

Faith

by

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Faith

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Introduction

Time heals all things. So they say. Unfortunately exploitation in the name of God occurs more often than most realize. Don't be so sure only the frail and weak fall victim although that would certainly be bad enough. This kind of scam can and does happen to all ages and to all levels of education. It knows no limits and has no boundaries.

Such experiences cut your soul like broken glass.

And the sad result—the most devastating loss is not one's possessions, not one's dignity. All those may be restored.

It's the loss of one's faith.

Chapter 1

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.
Hebrews 11:1*

What is faith? Where does it come from? How do you find it? How do you know if you truly have it?

Faith, Kathleen and Rachel were young, hopeful, and filled with anticipation. Their whole lives lay ahead, full of promise. They were three different young women drawn together by each one's individual desire to find a perfect future. They were certain that their lives were going to be better than their own family experiences. They believed it with all their heart. They had faith.

It all began in the spring of 1970.....in Montpelier, Vermont...

Faith rounded the corner from her home heading towards the high school from which she would soon graduate. She stopped at the enclosed bus stop and put her book bag down on the bench. She glanced around nervously, and then rolled her skirt waistband up, bringing her skirt length from below her knees to a length a few inches above them. The girls at school were wearing miniskirts and hot pants, pushing the limits of the school dress code and testing the administration. Yesterday, her friend Alice was sent home to change after careful examination and measurements by the principal's secretary. Alice wore her notoriety like a badge of honor, but Faith knew better. If she were ever sent home for improper dress, it would just kill her parents.

When I'm on my own I am going to buy myself nice store-made clothes and stop looking like a freak, Faith promised herself.

From her school bag she pulled out a small travel case. Inside she kept her makeup. Her mother had almost found it last week when she started rummaging in the bag looking for Faith's lunch container. Faith knew her mother would have punished her severely if she found the makeup. It was forbidden for women to wear any makeup in God's True Church. The worst punishment would be her parent's disappointment, and that was Faith's greatest fear. She didn't want to let them down. But they didn't have to go to school, and if they did, she knew they'd understand why she broke the rules just a little.

She applied some pink lipstick, blue eye shadow and mascara. She untied the tidy black velvet bow holding her hair in a ponytail and let her straight strawberry blond hair flow along her shoulders.

I'm not as strong as the other church girls are, Faith thought. *They think I'm strong. They assume I am because Mom and Dad are so deeply converted. But I'm not.*

"Hey, beautiful!"

"Billy! I didn't see you. How long have you been watching me?"

The young man smiled. "I just got here. You don't need that stuff. You are gorgeous just as you are!" He stepped closer and closed his arms firmly around her. She closed her eyes and smiled. He kissed her affectionately on her cheek.

Faith blushed and stood back, but he held her hands. "You are beautiful," he said. "Look at your skin. It's flawless. And you have the bluest eyes I've ever seen." He stroked her long blond hair. "I love you, Faith."

"Billy, stop. You know we shouldn't..." Faith pulled away reluctantly.

“Come on,” Billy said. “We’re going to be late for class.”

Alice nudged Faith who was reaching into her locker. “Hey girl. I saw you walk in with Billy. You two going together?”

“No. Nothing like that,” Faith said. “We’re just friends.”

“Well, I think it’s cute. You make the perfect couple.” Alice scrutinized Faith’s outfit with a curved eyebrow, but she didn’t make any comments. “Some of us are going to sneak into the theater Saturday night to see that new movie, *Mash*. You want to come?”

“Um, I can’t.”

“Oh, you’re such a square, Faith. I thought the preacher’s daughter was the one who always got into the most trouble. Don’t you ever have any fun?”

“My Dad isn’t a preacher...” Faith started to explain.

“Hey, I ‘m just razzing you. Don’t sweat it.”

Faith tried to explain. “We’re going to New Hampshire this weekend. I won’t be around.”

“That’s cool. What’s going on in New Hampshire?”

Faith regretted mentioning it. She didn’t want to tell her friend she went to New Hampshire every weekend for church services. “We’re visiting family,” she said.

“Groovy. Hey, I’ll see you at lunch. Some of us are eating out on the track field. It’s so nice, you know spring fever—see you there.” Alice hurried down the hall.

“Groovy,” Faith said to herself. She smiled as she remembered Billy. “Yeah, I am feeling kinda groovy.” She headed towards her class.

Graduation was only a few weeks away. Classes were mostly a formality for the seniors. Faith’s mind wandered as she sat through English, and math, and study hall. She hurried when the lunch bell rang and met up with her

friends at the track field. Alice was smiling and talking with several other girls who moved over on the bench to make room for Faith. One of them turned on a small transistor radio and tuned in to a music station.

“Alice says you and Billy are going together,” one of the girls said.

Faith glanced at Alice who had a mischievous look in her eye. Faith smiled. “Well, not exactly going together.”

“What then?”

“We’re friends.”

“Oh, we believe that. I saw how he looked at you. He’s whipped,” Alice said.

Faith smiled. “Oh, can you turn up the radio. I love that song.”

The radio belted out a new release from the Poppy Family. Faith had heard the song a few times when she played her radio in her room at night while she studied. Susan Jack’s angelic voice sang out, “which way you going, Billy. Can I go too?” There wasn’t much to the song, mostly a repeat of the chorus, but it touched Faith.

“Look, she’s moonstruck!” one of the girls said. They all giggled. Faith giggled too, but deep down the song’s words meant something she knew her friends could never understand.

Time dragged that afternoon as Faith sat through two more classes—history and sociology. All the real work was done, but the teachers tried to keep the students interested. Faith listened as her teacher talked about current affairs. President Nixon had reinstated the draft. Faith worried about Billy. Would he have to go to Vietnam? Would any of their fellow students end up there? The school had a memorial wall in the entrance way with the names of former students who’d gone to Vietnam, those who served, those who’d been injured, and those who never returned. She recognized some of the names, but she hadn’t known any of them personally.

Faith passed it every day without much thought, but now, she worried. Her younger brother was only 16, but what if the war continued for several more years. He would have to be a conscientious objector. It was required by God's True Church. But Billy didn't belong to the church. He'd have to go. She listened intently as the teacher explained how the draft lottery worked, how each male had to register for the draft when he turned 18, and how his birth date would determine his standing regarding the draft.

Faith's family didn't watch television. They didn't even own a set. But she could listen to the news on her radio, and she could read the newspapers. She had to know Billy's fate, even if they weren't destined to be together.

Faith glanced up at the clock in the classroom. School would be out in a few moments. It would soon be time to return to her proper self. She thought it odd how she was two different people, and how she could almost forget her religious obligations when she was at school. But now she must transition back to the true Faith, the girl she was supposed to be.

She said good-bye to her friends and headed down the street towards

her home. *I wonder if I really fool any of them*, she thought as she walked along. *Maybe they are just being polite*. Suddenly, Faith felt a pang of anger. *What if they feel sorry for me*, she thought. Her face flushed with humiliation. *Why can't I just be a normal kid?*

Billy ran up behind her. "Faith, wait up," he called. She stopped and turned around. She smiled. "Can I walk you home?" he asked.

She paused and his expression turned to concern. She could see his insecurity about their friendship. She knew she shouldn't lead him on. There was no future in

their relationship. But still she reached towards him and took his hand. He smiled.

“Sure. Just to the corner, okay? My folks wouldn’t, uh, well, just to the corner, okay?” Her face was hot and she knew her pale white skin was now red with embarrassment. How could she explain this to Billy or any of her friends at school? They would never understand.

“It’s okay, Faith,” Billy said, squeezing her hand reassuringly. “My folks are old-fashioned, too.”

“Really?” she said, relieved.

“I know what it’s like,” he said.

“I doubt that,” Faith answered, “but I’d love for you to walk with me.”

They walked while holding hands. Faith loved this new feeling—this friendship feeling was like none she’d ever experienced. Often she would date older men in the church, but none of them ever made her feel this way or this happy. “Do you know what you are doing after graduation?” Billy asked.

“I’m not sure,” Faith answered carefully. “College probably. My parents want me to go to the school they both attended in California.” She didn’t tell Billy that it was a religious college run by God’s True Church, designed to prepare young people for roles in the ministry. Males were to become ministers. Females were to become help-mates and proper minister’s wives.

“Why so far away?” he asked somberly.

“Well, I’m not sure yet that I’m going,” Faith answered. “It’s a pretty choosy college. Not everyone gets in, and they don’t decide until July.”

“Do you want to go there?”

“It’s an honor if I’m chosen. And my folks will be very pleased.” Faith answered.

“You didn’t answer my question. Do YOU want to go?”

Faith walked silently. She hadn't allowed herself to consider this question. She should want to go. Everyone in the church wanted to be chosen to go. But it felt like an extension of the stifling conditions she'd grown up in—no freedom, no opportunity to truly be herself.

Billy stopped and turned towards her, looking intently into her eyes. "I wish you wouldn't go so far away," he said. "Tell me you are looking at closer schools so I can have some hope."

Faith sighed. Other schools were out of the question. Her only other option was marriage to a church member, a marriage chosen by the ministry. They arrived at the bus stop and stepped inside.

Billy leaned in and whispered, "You know I'm crazy about you."

She leaned in closer. "I like you, too. But we can't get involved. I told you already—that isn't possible." She bit her quivering lip.

"I guess I just don't believe that," he said. "And I don't give up that easy." He kissed her. She didn't stop him. There was some privacy within the bus stop enclosure. She closed her eyes. Her heart raced. She felt a rush of emotions she'd never felt before. *This is wrong!* Her inner voice warned. *A good Christian girl doesn't do this!*

"Stop," she whispered. He kissed her again, his lips hot with passion pressing on to her lips, and she held him tightly. *This is supposed to be saved for my future husband. Disloyalty! Wickedness!* Her mind scolded her. *A virtuous woman wouldn't do this!* She didn't want to hear it. All the endless sermons and warnings couldn't stop the passion of the moment. She didn't allow herself to think, only to feel, and it felt wonderful.

When Billy groaned and kissed her harder, she pushed his hands away from her body. "No, I can't. I have to go home now."

Billy stood up. "Are you sure?"

She nodded weakly. "Please, just go, Billy. I can't do this."

"It's okay, Faith. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You're not angry?"

"I'd never be angry with you." He bent over and lifted her face to look directly into her eyes. "I love you Faith, and I'll wait for you as long as it takes." He lovingly tapped the tip of her nose and smiled. Then he stood up and walked away.

Faith watched him walk away. A tear rolled down her cheek. Then she unrolled her skirt and wiped off her makeup with a moist towelette. She combed her hair back into a discreet bow with the black velvet ribbon, and headed home. As she rounded the corner to her house, she returned to the proper religious girl she was supposed to be.

In Dover, New Hampshire...

Kathleen's grandmother, Paddy, came into the living room and turned on the television real loud. The old lady was hard of hearing especially when her ears were numb from alcohol. Paddy was a mean drunk. Not a sweet old lady, not a happy drunk, just plain mean. She would especially pick on Kathleen. "Why aren't you in school where you ought to be?" Paddy demanded. "Why are you dressed like a tramp? Don't you know that girls who dress like that are asking for it?" Kathleen couldn't stand it. She took her book and moved into the kitchen.

Never did Paddy offer a kind word and Kathleen knew it was best to avoid her when she was in one of her moods. Besides, her book was getting to the good part. So she headed for the kitchen where her mother was preparing dinner.

“Paddy is really nasty, Mom,” Kathleen said as she slumped down into a chair.

“Stay away from her,” her mother said.

“It’s not my fault she’s drunk, Mom. Geez, can’t you do something.”

“Watch your tone, young lady. And we don’t cuss in this house.”

“Geez isn’t cussing, Mom.”

“It’s a substitute for Jesus, which is just as bad. Don’t you kid yourself.”

“Why are you mad at me? I didn’t do anything.”

“Kathleen, you just sit around all day and complain. You should go back to school and get your diploma.”

“That’s not fair. You’re turning this around to make me the bad guy. Paddy is the drunk and you don’t do anything. You never do anything. Dad gets drunk and you tell us all to stay out of his way. Geez, Mom, this is my home, too!”

Her mother sighed. “Kathleen, you know perfectly well, that as a Christian woman, I cannot disrespect my husband even though he’s not converted. And unlike you, I obey God’s commandments and respect my elders, including your father and your grandmother.”

“Mom, come on. Dad’s a drunk. He’s a bum. They’re both drunks and all you do is defend them.”

“I think you should pray about this,” her mother suggested with a frown.

“They’re alcoholics, Mom. Are you blind?”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say, Kathleen.” Her mother turned back around to the counter and stirred the pot vigorously. “I don’t want to hear any more talk like that. You’re supposed to respect your parents.”

“Me? Why is it my fault, Mom? I don’t drink myself into oblivion. I don’t get nasty and snarl at people. Why do you put this on me?”

“Kathleen, you need to get on your knees and ask God to forgive your bad attitude!”

Kathleen bristled. “I’m going to read in my room where I can find some peace and quiet,” she said.

Kathleen wondered what had gone wrong with her plans. When she dropped out of school, she envisioned her days filled with reading and painting. Home was not the escape she’d anticipated. Paddy was retired and when her social security check arrived, she’d stock up on vodka and whiskey.

Before Kathleen quit school, she’d seen Paddy late in the day when she was beyond the mean stage, usually sleeping on the couch with the television blaring. Now since Kathleen was the handiest person to pick on, she received the brunt of her meanness.

Kathleen hadn’t counted on that. She dreamed of becoming a famous artist and showing her work in New York and Boston art galleries. Her work would be renowned and valuable. Then she’d be valuable.

A few hours later, Linda came to Kathleen’s door. “You all right?”

“Just fine,” Kathleen answered.

“Mom said I should check on you. Dinner’s almost ready.”

“I’m not hungry,” Kathleen said as she turned the page of the novel she was reading.

“Fine.” Linda said and left.

“Fine,” Kathleen parroted. “That’s just fine.” Kathleen put her book down. It wasn’t nearly as interesting as she’d tried to believe. In fact, she hardly remembered the plot anymore. Linda was the smart one. She was the one everyone liked and praised. Paddy never said a bad word about Linda. *Look at her, she’s just so together. She gets all A’s at school. She is the field hockey captain. She’s the most popular girl in school. She does everything perfectly and when she graduated valedictorian last*

year, it was a super big deal, Kathleen thought. The program from the ceremony was still pinned to the refrigerator. Now Linda was stellar in a local college.

Kathleen looked at herself in the mirror. She was tall and thin, but plain. Linda was so pretty. Kathleen wore tattered jeans and t-shirts. Linda wore miniskirts and stylish bell bottoms. Kathleen was a klutz and couldn't sing a tune and had no rhythm. Linda played the piano and danced expertly—she'd been the hit in the drama club and won a state prize for her acting role.

Kathleen didn't like being the center of attention. She preferred solitude, reading a book, or painting to hanging out with dopey friends who constantly put her down or compared her to Linda. *They are all right*, Kathleen thought. *Linda is smart and pretty and wonderful. I admire her too, but I can never be like her.*

Kathleen went over to her easel and looked at the picture she'd been painting earlier. She took it down and tossed it in the corner with several other half-finished canvasses. *I can't live like this*, she thought. *I'm going nowhere. My life is going nowhere. I have to get out of here!*

In Standish, Maine...

Rachel adjusted the volume on the car radio. She shivered and wiped the water from her face on her sleeve, but her sleeve was so wet it only smudged the water around. Outside the dark and heavy rain pounded against the car roof. She was drenched from her run through the rain to escape the hell inside her house.

Why did she come back? Why couldn't she leave us alone? We were fine. We were happy. Why did she have to come back!

Rachel pulled out a tissue from her pocket and wiped her nose. The voice on the radio boomed through the

darkness offering answers. She loved to listen to this program—"The Wonderful World That's Coming Soon". Even the title offered hope. Russell W. Sherburne offered the answers to life's difficult questions. He promised a future filled with peace and happiness. Tonight he talked about a cyclone tidal wave in Somalia that killed over 20,000 people. It was the fulfillment of end-time prophecies where the world would be filled with wars and rumors of wars, with pestilence and disease, and natural catastrophes like earthquakes and tidal waves. For those who were paying attention, all the clues are there—we are nearing the end times. But Russell offered hope—because all this was leading to the wonderful world tomorrow when the Messiah would return to rule for a thousand years of peace. He quoted Biblical passages and offered a free Bible correspondence course. He spoke with confidence and authority. She always felt better after listening to the program. Rachel switched on the interior light and scribbled down the information so she could send away for this course.

Two hours later, when Rachel went back inside, it was quiet. The arguing had stopped. Everyone had gone to bed. No one missed her. Her two brothers were hiding in their rooms, just as they always did when the fighting started.

Why couldn't she be that smart she wondered? Instead, she always seemed to be caught in the middle of it. Tonight her father cried when her mother pointed to Rachel and screamed, "You molested her! I have proof!"

Rachel was horrified to see her mother was holding her diary. For as long as she could remember her diary was her companion and confidant. She expressed her most private thoughts and fears where no one could judge, criticize or question.

Now her mother had stolen it, violating her, and was using it to falsely accuse her father of something terrible.

Yes, he had hugged her very tightly. She'd written that in her diary. It was after one of those ugly arguments and she knew that he couldn't express his feelings in words. He was trying to tell her that he loved her despite the evil accusations of her mother to the contrary. Rachel knew that he never hurt her. That he was sorry for her suffering, that maybe he felt responsible for her pain and wished he could make it all better. She knew her Dad regretted marrying this woman, but he didn't know how to fix it now that there were three children.

Her mother was perverting this into some nasty, mean, vindictive thing. Rachel knew her mother would carry out her threat.

"He molested you!" her mother accused.

"That's not true," Rachel choked out, grabbing for her diary. "That's not what I wrote at all!" Rachel hated her mother.

Her mother smirked, holding the diary away from Rachel. "You can say anything you want, but when a judge reads this, he'll send your father to jail! I'll see to it."

The drawn look on her father's face was too much for Rachel. She grabbed the car keys next to the door and ran out of the house through the heavy rain to the car. Once again, she escaped into the promising world of this radio program—The Wonderful World That's Coming Soon.

Now the kitchen was silent. Her diary sat on the kitchen table. She picked it up feeling like a wounded animal and crept quietly to her bedroom. She began to read from a passage she'd written a year ago in 1969. "I don't see what the big deal is all about. So I turned 16 today. There's nothing sweet about it. My life is still just as miserable as it was yesterday. No one even noticed it was my birthday. I'm glad. It would just be another reason for Mom and Dad to fight. I can't stand it anymore. Why did she have to come back? It was so peaceful with

just Dad and my brother and me. The kids at school say awful things about her, but I don't listen. I don't care what they say. She's my mother. No matter what she does, I still love her. I can't do anything else. I can't hate her. She's my mother. But I want to hate her. I hate what she does. She hurts so many people. I never want to be like her. She constantly lies. I never want to be like her. If I thought I was like her, I'd kill myself so I wouldn't hurt the people I love. I couldn't live with myself if I hurt people like she does. God, I pray I don't turn out like her."

Rachel sighed as she read her past words. She wondered if her mother had read this section. She doubted it would even faze her mother in the least if she did read it.

Now, two months later, her mother had returned again. She was even more vindictive this time. Rachel knew what she wanted. She knew her mother was determined to ruin everything. Her mother wouldn't be satisfied until Rachel left her Dad and went to live with her. Why? Rachel could only guess at her mother's motives.

The next morning Rachel woke with the sun. Despite her recurrent insomnia, Rachel always got up early. It would be years before she understood the extent of the trauma she and her brothers were experiencing. In many ways, insomnia was her friend. It kept her from those terrible nightmares.

She'd placed the diary on her bureau next to the white zippered Bible her grandmother had given her for her twelfth birthday. She cherished the Bible as much as her diary. Her grandmother emphasized how special this Bible was, and had it inscribed to Rachel. That's why Rachel felt so badly when she discovered it was missing.

"Where's your white Bible?" her grandmother had asked when visiting.

“There’s a little girl next door who took it,” Rachel explained.

“How do you know she took your Bible?”

“Because she invited me to her room to show it to me. I don’t understand, Gram. She tore out the inscribed pages. But how could she think I wouldn’t recognize it?”

“What did you say to her?”

“I didn’t know what to say. Her bedroom is in the attic. You can see daylight through beams in the walls. I know they are poor. All that she has is a light bulb hanging down on a wire in the center of her ceiling. We had to climb an old ladder just to get to her room.”

Her grandmother put her arms around Rachel. “Don’t say anything to that little girl. Let her keep the Bible. I’ll get you another one.”

“But it won’t be the same,” Rachel protested.

“It’s not the White Bible that matters. It’s the love inside the book. That’s what you need to remember. No matter what happens, God loves you. He loves everyone, even that little girl who took your Bible.”

Sure enough, the next time her grandmother visited, she had an identical white zippered Bible. Rachel treasured it. Her grandmother had told her no matter what happened, God loved her. She could have faith in the words in that Bible. She believed her grandmother. She wasn’t a liar like her mother.

Rachel unzipped her white Bible and turned to I John 4, verse 8. “God is Love.” It was one of her favorite passages. She knew God loved her. There was hope, just like the man on the radio promised. All she had to do was believe.

Rachel made scrambled eggs for breakfast for her two brothers and herself. Her father left for work at six, before anyone else was up. She woke her brothers and set the table. Her younger brother had left the last time to live with their mother. Her older brother and she had

stayed behind to live with their father. Even though he was only fifteen, her younger brother had quit school. He spent his days waiting on his mother and working around the house. He had an emotional chip on his shoulder and blamed everyone else for his mother's unhappiness. Rachel didn't blame him for his misguided anger. She felt sorry for him.

When Rachel went to her room to dress for school, her mother came in, eyeing Rachel nervously. Her mother picked up the diary. "You're coming with me," she said.

"No. I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying here with Dad." Rachel stood rigidly next to the bureau as if it would give her some added strength. "I can make my own decision about where to live. That's what the judge said when you got your divorce."

"Not when he reads this," her mother snarled. She opened to a page and read, "Dad hugged me so tight it frightened me."

"It doesn't say what you imply," Rachel said shaking.

"Doesn't matter. All I have to do is create a doubt." Her mother smirked triumphantly.

"But you know it isn't true. How could you do that?"

Rachel's mother gave her that familiar you-really-think-I-care look. It was the look she always had when she was about to explode. "I am your mother! You have to do what I tell you!"

"I'm not going with you," Rachel whispered, cowering.

"Then I'm not going. I'll stay right here. It's only a matter of time before your father goes back to the hospital—maybe this time he won't come home, especially after he faces a charge of molestation in court."

"You drove him to a nervous breakdown," Rachel said, her voice cracking. "You pushed him down the stairs—I saw you do it!" Rachel started crying. She hated that. She hated that her mother was winning. She hated being so weak.

“So what?”

Rachel knew her mother’s threats were real. She would make her father’s life hell. She’d literally drive him crazy, until he cracked. She might even try to kill him like she did before.

“When are you leaving?” Rachel asked in defeat.

“We’re leaving today. Pack your stuff. And your brother’s too.”

“You mean I can’t even say good-bye to Dad?”

“Why would you want to do that?” Her mother curled up her lips hatefully and Rachel knew it was over.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll like it. We’re going to that church you’re always listening to on the radio. They meet in Manchester, New Hampshire on Saturdays. It’ll be good for you.”

Rachel looked at her mother in disbelief. “Why would you take us to that church? You don’t even believe in it?”

Her mother smiled. “That’s how I can control you kids.”

Before they left Rachel took her diary down to the basement furnace. She opened the door and threw it inside and watched as the flames consumed her old friend and confidant. Her mother had taken yet another thing away from her.

Now a year later, when Rachel came home from school her heart sank. Her mother was moving yet again. They had already moved five times. She barely knew the kids at school and graduation was only a few weeks away. Boxes were half-filled and littered the apartment. This time, she had no intention of bringing Rachel along. “I can’t wait until June to be rid of you!” Her mother spit the hateful words at her when Rachel entered the living room.

Chapter 2

*But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in
me,
it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his
neck,
and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.
Matthew 18:6*

Manchester, New Hampshire that following Saturday...

Rachel couldn't believe it. She was here. She was actually here attending the services of the church she'd listened to so many times on the radio. These were God's people. This was God's true church. She couldn't believe it.

The Odd Fellows Hall was an old brick building on Hanover Street in Manchester, New Hampshire. The church met on the fourth floor in an old and uncomfortably warm room. Services were not on Sunday, but on Saturday, the true Sabbath according to scriptures, as Rachel had learned in her Bible course.

As soon as they got to the top of the stairs, a large man greeted them. He had a voice as big as his burly body. "Welcome to the True Church of God!" he said, grabbing their hands and shaking them vigorously. Her mother had led the way and didn't seem the slightest

taken back by this greeting but Rachel stood back a little. She didn't like physical contact, especially with strangers, especially with strange large men.

Rachel noticed a table with a woman sitting behind it. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight bun and she had a typewriter in front of her and was busy filling out some forms. There were framed color photos and posters on the table, and church literature, some of which she recognized. In the photos was an elderly man posing with dignified looking individuals. Rachel glanced at them and realized that it was the man she'd heard on the radio. These were photos of him preaching the good news to world leaders, just as he'd claimed.

"My name is Jordan," the greeter said. "How did you find us?"

Her mother answered, "Mr. Critchett invited us." This satisfied Jordan who then asked, "And how did you come to The Truth?"

