s nice, but strict. You’ll meet her soon enough,” she commented as Mrs. Johnson began to ring the bell to start school for the day. “What are you doing for lunch?”

“We’re going back to our house. That’s what we did at our old school.”

Bridget nodded, “You should join us one day. It’ll be fun.”
The classroom was small, but bigger than the classrooms we were used to. The desks sat two to a seat. There were only three spots that were left open. One was beside Bridget. One was beside a boy who appeared to be well liked by a few of the other boys in the class, along with a few of the girls. He winked towards Abigail and me when we entered. I turned towards Abigail but she didn’t seem to notice. The last empty seat was near the back of the room. No one was sitting in that desk. I knew that Abigail would take that seat as soon as we were free to sit down.

“Class, we have two new students here today. This is Hazel and Abigail. Please welcome them.”

“Hello Hazel and Abigail,” everyone echoed together.

“I am Ms. Hilburn and I will be your teacher for your ninth and tenth grade years. You ladies may take any empty seat of your choosing,” she said.

Abigail watched me closely for a second to see where I would be sitting. I knew that she wanted me to sit beside her, but Bridget was gesturing to me from the right side of the room. I looked towards Abigail with an apologetic look and headed to the back. I guess that she already knew that I would leave her, but I never turned back towards her to check for a look of disappointment.

Ms. Hilburn began the first subject of the day, Math, as soon as we had taken our seats. “Who knows without using their notes in front of them what 46 x 23 is? Anyone?”

I watched as a few of the students began to fidget in their seats and a couple lowered their heads to avoid eye contact.
“No one knows the answer? Remember that you will not always have pencil and paper in front of you. I am teaching you to open your mind and add, subtract, multiply, and divide in your heads.”

A girl with short curly hair to the left of Bridget and me, sighed aloud and raised her hand.

“Yes Mary. Do you know the answer?”

“Yes ma’am. The correct answer is 1,059.”

“You are close. But I am sorry, that is incorrect.

A whispered giggle began to echo throughout the room.

“I will have none of that in this room. We are all here to learn.”

“Yes Ms. Hilburn,” everyone responded.

“Now would anyone else like to try to answer the question.”

I raised my hand until I was called on. “I think that Abigail would like to answer your question.”

Abigail looked towards me as I glanced back in her direction for a moment, before facing the front again. Ms. Hilburn stopped for a moment and looked from me to Abigail. “Thank you Hazel,” she replied as I averted my eyes. Her gaze then fell on my sister. “Abigail, do you know the answer to my question?”

I hesitantly looked up at Abigail. She seemed to think to herself for a moment before replying, “1,058 I believe.”
I rolled my eyes. Bridget leaned over to me, “Is your sister some sort of math genius? Or is she a teacher’s pet?” I heard Evelyn and Harriet snicker behind us before we heard the voice of Ms. Hilburn.

“Bridget, remember that we do not talk or whisper in this class unless you are called on or if you have something to share with the rest of the class. Do you have something that you would like to share?”

“No, ma’am Ms. Hilburn. I apologize.”

“Be sure to mind your manners,” she stated before turning her attention back to Abigail.

“Abigail, your answer is correct. The correct answer class was 1,058.”

Abigail smiled shyly before Ms. Hilburn continued. “Next question. Who knows the answer to 30 x 55?”

“I wonder who will answer this question? Mary or your sister?” Bridget whispered over to me with a roll of her eyes.

We continued our studies of Multiplication, English, and then Science. Finally it was time for lunch. Abigail and I found John Mark waiting for us outside.

“How was your first day?” he asked as soon as we had caught up with him.

“I made a few friends and Abigail made a few enemies,” I commented.

“Ah! Just like our old school.”
“It’s not my fault. No one else knew the answer. Hazel suggested that I answer the question. Ms. Hilburn asked me and I knew the answer. I’m not rebuking myself for it. I didn’t come here to make friends, anyway. I came to learn,” Abigail spoke up.

“Yes Abigail. But you’re still the one that’s going to have to put up with your classmates for the rest of the year. So you have the choice to either make it easier or harder on yourself,” John Mark stated.

“How was your first day John Mark?” I asked.

“It was good. Mr. Sims is going to be a hard teacher, harder than my teachers at my old school, but I think I’ll learn a lot from him. I just have to study hard. Thankfully, it’s my last year though.

“I wish it was my last year.”
Honey and Joy were out back putting clothes on the line to dry when we arrived home for lunch. Katherine was sitting in the grass as she played with a couple of her favorite dolls. Joy called to us, and we headed in their direction.

“How was y’all’s first day?” Joy asked with amusing excitement.

I went over to Katherine and began to pick up one of her dolls.

“It was a little diff’rent from our old school. But I think we’ll enjoy it,” John Mark said with a shrug.

“The day ain’t over yet we’re just home for lunch,” Hazel commented.

“This is Lazarus and his wife Esther,” Katherine said smiling.

I laughed at the names she had picked out for them. Oh how the stories in the Bible would have been different if Lazarus and Esther were married.

“I done left some food for y’all in the kitchen. I made a plenty, so eat all you want. Your Pa’s done already had his share, but I left enough for you three and Mast’r Lawrence. He’ll be coming around that corn’r any minute now. His schools only a qua’ter mile down the road from y’all’s,” Honey said hanging a pair of jeans on the line.

“Thank you, Honey,” Hazel said.

“No problem, honey child. Gone in and help yourselves. I set out a plate for each of yah. Water’s in a pitcher on the cabinet’s well.”
“Yes, ma’am,” I heard John Mark and Hazel say before they began to head towards the kitchen door.

I looked at Katherine as she continued to make up a story for her dolls. “So why did you pick the names Lazarus and Esther?”

“I like their names the best from the Bible.”

“Oh. Do you like their stories too?”

She nodded, “I do. But I don’t like them as much as I like their names.”

I laughed quietly to myself, and tried to remember if I had as active of an imagination as she did when I was her age.

“Do you want to be Esther?”

“Sure,” I said taking Esther from her hands.

“They’ll be having a baby. But not right now, because I have to go upstairs and get another doll.”

“That’s how it usually works.”

I watched with curiosity and excitement as she came up with her own stories for her characters. “They met at the grocery store.”

“Oh really. When did they get married?”

“Three weeks later.”

“Three weeks? That’s really fast.”

“It was love at first sight. Like my mom and dad.”
I laughed and smiled at her, “That’s rare to find in life. Your parents were very lucky.”

“Yep. And they’re going to be together forever. Just like Lazarus and Esther.”

“Well I sure hope so,” a voice said behind me. It was Lawrence.

I turned to face him, he looked at me with a grin spreading across his face before looking towards his little sister. “Having fun, Katherine?”

She nodded for a second then frowned. “I have to go upstairs for a second. I need to get a baby.”

“Well why don’t we all go inside? That way Abigail and I can have some lunch while you play.”

She nodded in agreement and picked up her toys before following us inside the house. She laid her dolls on the kitchen table before running off through the door to find a baby.

“Hi, Lawrence,” Hazel said when she caught sight of him.

“Good afternoon, Hazel. How was your first day of school?”

“It was nice,” she said blushing. “I made a few new friends.”

“That’s great to hear. How was school for you, John Mark?”

John Mark held up a thumb in response as he chewed the food that was in his mouth.

Lawrence laughed as he turned his attention to me, “Abigail, how about –”
“Abigail! I found the baby. Come on we have to finish playing,” Katherine said coming into the kitchen. She grabbed my hand and motioned for me to follow her.

“Okay, I’m coming. I’m coming, but I can only play for a few minutes because I need to eat something.”

“Oh all right,” Katherine said in defeat.

I followed Katherine into the living room where she had laid out a few more dolls.

“Where are Lazarus and Esther? Oh. I forgot them in the kitchen. Stay right there. I’ll be right back,” Katherine said to me.

I smiled as she ran from the living room and into the kitchen. I looked over each of the white dolls as I took in their pale faces in comparison to mine. I couldn’t help myself as I placed the dolls arm next to mine. I looked at my arm for a time before shaking my head and returning the doll to its rightful place on the floor. I turned around to see if Katherine was returning, but instead found Lawrence entering the living room.

“Here. I brought you an apple. I thought you might need something to hold you over while you play with Katherine.”

“Thank you Lawrence.” My hand briefly brushed up against his as I took the apple from him.

He took a seat beside me and began to pick up each of the dolls. He looked over each one carefully. Maybe he was trying to imagine the same picture as Katherine.

Katherine came from the kitchen a few moments later and handed Lazarus to Lawrence and Esther to me.
“Lawrence are you going to play with Abigail and me?”

He looked from me to his sister as he saw her pleading eyes. “Only for a minute.”

Her face lit up. “Lawrence, you’re the husband Lazarus. And Abigail you’re the wife Esther.”

There was an awkward silence. Lawrence frowned for as second and then immediately smiled at Katherine.

“Who are you?” Lawrence asked, laughing off Katherine’s comment as I shifted uncomfortably where I sat on the floor.

“I’m the baby. Wah-wah.” We laughed at her impression of a baby crying. “But I’m also the doctor and the nurse.”

“Why do we need a doctor?” I asked.

“You always need a doctor. At least that’s what daddy says.”
ABIGAIL

It was Friday. The week had flown by. Dr. Rivers gave us the weekend to do whatever we chose, although Papa and John Mark were still expected to care for the animals. But Hazel and I had the weekend to ourselves. We couldn’t wait for school to be over.

“Papa, is it okay if I don’t come home for lunch today?” Hazel asked.

“Why don’t you want to come home?” Papa questioned.

“One of the girls from school, Bridget, she invited me over to her house for lunch. She only lives about fifteen minutes or so from the school. It’s not too far.”

Papa considered this information for a moment before responding, “As long as you’re on your best behavior. I don’t want to hear nothing about you getting into any trouble. You hear me? If you get into trouble, you’ll have me to deal with.”

Hazel rolled her eyes, “Yes sir. I promise not to get into any trouble.”

“Abigail, are you going to be okay walking home for lunch by yourself?”

“Yes sir.”

“I’d walk home with you Abigail, but I promised a few of my friends that I’d join them for lunch today too” John Mark spoke up.

I smiled at John Mark, “I don’t mind walking home by myself. It’s not too far, and I enjoy the scenery.”
I saw Papa begin to nod as I faced him, “I’ll be fine.”

“Alright then. You best head off for school. You don’t want to be late. Abigail I’ll see you for lunch.”

I followed after John Mark and Hazel. We were almost down the driveway when Lawrence waved and ran over to us.

“Good morning John Mark, Hazel, Abigail,” Lawrence began.

“Good morning, Lawrence,” Hazel said blushing.

“It looks like we’re finally getting some fall weather in the air.”

“Yeah looks like winter may be here early this year,” John Mark said.

“So, what do you think about the school now that you’ve been there for a week. Have you been having any problems, have you made any friends?”

“I’ve made a lot of friends. I’m actually going over a friend’s house today for lunch,” Hazel stated.

“Hazel’s always one to make friends fast. Never fails.”

Lawrence nodded, “What about you Abigail? Have you had the chance to make a few friends?”

I looked up at Lawrence, there was a strange kindness in his eyes that I couldn’t remember ever seeing before in a white man. He waited patiently for my answer as I gave the impression that I was thinking about his question.

“Abigail hasn’t really made any friends yet. She’s too shy to make friends. But her main focus is on school anyway,” Hazel interrupted.
“Oh. So you haven’t really made any friends?”

“Some. Maybe. A little. Not really,” I said hesitantly. I couldn’t get myself to complete a full sentence. I don’t know why. I had gotten used to Hazel talking for me over the years, when we were in the company of other people.

Lawrence let out a light chuckle. I didn’t have to look at Hazel to know that she was rolling her eyes.

“Well don’t worry. It took me a little while to make friends at my school too. And now we’ve all been friends for years.”

I appreciated his compassion. He was friendly. I wasn’t sure how long that would last or if he was simply trying to make conversation. But it was nice.

“I don’t want to keep you. We had all better head out before we’re all late. I have to catch up with a friend and then I’ll be heading off to school myself. I’ll see the three of you later.”

We watched for a moment as Lawrence headed in the opposite direction from the school.

“I can’t wait for lunch. I won’t be able to focus in classes all day. I can’t wait to go over Bridget’s house for lunch,” Hazel said.

“I hope you have fun, but don’t be getting into trouble Hazel. Because you know what will happen if Papa finds out.” I remarked.

“I won’t be getting into trouble Abigail. I don’t want to get on Papa’s bad side.”
“Dad! Lawrence is here! I’m leaving for school!” Matthew said to his father.

He heard the loud creaking of the chair from where his dad sat in the living room looking through the newspaper for any new events that might be happening in town. He heard his loud footsteps begin to exit the living room and enter into the kitchen to where he was.

Matthew, his younger brother Thomas, and their parents all lived in a small 2-story modern day home. His mom had left early that morning to go to the store for groceries and to buy a new pattern for a dress.

Matthew’s dad grunted as he began to look around the kitchen for a window to see the daylight that was already beginning to stream in. “Mind yourself and come straight home after you’re released. I heard that the Rivers family have gone and hired themselves some more Negros over on their parts and I won’t be having you associating with any of them.”

“Yes sir,” Matthew said not wanting to get into an argument with his dad today.

“I’ll be at the store a little longer than usual today, to finish up inventory. So be sure to help your Mom out with dinner.”

“Yes sir.”

Matthew’s dad, Mr. Johnson, owned the only drug store in town. He enjoyed having his own business and providing items for his customers. The only thing he didn’t like was serving people of color.
He nodded, “Now get out of here and learn something to put in that head of yours. Walk with your brother and make sure he makes it safely.”

“Yes sir,” Matthew nodded back gloomily.

Hurrying out the door with little Thomas following close behind him, he greeted Lawrence with a warm, but annoyed smile.

“Not a good day at the Johnson household today?” Lawrence asked with a weak grin.

“Is it ever?”

“I’m guessing he heard about our new house guests?”

“That’s an understatement. Where are they staying anyway? Not inside your house.”

“No. My dad gave them the house in the back. Although, he did allow for the girls to stay in the attic room if they choose to from time to time. It’s to help them be near Katherine if she ever needs anything.”

Matthew nodded quietly. They walked in silence for a quarter of a mile with little Thomas whistling in the back behind them, before he spoke up again.

“What are they like?”

“The Hendersons?” Lawrence asked trying to remember their past conversation.

He nodded, “Yeah.”

“I don’t know quite yet. But they all seem to be really nice. Mr. Henderson has a son and two twin daughters. The son is about our age, while the daughters are about two
years younger than us.” He looked back at Thomas for a second before whispering over to Matthew. “Between you and me I think the oldest twin has a crush on me. She wouldn’t stop staring at me yesterday.”

Matthew sighed aloud, “Just ignore her. That’s what I do. You don’t need rumors being spread about you more than usual. Especially now that you’ve got more negroes living on your land. The rumors will be spreading like wild fire.”

Lawrence laughed at his friend, “When have you ever had to ignore a girl of color? You don’t even look in their direction.”

“There’s good reason for that. I don’t need to be shunned or kicked out of my house because I’m spending too much time with a black girl. It’s not worth it. They’re not cute anyway. None of ‘em.”

“The Henderson girls aren’t too bad looking. Why don’t you stop by after school today and see for yourself?” Lawrence asked as they approached the school building.

“I have to get straight home after school. I’ll have to wait until my dad calms down to stop by the house again. But I’m not sure when he’s going to loosen his grip on this one.”

“I understand. Well you’re welcome over whenever you want to come over. Just be on your best behavior when you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m always on my best behavior.”

“Even around negroes?”

“Oh that’s explainable. I’m not me when I’m around them.”
“Then who are you?”

“My dad,” he said as he waved goodbye to his brother.
I watched Hazel throughout our first three classes. Ms. Hilburn had to remind her and Bridget to stop talking while she was teaching the class. I thought at one point that she was going to sit Hazel in the corner, but thankfully that didn’t happen. When Ms. Hilburn dismissed us for lunch, Bridget and Hazel darted out the door quick as lightning. *She left out without so much as a goodbye.*

I started down the road headed home for lunch when I turned a corner and caught a glimpse of Joy coming towards me. I stopped and waited patiently for her to catch up.

“Where’s Hazel and John Mark? They not coming home for lunch?” Joy said when she reached me.

“No. Hazel and John Mark are both going home with friends for lunch today. So I’m walking home by myself.

“That’s fine. We can walk together,” Joy said with a large smile.

I smiled back, “How was school for you? You’re in the eighth grade right?”

“Yeah. Next year I’ll be in the ninth with you. Although you’ll be in the tenth, we’ll still be in the same classroom.”

“That will be fun. We can sit together.”

Joy though to herself for a moment before responding, “I guess so. I have a few other friends who will want me to sit with them as well.”
“It’s okay Joy. I don’t mind sitting by myself.”

“You sit by yourself! No. No, I’m sitting with you when I come up. We can’t have that.”

We both laughed at her comment as we continued towards the Rivers house. Honey didn’t usually let Joy go to eat lunch with her friends, because she had chores to do when she came home for lunch and at the end of the day.

We were down the road from Dr. River’s house when we heard yelling come from behind us . . .
I was so excited to be walking home with Bridget for lunch. I had only gone home to another friend's house for lunch once before with Betsy, she was my best friend back in New Orleans. But I felt that I might soon be replacing her with Bridget. I wondered if Betsy had already replaced me. *Probably.*

When we reached Bridget’s house I couldn’t help but to stop and stare for long minute. It was a one-story home, but it was nicer than any home I had ever stepped foot in, besides Dr. Rivers’ house. There were a few bushes placed in the front of the house and a few chairs had been set outside on the patio entrance.

“You like it?” Bridget asked, “My pa’s been fixing up the house a little here and there. I like it. Come on, I’ll show you around.”

I followed her inside the house, which was by far nicer than on the outside. When we entered we immediately stepped foot inside the living room and I noticed that the floor was covered with blue and red flowered carpet. The kitchen was to the left of us, it was a decent size. Definitely bigger than the kitchen I had. I remembered seeing a caramel cake sitting on the cabinet, but before I could say anything about it Bridget grabbed my hand and led me to her room. Her room was plain in color, but she had placed pictures that she had drawn on the wall.
“These pictures are really good. Although I shouldn’t be surprised. I’ve seen what you can do in Ms. Hilburn’s class.”

Bridget nodded and began to bring out a few dolls that her mom had given her over the years. I held the first doll she handed me with envy. Abigail and I had never had our own doll before, but we always wanted one. She was white. White and pale with a pudgy face, along with brown hair that felt like rough cotton. Her nose and eyes were tiny and round. She wore a red dress with a white apron on top along with a red hair ribbon in her hair. I had never loved anything more.

“You can hold her until we head back to school,” Bridget said.

I smiled at her and held the doll close to my chest.

“Her name is Annie.”

“Well hello there Ms. Annie, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said warmly.

Bridget and I played in her room for a few minutes more before going into the kitchen to fix ourselves some lunch. As we headed towards the kitchen I caught a glimpse of a large square box with some sort of handle sitting on a bookshelf.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Huh?” Bridget asked turning to face me, “It’s a record player.”

“Oh,” I had only heard about record players. I had never seen one.

“My mama got that from her ma a few months ago. You want to hear a song from it?”
I nodded blankly as I watched her go over to a cabinet to the right of the bookshelf and pull out a record. This is Mahalia Jackson, I think you’ll enjoy her music. She placed the record on the player and picked up some sort of needle to the right of the record and carefully placed the needle on the record. As soon as the needle touched down on the record, music began to flow throughout the house. There was a soothing melody accompanying her voice. It was beautiful.

“Wow” was all I could say. I looked down at Annie who seemed to be enjoying the music as much as I was.

“I know. It's pretty magical. Come on, let’s get some lunch.”

I followed her into the kitchen as the music continued to drift throughout the house.

There was an icebox in her kitchen, I had only seen one other one before at my grandparents' house. She made us both a peanut butter jelly sandwich and a glass of water.

As we ate our sandwiches, we talked about school and the music coming through the record player. I eventually noticed the caramel cake sitting on the kitchen counter.

"Who made that cake?"

"My mama made it," Bridget said shrugging.

"Does your mama usually make cakes?" I was lucky if I had cake five times a year. Mama usually made one for our birthdays and then we either had cake or pie for
Christmas. But as I thought to myself, I couldn't think of any holidays that the cake could have been made for. Maybe it was someone’s birthday?

"Sometimes. But that's the cake my mama made for the revival tomorrow night. She has another one in the icebox."

"A revival? Do you have those a lot?"

"Once a month usually."

"You get to eat cake every month?" I asked surprised.

"Cake, pies, cookies, pudding, and a few others. I love it."

“You get to eat all of that at your revival?”

“And more. So would you like a piece?” Bridget asked gesturing to the Caramel cake.

"Can I have a piece?" I asked unsure.

"Sure. My mama wouldn't mind. It's for the revival, she has to cut it up to place slices on plates anyway. You know, you must have been to a revival before."

I nodded again, "We didn't go that often in New Orleans, but we went every now and then."

"Oh. You should come with us sometime." She turned around and looked at the cake again. "If you want a piece I can cut a slice for the both of us."

"Are you sure it's okay with your mama?"

"Of course. You're a guest and my mama said that you should always treat guests like they're at home."
I watched as Bridget proudly stood up from her seat and walked over to the counter. She took out a knife from one of the drawers and began to cut a piece of cake for her and me before placing it on two napkins. She came back over to me and placed my piece of cake along with a fork in front of me.

I looked at the cake in awe. It wasn't a holiday, or a birthday. The revival hadn't even happened yet and here I was eating a slice of cake. I looked towards Bridget who had already begun to eat her slice. I smiled down at the slice in front of me before taking my first bite. It tasted like a moist, caramel cloud.

"Whatya think?"

"It's amazing," I said drinking some water. "Your mom is an excellent cook."

"I know. She makes some of the best pies and cakes at the revival."

We continued to eat our cake slowly as we talked when we heard the screen door open and close.

"That must be my mama," Bridget said lighting up.

Bridget looked toward the kitchen entrance and I turned my head to watch for her mama. We saw her enter within seconds. But as she entered her eyes went from our faces, to our plates, to the kitchen counter where the caramel cake was sitting.

"Did you cut my cake!" Bridget's mom asked, her eyes widening in horror.
Abigail felt something hit her on the back of the head. She felt something hit her on the back of the leg. Joy screamed and held her head before running off. She never looked back behind her once. “Run Abigail!”

Abigail felt confused, *was it raining rocks?* She turned around and saw two white boys headed in her direction on bikes. They were each holding a bag of rocks, as they quickly reached in took out a handful and threw them in her direction. Now she understood. Abigail ran quickly behind Joy. She watched as Joy protectively covered her head and copied her position. *Why were they throwing rocks? What had they done to get rocks thrown at them?* It didn’t make any sense. This had never happened to them when they were in New Orleans. *She wished she was there now.*

~ ~ ~

Lawrence and Matthew turned the corner that led towards the River’s house.

“So what did the note say?” Matthew asked.

“Let it go Matthew. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did she ask you out? Did she confess her undying love for you?”

Lawrence rolled his eyes. It was all he could do to stop himself from laughing.

“How are you going to reply? Yes or no? Tell me Lawrence. I need to know.”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I have to get my excitement in life from someone. As of this moment that person is you.”

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“Don’t I feel special,” Lawrence said laughing at his comment. He stopped in his tracks when he saw two black girls running towards him. He couldn’t quite comprehend the situation. Usually black girls were running away from him, not towards him. He took a moment to study the girls closer as Matthew stopped beside him and followed his gaze. It was Abigail and Joy.

Lawrence could see it clearly now. They were running. Screaming. Holding their heads as they tried to get away from the two boys that were behind them. What were they throwing? Rocks? Rocks!

Lawrence immediately rushed off, but was held back by Matthew.

“What are you doing?” Lawrence asked impatiently.

“I’m saving you from becoming an outcast in the city. What are you thinking? You can’t save two black girls. Dang. You can’t save one black girl. That’s not how it works.”

“They haven’t done anything. They were probably on their way home from school. Why should they get punished for walking?”

“It’s not our responsibility to find out. They’ll be fine once they reach the house. Those boys wouldn’t dare step foot onto your pa’s property. Let it play out.”

Lawrence looked at Matthew for a moment, considering his words before shaking his head. “I can’t do that. I might not be able to save them, but I can certainly try.”

“You’ll be put to shame when the neighborhood finds out about it.”
“I’d rather have the reputation of trying to do the right thing and failing. Then
having the reputation of being a key witness and not doing anything to stop it.”

With those words Lawrence ran off in the direction of Abigail and Joy. But he
didn’t stop when he reached them. He kept running until the stood directly in front of the
boys who were throwing the rocks.

The boys came to a stop when they saw Lawrence. “You want some rocks?” One of
the boys asked.

Lawrence summed them up quickly. They were in his class. A grade below him.
Troublemakers. “No I wouldn’t like any rocks. But I would like to ask what you think
you’re doing.”

“What’s it look like? We’re having fun with a couple of black girls.”

“Yeah,” the other boy replied, “Do you think we just go around carrying this bag of
rocks for the fun of it.”

“What did they do to you?” Lawrence asked.

“They were born. That’s what.”

Lawrence looked back behind them. They had reached the property. They were
safe. For now. He turned his attention back to the boys, “Next time you think about
throwing rocks at two of the girls who work for my family. Don’t.”

“Nigga lov’r,” one of the boys said before they both rode off.

Lawrence ignored their words and headed towards his house. Matthew was waiting
by the entrance when he approached.
“I can’t believe you did that,” Matthew commented, “Rumors are going to be spread about you like crazy. You already know what people say about your dad. And now this?”

Lawrence paid him no attention as he looked towards the house for Abigail and Joy. “Where are they?”

Matthew gestured to the house. “They went inside your house. Honey saw them running and took them both inside.”

Lawrence nodded, “Okay. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah. Okay. But next time think before you act.”

“I did.”
“Explain yourself Bridget! Right this second,” Bridget’s mother, Lynn, screamed.

“Mama, Hazel wanted a piece so, I told her that it would be okay with you because sometimes we have cake before the revival. So we both got a slice. “

“Yes ma’am. That’s what happened. Bridget told me that it would be okay with you,” Hazel said lowering her eyes to Annie who was sitting in the chair next to her.

“Both of you! –” she seemed to catch her breath for a moment. “Bridget go and get me your Papa’s belt.”

Bridget looked at the floor as she stood from her seat. She slowly made her way over to the doorway that her mom was standing in. As she walked past, her mama smacked her hard once on the butt. “Hurry it up. I don’t got all day. And turn that music off!”

Bridget hurried. She ran into her pa’s room and grabbed his black belt as tears began to stream from her eyes. Why was she in trouble? She had had cake before. Maybe it was because two pieces were cut instead of just one?

“Move it Bridget! I’m waiting for you too long in here,” Lynn said.

Bridget entered the living room, handed the belt to her Mama and quickly bent over.
Hazel held Annie tightly to her chest. “I promised Papa that I wasn’t going to get into trouble. He was going to be so mad. He trusted me not to do anything wrong. But it was just a little piece of cake. Maybe he would understand . . .” she whispered to herself.

Hazel began to hear the crackling of the belt against Bridget. She closed her eyes as she held Annie. Suddenly she could hear her sister’s voice in her head counting. One, two, three, four, five . . . the belt was still crackling . . . six, seven, eight, nine, ten. She was done.

Hazel was pondering, “Is she going to spank me too? Should I leave? Should I run? If I run she’ll tell Papa and that would only make it worse.”

“Your turn missy, come on,” Lynn said.

Bridget walked past Hazel with tears in her eyes, “You better hurry before she starts adding on.”

Hazel nodded and went over to where Bridget’s mother was standing. “You know the routine, bend it over.”

“One,” Hazel said to herself as Annie fell to the ground.
I found Abigail and Joy sitting in the kitchen with Honey. Joy was crying as her
mom cleaned the back of her neck up with some alcohol and a warm cloth, but Abigail
wasn’t crying. She was silent. She watched with interested eyes as Honey cared for Joy.
She listened as Joy repeated the story over and over again to Honey, who only nodded in
response saying, “Yes darlin’ I know, it happens.” I stood in the doorway for a minute
watching them, shaking my head at the memories before I entered.

“Are you girls okay?” I asked.

“Well if it ain’t Mr. Knight’n shining armor himself. These girls done told me what
you’n did for’m. I have to give you my thanks Mist’r Lawrence,” Honey said.

“It’s not a problem Honey, I just happened to be in the right place at the right
time.”

Honey nodded and continued to wash up Joy’s face.

“Are you okay, Joy?”

“Got a few scratches. That’s all. It would’ve been worse if you hadn’t come when
you did. I have to say thank you too.”

“Of course.”
“Come on Joy. Let’s see if we can fix up your hair again. You done messed it up with all that runnin’,” Honey said before looking towards Abigail, “Abigail honey, do you need me to fix your hair?”

Abigail stared at the empty table in front of her and shook her head.

“Bless her heart, I don’t think she’s ever been through this before.”

“It’s the third time for me, ain’t it Mama,” Joy asked.

“That’s not somethin’ to brag about. Come on.”

I waited for Honey and Joy to leave the kitchen before I took a seat at the table with Abigail. She was silent, unwavering. She kept her eyes focused on the table in front of her.

“Abigail,” I asked carefully, “are you okay?”

Her tears caught me my surprise. She covered her eyes and face, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to cry.”

I knelt down beside her and grabbed the edge of her chair to steady myself,

“There’s no reason to apologize Abigail. You have every right to cry.”

She nodded, “I’ve always heard about things like this happening. But for it to actually happen to me. During my first week in Texas. It makes me want to go back to New Orleans.”

“Your Papa is going to miss you if you leave. And then who’s going to take care of Katherine? Are you going to leave that job all to Hazel?”
She laughed, “No. No, of course not. I can’t leave my family behind. I just . . . I have to be careful from now on.”

I nodded, “Like Joy said, it’s not the first time it’s happened to her. Keep a close eye out when you’re walking. And remember, not every white man is like them.”

She smiled at me for a moment before looking down at her hands, “No. I guess they aren’t. Thank you, Lawrence. I’m not sure if I’ve ever met another white boy like you.”

“Well my mom does tell me often that I’m one of a kind.”

She laughed again, she had a beautiful laugh. It was a little high pitched, but was filled with so much joy. I looked at her steadily for a moment as she began to twiddle her thumbs and look around the kitchen. I couldn’t quite figure this girl out. She was different from her sister, but in what way? Was she stronger? She was definitely more mysterious in a way. There was something I couldn’t quite understand about her, but it piqued my interest.

“Are you going to be okay going back to school?”

“I should be. I’m not scared. I have to be brave, that’s the only way to get through life. Walk tall and leave everything else behind you. That’s what my Papa says. Plus I know that the Lord is protecting me, like he was today. Because he sent you.”

She blushed at her comment as I smiled in response.

“I could walk with you and Joy for a little ways up the road, if that would make you feel better?”
Her facial expression was full of, shock, and terror. Her eyes darted around the room as she tried to gather her thoughts.

“What is it?”

She looked at me for a second before leaning in and whispering, “But you’re white.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. I laughed long and hard. She looked at me with uneasiness for a moment, before allowing a grin to spread across her face. “I know of the fact that I’m white Abigail. But I don’t care with people think about me. You said it yourself, I’m different.”

She shook her head in horror as if she had never before heard someone white say those words. “No Mr. Lawrence. I won’t be the cause of you being shunned by society. You’d be an outcast and I’d be hung. No sir. I can walk to school by myself.”

“Are you sure, Abigail? I don’t mind walking with you and Joy for a little while up the road. Just to be sure you’re safe.”

“They’ll be safe. Don’t you be worryin’ about that Mist’r Lawrence. Honey’s got this,” Honey said as she entered into the kitchen with Joy behind her. She took off her white apron and put on her jacket that had been placed on a coat rack in the kitchen. “I’ll be walking to school with these two. Don’t you give it another thought. I’m too old and I’ve seen far too much. If some young boys want to mess with me, they got another thing comin’. Let’s go chillun’. Abigail did you eat yourself some lunch?”

“No ma’am. I’m not hungry.”
Honey nodded, I’ll make you a sack to take to school with you. You can eat it at recess. You’ll get hungry soon enough. Trust me.”

Abigail nodded and turned to face me one last time before getting up from her seat and exiting out the kitchen door behind Honey and Joy.
HAZEL

We were sitting down at the kitchen table. Both of our uneaten slices of cake in front of us. Bridget’s face was streaming tears, I wanted to cry but all I could think about was Papa. He was going to be disappointed in me. I had broken his trust . . . again.

“Eat it up,” Bridget’s mom said standing between the two of us, “you wanted it. So you better eat it. Neither of you is going anywhere til its gone. And the next time you decide to cut a slice of my cake, you ask me, understood?”

We nodded in silence. I looked at my slice of cake. I didn’t want it. The thrill was gone, the taste was gone.”

“Do you know why the both of you got a spanking today?”

Bridget and I shook our heads.

“Because you ate a cake that I made especially for Miss Susie down the street. Now I have to go back to the store, wait in the long line, behind all those white people who treat me like I’m invisible. Just so that I can get more ingredients to make another cake.”

Bridget’s face fell. She had thought it was for the revival. “I’m sorry Mama.”

“Sorry ain’t gonna bring back my cake, now is it?” Her mom looked towards me, “And I’ll be telling your Papa about this, missy.”

It was time for my face to fall. I was hoping she would forget to tell Papa.
Bridget and I finished eating our cake and left the house without another word. Her Mama was still just as upset when we left.

“I’m sorry I got you into trouble Hazel,” Bridget said when we were a few minutes away from the school. “I didn’t know that her cake wasn’t for the revival.”

“How were you supposed to know?”

Bridget nodded, “I’m still sorry though. Do you think your Pa will be mad?”

I let out a long sigh, “After I promised him that I wouldn’t get into any trouble today. Yeah.”

Bridget lowered her head and ran off towards the school.
Their day ended as quickly as it had begun. Abigail and Hazel were in the kitchen making fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and biscuits for dinner while John Mark and Henri gathered fire wood and water for the next day. Hazel and Abigail laughed and talked about their day, but were careful not to share the most important details of it until dinner time.

Henri had heard about Hazel’s day from Lynn and Abigail’s day from Honey. He sat at the table in silence as he watched his children eat. Abigail was the same as she always was, but perhaps more unguarded than before. But Hazel refused to make eye contact with him. He already knew that she was guilty, but this only proved Mrs. Lynn’s tale.

“Abigail, I heard from Honey that you had an exciting day today.”

She nodded, “Yes Papa. But Honey and Joy helped me through it.”

“What happened?” John Mark asked.

Abigail quickly told John Mark and Hazel the events of everything that had happened during her lunch break. John Mark looked ashamed and disappointed in himself, “I am so sorry Abigail. I should have come home with you during lunch. Then it might not have happened.”

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“It still would have happened,” Henri said, “you being there only would have given them another target.”

John Mark nodded in agreement, “I promise I’ll walk home with you from school from now on.”

“Thank you, John Mark.”

He squeezed his sister’s hand gently as he turned his attention back to his plate of food. Henri turned his attention to Hazel. She didn’t look up.

“And how was your day Hazel?”

Her face flushed, “It was okay. I went to lunch with Bridget . . .”

“And . . .”

“I got into trouble.”

Henri nodded, “What happened?”

Hazel sighed as she recalled the events of what happened earlier that day.

“Hazel, I understand that you didn’t know that the cake was meant for something other than the revival and that you were led astray by Bridget. But you should never enter into someone else’s house and eat anything in there, especially dessert, without permission from an adult. Bridget is a child like you. I understand that mistakes happen. But Hazel, sometimes you have to learn not to listen to the influences of the people around you. You have to be able to know the difference between right and wrong. You have to start thinking for yourself.”

“Yes, Papa.”
After dinner was finished Hazel followed Henri into her bedroom closing the door behind her. “I want you to remember Hazel. That you are only getting another spanking because you did wrong and you should have known better. But although I’m spanking you I still love you very much,” Henri said wrapping the buckle of his brown belt around his hand.

“Yes, Papa,” Hazel replied bending over for the second time that day.
I couldn’t sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I was getting pelted with rocks. Papa said that it would eventually go away, and become a distant memory. But I couldn’t help it. Every time I closed my eyes, there they were. I knew I would have a few bruises and scars develop soon, but I tried not to let it bother me. They would be my victory scars. I made it out alive, when it could’ve ended differently. I was thankful for Lawrence being there. Maybe not at all white men were alike. Maybe.

“Morning,” Hazel said as she entered the kitchen. “Why are you up so early?” She asked trying to stifle a yawn.

“Couldn’t sleep. The events of yesterday, are still too real…in my mind.”

She nodded, “I’m sorry for what happened to you Abby.”

“You too,” I said in reply.

She nodded again, “At least Lawrence was there to help save the day. He’s a good guy. No wonder the Fortune Teller wants me to be with him.”

I rolled my eyes, and began to shuffle the wood in the fire underneath the stove.

“What?”

“Fortune teller again…really? Are you still on that?”
“What can I say, I can’t get her words out of my head,” she shrugged, “You don’t feel the same way? The words of the fortune teller don’t run around in your mind on repeat?”

I turned my attention away from her. She was right. The voice of Madame Phalange was always secretly ringing in the back of my head. I didn’t want to believe anything that she said. But I couldn’t help it. What if she was right? What if her predictions came true? Some people, like me, do have spiritual gifts from God. What if she had one?

“What’s so bad about me wanting to be with Lawrence anyway?” Hazel questioned as she tried to read my face.

“Besides the fact that you know nothing about him?”

“Yeah, besides that.”

“Why would you want to be with a white man anyway?”

“It’s not like I chose this.” Hazel said, “Maybe I’m supposed to be with a white man for a reason.”

“You always have a choice Hazel. Besides what reason could there possibly be for you to marry a white man?”

“How should I know? It hasn’t happened yet.”

I shook my head as I took ingredients out of the cabinet to make biscuits, as I watched Hazel head over to the stove and begin to prepare to cook the chicken that I had
killed and plucked earlier that morning. We were both quiet for some time as we worked.

It was me who broke the silence. “I’ve never told you this, but I’ve always been attracted to white boys. But I know that a future with one of them can never happen. And it’s not because the world would be against us being together, and they would, but it would mainly be because of the man himself. Hazel, how is it possible that you can forget the way they look at us? With disgust . . . hatred . . . that we’re worthless . . . useless and a waste of space. No matter which white man you come across, their viewpoint is always the same. Sometimes someone will appear to be different, for a second. But soon you realize, they’re all the same. The outcome is always the same. We’re slaves to them. Worthless. Useless. We’re of no value. When they see us, they don’t see a future wife, the mother of their children, their spouse. We are invisible to them. They don’t want to see us in any other way.”

“But maybe one day. . .”

“It will still be the same. Even if by some odd occurrence, a white man did look at us through a different set of eyes. He wouldn’t do anything about it. That would take courage, and strength. He would know that he’d be giving up everything to be with a Negro. No man . . . would give up everything to be with one of us. That’s the reality.”

I turned my attention back to my biscuits and closed my eyes for a second, “Whenever I see a white man, I don’t make eye contact. It’s easier for me to pretend that they’re not there. When they see me they’ll roll their eyes, spit, look on with disgust, or
laugh at me because I thought they might be different. It’s nice to have hope Hazel. And I’m glad that you’re looking at the world through a different set of eyes. But its pointless really. There may be a few white people in this world who are different from the rest. But those people are few and far between. Each of them is hiding something. Each of them is ashamed to be seen around or with us. But that’s life.”

Hazel opened her mouth then closed it forcefully as she tried to think of what to say. “Not even Lawrence?”

I thought about her question for a minute. Lawrence had proved himself to be different from the rest. His actions yesterday, showed that if nothing else did. But one thing I had learned over the years is that black and whites couldn’t run in the same circle. No matter what their actions may lead one to believe. I let out a long breath. There was sadness hidden within it, “Not even Lawrence.”

It was Hazel’s turn to sigh, “Maybe it would have been easier if we had been born white.”

“Yeah,” I said lifting my head up to the ceiling and blinking a few times before I looked over at her, “Maybe it would have been.”
HENRI

I saw her as she slowly made her way over towards the pond. I turned my attention back to the white cow with black speckles that I was milking. As time passed my attention turned back to my daughter. She was pacing. Back and forth, back and forth. Something was disturbing her. I quickly and thoroughly finished the last of my work and made long and quick strides over to the pond. She was no longer pacing, she had removed her shoes and socks, and she was now sitting at the edge of the pond in the grass as she kicked her feet back and forth in the water.

“Abigail.”

She looked up from where she sat and smiled solemnly at me, I saw the sadness in her eyes and took a seat beside her. Cautiously looking around for any unwanted creatures that could be near.

“What’s wrong Abby?” I asked looking intently at her facial expressions.

“Nothing Papa, I’m fine.”

“Abigail, I know that’s not true. What’s going on inside that little head of yours? What’s on your mind?”

She frowned for a second, then let out a long sigh, “I just can’t get them out of my mind.”

“The boys from yesterday?”
She nodded, “When will it end? Will it always be like this? Will we always be shunned for being the people God created us to be?”

I looked to the sky and closed my eyes for a second as I whispered a silent prayer. Soon I turned my attention back to my daughter. “Let me tell you a story that may help you.”

“When I was younger, after I had only been married to your mother for about a year or two. I was working at a company called, Tidal Wave Construction. I was working alongside a white man named Lewis. Usually I always went home to your mom for lunch and she always had a nice hot meal ready for me on the stove. But one day, Lewis decided to invite me over his house for lunch. I protested saying that my wife always had a hot meal ready for me. But he insisted time and time again, saying that his wife had enough food to feed an extra mouth or two. So eventually, I agreed to go with him. After traveling alongside him for a while, we reached his house. They had a hydrant outside to wash our hands and faces in, so after he was finished washing up for dinner, I did the same. He told me that he was going to go inside and let his wife now that they were going to be having company. I nodded and continued to get rid of the dirt that was on me. After I was finished I went around to the back of the house, to enter through their kitchen door. And that’s when I saw it. My food was sitting on the back porch, and two dogs were licking the plate clean. Lewis’ wife was standing at the back porch and gave me the meanest and dirtiest glare that I can remember and she said, “Listen. No nigger is going to be eating at my table. If you want some food. You can have what the dogs don’t eat.” I
looked at her for a second before I nodded and replied, “Thank you ma’am, but I think I can go ahead and eat at home. And when I got home, my wife had hot food waiting for me at the table. And I didn’t have to eat where the dogs ate.”

Abigail’s face was speechless as I finished telling her my story. She shook her head as she tried to process everything that had happened to me, once upon a time.

“The thing is Abigail, this is a white man’s world. We’re just living in it. We’re on one side of the fence and they’re on the other. It would be simple enough for them to open up the fence, allowing us to enter and take part of their society. But at the day and age that we’re living in right now, that’s not the case. Color and race are important in our society. Maybe one day that will change, and no one will notice color. I pray with my whole heart that we are all allowed to see that day come to pass, but until then we deal with the life that God has given us.”

“But if we’re only separated by a fence, can’t we just unlock it?”

I thought to myself for a second, trying to think about the best way to explain my analogy, “Think about it as a gate and fence put together.”

“A gated fence?”

“Exactly! Like it’s been double bolted. It’s been locked twice over, so that no matter what we try or do, we can’t get through. Only they have the key.”

“Them and Jesus?”

“Them and Jesus. And Jesus has the master key. Once he unlocks it, no man can shut it.”

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Abigail nodded, then a frown formed. “Why? Why does color matter so much? Who cares who is darker or lighter?”

“Listen to me carefully, Abigail. The world that we live in today doesn’t see us as human. We are compared to the scum of the Earth, or to animals. Yes, we are humans as they are, but they don’t see us like that. Negroes, slaves, the help, whatever they prefer to call us at the time that’s what we are to them. And as I said one day hopefully all of that will change. Maybe one day, someone will decide that they are not going to take it anymore, and when people decide that, the world will begin to see us at equals. But until then…”

Abigail seemed to think over the words that I shared with her but continued to shake her head, “Well what about the people who want to see us as equals already? And don’t have to wait for that change to happen?”

“Then they’ll be here to help solve God’s purpose. They’re here to help make sure the change in the world succeeds. But that doesn’t mean that we should abuse their power and friendship. They have to live in this world today, same as us. Look at the River’s family, they know our color and race, but they don’t judge or discriminate us for it. Because they know that God gave us this skin color for a reason, it was no accident that we came out of the womb this color Abigail. The hearts of the Rivers’ family have not been hardened like a majority of the people in the world today and we should all be thankful for that. But there are people out there, even Dr. Rivers’ neighbors and relatives that would not approve of him allowing us to live on his property or working his land.”
I looked at Abigail as she tried to process everything. Life here was different from our life in New Orleans, but I believed that we were placed into this situation for a reason. Everything that my children were experiencing and would experience is all in God’s will. But as I watched her trying to decipher everything, I could almost hear her thoughts out loud. *When was all of this going to stop? When would the world finally stop being so prideful and realize that God made us all equals. Why would an all-powerful God want everyone to look exactly the same? Wouldn’t that mean that he had no imagination and that he was as fickle as the world we live in? What would that prove? Why would God make a world where everyone was exactly alike? Where everyone looked the same, talked the same, dressed the same way, and married a person who was similar to them in every way possible. Wouldn’t that be unbearable to watch? But even in that world, there would probably be something that separated one person from the rest. Maybe someone’s hair would be different, or there’s a possibility that someone liked to read while the others didn’t, or maybe someone had freckles while the other didn’t. It would never stop. The world would always be looking for that one thing to separate the one from the rest. If it wasn’t skin color, then maybe it would be hair color, or the color of your eyes, or maybe because someone has a twin that looks exactly like them. And why have two people that look alike? Should one have to die, because the other wasn’t original enough? Ignorance and vanity lie everywhere, there would always be something to separate one from the rest.* “I guess you’re right Papa, someone will always want to be better than the rest,” Abigail said finally.
My Papa had talked to Honey about the church she attended on Sundays. She was more than informative when he asked about it. The church she attended wasn’t too far away from the Rivers’ house, so when Sunday morning arrived we all piled up in the wagon and followed Honey’s directions to my family the church.

The church that Honey and Joy attended was a Baptist church called God’s Covenant. When we arrived, people were already starting to file in. Honey said that it was best to be early, otherwise we would have to attend Sunday school. And she refused to be late.

“Girls you come with Joy and me. Mr. Henderson, you and John Mark will be going through the door to your left, while me and the girls will be going in through the door on the right. We’ll meet you inside.”

“Of course, Honey,” Papa said as he and John Mark followed her directions and entered the church.

The church that Honey attended was a good-sized church. Almost the same size as the one we attended in New Orleans. There were a lot of large windows in the front of the church and as we piled in we saw a lot more on the inside, beside the pews. Hazel and I stayed close to one another as we traveled behind Honey and Joy.

“Look Abby, there’s Bridget.”
I looked off in the direction that Hazel was pointing and saw Bridget walking quickly behind her mother, “Are you going to go say hi?”

She shook her head, “Maybe later.”

Papa and John Mark soon found us. We introduced ourselves to a few people before the choir stood up from their seats. The church went quiet as they began to sing. We were familiar with a few of the songs and sang along. There were only one or two songs that we didn’t know, but we followed Honey’s lead and sang quietly behind her. Honey had a loud booming voice, but it was beautiful. I wondered a few times why she wasn’t a part of the choir.

After the choir had finished their songs, we were asked to sit, and the preacher came to the pulpit and began his sermon.

“Strength. Your question should be…where…can I find strength to overcome this devil. The bible says that we are living in the last days. A perilous time for everyone around us. But during this time, I want to know where can one find strength…to go on. The bible says the joy of the Lord is your strength! It says that the joy, is…not was…your strength. The bible says that faith comes by hearing and hearing comes from the word of God. Once you hear the word the word of God, the Holy Ghost will convict you if you are meant to be convicted. If the Holy Ghost can’t get you to change, then we can’t do anything. Everything in life is a chance that we are taking. There are no guarantees. We will never fully understand what God’s full and final plan is.”
As I listened to the pastor preach his sermon I was brought back to my conversation with my father a few days earlier. Mistakes are something that we all come across. But someone won’t know that they are making a mistake, unless someone else points it out to them. In the world around us today, mistakes are a common factor. And it’s not because they don’t know what’s right and wrong, because they do. But because we are broken and lost people. That’s their mistake. It’s our mistake. It’s my mistake.