Rachel wondered for only a moment who was this Mr. Critchett since she had never heard of him. Then she slipped quietly past as her mother chatted with this man.

She looked around the meeting room. The windows were large and low to the floor. Someone had opened one near the doorway and Rachel worried instantly that a child might fall out. She looked around. No one was paying any attention to the window and the small children were close to their mothers.

Here she was in a place she'd only dreamed about with people who shared her dream, people who cared about the problems in the world and were actually doing something about it to make a difference. She surveyed the room of people, the men and boys were all dressed in suits and the women dressed in their best clothes. Even the little children were dressed up. Most were quiet and hanging near their parents. The men had brief cases. The women carried a Bible along with their handbags. Women

greeted one another with hugs and chatted in hushed voices.

Two youngsters ran by her, pushing and hollering. They were about six or seven, Rachel thought. Not so well behaved as the other children, yet no one paid any attention to them.

“Hello,” a feminine voice said from behind. “You’re new here, aren’t you? My name is Faith.”

Rachel turned to the young woman, noting how pretty she was, with her blonde hair neatly tied back with a black velvet bow and her lovely shirtwaist flower-print dress. “Hi, I’m Rachel. This is my first time here.”

“When did the minister invite you?” the girl inquired.

Rachel looked confused. “Invite me?”

“Well, you can’t attend services unless you’re invited.”

“Uh, my mother said we were invited by Mr. Critchett. I don’t know when,” Rachel explained, feeling a wave of unease.

Faith’s eyes sparkled as she looked over the newcomer. Rachel wondered what she was thinking. “Here, let me show you around,” Faith offered. “Come on.”

Faith took Rachel over to her mother. “Mom, this is Rachel. She’s new.”

Faith’s mother turned to Rachel and asked, “Where are you from?”

“Standish, Maine,” Rachel said, smiling. Faith’s mother was about the same age as her own mother; she guessed and wondered what kind of relationship the two had. She thought how lucky Faith was to have a mother obviously devoted to the church, a Christian woman who wouldn’t do things to hurt her own family.

The older woman smiled back. “Well, welcome, dear. I’m sure my daughter will take good care of you.”

Faith shrugged at Rachel as her mother immediately turned back to her own discussion with another member.

“Oh, there’s Kathleen. Come on. I’ll introduce her. You’ll like each other.”

They headed across the room. Rachel felt like the people were watching her. Actually most of them were. It wasn’t every week that a new member came. “Hey, Kathleen, I want you to meet Rachel.”

Kathleen was standing next to her mother and turned to greet her friend, Faith. She eyed Rachel and smiled. “Well, another convert,” she said. “How did you come to know The Truth?”

Rachel wasn’t sure what to answer. “I listen to the radio program.”

Kathleen nodded, glancing at Faith. “So, you’re really new, huh?”

“This is my first time here,” Rachel said. “But I’ve been reading a lot of the church literature. And I have my own Bible.” She held up her white zippered Bible to show them. They both nodded.

“Can you show me the ladies room?” Rachel asked. “It was a long ride from Maine, and my Mom got lost trying to find this place.”

“Sure, this way,” Kathleen said.

There was an elderly woman in the rest room combing her hair. When Rachel stood close to the mirror to put on some lipstick, the woman snapped at her. “We don’t allow harlots in our church!”

“What?” Rachel said, startled.

“Meet Alice,” Faith said.

“That’s Mrs. Andrews to you, young lady,” the woman reprimanded.

“Mrs. Andrews,” Faith repeated. “Rachel is new. She doesn’t know about our rules yet. Don’t you think it might be better to let the ministers tell her?” Faith knew she was being a little disrespectful, but she was also right

and Alice knew she wasn't supposed to offend one of the new recruits.

"Humph!" Alice said, picking up her bag and Bible and leaving the restroom. Both Kathleen and Faith burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Rachel asked.

"Did you see her face? I can't believe you said that to her. Don't you know she's our elder?" Kathleen said to Faith.

"So what? She was wrong and she knew it. What's she going to do? Tell people what she said to Rachel?"

"You're braver than I am," Kathleen said.

"I don't understand," Rachel said. "Did I do something wrong?"

"It's the lipstick," Faith said. "Look around. Did you see any make-up on any of the ladies out there?"

"Well, I didn't notice. Everyone looks dressed up for church."

"Women aren't allowed to wear make-up," Kathleen said.

"But we're not supposed to tell you that," Faith injected. "Only the ministers can tell new people the rules."

"Yeah, so they don't get scared away," Kathleen added.

"I don't understand," Rachel said. "Why can't women wear make-up?"

"It's in the Bible. Only harlots wear make-up. Don't worry, you'll hear all about it soon enough. Just wipe off the lipstick so no one else says anything."

Rachel wiped it off. Faith stepped closer when Kathleen was in the stall and whispered. "Don't sweat it. I wear lipstick when I'm not here, but no one knows. It's no big deal. Just a bunch of rules for church." She nodded at Rachel.

In came the young girl who'd run by Rachel earlier. "Hey, slow down," Faith said, grabbing the girl's arm. "Where's your mother?"

"Let go!" the girl said, pulling away. "I don't have to listen to you." The girl ran out of the restroom.

"Little brat," Faith said. Kathleen was washing her hands. "Come on, Faith," she said.

Faith looked at Rachel. "Justina—the ministers little girl. She gets away with murder."

Rachel nodded and said, "Oh."

"It's time for services to start. Come on. You can sit with us."

As the girls reached their seats near the back of the room, a man stood at the podium and asked everyone to stand. People pulled out hymnals and several songs were sung. Rachel didn't recognize any of them and they were difficult melodies to follow. The words sounded like psalms from the Bible but she wasn't sure. Everyone sang boisterously. It was a happy sound, especially to Rachel. She glanced at her two new friends feeling a warm glow inside. Maybe, now, she was finally home.

As they sang hymns, Rachel noticed her mother and two brothers on the other side of the room. She got a knot in her stomach and looked back at the hymnal. *How long would this last*, she wondered. *How long before her mother got bored and moved on to some new church?*

At the end of the songs a man gave a long prayer asking the Lord to open the minds of those present, to pour out his Holy Spirit on God's Children, and to correct any deviation in any member's attitude. "Amen" everyone said and sat down.

First there was a sermonette. Apparently it was given by a minister in training, a young man who looked little older than Rachel. His presentation lasted about fifteen minutes and he sat down. She wasn't sure what his

message was, but he quoted from numerous scriptures. People turned to them in their Bibles and followed along. When he finished, more songs were sung and then an older man stepped to the podium. “That’s the pastor,” Faith whispered. “Mr. Driscoll.”

The man had a thick English accent. “He’s from Australia,” Kathleen whispered.”

His sermon lasted three hours. It was nearly five o’clock when he finally wrapped up. Theme: Lean not to thine own understanding. He referred often to scriptures and the whole room took their Bibles and turned to the scriptures to follow along as he read the passages. Sometimes pages shuffled after he began reading as some younger person had difficulty locating the scripture.

Rachel turned to the passages, too, in her white zippered Bible. If she couldn’t locate it quickly enough, she pretended she’d found it and read along, making a mental note to memorize the order of the books of the Bible before the next meeting.

The message was clear: you can’t understand the truth on your own. You need the Holy Spirit. He admonished the congregation not to offend any of these little ones. Rachel figured he was referring to herself and her family, as new members. Faith nodded to Kathleen as if to say, “See, I was right to tell Alice off.” Kathleen shrugged.

Mr. Driscoll explained God’s Plan to the audience. “It is only through God’s Apostle, Russell W. Sherburne, that we can know The Truth,” he said. He went in to a lengthy story about Russell’s conversion and how he grew the flock of God’s Children and began doing The Work—God’s Work.

Russell was the man on the radio. Rachel had never thought about him, personally. Now she was learning what a wonderful man he really was—and that he was special, too. He was God’s Apostle. That explained why

his words and his voice were so soothing to her on those many lonely nights in the car. God was speaking to her through Russell W. Sherburne. She began to realize how blessed she was. Something special was happening to her. She was one of the chosen few.

Well, these were her thoughts during the sermon. Afterward, Faith and Kathleen explained to her that only converted people actually were chosen. “What do you mean?” Rachel asked.

“Well, you have to be born again. Don’t worry. You’ll learn all about it,” Faith said. “Besides, we’re not old enough yet. You have to be an adult to be a Child of God. We can only profess to be a Child of God until then.”

Rachel was confused, but confident it would all make sense eventually. She hadn’t read about this in any of the literature she’d received from the church. They sang several more hymns and prayers at the end of the sermon. The pastor closed with an admonition to pray for Mrs. Dugan who was sick.

Kathleen and Faith chatted for a while and Rachel stood up. She noticed another young woman a few seats up. Kathleen said, “That’s Wilma.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Rachel asked.

Faith and Kathleen looked at each other with concern. “We’ll introduce you,” Faith suggested. “I always try to talk to her.”

They made their way to Wilma, who was sitting listlessly in a wheelchair. Despite her aged and tired appearance, Rachel thought the woman must not be too much older than she, perhaps twenty or so.

“Hi, Wilma. We have a new friend—Rachel. She’s from Maine.”

“How do you do?” Wilma said, holding out her hand to shake Rachel’s.

“I’m fine,” Rachel said. “It’s nice to meet you.” Rachel noticed that Wilma’s hand was limp and reminded her of a dog’s paw, extended waiting for you to do all the work of shaking it.

Wilma nodded and looked down. “We’ll see you next week,” Faith said, pulling Rachel away. “We don’t like to tire her out,” Faith whispered.

“What’s wrong with her?” Rachel asked again.

Kathleen answered, “Don’t know. She has some medical problems.”

Faith and Kathleen seemed to have stuff to talk about, so Rachel moved among the friendly group by herself. The young girl who’d run by earlier stood by a woman in the front. Rachel surmised it was the child’s mother and the wife of the Pastor who’d given the sermon. She decided to introduce herself.

“Hi, my name is Rachel,” she said. “This is my first time here.”

The woman smiled at Rachel. “Welcome, dear. Where are you from?”

“Standish, Maine. I’ve been listening to the radio program for years and read most of the literature. I even completed the Bible course.”

The woman looked at her with surprise, and perhaps disbelief. This was a young girl, and the course was over 50 chapters. “Well, that’s very interesting. I suspect there are some things you have yet to learn.”

“I am anxious to learn,” Rachel said. “Especially about becoming a Child of God. How do I do that?”

“You can’t decide that, dear. Only God decides who is called and chosen.”

Rachel felt a twinge of rejection. The woman sensed it and quickly added, “You need to counsel with a minister. It takes time. Be patient.” She reached over to pat Rachel’s hand reassuringly. “We can’t comprehend The

Truth all at once. Soon you will understand that. God will reveal The Truth to you as you are able to take it.”

Rachel nodded. Her joy at finding God’s true church seemed to fade a little. There was a small voice inside that doubted. Soon she’d learn to recognize that doubting demon and purge it from her mind, but for now, she was still a babe. She knew she had much to learn. She was eager to do so. “I intend to be a Child of God,” Rachel said firmly to the minister’s wife.

“Good for you,” the woman said, then turned to her daughter who was pulling on her sleeve for attention.

Rachel made her way back to Kathleen and Faith. “We have to go now,” she said. “I hope to be back next week.”

“Great,” both girls said. “Faith was just telling me she wants to get her own place after graduation,” Kathleen stated. “What are you doing?”

Rachel hadn’t thought much about school. It was her dream to go to college but now that her mother had moved just a few weeks prior to graduation, she doubted she’d even get her high school diploma, but she didn’t want to tell her new friends about all that. “I need to find a place to live, too,” Rachel said, surprising herself. She’d often thought about living on her own but never openly verbalized it.

“Well, I want out, too,” Kathleen said. “I can’t stand living at home another day. Maybe we could pool our resources and find a place together. With the three of us, we could probably afford an apartment. Are you interested?”

Faith looked at Rachel expectantly. Rachel smiled. “You bet.”

“Then all we need is permission,” Faith said.

“From our parents?” Rachel asked.

Kathleen laughed. “That’s the easy part. No, from the ministers.”

Chapter 3

*Beloved, believe not every spirit,
but try the spirits whether they are of God:
because many false prophets are gone out into the world.
1 John 4:1*

Rachel could hardly wait for the next Saturday service. The idea of living on her own was not only exciting, but a way to escape the nightmare that had been her life for as long as she could remember. When she told her mother what she was thinking, she expected another blow-up. To her surprise, her mother had simply shrugged. “Fine,” she’d said. “I really am anxious for you to go. There’s no reason for you to stay with me now.”

Now, Rachel thought, now that she’d soon be eighteen and the child support checks would stop. Now that she’d taken her away from her father, kept her from graduating from high school, taken everything away from her. Now her mother was done with her.

Rachel felt tightness in her chest. Any words she wanted to say were stuck deep inside. It had happened before. Unable to speak. Dizzy. Faint. Rachel retreated to her room and took her white Bible from the stand next to her bed. She turned to her favorite verse and began to read it. 1 John 4:7-8: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth no God, for God is love.*

These words calmed her, soothed her and gave her strength. She told herself, *I'll soon be born of God, and I'll soon know God's love.* She remembered her grandmother who'd given it to her on her twelfth birthday. A large tear fell down her cheek. "I miss you Gram," she whispered, holding the Bible close to her chest.

Rachel's older brother left to return to her father that Saturday morning before she and her mother and younger brother headed to Manchester for church services. Rachel cried during the trip as she sat in the back seat. She would miss him. Part of her wanted to go back, too. But her mother would never allow that. And now that she'd found the True Church, she had to stay. God was calling her.

Her mother glared ahead, as she drove, her hands tapping angrily on the steering wheel. She'd been in one of her moods all day. Her younger brother sat in the front, looking worried, his jaw clenched, his eyes bloodshot. It was a long, silent trip. Just before they arrived, her mother exploded, "I don't understand you kids!" she yelled. "I do all this for you. I bring you to God's True Church, and you don't obey me. You don't respect your mother. I don't understand you!"

Rachel recognized that crazed look. Despite the many times her mother had done it, she still cringed in fear. It was the power of her mothers' animosity that always shocked her. How could her own mother hate her so? Rachel was convinced there must be something terribly wrong with herself. It must be her fault—not her mother's. No one else's mother treated them this way. She'd never seen another mother like this and she'd watched closely the mother-daughter interactions of others trying to figure it out.

Her brother glanced her a hateful, *why'd-you-upset-her-again* look. Rachel looked down, hoping they would soon arrive. She knew there was nothing she could say to

change her mother's mood. She just hoped that she wouldn't sabotage her plan out of spite.

Rachel kept her hand on the door handle ready to jump out. Her mother drove too fast, missed a stop sign, nearly crashed into another car. Her brother clenched his fists and his jaw. His whole body tightened like a giant knot. Rachel thought he was surely suffering the most harm from her mother, even though he was her favorite. *Look what she's doing to him, Rachel thought sadly. He quit school. He works at whatever she tells him to do during the day. He resents me and our older brother. He hates our father. He's just plain messed up. She has messed him up so badly.*

As soon as the car stopped in the parking lot, Rachel jumped out and ran into the building without a word. She was eager to find her two new friends. They were waiting for her, too.

"What took so long?" Faith asked.

"It's been a tough ride," Rachel answered.

"Well, come on. We're supposed to counsel with the minister today. What did your mother say?" Kathleen said.

"I can move out anytime," Rachel said, not mentioning that she had her suitcase and meager possessions in the back of her mother's station wagon. Whatever happened today, her mother had made it very clear, and she wasn't taking her back home with her to Standish.

The three girls were excited. Jordan, the large official greeter man joked with Faith and Kathleen. Rachel stood off a little. But he reached for her and did his big handshake deal again and pulled her close. He also hugged both Faith and Kathleen. They didn't seem to mind. Rachel tried to smile.

The three girls were led into a small counseling room off to the side of the main meeting hall. There were only a

few minutes before the service would start, so the minister asked them to come back after the sermon.

All through the sermon Rachel was distracted. Even though she'd often dreamed of running away now that she was really going to be on her own she was frightened. She looked around the room. *These people will be my new family*, she thought. *Anything will be better than what I have now.*

The sermon this week was delivered by another man. He didn't have the charisma like Mr. Driscoll. Faith explained to Rachel that Mr. Driscoll was the Pastor. He oversaw several churches and only came to Manchester occasionally. Today he was in Boston and their speaker was Mr. Critchett, the Local Elder.

Mr. Critchett talked about Satan and the bad influences of the world. "The World" was a different concept to these folks. Rachel sensed something was bad about the world.

"Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God," Mr. Critchett quoted as everyone turned to the book of I John. He continued, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments."

He admonished the audience, "Are you a Child of God? Do you love God and keep his commandments?"

He quoted from I John 4, "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world."

Critchett explained there could only be one True Church. There are so many diverse denominations, he said, that teach different things. They can't all be right, he explained. Only one can be right—only one can be the True Church. How do you know which one? You must try the spirits, he explained.

The truth was tested by the revelations of God's Apostle, Russell W. Sherburne. "You are privileged to be

chosen as a Child of God. What are you doing with that privilege and that honor?" He was demanding, almost accusing the audience.

Rachel felt uncomfortable. This was the man they would be counseling with after the service. She noticed that Faith and Kathleen didn't seem fazed at all.

When the sermon ended and it was time for more hymns Rachel whispered to Faith, "When do they take up an offering?"

"Oh, we don't do that," Faith explained. "Members tithe and give special offerings but not at regular services."

The three girls hurried to be first in line for counseling when the last prayer was given. Mrs. Andrews was ahead of them in line. She gave the girls a disgusted look.

"What's bugging her?" Kathleen asked.

"It's Rachel's skirt—see how short it is," Faith pointed out.

Rachel suddenly felt embarrassed. She hadn't noticed the women and girls wore their dresses well below their knees. She'd thought her skirt was modest. It came just to her knees. It was in fact longer than the current fashion because she'd already let the hem down as far as it would go. "I didn't know that," Rachel said, tugging at her skirt to get it as low as possible.

"Don't worry," Faith said. "It's not a big deal."

Mr. Critchett, the Local Elder, sat behind a table and motioned for the three girls to sit in front. He studied them for an awkward moment before speaking. When Faith began to say something he held up his hand to indicate not to talk. "I know why you're here," he said. "Your father told me."

Rachel glanced at Kathleen, who sat quietly. The two other girls looked expectantly at the man, hopeful he wouldn't dash their plans. "You know that having your own place means you will have to be responsible, as adults?"

Faith and Kathleen nodded. He looked at Rachel. "And you," he said, "you are new to The Church. Are you going to bring your worldly ways to these two Christian girls?"

Rachel was insulted. "I study my Bible," she said humbly. "I plan to become a Child of God soon."

He grinned. "That so."

"Where do you plan to live?" he asked the girls.

The two started talking at the same time. "We have pooled our money," Faith said.

"My mother said I could use her car this week to find an apartment," Kathleen said.

"You have to find jobs," he said.

"I have working papers," Kathleen said.

"I graduated from high school last week," Faith said. "We should be able to find work without much trouble."

He looked at Rachel. "I have always had a job," she said. "I'm sure I can find one here, too."

"And what about men?" he demanded while, looking at each girl intently. "Are you planning to entertain men in your new apartment?"

"Of course not," they said in unison.

"Humph!" His look said more than his words. "You are not allowed to have any men in your apartment at any time for any reason. Is that understood?"

They nodded.

"If it were up to me, I would never allow this," he said. "Mr. Driscoll has given his okay and I take my orders from him. But I will be watching you. Women should be under direct supervision. If you step out of line or give me any reason, any reason at all, you will be sent right back home."

"We won't," Faith said.

"Since your parents have all said it was okay with them as long as you continue to attend church functions, and the Pastor has agreed, then you may find your own

place. You will be on probation. If there is any problem," he said, "ANY problem at all, you'll have to go back home."

"I brought my stuff," Rachel said.

"On the Sabbath?" the Elder stated. He shook his head. "Work is not allowed on the Sabbath. You have a lot to learn, young lady."

Rachel blushed.

"I have arranged for Audrey Sinclair to help you. You can stay with her while you find your own place. But make sure you don't impose on her. You must pay your own way like adults, or it's home you go. Got that?"

They all nodded.

"Who's Audrey?" Rachel asked as they left the counseling room.

"She's a Deaconess. You'll like her," Kathleen said. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

"I don't think Mr. Critchett likes me." Rachel said as they gathered their stuff.

"He doesn't like any women," Faith said.

Kathleen nudged her arm. "That's not true, Faith. He loves his wife and daughter."

"Yeah? Why does he always pick on women? How many of the men has he publicly chastised? And how come the young men can have their own apartments but he puts us through the third-degree?"

"He's chastised plenty of men," Kathleen stated doubtfully. "But if you talk like that, and someone hears you, it will be the end of our plan. Cool it."

"Okay," Faith said. "I'm sorry. It's just that I overheard my parents talking about Mr. Critchett, and they said he doesn't like dealing with women." She shrugged.

Audrey was the woman who sat at the reception table. She was friendly. Her dark eyes sparkled. Her hair

was pinned back in a tight bun disguising its actual near-waist length. She wore dark colors, a long dress and jacket.

The girls approached the table. She was expecting them. "When can you come?" she asked with a southern drawl.

"I can come today," Rachel said.

Audrey looked surprised. "Well, that's fine. I haven't set up your bedroom yet, but if you don't mind the couch, you're welcome. Wade has to bunk with his brother while you're at our apartment."

Wade was the oldest of Audrey's three sons. Faith and Kathleen explained to Rachel that Audrey was a Deaconess, which meant she was privileged to serve. She had to leave her husband when she became a Child of God. It was a divorce and remarriage thing. The Church didn't allow anyone more than one marriage, except in the case of death.

Rachel immediately liked Audrey. She was friendly, open, and honest. When Rachel fetched her suitcase from her mother's station wagon, Audrey asked where the rest of her stuff was. "That's it," Rachel said.

"That's all you have?" Audrey asked, eyeing the small, gray, battered suitcase.

Rachel shrugged. "We moved so many times, I just kept less and less. It's everything I need."

"Well, come on. Let's get you settled."

Kathleen said, "I'll see you on Monday morning. We'll start looking for our apartment and jobs."

Faith agreed. "I'm taking a bus down. My folks will move my stuff once we find a place. This is so exciting," she said. The girls hugged good-bye.

Rachel watched as her mother and younger brother drove off. Neither had said good-bye to her. She figured her brother didn't want to upset her mother and didn't hold it against him. She hoped he'd be all right. She got

into the back seat of Audrey's station wagon next to her youngest son, Randy. He was five. He gave her a big smile. She smiled back.

Audrey had prepared a wonderful dinner that was waiting for them when they arrived. She had invited some of the widows from The Church, too, including Alice. By the time everyone left and the dishes were cleaned up, the three boys had gone to bed. As Audrey pulled out the sofa-bed, she said, "This might not be too comfortable, but we'll move Wade out of his bedroom tomorrow and you can have some privacy."

"That's okay," Rachel said. "I hate to make him move out of his room." She had noticed that Wade was sullen during the evening and seemed to be watching people, especially her.

Wade was Audrey's oldest son, nearly fifteen. But he seemed much older. His voice was deep, well past "the change." And his demeanor was always quiet, thoughtful. He seemed wise beyond his years. Perhaps he'd become "the man of the house" and felt the burden of worrying for his mother and two younger brothers. Perhaps he missed his father who sounded like a very nice person.

Rachel suddenly missed her own father, wondering what he was doing, was her brother okay, did they miss her, too. She returned her thoughts to the present and surmised Wade didn't appreciate giving up his room to her and her two friends, even though it would be for only a short time, she hoped.

"He's used to it," Audrey said. "It's part of the deal."

"The deal?"

"He gets his own room when it's not needed for brethren. Otherwise he'd always share a bedroom with his brothers. Part of my job is to provide a place for brethren in need. The church pays the rent here. He understands that."

Rachel wondered if he understood. Or maybe he tolerated it. Maybe he didn't like it at all, and she wouldn't blame him. But that was none of her business.

After the bed was made up, Audrey sat down with a glass of wine and the two chatted until quite late. Rachel was curious about this outgoing woman. "How did you get here in New Hampshire?" Rachel asked when Audrey said she was from Louisiana.

Audrey explained that she had been married briefly before meeting her husband, the father of her three sons. Even though that first marriage had lasted only a few months, it none-the-less counted, and she was living in sin with her second husband. He didn't understand any of this, of course, not being a Child of God. He was heartbroken when the church moved her and their three sons from Louisiana to New Hampshire.

"It's a test of my faith," Audrey said. "I know that God will someday get me and my husband back together. My husband promised to wait for me no matter how long it takes."

Rachel admired Audrey's strength and faith. She wondered how she could have left a man she obviously loved so much.

"I know he will wait," Audrey said. "It's only been three years. When we are re-united, it will be better than before. God will reward us. I'm hoping that my husband will also be chosen as a Child of God. That's my prayer, every day, morning and night."

Audrey took another sip of wine. Rachel noted that she'd had several glasses over the evening and during dinner. "We left three years ago, but God promises to reward the faithful," Audrey said. "I have to prove myself as a faithful servant of God."

"You're a Deaconess?" Rachel asked. "What does that mean?"

“It’s the highest honor for women in the church,” Audrey explained. I was ordained a year after we arrived. My responsibilities include helping with women’s needs in the church, and providing hospitality for visiting brethren. I do a lot of work with the elderly widows like Mrs. Andrews.”

Rachel frowned at the name. Audrey laughed. “Alice is one of my more challenging charges.”

“Where are the families of the widows?” Rachel asked.

“Most of them are alone or abandoned. Some of them can’t understand why their mother would join this church. If you ask me, it’s most often about the money.”

“The money?” Rachel asked.

“Yes. The widows have their wills changed to leave everything to The Church. That’s part of the deal. They get cared for in the church for the rest of their lives. That’s why they are relocated here, so we can take care of them. And keep their greedy relatives away from them, too.”

“They leave all their money to The Church?”

“It’s God’s will to do The Work.”

Monday morning Kathleen arrived a little before nine. The two girls giggled a lot. Audrey seemed pleased, feeding them muffins and juice. Faith would arrive at the bus station at eleven. Until then, Kathleen and Rachel scoured the newspaper looking at apartment ads. Most were too expensive. Between them they had about \$75. It would have to last until their first paycheck, whenever that would be.

After exhausting the apartment ads, they surveyed the help wanted ads. Kathleen circled a few.

“I brought my working papers,” Kathleen said. “What about you? You need them if you don’t have a high school diploma and you’re under eighteen.”

“I’ll be eighteen in July,” Rachel said. “We moved a few weeks before graduation.”

“Write to the school. They’ll send you the working papers,” Kathleen offered.

“Why did you move so near to graduation?” Audrey asked.

Rachel shrugged. She didn’t want to talk about it.

Audrey glanced at Rachel. “There’s stationary in the desk drawer,” Audrey said. “Go ahead and write to your school. The sooner you get the papers, the better.”

Rachel drafted a note to her old school principle. She asked for working papers and gave Audrey’s mailing address. She took out some change to pay for the stamp but Audrey protested. They mailed the letter on the way to the bus station.

Faith had brought a suitcase which was stored in the baggage compartment under the bus so they had to wait until everyone had exited the bus to retrieve it. They were anxious to start their search.

At the end of Monday, they returned to Audrey’s place. None of the prospective apartments had panned out. Landlords didn’t rent to single girls.

The job market hadn’t fared any better, but there were still several contacts they hadn’t been able to reach yet. Only a little discouraged, they told Audrey about their day, helping set the table for dinner.

Audrey’s three boys didn’t say much when the girls were around. The two older ones scowled and complained constantly to their mother. They resented having to give up their space during the visit. Randy, who was barely five, seemed to take to the girls. He would often crawl in between them while they talked. He especially took a liking to Rachel. “You’re my girlfriend,” he said.

Audrey laughed. “You’re too young for a girlfriend,” she said.

“I want to marry Rachel,” he asserted.

Rachel was embarrassed.

Audrey laughed again. “You’re too young,” she restated. “Why don’t you go play with your brothers and leave the girls alone.”

Randy reluctantly left the room. “He tends to get attached to people,” Audrey explained. “It’s innocent enough. He just likes you.”

The next day’s search for work and an apartment didn’t turn out any better and the girls were beginning to worry. Would they find a place? Would they find jobs? As instructed by Mr. Critchett, they were paying Audrey ten dollars a week to help with the costs. She protested, but reluctantly accepted the money. At the end of the first week, they were left with \$65. They were determined not to give up.

Thursday night, just as dinner ended, there was a knock at the door. It was Mr. Critchett. He looked at the three girls and asked Audrey to leave so he could talk to them. He didn’t look happy.

“Why are you still here?” he demanded.

“We are still looking for an apartment,” Faith answered. “It’s more difficult than we anticipated.”

“But we have some leads,” Kathleen added. “It won’t be much longer.”

The man turned to Rachel. His face was hard. His eyes dark. “And you?”

Rachel felt her stomach tighten. “Uh, I’m trying, too,” she stuttered.

“Your mother told me about you,” he said, accusation in his tone. “She said you are very selfish. She said you are lazy. She said you are trouble. She said you’d take advantage of Mrs. Sinclair.”

“I, I, we paid Audrey,” Rachel said, surprised and hurt. Her mother. She should have known she’d never be free of her mother, even when she got her own place.

“You have one week,” he said, turning to the door. “If you aren’t out of here in one week, you’re all going home.”

He opened the door and looked back to the girls. “Tell Audrey to send Wade out to the car. I need to talk to him.” He slammed the door.

The girls looked at each other. Rachel bit her lip holding back the tears. “Hey, don’t worry. We’ll find something,” Faith said.

Kathleen sat next to Rachel. “We should pray about it. That’s what we did wrong. We didn’t pray and ask God to help us find the right place and the right jobs.”

“I told you he doesn’t like women,” Faith whispered. Kathleen glared at her friend.

“I’ll go tell Audrey to send Wade outside,” Faith said.

They heard Audrey call Wade from his bedroom. “I don’t want to go talk to him!” Wade yelled. They heard Audrey’s muffled voice. “Come on, Wade. Don’t act like that. He just wants to talk to you. That’s an honor for the minister of God to talk to you.”

Wade passed by the girls with a hard look on his face. He glanced back at his mother. “You don’t have a clue, do you Mother?” he said.

“Go!” Audrey said firmly, pointing outside.

The girls told Audrey what Mr. Critchett had said, that they should be out by the end of the week. They promised they would be.

“I enjoy having you,” Audrey said. “I don’t want you to feel pressured to leave, but we must obey the ministers.”

Neither girl mentioned Mr. Critchett’s comments to Rachel about her mother. They seemed to understand.

Wade didn't return for nearly two hours. Everyone had gone to bed. Rachel heard him close the door and walk to his room. She still didn't fall asleep very quickly, even in a safe place. Her mind was in turmoil over the minister's comments. Lazy. Selfish. Trouble. Was that what her new friends were going to think of her? She decided her only hope was if her mother tired of this church as she had so many others and moved on. Meanwhile, she would try to hang on. Knowing her mother, it shouldn't take too much longer.

Friday night, Rachel was impressed with the preparations Audrey made for the Sabbath. All the food was cooked in advance for both the dinner meal and Saturdays. Clothes were laid out for services. The television was off. Church literature was on the table to be read by Audrey and her sons as they discussed God's laws. Even Faith and Kathleen seemed more religious.

Rachel was beginning to understand the ways of The Church. You weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath which was Friday night at sunset until Saturday night at sunset. You studied your Bible and that required, of course, the guidance of the Church literature. You were supposed to pray. No work was allowed so everything was prepared in advance. It was a lot of effort for the women. Even the table was set for tomorrow night's meal after the two services, morning and afternoon.

The three girls were excited, too, because Friday had been more successful. Kathleen had found a promising ad for a "Penthouse Apartment" that fit their budget and when she called, the landlady was willing to rent to single girls. And Faith had found a factory that hired her instantly. She would start Monday morning.

The apartment was within walking distance from where Faith worked. She said the personnel director told her there were more openings and to send her two friends right in. The pay was \$1.35 per hour, and if all

three worked, they would have plenty of money. Things were definitely looking better.

It was getting late, though, and they'd have only enough time to see the apartment before the Sabbath started at sundown. So they piled into Kathleen's mother's station wagon and headed towards Penacook, NH. Penthouse sounded so nice. The landlady was standing in front of the old building when the girls arrived. Kathleen introduced herself. The woman eyed the other two girls, turned to the door and said, "This way."

They went up two flights of stairs. The Penthouse Apartment was actually a glorified attic. There were slanted walls with two windows at each gable end. But it had a bedroom, a living room, kitchen and bath. The girls didn't notice the windows were wide open and it was still very warm. The price in the paper was \$25. They could afford that.

"We'll take it," the girls said after a brief survey.

"Great," the woman replied. "I need a week's rent in advance, and you can move in as soon as you want. That will be \$35.00."

"Thirty-five? The ad says twenty-five," Kathleen said.

"That is the price for two people. There are three of you. It costs more, you know, for utilities and stuff."

Kathleen looked at Faith. They only had \$65.00.

"You can pay me the deposit now," the landlady said, "and the first week's rent when you move in."

"Can we move in on Sunday?"

"Sure. Just bring the money. I'll meet you here with the key. Nine o'clock?"

"Great," Kathleen said, handing the woman thirty-five dollars.

"Where are we going to get the extra five dollars?" Rachel asked.

"Not to worry," Faith said. "My folks will lend it to us."

Chapter 4

So the last shall be first, and the first last:
for many be called, but few chosen.
Matthew 20:16

Audrey was as excited for the girls as they were themselves. They'd found their own apartment. She wanted to hear all about it. "Thirty-five dollars? That sounds a little steep for a one-bedroom, third floor apartment."

"Penthouse," Faith said. "We have our very own penthouse."

"And with any luck, we'll all have jobs next week, too," Rachel said.

Randy was sitting beside her on the couch. "There's no such thing as luck," he said.

"What?" She looked at him puzzled.

Audrey explained that The Church doesn't believe in luck. It's like gambling. Nothing is luck. Especially if you're a Christian. There's a plan and purpose to everything and it would be blasphemous to relegate anything to simple luck. Better to be thankful to God for providing the item.

"Oh," Rachel said. "That's very interesting. I'd never heard that before. It isn't in the Bible studies I did. I'm sure I would have remembered that."

"There's a lot of stuff not in the Bible course," Faith said.

"Yeah," Kathleen added. "Lots of stuff—lots of good stuff."

The three girls were so excited they could hardly sleep. They whispered and giggled late into the night. The next morning they were dressed and ready for church

early. They thanked Audrey for her hospitality and headed to Manchester, talking incessantly all the way there.

The official greeter once again hugged all three girls welcoming them to Sabbath services. He didn't pay any special attention to Rachel anymore. She guessed she was being accepted as one of the flock which was a nice feeling. She belonged. Even though she didn't like the hugs so much, she liked the sense of belonging.

There were lots of hugs. As people got to know Rachel, she was greeted by everyone, even the children, with a hug. Sometimes even a kiss. Always a warm smile and welcoming gesture. Women were the biggest offenders. They hugged each other as if they'd been apart for years, when it had only been a few days. Those who lived close enough saw each other on Wednesday nights—Women's Meeting night. Rachel had attended her first last week while staying at Audrey's. From now on, she'd be able to go every Wednesday night.

Of course, the official greeters hugged everyone at all services. Rachel now understood their role went beyond greeting. They were also screening to make sure no uninvited people attended.

"Let's go tell Wilma the good news," Faith suggested before the sermon started.

They approached the young woman who smiled weakly at the three excited young girls. They began to tell her about their apartment all at once. She waved her hand. "Slow down. I can't understand you all talking at the same time." The girls laughed. Faith explained what had happened, how they had found an apartment on the third floor--a penthouse apartment, and how they each had jobs at a local manufacturing firm.

"That is great," Wilma said. "Congratulations. It sounds so exciting. I hope everything works out for you. I wish I could join you."

The three girls stood awkwardly. Kathleen glanced at Faith. But Faith didn't have the appropriate response. She shrugged.

"We wish you could, too," Rachel said.

"Thanks," Wilma smiled. "Thanks," she whispered again.

The sermon that morning was given by the local pastor, Mr. Roberts. He was higher in rank in the ministry than Mr. Critchett. He was his boss, actually, and usually gave the first sermon of the Sabbath service. Most of Mr. Roberts time was spent working with the two smaller churches in Vermont and Maine, which weren't large enough yet to have their own full-time minister. This left Mr. Critchett to tend to affairs in New Hampshire.

Mrs. Roberts, Nancy, whom Rachel had met that first day she attended services, also led the Women's Meetings on Wednesday nights.

They had two children, James who was eight and Justine who was eleven. These were the children Rachel encountered her first service.

"The Roberts are both graduates of the college in California and have been in the region for only a year," Faith explained to Rachel

"Faith is supposed to go to that college," Kathleen said.

Faith grimaced.

Kathleen was surprised by this reaction. "You aren't honored by that? Geez, I'd love to be chosen to attend."

"Don't swear!" It was Mrs. Andrews who was sitting in front of the girls.

Kathleen blushed. Faith went on to tell Rachel, "Most pastors and elders stayed in a church area for a few years and then are moved to another location."

"We like Mr. Roberts. I hope they don't relocate him too soon," Kathleen said.

"Not soon enough for Mr. Critchett!" Faith said.

Mrs. Andrews turned around and gave them all a dirty look.

When she turned back around, the three girls sat quietly. They might get away with such talk now but if they were actually Children of God, they could be severely reprimanded for it. Women had been suspended for such careless words.

Faith whispered to Rachel, "Mr. Roberts will be more interesting than Mr. Critchett," she said.

Kathleen nodded, rolling her eyes.

After the hymns were finished and the prayer given, a young man approached the podium to give the sermonette. He had red hair and a ruddy complexion, was thin and athletic. Rachel noticed Kathleen straighten up in her chair and listen closely. She glanced at Faith who nodded and whispered, "She has a crush on him."

"Who is he?" Rachel asked. "He's Joel."

Kathleen frowned at them and Faith giggled. Mrs. Andrews was sitting in front of them and turned around and gave them a dirty look.

Faith looked down, embarrassed. Rachel looked in another direction and Kathleen just ignored the old lady. When Alice turned back around, Kathleen looked at Faith and Rachel and rolled her eyes. The girls stifled another round of giggles.

"Shhhh," Kathleen whispered. "I want to hear him."

Faith nodded to Rachel a see, I-told-you-so look.

More hymns and then the main sermon began. Mr. Roberts started with a question, "What is Faith?"

He looked at the audience with confidence. "Do you have faith?" he asked. "Turn to I Timothy 3:13," he said. Pages rustled. He waited for a moment, then read the scripture: "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou has learned and has been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them. And that from

a child thou has known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

Mr. Roberts explained that faith was required for salvation. He explained that they were chosen, a chosen few, who had this wonderful gift to understand the scriptures. Others were deceived by evil men, seducers, religions that sounded like the True Church but were actually clever counterfeits. He explained that the world would only get worse and worse and that faith was needed for salvation.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” he said, reading Hebrews 11:1. “Do you have faith?” he asked the audience again.

Two hours were spent on the subject. Rachel was glued to his words. She was hearing The Truth. The Truth. It was soothing to her ears and to her heart. She was sure she did indeed have faith. That was what had led her here, to God’s true church. Her faith and her prayers. Otherwise, she was sure; she would have given up long ago.

Pastor Roberts turned to the Book of Revelation, chapter two, verse thirteen: “I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and *hast not denied my faith*, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.” Verse seventeen: “he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone *a new name* written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”

And verse nineteen: “*I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith*, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. (Verse twenty) Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because

thou sufferest *that woman* Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. (Verse 23) And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.” Roberts explained that God knew their hearts and how dedicated they really were to The Work.

He turned to James chapter two. He started at the first verse, “My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.” (Verse 5) “Harkin, my beloved brethren, *Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith*, and heirs of the kingdom which he had promised to them that love him?”

(Verse 14) “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?” (Verse 17) “*Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.*” (Verse 19) “Thou believest that there is one God’ thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.” (Verse 20) But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” (Verse 24) “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” And finally, verse 26, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

Pastor Roberts explained to the congregation their duty to support the Work of God. He chided those who claimed to have faith, but didn’t do The Work. “You must give until it hurts,” he said. “Show God your faith by your works.”

Lunch was sandwiches and soft drinks in the anti-room. The three girls decided to take a walk. It was a glorious late spring day. Rachel was excited by the sermon. She’d never heard anything like it before. She eagerly discussed it with Faith and Kathleen.

“Wait till she hears about the Place of Safety,” Faith said to Kathleen.

Faith left with her parents at the end of the day, so she could pack her things and come to the apartment the next day, Sunday. Kathleen went home with her mother, too. Each girl was assigned to bring whatever they could find to fill the apartment, beds, dishes, linen, mostly donated by their parents and some of the brethren.

Rachel avoided her mother, but got a chance to speak to her younger brother briefly. “How’s everything?” she asked him.

“Not that you care,” he said. He instantly looked hurt and guilty.

“Of course I care,” she said, looking him in the eye.

“We found an apartment,” she told him, changing the subject. “We’re moving in tomorrow. Maybe you could come and visit sometime, if you want.”

The young man looked as if he would start to cry at any instant. She didn’t know what to say to him. She gave him a hug. When her mother started their way, Rachel left. She could hear her mother’s accusing voice as she walked away. She tried in vain not to be embarrassed.

That night as Rachel lay awake, her last night at Audrey’s, her mind raced with thoughts about her new life. The new information—The Truth—was so wonderful. Her new friends, Faith and Kathleen, and especially Audrey. It all felt so good. She could hardly wait for morning, which turned out to come more quickly than most as she soon fell asleep.

Kathleen arrived early with her mother and her mother’s station wagon. Rachel put her suitcase in the back and jumped in. They both waved to Audrey as she watched them drive off. “I can bring lunch,” Audrey called after them, but they didn’t hear her.

Kathleen's mother had given her a full size bed and box spring that was tied on top of the vehicle. She'd also given them a set of sheets and two blankets, some odd dishes and a few towels.

Rachel watched Kathleen and her mother interact in the front seat. Kathleen's mother spoke erratically, as if her thoughts came faster than her words. Sometimes she paused as if to allow her mind to catch up. Despite Kathleen's complaints, Rachel knew that Kathleen's mother loved her. She smiled. It was reassuring to her that a mother could love her daughter. She hoped someday she'd find that wonderful experience.

It didn't take long to unload the station wagon. Several of the young men and the Deacon who lived nearby showed up just as the girls were struggling to get the bedding up the two flights of stairs. They had the task completed in no time.

Faith arrived with her father a little after eleven. She had also brought a bed—twin size, and a bureau. Her parents had thrown in two lawn chairs, two old lamps, some dishes, and some pantry staples. They had bath soap, dish soap, laundry soap, and cleaning stuff thanks to Faith's mother.

Soon Audrey arrived carrying a box of sandwiches and a cooler of soft drinks. She included some cookies and potato chips. The girls gave Audrey the grand tour. She eyed the apartment doubtfully. The girls were unfazed.

The young men and Deacon left, as did Faith's father and Kathleen's mother. They had other official church work to do. Audrey joined the girls for lunch. They sat on the floor in the living room where the mattresses were temporarily set. You could hear the laughter down the two flights of stairs and out onto the street.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Audrey said as she reached into her handbag. "This came for you. I had to wait until sunset to give it to you." She handed Rachel a letter.

Rachel saw that it was from her high school. It was a large manila envelop and when she opened it there was a hand written note from the principal. He said they had wondered what happened to her and tried to find a forwarding address. Enclosed was her high school diploma. Tears filled Rachel's eyes.

"Guess you must have completed enough course work before you moved," Audrey said.

Rachel smiled. "I can't believe it. I graduated."

Monday morning Faith dressed and left for work at 7 a.m. She encouraged both Rachel and Kathleen to come in as early as they could to see about a job. The two girls were there at eight. Kathleen went into the personnel office first. She came out fifteen minutes later with a big smile on her face. "I can start tomorrow," she told Rachel. "He said to send you in."

Rachel went into the office. A thirtyish man sat behind an old metal desk. He waved to a chair for her to sit down. She complied. "So, you want to work for Penacook Components Assembly?"

She nodded. "Have you graduated from high school?"

She blushed. "Yes."

"Are you planning to go on to college or anything in the fall?"

Rachel hadn't thought about that. Fall seemed so far away. But she did want to go to college. She'd always wanted to. It wasn't an option. Her hesitation raised his interest.

"We don't want to invest in training anyone who isn't planning to work long term." He looked at her sternly.

"I don't plan to go anywhere," Rachel said.

"Can you start tomorrow, too, with your friend?"

Rachel's eyes widened. "Yes," she said. "Yes, of course."

"Good. See you then."

Chapter 5

*Who can find a virtuous woman?
Proverbs 31: 10*

The Women's Meeting had begun exactly at 8 p.m. Thirty-two women sat in a loosely formed circle in the basement meeting room of the minister's house. First the minister's wife stood up and everyone was suddenly silent.

She held her Bible in front of her, briefly looked around the room, and then started reading: "Romans 8 verses 16 and 17: *The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.* My name is Nancy and I am a Child of God," she said, then sat down.

The elderly woman next to her rose. "My name is Alice and I am a Child of God," she said, then sat down. Around the circle the process continued. "My name is Faith and I profess to be a Child of God." "My name is Madeleine and I am a Child of God," an older woman said. A young girl, barely twelve sitting next to Madeleine stood up and quickly said, "My name is Ruth and I profess to be a Child of God."

"My name is Rachel, and I profess to be a Child of God." She blushed and sat down as quickly as she'd stood. "My name is Desiree and I am a Child of God," a very thin, frail-looking, elderly lady said in a squeaky high-pitched voice. "My name is Laura...My name is Marianne....My name is Gayla...My name is Esther...around it went, until it came to another teenager who stood, "My name is Kathleen and I profess to be a Child of God." She glanced

around the room as if gauging the reaction and then sat down.

From the eldest, Desiree, to the youngest, Ruth, each took their turn rising and announcing who they were and sitting back down.

“Welcome to the women’s ministry,” Nancy said, still sitting. We have been instructed to read Proverbs 31 tonight. Each woman took her Bible and turned to the designated passage. Nancy started reading, “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.” Nancy nodded to Alice who read the next verse, and then Nancy nodded to another woman and so on until they had read the entire chapter.

“Does anyone have any questions?” Nancy asked.

Ruth, the precocious young girl with short naturally curly blonde hair raised her hand. Nancy nodded to her. “Did they sell girls back then?” Ruth asked.

“Excuse me?” Nancy said.

“It says her price is far above rubies. Does that mean that girls were sold for rubies?”

Nancy frowned. “Well, in the Old Testament days life was different. Sometimes the families of women received dowries or compensation for losing their daughter when she married. It was different back then.”

Ruth persisted. “But, does that mean it’s okay to sell women?”

“If it’s in the Bible it must be okay,” Nancy answered impatiently.

Madeleine, Ruth’s mother, pulled her daughter back down to her seat and gave her a stern look. “Shhhh...” she whispered loudly. “You’ve asked enough questions.”

Nancy looked around. “Any other questions?”

Esther, a young recently married woman raised her hand timidly. Nancy nodded to her.

“I am confused,” Esther said. “I was told that women didn’t talk about their husbands’ service and yet I find a lot of us seem to do that. What are the guidelines?”

Nancy studied her for a moment, and then answered succinctly. “Women are to remain silent in The Church and their husbands’ service is not to be discussed in any way that might cause division or competition. We all know that women tend to be very competitive, especially in the services they seek. Not all are called to be leaders or serve in higher roles.”

The young woman looked confused. “But I thought seeking service was a godly thing and something we should strive for?”

“Strive for silently,” Nancy stated. “We must not gossip or criticize our husbands or any other man’s service. Our whole role is to serve. Can you give me an example of what is confusing you?”

Esther shifted nervously. “Well, at services, while talking with Laura and Marianne, they were telling me how their husbands were assigned to different tasks that didn’t fit them and that they were sure it was a mistake, it would be better to let them do the tasks that were more natural and compatible to their talents and education.”

Nancy looked at Laura and Marianne who were sitting beside each other, and now both women blushed nervously. “You have asked a good question that allows us to clarify gossip, Esther. It is not the place of Laura or Marianne, or any of us to decide which position of service our husbands hold. It is presumptuous of us to believe we are wiser than those chosen by God to lead and make these decisions. It is disrespect for authority and disruptive to the good of The Work.”

Faith and Kathleen ritualistically studied their Bibles every evening after dinner. They would spend half an hour each morning in secluded prayer.

Rachel saw this and wanted to comply as well. She reviewed her notes from Mr. Robert's sermon on Saturday. She looked up each scripture he'd quoted, and he'd quoted many scriptures.

One struck her, I Timothy 4:1. It read: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils." Rachel decided to pray about it, asking God to help her keep the faith and protect her from seducing spirits and doctrines of devils.

She was sure that other churches, some of the very churches that her mother had dragged her to in the past, were in fact such seducing spirits and devils. It was all beginning to make sense, despite the teaching that one could not understand The Truth without the Holy Spirit which was only available to true Children of God, attained when accepted by the ministers and baptized. Only adults could be members.

Rachel hoped to soon be baptized so that she could receive the Holy Spirit and then fully understand The Truth. It was her all-consuming goal and she studied her Bible diligently.

On Wednesday nights, Jeanette, another Deaconess, came by to pick the three girls up for the women's ministry meeting. Jeanette was older than Audrey, also single, the product of a divorce from a nonbeliever. She had left her two teenage children with her ex-husband when she joined The Church.

This was Rachel's third such meeting having attended while at Audrey's. The topic was once again Proverbs 31. While all of these scriptures were well-known to most of those present, to Rachel they were wonderful revelations of truth. They were jewels she treasured. She couldn't get enough. The more she learned, the more she desired to know about The Truth.

When Esther asked the question about gossip last week, Rachel took notice. She understood the harm of gossip. She'd experienced it firsthand. Still, this was different. What did the minister's wife mean, women were competitive? And what was this about service? Were there roles specified for the brethren? Rachel was curious and eager.

That Saturday, Mr. Critchett once again gave the main morning sermon. He raged on about the roles of service in the church. An hour into his sermon he announced that two sisters had been suspended for gossiping about their husbands. It was Laura and Marianne. Rachel was astonished and puzzled. She realized that someone, most likely Mrs. Roberts must have told the ministers about their comments at the women's meeting. She looked at Faith and then at Kathleen who sat quietly and somberly.

"What does that mean, suspended?" she whispered.