“It’s our turn to fight the good fight. Maybe it’s our turn to fight…to make a difference in the world. It’s time for us to speak up and let others know about their flaws and the fatal mistakes that they are making in the world. No difference can be made unless a change is first made within us. We bring the gospel to life with our words but more with our lives, the way we live life daily. But don’t lose hope. Reconciliation is a process. It’s a journey. God works everything out in his timing.”

“God’s purpose and plan may not make sense now. But remember that we are only seeing a small section of his much larger picture.”

“Let us pray, dear Lord please help us to be patient in waiting for the things that you will bless us with in the future. Please continue to let us show love towards our neighbor and honor you through all things, putting you first before everything else. In your name we pray, Amen.”
October 1941
On days like today with the cool fall breeze blowing and the trees whistling as they swayed back and forth. Abigail would normally be sitting and rocking silently on her tree swing. Often accompanied by Lawrence. Occasionally, Hazel might join them along with little Katherine. But today they were by the pond behind the Henderson house and Abigail and Lawrence had the swing to themselves.

A friendship had begun to blossom between the two since Abigail had been pelted with rocks a few weeks ago. It was an unexpected bonding moment for them both. Usually their conversations would range anywhere from the weather, to school, to biblical topics. But not today. Today there was something else on Lawrence’s mind.

As a private local doctor, Dr. Rivers’ work kept him in town and away from his family frequently. Since he hired the Henderson family to help look after his home he was gone more than usual and occasionally took Lawrence with him. Lawrence dreaded going into the family business, but it was in his father’s wish that he did so.

“For once I want to do something that I want to do.”

“Like what?” Abigail asked as they swung in the porch swing my Papa had made. The swing stood equally between the River’s house and the Henderson house. It was held by the two strong oak trees Abigail had found weeks earlier. Papa had built it for Abigail,
because he knew that she would be the only one who enjoyed it. Before they moved Abigail and her mother were the only ones who enjoyed the entertainment of the swing.

“I don’t know something meaningful . . . something important.”

“What’s more important than saving a person’s life?”

“Never mind . . . you don’t understand.” He grew silent.

“Then explain it to me. I’m listening . . . ”

He searched Abigail’s eyes for a moment or two as if he was looking for something. But he soon turned away and spoke as he looked down upon the faded blue jeans he was wearing, “Well ever since I turned fifteen all he does is talk to me about getting into the family business. He wants me to be like him, but I’m not like him.”

That much was true, Abigail thought, physically, at least, Lawrence looked nothing like his father. While he was tall and skinny with dark colored brown hair with blond accents, his dad was shorter than him by about four inches, he had a plump stomach from eating all of Honey’s cooking, and his black hair, unlike that of Abigail’s father, was starting to show small streaks of gray.

“If you could pick any profession right now . . . what would it be?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. But I have faith though that God will guide and show me when it’s time to know.”

“I trust that he will, Lawrence. I honestly do.”
Lawrence and Abigail’s friendship was different from the friendships she had had in the past. This friendship was sneaky, and she enjoyed every second of it. They both did. Lawrence was more open with Abigail than all of her past girlfriends had been. He didn’t mind opening up to her to share his feelings or what was on his mind. In a way, she felt that she was his journal. A source that he could pour into whenever he needed an outlet. It was the same with her, she tried to be as honest as she could with Lawrence. They both felt as if they had known each other their whole lives, instead of only a few months. It was scary, it was new, it was different.

Katherine was a child with a mind of her own though, unlike her brother she had an active imagination and knew what she wanted to do. She loved to spend the day at the pond or in the living room playing with her dolls. She enjoyed learning new things and following the Henderson children around the yard as they attended to their daily life. Abigail soon found out that Katherine viewed Honey as an alternative mom. She had a sweet sensitive nature, but a firm stance on how a person should act and behave. Honey was a strong Christian woman, who loved her job, life, family, and everything in it. Although Honey appeared to be a woman who kept to herself about the things happening around her, she wasn’t. If she felt like it was her place to speak she would and she sounded her opinion loud and clear. Dr. Rivers admired this about Honey, it always showed through the way he never interrupted her and respected each word that came out of her mouth. It was easy to see that they both had been through a lot together over the years. It was understandable to see why she loved her job as much as she did. Joy loved
her job too. And she had begun to enjoy it even more since the Henderson children moved in on the property. Because her joy came from one person in particular . . . John Mark.
“Good afternoon, Honey,” Hazel said as she and Abigail walked through the kitchen door.

Honey nodded after them, “How was school today?”

“Same as usual. Although Abigail is quickly becoming the teachers’ favorite.”

Abigail shook her head as she took an apple from her lunch bag.

“You didn’t eat lunch today?” Honey asked cocking her head to the side.

“I wasn’t really that hungry.” She hid her eyes as she took a bite from her apple.

Honey and Hazel exchanged a look and just as Honey was about to press her, Hazel shook her head.

“Well, where is Joy? Shouldn’t she have come in with the two of you? It was Abigail’s turn to share a look with Hazel. They both began to laugh silently.

“What am I missing here?” Honey asked.

“Joy’s out back…talking with John Mark,” Hazel said with a laugh.

Honey rolled her eyes and threw down the towel she was holding. That girl knows she’s supposed to be starting her chores as soon as she gets in from school!

“Joy!” Honey yelled out the kitchen door. “Bring your butt in here this instance. I don’t have time for you to be slacking off today!”

“What’s today?” Abigail asked.
Honey dabbed her head with a towel briefly before responding, “Dr. Rivers done got some people coming in from the hospital. I gotta be making dinner for all of them…more mouths to feed… then I still got to deliver a cake to Miss Lizzy down the street. I don’t have enough hands to go around.”

“We can help you, Honey.”

“Sure,” Hazel said. “We’d love to help.”

Honey thought for a brief second before nodding in response. “Alright girls, I’ll take you up on that. You girls can deliver the cake to Miss Lizzy.”

“Be sure to watch out for Jack,” Joy said entering through the kitchen door.

“Who’s Jack?” Hazel asked.

“That’s her dog. He’s a racist dumb animal.”

“Racist?” Abigail asked.

“Yeah. That’s the way he was raised according to Miss Lizzy. She’s not racist by any means. I’ve been to her house several times. But she got the dog after her brother died, he served in World War I…he was racist.”

“Enough will all that gossiping. Come over her now and sift some flour,” Honey said to Joy.

“Yes, mama.”

“A racist dog?” Hazel asked Abigail. She hunched her shoulders and went over to Honey who was pointing to some green beans that needed to be peeled.
Three hours later Abigail and Hazel were heading towards Miss Lizzy’s house. They weren’t sure what to expect. They had dealt with racist people all their lives. But dogs…all the animals they knew had been so friendly. How could a dog be racist?

They approached her house thirty minutes after they had left the Rivers residence and they immediately knew they were in the right place.

He growled. He barked. He showed teeth. Abigail and Hazel took three steps back.

“Maybe we can leave the cake on the sidewalk. She’ll have to find it, eventually right?” Hazel asked.

“Umm…maybe,” Abigail said.

The dog was large. Light brown with a large black patch on his back. A German Shepherd. His ears arched back as he continued to growl and inch his way towards the girls.

They inched backwards once more as the dog began to run towards them then suddenly stopped short. He was on a thick silver chain. The girls let out a long breath.

An older woman came out of the house then. She was about 5’4” with white curly thick hair. She was wearing a plain green and black sundress and house slippers. “Jack would you stop all that barking! That’s no way to treat visitors.”

He wasn’t listening. He continued to launch after the girls. Trying to break off his chain. Then he heard it. The lady let out a loud whistle. He stopped. He sat. Everything went quiet.
“Ladies, please. If you could enter through the back door.” The girls eagerly nodded. Never in their lives had they been more excited to enter through the servant’s entrance. They ran past the dog. Hoping to never see him again.

“Thank you!” she said finally. “And I don’t want to hear another peep out of you, Jack.”
“Come in…Come in. How are you two lovely ladies doing this evening?”

“Fine ma’am.”

“Oh no. Ma’am was my mother. You can call me Miss Lizzy. Come. Sit. Sit.”

Hazel and I looked at one another for a moment before we took a seat at the kitchen table.

“So, what did you young ladies bring me? Please tell me it’s one of Honey’s cakes.”

“Yes ma’am. Lemon Caramel cake.”

She sighed, “I have been waiting months for one of these.” She took the cake from Hazel, “Honey is always making me a few of her special cakes and pies, but she makes so many that I only get to taste a certain flavor once a year. I don’t think I’ve had one of these in . . . about a year actually.”

She looked from me to Hazel, “Have you tasted her Lemon Caramel cake before?”

We shook our heads. “No, ma’am.”

“Well we can’t have that.” She went to the cabinet and pulled out three small saucers and three glasses.
“I’m not a fan of eating by myself. I hope you girls will eat a slice with me, before you go on your way.”

“Yes ma’am,” Hazel said as she began to eye the cake.

“Good!” She quickly began to cut three slices of cake and placed them on the saucers and she took the glasses and gave us each a little water from her pitcher that was sitting on the counter top.

Miss Lizzy, was an interesting older woman. She had active and alive eyes. She didn’t look as if she had lived a hard life, but she looked like she had lived a life full of joy and adventure. Hazel immediately began to engage into a conversation with Miss Lizzy. But I had to be me. I sat back and observed her behavior. She didn’t act like a racist woman. She treated both of us, as if she were color blind. Maybe she was.

“What’s on your mind, Abigail?” Miss Lizzy asked.

Her question caught me off guard, I had zoned out for a little while. “It’s just. You’re not like normal white people. You don’t seem to mind the fact that we’re black.”

Miss Lizzy laughed to herself for a minute. “I am quite aware of the fact that you and your sister are black, Abigail. But color has never been something that has bothered me. We are all equal in God’s sight. None of us are better than the other.”

“That’s not what the rest of the world says,” Hazel muttered.

“Racism isn’t new. And I doubt that it will ever be gone for good. But we have the opportunity and chance to direct our children and the people that come into our lives along the same path or along the path of change.”
“You want the world to change?”

“Isn’t that why Jesus died on the cross? To make a change in the world.”

“Because we’re all sinners in need of a savior?”

“Exactly. Because we’re all broken.”

“Especially Jack.”

Miss Lizzy laughed, “Jack may be a lost cause. But that doesn’t mean we can’t steer the rest of the world in the right direction.”
ABIGAIL

At the age of five, I was awoken to the sound of humming coming from our living room. I quietly left my bed and the room I shared with my siblings and reached where the entrance to the living room started to see my mother dancing to a tune she was humming. She was dancing alone because my father, I assumed, was in bed. But that didn’t bother her, she slow danced gracefully from one end of the room to the other, back and forth until the tune that she hummed ended. When the tune finished she sighed and curtsied to herself. I slowly moved from the spot where I had been hiding in the shadows and was moving towards my room when one of the loose floorboards beneath my right foot squeaked. I gasped, quietly or loudly I’m not sure, but soon enough I heard the squeak from the rocking chair come to a halt and as quickly as my tiny body would carry me I scurried off to my bedroom. Jumping onto my bed and shoving my body underneath my thick red quilt, I closed my eyes tightly and waited for the footsteps of my mother. I didn’t have to wait long because she arrived shortly after I had gotten situated in my bed. But seeing that each one of her three children were nestled in our beds she turned to leave, and I soon heard the squeak of her rocking chair start up once again. I don’t believe that she ever did find out that I was the one awake that night, but the memory of her dancing was one I kept with me forever.
Over the next few years, my mom would grab me from where I sat on my bed or on the ground outside and ask me to dance with her. I always agreed and was thankful to have my own special time with my mother. She taught me all the dances that she knew. A few slow dances, as much of ballroom dancing as she could remember, and swing dancing. I loved watching my mom dance and instruct me on what I did wrong. Because somewhere in the back of my mind I wanted to be as great of a dancer as she was. Granted I didn’t know many dancers at the time, but that didn’t matter to me because my mom was the best.

So, when Katherine came into my room one evening after school, and asked me if I knew how to dance, my answer could only be one thing.

“Why do you want to know how to dance?”

“Well, Lawrence is having a dance at his school in a couple of weeks. I asked him if I could go, but he said I couldn’t. Because I’m too young and I don’t know how to dance,” her face was sullen as she said this.

“Can I let you in on a little secret?”

She nodded vigorously.

“I was only a little bit older than you, when my mom first taught me how to dance. So I say, you’re not too young.”

“You’re going to teach me?”

“Of course. But not in here. Why don’t we go the parlor and practice in there?”
She quickly grabbed my hand and led me to the parlor area. Thankfully there was not enough furniture in there to get in our way.

“We don’t have any music!” Katherine exclaimed as soon as we were settled in the room.

“You don’t need music to dance, Katherine. You need rhythm. And sometimes the best music is the music you make yourself.”

She nodded as she looked at me with eager eyes. “So, would you rather learn how to ballroom dance or slow dance?”

She seemed to think about this for a moment before answering, “A slow dance sounds easier, so let’s start with that one.”

I nodded and took her hands up in mine. “Here place your hands around my waist. There you go. And then place your feet on top of mine.”

“But I’ll be too heavy.”

“I got you, Katherine. I promise.”

She did as I instructed, and slowly and carefully I guided her around the area of the parlor. I began to hum a little tune as I did.

“This is fun!” she said as I twirled her around a time or two.

We danced until I had sung through a few different songs. “Okay I think that’s it for this evening.”

“But I want to learn one more. What about the ballroom dance? Or a ballet dance?”

I looked at her for a moment as I watched a figure appear in the room.
“What’s going on in here?”

It was Lawrence. He had just arrived home from school. He was dressed in a white shirt and overalls. His backpack was still strapped to his back.

“Abigail is teaching me how to dance. That way when I get older, I can go to a school dance like you.”

I shifted awkwardly from where I stood. “I guess I should be getting back to work.”

“You can’t go yet!” Katherine proclaimed. “You have to dance with Lawrence once. That way he can see what you taught me.”

“No. I’m sure Lawrence has better things to do tonight, Katherine.”

I watched as Lawrence took a step towards me as he looked at his sister’s pleading eyes, “I don’t mind sharing a dance with you. If you don’t.” He placed his backpack on the ground, far enough out of the way that neither of us would slip on it.

“Please Abigail?” Katherine begged.

I nodded and waited for Lawrence to reach me before placing my right hand in his left. I flinched at his touch.

I closed my eyes, as we began to dance among the room around us. I danced easily and gracefully with him as he spun and twirled me around the room. My light pink flowered dress twirled around the room as he spun me. I hadn’t felt a feeling like that in a long time.

We slow danced together for as long as time allowed. And it felt as if time stopped altogether. Lawrence slowly spun me around three times then smiled.
“Beautiful,” he remarked as I fell back into step with him.

He dipped me once, then twice before bringing me back up to him and laying his head on top of my own. For a moment we both seemed to forget our place in the world. It was just the two of us.

I could feel his heartbeat beating in perfect rhythm with my own. His breath against my cheek was slow and easy as if he had been waiting his entire life for this moment. We continued in perfect step with one another before he spun me again. But this spin was different, this time in mid-spin, I was suddenly transported back to the dream I had only had a couple months earlier. As I fell back into step with Lawrence once more, I sighed as he drew me close and held me close and gently to his chest.

I breathed out and breathed in the scent of Lawrence. He smelled of old school books and fresh air. I never wanted the dance to end, I never wanted this moment to be over. I never wanted to forget this moment. But I knew that it would never last. Only three things last in this world: faith, hope, and love. Not moments. Moments are here one second and gone the next.

We heard a voice clear their throat, “Abigail!”

Lawrence and I broke apart immediately.

“Child, don’t you got some chores to be doin’? You need to get to them chores right now.”

“Excuse me I gotta go,” I said to Lawrence, but not taking my gaze off Honey.
I walked over to Honey and I could feel her glare upon Lawrence as I saw her shake her head at him at the corner of my eye.

I left the room and soon heard Honey behind me as she let out a loud grunt. As soon as I entered the kitchen, I felt Honey grabbed me by the arm. “Listen here Honey child. You cannot be messing with no white man. You know you’re a black woman. Do you wanna get yo’self killed? Do you wanna get us killed? Do ya? Do you wanna get us killed? Do you wanna get ya Papa killed? Do want ya Papa to be gone from here? Cause if that’s the case then keep doing what ya doin’. Because if ya keep on doin’ what ya doin’ that’s what’s gonna happen. And I likes my job out here too much to be losin’ it over something like you. So you needs to leave that white boy alone. Do you understand me?”

“Yes ma’am.” I said as I tried to focus on the floor tiles that were situated underneath my feet. “Yes ma’am.”

“Now. Don’t you got chores to do? Get to your chores,” Honey looked at me then with understanding in her eyes, but it only lasted a second before she shook the thoughts out of her mind.

“Yes ma’am.”

“And don’t you forget . . . to leave that white man alone.”
“Hey,” Lawrence said one afternoon as he took a seat next to me on the couch.

“Hi,” I said closing my bible. I slipped my index finger inside to keep my place.

“Where is everyone?” He looked around at the empty living room and leaned back as far as he could on the couch to take a glance up the staircase.

“They’re all in the kitchen having lunch.”

“Ah,” he got up and began to walk towards the dining room. Not seeing me follow him he turned around as his gazed became fixated on my own. “You’re not coming?”

I shook my head in reply, “I’m not hungry.”

“Not hungry? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Lawrence, really. I’m just not hungry.” I turned my attention back to my bible and began to read where I had left off, in Genesis.

I felt Lawrence walk back towards me, but I tried not to fix my attention or gaze on him. It had been a little awkward between us, since we had danced. We weren’t sure how to act around one another. Especially because neither of us wanted to get in trouble with Honey again. “Are you reading back through the bible again?” he asked me astonished, “That’s like the second time since you’ve been here.”

“It’s the only book I have to read,” I said looking up at him.
He shook his head and began to pace back and forth for a few seconds, before stopping in his tracks. “Come with me.”

He walked off towards his father’s study, so I closed my bible, leaving it on the couch and hurried after him. As he entered in I hesitated by the door for a moment before deciding not to enter.

“Well come on,” he called over to me.

At his command, I followed him into the room and looked around. His father had a large mahogany desk that sat in the middle of the room with a brown wooden chair behind it, and two smaller wooden chairs in front of it. On the left side of the room, there was a bookshelf built into the wall containing five columns and four rows full of books and large stacks of papers. On a small desk in the back corner of the room was a typewriter and another small stack of papers.

On the right side of the room, there was another bookshelf built into the wall. However, this one had five columns and five rows full of books. I gasped at the sight of all the many books Dr. Rivers had stored inside his office.

Lawrence must have heard me gasp at the sight of the books, because when my gaze finally met his he was smiling down at me.

“What?” I asked taking my attention off him to begin lightly searching through the books that filled the room.

“Nothing. I just…I thought you might like it. Go ahead pick one.”

“Pick one? Am I allowed to?”
“These are most of my mom’s books on the right side of the room. She’s already read them and would love to have someone else to share them with. Trust me.”

I searched his eyes for signs of deceit or manipulation but found none. His blue eyes held truth and security, so I went forward and approached the large shelf. Scanning through each book slowly and carefully. Soon I found a title that sparked my interest.

“Can I borrow this one?” I asked pointing to the book on the shelf.

“The Pilgrim’s Progress?” Lawrence responded taking the book from its place on the bookshelf, “Sure. I’ve read this one a few times myself. It’s a pretty good read. I think you’d like it.” He handed me the book and I slowly took it from his grasp. “Now the only thing about borrowing these books are…One: Don’t come in here without me, Two: Don’t ruin it. Three: Don’t borrow another book with another one still out. And Four: Discuss the books with me or my mom when she gets back. I’m always looking for something interesting to capture my attention. And my mom, she loves discussing the books she’s bought with others. So that will make her day.”

“Yes, sir.”

He laughed, “I don’t mind bringing you in here to look at the books and to broaden your reading horizon, just let me know and I’ll usher you in.”

“Yes sir,” I repeated. He began to laugh once more as he saw me slide my hand over the front cover and flip the book to the back.

Lawrence gestured me out of Dr. Rivers office and back to the living room where I sat back down on my seat, carefully moving my bible to one side of me. I held the book
gently in my hand. Flipping it back to the front once more I brushed my hand lightly across the front cover and opened it up to page one. I was so engrossed with the words on the first page that I never heard Lawrence leave the room.
It was Saturday. It was Lawrence’s idea that we all play a little innocent game of baseball. He decided that we needed to put more exercise and fun into our routine. This was something that we played back at our old home, so we were quick to agree. Jacob usually joined us along with a few of the kids on our street. Lawrence was in the field as a catcher, while Katherine was sitting in the grass playing with her dolls as she quietly watched us.

“Are you ready?” John Mark asked

“Of course, I’m ready. I’m always ready. Would you pitch it already?” Hazel said.

“Are you going to pitch it or not?”

“Alright here it comes,” John Mark said. It was an underhanded throw. It was always underhanded. Hazel was the only one who threw over handed. She always seemed to be too curious of how far and fast she could throw.

She hit the ball and one easy and fast swing. Then she was off. She ran towards first base, that had been marked with a large stick. And then second base that had been marked with an old shoe of hers. Then third base that had been marked with one of our school books. That’s where she stopped.

“Why’d you stop?” I asked holding the baseball in my right hand.

“You think you’re so sneaky. Don’t you?”
I shrugged and took my place to bat. He threw, I hit, he dodged, I ran. I ran fast. I ran long. Hazel and I both reached home plate before John Mark had the chance to gather the ball up from the ground.

“Yes! Victory,” Hazel said.

John Mark rolled his eyes. “Your turn to pitch, Hazel.” They quickly switched places. John Mark was up at bat and Hazel was ready to pitch. “Not too hard this time Hazel.”

“Yeah…yeah.”

She threw it hard. As usual. But John Mark was able to hit it as soon as the ball reached him. Then he ran. Second Base.

I was up next. “Not too hard Hazel,” I muttered to myself, knowing that she wouldn’t listen if I said it out loud.

She threw it. The ball went far and long, over my head and into the trees behind our house.

“Hazel!”

“Oops.”

I rolled my eyes and rushed off to go get it. I had to look around for a moment or two before I finally located it sitting on top of a patch of pine needles. I reached down to grab it and felt a sharp pain shoot through my left leg. I yelled out. I heard John Mark and Hazel begin to run towards me.

I fell to the ground and grabbed hold of my leg. It was stinging in pain.
“Ow, it hurts.”

I was starting to feel weak and dizzy. But maybe that had been because of all the running. John Mark immediately came to my aid and looked down at where I was holding my leg. Then he began to look along the ground floor. I pointed off in a direction, before grabbing my leg again.

“Is that blood?” Hazel asked.

John Mark seemed to have noticed it at the same time. They both looked back at me and their faces went pale.

“What? What is it?”

“Snakebite,” John Mark whispered so lowly that I faintly believed that I imagined it.
John Mark began moving faster than his brain could process. He immediately took off his black shirt that he was wearing over his undershirt and, moved over to the pond and quickly dipped it in and fully soaked the shirt. Afterwards he lightly rang it out he began to tightly wrap it around the snake bite on Abigail’s leg quickly making it into a tourniquet. He was careful to leave the bite open enough for him to cut it.

“Is that tight?” John Mark asked as he looked worriedly over to Abigail. She nodded her head but paid close attention to everything that her brother was doing, keeping every step enclosed sacredly inside her brain in case the situation came up again. She hoped it wouldn’t.

Lawrence and Hazel were starting to look nervous and anxious as small tears began to run down the front of Katherine’s face. John Mark knew that unless he could keep everyone calm especially Abigail this entire situation was going to go downhill fast.