Mrs. Andrews shushed them.

Faith whispered back, "it means they can't attend services for a while."

"How long?"

Faith shrugged. "Usually three or six months, depending on the severity of their bad attitude."

All the women were somber that Sabbath. Their usual bustle was gone. The hugs were a little harder and more silent. It was as if they didn't dare to speak lest they say the wrong thing. Rachel struggled to understand this.

Pastor Roberts spoke in the afternoon about the role of women in the church. Roberts pointed out that false churches are referred to as whores in the scriptures. It was Eve who seduced Adam leading to expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But there was hope. It was faith. Faith in God and his Truth would save women. Rachel was determined to have such faith. She was determined not to be one of these wicked women.

Roberts lecture continued. Women were not allowed to speak in the church. They must have long hair as a veil to cover their heads. They must obey their husbands who are the head of the wife. He quoted scriptures that assured that women would be saved in childbirth if they were faithful.

After the service ended, Rachel asked, "What does that mean that women are saved in childbirth?"

"You'd better be faithful since medical care is not allowed," Faith answered.

"Midwives are okay," Kathleen added. "But it's hard to find someone. They don't like to do home deliveries."

"There is a doctor some of the brethren use," Faith said. "But he has come under scrutiny since Marianne's delivery."

"What happened?"

"She began to hemorrhage...they had to rush her to the hospital. She didn't want to go, but the doctor insisted. He isn't too popular I guess and since then he's been reluctant to deliver other babies at home."

"Jeanette has helped several women," Faith pointed out. "She was a nurse before finding The Truth. She had to give that up of course, being that we don't believe in doctors."

"I never read about this in the literature," Rachel said.

"Of course not. We shouldn't be telling you all this. You should hear it from the ministers. They know when people are able to handle such information," Kathleen said.

"I can handle it."

"I'm not sure I can," Faith answered.

Chapter 6

*Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.
Matthew 7:20*

August 1970

Rachel baked two loaves of whole wheat bread on Sunday using a recipe Audrey provided. Natural food was encouraged by The Church, and in fact, was an obsession by most of the members. Everything had to be natural. Even milk and dairy products were purchased from local farmers. She learned that certain foods were taboo, such as pork and shellfish. Meat must come from animals with cloven hooves. She was surprised to learn that it was a sin to eat “unclean” foods.

Her first whole wheat bread loaves were a huge success. No need to worry about the leavening. With the steamy heat in the penthouse apartment, both loaves rose quickly, spilling out over the edges of the loaf pans. The girls gorged themselves on hot slices of the fresh bread drenched in honey and butter.

In the past few months Rachel had learned much about The Truth. Each of the girls sent ten percent of their gross income (before income taxes were taken out) to the headquarters in California. It was their Tithes. They also set aside a second tenth of their income as a reserve for Holy Day attendance and offerings. She learned that

every third year, a third tithe was required to support the widows and orphans. This was the fund that supported folks like Audrey and her three boys. And of course, there were special offerings and emergency collections for "The Work." It didn't leave much for the three girls to live on, and between them, they scraped out enough for the rent.

Working at Penacook Components Assembly was tedious and boring. Their pay barely covered necessary expenses after their tithes were taken out, but despite this, all three girls were happy in their Penthouse apartment.

A kind church member had even lent them a window fan after hearing about the unbearable heat. Routines set in. Monday after work, they would go off to the Laundromat a few blocks away. If the weather was nice, they'd bring the clothes back to dry on the clothesline out back. That would save some money. Tuesday, they shopped for groceries. Much of what they ate came from the Brethren, who'd bring fresh vegetables and eggs on the Sabbath to share. Wednesdays was Women's Meeting night. Thursday was Bible Study night. Friday, of course, was the evening of the Sabbath. Saturdays were full with services and Sundays often held other church activities. They were very busy. Fitting in personal prayer and Bible study consumed much of their remaining time.

Kathleen had given up reading her novels. She still painted, keeping an easel in the corner to catch a few minutes here and there.

Rachel studied the church literature ravenously. Often she'd share her new found truth with the other two girls, who were usually amused. How could someone be so excited about something they'd known for years? The three girls grew close like sisters. And like sisters, sometimes got on each other's nerves.

Such was the case when they arrived home Sunday from a church picnic and Billy was waiting on their front steps. Faith pretended not to see him as the Deacon

dropped off the three girls. Deacon, an older man responsible for looking out for the girls, eyed Billy suspiciously. “Who is he?” he asked the girls.

Of course Kathleen and Rachel could honestly say they had no idea who the young man was. “Do you want me to speak to him?” the deacon asked. “You don’t want guys hanging around.”

Faith answered quickly. “Oh, no, that’s okay. We’ll just ignore him. I’m sure he’s here to see someone from the downstairs apartment. They probably aren’t home or something.”

She hurried to close the car door and waved goodbye to Deacon as Kathleen and Rachel watched the young man on the steps stand up. Deacon seemed to be lingering as if to make sure they were okay. Faith waved him on and he finally drove off. She watched him round the corner and go out of sight. The young man started heading their way.

“Faith,” the young man said as she turned around. “I’ve been waiting here all day.”

“How did you find me?” Faith asked.

“Who is this?” Kathleen asked.

“A friend from high school,” Faith said, giving Kathleen a mind-your-own-business look. She took his arm and walked aside. Kathleen and Rachel watched for a minute, and then went upstairs. It was several hours before Faith returned.

“Where have you been?” Kathleen demanded.

“We have been worried sick,” Rachel added.

“I was ready to call the Deacon,” Kathleen said.

“I was talking to Billy,” Faith explained. “He was a friend at school. There was a lot of stuff about school he wanted to tell me.”

“He came all the way down here from Montpelier, Vermont, to talk to you about your high school?” Kathleen asked. “You know we’re not supposed to get involved

with outsiders—he's part of the world." Despite her youth, Kathleen's tone had a superior-self-righteous tone to it.

Faith was defensive. "You're not my mother!"

Rachel was startled by Faith's reaction, and suddenly felt great concern for her friend. There was obviously something more here than Faith had shared with them in their many long, late-night talks.

"If we screw up," Kathleen said.

"You mean if I screw up," Faith interrupted.

"If any of us screw up, we're all going back home. Do you want that?"

Rachel raised her hand to quiet the two girls. "No one has screwed up," she said, eyeing Faith nervously. "Faith's right, Kathleen. We shouldn't give her the third degree—that's the minister's job."

"Great. You're going to turn me in!" Faith cried.

"No, I didn't say that," Rachel said. "But we're friends, Faith. You two are my family, now. And we have to help each other. The world is tempting you. Satan sends temptations all the time. We just want to help you."

Kathleen had listened quietly. "She's right," Kathleen said. "I'm sorry I jumped on your case."

Faith wiped tears from her eyes. "It's so hard," she whispered. "I have feelings. I just want to be normal. All my life I've been the good little Christian girl, while everyone has fun. And..." she trailed off with a distant look on her face.

It was the first disagreement the three girls had and none of them liked it. "You've put us in a bad place," Kathleen said.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Where were you? What did you guys do?" Kathleen asked, a little more kindly this time. She deeply resented Faith for putting them in a compromising position.

“We just talked,” she replied. “That’s all. We went to school together. Billy wants me to be his girlfriend, but I told him that wasn’t possible.”

Kathleen glanced an alarmed look at Rachel.

“He wants you to go with him? How did he get that idea?” Kathleen asked.

“I didn’t lead him on, if that’s what you’re asking,” Faith said defensively.

“Hey, don’t get upset with me. If you think my questions are harsh, wait until the minister asks you.”

“You can’t turn me in,” Faith pleaded. “It’ll kill my parents. They think I’m their perfect little girl.”

Kathleen knew that she should turn her in, but she also knew that she wouldn’t. “You have to promise us that you’ll never see Billy again,” Kathleen said.

Faith’s eyes watered. She sobbed. “But I think I love him,” she said, shaking.

“That’s what happens when you let Satan influence you,” Rachel said. “He wants to hurt you. He wants to test your faith. You have to be strong.”

Kathleen was now furious with Faith whose selfish and bad judgment could send her back home and derail all their plans. She couldn’t understand how Rachel could be so understanding.

Faith sobbed, hiding her head in her hands. “I’m so sorry,” she repeated over and over. “Please don’t turn me in.”

“The only way we keep this our secret is if you promise you will never see Billy again,” Kathleen restated.

Rachel nodded. “It’s for your own good, Faith. We can’t let you make a mistake like this.”

“Okay,” Faith said, reluctantly. “I know you’re right. But it just feels so unfair. Why is God taking everything away from me?”

“You’re just confused,” Rachel said. “If you pray and fast, God will help you understand His plan in your life.”

And it doesn't include Billy." Rachel had learned about this new spiritual tool of fasting and actually looked forward to adding it to her spiritual arsenal. She was sure it would bring her closer to the day when she could be baptized and become a true Child of God.

"We'll all pray and fast," Kathleen said, suddenly brightening. "We need to ask for strength and wisdom. Don't forget, we're not yet true Children of God, only professed children. We're bound to make mistakes until we have received the Holy Spirit. God understands that. We'll pray and fast with you Faith."

Faith smiled at her two friends. "You are the best," she said. "I know you really care about me. Thank you for not letting me ruin my life."

"Promise us one thing," Kathleen said.

"What?" Faith answered.

"If you ever have another moment of weakness, come to us. We'll help you."

"I will," Faith said. The three girls hugged.

"Next time we'll be here to strengthen you," Kathleen said.

"We should pray about it," Rachel suggested.

The three girls knelt together and Rachel started. "Lord, please give our sister the strength she needs to resist temptation."

"Lord, please give our sister the wisdom she needs to know right from wrong," Kathleen said.

"Lord, please forgive me," Faith said, crying softly.

The three girls changed from that moment on. They had made a decision. They had solved a problem the way a truly converted Christian would do with prayer and fasting. It made them feel grown up, and they began to act more adult. Less of the silliness that teenage girls tended to do. More piety. More seriousness.

Rachel especially felt it. She was connecting to her new life and her new faith. She felt part of something important. Despite the mistake Faith had made, it helped them gain something. They were closer.

Faith took more seriously her behavior. She didn't roll up her skirts like she had. She threw away all her makeup and began to wear her hair tied back.

Kathleen didn't mention it again. She often sat quietly in the corner painting. They prayed together every day, as well as continuing their own personal prayer and Bible study. The incident seemed to have matured them somehow.

Billy's name never came up again.

At Sabbath services that next week Rachel noticed as soon as she entered the hall that something was wrong. Jordan didn't hug them when he greeted them, but seemed distracted. Audrey didn't look up from her typewriter.

Rachel noticed that Wilma wasn't sitting in her usual spot. She looked around the room for her. "Where's Wilma?" she asked Faith and Kathleen.

"Sometimes she misses services," Faith said. "She's probably not feeling too well or something."

Or something.

Pastor Driscoll was the speaker today. It was unusual for him to come on a regular Sabbath. He usually came on a Holy Day or Feast Day as the church called them. After the hymn and prayer, he got up to speak. No sermonette today. The three girls wondered what was happening. Did someone get suspended, or worse, was there a problem with attitude? It had been a long time since Faith could remember anyone being excommunicated, but she remembered it was solemn like this.

Driscoll spoke haltingly at first. His Australian accent seemed thicker, like his tongue was too large for his mouth. He chewed his words. "My dear brethren," he

said. "I bear sad news today." His voice faltered, before he finished his sentence and he paused to regroup. "Our sister in Christ, Wilma, passed away this week."

Rachel sat rigid with shock. A voice inside her screamed "Run away! Run away!" She clung to the side of the chair as if to hold herself in place. How could this be? Wilma had died? She was so young. Why did she die? Didn't God promise to heal those who were sick? She was dizzy with questions and could only hang on to the seat like some poor roller coaster rider unable to stop or get off, trapped until the ordeal finished.

Faith and Kathleen sat equally still. It was like no one in the room was breathing. Pastor Driscoll surveyed the room, his eyes welling with tears. Soon, the women in the room were crying softly, wiping their eyes.

He sighed and studied the audience, then smiled. "Why do we mourn? Our sister is waiting in the ground for the return of Christ. Her suffering is over," he said. "Do you not know that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth?"

For nearly three hours the pastor explained this tragedy. Explained how it was up to God, and not to us, to decide who was healed. It was God's wisdom to take Wilma, barely 21, at this time. She was a diabetic and had died in faith—trusting God, not man and man's medicine to heal her. And he indeed had healed her, in his own way. We must not question God.

Driscoll reminded the congregation not to lean unto their own understanding. The mysteries of life belong to God and we dare not doubt God's wisdom. Somehow, we were supposed to rejoice that Wilma had died in the faith—she was assured to sit with the Lord in the wonderful world tomorrow—the Kingdom of God, now and forever a true Child of God. Yes, indeed, we should rejoice because our sister has died in faith.

Rachel never discussed Wilma with her two friends. She didn't want to unravel the thread-bare reasoning that was holding her to "The Truth". She didn't trust her own mind any more—she didn't and couldn't lean to her own understanding. Her own thoughts would fail her, betray her, and she'd fall away from "The Truth".

This was surely the biggest test yet of her faith and she felt vulnerable. It wouldn't take much to cause her to question—and that is the biggest sin of all—to question the authority of God who makes all decisions. It wouldn't take much to push her away from this family she'd found—from what little security and love she'd found in her young life. She couldn't risk such a thing.

Rachel feared greatly the alternative—falling away from the truth. She feared this more than the fact that Wilma had died—this young woman whom she'd become so fond of in such a short time, Wilma, who was not much older than Rachel herself, a very sick young woman who chose not to seek medical care and refused to take insulin. She had died. She was no more.

Of course, Rachel reasoned, she couldn't understand everything. She shouldn't expect to understand. She didn't yet have the Holy Spirit, but when she did, when she was finally baptized, and then it would become clear. Of this she was certain. She clung to this faith. God would not fail her.

No, she didn't mention Wilma, and neither did either Faith or Kathleen.

Chapter 7

*The words of a talebearer are as wounds,
and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.
Proverbs 18: 8*

Later that month, Billy showed up at Sabbath Services. This time Faith couldn't pretend she didn't know him because the Deacon immediately recognized him.

Jordan, a big man with a booming voice, the official greeter, met Billy at the door. "And who might you be young man?" he demanded.

Billy was taken aback by the greeting. He looked at Faith across the room. She was ignoring him, obviously embarrassed. Mrs. Andrews was watching from nearby, surmising the situation and shaking her head in disgust.

"You're going to get us all into trouble," Kathleen scolded. "Now what are we going to do?"

"I told him to stay away. Honest. I don't know why he's doing this."

"I want to join the church," Billy stated loudly to Jordan.

"Really?" he said eyeing Billy suspiciously.

"Yes. I can join, can't I?" The young man replied nervously.

"Well, that's not for me to say. You have to counsel with the minister for that."

"Where do I counsel this minister?" Billy asked.

As the greeter led Billy past the three girls, the young man ignored Faith. The Deacon approached the girls and demanded to know who he was. "He went to my high

school,” Faith admitted. “He’s a nice boy, but I can’t seem to convince him that I’m not interested.” She shrugged.

“He’s not that nice, then, is he?” The Deacon turned abruptly and left.

“We’re in big trouble now,” Kathleen said.

To their surprise, Billy was escorted to the other side of the room and allowed to attend the service. Mr. Critchett had said that perhaps the Lord was calling Billy and who were we to question that. If he was not being called, then he would tire of the church and leave of his own accord. It was unusual and a surprise to everyone. And a big relief to Faith.

None of this escaped Alice, who surmised one of the girls was involved with Billy but from where she watched she didn’t know which one.

There was a social that evening after services. It was cool and raining lightly. Faith and Billy wanted to talk. She’d given him a note to meet her at Kathleen’s mother’s car—the station wagon in the parking lot. Her own parents had left for Montpelier due to the inclement weather. Kathleen lent Faith her raincoat. Faith pulled up the hood and headed downstairs to the parking lot.

Alice watched from the window and spotted the young woman meeting this new man. They hugged and hurried to get into the car. She watched intently until they emerged some twenty minutes later.

Monday night there was a knock at the girl’s door right at seven p.m. It was Mr. Critchett. He had the Deacon with him. He pointed to Kathleen. “Come with me,” he ordered. She quickly followed the men downstairs to the waiting car. It drove off and she didn’t return until nearly nine and she had obviously been crying. Her eyes were puffy and red.

“What happened?” Rachel asked.

“What did he want?” Faith asked.

Kathleen slumped on the floor in the living room. Her two friends surrounded her. She cried for several minutes. Faith looked at Rachel, worried, but they waited for Kathleen to regain her composure.

“He said I was a fornicator,” Kathleen blurted out.

“What?” Rachel asked, shocked.

“A fornicator!”

Faith grew pale. An ache grew in her gut as she suspected what may have happened. “Tell us, Kathleen. For God’s sake, tell us what he said.”

“Mrs. Andrews said she saw me fornicating with Billy on Saturday night.”

All three girls were silent.

“I’m so sorry, Kathleen,” Faith said softly. “I’ll tell him the truth right away.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“He thinks I did it. He wants to think I did it. If you say you were with Billy, he’ll send us all home. You’re supposed to be the most spiritual. He told me that if you weren’t here then he would send us home. You can’t tell him it was you.”

Rachel was confused. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“I lent Faith my raincoat so she could meet Billy in my mother’s car last Saturday night. Remember, it was raining. That old bat must have been spying on us. She called Mr. Critchett up and told him she’d seen me get into the car with Billy.”

Rachel looked at Faith. Faith was horrified—stricken—as if she could faint at any moment. “My God. I never meant for this to happen,” she said.

“Stop using God’s name in vain,” Kathleen said impatiently. “You’re always doing that. Stop it.”

“What happened?” Rachel asked fearing her friend may have been suspended from services. “I have to fast for three days. Mr. Critchett said that since I’m not yet

converted he isn't going to expel me, this time. But I'm on probation. We are all on probation."

"I'll fast with you," Faith said.

"Good idea, since you're the true sinner," Kathleen said.

"I'll fast, too," Rachel said. "Great. We'll all fast together. Starting now. No food, no water, for the next three days, and we have to study Proverbs 31 every day for three hours. He gave me some literature to read, too."

"It will be good for all of us," Rachel said. "We've gotten off the tracks."

Kathleen looked at Faith. "What are you going to do about Billy?"

"I'll tell Billy to stay away. I promise. I'm so sorry. "

"You have to choose, Faith," Kathleen said, looking intently into the eyes of her friend. "You have to choose good or evil. You know that."

Faith nodded. "I will. I've been weak. I'll tell him to go away forever. I will. I wish I could tell Mr. Critchett the truth. I don't want you to be marked."

Kathleen held her head up and looked Faith squarely in the eyes. "Don't worry about me. This isn't going to hurt me. I know the truth. I know I didn't do it, and so does God. What others think doesn't matter."

"Not even a minister of God?" Rachel asked.

"It's a test. That's all. To see how strong I am."

"You're stronger than me," Faith said.

"Besides, I can't let Mrs. Andrews get the best of me." Kathleen smiled. "She's got a dirty mind, don't you think?"

Faith smiled. "I wonder what sins she's hiding? Remember what Mrs. Driscoll said about seeing in others the faults in yourself?"

"What a scary thought! Mrs. Andrews fornicating!" All three girls giggled.

The next morning, Billy showed up at their door. "What are you doing here?" Faith said, looking around nervously. She pulled him into the hallway and shut the door. "You have to go away," Faith told him. "You have to forget about me. It isn't going to work. Please, I don't want to see you anymore."

He looked at her sadly. "I just came to tell you I will be going to Florida on Monday."

Faith looked at him. "Florida?"

"Yes. I'm taking a job down there with my uncle. I need to get away from you. I love you Faith." He shook his head sadly. "But I can't live with your crazy religion."

Faith was stunned. "I'm sorry," she said.

"So am I. If you ever come to your senses..."

"I have my senses," she said defensively.

"I mean, if you ever want to belong to a normal church, not one with a bunch of perverts..." Billy said.

"Get out!" Faith interrupted. "How dare you speak of God's Church like that?"

"You don't know do you?" he asked.

"Get out!" she repeated.

He shook his head. "God help you, Faith. I truly love you. I've always loved you. But you are playing with fire and I don't want to be around when you get burned."

He turned and walked away. Faith watched silently knowing that any future they might have had was now lost. Deep down she had secretly harbored hope that he'd be called and become converted, that God would make it possible for them to be together in a Christian way. But now, as he walked away, she realized that would never be.

Billy was never seen again. Perhaps because his glimpse into the world of the True Church scared him off or perhaps because he sensed that he wasn't welcome. Whatever the reason, Faith would never see him again. She would try to forget him.

But Mrs. Andrews wouldn't forget. She let everyone know what Kathleen had done, and what she was—a harlot. Alice loudly proclaimed that these three never should have been trusted to live on their own, to disgrace the Church as they did. There was no use explaining it to Alice. She'd only say all three girls were harlots. Kathleen protested to those whose opinions mattered to her, insisting that she hadn't done anything wrong and certainly hadn't fornicated with an outsider, but wasn't sure they believed her. After all, Mrs. Andrews was converted. She was a Child of God. Kathleen was still unconverted. She still lacked the Holy Spirit.

Faith was tormented by her harm to her best friend, tormented that she couldn't change it. Reputation meant so much to women in The Church. Kathleen was tainted. No one would ever view her as a truly virtuous woman. Faith hated herself. She was the one who should be punished, but everyone had listened to Alice, an elder in the group. Faith tried to talk to Mrs. Andrews, but the woman wouldn't listen. Kathleen had pulled Faith away admonishing her not to waste her time. All three girls hoped the issue would pass and devoted themselves to their personal spiritual growth.

Mr. Critchett didn't name specific names in his sermon that next Saturday, but everyone knew whom he was talking about. The three girls sat quietly through the sermon and left immediately after it ended. It was their punishment. They couldn't understand why this minister hadn't sent them all home as he had originally threatened. Of course, Rachel didn't have a home to return to. Perhaps he knew that.

Mrs. Andrews looked smugly at the girls during the sermon confident that she had set them straight. She adjusted her hair and shook her head looking intently at the minister, her lips pursed tightly together. Next to her sat Rachel's mother. It gave Rachel a shiver.

In a few weeks the incident seemed to have passed. The girls kept a low profile and kept their noses clean. No giggling during services. They somberly greeted other brethren, carried their Bibles everywhere and looked down when a man spoke to them. To their relief, it seemed to be over.

But it wasn't. Faith had been feeling ill for several weeks. She tried to hide it from her two friends, but they knew something was wrong when she spent so much time in the bathroom. One day she arrived an hour late for work. "It's just something I ate," she insisted. "It'll pass."

Kathleen stated right out plain. "You're pregnant, aren't you?" Rachel looked at Kathleen in disbelief. Then she looked at Faith.

"I don't know. My period is late but you can't say anything," Faith pleaded. "My parents are coming Sunday. We're supposed to meet with Mr. Roberts about my attending college in California. I'm supposed to leave in a few weeks."

"You can't go to California pregnant," Kathleen said.

Faith started to sob. "I can't tell my parents. It'll kill them."

"We should pray," Rachel offered.

"Pray? How can I pray?" Faith said.

"We are your friends, Faith," Rachel said. "We're your family. We won't leave you. We'll stand by you." Rachel nodded to Kathleen.

Kathleen looked disgusted. "How could you get yourself knocked up? Billy really loved you, didn't he? Where is he now?"

How could Kathleen be so cold and cruel, Rachel wondered.

Faith gathered her composure. "What am I going to do?" She looked at her two best friends desperately. "What am I going to do?"

Rachel paused. "Pray."

The two girls didn't let Faith's secret out. Faith stayed home from work on Thursday, sick. She told them not to worry. She just needed some rest and she'd be fine. When they arrived that afternoon, Faith was in bed, pale and nearly unconscious. The two girls panicked.

"We should get help," Kathleen said.

"Who?" Rachel asked.

Faith moaned. "I'm okay," she whispered. "I'm okay. I miscarried this afternoon. But I'm okay now."

"Miscarried?" Rachel said, glancing at Kathleen. "Are you hemorrhaging? I've heard that you can hemorrhage during a miscarriage?"

"I did bleed a lot, but it's stopping now," Faith said. "Please, just let me rest. I'll be okay."

Faith made a heroic effort to appear normal at services Saturday. Only her two closest friends knew why she sat down most of the time, and looked so pale and tired. They brought her some fruit and cheese and encouraged her to eat. She was visibly weak.

"Your parents will notice," Kathleen warned.

When her parents arrived on Sunday, her mother felt her daughter's forehead in a motherly way. "Are you ill, dear?" she asked.

"Just my period, Mom," Faith said, knowing that her mother wouldn't pursue that conversation with her father in the room.

They left to meet with the Pastor. He had good news. Faith was accepted for college and would be leaving in just two weeks. Faith's parents dropped her off at her apartment. Her mother looked into the refrigerator and cupboards as if to see if they had enough food. She sensed something was wrong with her daughter. She could see that Faith wasn't happy, not the way she should be. Going to the Church College was an honor. It meant she would

most likely marry a minister. Hers would be a life of service to God and her husband. It was indeed a great honor.

Before leaving, Faith's mother went into the bedroom to say good-bye to her daughter. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Faith nodded, tears filling her eyes. "Just emotional. You know how I get with my period."

"Well, it's a big change for you, going to California. But you've had some time on your own now. The transition won't be so bad."

"Mom, would you be disappointed if I didn't go?"

She looked alarmed. "Faith, you are just apprehensive. You'll get over it. Look how well you've done living here on your own. We're very proud of you."

Faith began to cry. "But Mom, I don't want to go. I don't want to marry a minister. I don't have a big "M" complex."

"No one said you have to marry a minister," her mother soothed. "But the opportunity to be educated at headquarters is too important to pass up. Tell me, dear, what is really bothering you?"

Faith wiped her face. "Just last minute jitters, I guess. You know they'll pick my mate. That's the way it works at the college. Some of the ministers' wives aren't very happy with their choices. Remember Mrs. Brown? She ended up killing herself."

Her mother looked at her sadly. "Try not to think like that, Faith. Mrs. Brown was depressed and she had lost the Holy Spirit which would have comforted her. She allowed evil thoughts into her mind. Once you're baptized, everything will be fine. You'll be happy. You have to have faith."

Faith could see the concern in her mother's face. She hugged her tightly, wanting to tell her how sorry she was, what she had done, that she didn't deserve the honor of

being accepted to the Church College or becoming the wife of a minister. But she couldn't hurt her Mom. "It's just my period," Faith said.

"Okay. You rest, dear. We'll make arrangements to get you to the airport in two weeks. If you want to come home until then, you can."

"Thanks, Mom. I'd like to stay here."

The last week of September the three girls spent their last nights together in their Penthouse apartment. Faith shared her apprehensions about going to the Church College with her two friends. Faith had attended The Church all her life and knew more about church life than Rachel and Kathleen. She shared some of the events with them.

"Several years ago one of the minister's wives committed suicide," Faith told them. "She was unhappy with the marriage. You know, the ministers decide who gets married, especially at headquarters."

Rachel didn't know this fact. Like so many things, certain information wasn't readily available and people didn't discuss it with those who were unconverted. "What if you don't like the man chosen for you?" Rachel asked.

"You are told you will learn to love them," Kathleen answered.

"Do you think that's true?" Faith asked.

"Well, if it comes down to that I guess we'll find out. But there are people who get married because they chose to," Kathleen pointed out. "Not all marriages are arranged by the ministers."

"They must all be approved by the minister, though," Faith said.

"Because God gives his ministers wisdom and insight," Kathleen argued. "They can see if two people aren't

meant for each other. What's wrong with preventing a big mistake? You only get one shot at it, you know."

"One shot?" Rachel asked.

"You can only marry once. You aren't allowed to be divorced and then remarry in the church. That's Audrey's situation."

Rachel nodded. Audrey had been married before she married her sons' father. Remarriage was considered an adulterous situation, and therefore anyone who was previously married had to separate. To continue living together was considered to live in sin.

"You can remarry if you are widowed," Faith added. "That minister whose wife committed suicide remarried a few months later."

"How is the new wife doing?" Kathleen asked.

"They moved to another area. We never heard from them."

"I wonder who we'll end up marrying?" Rachel asked. The three girls looked at each other.

"I'm in no hurry," Kathleen stated. "Better not to get married than to marry the wrong person and be stuck with them forever."

Rachel smiled. "You say that now."

The girls laughed.

"We're going to miss you," Rachel said to Faith.

"You won't miss all the trouble I cause," she said.

"That's true," Kathleen kidded.

"Will you keep in touch with us?" Rachel asked. "Tell us all about headquarters. It would be so exciting to go there, I think."

"I wish you were going instead of me," Faith said.

"You'll like it once you get there," Rachel assured her.

"Maybe they'll choose you next year," Faith said.

"And then I'll be left here all by myself," Kathleen said.

College was Rachel's life-long dream. She hadn't shared that fact with her friends. She gave it up when they

moved and she hadn't expected to graduate. Besides she didn't have any money—her mother had taken her meager savings, just as she always did. Now her new life didn't have room for college. And until now she hadn't thought much about college.

With Faith leaving, it made her think, however briefly, about her lost dream to attend college. It was a fleeting twinge not the haunting anguish it might have been if she hadn't found her new life in The Church. With The Truth why would she need to go to college anyway? Her life was here now. And it was full.

Chapter 8

*Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain:
but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.
Proverbs 31:30*

Faith's final two weeks in New Hampshire passed quickly and it was time for her to fly to California. Deacon offered to take her to the Boston Sabbath Services, where she could catch her plane after sunset as a favor to Faith's parents. Rachel and Kathleen were invited to go, too.

Deacon was an older man, one of the first church members in the area, having been converted for nearly thirty years. His wife was unconverted and didn't belong to The Church.

He spent a lot of time serving the brethren and was esteemed by the congregation. In the absence of an ordained minister, Deacon made the decisions. He had been assigned to keep an eye on the girls since he lived only a few blocks from their apartment. The incident with Billy didn't seem to bother him too much. He laughed it off as a young fellow going after the girls, and no harm was done and the reprobate was gone now.

Rachel and Kathleen were excited about attending the Boston services because that was the home base for the Pastor Driscoll. They both found his sermons the most interesting, and he was friendlier than Mr. Critchett, who usually gave the morning sermons at their church.

Pastor Roberts gave the afternoon sermons. He lived nearby with his wife, Nancy, who handled the Wednesday night Women's Meetings. He was assigned to rotate between the Vermont Church and the Maine Church, both of which were too small to warrant a full-time elder. They were growing, though, and it was hoped that soon

another minister would be assigned from Headquarters, and then there'd be a full-time elder in each congregation. In the off-weeks, a local deacon in each of the two churches would present a Bible Study prepared by Mr. Roberts.

The Boston Church was much larger than New Hampshire's. There were over two hundred people present for services that Saturday. Because the girls accompanied Deacon, they were immediately accepted. Everyone knew Deacon.

There seemed to be an extra excitement at this service. The three girls were greeted by the official greeters and welcomed into the meeting hall. Apparently no one in this congregation knew of their recent reprimands. The girls felt happy to be free of the cloud that had hung over them in New Hampshire.

As they selected their seats and put their Bibles and purses down to reserve them a group of young men approached. Kathleen tapped Faith's arm and nodded in the direction of the young men. "Don't get any ideas," she teased. Faith rolled her eyes.

The tall young man who had given the sermonette that first week Rachel attended introduced himself. "Hi," he said, reaching to shake Faith's hand first. "I'm Joel. Are you visiting from another church?" He blushed a little.

Faith smiled. "Yes. We're from New Hampshire. I'm here to catch a plane out of Logan tonight."

"She's going to the college," Kathleen said, shaking Joel's hand hoping to redirect his attention towards herself.

Joel's eyes lit up. "College? Hey, that's great. I've got a friend out there. Maybe you can say hi for me. I'll write down his name. He'll be glad to show you around, too."

"Thanks," Faith said.

Another man approached. He introduced himself. Alberto. He was a tall, handsome Italian man, also twenty

something. “Are you three baptized?” he asked without apology.

“That’s kind of personal,” Joel chided his buddy, but looked anxiously at the girls for their answer.

Faith laughed and Kathleen rolled her eyes. Thankfully Deacon stepped in. “You guys leave these girls alone.” It was all in good humor, though. Finding a mate was almost a Christian mission for the young men in the Church. “Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord.” Proverbs 18:22. So they were quite justified in their obvious pursuit.

Rachel wondered if Deacon hadn’t purposely brought them here to Boston just for that reason. He was sort of a match maker in the local church, but there weren’t many available young men in the New Hampshire church.

“Can we get your name and phone number?” Joel asked.

“For the Feast?” Alberto added. “Maybe we can see you there.”

Rachel looked at Deacon and he nodded his approval with a sly smile. “But you mind that these girls aren’t available yet,” he said. “They aren’t baptized.”

The two young men looked at the girls. It was as if they were thinking, that’s okay, we got to them first. Maybe we can hook them before someone else does.

Rachel wasn’t sure she liked the feeling of being so hotly pursued. She was barely eighteen. Kathleen just kept gazing at Joel. Faith wrote down their names and address on a paper and handed it to Joel. Alberto grabbed it and the two young men were off in another direction, horsing around.

“Better get used to it,” Deacon said to the girls. “You’re going to have to settle down with a husband one day.” Deacon seemed amused, or perhaps pleased with himself.

An older man asked, "Is this seat taken?" Rachel shook her head. Kathleen gave her a curious "who's that look?" Rachel shrugged and sat down.

The man reached over to shake Rachel's hand. "My name is Ben," he said.

She smiled and reached to return his handshake. "Rachel," she said, answering his unspoken question. "We're from the Concord, New Hampshire church."

He grinned in a silly way for a mature man, almost more obvious than the young men who'd come by a few moments before. Until the actual services started he kept asking Rachel questions. "How did she come into The Truth?" "What was her favorite hymn?" "Did she hear that Russell was making a personal appearance at the Feast of Tabernacles on the Last Great Day this year?"

Rachel was relieved when the announcer asked everyone to find their seats and prepare for the opening of services which started with the usual hymns and prayers. Alberto led the hymn singing. He waved his arms broadly and sang loudly although a bit off key as the group joined in the hymns. He flashed a smile directed towards Rachel, Faith and Kathleen

Ben sang loudly and with no sense of melody. Rachel wanted to laugh, but knew that wouldn't be polite. Kathleen gave her another eye-roll look.

Joel gave the sermonette. He had given the sermonette in Concord a few times, too, but the girls had never met him personally until now. Kathleen blushed when he looked their way. Rachel nudged Faith and they both giggled.

More prayers and hymns. This time Ben tried to share the hymnal with Rachel, awkwardly holding the book for both of them to see. He was considerably taller than Rachel, his hair beginning to gray and thin on the top, the sides a little long and curled into ringlets. Rachel tried not to look at him and not to be annoyed by his unwanted

attention. It was now obvious that he was looking at her as a potential wife.

One of the Boston Deacons stood up to give the next prayer. He asked for the Holy Spirit to open their minds to The Truth. He asked for the Lord's forgiveness for their many shortcomings. He asked God to heal Mrs. Dugan who was present with her family. He pleaded for mercy and patience and concluded with a strong "Amen."

The congregation seemed charged with excitement. Rachel wondered what was making this service so special.

Soon, Pastor Driscoll began his sermon. Today's topic: The Place of Safety. This was a new idea for Rachel and she eagerly wrote down all the scriptures and took scrupulous notes as he spoke. He described the end times which were about to happen: "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them." (Rev. 9:6).

He cautioned the congregation to be ever vigilant. "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." Matthew 24:48.

The Great Tribulation, Rachel learned, was the end of this world. The beginning of the wonderful world tomorrow she'd heard about on the radio program. The church was promised to be secured away to a place of safety once their work was complete. Matthew 24 described all this: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. (Verse 14). This was The Work. This was where the money was being spent—all the tithes and offerings.

Driscoll explained that not all would be spared from the Great Tribulation. Verse 24 "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect."

This new truth was exciting. She was so engrossed in her note-taking, that she didn't think any more about Ben, who watched her closely from the corner of his eye. It did not escape him that she was such a devoted member and took such scrupulous notes.

This was all new to Rachel and she began to share in the excitement around her. No wonder the crowd was so aroused. "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Isaiah the prophet, stand in the holy place (whoso readeth, let him understand), Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: (verse 15-16)

"You must be prepared at all times," Driscoll admonished. "Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes (verses 17-18). "You won't have time."

Ben whispered to Rachel, "I keep my suitcase packed so I'll be ready to leave."

Rachel was both surprised and annoyed by Ben's interruption, and refocused on the Pastor's words. "When the call comes you must be prepared to leave," Driscoll said. He didn't explain the part about "them which be in Judea." He applied the scripture to The Church today. "The prophets who wrote these words thought the end was coming in their time, but they were mistaken," he explained. "There was much left to do before the return of Christ."

People listened silently. Verse 19: "And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!" Driscoll warned that the time would come when they must not have children. Rachel wondered about that. Would she have a young child when it was time to leave for this Place of Safety?

Driscoll continued: "But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath day: For then

shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.” (Verses 20 and 21). He explained how the chosen ones would be whisked away to the wilderness to a Place of Safety for three and a half years (the duration of the Great Tribulation). They would await the return of Christ there, having completed their duty to preach the gospel to all the world—The Work.

“Not all of you will be taken to the Place of Safety,” Driscoll warned. “Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come...Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.” (Matthew 24: 40-44).

“The church is the bride of Christ,” Driscoll explained. (Rev. 12:6) “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.” This was the Place of Safety where the Church, God’s True Church, would be protected during the Great Tribulation which would last three and a half years.

Verse 14: “And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.” Driscoll speculated that they might be flown to the Place of Safety in the Wilderness on large planes, perhaps Boeing 747’s.

Rachel had read some of this in the church literature but Pastor Driscoll was bringing it alive. He spoke with passion, with diligence and with authority. And he warned about “the mark of the beast.”

Ben leaned over and whispered in Rachel's ear. "If you think this is great, wait until you hear the Evangelists at the Feast." He nodded eagerly.

Rachel nodded slightly and wondered only briefly about this man's distraction. Soon she was engrossed in her note-taking again.

Rev. 13:16-18: "And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six."

Rachel noticed Ben wrote in large print, 666. He glanced at her, a combination grimace and sigh.

Driscoll closed his fiery sermon with these words. "God's Apostle, Russell W. Sherburne, will share with you these amazing insights at the Feast of Tabernacles. You must prepare yourself to be ready for these precious truths. Spend time fasting. Do extra prayer asking God to give you his spirit to help you understand his truth. Most of all, clean out your heart—rid yourself of the worldly distractions—purify your mind. Watch, and be ready! Have your heart and your mind totally on The Work."

Rachel barely breathed during his final words. This was amazing. She was feeling something she'd never experienced. As soon as the last hymn was over, she hurried past Ben, who was deliberately gathering his stuff slowly hoping to spend more time with Rachel. She wanted to speak to the pastor.

There was already a small crowd gathered around him. She waited anxiously, hoping to speak to him before Deacon came to get her to leave. Finally Driscoll turned to the young woman. "I need to be baptized," she blurted. "I'm ready. I know I am."

He smiled. "That may be, but you need to counsel first. Have you talked with your local minister?"

Rachel cringed. She didn't want to talk with Mr. Critchett any more than necessary, especially not about something so personal as her salvation.

Pastor Driscoll sensed her uneasiness. "Look," he said. "You have to counsel with Mr. Critchett. He's the minister in your area and he will make the recommendation concerning your baptism. If you have a problem with him, you are obviously not ready, and not mature enough to be baptized."

Rachel was surprised that he spoke to her like this. "I'll talk to him," she said, looking down.

Driscoll patted her arm, and smiled. "That's good. I'm sure you'll do just fine."

As he turned to another member, Ben caught up to Rachel. Driscoll grinned at Ben, "What are you doing bothering this young lady?"

Ben giggled and blushed without response, and Driscoll began another conversation.

"Can I see you at the Feast?" Ben asked.

Rachel didn't quite know what to say. "Well, I am going to be there with Audrey and my friend Kathleen," she said.

"Great. I'll look you up. Where are you staying?"

"I don't know. Audrey has that information," Rachel answered uneasily.

Ben smiled victoriously. "I bet she's at the same place as last year. That's where they put up the widows. I'll see you there. Got to go, now. I really enjoyed sitting with you during services. Bye." He waved and left.

Rachel watched him leave, incredulous at his presumptiveness. She turned aside and noticed a woman lying nearby on a cot. It was Mrs. Dugan.

Rachel remembered Wilma, and felt a sudden twinge in the pit of her stomach. She didn't want to face that

again, not another sick person. She didn't know Mrs. Dugan so she headed past the woman. But Mrs. Dugan grabbed her hand as she passed by and pulled her towards her.

"Young woman," she said in a hoarse voice. "Young woman?"

"Yes," Rachel said, startled. Perhaps this woman needed something—water or medical attention. Rachel felt herself panic as she looked at Mrs. Dugan. The woman's eyes were dark and sunken. Her skin was taut and pale. Her lips chapped and dry. Rachel held her breath for an instant, and then tried to smile. "I will pray for you," she told this stranger.

The woman pulled her close, right down to her face. Rachel thought Mrs. Dugan wanted to say something but couldn't speak loudly enough to be heard, so she bent down to listen.

"It's all a lie," the woman whispered.

Rachel looked at her in horror and pulled away. The woman nodded, pulling her back down. "It's a lie. I waited too long. Now I'm dying. I'm leaving my family, my children and my husband. I have constant unbearable pain. If I had it to do again I'd run to the doctors. I'd RUN! Don't make the same mistake I've made." The woman released Rachel's hand as if she'd accomplished what she desperately needed to do.

Rachel looked at her, stunned. The woman's face was kind. She didn't look at all like a monster trying to steal Rachel's faith. This dying woman was trying to warn her, as if she knew that at some point, Rachel would be faced with this same decision—to seek medical care—to live or die.

"But, God promises to heal those who are faithful," Rachel whispered.

Mrs. Dugan closed her eyes. A tear formed and rolled down her cheek. "God helps those who help themselves,"

she whispered. “Not those who shun the help that’s available. Why do we believe that God provides for our needs when it comes to food and shelter, but not when we need medical care? Somehow it’s wrong to use medicine but okay to eat the food of this world?” She shook her head. “I’d run as fast as I could to the nearest doctor, if only I could, if only it wasn’t too late.” The woman stared off into the distance, deep in thought.

Rachel walked away. She swallowed hard. There was Kathleen and Faith looking for her. She hurried to them, shaken by the encounter. That small voice she’d heard when Wilma died had come back, only this time it came from outside her head, from this stranger, a dying woman who took the time to warn her. To tell her “Run away!”

Rachel distrusted her own thoughts—she must purge these doubts from her mind. She must pray and fast and ask God to guide her, lest she actually run away.

Faith was going to the airport with two other college students. Alberto and Joel came by to see them one last time. “Wasn’t that a great sermon?” Kathleen said.

“Wait until the Feast of Tabernacles,” Joel replied.

“Yeah, wait until you hear the evangelists and God’s Apostle,” Alberto said. “We’ll see you girls there.”

So that was the excitement, Rachel decided. Everyone was anticipating the fall feast days. She’d heard about it and saved her second tithe to be able to go but now she was catching the infectious excitement, too.

It was to be a special time, but now the time had come to say good-bye to Faith. The three girls cried and hugged, oblivious to the rest of the crowd. The members were likewise oblivious to the girls. “I’ll miss you,” Rachel said. “Me, too,” Kathleen added.

“I’ll be back,” Faith promised. “We’ll be together again.”

But all three of the girls knew that was unlikely. Their time together, brief as it was, had come to an end. They

were older and wiser than back in June. And they were sure of only one thing—they would always be friends.

“I’ll write,” Faith said, as she left with the others. “I promise.”

The ride home from Boston was quiet. Both girls missed Faith. They wondered what would happen now. Making ends meet had been difficult with the three of them working; now there would be just the two. Deacon concentrated on the traffic.

Once they were outside the city, Rachel mentioned Mrs. Dugan. “I met Mrs. Dugan, the lady who’s sick,” she said.

“She has colon cancer,” Deacon said.

“I hope she’s okay,” Rachel said.

Deacon shook his head and said, “I think you’d find that when bad stuff like that happens, if you knew the truth, the person has let down on prayer and Bible study. They’ve got a spiritual problem.”

Rachel glanced a shocked look at Kathleen, who shrugged. “Do you really believe that?” Rachel asked Deacon. “Couldn’t it just be a test of their faith, like Job was tested?”

“Just my opinion,” Deacon said. “When bad stuff happens, people aren’t doing their Christian duties.”

“But that’s like saying Mrs. Dugan deserves to have cancer. It’s like saying it’s her fault. How can you say that?” Rachel asked.

Kathleen nudged her and gave her a look indicating, don’t question authority.

Deacon was unfazed by her questions, though. “Well, I certainly hope Mrs. Dugan recovers. I hope it’s a test and she passes with flying colors. But, I’ve been in The Church for over thirty years now. I’ve seen a lot more than you have, young lady. And it’s my observation, bad

stuff happens to the unfaithful. You just don't know all the secrets people keep.”

Rachel thought of Faith and their secret, kept for their friend. Suddenly she wondered if something bad was inevitable—a punishment to them for their deceit and disobedience. A flash of panic crossed her face, but no one noticed.

She made a mental note to fast and pray for forgiveness this coming week. She would ask God to purge from her mind those words Mrs. Dugan had whispered to her—to help her forget the warning. It was obviously not from the Holy Spirit.

Maybe Deacon was right. Maybe Mrs. Dugan did have a spiritual problem that led to her illness.

Chapter 9

*If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother,
and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters,
yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.*

Luke 14:26

At her first opportunity, Rachel approached Mr. Critchett as Pastor Driscoll had instructed her, to ask for counseling about baptism but Critchett rebuffed her. “You aren’t ready,” he said sternly.

Rachel nodded, looking down.

“You know,” he added, “you can’t become a member if you’re still in the world.”

She looked at him wondering what he meant. He told her. “Your mother (when she heard those words her heart sunk instantly) told me about your problem with boys.” He seemed to snarl out each of the hateful words and she could hear her mother’s voice echoing those same words in her mind.

“I, I, don’t, I mean,” Rachel stuttered, unable to get words to come out of her mouth coherently. She felt the way she did when her mother victoriously got what she wanted—when she felt inadequate and helpless to fight back.

“Go and pray and study and come back after you have fasted for three days.” Then, and only then will we discuss your conversion.

She did fast several days and prayed every spare moment she could over the next few weeks but she didn’t get a chance to go back for counseling because fast

preparations intensified and Mr. Critchett had no time for Rachel.

Deacon arranged for the girls to travel to Pennsylvania for the Feast with Audrey and her boys.

Rachel and Kathleen were to take in another teenage girl—Lorna who arrived the week before leaving for the Feast. Lorna was coming from down east in Maine and needed a place to stay. She was also hired by Penacook Component Assembly, so once again the girls were walking to work and doing their errands and living for the church activities.

The Feast began the first week in October. Clothes were prepared, food was packed, notebooks and pens were gathered. It was an exciting time. Audrey told Rachel about her past Feast experiences.

Kathleen listened without much comment, but Rachel knew that she was excited, too. She figured it was Joel. Kathleen hadn't stopped talking about him since their trip to Boston. "Do you think he noticed me?" she asked. "He is so cute," she gushed. "Maybe he'll come to Concord again soon."

Rachel kidded her. "And you think Faith is bad?"

"Hey, he's in the Church. I can have a crush on a church guy," Kathleen said. They shared this with Audrey, who was amused.

Audrey's youngest son Randy still had his own crush on Rachel and made no bones about it. He listened to their conversation. "I'm going to marry you," the five-year-old told her confidently.

Rachel smiled, a little embarrassed.

Audrey explained to him that was unlikely, but he didn't seem to believe her. Audrey shrugged and they all laughed.

Mr. Critchett started the last Sabbath sermon before leaving for the Feast with this question: "What is keeping you out of the Kingdom of God?"

He admonished the congregation about their attachments to worldly things. “You must forsake all,” he said, “and follow the Lord.”

“You must put God first, before anything else in your life,” he quoted scriptures at a fast pace.

Rachel listened to him, without turning to the now familiar scriptures. He waved his arms erratically and shook his head as he yelled out his admonitions. The group sat quietly at his rebuffs. “You people aren’t worthy of God,” he snarled. “Look at you. You have your hearts in the world, not in The Work of God.”

“Turn to Luke 17,” he said. Pages shuffled and when it was quiet he began to read. “And as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the son of man.” Verse 26. “Are you guilty of worldliness?” he asked.

Verse 27: “They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all.”

Rachel felt her stomach tighten. Was she guilty of worldliness? She worried that she was indeed.

“You may think you’re saved,” Critchett chided, “but you are kidding yourself, just like the people who lived in Noah’s time, and in Lot’s. Remember what happened to Lot?” Verse 28: “Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all.”

“You need to pray and fast and ask God to forgive you. Root out the wickedness of the world. Purge Satan from your lives. Rid yourself of any worldliness before it’s too late, before God’s patience runs out, before the floods come, before the fire and brimstone come on you!”

He stopped for a moment and looked about the room silently. “And you women,” he said, “you women must

root out the wickedness in your very nature.” He turned to Proverbs 9:13 and read: “A foolish woman is clamorous; she is simple, and knoweth nothing. For she sitteth at the door of her house, on a seat in the high places of the city, to call passengers who go right on their ways: Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he knoweth not that the dead are there: and that her guests are in the depth of hell.”

He turned to Chapter 23 and read starting at verse 27, “for a whore is a deep ditch: and a strange woman is a narrow pit. She also lieth in wait as for a prey, and increaseth the transgressors among men.” The room was silent. Critchett looked about triumphantly.

Rachel shifted in her seat. Did he mean to say that she was a whore? Did her mother convince him that she was not a virtuous woman? She tried to be virtuous. She tried with all her energy and thoughts to be pure and righteous, the Proverbs 31 woman, but now she wondered. Was her innate nature so evil? Was she indeed a whore in her heart even though she’d not done the actual deed? Was that what Mr. Critchett was saying, that women were innately evil?

After a long pause, Critchett spoke, “Our sisters, Laura and Marianne will be returning after the Feast of Tabernacles. Their banishment will end and we must welcome them back.” People started to clap. He pursed his lips and nodded.