“Lawrence, breathe,” he said holding him by the shoulder, “There’s no need to panic. Because if you panic, Abigail will panic, and she needs to remain calm.”

“I am calm,” Abigail’s said aloud, “Just do what you need to do and fast.”

“Okay…okay…let me think,” John Mark said aloud as he reached to take his pocket knife from his back pocket. “Lawrence, run over to the field and get my dad. He was with the cows earlier, so check there first. Tell him what happened and hurry back.”
“Yeah okay,” Lawrence said as he took one last look at Abigail before sprinting off towards the field.

“Hazel, take Katherine with you and go get Honey. Tell her what happened and get her to boil some water and make sure Abigail’s bed is ready so for when we head up to the River’s house. Now!”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Hazel said picking up Katherine so that she rested on her hip and ran towards our house as fast as she possibly could.

“It’s going to be okay Abigail. I promise,” he said as he looked around in the green grass for a stick. He studied and tested each stick quickly and carefully before he finally found one that he believed was firm enough for Abigail to bite into as he cut open the wound.

“What is that for?” Abigail asked as she watched her brother begin to trim the stick and make it smooth around the edges.

“It’s for you to bite. Open.”

Abigail did as she was instructed and held the stick between her top and bottom teeth. She watched as her brother wiped off the blade of his pocket knife with his shirt and slowly looked up at her. “This is going to hurt but try your best to stay still.”

Abigail nodded and watched silently as her brother began to cut the snake bite with his knife quickly and smoothly.

She could feel the cool fall air, brush by the blood that was beginning to run onto John Mark’s torn shirt that was wrapped around her leg. She could feel a tear or two
leave her eye and fall silently down her cheek to the grass that lay beside her. She watched and waited patiently for her brother. She bit hard on the stick that tasted of dirt and morning dew, as she felt her brother slice the thick skin around the snake bite, careful not to let it fall out of her mouth from the scream that was dying to come out. She bit it as if it was her lifeline and letting it go would cause her to die. Then to herself quietly she said a prayer, *Please God don’t allow me to die. Not now. Please let John Mark take out all of the poison and allow me to be healed in no time at all. Amen.* After John Mark had finished making the incision cuts with his knife he bent his face down to the snake bite opening, ready to suck out as much poison as he could.

Lawrence didn’t find Mr. Henderson with the cows as John Mark had previously thought, but instead found him in the chicken coop with the chickens. Mr. Henderson was caught off guard when he saw Lawrence running into the coop but couldn’t help but to smile.

“Where’s the fire, Mr. Lawrence?” Henri asked.


“Slow down there, sir. Now, what’s going on?”

Lawrence held onto his sides, thinking to himself that with the speed he finished running to reach Mr. Henderson the track coach, Mr. Yeller, would be wondering why he
didn’t put this much effort into the P.E. class. After a few seconds had passed, Lawrence took in a deep breath and quickly told Mr. Henderson what had happened.

Mr. Henderson was soon running back towards John Mark and Abigail, with Lawrence only a foot behind him. When they finally reached them, John Mark had Abigail in his arms and was already heading towards the River’s household.

“John Mark,” Henri yelled getting his son to come to a halt, “How? What did –?”

“Don’t worry dad, I did everything exactly the way you taught me to. I got out as much poison as I could.”

“Good job, son. Now hand Abigail to me and you two go inside and see that Honey has everything ready for when we arrive.”

“Yes, sir,” John Mark said as he handed his sister to Henri and followed Lawrence inside the house.

“How are you feeling there, babycakes?” Henri asked.

“Right as rain, Papa, right as rain.”

What Henri didn’t know was that Abigail was feeling more like hail falling from the sky and crashing to the ground in a bottomless pit of fire, a rain coming down from Heaven to bring moisture to the Earth. But she knew if she were to tell him how she really felt, it would make him worry more than he already was, and she didn’t want that.

Honey and Joy were ready to help assist Mr. Henderson as soon as he walked through the doors of the River’s house with Abigail in his arms.

“Oh, good gracious. Sweet girl, how are you feeling?”
“Never better, Honey,” Abigail replied, growing paler by the second.

“Now I’d done made up the guest room for you on the second floor Ms. Abigail. Follow me. Joy, sweetie, go get the pot of boiling water from the kitchen along with a few cloths and bring it to the guest room immediately.”

“Yes’m,” Joy said as she quickly returned to the kitchen.

“I thought it might work best to use the guest room for Ms. Abigail, she’ll be having more room to herself and then the doctor, well now he’d have more room to work,” Honey continued.

“Thank you for looking out for my daughter, Honey,” Mr. Henderson replied.

“Now you know very well that I have begun to think of each of these little young’ins as my own. We’re family now, we have to watch out for one another.”

As they stepped into the guest room John Mark and Hazel took a moment about themselves to look around, as Honey helped Lawrence and Mr. Henderson get Abigail situated and comfortable on the bed.

“This room is as big as our old house,” Hazel whispered over to John Mark.

The guest room had a four-poster queen size bed immediately to the right of the door. The walls were painted white while the floors were hard wood like the living room, but there was a white thick rug covering a majority of the room. There was one large, floor length window covered with a tan curtain that lay to the right of the bed. To the left of the door were two sitting chairs and a small table which would soon hold the pot of water that Joy was soon to bring up. On the walls to the right were pictures that looked
as if they had been in the family for quite a while. While on the walls to the left was a medium-sized mirror which had been decorated with chrome and silver lining.

“It’s not that big, Hazel, but it is big.”

“Maybe I should’ve been the one to get bit by that snake instead of Abby.”

“Now you shut it. I don’t ever want to hear you say anything like that ever again. Do you understand me?”

Hazel closed her mouth and nodded. She knew that when John Mark went into his authoritative fatherly voice there was no arguing with him after that.

Joy entered soon after their conversation ended and put a pan of boiling water along with several cloths on to the table.

“Honey, can I leave you to clean up Abigail’s wound, while I go into town to find a doctor, or at the very least Dr. Rivers? I’m not sure how soon he was supposed to be coming back into town this time.”

“Of course, Mr. Henderson. You go on ahead and find a doctor. I’ll watch over Abigail and keep an eye on things.”

“Thank you, Honey.” Mr. Henderson nodded towards Honey but turned his attention to his daughter. “I’ll be back as soon as I can Abby. Try to get some rest, sweetie.”

He watched as his daughter silently nodded and turned his attention over to his other children. “Hazel I want you to stay here with your sister and Katherine, and keep an
eye on them. I’m going to take Lawrence and John Mark with me into town to find a doctor.”

They both nodded. John Mark and Lawrence quickly followed Mr. Henderson out of the door and into the hallway, while Hazel and Katherine went to offer their assistance to Honey.

Abigail tried to keep as still as possible as Hazel and Honey took turns cleaning the infected wound. She wasn’t anxious for the doctor or for anything really, her heart began to beat slower than she was used to. Taking her eyes off of Honey and Hazel for only a moment she looked up at the ceiling which had diamond centered cut-outs embedded into the tan ceiling tiles. As her heart began to slow down even more she saw the room begin to disappear around her. Slowly at first, but it began to speed up as the seconds flew by. She closed her eyes to take her mind off of the spinning room and the women that were gathered about her leg, and soon she was fast asleep.
“How is she?” Henri asked when he arrived back in the guest room.

“She’s been resting since you left, but that’s not my concern at present,” Honey said leading Mr. Henderson and Dr. Rivers over to Abigail’s leg. “The area around the bite on her leg is starting to turn red. It’s swelling, and the bite is starting to spread. I’ve been keeping cool compresses on the bite since you left to fetch Dr. Rivers. But I’m not sure that there is much else I can do, and…she has a fever.”

“Let me see,” Dr. Rivers said, pushing through to take a long up-close look at the snake bite. “Oh, oh yes I see.” He shook his head as he headed up to the head of the bed and took Abigail’s right arm into his right hand and slowly studied the watch that was fastened on his left wrist. “Her pulse rate is normal, it’s at 84,” he then opened his black leather medical bag and searched for a moment for taking out a mercury thermometer. He shook it twice before carefully lifting up Abigail’s chin and placing it in her mouth under her tongue. While he waited he took the cold compress that Honey had on Abigail’s snake bite and moved it to the side to get a better look at it. “Did it look like this before you put the compress on Honey?”

“No suh, it didn’t look like that at all. It’s gotten bigger since I put the compress on.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Get me a fresh one Honey.”
“What does that mean Dr. Rivers?” Henri asked looking from the doctor to Abigail.

Dr. Rivers didn’t answer him but went back to the head of the bed and looked down at Abigail. Slowly and quickly he opened each of her eyelids and looked inside, peering carefully and intently at the pupils. “Hmm,” he thought to himself. After closing her eyelids, he removed the warm rag off of her forehead and handed it to Honey, who began to dunk it into the bucket of cold water and wrung it out bringing him a fresh cold rag. He felt her head for a moment before placing the cool rag back on her head. Then he took the thermometer out from her mouth and sighed.

“Henri, I don’t want to cause any reason for alarm, but the bite on her leg is beginning to swell and so is her leg. It’s quickly spreading to her ankle and foot. The fever that Honey mentioned is correct. Abigail has a temperature of 104 now and that is trying to fight off the infection and the venom.

“What does this mean?”

“What means, Henri. That we’re going to have to wait it out and see what her body decides to do. That’s all we can do.”
It didn’t take Dr. Rivers long to find Henri. He had been in Abigail’s room all night.

“Henri,” Dr. Rivers whispered, hoping not to wake Abigail.

“Yes suh. What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind going to the drug store for me. I’ve ordered some medicine for Abigail and it should be ready by the time you arrive. I’d pick it up myself, but –”

Henri nodded, cutting Dr. Rivers off. He was the doctor, he needed to be there in case anything was to change.

“It should be at the front counter when you arrive Henri. Just let them know that you’re picking up an order for me. I’m giving you this note. In case you have any trouble.”

“Yes suh. I’ll return as quickly as I can,” Henri looked at his daughter once more before heading out of the room.

He was pushing the horses to go as fast as he could get them to run. But it still took him a little over twenty-five minutes to arrive at the drug store. He tied the wagon and the horse on the back side of the store. He walked quickly to the front of the store. There
were sale items located in the store front window as well as few candy items that were being promoted. As he entered the bell for the store dinged loudly.

No one was inside except for the pharmacist. Henri couldn’t help but to feel relieved.

“Can I help you?” the pharmacist asked. He didn’t like people of color. Henri could sense this. But he was only in there for one thing. The pharmacist was white, brown hair. Maybe he was in his mid-thirties, dressed in a pair of overalls. The expression on his face was mixed with annoyance and sleep deprivation.

“I’m here to pick up an order for Dr. Rivers.”

The pharmacist nodded and looked behind him at the pill bottle that had already been set aside for Dr. Rivers.

“You got proof, that you’re here for the Doctor?”

“Yes suh,” Henri said. Taking out the slip of paper from his pocket and handing it to the pharmacist.

“Huh.” Was all he said before bringing the pill bottle over for Henri and ringing it up. “That’ll be $0.75”

Henri reached in his pocket to get the money to pay the pharmacist, when the bell dinged. Henri and the pharmacist both turned their attention. It was an elderly white woman followed by her two children.

Henri immediately moved over to the side. Allowing the lady and her family to fill their order. As she began to tell the pharmacist what she needed she glanced towards
Henri and offered a warm smile. Which he returned. Her order was quickly filled. And she soon left.

Approaching the counter once more, Henri reached into his pocket for the money when the bell dinged again. This time it was a young man and his wife, followed by a young girl. Unknowingly, Henri moved back over to the side once more. Making room for the customers.

He smiled at each of them, not worrying about his daughter or the time it was taking him to get the medicine. He knew that God was in control. Patience is something that he had learned over the years in situations like these. After some time had passed, it was finally Henri’s turn once more. This time there were no interruptions.
“What are you doing in here?” I heard Abigail groggily say.

“We’ve all decided to take shifts watching you. You know, because this way everyone gets a chance to get some rest and continue with their lives. Since you’re being so selfish as to pull everyone away from their current life.”

She let out a half silent chuckle as she turned her body slowly on the bed so that her face could see mine in the light that was provided by a lamp that stood in the corner of the room next to the window, “I’m sorry.”

“Now don’t you ever apologize to me again, understood? This was not your fault. God had this planned out before you were even born, I don’t know why. But for whatever reason it is, it doesn’t need apologizing, understand.”

She nodded with a blink of her eyelids as she breathed slowly. “How bad is it?”

“What?”

She didn’t respond but looked back at me with an intense gaze that spoke the words for her, “It’s not that bad, honest. Since you wear dresses all the time anyway, all you have to do is wear an extra-long one that covers pretty much everything, and you’ll never even know anything happened,” I said grinning. She cracked a smile knowing that I was doing my best to lighten the mood and bring humor into the moment.
“But how are you, Abby? How do you feel? Hot? Cold? Hungry? Do you need to use the bathroom? Because I can call Hazel and we can help you in two seconds.”

“I am a little warm now that you mention it,” she said as she began to push the covers off of herself.

I got up and walked over to the bucket of water that Honey had left in the room and wet up another cloth to place on her head. I walked back over to her and carefully placed it on her head as she sighed from the coolness that it brought.

She closed her eyes for a minute or two until I believed that she was asleep. I closed my eyes in response until I heard her voice once more, “John Mark?”

“Yeah?” I drew close to the bed and held her right hand in both of mine.

“Do you remember when we were little and you used to tell me bedtime stories to help me get to sleep?”

I nodded in response then realized that she could not see my head nod due to the fact that her eyes remained closed. “Yes. What about it?”

“Could you tell me one?”

“Now?”

“Please? It’ll help me to forget all of this and get back to sleep.”

“Sure, thing Abby,” I leaned back in my chair and thought for a moment as I rubbed my chin, “Okay I got it. You’ll fall asleep to this story in no time. It’s a John Mark classic.”

“Oh no, not a John Mark classic.”
“Oh yes. Ready? Here we go.”

I looked at her face as her eyes remained shut but her ears were wide opened to hear the story I had in mind for her.

“Once upon a time, there was a prince by the name of Camden. Now this prince was days away from commanding a whole kingdom since his father was getting close to dying in his old age. The king was seventy-eight. But before he could become king he had to find a woman whom he could call his queen. Now there was plenty of princesses all over the land but none of them caught his eye, but one day when he was riding his horse into town he saw a peasant woman that was washing some clothes outside. Now this woman went by the name of Lauren. She came from a very poor family with one brother and three sisters and she was the oldest of them all. She always wished to marry a prince because she knew if she did all of her family’s money problems would go away. So, when the prince saw her his eyes lit up like the jewels on his father’s crown. He instantly fell in love. He knew that she was the woman he wanted to call his queen so the very next day he went back to her house to ask the father for his daughter’s hand in marriage. When she overheard him saying this her heart was overfilled with joy but it didn't last long.

Without hesitation, the father said, “No daughter of mine is going to marry some prince. I don't care how poor we are.”

The prince was determined to make Lauren his bride, got on his horse and rode off into the woods in search of a man by the name of Rumpelstiltskin. Now Rumpelstiltskin
was a powerful man. He could grant any wish you wanted to be granted but it would come at a price. Now when prince Camden made it to the woods he jumped off his horse and started yelling for Rumple to show himself. Screaming at the top of his lungs while turning in circles for what seemed like hours he dropped to his knees while softly saying please show yourself. He then heard a voice behind him saying “How may I help you, my dear young prince?”

The prince quickly got up and begged to rumple for him to grant his wish of allowing Lauren's father to let him marry her. “I'll give you whatever you want. Money, fame, anything. You name it and it’s yours.”

“Oh poor, sad, confused, little prince. You can keep your money and fame. All I want is…a lock of hair from your first-born daughter,” said Rumpelstiltskin.

The prince was eager, “Yes. Yes, I can do that. That will not be a problem on my part, now please will you grant my request?”

With a snap of Rumpelstiltskin’s fingers, the young princes’ wish was granted.

“There, my boy, your wish has been granted but don't forget your promise because if you do you won't like the consequences,” said Rumpelstiltskin with a wave of his hand.

"I promise I won't," said the young prince.

With his wish granted he jumped back on his horse and quickly rode back to town to ask Lauren's father once again for her hand in marriage and, this time, he said yes. Within one weeks’ time, they were happily married. Prince Camden was now a king and
Lauren was now a queen and her family was no longer poor. Everything seemed great. Two years later they were blessed with twins: a boy and a girl.

Now with all the excitement going on in his life King Camden forgot all about his promise to Rumple. But Rumple never forgets. One day when king Camden was riding through the woods to go to another town to meet with another King when he ran into rumple who was not so happy.

Rumpelstiltskin said, “Now, my sweet King, you have not held up your end of the bargain.”

“What bargain?” the King asked.

“The lock of hair of your first-born daughter.”

“I have no daughter. Now get out of my way, old man.”

“We'll see who the old man is,” said Rumpelstiltskin, and with a snap of his fingers, he put a curse on the King, “Have fun living the rest of your life, my sweet old King.” With that, he vanished into the woods.

The King didn’t know what he meant by that and didn't care since his life was going so great. However, the next morning when the King woke from his slumber he wasn't feeling himself and found it very hard to walk. When he looked in the mirror he saw that he was a half century older, almost the same age his father was when he died. Scared for his life, he got his servants to take him back to the woods where he had found Rumpelstiltskin before.
When he finally arrived, he saw Rumple standing there as if he was waiting on him. As he slowly walked up to Rumpelstiltskin he began to yell, “Turn me back! Turn me back!”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head at the old king and with one swift movement of his left hand, he knocked the King onto the ground then threw his head back in laughter. When he had finally ceased his laughter, he bent down to the ground and got really close the old King’s ear then whispered, “All magic comes with a price. Enjoy the next three years of your life, because that’s the only amount of time I’m giving you.”

With that, he once more vanished into the woods leaving the old King on the ground crying and heartbroken that he had broken his promise and was now cursed. The End.”

As I ended the story I realized that Abigail’s eyes were completely focused on me.

“Well, what happened to the wife?” she asked trying to turn her body to face me.

“And why did Rumpelstiltskin have to make him die at the same age of his father? Then what about his children? Is he going to tell them he’s going to die in three years? Or is he going to leave them a note for them to find when he’s gone? And what about the kingdom? Who’s going to be the new king? Or is he going to train to put his newlywed wife in charge? Or is his young son going to be the new king of the land? There are so many holes in your story, John Mark,” she joked.

I shook my head in response and let out a defeated sigh, “It’s only a story, Abigail.”
“And was that supposed to be uplifting, or was there some sort of a coded message inside that was trying to tell me that this snake bite is going to kill me?”

At that moment, her eyes began to fill with tears, and she began to cry.

“You…are not…going to die, Abigail. Not on my watch or anyone’s. God is not done with you yet, you know that. He still has so much more in store for you. Who is that snake to end the life that God has given you? That snake…would be nothing without the life that God breathed into it. He could strike it down right now so that it could hurt no one else. So no Abby that story is not about you, because as long as I am around, you’re not going anywhere.”

“It’s not about me?”

I shook my head in response, “No.”

“So then why couldn’t the young prince remember his promise? He wasn’t even old yet. Not to mention all Rumpelstiltskin wanted was a lock of hair. He could’ve gotten that from her hair brush.”

I laughed at her question until she gave me her evil eye. Even in all her paleness, she was still as stubborn as ever, “Would you like another story?”

“Yes, please. And give this story a better ending with smarter characters.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

I sighed as I thought once more and tried to come up with another classic story for Abigail, “Okay I got it. Sit back, because you’re going to love this one.”
She turned back so that she lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling, “I’m ready.”

“Once upon a time, there was a girl who went to sleep. The end!”

“John Mark!” she screamed as she coughed out her laugh.

“Okay, okay, I was only kidding.”

“Uh-huh. So, where’s my story?”

“Okay, here it is, once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a diamond castle…’
As I looked at her swollen ankle and the bruising that continued to form around it. I felt a tear fall down my cheek. It was all my fault. She wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for me, she wouldn't have gotten hurt if it wasn't for me, she would’ve been safe and sound inside the house teaching Katherine the end of her lesson, instead of having to suffer the repercussions of a snake bite. I touched her forehead with the back of my head. She was burning up. Dad said it could take a few days for the fever to break. I shook my head as I picked up her right hand and kissed it lightly.

“I'm sorry, Abigail,” I said and laid her hand back down on the bed.

I slid off the bed and onto the floor. Lying down face first on the carpeted guest room floor I cried until I had no more tears or energy left in me. As I continued to lay there on the floor minutes later I began to pray, “Dear Lord, I don't know why you have let this event happen in Abigail’s life or in her family’s life. Please allow let this event work for your glory. Lord, you let everything happen for a reason and that you have a purpose for everything. We don’t know what the reason or purpose is for this, but God you do. God, heal my friend Abigail, please heal her from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet Lord. Please let her awake from this peaceful sleep that you have her in Lord so that she may come back to her friends and family. Because, God, she's not only a part of her mother's and father's family but she is also my family. She has become
the most consistent family that I have ever had God and I need her in my life. She makes me a better person. God, she helps to strengthen me in the areas where I am weak. Please allow your vessel to enter back into our lives God, for even only a season more. Please allow us to love her as we always have God,” Taking a deep breath I sighed, as I felt a hand rub my back, “in your name, Amen.”

“Amen,” the voice of Abigail's dad echoed behind me.
HAZEL

I woke to the sound of Dr. Rivers shuffling through his medical bag. I moaned quietly as I tried to make myself comfortable on the chair that sat next to Abigail’s bed. But at the sound of my wrestling with my quilt, Dr. Rivers turned to face me.

“Good morning, Hazel,” he whispered over to me. “Sorry to have awakened you.”

“Good morning,” I whispered back with a shy grin, as I turned my gaze towards my sleeping sister, “How is she doing?”

“About the same. There doesn’t seem to be any changes. The swelling looks normal. Hopefully, that will die down soon enough. Heart rate and blood pressure are stable, and her temperature is still between 101 -102 degrees. We have to be thankful for the small blessings God gives us.”

I nodded my head as I turned my attention back to him, “Do you think she’ll make it through?”

He shrugged, “Only time will tell. The first few days are the hardest, but if she can make it to at least day eleven, she’ll live.”

_Eleven!_ I thought to myself, _We’re only on day three! These next few days will be some of the longest days of my life._

My sister moaned softly as Dr. Rivers took one last look at her and slowly exited the room. I waited for her eyes to open. They never did. I thought to myself for a split
second, *is she dead?* I watched carefully and closely for her chest to rise. It finally did. I watched as her chest continued to rise and fall repeatedly numerous times afterward. I soon came to the conclusion that she had fallen back into a deep slumber.

“Abigail,” I whispered softly as I began to move my chair closer to the bed. I stroked her face lightly and tucked a loose strand of damp hair behind her ear, “Abigail,” I whispered again as I heard her let out a slow breath and turn on her left side away from me.

It was my turn to moan. “I need to say something. I know you’re sleeping, but is it okay if I talk for a while?” Silence followed. I leaned back in the chair and tilted my head back far enough so that I was looking up at the square ceiling tiles that were above me. “I know that God has a plan for you and me. I know that God saw this coming before we ever did. Most importantly I know that in time God will bring you through this. Because I can’t lose you. You can’t leave me here by myself. Yes, I will still have dad and John Mark, but you’re my sister. My twin. We have a bond, a connection that draws us together. Or at least, we did. I know that I’m responsible for that, I take full blame for the way our relationship has become. I don’t know why I am the way that I am. I don’t know why I feel like I’m always needing to compete with you. I guess…I suppose, I feel as though I deserve everything first because I’m the eldest. But I now know that that’s not true. We shouldn’t have to compete for who’s first in everything, we should be thankful for the things that God blesses us with and the people that he puts into our lives.
I’m sorry for the way I’ve been chasing after Lawrence. That was childish and immature of me.”