This sermon went on for another two hours. Rachel made notes to pray, to fast, and to look for Satan’s influence in her life. She resolved to root out all in her life that was worldly even though she didn’t have very much stuff. Surely she was evil, she was unbaptized, and she didn’t have God’s Holy Spirit. It must be because she hadn’t yet cleaned out her life and rid herself of the world.

She would prove herself worthy of becoming a Child of God. She would prove God was indeed calling her to be one of the chosen few. Of that she was sure.

Critchett turned to Luke 18:29 “Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the Kingdom of God’s sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.”

Critchett preached, “You may think you’ve given up a lot for The Truth, but you are promised to be reward manifold in this present time, and to have everlasting life in the world tomorrow.”

“Lay not up for yourself treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal,” Critchett read Matthew 6:19-20. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” Verse 21.

“Where is your treasure?” Critchett demanded, as spit flew from his mouth. “If your treasure is not in The Work, neither will your heart be in The Work. Before you leave for the Feast of Tabernacles, examine your heart. Where is your treasure?”

He paused for a long moment looking at the congregation as if to look inside each of their souls. “You must give until it hurts,” he said. “You must have your heart in God’s Work. Completely. No compromises. No exceptions.”

Kathleen and Rachel helped serve the food at the church dinner after Sabbath services. Rachel didn’t see her mother at services this week and wondered if her younger brother was okay. No one seemed to know and Alice had sat by herself. Rachel wasn’t going to ask Alice anything.

Lorna was saying good-bye to her family, her many brothers and sisters and her mother. She was the eldest of the eight children. Her mother had the remarriage problem and in order to become a member she was going to have to leave her husband, the father of her children. Rachel was familiar now with the doctrine based on Luke 16:13, “Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.”

Since she had graduated from high school, Lorna was leaving to lessen the burden on her mother but it was a difficult time for her. Rachel and Kathleen felt badly for Lorna but she didn’t talk about it at all. She put on a good front or else she feared she would break down if she discussed it. Whatever the reason, Kathleen and Rachel didn’t pry.

The two girls had continued their evening prayers together and invited Lorna to join them but she declined. She hadn’t shared their experience that led to this closeness and obviously felt uneasy about it. They didn’t push her. She was new, after all. There was plenty of time for her to learn The Truth.

“I’m going to make a list,” Kathleen said.

“A list of what?” Rachel asked.

“A list of all the worldly things in my life.”

Rachel nodded. Lorna listened curiously.

“I don’t have a lot of stuff,” Rachel said, “but there is one thing that links me to my old life.”

Kathleen looked at her.

“It’s my white Bible—the one my grandmother gave me.”

“You treasure that Bible,” Kathleen said.

“I know, but it’s not the version that we use in the church. We all have a copy of the official Bible and as long as I keep this old one, I’m hanging on to my past. It links

me to my family. Critchett said we have to forsake our family, remember? I want to put that—all of that—behind me.”

“I think you’re right,” Kathleen said. She nodded and thought about her own list. “I need to throw away my painting. I’m hanging on to my old life, too.” She got up and retrieved paints and canvas and tossed it all into the trash bin.

“Wow,” Rachel said. “You really love to paint, Kathleen.”

Rachel went to her room and found the old white zippered Bible her grandmother had given her. Inside was an old silver dollar her father had given her years ago on her tenth birthday—before the divorce. She put the silver dollar into her purse. She went back into the living room and held the Bible for a few moments.

Kathleen nodded to her. “Go ahead. You’ll feel better. I do.”

Rachel nodded, but inside she felt a twinge of sadness. She hadn’t seen her grandparents for a long time—at least two years. She wasn’t even sure how to reach them now. They’d moved to a new place in Florida. They’d moved on without her, without any thought about her.

It was time for her to move on, too. She gently placed the Bible in the trash bin. Yes, she was sure that was the right thing to do. It was all that held her to her old life, her only link. Now it was gone.

She sat back down with Lorna and Kathleen. They looked at Lorna and she shrugged. “I have some records,” she said.

Kathleen looked at Rachel. “You know, Lorna, you don’t have to do this. You may not be ready yet to leave your life behind. You don’t want to rush into it.”

“I’m ready,” Lorna said. She went to her room and carried out several recordings—all of Neil Diamond.

“Well, there are worse things to throw away,” Kathleen laughed.

Lorna looked like she might cry and Kathleen realized these records were indeed important to her, just as important as her paints or Rachel’s white Bible. She realized that Lorna was going through a lot of emotions, leaving her father, separating from her mother and brothers.

“I’m sorry,” Kathleen said. “Why don’t you wait before throwing those away? There’s no hurry.”

“Unless we flee to the Place of Safety tonight,” Rachel quipped. Rachel and Kathleen giggled and Lorna asked them, “What’s so funny?”

“She’s right,” Kathleen said. “We shouldn’t joke about that. It’s just that we are supposed to be ready to flee to the Place of Safety at any moment.”

“The Place of Safety?” Lorna asked.

“You’ll learn all about it at the Feast of Tabernacles,” Kathleen said.

“What’s it like, the Feast of Tabernacles?”

“It’s my first time, too,” Rachel said.

“It’s like nothing you’ve ever experienced,” Kathleen said. “You will hear sermons from evangelists and Russell W. Sherburne, God’s Apostle. It’s the only time of the year that he speaks publicly. He’s amazing. God reveals all truth through his Apostle. And there’s lots to do. We eat out every night in swanky restaurants. There are special socials for teens. We might even get to attend the young adult socials. That would be so cool.”

“All the guys in the church are looking for a wife,” Rachel said. “Watch yourself or you might get hitched before we get back.” They all laughed.

Sunday they spent deciding which clothes to bring with them and packing. They would have no time during the week and they were leaving on Thursday for

Pennsylvania for the Feast of Tabernacles. Over ten thousand members would be gathered there.

Monday Rachel received a large manila envelope in the mail. It had several forwarding addresses on it and had taken several weeks to reach her. It was from her high school. She tore it open.

Inside was a note from the principal.

It read:

Dear Rachel, You will find enclosed an award you received for your leadership essay. Unfortunately, since you were not present for graduation, you were not awarded any scholarships, but if you find yourself short of funds at the University, call the guidance office. Sometimes money is left over when other students don't use their scholarships.

Good luck. Mr. Stewart.

Rachel sat down at the kitchen table staring at the documents. "Is everything okay?" Kathleen asked.

Rachel nodded. "It's a plaque I received for an essay I wrote. I had forgotten all about that. I missed the last few weeks because we moved." She looked at Kathleen, her eyes filling with tears. "I was accepted at the University of Maine and I didn't even know it. And they offered to help me financially. No one's ever done something so nice for me."

Kathleen hugged her. "It's okay Rachel. It's okay."

"What's wrong?" Lorna asked.

"She's just overcome," Kathleen said. "It was her dream to go to college."

"How did you know?" Rachel asked. "I never told you."

“A bookworm like you. I know your type, Rachel. You are just like one of those college preppies in my old high school. Besides, I know your Mom moved just so you couldn’t graduate—what a bitch.”

Her insight surprised Rachel. “You’re pretty smart, Kathleen.”

“It comes from living with crazy people,” Kathleen quipped.

“I wonder if I should throw this away, too?” Rachel said, mostly to herself.

“No way,” Kathleen said. “You’re keeping this plaque and your diploma.”

Rachel realized that Kathleen didn’t have her diploma, and had left high school in her senior year, long before completing enough of her courses to qualify. “You could get your GED.”

“I know,” Kathleen said. “I’ve been thinking a lot about that. We could get much better jobs if we had a high school education, or more.”

“More?”

“Why not?” Kathleen asked. “We’re smart enough, right?”

Lorna and Rachel smiled. “Right,” they both said.

Maybe she would get her dream of college someday, Rachel thought, and maybe her friend Kathleen would be there with her. She smiled.

Chapter 10

*And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,
Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them,
concerning the Feasts of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be
holy convocations, even these are my feasts.
Leviticus 23:1-2*

What Rachel and Lorna learned at the Feast of Tabernacles that fall was that there were actually several Holy Days observed during the year. This was special truth revealed to the chosen ones through God's Apostle, Russell W. Sherburne. She learned that they were to live in "booths" during the eight days of the Feast celebration and that everyone looked forward to this event all year long.

They had saved their second tithes for the purpose of observing the Holy Days and this one in particular meant spending that money, for lodging and travel, as well as special offerings.

Audrey had a station wagon. Her oldest son and middle son sat in the front seat with her while Lorna, Kathleen and Rachel rode in the back with Randy. It was snug, but no one minded, being filled with anticipation of the Feast of Tabernacles. The back was filled with luggage and essential things, including food and Bibles and bags for carrying it all to services. The excitement was contagious and all of them were focused on what they expected to be a wonderful experience with God's People.

They traveled from New Hampshire to the mountains of Pennsylvania, about eight hours by car. It was early October and the foliage was stunning adding to the awe of the occasion. They lodged in a motel just outside Stroudsburg, PA.

The Church owned a large facility nearby where these annual meetings took place. There was a large metal building with concrete floors, slanted like an auditorium so all the rows of seats had a view of the podium. Sections were numbered. People were supposed to sit in assigned areas.

The place was alive with activity, sound systems being tested, lights flickering on and off, huge bouquets of flowers being placed on stage, people everywhere, laughing, hugging old acquaintances, children running around and the air electrified with excitement.

Rachel felt an overwhelming sense of going home and finally belonging to a large extended family.

Kathleen took it all in stride watching quietly, busying herself with her own notebooks and stuff.

Lorna was awestruck. From a remote town in down east Maine she'd never seen so many people in one place. Her family was going to be there and she eagerly searched for them and planned to spend her time with them.

Rachel and Kathleen decided to sit by themselves, leaving Audrey with her three boys and her own adult friends.

Gangs of youth, both males and females, seemed to roam the auditorium like predators and prey on an African Plain. This was the place where many marriage partners were found and unions were made, with the minister's approval, of course.

If one was blessed an evangelist might even perform the ceremony. That would be a huge honor.

Many of the young couples would meet at the Feast, however, and communicate once they were back home, until a marriage could be arranged. The wife would always leave her family and area to go where her new husband wanted to live—that was the custom.

It wasn't long before both Rachel and Kathleen were approached by eager young men who were checking them out.

Kathleen was annoyed by the attention. She was already focused on Joel. No one else mattered to Kathleen, so she shunned any advances with curt replies, such as "I'm not available" or "Sorry, not interested." It made her appear snobbish and Rachel had to smile—her friend Kathleen was so sophisticated and grown up. They were dressed in feminine dresses with their hair fixed and proper. No makeup. Just wholesome, young faces glowing with anticipation and excitement.

Rachel was shy—unlike Kathleen and tended to blush if anyone spoke to her. She did her best to be polite, but deep down, she wasn't ready for any commitment—certainly not marriage. She was totally focused on becoming a Child of God—of being a baptized member and receiving the Holy Spirit. Until then, marriage was impossible anyway.

She wanted to hear the terrific speakers her brethren had raved about—she wanted to learn more truths—she was hungry for the spiritual rejuvenation the Feast of Tabernacles promised.

So both girls frustrated potential suitors, who quickly moved on to more receptive game. And there was plenty of game from which they could choose.

That first day of the Feast of Tabernacles there was an evening service. It started at 7 p.m. and lasted until nearly 10. The speaker was Mr. Waterman, an evangelist, whose job was to welcome everyone and kick off the eight day event.

Rachel learned there were twelve evangelists under the Apostle. They would be hearing from three of them at this Feast site. Other sites around the country were scheduled to hear from the other nine evangelists. The Apostle would make a one-service appearance at each of

the sites across the country where the church celebrated the Feast. The mere mention of the Apostle brought waves of applause from the audience.

Mr. Waterman spoke about the requirement to observe God's Holy Days, and how God had revealed this truth to his Apostle, Russell, specifically to prepare for the End Times.

There was only one true church, he explained, only one church that God was imparting with his holy spirit, only one church that had revealed to it The Truth about the end times and the wonderful world tomorrow.

Only a few were chosen to understand this truth, and even amongst the 10,000 gathered there, some were not going to make it—some were going to fall away from the truth as the end times approached.

He read Leviticus 23: 34: "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a Sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation."

They had observed the Feast of Trumpets before leaving last week. It was an exciting prelude to the Feast of Tabernacles. And as Mr. Waterman explained it was a high Sabbath Day. No work is allowed. Special offerings are made. Rachel learned that it was only on these special holy days that the offering basket was passed, and she had happily donated the money she had saved for this occasion. She was letting go of her family, first her beloved grandmother with the white Bible and now her attachment to money even though she needed it for food. She had felt exhilarated, and knew she was closer to her goal, to becoming a Child of God.

Following the Feast of Trumpets, (verse 27) they had celebrated the Day of Atonement. "Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the

Lord.” This had been a day of fasting for the entire congregation followed by a huge meal after sunset.

Rachel had learned that some members took the command to fast so seriously, that they wouldn’t even brush their teeth for fear of swallowing some of the water. They didn’t want to cheat. The Scriptures were very clear: (verse 29) “For whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people. (Verse 30) And whatsoever soul it be that doeth any work in that same day, the same soul will I destroy from among his people.” This was serious business. The brethren took it very seriously, and the whole day was spent fasting, listening to sermons, private prayer, and group worship.

Now Mr. Waterman discussed this Feast—the Feast of Tabernacles. He read Leviticus 23:34 “Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the Lord. (Verse 35) On the first day shall be an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein. (Verse 36) Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: on the eighth day shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: it is a solemn assembly; and ye shall do no service work therein.”

So here they were, observing eight days of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Bible commanded that: “Ye shall dwell in booths seven days...That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths...”

Mr. Waterman explained that today, the children of Israel referred to the Children of God. Russell had come to understand this wonderful revelation during a long period of fasting and prayer. He promised more about this subject in the sermons to come during the week.

For now they could rejoice in understanding the requirements of observing these wonderful Feast Days and that God had provided this insight in these last days before The Great Tribulation.

It was a dynamic start and both Rachel and Kathleen could barely sleep once they returned to the hotel room they shared with Audrey. Audrey seemed to enjoy their enthusiasm and the three talked late into the night.

Despite the inadequate sleep, they were up and ready for the three services they'd attend on this first day of the Feast of Tabernacles—a special High Sabbath. Here at the Feast of Tabernacles, only the top ministers spoke. Their pastor, Mr. Driscoll, would give a sermonette or lead the hymn singing at most. Regular ministers like Mr. Critchett seldom got the opportunity to speak.

Kathleen and Rachel decided to sit in the front of their section today, hoping to get a better view of the podium. In addition to the regular opening hymns and prayers, there was special music today. A group of musicians and singers performed a lively medley of hymns. The whole auditorium was filled with their music and everyone clapped when they finished. This was part of the command to rejoice on the Holy Days. Rejoice they did.

“Look, there's Joel,” Rachel said, poking Kathleen.

“Where? I don't see him,” Kathleen said, looking in the direction Rachel indicated.

“Who's he talking to?” Rachel asked, observing that Joel was engrossed in conversation with a pretty young blonde. Kathleen frowned.

“Let's go say hi,” Rachel said, taking her friend's arm.

Kathleen protested, but went along with Rachel. Alberto was the first to spot them and greeted them with a big smile. Joel nodded to them but continued his conversation with the young woman. Alberto introduced the two girls to his friends, Justin and Malcolm. Rachel shook their hands and said hi pleasantly.

Justin was a small man and Alberto told them Justin was a musician from the Boston church and engaged to a young lady from the Vermont church. They planned a Feast wedding and the girls were invited to attend.

Malcolm was brand new. This was his first Feast and he'd likely be attending services in the New Hampshire church once they returned home.

Rachel noticed Malcolm was shy. He didn't say much. She smiled at him, thinking he had so much to learn but would surely leave this event with a greater base of understanding than she'd had when she first started attending church last spring. She asked him, "How did you come into The Truth?"

"I heard the radio program," he said.

"So did I," she said.

"Where are you sitting?" Alberto asked.

"We have seats over there," Kathleen pointed.

"Want to sit with us?" Alberto asked.

Kathleen looked at Joel who was settling in a seat next to the blonde girl. "No," she said, pulling Rachel away. "We have seats already. Thank you."

Alberto looked briefly disappointed, but turned to another young lady who was passing by. Rachel gave Malcolm a smile and headed back to her seat with Kathleen.

"What's the matter?" she asked, sensing Kathleen was annoyed.

"Nothing."

Rachel knew Kathleen liked Joel. Joel hardly said hello to her. Come to think of it, she couldn't remember Joel ever indicating any particular interest in Kathleen. She felt sorry for Kathleen, but Kathleen wasn't about to be the victim. "He's a jerk," Kathleen said.

"Who?" Rachel asked.

"Joel." Kathleen frowned.

“Kathleen, he’s just enjoying the Feast. We’re not eligible—remember? He can’t really get involved; none of them can, until we’re baptized. Don’t worry about it.”

Mr. Driscoll gave the sermonette and introduced the main speaker that morning. Driscoll’s topic was brief—child rearing, and he admonished the parents in the group to use discretion when disciplining their children here at the Feast. There were those, he said, who didn’t understand the church’s policy on child rearing. He instructed them to use a private room set aside for that purpose in the back of the building.

Paddles were one of the staples every good member kept in their briefcase or book bag they took to services. It was not unusual for a parent to spank a youngster in the restroom at church services, or sometimes in their cars.

Rachel had noticed it when she first started attending, but not having children of her own, she hadn’t given it a lot of thought. It explained why most of the children were so well-behaved. The exception seemed to be the two children of the local elder—the children who’d run past her that first day she attended services. They didn’t seem as reticent and controlled as the rest of the children.

New converts were quickly told the rules for child rearing. People didn’t tolerate unruly behavior even from kids, with the apparent exception of Pastor Roberts’s two children.

Kathleen sat quietly through the sermon. Rachel knew Kathleen was hurting, but saying any more would only make her feel worse. Maybe Audrey would have some sage advice, she thought, if Kathleen wanted to talk about Joel later.

By the end of the first day, Rachel wondered if she’d brought enough note paper. Already, she’d filled nearly one notebook and it had only been three services. There was a gift shop in the lobby of the motel and she decided to purchase at least one more notebook there. There was

just so much information; she didn't want to miss any of it. These notes would make wonderful Bible study material later when she returned home.

Most of what she was learning she hadn't seen in any of the church literature. Of course, that was because new people might not be able to handle learning this all at once. It had to come in doses that one could absorb. She understood that now.

As Kathleen and Rachel gathered their bags and coats to leave, Audrey caught up with them. "Meet me at seven o'clock at the car—we're in Parking Lot B, remember?"

The girls agreed. "I have to help out at the receptionist's desk for a couple hours. Will you two be all right?"

"Sure," Kathleen said. "We'll just meet some of the people."

"We'll have to make it a quick dinner tonight," Audrey said. "How do you feel about pizza?"

"That's great," Kathleen said. Audrey walked away. "I think she's short of money," Kathleen told Rachel.

"You think so?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah. She doesn't work you know. They give her some money to come, but she has to work while she's here. I don't think she can afford to feed us, too."

"Well, we have our own second tithe money," Rachel said. "Why don't we buy food for her and the boys?"

"She's proud," Kathleen said. "Charity bothers her, unless she's the one giving."

"I noticed that, too. I think she really misses her husband. Did you notice how much she talks about him?"

"She thinks they'll be back together—that God will provide a way. He promised to wait for her," Kathleen said.

“Yeah, but Kathleen, he’s not converted. Do you think God will call him to The Truth? How else could they ever get back together?”

Kathleen shrugged. “I don’t know. Some people are married to non-believers, like Deacon. She believes they’ll be together, though. Have you noticed how Wade never says anything?”

Rachel nodded. “He’s very unhappy,” she said.

“Look, I’m going to find my Mom. She’s here somewhere. You want to come?” Kathleen asked.

“No. Go ahead. I’ll just wait around here. There are some older folks I’d like to meet over there. I’ll just fellowship with the brethren for a while.”

Kathleen left and Rachel felt suddenly alone. Here she was in a huge auditorium. Her feet were cold—all the people leaving and the doors being open letting cold wind waft through the room. The concrete floors seemed to penetrate the cold through the bottom of her shoes up her legs, giving her whole body a chill. She started to walk around, wondering if she could muster the nerve to go up to strangers and introduce herself. They were supposed to do that, but she’d never felt too comfortable about it.

She spotted a young child sitting in a chair by herself. She was sobbing and wiping her nose on her sleeve. No adult was around and Rachel wondered if perhaps the child was lost. There had been many notices on the loud speaker about lost children. She went over and sat down next to the little girl. “Hi,” she said.

The girl looked at her. Rachel thought she was frightened. “Are you lost?”

The girl shook her head.

“Are you sick?” Rachel asked, wondering what was bothering the little girl.

She shook her head again.

“Can you talk?” Rachel asked, smiling.

She nodded, sniffing back her tears.

“Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

The little girl’s eyes filled with tears and Rachel regretted upsetting her again. She looked around and no one seemed to belong to the child.

“That’s a nice doll you have,” Rachel said. “Did you get that for the Feast?”

The little girl nodded. Feast gifts were common especially for the children, as a replacement for Christmas which was not an allowed holiday.

“Does she have a name?”

“Lucy.”

“That’s a nice name. I like Lucy. May I look at her for a moment?”

The little girl obeyed handing Rachel her doll as tears rolled down her cheeks. Rachel felt guilty. She didn’t mean to take it from the child, so she looked at it quickly and quickly handed it back to the girl, who hugged it tightly. “I can see why you like Lucy,” Rachel said.

The girl sat silently.

“Do you suppose Lucy could tell me what is making you so sad?”

“Lucy knows that I miss my mommy,” the little girl answered.

“You miss your mommy?” Rachel asked, suddenly feeling tightness in her stomach. “Where is your mommy?”

“She’s waiting for God,” the child said. “I miss her so much. I want my mommy to come back.” Her tears flowed again. Rachel wanted to hug her and comfort her, realizing the child’s mother must have died, probably recently.

“Why are you here by yourself?”

“My daddy told me to wait here. He spanked me for running around and said not to get up from this chair until he came to get me.”

Rachel swallowed. "Can you sit with me?" she asked the child.

"Is it okay?"

Rachel nodded. The little girl climbed into Rachel's lap and hugged her. She clung to her doll. Rachel hugged her back, noticing bruises on her upper legs when her dress slipped aside. She gasped. *How could someone spank a child grieving for her mother*, she wondered. *How could he leave her alone in this large building full of strangers?* She looked around again but could not see anyone who seemed to belong to the child. "How about if I sit here with you until your daddy comes back?" she said.

The little girl nodded and her sobbing subsided. She sat in Rachel's lap and busied herself with her doll, talking to her doll and fixing her doll's hair. At one point she scolded her doll and began spanking her. Then she hugged the doll and said, "I only spank you because I love you, Lucy."

Rachel felt the warmth of the child close to her and smelled her damp hair, the smell of a freshly shampooed baby's head. She guessed the little girl was probably around five years old. "Do you have brothers and sisters?" she asked.

The little girl shook her head.

"What about a grandma or grandpa?"

"We never see them. They don't go to our church."

Rachel nodded. She glanced at her watch. It had been over an hour. Where was this child's father? She decided to take her to lost and found if he didn't return soon, or at least by the time she had to leave with Audrey. Just as she was starting to stand up and take her to the lost and found booth, a man approached. He had a young woman by his side.

"Cynthia, I see you've found yourself a friend." He smiled at Rachel. "Thanks for sitting with her."

Rachel tried to smile, but she didn't like this man. He was neatly dressed in his church going suit. But he was too friendly. And he'd hurt his daughter.

"Cynthia, this is Romelle. She's going to dinner with us. Isn't that nice? You say hello to her."

The little girl obediently reached out her hand and said hello. Romelle looked her over, as if measuring, deciding, and evaluating. "Hello, sweetie," she said.

"Time to go," the man said, taking his briefcase from the chair. "Put your coat on." Cynthia grabbed her coat. Rachel helped her put it on. Romelle seemed annoyed, but smiled patiently. Off they went. The little girl turned, as her father tugged her along by the hand, and looked at Rachel.

Rachel looked at her watch. It was quarter to eight. She'd have to hurry to find her things and meet Audrey and Kathleen at the car. Later that night, as they munched on pizza, she told Audrey about Cynthia. "She was such a sweet little girl," Rachel explained. "It doesn't seem right that her father should spank her until she's bruised, just because she misses her mother."

Audrey seemed uncomfortable. "We shouldn't question," she said. "God says not to spare the rod."

"Would you spank Randy if he was crying for his daddy?" Kathleen asked.

"No." Audrey said quickly. "That's different. He misses his father. All three of my boys miss their father. I understand that. I miss him, too."

Kathleen glanced at Rachel, and they mutually knew it was better to change the subject.

Ben caught up with Rachel on the third day, just as she and Kathleen were getting settled in their seats for the morning sermon. "There you are," he said with a big smile. "I thought you were going to meet me."

"I, uh, you didn't say where to meet you," Rachel stuttered. Kathleen held back a giggle, amused by Rachel's

predicament. She'd kidded Rachel about dating "older men."

"Well, right down front, of course," Ben said, a little annoyed. "That's where everyone meets. I've been looking for you everywhere. Didn't you hear them page you on the first day?"

Rachel shook her head. She hadn't heard her name paged. The room was so noisy that she seldom paid any attention to the intercom and doubted that anyone else could understand it, either. She tried not to look annoyed as she felt this man was imposing himself on her. She hoped she hadn't said or done anything to lead him to believe she was interested and was quite certain she hadn't in fact done either.