I took a deep breath before I continued, “It’s true that I like Lawrence, but not the way that I believe you will grow to. Not the way that he already likes you. Whether you believe it or not, Abigail, he likes you. He doesn’t know how to show it yet, but don’t worry in time he will. I promise to keep my distance because I only want God’s best for you, and if God’s best for you is Lawrence. Then by all means. I’m heartbroken that you’re going through this trial right now Abigail. But somehow, I know that it can only make you stronger. Hey, it’s like what the fortune teller lady said back in September, “You shall soon be faced with a near-death-like experience. You will come very close to death, but you will survive, and it will only end up making you stronger.” Do you really think that she knew you were going to be bitten by that snake?” There was silence again on Abigail’s end. “At least, she said that you would survive. As I said you would. You have to survive Abigail because I don’t know what I would do without you if you left.” I looked at the ceiling once more before closing my eyes, “I don’t know what I would do without you.”
It was Thanksgiving Day and the noise in the house was deafening. Honey and Joy were in the kitchen making dinner, while Lawrence, John Mark, Hazel, and Katherine pitched in to help with the cleaning around the house.

Dr. Rivers had decided after much of an internal debate with himself that he thought it would be best if they celebrated Thanksgiving this year. Even with everything going on, he believed that it was for the best and it would help to raise everyone’s spirits.

Abigail’s state for the past few days seemed to be remaining the same. She wasn’t doing any better or worse than she was after the first day of the snake bite.

“Dr. Rivers, your parents have arrived just outside,” Henri said coming in through the white door of the house.

Dr. Rivers looked taken about for a moment before gathering his thoughts together, “Thank you, Henri. I’ve been so overwhelmed with everything lately that I have completely forgotten they were even coming into town this very day.”

Henri smiled. “It’s always good to be surrounded by friends and family during the holidays suh.”

“Yes, it is. Let me go outside and greet them in. Will you help me with the bags Henri?”

“Yes, suh.”
As they headed for the door, little Katherine, who had been hiding from her chores and her father behind the small sofa next to the door that led to Hazel’s bedroom, came out and quickly ran over to the parlor to find Lawrence.

“Lawrence!” she shouted. “Grandpa and Grandma are here!”

“I know Katherine,” Lawrence said with a hearty laugh, “I’m trying to get these chores finished up so I can go outside and greet them. Why don’t you help me out so we can finish faster?”

Katherine nodded, and as they worked quickly together, they were soon finished.

“Now aren’t you just as big as a minute?” Grandpa Clyde stated measuring his granddaughter with his hand.

“Hi, grandpa!” Katherine screamed as she ran over to him as she exited the parlor.

“How was your trip?”

“As to be expected, sweetheart. As to be expected.”

“Is that my little Lawrence?” Grandma Cecilia asked.

“I’m not so little anymore grandma.”

“Certainly not. It’s only been a little over a year and you’ve already grown almost as tall as your grandfather.”

“Don’t speak lies, Cecilia,” Grandpa Clyde said. “He’s still got a few more inches to grow to catch up with me.”
Lawrence chuckled under his breath as he went over to greet his grandfather as well. “I don’t mind you being the tall one in the family grandpa. I’d take second place to you any day.”

Hazel and John Mark soon entered into the living room and watched from a distance, the greetings that were being shared back and forth between the Rivers family. They looked from one grandparent to the next. Grandma Cecilia was dressed finely in a long green lace dress with long sleeves with a black parka to shield her from the windy weather. Her gray hair was cut short but styled lovely. She did not appear to be any older than sixty, but they knew that not to be true. Grandpa Clyde was tall and lanky. He was wearing black dress pants with a gray button down long sleeve shirt and black loafers to compliment the pants. His hair was short and thinning and one could only notice the resemblance between him and Dr. Rivers. Unlike his wife, one could tell that grandpa Clyde had a story behind his age. He appeared to be old and tired, his eyes were full of life and laughter, but his wrinkles showed that he had seen a lot of history and experienced a lot of grief.

“Hello there,” Grandma Cecilia said looking past her family and over towards where Hazel and John Mark stood. “Daniel, aren’t you going to introduce us?”

Dr. Rivers nodded in reply as he waved them over. “Mother…father. This is John Mark and Hazel Henderson. They are the children of Henri Henderson.”

“How do you do?”

The Henderson children nodded in reply
“John Mark…Hazel these are my parents, Clyde and Cecilia Rivers.”

“Oh please, stop with all the formality Daniel. Just call us grandpa and grandma like our own grandchildren.”

John Mark and Hazel took a moment to exchange looks between the two of them, but soon turned their attention back to the grandparents and smiled in return.

“Now Daniel, have I started to lose my hearing, or did I hear Henri say earlier that he had three children?”

“No, mother, you heard correctly. His other daughter –”

“Honey, is that you?” Grandma Cecilia asked cutting him off upon the entrance of Honey.

“Yes’um. How do you do Mrs. Rivers?”

“My dear Honey. The only one in this entire household that refuses to call me by the name I prefer. How are you, my dear?”

“Blessed beyond all measure. And yo’self?”

“Likewise, Honey. I hope you’ve prepared all of my favorite dishes this year. Do you need help with anything in the kitchen?”

“Oh no, ma’am. Joy and I got things covered in there.”

“I’ll be the judge of that Honey. Come with me,” Grandma Cecilia said walking in front of Honey into the kitchen.
Grandpa Clyde and Dr. Rivers exchanged suppressed laughs, “She’ll be in there for the rest of the evening,” Grandpa Clyde joked. “Now Daniel, what about this other daughter?”

“Her name is Abigail and she’s on bedrest upstairs at the moment.”

“Why what’s the matter with her? Oh wait, was she the one,” he paused for a second, “with the snakebite?” he whispered.

“Why is he whispering?” Hazel whispered over to John Mark.

“There’s no need to whisper, father. Everyone here is aware of Abigail’s condition.”

“How is she?”

“ Stable for the time being,” he said clearing his throat. “Speaking of which, I need to go upstairs to check on her, John Mark would you join me, please? Everyone else make yourselves comfortable until dinner.”

John Mark quietly followed Dr. Rivers up the stairs towards the guest room. But Dr. Rivers stopped short upon approaching the guest room.

“John Mark?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I wanted to tell you something that I haven’t gotten the chance to tell you yet.”

John Mark nodded and waited patiently for him to continue.
“Although your sister for the time being is stable and I’m not sure when she will improve, although I have faith that in time she will. I wanted to let you know that your quick thinking and fast acting, saved your sister’s life.”

“Sir?”

“If it would have been anyone else, Hazel for instance or even Lawrence I’m not sure if they would have been able to put their feelings or fear aside to do what needed to be done in that moment. And for that, I wanted to let you know that you did a swell job. Keep that up John Mark and never doubt yourself.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. Now would you like to join me as I check on your sister before dinner?”

John Mark nodded once more and followed Dr. Rivers inside the guest room, where they saw Abigail sleeping peacefully on the bed once more.
December 1941
Dr. Daniel Rivers got up the next morning earlier than he usually did on his off days. He was dressed and washed up in no time at all because all he could think about was her. His wife, Josephine, had been the only subject of his dreams since she left and the only thing on his mind for the past few days, knowing that she was on her way back to him. It had been three long months since he had last seen her and all he wanted to do was wrap her up tight in her arms and kiss her long and lovingly until she pushed him off of her with a laugh that would light up her bright blue eyes. He took out the pocket watch attached to the chain on his jacket vest and glanced down at it read, 6:02. His wife’s train wouldn’t be arriving at the station until nine o’clock that morning. He was thankful in a way for the late arrival. It would give him time to finish a few errands before the business of the week began to overwhelm him. He could check on Abigail, and also it would give Katherine a few extra hours of sleep.

He left his room, closing his door behind him. Before heading down the stairs to see what Honey and Joy had prepared for breakfast this morning, he took a sharp right turn down the hall and headed for the guest bedroom. He thought to himself as he walked about Abigail’s progress since the bite. She seemed to be healing quite quickly which was quite remarkable for a girl her age, so that was a blessing. But nonetheless, it also worried him deeply. With the other doctors that he knew, most of their patients had a
relapse phase where their patients would grow close to death. Some would make it, others
would not. He hoped that the same thing would not happen to Abigail, he knew that she
was a fighter and would make it through regardless. But he always prepared himself for
the unexpected.

Arriving at the guest room, Dr. Rivers knocked on the door once and began to
reach for the doorknob when the door swung open in front of him and he was suddenly
greeted with the presence of Honey.

“Oh. Dr. Rivers, thank Heavens. I was on my way to get you.”

“Why Honey? What’s the matter?”

“I was doing my morning watch and Miss Abigail was doing fine. But about ten
minutes ago, she started sweating and now she is burning up with fever. I did everything
you instructed me to do, down to the ‘T’. I used a cold rag like we’ve been usin’, I had
her to sit up and I gave her some Echinacea oil like you said to. But nothing seems to be
working and it's worrying me sick.”

Without a second thought, Dr. Rivers rushed over to Abigail’s bedside. Honey was
right, her head was burning up. He and Honey began to watch in horror as Abigail tried
er her best to get comfortable on the bed. She had thrown the covers off of her and was now
taking her leg from its elevated position and placing it next to her left leg on the bed. She
began squirming and tossing from one side to the other.
Abigail was fully aware of how much pain her body was in now that she had taken her leg down, but she ignored all the pain that her leg was beginning to cause her. Because at that moment, her leg wasn’t the only thing causing her pain.

“Honey, run downstairs and get my bag from the living room.”

“Yes suh,” Honey said as she hurried out the door.

“Dear God,” Dr. Rivers muttered to himself as he began to shake his head, “This is what I was afraid of.”

Honey hurried downstairs and took the bag from the position on the couch as quickly as she could. She turned and quickly ran back towards the staircase before she heard a voice from behind her call out her name. She turned and was barely able to register the figure of Mr. Henderson because her mind was still moving as her body remained still.

Mr. Henderson came at her quickly, “What’s wrong? Why do you have Dr. Rivers’ bag?”

“It’s Abigail.”

Mr. Henderson was standing only inches away from her now, “She was fine thirty minutes ago when I went in to check on her.”

Honey could only shake her head as she said, “Relapse.”

With that being said they both raced up the stairs and hurried towards the guest room as fast as their feet would take them.
Dr. Rivers continuously dabbed at Abigail’s forehead and neck as he waited for Honey to return with his bag. He had placed a cold compress inside of her mouth and he was thankful that it seemed to be helping her to get cool on the inside.

Seconds later Honey returned with the bag in hand and Mr. Henderson in tow.

“Thank you, Honey,” Dr. Rivers said taking his bag from her hands and quickly looking through it. After a second or two had passed he withdrew two items. The first was a thermometer and the second was liquid Ammonia. He took the thermometer out from its sealed box and placed it under Abigail’s tongue and he began to place thirty minims of liquid ammonia into a syringe. He waited until the thermometer was done before withdrawing it from her mouth. Seeing the results, he shook his head, got the syringe, held her right arm tightly so that it remained still as he placed the needle into a vein on Abigail’s arm and allowed the medicine to flow into her veins until the syringe was empty.

They all watched in silence as Abigail began to slowly calm down and breathe and act normally once more. Dr. Rivers sighed with relief, but began to reach into his bag once more and took out a brown bottle slightly filled with small round pills.

“Honey, can you bring me a glass of water?”

She didn’t respond but quickly headed over to the small dresser and poured a glass of water into a clear plastic cup and handed it to Dr. Rivers.

“Thank you, Honey.”

“Yes, suh.”
Dr. Rivers patted Abigail on the cheeks slightly until she opened her eyes and focused on him. “Drink this dear,” he said handing her one of the white pills and the cup of water.

Abigail did what he said, but without another word or look around the room, she lay back down and closed her eyes once more.

Dr. Rivers placed everything back into his bag, got up and walked over to the door. “Henri, I’ve given her some medicine to slow down her heart rate and bring it back to normal speed. It’ll take a little while, but her body is already headed in the right direction. I’ve given her some medicine to help her sleep. She should be out for a while. Hopefully, until I return with Josephine.”

“Thank you suh. Uh, Dr. Rivers?”

“Yes Henri, what is it?”

“You checked her temperature. What was it?”

Dr. Rivers looked back over to a sleeping Abigail once more and shook his head. He made eye contact with Henri for a split second before turning away. “It’s 105 degrees. Higher than I would have hoped for. That’s what worries me.”

Honey and Mr. Henderson both stared at the doctor speechless, neither knowing what to say.

“I’ll be back in a few hours, keep an eye on her. If anything else progresses and I’m not back in time, go over the list of things I’ve told you before. Hopefully, that will delay the process and give me enough time to make it back.”
“Should we be worried?” Mr. Henderson asked solemnly.

“I don’t know, Henri. I don’t know.”
He was more handsome that the last time she had seen him if that was even possible. The moment she stepped foot off the train their eyes scanned the immense crowd of people and immediately found one another. She smiled longingly at him, comparing his features to the image she had tucked away in her memory. He was, however, just as she had remembered him. Tall but medium built. He had more of a stomach now than he did when she left. His brown eyes sparkled in the light of the sun. His black beard and mustache had been newly shaven for her. He was dressed in a pair of black slacks and a button up light blue t-shirt.

Dr. Rivers had only been waiting about twenty minutes when he heard the train sound off and soon he could hear it approaching on the tracks. He and Katherine immediately rose and waited for the train to come to a complete stop. Soon enough the doors on the train opened up and he searched the crowd thoroughly with his sight for his wife. He pictured her wearing her blonde hair up in a bun atop her head and wearing the blue flowered dress that he loved so much and the black heels that complemented it. But she shook away the thought not wanting to trick his mind into looking for one certain image. But no trick of the mind could have seen what his eyes saw next. His eyes immediately landed on her at the same moment as her eyes landed on him. They stared at
one another for a moment. *She’s wearing the blue dress and my, doesn’t she look as lovely as ever,* he thought to himself.

After a long minute had passed he heard his daughter shout, “Mama!” across the enormous crowd of people who were now scattered along the train station exit. He looked down at his daughter and took her hand in his before heading over to his wife.

The moment they were within an arm’s reach of one another they embraced magically and gracefully in a long hug. “Mon Amour,” Josephine said quietly under her breath.

Only not quietly enough for Dr. Rivers heard her and held onto her tighter. Not allowing the other to release, he drew his head back for only a moment to kiss her gingerly and lovingly. Removing his lips from her only to hug her once more.

“Mama…” a voice from below called.

Dr. Rivers and Josephine released one another as they looked down below them and laughed at their five-year-old daughter who was waiting eagerly to greet her mother.

“Oh ma douce petite prune de sucre. Viens ici. Je ne t’ai pas oubliée.”

Katherine smiled curiously up at her mother but brought her in for a tight hug nonetheless. “Mama, the next time you go visit Aunt Caroline, can I come with you?”

“Bien sûr, tu peux mon amour. Mais je m’ai pas l’intention de quitter ma famille de si tôt.” She paused and grinned up at her husband, “Je suis partie depuis trop longtemps. Et tout le monde m’a manquée terriblement.”
Katherine giggled lovingly at her mother, but nodded and started to head back to the car with her parents only a few steps behind her own.

“Mais la famille ma chère? Et Lawrence? Et Honey et Joy?”

“My darling, you’re going to have to switch to English around me. I’ve only understood about a quarter of what you’ve been saying,” Dr. Rivers said wrapping one arm around her waist.

“I am so sorry, my chèri. It is hard for me to go back to speaking English when I’ve been spending so much time around Caroline and her husband.”

“It’s okay, my love, I completely understand. Now, what is it you were asking? Hmm..?”

They reached the car and Josephine waited as Dr. Rivers held the door opened for her and made sure that Katherine was buckled in before pulling out of the parking lot and heading back home.

“How is Lawrence?”

“He’s doing fine, dear. Still going to school, helping out in the yard. He’s made friends with the Henderson children, and he likes them fine.”

“Oh yes, you told me in one of your letters that you hired on some extra help after Eric left. Please, tell me about them.”

“Abigail has been sick for almost a week now and everyone is starting to wonder if she’s going to die or not. I was there at the pond when she got bit by the snake. But I don’t believe that she’s going to die because Abigail promised me herself that she
wouldn’t. And she said that she doesn’t break her promises,” Katherine spoke up from the back of the car.

Josephine turned around hurriedly in her seat to face her daughter, but seeing that Katherine’s attention was already focused on something else she turned back around and looked curiously at her husband as he continued to drive on in silence.

“There’s a dying girl in our house?” Josephine asked.

“She’s not dying dear. She’s only getting past the first few stages of the snake bite. If she can make it until Thursday, she’ll live.”

“Do you think she will?”

“Oh and Honey and Joy told me to tell you hi. Honey said that she’s preparing one of your favorite dishes for dinner tonight,” Dr. Rivers said as he quickly changed the subject.

“Hmm…and how is the rest of this Henderson family?”

“I like them all quite well. They are all quite respectful and Abigail and Hazel are great with Katherine. Plus, Lawrence seems to like having John Mark, or, at least, someone his own age around the house to talk to.”

“Well then, I can’t wait to meet them all.” She paused for a moment thinking to herself, “Have you taken out the Christmas tree and decorations yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Why is that?”
“It was my idea Mama,” Katherine said from the back seat, “I suggested that we wait until Abigail is feeling better before we put up the Christmas tree and ornaments. That way she can join in on the fun.”

Josephine smiled at her daughter before glancing over at her husband who shrugged with a grin on his face.

“I think that’s a lovely idea, sweetie. Abigail will be very thankful.”

Katherine leaned back in her seat. A smile glued to her face.

“Was the snake bite as serious as it sounds?” Josephine asked after a long silence had passed.

“Even more so. John Mark, the Henderson boy, did all he could to save his sister’s life. She’s been fighting the infection in her body day in and day out. But today she had a relapse, and it worries me that all the fight inside of her is leaving.”

“You were right to cancel the holiday traditions. We’ll do something after Abigail heals to make it up to everyone.”

Dr. Rivers took his eyes off the road for a split second to look at his wife. He admired her in every way and was thankful that God blessed him with her as a wife. She made him stronger every day. He took her hand in his and looked back at the road, “I’m glad you’re back Josephine. And I’m glad you’re wearing that blue dress.”

“This old thing? It’s something I found lying around last night. I actually used to know a guy who used to light up at the sight of me in it.”

“Oh yeah, whatever happened to him?”
“I married him.”

He squeezed her hand and let out a slow deep breath as he tried to contain the smile forming on his lips, and for a moment he forgot about everything else except her.
Later that morning it was my turn to keep an eye on Abigail. She had been sleeping most of the morning away thanks to the medicine that Dr. Rivers had given her. But after I watched her sleep for almost an hour, she finally awoke.

“Hey. How are you feeling?” I asked sitting up in the chair next to her bed.

She didn’t say anything but shook her head. As the days had passed, Abigail had begun to talk less and less. Her talking was replaced with nods, head shakes, a shrug here and there, and lots of intense coughing. It broke my heart daily. I prayed every day she would pull through and get better, but every day she only seemed to get worse.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked.

She shook her head, then turned her attention towards me, “Have you seen Lawrence today?”

Now it was my turn to shake my head. Snakebite or not…she missed him.

“Not today, no.”

I watched her close her eyes once more and turn her head away.

“We’ve decided to wait until you feel better to put up the Christmas tree. Katherine didn’t like it too much, but everyone else thought it was a great idea,” I spoke up.

“I’m not much into the Christmas spirit if you know what I mean.”
“But you will be, as soon as you get better. Dr. Rivers said that you only need to hang in there for three more days and you’ll be past the hard part.”

“What if I don’t? What if I can’t get past today?” she stared hard at the wall ahead of her, before coughing. Her cough seemed to last five minutes, but I knew that it was no more than one. But somehow it managed to be the longest minute of my life. She was starting to lose hope that she was going to get better. She was starting to lose faith in God and his plan for her life. She was starting to get weak, which caused her body to not want to fight as hard as before.

“You will get past all of this Abby. Today, tomorrow, and for many years to come. Remember you were the one who always said that you wanted to live to be in your nineties?”

She managed to get a weak smile out, “I’m pretty sure I said I wanted to live to see my one-hundredth birthday.”

“Even better, that’s an extra ten years on the Earth for you. Don’t give up, you’ll be better –”

She turned to the left side of the bed, where the trash can was located and began vomiting before I could finish my sentence. I wondered what she had to throw up since it had been days since she had been able to keep anything down.

“Let me help you,” I said getting up from my spot.

“No, I’m fine. I just need a minute.” She began breathing extremely hard and soon the breathing turned into a moan. She moaned loudly as she leaned her head against the
wall doing her best to situate her body and head. A few seconds later she let out a
piercing scream that was loud enough to awaken anyone in the house. I tried once again
to offer my help, but she only shut me down. Then she was crying.

“…Abigail? Are you okay?”

Footsteps were heard coming up the stairs. I doubt Abigail heard them. Soon
enough my dad, John Mark, and Lawrence were rushing into our room.

“Abigail what’s the matter?” my dad said rushing to her side.

She said nothing but continued to allow the waterfall of tears slide down her face.

“Come on Abby, tell me what’s wrong. Use your words.”

She continued to cry, but managed through her tears to get out, “My leg is killing
me, my head hurts, I can’t get comfortable on this bed, I feel nauseous, and now the room
won’t stop spinning.”

“Is it worse than yesterday or better?” my dad said checking her forehead.

She only cried harder when he said this.

“Hazel, go outside and see if you can find Dr. Rivers. If not, get in contact with the
nearest doctor. Tell them what happened earlier this week and tell them that she’s
burning up with fever.”

“Maybe it’ll pass, Papa. Dr. Rivers said that some of her symptoms might get
worse. I don’t think we should worry about it.”

“I wasn’t asking for your opinion, Hazel. Now GO!”
I nodded and looked over at Lawrence and John Mark. John Mark’s expression only showed fear, but Lawrence’s was different. He had the same expression on his face that he wore the day we found out that Abigail had been hurt. There was care, compassion, sympathy, and tenderness in his eyes. But there was also something else that I couldn’t quite place.

“Yes sir, I’ll be right back,” I said looking over at my sister once more who had now locked eyes with Lawrence. The one person she had been waiting to see for over a week now. Looking back at Lawrence he secretly shared a smile with Abigail that showed hope, peace, care, and…”

“Hazel,” Lawrence whispered over to me as he grabbed a hold of my arm, taking his eyes off of Abigail for only a split second, “Please…please tell him to hurry.”

He released my arm and turned his attention back to Abigail. That’s when I realized the other hidden expression in his eyes…love.

I raced outside as quickly as I could and my heart leaped from my chest as I noticed Dr. Rivers driving up into his driveway as soon as I had exited the white door of his house. I pressed forward and soon reached him and his family at his car. He hadn’t even unbuckled his seat belt when I saw him let down the window and heard him say, “Abigail?”

I nodded in reply, “You need to come quickly.”

Dr. Rivers parked the car and looked back at his wife.
“Can I help you with anything mon amour?” Josephine asked as she began to exit the car.

“You know that I always need my number one by my side. With you here, we may finally be able to cure Abigail of this snake bite and bring her through it without too much damage,” Dr. Rivers said as he began to exit the vehicle, with Josephine right behind him.

“Hazel I need you to stay downstairs and keep an eye on Katherine, please. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes sir,” I said in reply.

“Thank you,” Dr. Rivers said turning his attention to his wife. “After you, my dear.”

Together they made their way in haste and were soon entering through the white door of the Rivers home, with Katherine and me only a few paces behind them.
Dr. Rivers and Josephine scrambled up the stairs and entered into the guest room to see everyone gathered around and staring at Abigail in horror. She clung to the bed sheets as she gasped for breath. Since she was growing paler by the second, they knew that they didn’t have any time to lose.

“I need everyone to clear out of this room immediately!” Dr. Rivers instructed as he caught a glimpse of his wife headed over towards Abigail to find a way to allow her to breathe once more.

Dr. Rivers watched as everyone began to leave the room, but shut the door before Honey had the chance to exit. “No Honey, I’m going to need you to stay in here for the time being.”

“Yes, suh.” She made her way back over to the water basin.

Dr. Rivers began to empty out his medical bag. Looking towards Abigail he saw that she was now breathing on her own. He looked towards his wife and couldn’t help but think, my wife makes an awesome nurse. He watched as she began to check the veins in Abigail’s neck and arms, before she called out to him.

“Do you have a tongue depressor I can use, darling?”
He nodded and handed her what she was looking for. Upon contact with the depressor Josephine immediately thrust it into Abigail’s mouth and began to search for something she could never find.

She took the depressor out with a shake of her head. “Has she been eating?”

“Very little ma’am,” Honey spoke up.

“Fluids?”

“She throws everything up, dear,” Dr. Rivers commented.

“Very well. I know why she’s not healing near as fast as she should be. Her body is starting to dry out. That’s why she was having trouble breathing. And her veins are failing.”

“It’s worse than it was before I left to pick you up.”

“I’m going to need to go to the hospital and see if they’ll let me borrow an IV drip. That’ll keep her hydrated for a while and put fluids back into her body.”

“Alright dear, hurry back.”

“I will,” she said heading over to him and giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I’m going to take Henri with me. Maybe he can stop by the drug store while I’m at the hospital and pick up some medicine for her to take when she wakes. Plus, getting him out of this might help him…it might help everybody.”

Dr. Rivers nodded, “You’re right.” He turned towards Honey, “Why don’t you tell everyone to go outside for the day and get some fresh air. They can come back inside
when it’s time for dinner, but not before. I think my wife is right, everyone needs to get away for a little while. That includes you as well.”

“Yes, suh,” she said as exited out the door and began to head downstairs.
Lawrence went for a walk that afternoon, he didn’t know where his feet might lead him, but he knew that he wanted them to take him far away. Nothing seemed to be the same since Abigail had been bitten by the snake. He wondered if she had noticed the number of guests that had entered and exited her room since she went ill. But he shook his head and continued walking.

Shortly, he found himself by the stables. As he approached he noticed that the stables were not empty but were filled with the voice of Hazel. He slowly walked towards where the voice was coming from and soon found her beside the Henderson’s horse, Pluto. She was in her own world, singing and brushing him as he neighed every so often, to sing the harmony. He laughed heartily, this captured the attention of Hazel, and she immediately turned her attention towards the sound of the laugh.

“Hey,” Hazel said when she realized that it was Lawrence who had entered the stables.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving Pluto a good brush and feeding before I take him out for a ride. What are you doing?”
He looked around the stables until his eyes landed on that of his black horse, Dexter. Never taking his eyes off his horse, he asked, “Mind if I ride with you?”

Hazel was taken aback by his offer but tried her best to hide the sudden pounding of her heart against her chest, “I’d be honored.”

She watched Lawrence carefully and closely as he saddled up Dexter and brushed him every so often with his hand. She began to wonder what might be going through his mind because on an average day he was doing anything he could to stay away from Hazel. But not today. Today he had asked to ride along with her? She shook off her thoughts and tried not to overthink the situation. It’s a ride, Hazel. He probably wants some fresh air, this has nothing to do with you.

As they left the barn and she watched him race off to the field. After a moment had passed she pushed her heels into Pluto’s side and soon enough they had caught up to Dexter and Lawrence. Hazel suddenly became overwhelmed with emotions looking over at Lawrence as he rode on his horse. His hair blew wildly in the wind as he kept his posture long and strong. When she finally saw Lawrence beginning to slow down, she pulled back on Pluto’s reigns and came to a stop beside him. She slowly got herself off the horse and followed Lawrence to an old weeping willow tree that was standing in the distance. Taking a moment to look behind her, she noticed that they were still in view of the River’s house, but from this distance, it looked like a marble.
Lawrence noticed Hazel take a seat beside him on the ground, but for once didn’t feel the need to scoot farther away from her. He only watched her as she made herself comfortable and gave her a solemn grin when she looked his way.

“What’s wrong, Lawrence?”

“Hmm?” he asked. He was looking off into the distance, but all he saw was the image of Abigail lying hopelessly in the bed upstairs in the River’s house.

“What’s wrong?” Hazel tried again.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” He asked as stared straight ahead of him into the distance.

“I’m praying that she will. I blame myself. Everyday.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s my fault! If I hadn’t thrown the ball so hard. If I hadn’t been trying to show off. If I hadn’t…,” she trailed off. “Then she never would have gotten bitten by the snake.”

Lawrence nodded at her comments, “Yes. But at the same time I’m always brought back to the wise words of my father. Everything happens for a reason.”

“What could the reason possibly be for this?”

“I don’t know. But I guess we’ll have to wait and find out. God has a purpose and a plan for everything. We just have to be patient.”

“Easier said than done.”
As Hazel looked towards Lawrence, she could see the care in his eyes. He never liked her. That much she knew all too well. But Abigail. He liked her. Maybe he didn’t know it yet. She knew Abigail didn’t. But one day. Maybe if it was in God’s plan. They may be together.

“Well, I guess I had better head back. It’ll be turn to watch Abigail soon.” Hazel saddled up on Pluto and began to make a slow trot back to the River’s house. She didn’t wait on Lawrence. He continued to sit on the grass beside the weeping willow tree until the sun started to fade away into the distance.
I rode back to my house as fast as Dexter could take me. I beat Hazel by six minutes easily. As quickly as I could I unsaddled Dexter and put everything back into its rightful place, then raced inside the house and up the stairs. When I finally arrived at the guest room door, I lifted my hand to knock. But before I could shape my hand into a fist to knock on the door, I stopped and caught myself staring hard and long at the brown wooden door instead. I sighed as I allowed my hand to fall back down to my side, slowly turned on my heel and headed back down the stairs. As I allowed my feet to lead me to the kitchen where I could smell the dinner that Honey was already starting to cook, I noticed Hazel entering through the front door of the house. Not knowing what to do and not wanting to be judged by Hazel for not being upstairs with her sister, I followed my first instinct and quickly hid in my father’s study. I closed the door slowly and quietly behind me and let out a slow breath.

“What are you doing in here, Lawrence?”

I quickly turned at the sound of my mother’s voice. “Wh-what? Nothing.”

“Yes. It looks like nothing.”

“Who are you hiding from?” Josephine asked starting to get annoyed.

“What? No one,” I said shrugging off her question.
“You’re doing nothing? While hiding from no one…in your father’s study? You want to try to answer that one again?”

I sighed and sank slowly into the chair closest to where I was standing. As I did I buried my face in my hands trying to hide my misery from my mother, remaining silent.

“What is it, Honey?”

I looked up to and noticed that my mother was no longer sitting behind my father’s desk, but had taken a seat at the edge of the desk only inches away from where I sat.

“I can’t visit her, Mama. Seeing her up there. Helpless. Lifeless. I can’t face her.”

“Ah. This is about Abigail.”

My face fell again, but this time, my mom caught it mid-way with her index finger and brought it up once again. “Sweetie, don’t you think her well-being is more important than your own selfishness?”

“My selfishness?” I asked ripping away my face from her hand.

“Yes, yours. You’re beating up yourself down here, while Abigail is upstairs still fighting for life, and all she wants is to see her friend. I’ve seen Abigail a few times since I’ve been home and I’ve gotten to know her the best I could under the circumstances. Do you know what I’ve learned about her?”

I shook my head as my eyes started to fill up with tears, “No.”

“That she believes you are very important and special to her. She asks about you every time I visit. You owe her a visit. You understand that don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”
“The books that you bring her are only a small gesture, but it doesn’t mean near as much to her as the friendly face she hasn’t seen in over a week. If you value your friendship with Abigail as much as you say you do, then you’ll put behind your foolish pride and head upstairs and treat that girl to some good company. There is no reason you should feel guilty about what happened. That was in the past and it’s the last thing that’s on her mind. Don’t bank on tomorrow. You never know what God has planned for the future. What if today was her last day? What would you say...what would you do? Would you want to spend it down here?”

“You’re right. I know you are. I guess I’ll head upstairs and talk to Abigail then. She deserves that much.”

“But first,” Josephine said getting up from where she sat and heading towards the book shelf. She passed her index and middle fingers down two rows of books before finally grabbing one off the shelf. “Here, you may want to actually hand her the book this time.”

I took the book from her and read the title, “A Little Princess.”

“I think she’ll enjoy that one.”

“Thanks, Mama.”

“Well...be on your way then, try to catch her before she takes another nap.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said getting up from my chair and heading towards the door.

I made my way out slowly trying to avoid anything that could draw attention to myself and ran as quickly as I could up the stairs. I reached the guest room door again,
and I paused once more. *Don’t forget to breathe*, I said to myself as I let out a slow breath, remembering the words that Abigail had shared with me some time ago. I allowed my hand to knock twice on the door and I waited for a reply. After a minute or so had passed and no response had answered my knock I began to turn around and head back down the stairs. But before I did, I heard a faint voice from inside the room whisper, “Come in.”

I turned to face the door and slowly put my hand on the door knob and with every bone in my body telling me to retreat I opened the door and made my way inside. I allowed the door to close behind me, but it never fully closed, leaving the door slightly cracked. I looked at the face of Abigail who looked back at me with weak eyes and a pale face that had lost all color. She looked better than she did the day we brought her in here the day of the snake bite. I allowed my eyes to go to her leg. It was less swollen than the last time but was still being elevated by a contraption that my dad had made for her. When my eyes fell back on her, I noticed that she was giving me a faint smile. I wanted to speak, I tried to speak, but my mouth refused to utter a word.

With an awkward and tensed silence in the room, she looked at me curiously with humor and laughter in her eyes and said, “Hey there, stranger.”
ABIGAIL

I awoke on the porch swing that had once been hung by a pine tree in our front yard. I immediately began to look around at my surroundings. Everyone was exactly the same as I remembered it had been before I left to work for the Rivers family. I wanted to remember this moment, this feeling. I didn’t see any member of my family outside with me, so I figured that they must all be inside.

But as I sat there on the porch swing soaking in the late fall sunlight, I saw someone emerge from the house. I recognized her immediately, she had been gone from my life for almost four months now. As I sat there on the tree swing looking at her, I noticed that she had never looked more alive.

“Hey pumpkin,” my mom said as she came over towards me, “mind if I sit?”

I looked up at her. I wanted to speak to talk to her, but all the word that were forming in my mouth seemed to have been trapped on my tongue.

We sat in silence for a time, embracing the setting sun. I looked at her strangely as we sat there. I didn’t want to break the beauty and peacefulness that had formed since my mother joined me, but I couldn’t help but wonder why she was here.

She caught me looking at her and smiled, “What is it?”
I turned my head in shame, but as I did she brought me close to her for a hug. I loved the feeling that her warm hugs brought me. They brought safety, peacefulness, hope, and tenderness. “I miss you so much, Mama.”

She this it was her turn to look at me strangely. “Why would you miss me? I’m right here.”

I thought about this for a moment and realized that she was right. Maybe she really wasn’t dead, maybe it had all been a really bad nightmare that I had finally awoken from. But something still didn’t feel quite right. If it had all been a dream, had us moving been a dream too. The snake bite, the Rivers family, Lawrence? Had all of that been a part of my dream?

“Talk to me sweetie. What’s going on in that little head of yours?”

I didn’t know what to say. What could I say? Mom, I had a dream that you died, and then we moved in with a family. After two months of living with them I got bit by a snake and I may or may not like the son of the owner. I couldn’t tell her any of that. It was only a dream, none of it was even real. Or was it?

“Okay…” my mom said releasing me. She tilted my head from one side to the other as if trying to find something. “If you’re not going to tell me what’s going on, I’ll figure it out for myself.”

I laughed and waited for her to read my mind. My mom always had a gift for knowing what was wrong with me and helping me to fix my problems, without a word spoken from my lips.
“Let me see,” she said closing her eyes. I always use to wonder what she saw when she closed her eyes. I use to believe that she saw God, and in his hand was a slip of paper that showed her a brief summary of everything that was going on inside my hand. That may not be true, but I was only about six when I came to that conclusion and it seemed to make perfect sense. “You’re fearful of death…is that right?”

I looked at her in awe. She hadn’t lost her gift. But how had she known? Did I have the dream about the Rivers’ house and the snake bite, because I was afraid of death? Is that why my mother died in the dream the way she did.

“Abby, listen to me. One day everyone is going to die. Every single one of us, but not before we are called by God. He has a set date for each and every one of us, I don’t know when my date will come and neither do I know yours. I do know, however, that we will not die, before the Lord says so. We can’t get upset or angry when our time or someone else’s time is upon us. Everything happens for a reason and a purpose. We may not know what that reason is immediately, but one day God will reveal his purpose for why he allowed a certain death to happen. All you need to be concerned about is, have you and are you doing God’s will in your life and living your life to the fullest before your time is up? We shouldn’t be mad or sad, we also shouldn’t blame God for our loss. This Earth is only our temporary home, it wasn’t made to be permanent, nor should we want it to be permanent. We should want to leave this Earth and spend eternity in heaven with our Heavenly Father. Understand?”

I nodded in reply. “Yes, mama.”
“Okay what else are you not telling me, but you clearly need to talk about?” she asked closing her eyes once more. I tried to memorize her facial features before she opened her eyes. Her face was oval, like mine, but a lot slimmer. Her cheek bones were high and were easily noticed whenever she smiled, which was often. She had put her hair in a braided bun on top of her head as she usually did and she wore a plain white dress.

“Is there someone in your life that you’re beginning to have feelings for, Abigail?” mom spoke as she opened her eyes and turned her attention towards me.

“Wha – no. I mean there was this guy in a dream I had, and he seemed to like me and I was beginning to slowly like him back, but it was only a dream.”

“Was it? Listen, Abigail, let me give you a piece of advice concerning men. Hold your heart, don’t give your heart away to anyone. Whoever in the end you decide to give your heart to, be sure that they are worthy of it and you. I’m sure that your Papa will help you to make sure of this too.” She smiled as she looked off into the distance, but continued, “I want you to marry someone who is as loving and caring as your Papa. Someone who looks out for you no matter what, keeps you safe, treats you with all the respect that you deserve, and cares for you tenderly. With every fiber of his being. He shouldn’t want to or have to hide you from the world, he should want to share the world with you. Never feeling ashamed of the love that he has for you. The love that should grow between the two of you over time. Growing into love with someone takes time Abby, so don’t rush it. Don’t fall into the temptation of the heart, because your flesh is weak. It is sinful and if you don’t lock it down now, how do you expect to control it
later? Be patient and stay prayed up, and in God’s timing, he will send the right man to you. There’s no need to doubt or worry, he has a plan for your life and it is a joyous one.”

I nodded as I began to fill my eyes well up with tears. Slowly one after the other they began to fall down my cheeks, and eventually I was able to taste salt water drip fall to my lips.

“Why are you crying?” my mom asked bringing me in for another hug.

“I miss this…me and you, talking about life and death. The future, hope, love, and faith. I miss you.”

She nodded as if understanding what I was talking about. She continued to hold onto me tightly and lovingly until finally she drew herself back from me. “Abigail I want you to remember something, I will always love you. No matter where you are or where I am, no matter how many miles are put between us. I will always be here for you, to help you, guide you, and assist you in the areas where you need help the most.”

“Well I better go back inside and check on your father, and you need to be heading back inside soon too Abigail so that you can get some rest. You’ll need plenty of rest if you want your body to heal.”

Getting out of the swing she stood up and began walking back towards the house. I repeated the last word she said, heal…heal…heal? Wait was this the dream?

“Mama,” I said leaping off the porch swing and racing over to where she stood. I brought her in for a tight hug and refused to ever let her go. “Will I ever see you again?”
I felt her hug me back tighter, “You have the gift of dreams dear Abby, I will never be too far from your heart. I will always return when you truly need me. now you must release me so that I can go inside.”

“No, no, I won’t let you go. I can’t lose you again. I won’t.”

But soon she was gone and I was awoken to the sound of my father’s voice. “Hey there Abby, how are you feeling this morning?”

I looked up at him and smiled, happy to see his face and happy that I had a dream after all these weeks. “I’m wonderful.”
ABIGAIL

I could feel someone’s cold breath on the back of my neck. I held my breath and waited for it to go away. It never did. I cracked opened both of my eyes and slowly rolled over to face my visitor. It was Katherine, her face was five inches away from my own. I glanced down at the floor and saw that she had found my stool that usually sat at the opposite corner of the room. She was sitting on it staring back at me with a large smile on her face.

“Finally . . . you’re awake. You’ve been sleeping for hours!”

“I think I could’ve gotten in another hour or two.”

“Then why did you wake up?”

“I felt someone’s cold breath on the back of my neck,” I sighed, “Is there something I can help you with, Katherine?”

“I was only wondering if you were feeling any better.”

“Only when I’m resting.”

“Oh I’m sorry, I woke you up. Are you in pain again?”

“Not at the moment,” I said turning to lie on my back.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Umm…” I started to say before I was cut off by a loud voice.
“Katherine, what are you doing in here? I’ve been looking all over the house for you. You’re supposed to be letting Abigail sleep!” Lawrence said as he stood at the entrance of my room.

“I know, but I haven’t seen her in days. I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

I smiled at Katherine and then looked back over at Lawrence, “You can come in, Lawrence.”

He hesitated at the door for a second before finally entering. “Sorry I yelled Abigail, it’s only that I told her to stay away, then I couldn’t find her and thought that she would be in here…”

His voice trailed off as I closed my eyes to help ease the headache that was beginning to come back. After a minute or so of the silence that followed I slowly opened my eyes to find two concerned faces only inches away from my own.

“I’m okay…I promise,” I heard myself mumble.

“Come on, Katherine, let’s let Abigail get some rest, so she can heal.”

“Okay,” I heard Katherine agree lowly.

“Wait don’t go,” I said as I began to lean on my right elbow, “You don’t have to go.”

“Abigail,” Lawrence screamed as he headed in my direction, “Your instructions are to lie down in the bed and not move.

“Well then don’t make me have to. Stay. Just stay.”
“We can’t. You need to rest,” he said helping me to lie back down on my pillow. He placed his hand gently under my head and readjusted my pillow so that it was lying comfortably underneath my head. “There…please lie there, don’t move.”

“Only if you both agree to stay.”

He nodded his head in defeat and took a seat on the stool that Katherine had left by my bed.

“Katherine come here and talk to me so I can rest.”

I watched her rush over to find a comfortable spot on her brother’s lap. “What would you like to hear?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said closing my eyes and pulling my quilt over my chest, “Why don’t tell me about the bible study lessons that I’ve missed. I feel like I’ve gotten so far behind since I’ve been bound to my room.”

“Hmm…Lawrence can fill you in better than I can.”

“Oh yeah?” Lawrence asked amused as he stared at his sister.

“Yeah. Tell her Lawrence.”

I opened my eyes to look over at her, but my eyes met that of Lawrence’s. “Well is someone going to fill me in on what I’ve missed? Or do I need to get Dr. Rivers to tell me instead?”

“I’ll tell you,” Lawrence said blankly.

I smiled back at him before closing my eyes once again and waited to hear the sound of his voice.
“We’ve been studying the book of Second Kings. Last night we covered the section in chapter four where Elisha brought the Shunammite’s son back to life.”

“Mmm…I think I’ve heard that story before. But tell me again anyway.”

Lawrence cleared his throat and began, “She was known as a woman who had great faith regardless of the way the situation looked to others. She never doubted the Lord even in her deepest struggle. This is her story.

There once lived a woman in Shunem who was very wealthy. Her husband farmed the land that they owned and the land produced great crops. They lived in a comfortable home and because of their abundance they were always willing to share with others around them. Her husband made sure that she had the best clothing to wear and provided servants to assist her in all her household duties. The Shunammite and her husband had many servants to work the fields and they always made sure to pay them well for their labor. Her riches, however, were unlike those of her husband. Her riches were not stored on Earth, but in Heaven. God had blessed the Shunammite in every way possible, a loving caring husband who trusted her to carry out the responsibilities of the home, and a husband who loved and respected her.

However, there was one thing that she did not have. She had not been blessed with a child. Over time, the Shunammite had learned to be content with the things that God had blessed her with and did not doubt that he would continue to bless although she was barren. She and her husband continued to grow older and as she was now past the childbearing age, she knew that she would not be able to bear any children. This woman
remained content in the fact that God knew what was best and she trusted Him. Why
should she question the will of the Lord?

One day a man named Elisha came to Shunem. He was a great prophet in Israel and
was traveling through Shumen with his servant, Gehazi. She was outside when she
happened to notice the two travelers.

She discussed it with her husband and urged them to stay for a meal. Elisha agreed
and he and his servant shared the meal with her that day. Elisha and his servant made
such a strong impact on the Shunammite that she invited them to stop by whenever they
were in town. They did exactly that. Every time Elisha and Gehazi went to Shunem they
would stop by and have meals in her home.

The Shunammite said to her husband, “I am sure that this man who comes here so
often is a holy man. Let’s build a small room on the roof, put a bed, a table, a chair, and a
lamp in it, and he can stay there whenever he visits us.” Her husband agreed and soon he
and the servants were in the process of building a room for their house guest, Elisha.

One day Elisha returned to Shunem and went to his room to rest. He told Gehazi to
call the Shunammite up to his room. When she had approached his room Elisha said to
Gehazi, “Ask her what I can do for her in return for all the trouble she has had in
providing for our needs. Maybe she would like me to go to the king or the army
commander and put in a good word for her.”

But she simply replied, “I have all I need here among my own people.” She left and
Elisha asked Gehazi, “What can I do for her then?”
Gehazi replied, “She has no son and her husband is an old man.”

Elisha called for her once again and she came up to his room and stood in the doorway as he said, “By this time next year you will be holding a son in your arms.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Please, sir, don’t lie to me. You are a man of God.” But she soon found out that he was not lying. She became pregnant and the next year she gave birth to a beautiful son as Elisha had said. The boy grew and one day, around harvest time the boy went out to the field to join his father and the other workers, when suddenly he cried, “My head hurts! My head hurts!”

The father told a servant to carry the boy to his mother immediately. The wife held him in her lap until noon at which time he died. She carried him up to Elisha’s room, placed him on the bed and closed the door behind her. She did not breathe a word of her son’s death to her husband or any of the servants but called on her husband and asked for a donkey so that she might go see Elisha the prophet. “Why today?” he asked. “It’s not a special occasion.” “That’s all right,” she said. So she saddled the donkey and went on her way not stopping to talk to anyone on the way.

Elisha saw her coming from a distance and sent Gehazi to meet her and ask what was wrong, but the Shunammite replied that everything was all right. When she reached Elisha she bowed before him. Gehazi was about to push her away when Elisha said, “Leave her alone! Something is troubling her and it has been hidden from me.” She said to him, “Sir, did I ask you for a son? Didn’t I tell you not to raise my hopes?”
Elisha turned to Gehazi and said, “Hurry, take my staff and go. Don’t stop to greet anyone you meet, and if anyone greets you, don’t take the time to answer. Go straight to the house and hold my stick over the boy.”

The Shunammite refused to leave with Gehazi, so she and Elisha headed back together behind Gehazi. Gehazi did exactly as Elisha had commanded, but the boy showed no sign of life. When Elisha arrived at the house he went into his room alone and started to pray to the Lord. Then he lay down on top the boy, placing his mouth, eyes, and hands over the boy’s mouth, eyes, and hands. He felt the boy’s body start to get warm.

He got up and walked about the room and then went back and stretched himself over the boy once again. The boy sneezed seven times and then opened his eyes. Elisha called for Gehazi and told him to call the Shunammite. When she came in, Elisha told her to take her son. She fell at his feet with her face touching the ground then took her son and left.”

After a moment of silence, I opened my eyes to see Lawrence and Katherine slowly sneaking their way out of my room. “Where do you think y’all are going?”

“It’s obvious that you need your sleep, Abigail, so we’re going to leave so that you can get it.”

“What do you mean ‘it’s obvious’?” I said yawning.

“Despite the yawn you just issued out? You fell asleep on my summary of Second Kings 4.”

“I did no such thing. I was only resting my eyes.”

“In any case, you need your rest. We’ll talk to you later, Abigail.”
I heard the door open and a pair of tiny feet exit before I spoke, “Lawrence?”

“Go ahead, Katherine, I’m right behind you,” I heard Lawrence whisper to his sister.

I tried to pull myself up to a sitting position as best as I could before Lawrence had a chance to run over and help me.

“What are you doing?”