He put his coat and briefcase on the chair next to her. She glanced at Kathleen. "What do I do?" she mouthed. Kathleen shrugged and giggled. "Thanks a lot," Rachel muttered.

Rachel had actually seen Ben from a distance two times since the Feast started and successfully avoided him, until now. He had spotted her first.

"We're having dinner with the Roberts tonight," Ben whispered, leaning close to her. She blushed.

"Tonight?" she asked.

"Yes. Isn't it great? We're going to Mount Airy Lodge. All the big shots are going to be there. It's a special honor. You'll love it."

"But, I, uh, I already have plans," Rachel lied.

Ben studied her. He didn't believe her and she knew it. Lying was a sin. She gulped, hoping that he'd not challenge her, but he did. "What plans?" It sounded like he was accusing her, after all, how could a mere girl like her possibly have plans, especially better than spending a wonderful evening with him in the presence of God's ministers?

Kathleen spoke up. “We’re supposed to help Audrey serve at the variety show tonight—at the concession stand.”

Ben looked defeated. Now it was his turn to blush. Rachel flashed a subtle thank you to Kathleen. “Yes, we can’t change that at this late hour. They are counting on us,” Rachel stated matter of factly. “Thank you so much for thinking of me, but I really can’t go with you to the Lodge tonight.”

He thought for a moment. “Then I’ll come to the variety show. We can go out to eat tomorrow night,” he said, his face brightening suddenly.

Rachel started to say something, but the announcer asked everyone to stand for the first hymn. She glanced a worried look at Kathleen, who only shrugged.

Rachel and Kathleen helped Audrey serve concessions at the variety show that night. Ben hung around, snatching small bits of conversation with Rachel in between customers. She was exhausted by the end of the evening.

Ben insisted on walking her to the car. Once there, Rachel had to wait for Audrey and Kathleen who lagged behind for one last bit of cleaning up. She regretted not realizing they weren’t following behind them and wished she’d stayed with them, but now here she was by herself with this man. She looked at him and wondered how old he was? Too old, she concluded.

“I have something for you,” Ben said with a sparkle in his eyes.

Rachel didn’t know what to say. Feast gift exchanging seemed to be a custom she’d not been forewarned about and she felt embarrassed that he was offering her a small package. She didn’t reach for it, instead stood there foolishly trying to think of something to say, but appearing perhaps to be too stunned, in Ben’s mind, too pleased, to say anything.

Audrey and Kathleen arrived. Ben put the gift in Rachel's coat pocket. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said, and bounded off into the dark parking lot.

"Someone's in love," Audrey teased.

"It's not me," Rachel said, climbing into the car, not the least bit amused.

Each of the next six days, they sat through two sermons, one filling the morning and one in the afternoon. Evenings were filled with special events. There was a musical put on by the various churches. There were several weddings.

Everyone was invited to attend the weddings and usually several young couples were married at the same time. It was considered an extra honor to be married by an evangelist or pastor at the Feast of Tabernacles. Weddings were quite simple. The brides wore white gowns with veils. The men wore dark suits. Often they were accompanied by best men and brides' maids, similar to traditional weddings.

But the words were quite different. The husband was the head of the wife. She must promise to honor and obey, to submit to him for the rest of her life, just as the church is the bride of Christ and must submit to God's will. The husband must promise to love and cherish her, as the Lord cherishes his church. They were promising before God. Their union was special, joined in the presence of God by the servants of God—his ministers. People loved to attend the wedding ceremonies. It was a time of great celebration.

Kathleen, Rachel and Audrey went to Justin and Abigail's wedding the next evening to view the festivities. They attended every event, except when they were asked to serve at the minister's lodge.

Audrey was often busy, as receptionist, or attendant at the women's restrooms, or other duty. Both Kathleen

and Rachel were asked to serve at the big lodge where the ministers and their families stayed. They babysat for several of the ministers' children. They even waited on tables at one of their private dinners. It was all so exciting. Other young people were also asked to serve.

Finally, the day they had all been waiting for—the Last Great Day. Not only was it the Eighth Day—a high Sabbath day, but it was the day God's Apostle would be giving the sermon. Rachel was finally going to hear Russell W. Sherburne in person—the voice on the radio that had rescued her countless times from the horror of her home life.

Kathleen had heard him before because she'd attended the Feast of Tabernacles several times with her mother in the past. Still, everyone was especially excited on this day.

There was also a sadness beginning to settle in. It would soon be over. They would soon head back to their homes and lives. The fellowship they'd shared was coming to an end. Rachel tried not to think about that, because she feared she would cry.

The room erupted into applause. Everyone stood up, clapping and cheering as Russell walked onto the stage. Rachel and Kathleen had managed to get seats near the front and had a good view of the podium.

Rachel was surprised. Russell was not a large man. He was in fact, quite short. His white hair glistened from the stage lights. He seemed to be larger than life—his smile infectious. No question, he enjoyed this moment and let the crowd cheer for several moments before asking them to sit down.

His first words were "I'm here to share with you the good news of the wonderful world tomorrow!" He bellowed the words and the crowd erupted once again. He nodded, smiling. When the crowd subsided, he lowered his deep voice and asked, "Will you be there?"

The crowd grew silent. Russell told them to turn to Rev. 20:10 and he read, "And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever."

He paused, looking around the auditorium. Rachel was attentive to his every word. "There is a great danger," he said. "As we approach the end days, Satan is very angry. He's not going to give up. He's going to try to devour God's true church and destroy each and every one of you. If you are not vigilant, you will lose out on the Kingdom of God. You will not share in the wonderful World Tomorrow."

He turned to II Thessalonians 2:3 and read the scriptures, "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;"

Russell explained that before the end would come, a great many of those who had been called would be deceived and fall away from the truth. Hebrews 6:4 "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." There was no salvation, no hope, for those who fell away from the truth.

Rachel felt goose bumps on her arms. She sensed that he was telling them something very important. As he went on to explain about the prophecies, she marveled at his understanding, at how God had shown him The Truth. She felt great appreciation that she was being allowed to understand this truth.

But now, she understood that with that gift came great responsibilities. One must not let down, lest they

fall away from The Truth—a fate worse than never having understood The Truth in the first place. This was the sin from which there was no pardon, no redemption.

The audience listened. The whole room was silent except for an occasional cry of a baby who was quickly whisked outside. All those times Rachel had listened to this man on the radio, he'd never sounded so powerful. His words had been soothing and promising, but now he spoke with authority. She understood. He was God's Apostle and this was indeed the end time.

She thought about all those young people who were newly married and wondered if they were to have children, would they suffer when it came time to leave for the Place of Safety? Why did the ministers encourage marriage at all knowing the horrors to come? But of course the answer was that God would protect them during that tribulation. Those who were chosen, who had their hearts in The Work, those who didn't fall away from the truth—they would be safe and their children would be safe.

Rachel wondered what could be so terrible as to cause anyone to fall away. Yet, there were those who had done so. She remembered Laura and Marianne being exiled from the church when she first began attending. What an awful experience, she realized now. To be that close to falling away. They must have been so frightened, she thought.

And there were stories of those who were marked and excommunicated. People whose sins were so great, they no longer were allowed to attend services. The members could not talk with them or communicate with them in any way. They were to pass on the other side of the street and avoid eye contact and not answer any questions or greetings.

She didn't know anyone who'd been excommunicated. There had been some before her attendance began, but no

one discussed those former members, at least not with her. She wondered what happened to them after they left. Surely they must be most miserable. In other sermons she'd heard that many who fall away from the truth commit suicide, or enter mental institutions.

Russell talked a lot about The Work—preaching the good news of the coming Kingdom of God to the entire world. He told the audience about his many accomplishments during the past year. He'd met with world leaders. He added many new radio stations, and they planned to start a television show in just a few short months. His son was going to take on some of the work, preaching the gospel. He explained how God was showing him “new truth” and shared insights into scriptures heretofore misunderstood by others.

When he explained that it was better never to have known The Truth than to fall away from it, Rachel worried that she might not be strong enough. Could she really forsake all and follow Christ completely? Such doubts would surely subside once she'd been baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Then she would truly understand. She redoubled her resolve to become a Child of God as soon as possible.

She just wished she didn't have to go through Mr. Critchett to obtain that goal. Then she had an epiphany: *What if her bad attitude toward Mr. Critchett was holding her back from conversion?* She knew she didn't like him. That was the hurdle she must overcome. She must submit to his authority with humility. It was her bad attitude. No wonder she'd not been baptized yet. Now that she understood, she was determined to change her attitude.

Russell closed his sermon with Romans chapter 8. He started with verse one, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after flesh, but after the Spirit.” He explained

that we are no longer doomed. We are redeemed and saved by Christ Jesus, if we are of the Spirit.

Verse 2: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.” We no longer served the physical laws, he explained, but served and obeyed on a spiritual level, something that is incomprehensible by those not filled with the Holy Spirit.

Verse 5: “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.” He admonished the congregation to seek those things that are spiritual—the Work of God to spread the gospel in the end times. This he explained was truly the love of God—to warn the world and give mankind a chance to be saved from the Great Tribulation. It was a tremendous privilege to have a part in such a wonderful work—proclaiming the good news of the wonderful world tomorrow.

“Do you have peace?” he asked the audience. Those who were spiritually minded would also have peace of mind (verse 6). If you were troubled, then perhaps you were not spiritually oriented enough—you were too focused on the physical and on this world, and therefore vulnerable to Satan and falling away from the truth, he explained.

Verse 9: “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” Rachel felt a twinge at these harsh words. She desperately wanted to belong, to be one of the chosen—the truly converted with God’s Spirit in her.

Verse 14: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God,” Russell bellowed the words, filling the auditorium. People listened with baited breath for every word of this Apostle.

“Verse 15,” he said, “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the

Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” If you have God’s spirit, you are not living in fear, but in confidence that God has adopted you, he said.

Verse 16: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:” Russell repeated with great emphasis “WE – ARE – THE - CHILDREN - OF - GOD.” With that, the audience again erupted in applause. People stood up. Some whistled, yelled, cried.

“We are the children of God.” Russell repeated as a final punctuation to his presentation and stood for a moment smiling at the audience. Then he walked off the stage. .

The Feast of Tabernacles was coming to a close. Slowly the audience quieted. A pastor led the final hymn. Another gave the final prayer, asking for safe travel as the brethren headed back to their homes.

Some of the women wiped tears from their eyes. Men were somber. Going back into the world, away from the safety of this wonderful spiritual environment was a little scary. Each hoped they would make it through yet another year of tests and temptations and return next year to celebrate yet another Feast of Tabernacles.

Kathleen and Rachel, though not yet baptized, not yet completely and truly converted and full of the Holy Spirit, none-the-less, felt the same emotions. Silently, they vowed, each of them would succeed, and return next year, too.

Ben sat beside Rachel at every service. She’d kept his gift in her suitcase, unopened, and hadn’t shared it with either Kathleen or Audrey until the last night in the motel. When Audrey asked her what it was, Rachel said, “I don’t know. I haven’t opened it.”

“Well, open it, girl. Let’s see what the old geezer gave you.”

Rachel retrieved the small gift box. When she opened it, it was a locket on a necklace. Kathleen remarked how pretty it was.

“You must really like this man,” Audrey said.

“No, I don’t,” Rachel said.

Kathleen laughed.

“It’s not funny,” Rachel told her.

“Well, this is a serious gift. If you don’t like him, you shouldn’t have accepted it.” Audrey was offering mature, motherly advice, which was not like her. She usually seemed like one of them.

“I thought it was a custom to give gifts at the Feast,” Rachel said, suddenly worried.

“This isn’t an appropriate gift from a single man to a single woman unless they are planning on getting married,” Audrey said. “Not jewelry. This looks expensive.”

Horror gripped Rachel. “That’s the last thing I want to do,” she said.

Her reaction was so overdone, that both Audrey and Kathleen started laughing.

“Well, you better give it back,” Audrey said. “Don’t go leading the poor man on.”

As the final service ended, Rachel was caught up in the moment. Then suddenly she remembered Ben. It was time to say good-bye, and to return his gift. She reached into her pocket to pull out the small box.

Ben seemed excited. She sensed he wanted to say something, but she wasn’t going to mislead him. “Here,” she said, handing the box back towards him.

Now he looked horrified. “You don’t like it?”

“No,” she said. “I mean, it’s very nice, but I can’t accept it. It’s too, well, it’s just too much. You are very nice, but I’m not interested in getting serious about anyone at this time.”

She could see he was hurt, and perhaps, she detected, a little angry. It made her uneasy. Then he brightened a

little. "You're young," he said. "I'm pushing you too fast." He nodded as if his explanation made complete sense.

"Take it," she said, thrusting the box at him. "Please. I don't want it." Rachel surprised herself at her assertiveness. He took it, a little meekly, and gathered his briefcase and coat and headed off without further comment. She couldn't help but notice a dejected stance in his walk. It caused her a little guilt, but she soon forgot him.

Audrey decided to leave early the next morning. Money was almost gone, so they ate sandwiches in the motel room. She went to bed soon after eating, obviously tired. The three boys had their own room next door. Lorna had returned after the last sermon and the three girls talked softly in the corner of the motel room. The Feast of Tabernacles had lived up to all they had been told, and more. Each of the girls had filled their notebooks during the many sermons.

Lorna told them she'd met a man who was going to come to New Hampshire shortly and ask the minister for permission to marry her.

Both Kathleen and Rachel were surprised. "But you aren't baptized," Rachel said. "How can you marry a man in the church?"

Lorna shrugged. "Guess I'll just have to get myself baptized."

"If Mr. Critchett will allow it," Rachel said. "I don't mean to dampen your hopes, but he's been putting me off for months whenever I ask about baptism."

"Maybe he doesn't think you're ready," Lorna said.

Rachel was hurt. They'd taken this newcomer into their apartment and treated her like a sister. How could she insult her?

Lorna thought that Rachel was jealous because she'd found a potential husband. She was consumed with her

own life and the events of the past eight days. And she hadn't felt all that accepted by Rachel and Kathleen, despite their gestures to welcome her.

Kathleen said, "That's great Lorna. We hope it works out for you, don't we Rachel?" She gave Rachel a subtle wink.

Rachel smiled. It would be nice to have the apartment to themselves again. "Yes. I wasn't trying to worry you. It is up to the minister to decide and I'm sure he'll approve your wedding to, what did you say his name was?"

"Gregory."

"Your wedding to Gregory."

Finally, the girls settled down into a light sleep. Despite being tired, they were still too wound up from all that had happened to sleep soundly. By the time they arrived back at Audrey's apartment the next day, they were all exhausted. And they had to go to work at seven the next morning. Reality began to set in.

Chapter 11

*But now I have written unto you not to keep company,
if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator,
or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard,
or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat...
Therefore put away from among yourselves
that wicked person.
I Corinthians 5:11-13*

November 1970

Mr. Critchett wants to see you right away,” Alberto said to Rachel when she arrived at Sabbath services the following Saturday. She glanced at Kathleen who looked worried.

“What about?” Rachel asked.

Alberto shrugged. “I didn’t ask.”

Rachel was escorted to a small counseling room. Could it be that he’d decided she was ready for baptism? It was odd to be called into this room before services. Most counseling took place afterwards. She waited until he motioned for her to come forward.

“Sit down,” he instructed, pointing to the chair in front of the desk. She complied.

“Have you spoken to your mother?” He looked at her intently.

She shook her head. “No. I haven’t seen her since the Feast of Tabernacles.”

“What about your brother?”

“No. Is there something wrong with them?” Rachel felt a wave of panic and wanted to stand up but instead sat still.

“I need to know if you plan to communicate with your mother?” “I don’t understand,” Rachel said.

“She’s been excommunicated.” He waited for her response.

Rachel’s mind reeled. “What happened?”

“She has a problem with demons,” Mr. Critchett stated matter-of-factly. I plan to announce it to the congregation today. No one will be allowed to talk to her or have any communication with her. If that’s a problem for you, you’ll have to leave, too. We cannot allow any contamination in our midst.

Rachel was shocked. “I can’t leave,” she said. “This is my home.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“What? What was the question?”

He looked at her impatiently. “Are you going to talk to your mother?”

“I don’t talk to her much,” Rachel started to explain.

“Much isn’t good enough,” he growled.

“I mean, I never have talked to her much,” Rachel stuttered. “I won’t talk to her at all anymore.”

She thought he didn’t believe her, his glare was so intense. This close, she could see the greasy film on his deeply pot-marked face, as if the heavy grease he used on his hair had slipped down his forehead. She swallowed.

“What about your brother? You talk to him, don’t you?”

“Did he do something wrong?” She noticed her elbows were shaking and tried to push them against the sides of the chair to keep them still.

“He’s with your mother. That means he’s contaminated, too. Can you promise me before God that you won’t have anything to do with either of them? The Bible commands that we forsake our family.”

She nodded, looking away from his intense stare. Her stomach knotted and a lump filled her throat. It was all she could do to hold back tears.

“That means, if they approach you, you turn away—you walk away. No conversation at all, not even to say you can’t talk to them. Is that clear?”

She nodded. Her face felt hot and she knew she must be blushing. Her hands were damp and her knees shaking. “I won’t have anything to do with them, either of them, if that’s what you want,” she whispered.

“You can leave.” He dismissed her with a wave of his hand and turned to some papers he’d been working on before she came in. She figured it was his sermon notes. She stood up meekly and left.

“What’s the matter?” Kathleen asked when Rachel sat down.

“It’s my mother. She’s been excommunicated.”

Kathleen was silent for a moment. “Well, that’s not so bad. You didn’t like her hanging around anyway.”

Rachel held back tears. Her throat was tight and hurt. “My brother’s been excommunicated, too.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Rachel,” Kathleen said.

It was a tough sermon for Rachel to sit through. Mr. Critchett raved on and on about demons infiltrating the church. He railed against her mother and forbade anyone to speak to her or her son.

Rachel glanced around. There was Alice, her mother’s friend, with a somber expression. She looked straight ahead, avoiding eye contact with anyone. Maybe, Rachel thought, Alice turned her mother in. The thought almost made her laugh, but she knew that was inappropriate.

Critchett spent most of the sermon talking about falling away from the truth. He read from Deuteronomy 13, verse 6: “If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy

friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers...(verse 8) Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor harken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shall thou conceal him; (verse 9) But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people.”

Rachel felt that he was telling her she must lead the way in excommunicating her mother and brother. He was testing her. She sensed his glare on her as she sat silently, looking down at her Bible, at those awful verses in Deuteronomy.

He never said what her mother had done. Of course, she knew her mother. No one told her mother what to do. It had been only a matter of time before she wore out her welcome, just as she had done in so many churches before this one. Rachel had known this was another of her mother's short-lived decisions. Church-hopping had been a hobby, Rachel thought, and an entertainment of some perverted sort to her mother. She knew all along her mother wasn't a Child of God. It had surprised her that others took so long to figure that out. Now her mother would simply go on to the next group until she grew tired of them or they of her.

But she wondered about her brother. He must be alone, she thought, so much alone now, without her or her older brother, living with her mother. The thought made her shudder. She didn't mind her mother's excommunication, but she wondered if she were strong enough to shun her brother, if he ever tried to talk to her. She would pray for strength.

That night Rachel suffered her first bout of insomnia since she'd moved into the Penthouse apartment with Kathleen and Faith. When she finally fell asleep, she tossed and turned...she saw her mother's face laughing at

her...she saw her brother's face so sad, streaked with tears...she saw that large open window at the Odd Fellows Hall in Manchester...open the way it had been that first day she attended services...that feeling she'd had...that fear that a child might fall out....a child...a Child of God might fall away from the truth...suddenly she felt herself falling out the window, grabbing for the sides, but her hands slipping...fear gripping her as she slipped down...down...down...the concrete walkway below...falling, falling away!

Rachel sat up in her bed, covered with sweat, shaking.

Kathleen woke up. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Just a bad dream."

"Are you worried about your family?" Kathleen asked.

Rachel nodded. "My brother. I'm worried about my brother." For the first time she cried—she felt such a tremendous loss—her brother—it was as if he'd died.

Even though her life with her mother had been miserable, she now felt alone and abandoned. She realized she could never see or talk with either of them again.

Kathleen hugged her. "Let's pray," she suggested, and both girls knelt down and prayed next to the bed.

Routine set in. The leaves had fallen and the fall weather was crisp and cool. Wednesday night Women's Bible Meetings resumed.

At first the brethren had avoided Rachel, perhaps fearing that she might be contaminated with whatever spiritual disease had afflicted her mother. They got over it though, and Rachel and Kathleen were soon included in dinner parties and socials.

Sometimes they babysat for the brethren so they could attend special events. Sometimes they were invited to participate in the events.

Rachel hadn't approached Mr. Critchett again about baptism. When Mr. Roberts visited, she often wished she

could counsel with him instead, but there was a proper chain of authority. Roberts was responsible for the other two churches. Critchett was her elder. That was the way it was. She decided to pray for a sign and trust God to let her know if and when she was ready. She'd begun to wonder if she were truly being called, or if she'd just hoped for it so much.

Doubt shouldn't happen if you were truly being called. But she found herself often doubting. She doubted about spanking little children so severely. She doubted about breaking up families like Audrey's and Lorna's mothers. She doubted the doctrine on faith healing. She tried to put those doubting thoughts out of her mind, and she didn't share them with anyone, not even Kathleen.

Maintaining a good attitude became more difficult. She could only pray and study, hoping that Deacon wasn't right in his assessment that God punished those who had spiritual failings. Fear became her daily companion. Her biggest fear was falling away from The Truth and losing everything, her new family, her eternal salvation and her sanity.

The dream returned nightly. She would feel herself falling out of that window. She knew it meant that she wasn't ready—that if she accepted baptism now, she risked falling away and losing her salvation forever. You only got one shot at it. It was better not to be converted, than to be converted and turn your back on The Truth.

The two girls studied together often. They spent time praying every morning before going to work. That would help them fend off the worldly influences they'd encounter during the day.

They'd spend extra time in the evening studying and praying as well. They fasted by going without food and water at least two days each month. They made it a team effort helping one another to stay faithful and obedient.

In early November, a letter arrived from Faith. She'd enclosed a photo of herself with several other students. They were standing in a large room with a fireplace behind them. She explained it was from The Feast of Tabernacles in Texas where she'd gone with her new classmates. She looked to be having a good time and her letter was cheerful, but not intimate.

"She's adjusting pretty well," Kathleen said.

"I'm glad. She so didn't want to go," Rachel said.

"That's what she said, but I think, deep down, she did exactly what she wanted to do," Kathleen observed.

Rachel thought for a moment. "I really miss her. She says she'll be visiting next summer. Maybe she'll stay here with us."

The Sunday before Thanksgiving, there was a knock at the door early. Kathleen had gone home to visit her mother that previous day after services and wouldn't be back until afternoon. Lorna was still asleep in her bedroom. Rachel was studying her Bible at the kitchen table. The knock startled her.

She went to the door. "Who is it?" she asked.

There was silence, or semi-silence broken by heavy breathing and gasping. Rachel's eyes widened. "Who is it?" she repeated nervously.

"It's me, your brother," a broken, halting voice replied.

Rachel's heart raced. Her mind reeled. She wasn't supposed to talk to him. Mr. Critchett had been clear. She couldn't even speak to him to tell him good-bye or to say she couldn't talk with him.

"Rachel," he sobbed. "Rachel, please let me in. Rachel?"

Rachel slumped down by the door. She leaned against it, stunned, silent. Her heart was broken. Tears rolled down her face. She saw that window in her dream. This was it, she was certain; this was the moment she was being

tested to see if she put God before everything else, including her family.

“Rachel,” he cried. “Please, Rachel. I need you. I have to talk to you.”

“I can’t,” Rachel mouthed, but no sounds came out. “I can’t.”

She sat there, sobbing, for nearly an hour. She could hear her brother crying. Then her brother went down the stairs. She ran to the window, and watched as he limped away, beaten and broken. Tears ran down her face.

He stopped at his old pickup truck and looked back at her, somehow sensing she was there. She wanted to wave, but she couldn’t make her hand move, or she was determined not to let herself. She wasn’t sure which.

Their eyes locked for a long moment speaking more than any words she could imagine at that instant. He got in his truck and drove slowly away. Rachel felt a great weight on her chest, like a vise squeezing the breath out of her. She gasped, slumping to the floor.

Lorna woke up when she heard the commotion and stood in the kitchen doorway. When Rachel fell down, she rushed to her side. “Are you okay?” she asked. “You look terrible.”

“I can’t believe I did that.”

“You did the right thing.”

“It doesn’t feel right.” Even though she knew it was the right thing to do, the obedient thing to do, she felt dirty. She felt guilty. She felt shame. She missed her brother terribly at that moment and wanted to run after him. She wanted to hold him and comfort him knowing he must be tormented by the fear that he had fallen away from The Truth or that he was suffering from some madness her mother was inflicting on him. Sadness overwhelmed Rachel. Such sadness she didn’t know she could feel, and wasn’t sure she could endure.

She pulled herself back up. "I'm going to take a shower."

At the Wednesday night women's meeting, in early December, after the usual reading of Proverbs 31, and expounding on some principles, Nancy asked if there were any final questions before closing the meeting. Esther raised her hand timidly. Nancy nodded.

Esther stood up, blushing. "I don't really have a question," she said. "May I make an announcement?"

Nancy nodded.

"We're expecting a baby," she said.