I pushed his hands away from me, as I leaned my back against my pillow and the wall, “Lawrence…why do you think God allowed this to happen to me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I came close to death. Sometimes I feel like I’ll die in my sleep and never awaken. I know it was only a snake bite, but sometimes I can’t help but wonder. What if? What if I did die and it was my time to join my heavenly father in Heaven? Would I be ready?”

“It’s okay to be scared about things like that Abigail. Thinking about it is natural. We just can’t allow it to control our thoughts and actions. That’s the doorway of allowing the enemy to come into our lives and do the destruction that he’s been waiting for years to do. Don’t even give him an inch Abigail. It’s not worth it.”

“So why let it happen then?”

“I don’t know what God’s plans are for you, Abigail. All I know is that you came out on top of this and didn’t let it overcome you. You can only get stronger and grow in the meantime. And I’m not only talking about physically…spiritually too. Take the
story about the Shunammite woman, for instance, she had to learn to have faith through every obstacle. Never lose faith in the Lord or doubt that he always has a plan for your life, no matter what you are facing at the moment.

What did that fortune teller say? “You shall soon be faced with a near-death-like experience. You will come very close to death, but you will survive and it will only end up making you stronger.” Is it possible that she was right again? Three for three?

“Thank you, Lawrence.”

“Of course. Now if that’s all you really need to—”

“Get some rest. I know…I know. You’re like a broken record.”

“Sorry. I only want you to get better as soon as possible. That’s all.”

“Thank you for caring,” I said as helped me to position my head comfortably back on my pillow.

“Anytime.” He slowly leaned down and gently gave me a light peck on the top of my head. Hesitated and then quickly drew his face away from my own. “I’m so sorry. I’m so used to doing such things with Katherine when she’s sick that I forgot myself and—”

“It’s fine. No harm done.”

He smiled awkwardly and walked over to the door, “Sweet dreams, Abigail.”

“Sweet dreams” I said. I closed my eyes and fell asleep in seconds. Still feeling the light touch of that kiss that I could have sworn was imprinted on my forehead.
“Do you want to color with me?” Katherine asked. I shook my head and took in the scenery around me.

It was Sunday morning. The first time I had been let downstairs since the snake bite. I had help from John Mark and Lawrence descending the staircase, but in the end, it was worth it. It was nice being downstairs again. Hearing the commotion of Honey and Joy in the kitchen as they began to prepare lunch for the day. Watching as Katherine began to draw yet another picture of her family and us in the surrounding living room area. I listened and watched as Hazel and John Mark entered the house discussing something that I couldn’t quite capture the fullness of. I smiled knowing that once again I was a part of all of this. That being once so close to death, I had conquered it and could now move on with my life. A life that included all of my friends and family. A life that I was happy would not be ending soon.

I closed my eyes and lay down on the brown sofa that I had been sitting on and listened to the classical music that played on the radio. Remembering that even something as simple as music shouldn’t be taken for granted. It could be the last thing that we may ever hear.

_How many times did I think that while I was fighting for my life upstairs? That the last book I heard may be my last or the song I listened to on the radio?_
I concentrated on the music. I wasn’t thinking about the experiences that I went through, but instead thanking God for the millionth time for my life and for the lives of others. Others who went through worse things than I had and fought their way through just as I had.

“We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin,” a man on the radio said. I opened my eyes and turned to face the radio wondering what was going on. He continued, “The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii by air, President Roosevelt has just announced. The attack also was made on all naval and military activities on the principal island of Oahu. We take you now to Washington.”

I watched as John Mark and Hazel headed over towards me and took a seat beside me on the couch. They had heard the announcement as I had on the radio and were curious as I was to know what was going on.

“What’s Pearl Harbor?” Katherine asked continuing to color her picture.

No one responded to Katherine’s question, instead, we looked up at another set of bodies coming from the kitchen to join us in the living room. Honey and Joy didn’t take a seat on the couch, but stood close enough to the radio, so that a single word wasn’t missed.

The man on the radio began to speak again, “A Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor actually would mean war.”

“War?” John Mark exclaimed as Lawrence, Dr. Rivers, and my dad entered through the front doors of the house.
“What is this I’m hearing about an attack on Pearl Harbor?” Dr. Rivers asked as everyone huddled around the small radio that sat on the end table near the couch where I continued to lay.

Everyone fell silent as the man began to speak once more, “Such an attack would naturally bring a counterattack and hostilities of this kind would naturally mean that the president would ask Congress for a declaration of war. And just now comes the word from the presidents’ office that a second air attack has been reported on army and Navy bases in Manila.”

There was static on the radio, but it grew silent. Dr. Rivers hit the radio a twice before shutting it off altogether. Everyone was silent but looked at one another for facial reactions and silent thoughts.

“What is Pearl Harbor and why do they want to bring a war?” Katherine asked finally looking up from her artwork. “Papa?” she said getting up and walking over towards Dr. Rivers, “What’s going on?”

But he didn’t answer. No one did. No one could. We were all speechless. Silence filled the room.
“Henri. Hey, Henri, wait up a second.”

Daniel was running at full sprint towards Henri. The moment that Henri heard his name he stopped moving towards the fields where the cows were waiting to be milked and turned. Daniel continued running towards him for a few seconds longer and then paused to catch his breath.

“Thanks for waiting up for me, Henri, I’m not near as young as I used to be.”

“Yes suh,” Henri said in reply, “Neither one of us are. What can I do for you suh?”

“It’s not what you can do for me, but what I can do for you.”

“Suh?”

“Well I and the Mrs. have been talking and we’re thinking about hosting a Christmas party this coming weekend.”

“A Christmas party suh?” Henri shook and scratched the top of his head in confusion, “What does a Christmas party have to do with me?”

“It’s more like you indirectly. It’s actually more for Abigail.”

“I don’t understand.”

“As I said me and the missus were talking. Since we had to pass up Thanksgiving this year because of Abigail’s sickness and then the dressing of the Christmas tree, we decided that we would do something to help everyone celebrate. Now that Abigail is
better she will be able to enjoy the fun with us. The party is for everyone, but it’s mostly to celebrate Abigail and her health.”

“Well, thank you suh. There are no words for your kindness.”

“Henri, I’ve told you on more than one occasion that y’all are family here. We all love Abigail and are thankful that she’s better.”

“Yes, suh, as am I.”

“I know you are Henri,” Daniel paused and smiled at Henri, knowing exactly what these last few weeks had put everyone through. Never knowing if the next day would be Abigail’s last. “So what do you think of the Christmas party idea?”

“That sounds fine by me suh, I’m sure Abigail will enjoy it very much.”

“Splendid, I’ll go run and tell the missus so she can get started on planning the party.”

“Who’s coming, suh?”

“Just a few close friends and family. Did y’all have anyone you wanted to invite?”

“No suh.”

“Okay, sounds good. See you Henri.”

Daniel walked back to the house, this time. He was still out of breath from the earlier run, and did not wanting to risk the possibility of him passing out on the way.

When Daniel did finally reach the house he went inside to find his wife. Hearing her voice coming from the kitchen he entered to see Josephine sitting in a chair sitting against the wall talking to Honey and Joy.
“I’m just suggesting Honey that we have fish tonight instead of chicken. Trust me I’ve had my fair share of chicken when I was visiting my sister,” Josephine said to Honey, not hearing her husband come in through the door.

“Yes, miss. How would your fish to be served?”

“Surprise me, Honey, you know what I like.”

“Yes’um.”

Daniel cleared his throat and all the women turned their heads to see where it came from.

“Hello dear, Honey and I were just discussing the menu for tonight. Did you get a chance to talk to Henri?” Josephine said as her eyes lit up at the sight of her husband.

“I just came inside from talking to him. He thinks it’s a grand idea.

“Marvelous! Honey you and I will get started immediately on the decorations and invitations.”

“Yes’um.”

“It’ll have to be a short list of course since it’s such short notice,” Josephine continued, “Oh Goodness. Darling when do you think that we should put up the tree? Is Abigail well enough to help decorate?”

“I’ve already thought of that. She’s only just starting to get her energy back, so she won’t be able to help much. But Lawrence and I found the perfect gift for her the other day when we were in town. As for the tree, I thought we could put it up tomorrow evening.”
“Sure darling tomorrow sounds like an excellent idea. Now, what is this present you have come up with?”

As she asked this Lawrence peeked his head through the door. Once he caught the attention of his father he motioned him over.

“Wait one second my dear,” Daniel said to his wife before going over to his son.

“Here it is, father. I got it wrapped and everything. What shall I do with it?”

“Good, good. Put it in my study for now and we’ll give it to her tomorrow night.”

“Yes sir,” Lawrence said as he walked off, letting the door close behind him.

“Was that the gift?” Josephine called out, “It’s kind of a small box. What’s inside dear?”

“Uh-uh. I don’t want to ruin the surprise. Everyone will find out right along with Abigail tomorrow.”

“Will she like it dear?”

“Trust me, she’ll love it,” Daniel said as he turned to walk out of the kitchen.
ABIGAIL

I had only begun to start a nap when Honey came into my room to help me get dressed. She wouldn’t tell me why I was to get dressed or what the special occasion was, only that I was to get dressed as quickly as I could and head downstairs as soon as I was finished. A part of me wondered what might be going on downstairs that required my presence while the other part of me was thankful to have a chance to leave this dreary guest bedroom.

In all honesty, this room is quite lovely and is decorated nicely. If it was any other day or occasion I would love to spend the night in this room or even stay in it for a long while. But it isn’t any other day. This room has been the only room, scenery, and environment I have been able to view and enjoy for the past two weeks of my life. At the moment I would believe that a bathroom would be a better choice of scenery compared to this guest bedroom, at least, the bathroom would give me something else to look at for a change.

The books that Lawrence brings me are nice and they help to create a new world in my imagination, away from reality for a short while. As I read I forget all about the room that I have been placed in and I escape to another room, another world, another life. But then I’m done and I close the book only to see that I am exactly where I have been. In this bedroom.
After more minutes than I would like to admit had passed, Honey had finally succeeded in helping me to get dressed. I was wearing my pale blue summer dress that I had arrived in back in September. My hair was placed in a bun atop my head. Finally, black socks were on my feet to compliment the end of my outfit. My left leg and ankle were still swollen due to the bite and I refused to wear only one shoe. Thankfully, though Honey agreed with me and we both decided to settle on my black socks.

My dad stood outside the door as he waited on us to finish. Honey opened it as soon as we were finished. My dad rushed in took one glance at me and smiled, “You look beautiful, Abby.”

I could only smile as he gently lifted me and began to carry me down the stairs and into the living room. The image I saw as we entered was one that I was not expecting. There was a Christmas tree placed beside the fireplace. It wasn’t fully decorated as of yet, but it was slowly coming together as I watched everyone take turns grabbing an ornament from one of the three brown boxes that stood in the middle of the floor, to finish their section off.

My dad placed me on the longer of the three couches that were in the living room area and I watched in awe as my friends and family members decorated the tree with laughter in their voices and excitement in their eyes.

After I had been watching for only a few moments I noticed that everyone stopped decorating one by one and turned to look at me. I smiled at each of them as I noticed Dr. Rivers at the corner of my eye bend down to grab two boxes that had been sitting on the
fireplace. One was wrapped in a paisley blue paper while the other was wrapped in a shiny purple. Dr. Rivers quickly approached me and handed me the small box wrapped in the blue paisley paper.

“Open it,” he said with a huge grin.

“Open it? Now?” I questioned with a confused look at him and the others.

“Please,” was his only response.

I smiled at him before looking down and quickly opening the box. Inside the box lay a beautiful shiny blue round ornament with the name Abigail written across it. I picked up the ornament and turned it around in my hand several times before Dr. Rivers spoke.

“We saved you a special place on the front of the tree for you to place it.”

I looked up at and smiled again. He stretched out his hand, which I took and slowly he guided me over to the tree and everyone watched as I placed my ornament in the dead center of the tree. Right in the front. I looked at it for a moment sparking from all of the overhead lights in the living room. It was surrounded by the ornaments that everyone else had placed on the tree and I was happy.

Dr. Rivers helped me back to my seat as I continued to watch everyone else finish decorating the tree. Joy brought out chocolate chip and sugar cookies for everyone to enjoy as they decorated along with some fresh milk. While Honey brought out some fresh fruit and soup for me to enjoy.
The last of the ornaments were being put on the tree when Dr. Rivers came over to me once more and offered me the purple wrapped box. I opened it as soon as he handed it to me. Inside was a crystal star, and I immediately knew that it was the tree topper. It brought tears to my eyes, that he would want me to finish off the tree and trust me with something so valuable.

“Will you do the honors, Abigail?” he asked offering his hand to me once more.

I took his hand and watched as my dad came over to lift me up. But this time, he didn’t carry me, but instead he lifted me up enough to carry me on his shoulders.

“Am I heavy?” I asked with laughter that he could only hear.

“No, dear, you are as light as a feather.”

I believed that. I had hardly been able to keep down any food since the poison infected my system. There was no way to keep track of how much weight I had lost, but I knew it had been quite a bit.

I held on tightly to my dad as he reached the front of the tree and leaned forward slightly so that I could place the tree topper on steadily. After it was placed, my dad backed up a few feet and allowed me to view the completed tree. I had only placed two things on the tree, but the fact that Dr. Rivers had allowed my family and me to be a part of this occasion made my heart leap with joy.

No one heard the door front door open as Honey let in our visitors. But everyone heard a young man call out, “Merry Christmas!”
Lawrence immediately rushed to the door with his dad and Katherine close behind him. He greeted the young man and woman that stood near the door and after short moments had passed Lawrence turned to make introductions.

“Henderson family, these are my cousins. Logan, and his sister, Laura.”

We nodded and said our hellos, but our faces dropped immediately when we heard Logan say, “What’s going on in here? Whose bright idea was this? Who invited Niggers to Christmas?”

My face went solemn and the joy I felt inside of me withered away.
I couldn’t go back to sleep that night. After we had met the cousins of the Rivers family, they were fed and left to get situated in their guestrooms. Thankfully, the Rivers family had many extra rooms, so I wasn’t forced to leave mine. My dad had forced me to return to my bedroom as soon as the empty boxes were put away once again and all my soup was devoured. He left Honey in charge of me to make sure that I was dressed for bed, but after I was tucked in and checked on by Dr. Rivers everyone exited my room and I was left alone. I guessed that everyone had finally settled into their beds and were heading to sleep after the night’s events. Everyone but me at least. I hadn’t had a proper night’s sleep since the accident without some type of sleeping medicine in my body. My body had grown accustomed to the tiny white pills that Dr. Rivers kept giving me, but since my body was slowly getting better. He didn’t believe that I needed them anymore. My body always seemed to semi-relax when the pain was ceased for several moments, but as soon as it returned I was up tossing and turning all night. Sometimes I was thankful that my sister was such a heavy sleeper. Hazel was sound asleep beside me in the bed, one leg hanging off the side while the other had found a nice comfortable spot on top of her blanket. While her right arm was sprawled over her forehead. She never even heard me leave...
Knowing that I’d never get back to sleep if I didn’t somehow figure out how to clear my head, I left. I took the quilt that was lying on top of my comforter and very slowly and carefully tiptoed out of my room. I had barely made it out of the door when I heard, “What on Earth do you think you’re doing?”

I didn’t have to turn my head to realize that the voice came from Lawrence. I tried to ignore him as I closed the door behind me, but he quickly caught up to me and grabbed me by the arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“To my swing?”

“Your swing? This late at night? You’re not well enough to make it to the swing. Let alone down the stairs.”

I sighed, defeated, since I’d been caught. But mostly because I knew he was right. I probably would have made it down the first two stairs before I either fell to my death or passed out from exhaustion.

“I can’t sleep,” was my only reply.

“That’s no excuse,” he opened the door to my room and ushered me back inside. At first, I thought he would lead me back to the bed, but he did no such thing. Instead, he opened the curtains to the window that revealed a closed door and a balcony on the other side. Quietly he opened the door and helped me outside where there were two patio chairs already placed outside. After I had sat down in the chair to the left, he took the quilt that
I was still holding in my hands and placed it over my neck covering me from head to toe. He quietly closed the doors once more and took a seat in the chair to the right of me.

“At least this way I can keep an eye on you,” he said grinning.

I faced him and copied the smile that was barely showing on his face in the moonlight. I watched the stars as they twinkled in the night sky. It felt like it had been years since I had been allowed to see the stars. Feel the fresh cool December air on my face. Enjoy the cold smoke that escaped my lips when I let out a breath. We sat in silence for a long while before either of us said a word.

“I apologize for my cousin. He talks before he thinks.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I’ve been dealing with worse words than that since I was a toddler.”

“Still he had no right to say the things he did. He doesn’t know you, your family, you’re your situation. But Logan has always been ignorant and quick to judge.”

“But he’s still your cousin and you love him.”

He laughed at this, “Yes, I suppose so. Family is still family, no matter what the past or present may be.”

There was silence among us again, but more than that there were lingering questions. Questions that neither of us wanted to ask.

“So why are you not asleep tonight?”

“Sleep doesn’t seem to want to be my friend either.”
I smiled. “I wanted to thank you and your dad again for the present. I can’t even begin to tell you –”

“Don’t mention it. You deserved it. I’m glad you liked it, though.”

“I did.”

I nodded as I began to recall something. Or at least, I believed that I was beginning to recall something, but nothing stuck.

“I haven’t had a dream in weeks,” I said not remembering what my brain tried to recall.

“What?” Lawrence asked turning his head to face me.

“A dream. I used to have one every night. But since I got bit by that snake, it’s as if they left me. Like I lost my gift.”

“They’ll come back as you heal. Give it time.”

“It’s just that...”

“What?”

“I don’t like to sleep anymore. When I used to sleep,” I looked deep into his eyes now hoping that he’d understand what I was trying to say, “I would be transported to another world. Like reading one of the books you bring me from time to time or watching a film. But now I stay in this vast emptiness. I can’t escape it and I wake up empty. I feel as though I’m losing a part of me every time.”

I could tell he was at a loss for words. I don’t know why I even told him. My mind continued to wonder, I needed to think and he was here listening to me.
“I used to play the piano,” he said finally.

“What?”

“The piano. I used to play it all the time before my aunt died. She was my dad’s sister and you would’ve loved her. Aunt Jacquelyn, she taught me how to play every time she used to come visit. Which was almost once a month or so, but since she died. I can’t seem to get myself to play anymore. That was our thing, but every time I see that black piano in the living room, I feel like I’m betraying myself and her by not playing. But I feel as though no one wants to hear me play anymore, you know. Because it reminds them of her.”

A long silence followed his statement, “I’d love to hear you play. I know what it’s like to have a gift and then lose it…you don’t want to lose yours. You should play again.”

“I can’t.”

“You can…and I think you should do it now.”

“Now? Everyone is asleep.”

“Well play a soft song. It’s either that or stay out on this patio for the rest of the night.”

“You do need to get out of this cold weather…it’s not good for you.”

“Then do we have a deal?”

“As long as you promise to listen and enjoy.”

“I promise.”
He opened up the doors once more and carried me down the stairs, to the long leather couch that I had grown accustomed to as my own.

The piano hadn’t been touched in years, but the sound that it brought out could have fooled anyone. As he sat on the piano bench and tuned it correctly so that the sound brought tears to my eyes. But I blamed the headache that was building inside of me which had now reached an eight on a one to ten scale. After he finished tuning the piano he looked back at me. I was lying down on the family couch with a pillow that Lawrence had fluffed for me sitting comfortably under my head.

“You ready?” Lawrence asked hesitantly.

“Ready.”

I can’t remember the song that he began to play. All I remember is thinking, I hope someone wakes up and hears this beautiful melody. He wasn’t using any music sheets, the song that he had chosen was being played completely from memory. The sound that the piano made was so beautiful. I closed my eyes and prayed over Katherine, over myself, over my family and the Rivers family, over the cousins. Then finally, I prayed over Lawrence. I prayed that he would continue to enjoy his gift of music and that he wouldn’t let it go again. Then I thanked God for our blossoming friendship. Knowing Lawrence had made my transition between homes a lot smoother than I could have previously imagined. I listened to Lawrence hit each note perfectly as the music found its way around the house and hopefully to the ears of everyone inside. Finally, I prayed that I
would get my gifts of dreams back one more. That was the last prayer I remembered praying before I fell asleep.
When the Hendersons had arrived at the Rivers’ estate back in September, Mr. Henderson had remembered to tell his friends and family his new address and gave them Dr. Rivers’ address if they ever wanted to send him a letter to keep in touch. He never believed that any of them would send him letters very often because they never did at his last home, but he told them nonetheless.

However, when the snake bit Abigail he sent out five letters. One to his mother, one to his wife’s mother and father, one to his brother, one to his other brother, and one to his sister – in – law. He had only gotten back two replies within the week or so since he had mailed off the letters. One had been from his mother, which said:

Henri,

Goodness me boy! Why are you letting Abigail be in the woods? You know that’s where those snakes live. Don’t you know that you should be watching her more carefully? Thank God that John Mark was there to suck out that poison. Good thing you have a good fatherly intuition and told showed him how to do all of that all those years ago. I can’t be having my granddaughter leaving this Earth before I do, she needs to be living life to the fullest. Not ending it before it even begins. Tell her that she is in my prayers and will continue to be until the day that I leave this Earth. I pray that she heals quickly and gets better soon. I wish I could come to visit, but you know as well as I do, that’s not possible.
But if you need anything, anything at all let me know and I’ll be glad to help you. It will not be a problem and you know it. I Love you, son. Tell John Mark, Hazel, and Abigail that I said hi.

Don’t be a stranger. I expect a visit and another letter from you very soon.

Your mother.

Henri’s mother moved around fine but had not left the safety and comfort of her home in years. If her children or other relatives wanted to see or check in on her, they would have to come visit her or send her a letter in the mail. Because as far as her visiting people went…well it just didn’t happen.

The other letter had been from his father – in – law. Henri had not received the letter until two days after Mr. Rivers had told him about the surprise Christmas party he was planning for the family and Abigail. He had already told Mr. Rivers not to expect any family, but after reading the letter, he was beginning to think otherwise.

Henri, December 8, 1941
The letter you sent me and my wife was one I was not expecting to ever get. How is my dear sweet Abigail? Has she any better since the day we received your letter? I’m praying that she is. Why did you take so long to send us a letter to inform us of the incident? I suppose she got that free, adventurous spirit from me and her mother. What can I say, it runs in our blood. I pray that all is well with the family. I know that y’all are doing everything in your power to make sure that she gets better as soon as possible. I can’t imagine how hard this all must be on you, your family, and Abigail. How are the family that you’re working for handling all of this? I sincerely hope they are understanding.
No...no, I have far too many questions for you to answer, and who knows how long it will be before you are able to return a letter back to me. So, I’ve decided that I’m coming to visit and check up on my dear sweet Abigail myself. Wait...ah yes, and Clara will be coming with me. The decision has been made. We will try to be there in two days’ time. But if not definitely expect us by the third day. We still have the address that you sent us, so we will be headed your way very soon. If at all possible, Clara, said that she would like for her bedroom to have a view of the pond. We are excited to see you and the family.

See you soon,

Joel & Tara

Henri looked up from the letter and tried to think long and hard about what day it was. The 10th he said to himself. He shook his head and looked at the sun setting in the distance. I suppose they won’t arrive until tomorrow. Probably sometime in the morning. Henri knew that his in–laws liked to rise and travel early in the morning. The phrase, the early bird gets the worm, was their life motto and they always stuck by it. He hung his head only for a moment, as he began to think about the preparations that needed to be made before their arrival tomorrow. Hazel may have to sleep in the Rivers’ house for a few nights while he allowed the in–laws to sleep in the girls’ bedroom. Especially since it had a perfect view of the pond. He smiled at the thought of his them coming to visit. He hadn’t seen them since the funeral of his late wife but was thrilled at the thought of seeing them once more. He placed the note inside of his pocket and rushed into the Rivers’ house and up the stairs into the guest bedroom. Where John Mark and Hazel were
taking turns telling Abigail about their day. When he walked in they all closed their mouths and waited for their father to catch his breath and speak.

“What is it, dad?” John Mark asked before the girls had a chance to.

“Your grandparents…are coming to visit,” he said with a broad grin.

Each child immediately knew which grandparents he was referring to because Henri only had a mother that was still living. His father had died years before the children had ever gotten the chance to meet him. Henri looked at each of them as their faces lit up in turn. But Abigail was the one to break the silence.

“When?” she asked excitedly.

“According to this letter,” he replied pulling the letter from his pocket, “They’ll be here first thing tomorrow. Which means we have a long night ahead of us.”

But they were each to thrilled to care about the chores or how late it was already getting. They could only count the hours until their grandparents arrived at their new home.
As Henri had assumed, his in-laws arrived first thing the next morning. Thankfully, Henri and his children had prepared the house as much as they could, to get things prepared for them on short notice.

Hazel was the first one to notice them arrive, “Grandma and grandpa are here,” she shouted inside the house. She rushed outside and greeted them before her grandpa had pulled the wagon to a halt. “Hi, Methuselah,” she said greeting her grandparents horse.

“Is that my Hazel?” Grandma Tara said as she quickly exited the wagon. “Being in a wagon for that long of a time, is hard on an old woman like me.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Give me a hug. There we are. Now go get your dad and brother and tell them that we need help with our luggage. We’re too old to get it our ourselves.” She laughed and whispered, “It took us long enough to get it into the wagon in the first place.”

Hazel shared a laugh with her grandma before moving towards her grandpa, who was just now making his way off the wagon. “Hi grandpa.”

“There she is,” Grandpa Joel said with a large smile lighting up him gummed mouth. “How are you, sweetie?”

“As good as I can be, grandpa.”

He nodded as he went towards the back of the wagon to help take out the luggage.
“Joel, let those young men do that. You’re too old for that now. You almost threw your back out trying to put that stuff in,” Grandma Tara shouted.

He ignored her and made his way towards his son-in-law and grandson.

“Now, Hazel, where is Abigail?”

“She’s inside the Rivers’ house grandma.”

“Does she know that we were coming?”

“No ma’am.”

She nodded, “Joel. Let’s go. We’re going to see Abigail.”

Abigail was asleep when her grandparents followed by Hazel entered the room, but she was easily awoken by the sound of her grandmother’s voice.

“Abigail, don’t you think you’ve gotten enough to last a lifetime?”

She began to smile in her sleep, knowing the person of whom the voice belonged to. Opening her eyes, she immediately saw the images of her grandmother and grandpa only inches from her face.

“What are y’all doing here?” she asked sleepily.

“We’re here to see you, sweet pea,” her grandpa said.

“I’m going to get you better in no time,” her grandmother commented as she took the cool rag from her forehead and removed the comforter from her body. “They have you too warm in here. You need cooler weather.”
“Tara, would you leave her alone. I’m sure that the doctor knows what he’s doin’ better than you do.”

“Shush, Joel. Hazel go and crack a window for me over there.”

Hazel hesitated for a second. She looked from Abigail to her grandfather to her grandmother.

“Move it, Hazel.”

Hazel slowly approached the window as her Papa entered the room. “Let’s keep the windows closed for now.” He watched as Hazel let out a deep breath. “We don’t need Abigail catching pneumonia on top of everything else.”

“She won’t catch that new-morning, Henri.”

Abigail chuckled at her grandmother’s comment, but it came out as a cough instead.

“Are you okay?” Grandma Tara asked, as Abigail nodded in reply. “Are you hungry? Do you want me to make you some skettis?”

“I’m not sure she can handle eating spaghetti right now, grandma,” John Mark commented, taking a seat beside the bed.

Grandpa Joel turned his attention away from everyone in the room and only focused on his granddaughter. She had always been his favorite and everyone knew it.

“How are you doing sweet pea?”

“I’m good, grandpa. But I must be honest. I’ve been better.”

They laughed in unison at her comment. “You’ll get better in no time.”
“I hope so. I’m getting tired of being in this room.”

“Well, maybe we can let you go on a stroll outside for a second or two,” Grandma Tara spoke up.

“No!” everyone yelled.

“Her body isn’t strong enough for that yet,” Henri stated.

“Thank you for trying to help me out grandma,” Abigail said forcing a smile.

“Once you’re better we’ll have to play a game of hop-ta-skopy, tick tack too, and maybe some jumping rope.”

Abigail heard her brother and sister groan silently in the background at the pronunciation of her grandmother’s words.

“That sounds awesome, Grandma.”

The room was silent for a brief second before Honey walked in with a washing pan and towel. “Alright. I’m gonna need for everyone to clear out. It’s time for Miss Abigail’s bath.”
Abigail gazed admiringly at the ornaments on the Christmas tree. In all the days, she had been blessed with on this Earth she had never been a part of the decorating of a beautiful Christmas tree such as this one. The ornaments were lit up by the twinkling lights that dangled from the limbs. The scent of fresh pine played with her senses and she couldn’t help but to smile and be thankful that she was a part of this. At her home, before they moved, the only Christmas tree they had was the one that was in front of their house. Her family never had enough money to pay for one, so they would decorate the one sitting outside the house with loose paper sheets and homemade ornaments. Their presents would lie underneath the window beside the front door. But she would never trade those Christmas’s or the memories and fun she shared with her family for anything in the world.

As she stood there she began to feel herself beginning to drift away, but hearing music, the laughter, and the friends and family that had decided to show up to celebrate this year's Christmas and enjoy the fun, made her want to stand. She couldn’t give up and refused to ask for help to head back upstairs. She wanted to stay and enjoy the party until it was over. Although she had no idea how long it would take until it would end, she was persistent to remain present until goodbyes were had.
Lawrence couldn’t take his eyes off her. He watched her as she interacted with the very few people who came over to talk to her. She would nod her head and reply sweetly with conversation maybe getting in a laugh or two before they would walk away satisfied that it had ended so briefly. He took a step forward and began to watch her more cautiously. He seemed to notice the color change in her face, for a moment he thought it might only be a trick of the light. He began to take another step forward when his cousin approached.

“Hey, cousin. What are you doing over here? The party’s in there,” Logan said pointing in front of him to the right towards the dining room.

“Yeah, I’ll be there in a second,” Lawrence replied as he began to search the room. John Mark was standing near the staircase carrying on a conversation with Lawrence’s uncle Joe, a former military man. Hazel was standing near the dining room entrance talking to Joy who seemed to be enjoying her conversation. Mr. Henderson was engrossed in a conversation with his dad, and they both seemed to be for the moment ignoring the chatter of everyone else that surrounded them. As Lawrence looked from one person to the other he noticed the same thing from each of them. No matter how interested in the conversation that was being had by each of them, they were all keeping a close hidden eye on Abigail. It was hidden to their conversational partner, but obvious to Lawrence which only made him smile.
“Oh, don’t tell me you’ve got a thing for that nigger over by the tree?” Logan spoke up, “There’s a ton of girls in the kitchen who are a lot better suited for you than that one. Listen to me cousin, she doesn’t deserve your time. None of them do.”

Lawrence ignored his cousin and walked over towards the Christmas tree which was currently being abandoned by Abigail, as she headed towards the conversation that her sister was having with Joy over by the staircase.

Logan was following close behind his cousin, “I’m serious. She’s not worth your time. Heck, she’s not worth your glances.”

“Excuse me?” Lawrence asked finally turning his attention over to his cousin.

“I mean, I suppose she’s pretty compared to certain objects or whatever, but you could have any girl in the world. Why would you want a nig—”

“Not that’s it’s any of your business, Logan, but if I were to like Abigail, and that is her name in case you have missed it earlier, not a nigger…not that object over there. It’s Abigail. And she’s become one of my closest friends over the past few months. Now with everything that she’s gone through the last thing I want to do is lose her from my life. I’m not saying that I know where my feelings lie for her because I don’t, but I am saying that if someone, anyone tries to take her out of my life because of something as ignorant as the color of her skin. Then that person will become one less in my life.”

“You’re willing to give up everything for her? What about –” Logan asked taken aback.
“It’s a matter of principle and morals, Logan. Jesus didn’t discriminate on color so why should I?” Lawrence began poking his cousin in the chest. “God’s sees everyone as the same, he doesn’t love one person more because of the color of their skin. How vain would he be if he did? How vain are you because you do?”

“Don’t you poke me,” Logan said as he gave a quick shove to Lawrence. Allowing him to stagger backwards for a moment.

Lawrence didn’t even think, he immediately shoved Logan. Sending him flying backwards into the Christmas Tree. It swayed back and forth for a moment before falling on top of Logan’s back. A clashing of ornaments sounded around the room.

Gasps were heard around the room.

“We can’t be like the rest of the world, Logan,” Lawrence said finally.

“You cannot escape the consequences of your actions, cousin. You’ll get yours soon enough. Then you’ll wish you would’ve listened to me.”

There was loud shriek in the far corner. Lawrence looked up to see Laura shrieking at the top of her lungs, when he looked in the direction that she was pointing, he saw Abigail lying unconscious in the middle of the floor. As he ran over towards her, the ornament she had received earlier fell to the ground with a crash.
I waited outside the door with Hazel, John Mark, Logan, and Laura. We all waited eagerly and breathlessly for my dad and mom to exit. It was the longest ten minutes of our lives, standing outside of the guest room door…waiting. After twenty minutes or so had passed my dad, mom, and Mr. Henderson all exited from the room.

“So?” Hazel said speaking up before anyone else could.

“She’s fine,” my mom replied, “She got a little dizzy at the party that’s all. Her body must build up the energy and strength that she had before. That doesn’t happen overnight. We all know that Abigail is strong, she knows it too. But even she should remember that she has her limits, and tonight she found out one of them.”

“So, she’s going to be okay?” John Mark asked.

“Yes, she needs some rest and lots of fluids, but she’ll be fine. We’re going to need to keep a closer eye on her than we have been. We can’t allow this to happen again. Next time we might not get off with as easy of a diagnosis of fluids and bed rest.”

We all nodded in reply. No one wanted to see Abigail go backward again. Especially since she had come so far in her healing process.

“Abigail is going to be fine. So, I suggest that everyone head back downstairs. There is still a party going on. You can come back up to check on Abigail after the party ends.”
Everyone hung their heads but nodded in response and one by one began to descend the staircase. I was the only one who hung back. After everyone had descended and went back out to join the party I slowly opened the door to the guest bedroom and entered.

Her eyes were opened, and her eyes lit up when she saw me enter into the room. I slowly walked over to the right side of the bed and took a seat in the empty chair that was beside it.

“Hey,” I said, “Feeling any better?”

She shrugged, “A little light headed and tired, but other than that I’m just fine.”

“Is there anything I can do to help? Do I need to leave so that you can go back to bed and get some rest?”

She shook her head, “No, please stay.” Her eyes turned towards the door and she let out a sigh. “I don’t want to be the only one not attending the party.”

“It wasn’t really that much fun anyway,” I said jokingly letting out a yawn.

“Well, when you’ve been locked up away in a room for almost three weeks, that party downstairs seems like going to a carnival. If you know what I mean.”

I nodded as I tried to understand what she was feeling, but in truth, I had never once come close to experiencing the pain and trial that Abigail had dealt with.

She gave me a long hard searching look before turning her attention back to the music that came from downstairs. There was only that in the silence that followed. Only
our breathing filled the air around us. We both wanted to speak but neither of us knew what to say. It was her laugh that eventually broke the silence.

“What’s so funny?” I smiled not looking away from her. “Tell me.”

“Nothing. It’s only…don’t you think it’s funny how God knows everything that’s going to happen before it does? He sees everything years before it happens and sometimes he warns us in a way that we can understand. I mean look at what’s happened since we moved here. He knew about everything and in a way, he warned me about all of it.”

“He did? When?”

She looked distant then, closing her mouth quickly she began to shake her head, “It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that everything happens in God’s perfect timing and somehow it all works together for his glory. That’s enough to make anyone smile.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

She looked at me for a moment and soon matched her smile with my own. I was thankful that Abigail and her family had been brought into our lives. I was thankful for our friendship and for the second family I had begun to know and love as my own. I was thankful for God and his daughter that was becoming a close friend to me.

“I’m glad you’re okay Abigail.”

“Me too.” She turned her attention back to the door as if she was listening for something besides the music.

“I would have hated if…”
“Oh. Excuse my interruption sir,” Abigail’s grandfather said lowly as he entered through the doors of the guest room, “I was only coming up to check on my granddaughter, but I don’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s not a problem. I was just leaving. Please stay. I know that Abigail would love nothing more than to talk with her grandfather,” I said getting out of the chair and heading over to the door where her grandfather still stood.

“I thank you kindly, sir.”

I nodded in reply and turned my head to give Abigail a solemn smile. “I’ll talk to you later okay?” I said seeing a thankful smile cross her lips before I turned to exit the room.
“Thought I might find you out here,” I said approaching the spot where Abigail was lying peacefully a good distance away from the pond, but comfortably under the stars. “I didn’t see you in your room when I got up. How are you feeling?”

“Better than I’ve felt in a long while.”

“And the distant memory of snakes doesn’t scare you?”

“It’s never too far from my memory, but I can’t live in fear, forever can I?” she asked moving over on her quilt that lie underneath her.

“No, I suppose you can’t,” I said. I moved into the empty spot to the right of her and lay beside her as we watched the stars.

“If you could go back to January right now. Would you ever imagine thinking that any of the events that have happened to us this year would have happened?”

“Not in a million years,” I said letting out a breath. “Mom dying, us moving to a different town, you getting bit by that snake, Lawrence’s cousin’s coming to visit, the Christmas party, seeing our grandparents, need I go on?”

“Hazel chasing after Lawrence?”

“Now that I could have predicted.”

She giggled, “I think we all could have.”
“But who would’ve guessed that both of my sisters would be falling for the same
guy,” I said nudging her in the arm.

“Me? Falling for…Lawrence? I don’t think so.”

“So, it’s only Hazel then. My mistake.”

“Yeah.”

“So…what are your feelings for him Abby?”

“How should I know?” She sat up on the blanket and brought her knees to her
chest, “I like him well enough. He’s nice, sweet, a great dancer, he listens to me and likes
being around me. He understands me in ways that Hazel doesn’t. He picks my brain
more than you do. He’s as protective and loving as dad. He has as much wisdom as mom
and I care about him. I care for him in a way that I can’t quite understand yet.”

“But you don’t have feelings for him?” I said with laughter ringing in my voice.

“Does it matter? Do I need to decide now?”

“You don’t, Abby. I was picking your brain about him. Breathe.”

She did, and I saw the muscles that had begun to tense in her back relax. After a
moment, she lay back down on the blanket. Placed both hands on top of her stomach and
quietly watched the stars as we listened to the silence of the nighttime air.

“Do you ever think about getting married?” I asked after long minutes had passed
by us.

“Umm...yeah,” she said seemingly startled by the question, “sometimes.”
“Do you pray for your future spouse, like mom always told us we should?” I asked as she kept her focus on the stars above.

“Every night before I go to sleep, and sometimes as soon as I awake, you?”

“Same, but for my wife. I might not know who she is just yet but that doesn't give me the excuse to not pray for her.”

“Do you also pray for yourself in that area?” she asked as I looked over at her.

I thought about her question for a second before I responded, “Yes, I do. I pray for patience, patience to get through the day and not to fall into lust and temptation. Then I read my bible, I love reading about Jacob and his dedication to work for Rachel in Genesis 29. Not only did he work for her for seven years and then ended up getting married to the wrong sister, but he worked another seven years on top of that. Because that’s how much he wanted to prove his love for her. I hope to grow to love a young woman of Christ someday with that same passion and dedication that Jacob had,” I paused for a second and glanced over at her, “What about you?”

“I'm the same way. I want the man that God has for me in life, not the man that I want. Because God’s plans are different from our own and I don’t want to make the mistake of choosing or ‘falling for’ the wrong man. Honestly, I’m praying the man God has for me will grow to become my best friend and then ‘if and when’ he does propose, I’ll know it’s him.”

We continued to sit in silence as we both thought over what the other had just said; it was her who broke the silence this time.
“Has God spoken to you anything about who your wife will be?” she asked shyly.

“No. Well, at least, I don’t think so. I don’t believe that the woman who God has for me to marry has even come into my life yet. But I’m waiting patiently for her. I pray that when she does come into my life and me in hers, that I am ready. You?”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure.”

“Oh, who was it?” I asked thoroughly interested.

“I’d rather not say. Don’t want you to go and get anyone’s hopes up or anything.”

“I admire your choice. But I bet I know who it was.”

“Well, you can keep your bets to yourself. I don’t want to know any of your guesses.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Well whoever it is that God has for you Abigail I can honestly say that you’re worth the wait,” I replied, “and he'll love you for who you are if he doesn't then he's not the guy that God has for you.”

“I also pray that my husband has a great sense of humor and can always make me laugh.”

“Don’t worry, he will.”

Silence followed my words. I knew that I needed to tell her what’s been on my mind for a long time now, but I couldn’t find a way to tell her.
I felt her move beside me and I looked over to see her sitting up straight looking back at me, “What is it?”

“What?” I asked.

“What’s on your mind? I can tell you need to say something.”

I sighed, “Abby?”

“Yes?”

“I…uh…I’ve signed up to join the Army. I want to fight for our country in the upcoming war.”

She let out a long breath that filled the air around us. She grew still. Silence filled the space between us and no other words dared to be spoken.
“Come back inside this house before you catch that new-morning, girl! You’re going to freeze to death out here!” My grandma yelled at me.

“I’ll come inside in a second.”

I heard the door close to my house as I continued to sit on my swing. I couldn’t believe John Mark was leaving. It had always been me, him, and Hazel. What would we do now that he was going off to fight in the war? What if he didn’t survive? What if…

My mind trailed off. I couldn’t think about the negative. I had to be proud of my brother for wanting to serve his country. For wanting to put his life at risk. As dangerous as it may be.

The wind outside continued to whip across my face. The cool air made me long for the heat from the fireplace inside our house. But I couldn’t get myself to move. All I wanted to do was escape for a little while longer. Before the reality of losing my brother sunk in.

“Hey,” Lawrence called as he approached me.

“Hi.”

“What are you doing out here? It’s freezing!” He placed a blanket around me as he bundled up inside of his coat. “I figured you might be out here. I heard about John Mark.”

I nodded at his comment.
“Are you going to be okay.”

I nodded again. I wondered if I should stop talking again. That seemed to work well the first time. I was losing everyone around me. My mom and now John Mark. Soon Hazel would be getting married and leaving me to. Then my dad would die. And who would I be left with?

I looked towards Lawrence and smiled. He had been such a good friend to me these last few months. I’m grateful and blessed for his friendship. My smile began to turn into a frown. Maybe if our paths had crossed at different times. Maybe if things were different. If the gated fences were unlocked. Open. Allowing me to enter onto his side and him to mine. I couldn’t read his thoughts tonight.

“I’ve decided to enlist too.”

“Wait…what?”

He nodded. “I’ve thought about and prayed about it. And I think this is what God’s plan is for me.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Now I’ll be losing you and John Mark.”

“You won’t be losing either of us. We’ll just be in separate directions for a while. But we’ll meet up again. I have faith that we will.”

“Just don’t die on me, okay?”

“I promise.”
He looked at me with a wonderment about his eyes.

“I have something for you.”

“What is it?”

He pulled out a small box and handed it to her. It was covered with a plain wrapping paper with a bow attached to the top.

“Something of a going away present.” He smiled, “Don’t open it until I leave okay.”

I nodded.

“Abigail, I want you to know that I’m thankful for your friendship. I’m blessed that God has brought you into my life. And I’m even more blessed to know that after everything you went through, that you are still alive today.”

I smiled, “Thanks, Lawrence. I’m thankful for you, too.”

“Well,” he got up from the swing, “Don’t stay out here too long. You don’t need to be ill again.”

“Yes, Lawrence.”

He looked at me one final time before he turned around and headed back towards the house.

I watched as Lawrence began to quickly head towards his house. I continued to hold the small box in my hand for a moment, gently stroking the plain wrapping that covered it. As soon as he had gone inside, I smiled, curious to know what was inside.
“Then what happened?” Hannah leaned forward toward her grandmother with her elbows settled on her knees.

“That’s the end of the story for now, Hannah. I need to stretch my legs for a little while.”

“But . . . but . . . you can’t leave. I need to hear the rest of the story.”

“And you will. Just not at this precise moment.”

“But, what happened between you and Lawrence? What was inside the box? Did Uncle John Mark go off to the war? Did Aunt Hazel ever find true love? I have so many questions!”

“I think you may already know the answers to a few of those questions.”

Hannah thought for a moment, then let out a deep breath. “I only know about Uncle John Mark. I don’t know what happened with Aunt Hazel. We don’t talk much.”

Grandma Abigail nodded as she smiled at the thought of her sister. It had been too long since she had last seen her.

“But she RSVP’d to the wedding tomorrow. Maybe I can ask her when she arrives.”

“Hannah!” her mom yelled from across the hall. “August is here to see you.”
She rolled her eyes and whispered, “He’s not supposed to see the bride the day before the wedding.”

“He says it’s important,” her mother replied as if hearing the whispers of her daughter.

Hannah looked towards her grandmother with pleading eyes. “Will you finish telling me your story when I return?”

Grandma Abigail smiled at her eager granddaughter and nodded. “Good, because I need to know how it ends.” She looked towards the open door then back towards her grandmother, “I’ll be right back.”

“Alright dear, I’m going to go outside for a moment and stretch my legs. I’ll finish the story later this evening.”

Hannah nodded and exited the room to meet her fiancé. Grandma Abigail made her way to the door of her bedroom and overlooked the sight of her granddaughter and fiancé greet one another with a loving hug. She smiled at them for only a moment before it quickly faded into a frown. Making her way outside she breathed in the crisp spring air, closed her eyes and let out a deep breath.

“I thought I might find you out here,” a woman called out from behind her.

A smile spread across Grandma Abigail’s face as she recognized the voice. She turned and embraced the woman that was standing inches from her.

“Hello sister!” she exclaimed letting her hug linger.

“Hello, Abigail.”
“I didn’t think that you were going to be able to make it.”

Hazel took a step back from Abigail, withdrawing from her embrace. “To be honest, I hadn’t planned on coming.”

Abigail raised an eye, as if trying to decipher her meaning. “What made you change your mind?”

Hazel let out a deep breath. “I ran into an old friend of ours about a week ago. And she was . . . very intent on seeing you again.”

“What friend?”

“Hello, Abigail. It’s been a long time. You look as beautiful as ever.”

Abigail didn’t have to turn to recognize the voice of the woman behind her. Katherine. She hadn’t seen her in years.

Abigail turned to face her, she was so grown up and she looked every bit like her brother. She stood in awe for a moment as memories flooded my mind, and as much as she wanted to smile from seeing her friendly, familiar face. She couldn’t stop her tears.
Abigail watched as Lawrence left the swing and headed towards his house. She held the small box in her hand for a moment, gently stoking the plain wrapping that covered it. She opened it. Taking the box from its wrapping and opening the box. Inside lay a single locket. It was a silver oval shaped frame and the front of the locket contained three garnet gems surrounding a small diamond in the middle.

She brushed her thumb over the design before opening it. A piece of paper flew out of the locket. It flew across the lawn before landing on a patch of dry grass. Snatching it up, she quickly unfolded the small note. She blinked once. She blinked twice. Maybe she had read the note wrong. She read it again. No, she had read it right. Was she dreaming? Her heart skipped a beat as she read the note again. “To the One Whom My Soul Loves.”

“Lawrence loves me?” She whispered quietly. She feared if someone were to hear her, they would wake her up and she would realize that it had all been a dream. But no one heard. No one was around. It hadn’t been a dream. She held the note and locket close to her heart and closed her eyes as she felt the cold winter air envelop her.
VITA

Shaina G. Hawkins was born and raised in Longview, Texas. A graduate of Stephen F. Austin State University, Shaina earned a Bachelor’s Degree in English and Creative Writing. She is currently a returning alumni student pursuing her Master’s Degree in Creative Writing. Her recent works include *Love is Patient*, *Breaking Free*, and *One Righteous Person*. Between writing and attending school, Shaina enjoys spending time with her family, reading, and horseback riding, while spending every day meditating on the word of God. God is her inspiration and she states that this book or any others would not have been written without his love, grace, and patience.

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