Everyone smiled and clapped. Next to marriage, having children was the greatest gift from God. So with that announcement, the group broke up and everyone gathered around Esther. Some offered to share baby clothes and furniture with her. Some promised to lend her maternity clothes. Inquiries about how she was feeling and what she planned to do for the delivery. It was all very exciting.

Rachel and Kathleen watched, but didn't participate. They were in between, not children, but not yet adults either. This was a woman's moment, so they were left to observe.

Brethren were encouraged not to spend time with family outside the church, especially during the holiday season. Christmas was not an acceptable Christian holiday in the church. It was in fact, not allowed. The Truth was that Christmas was pagan in its origins and outright idolatry. Extra church socials were planned so people could spend time together and tell any curious relatives they had "other plans."

It was at such an event that Rachel once again met Malcolm. He'd driven down from Maine to attend services and told her that he'd soon be working in Concord. He'd

gotten a job at a local company. "Would you like to go to the movies with me on Monday night?" he asked.

Rachel was surprised. She wasn't sure what to say. "Do we need to ask permission?" She felt her face blush.

"I already did," Malcolm said. "It's okay, as long as we only go to a movie and dinner and I have you home by eleven thirty."

"Eleven thirty?" Rachel said, thinking out loud. She had a routine. After work, she and Kathleen would do any errands and prepare dinner. They studied after they ate and prayed after that and were in bed no later than ten. Going to work at seven meant they had to be up by five at the latest, if they were to get in at least a half hour of prayer and a half hour of Bible study before leaving for work.

"Is that too late?" Malcolm asked. "We could go to a seven o'clock movie and you could be home by nine-thirty."

Rachel looked at this young man. He was slim and muscular. She wondered if he was an athlete and could picture him playing ball or running a track field. Her stomach had butterflies and she felt herself blush.

"I'd love to go. The early show would be best since I have to work the next day."

"Great. I'll pick you up at five. Is that okay?"

She nodded. "Five is good." She smiled.

When she told Kathleen later that night about her upcoming date, Kathleen quipped, "Don't go getting married on me. Lorna is going off soon and I can't afford to live here by myself!"

Rachel laughed. "It's only a date. I don't think you have to worry just yet. Besides, you'll be getting married first. Maybe we can get married at a joint ceremony."

"Doubt that," Kathleen said. "Joel doesn't even know I'm alive."

"There are other guys out there."

Kathleen shook her head. "He's the only one that does it for me. Sorry."

"Suit yourself. If you ask me, you're being too choosy."

"Better than settling," Kathleen stated.

"Settling? Do you think that's what I'm doing? You don't even know Malcolm."

"Well, seems to me, you're the one with the dream to go to college and become a teacher. Isn't that what you told me? How are you going to do that if you get hitched?"

Rachel thought about this. She wondered, was she giving up her dream? Then Kathleen punched her playfully on the arm. "Just kidding. Don't get so serious. It's just a date. You probably won't like him when you get to know him. I bet he farts or picks his nose or something!"

Rachel punched her back. "Kathleen! That's terrible."

Rachel and Malcolm had several dates over the next few months. By February, they were sitting together in services. Deacon seemed to go out of his way to place them together whenever he could with a silly grin on his face all the while. People began to tease them. When were they getting married? What were they waiting for? They asked all sorts of leading questions, to which Rachel always blushed. Malcolm blushed, too, but not as much. He seemed to wear his relationship with Rachel proudly, as if he'd found a prize.

Everything changed mid February, when at Sabbath Services, he ignored her completely. Rachel arrived with Kathleen and Audrey and was helping carry in some bags when she spotted Malcolm. "Hi," she said, smiling. He turned abruptly and walked in the other direction.

"What's wrong with him?" Kathleen asked.

Rachel shrugged. "Maybe he didn't see me."

Once Audrey's things were put on the receptionist's table, Rachel headed towards where Malcolm had gone, but she couldn't find him. She wondered if he had gone outside for a walk before services. Sometimes they did that. She opened the back door to the hall and looked outside. He wasn't in view.

Rachel went back into the auditorium and placed her coat, Bible and notebook on the seat that she and Malcolm usually sat in and looked around. There was Malcolm in the corner talking with Alberto and Joel, who was visiting from Boston. She and Kathleen had heard a rumor that both young men were re-locating to the New Hampshire area and would be attending services here regularly from now on. Rachel headed towards the young men.

Before she got there, Malcolm hurried off in the other direction. It was obvious he was deliberately ignoring her. She said hello to Alberto and Joel. They shuffled nervously and quickly headed in another direction, too.

Kathleen caught up to Rachel. "What's going on?" Kathleen asked.

"I don't know," Rachel said. "But would you like to sit together today?"

"Sure," Kathleen said. The two girls gathered Rachel's things and headed to the back of the auditorium where they reserved their seats. When Malcolm passed by, Rachel started to speak to him but then stopped. He hadn't even looked her way but had a hardened face as if he was angry with her about something. But what? She wondered.

"Did you offend him?" Kathleen asked.

"I don't think so," Rachel answered.

"It's probably Alice," Kathleen said.

The color drained from Rachel's face. "Alice?"

"I'm just speculating," Kathleen quickly added. "What if she told him some lie, and he thinks you're a whore like me?"

“Kathleen!” Rachel said, alarmed. “That’s not true. You’re not a whore, and neither am I. You know that.”

“I wonder if it matters what’s true,” Kathleen said, “or if it’s more important what people believe is true? I’m sure that’s why Joel doesn’t like me—he believes that rumor Alice spread about me.”

The two girls sat whispering to themselves until it was time for services to start but they were no closer to an answer. When Audrey sat down, Kathleen asked her if she knew why Malcolm was ignoring Rachel. Audrey shrugged.

Malcolm sat down front with Alberto and Joel. Rachel was perplexed and hurt. She wondered what she’d done to offend him. Did Alice repeat some horrible lie from her mother? That thought gripped her like a sudden pain and she thought she might faint.

People noticed that Malcolm and Rachel weren’t sitting together and how he avoided Rachel. She felt like everyone was avoiding her but wasn’t sure if she was just reacting to how Malcolm was behaving. It was as if they all knew a secret but she had no clue what it might be.

Until later that week. Tuesday night, a little after ten p.m., there was a knock on their door. Alberto asked that Rachel come out to the car. Mr. Critchett wanted to talk to her.

Rachel had already put on her pajamas. She wasn’t dressed properly and her hair was pinned up. “Hurry up,” Alberto said. “You don’t keep Mr. Critchett waiting.”

She felt like he was saying that she, especially she, shouldn’t keep him waiting, as if there were some special problem with her. It made her more nervous. She threw on a robe, and her coat over that and slipped on her boots, and hurried after Alberto who was already half way down the two flights of stairs.

Once in the car, she sat in the back, Alberto sat in the front next to Mr. Critchett who was behind the steering

wheel. Alberto looked straight ahead, his eyes fixed in the distance as if he was trying not to listen. Critchett turned halfway around in his seat and looked at Rachel.

She suddenly felt extremely embarrassed—realizing she must look awful. She looked down but could tell his stare was still on her.

“I understand that you and Malcolm would like to get married,” he stated.

She was shocked. They hadn’t discussed it at all. She had assumed that Malcolm understood that as long as she was unconverted—unbaptized—she wasn’t eligible for marriage. “I like Malcolm a lot,” she said. “But,”

“But you’re not a member, and therefore it is a sin for the two of you to get involved.”

Rachel tried not to cry. It sounded like an accusation. She felt she was evil, unclean, which of course was the teaching of the church. Women were unclean, and inherently evil. It is their nature and not their fault, and men were encouraged to have compassion and sympathy for women. But also to be wary of them. Women could cause them to sin—to fall away from The Truth.

“You two are not to see each other anymore,” Critchett ordered

She nodded. Another test, like her brother had been a test. She was beginning to wonder if she had the strength to pass these tests.

For the next two months, Malcolm and Rachel avoided any contact with each other. They never spoke so much as a hello in passing, nor looked at one another, waved, nodded, or did anything that recognized the presence of the other.

She realized now that Malcolm was behaving the way he did because he’d been ordered to do so, just as she now was. She didn’t hold it against him. After all, she’d turned her back on her own brother—her baby brother who had depended on her so much when they were

growing up in an abusive household. How could she judge anyone else after what she'd done? They were only obeying God, after all. It was required.

One must trust God, and everything will work out all right. God works through his ministers. They have wisdom and insights beyond the brethren. One must obey God's ministers no matter what. She was determined to do so.

In a strange sort of way, it was building a bond between them—an unspoken bond. She believed that he was obeying the minister's commands, as was she, because that was required, but it was also a test of their devotion. Could they endure this conflict? Would their affection grow or wane? Yes, indeed, it was a test and she was quite certain he believed the same way. If they passed this test, one day, they might well end up together, married in the faith. At the least, such a viewpoint made the whole thing more bearable for Rachel.

Lorna was baptized shortly after the Feast. It was a simple event without much comment to or from Kathleen, Rachel or Lorna. She'd simply come home one Sunday afternoon and told them she'd been baptized at Deacon's home. That was it.

She and her fiancé were married in early March after sunset on a Sabbath Day. It was a lively event with young church members providing dance music from their band. Another member was assigned to take pictures. One of the older ladies sang a song especially for them. Lorna's mother was dressed in a pretty dress and surrounded by her remaining seven younger children, who seemed to cling to her.

There were lots of guests at services this day, one of them Ben. He'd timidly sat next to Rachel, without conversation but sneaking a sly glance to see if she were noticing him. Rachel was busy and didn't realize he'd sat there until services started and he once again held the

hymnal as they sang. He was off key as usual but it didn't deter his attempt to "make a joyful noise to the Lord."

Kathleen and Rachel had been part of Lorna's wedding party, along with two of her younger sisters. Lorna wore a wedding dress shared by the brides in the Church. The bride's maids all wore formal gowns reserved for various church functions.

Soon Lorna and her new husband were off for their honeymoon. After waving good-bye, everyone returned to the celebration. It was a lazy Saturday evening and the hall was rented for the whole day, so everyone partied. The church band played lively tunes and couples danced. Even children danced.

To her dismay, Ben was everywhere Rachel turned. He made small talk, put his hand on her arm affectionately, and touched her quickly before she could push his hands away, as if by accident.

She noticed Malcolm watching her at one moment but he quickly turned away. She thought she detected disgust in his countenance. She wanted to tell him that Ben was not important to her—that it was all his imagination. But people were beginning to tease Ben with off-hand remarks, which he seemed to encourage. Even Deacon commented about "who the next wedding might be."

After that, Malcolm never looked at her. She missed him. They had enjoyed each other's company.

Alberto asked her to dance. He was large and clumsy, even though he was an attractive Italian man. She politely smiled and thanked him after the first dance ended, hoping he'd find another dance partner, which he did. It was as if he knew she belonged to another and was just being polite.

Ben stepped in and put his arms around her taking her into the next dance. Reluctantly she danced, looking for an avenue of escape. She had to push his hand up as he let it slip down her back too far. She was embarrassed.

Finally the song, a waltz, ended and she said, "I have to get some punch."

"I'll get you some," he said happily, and hurried off to the refreshment table.

Joel asked her to dance. She glanced at Kathleen who stood nearby. She shook her head. "Maybe next time."

In a short while she saw Kathleen dancing with Joel. She smiled as she watched them. Kathleen was smiling, too. It was only one dance, though, and Joel moved on to dance with another girl.

Finally, the event ended. Ben hovered around Rachel until the last minute. He asked her to a church social coming up in Boston. "I can't," she said. "I have something else planned for that night." She wasn't really lying this time. She and Kathleen were babysitting the minister's children so that they might attend that same event.

Ben looked disappointed. "I'll be coming back up more often now," he said. "We'll be able to see more of each other."

Rachel felt her face grow hot. She didn't know what to say. He just didn't seem to get it.

Mr. Critchett passed at that very moment. "Ben," he said, "what brings you up this way?" Critchett eyed Rachel suspiciously.

Ben blushed. Critchett nodded and continued on his way.

Rachel turned away, hoping Ben would leave, totally humiliated, trying to hold back the anger growing inside. "I got to go," he said. "It's a long ride and it's getting late. Bye."

She nodded. "Bye." Finally, he was gone.

The girls helped clean up and Deacon gave them a ride back to their apartment. Kathleen was excited about Joel's attention but didn't seem to want to talk too much as if she feared it might jinx it or something.

“You’re whipped,” Rachel teased.

“Yeah, so what?” Kathleen replied. “It’s nice to be whipped.”

“It’s nice to be whipped about someone if they are equally whipped about you,” Rachel said. “It’s not so nice if they’re not.”

Three weeks later, towards the end of March, on a Monday night there was another knock at the door. It was ten p.m. Kathleen answered and Joel was standing there. “Mr. Critchett wants to see Rachel,” he said.

“Oh. She’s sleeping.”

“Wake her up,” he said.

Startled by his curtness, Kathleen quickly nodded. “I’ll go get her.”

Rachel was awakened by the commotion. “Who is it?” she asked in the dimly lit bedroom.

Kathleen turned on the light. “Get up. Mr. Critchett wants to see you.”

“Now?” Rachel said.

“Now,” Kathleen said. “You better hurry.”

Again, Rachel quickly threw on her robe and jacket and shoes. Joel gave her an odd look, and turned and headed down the stairs. She followed, trying to keep up with him.

This time, Mr. Critchett was sitting in the passenger side of the front seat. Joel sat behind the steering wheel. He, as Alberto had done, looked straight ahead and appeared not to be listening. Rachel thought this must be some sort of training they receive because they often accompany Mr. Critchett when he counseled people.

Still, it made her uneasy to have someone else in the car. She didn’t know what Mr. Critchett wanted but assumed it was not good. Try as hard as she could, she was still not in a good attitude about this man, and she knew it was keeping her from receiving God’s Holy Spirit.

She'd fasted and prayed fervently for help with her attitude.

"Are you ready to be baptized?" Mr. Critchett asked.

Almost too surprised to answer, Rachel stuttered, "Yes. Yes! I am ready."

"Next Sabbath services bring a bathing suit and towel. We're having a baptism after services at the Deacon's house. He has a tank for that purpose. I'll let you know then if you can be included."

That was it. He turned around. For a brief moment Rachel sat there expecting more. Then Joel gave her a look and she knew she was supposed to get out of the car. She hurried back to the apartment and excitedly told Kathleen. Kathleen was happy for her.

Chapter 12

*There hath no temptation taken you but such
as is common to man: but God is faithful,
who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able;
but will with the temptation also make a way to escape,
that ye may be able to bear it.
1 Corinthians 10:13*

Rachel could barely contain her excitement the rest of the week. This was the big moment—she was finally going to be baptized and become a Child of God. All the tests and worries faded as she anticipated the event. She could hardly concentrate on her work, or on her prayers and Bible studies.

Wednesday night the two girls got a ride to the Women's Meeting with Audrey. The first thing Rachel said was, "I'm going to be baptized Saturday after services!"

"That's great," Audrey said, genuinely happy for her. She glanced at Kathleen. "What about you?" she asked.

Kathleen shrugged. "Not ready."

"You haven't even asked," Rachel said. "Why don't you? Maybe we could be baptized together. That would be so cool."

Kathleen didn't seem too concerned. Rachel figured that baptism, for whatever reason, hadn't been as important to Kathleen as it had to her. Kathleen had never told her how she felt about it. All the long conversations where she had poured out her desires and desperation about becoming a Child of God, and now she thought, for the first time, Kathleen had never expressed the same feelings.

She'd been a good listener, so much so, that Rachel had believed all along that Kathleen shared her feelings and felt the same way.

At the Women's Meeting, Nancy started by standing and announcing she was a Child of God, and as they did every week, each woman stood and made their pronouncement. It was a ritual—one that was required, that a true believer must profess his faith before the world and not deny God or The Truth. Esther wasn't present for this meeting and Nancy inquired if anyone had heard from her.

Madeleine raised her hand. She was an older woman who had several children, one being Ruth, the precocious young girl who accompanied her to the meetings. Nancy nodded and Madeleine stood up. She was embarrassed at any sort of public speaking and blushed.

Even though what she announced caused concern, she smiled nervously as she said it. "Esther called me last night. She has been bleeding for several days. As you know, she's only about seven months pregnant so I told her to stay off her feet. She said she was going to call the minister for an anointing if it didn't stop."

Nancy looked concerned. "I'll check with my husband to see if she called. And I'll go by and visit her tomorrow. Thank you for letting us know about our sister, Esther. We all need to remember her in our prayers. This is her first child and sometimes that can be difficult."

The room was silent for a long moment. Then Ruth raised her hand and jumped up before Nancy could call on her. "I was wondering why God punishes women for having children when they are supposed to be a gift from God? Why does it hurt so much to have a baby anyway?" she asked.

Her mother, Madeleine, pulled her back down. "You shouldn't ask such things," she whispered loudly. Ruth was unfazed and just looked at Nancy for an answer.

Nancy told the women to turn to Genesis 3:6 and read, "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

She let the women think about the scripture for a moment. "God has designated that women travail in childbirth, since Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden," she said, "but we have hope. Turn to I Timothy 2:14."

She waited while the woman turned to the scripture, and when the shuffling of pages stopped, she read, "And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression."

Nancy paused and looked around the room. "Now, we can learn that we have hope. Let's read verse 15. "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety."

Nancy looked in Ruth's direction. The young girl listened eagerly. "So you see, Ruth, your question is a very important one. If we, as women, are obedient to our husbands, we are promised salvation in childbirth. Let's read one more scripture. Turn to John 16:21."

She waited a moment, then started reading the passage: "A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world."

Alice raised her hand and Nancy nodded. "That is so true," Alice said. "Once the birth is over, you miraculously forget all the pain. That's what happened to me."

Other women nodded, some whispering to the person next to them. Nancy looked back at Ruth and said. "So you see, even though women have been ordained to suffer in childbirth, God has mercifully made it so that the pain is forgotten once the birth is over."

Nancy looked around the room. “It is the duty—the Christian duty—of women to bear children and raise them to be obedient. Children are a delight and a gift from God,” she stated.

“Does anyone have a favorite scripture on the subject that you’d like to share with the rest of the group?” Nancy asked.

Laura raised her hand and said, “Psalm 113 verse 9 is one of my favorite scriptures.” She turned to it and read aloud as the other women listened. “He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the Lord.”

Madeleine raised her hand. “Another Psalm is one of my favorites. Psalm 127, verse 3 to 5. “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man, so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.”

There was a quiet giggle as Madeleine read. She had eight children, so obviously she had been very blessed and her husband was quite a happy man.

The only woman who didn’t say anything was Gayla. She was nearly forty and had never conceived. She didn’t share with her sisters in faith her daily inner turmoil she experienced, and the degrading attitude of her husband, Jordan, who constantly reminded her that she was barren. It was a private test of her own faith. She would suffer silently, and pray, and have faith that God’s will would be done. When she’d suggested adoption, her husband had raged for hours about her lack of faith, finally stating, accusing her that what prevented her conception of children was her lack of faith. It was her fault, and hers alone. She never suggested adoption again. Such was her shame, and all the other women knew this, silently feeling

compassion for her while at the same time relieved that they weren't so cursed.

In closing, Nancy reminded the women to begin preparations for the Days of Unleavened Bread, and for Passover which was coming up in just a few weeks. She admonished them to remember to pray for Esther.

As they drove home, Rachel remarked, "This will be the first time I will participate in the Passover Service. What is it like?"

Audrey drove for a moment before responding. "It's the most beautiful ceremony," she said. "I don't think I can adequately describe it with words. You have to experience it for yourself. I don't want to spoil that for you."

Kathleen had been quiet up to then. "I think I'll ask Mr. Critchett if I can be baptized on Saturday night, too," she said.

Rachel smiled. Audrey smiled and nodded her approval.

Rachel and Kathleen both brought a bag with a towel and their bathing suits to Sabbath Services. They left them in Audrey's car until after the meeting assuming they would be going over to Deacon's house for the baptism ceremony. Audrey was going to go with them so she could celebrate their baptisms, too.

It was considered improper to bother the minister before a service as they needed to focus on their sermons. After all, God was inspiring his ministers and they needed to be in a prayerful state of mind.

So Kathleen waited until the service closed before asking to speak to Mr. Critchett. Alberto was the doorkeeper to the counseling room this week and he jotted down her name on a notepad. "Wait here," he told her. "There are three people ahead of you."

Rachel spotted Nancy as she waited with Kathleen to speak to the minister. She asked her about Esther. Nancy shook her head sadly. "It doesn't look good. She's having premature labor and bleeding."

"Should she go to the hospital?" Kathleen asked, regretting her words immediately.

Nancy ignored her question. "My husband went over to see her last night and they anointed her with oil and asked for God's intervention. If it's God's will, the child will be born safely," Nancy said. "Pray for her and her baby."

Kathleen and Rachel both nodded solemnly.

Finally Alberto motioned to Kathleen that it was her turn to see the minister. He stopped Rachel at the door. "We both want to talk to him," Kathleen said.

"One at a time," Alberto said, standing rigidly.

"I'll wait here," Rachel said. "You should add my name to your list," she told Alberto.

"Don't have to," he said. "You're already listed."

Rachel felt a pang in the pit of her stomach, and then re-assured herself that it must be about being baptized. He had said to bring her stuff, and he'd let her know his decision. Surely, that was just a formality. She began to sweat. Her heart raced and she sat down feeling dizzy. She breathed slowly and deeply trying to calm herself.

Kathleen went inside the counseling room and sat down in front of his desk. "I'd like to be baptized, too," she told Mr. Critchett.

He stared at her for a few moments without a word. The chair in which she sat felt awfully hard and she noticed how uncomfortable she was, no matter how she shifted in her seat.

Finally he spoke, "You want to be baptized?"

She detected sarcasm in his voice. She nodded.

"Speak up!"

"Yes," she said. "I want to be baptized."

“Tell me why?”

“Umm, I want to be a Child of God,” she said.

“Have you repented of your fornication?” he demanded.

Kathleen sat still, shocked, unable to respond. It was as if the breath had been kicked out of her and nothing was left to speak words.

“Have you?” he bellowed impatiently. “Do you know what God commands we do with those who commit fornication?”

Kathleen swallowed. “Yes,” she said meekly, looking down at her hands, wringing them, anger growing inside her. She suddenly hated Alice. It was all she could think about—that old bat telling lies about her, ruining her reputation. It was Alice who had turned Joel against her; she knew it, suddenly as sure as if Alice had admitted it to her in person.

“I don’t believe you,” Mr. Critchett stated matter-of-factly. “The last thing the faithful flock needs is to be infiltrated by whores.”

“I am not,” she started, but couldn’t bring herself to say the word whore out loud, not in denial, not associated with herself.

He smirked triumphantly and sniffed. “Look at yourself. Your hair is shorn. Don’t you know that your hair is your crown and God expects women to wear long hair?”

Kathleen reached for her short hair. She liked it short. It fit her. No one had ever said anything about it before. Other women had short hair. Certainly most of them grew it long and wore it over their shoulders but she hadn’t thought it was mandatory. “I could grow it out,” she said.

“Looks like you have a lot of work to do before you can be baptized,” he said.

“When will I know that I’m ready,” Kathleen asked.

“Until I see some evidence of your sincere conversion and dedication to the truth, you most certainly will not become a Child of God.”

“What evidence?” Kathleen asked. Her jaw muscles twitched but she was determined not to cry. She bit her lip to steady its quivering.

“Keep a log,” he said. “Write down all the time you spend in prayer and Bible Study.”

Kathleen waited for what she expected to be more instructions. When he started writing some notes in his journal, she asked, “How long do you want me to keep this list?”

“Just do it. I’ll let you know when to stop.”

That was the end of the conversation. Kathleen stood up and waited for him to dismiss her but when he didn’t acknowledge her, she walked out. Rachel was sitting outside.

“How did it go?” she asked.

Kathleen’s expression told it all.

“I’m so sorry, Kathleen,” Rachel said. She started to hug Kathleen, when Alberto called her to go inside.

“Good luck!” Kathleen said sarcastically. “What a jerk,” she whispered, turning away.

Rachel watched Kathleen walk away, startled by her comments.

Rachel gulped and headed inside. She waited for Mr. Critchett to acknowledge her. He nodded to the chair without looking up from the paper in front of him. She sat down. “I brought a towel and my bathing suit,” she said.

“I just met with your girlfriend,” he said, giving her a hateful look. Rachel thought he really did dislike Kathleen, and her, too.

“Kathleen. Yes, I saw her outside,” Rachel said.

“Did she tell you?”

“Tell me? No, I guess she didn’t,” Rachel answered, a feeling of unease waving through her body.

“Well, she’s not ready for baptism, and neither are you. I’m going to tell you the same thing I told her. You go back and keep a log. I want to know exactly how long and when you pray and study. Write down your meditations—what you are thinking about, too. Be specific. Don’t just say: Bible Study. Write down what you study—what scriptures you look up and what literature you’re reading.”

Rachel couldn’t prevent the tear that rolled down her cheek. It surprised her, apparently more than Mr. Critchett who ignored it.

“I can’t be baptized?” she asked.

He looked at her sternly and with annoyance on his face. “I want you to write down everything you do, who you talk to and what you discuss, how you spend every waking moment of the day. Do you understand that?”

“But you said, you told me to bring my bathing suit and towel, and I thought I would be participating in Passover next week, and, well, I don’t understand. I spend all my time in prayer and Bible Study. I fast at least one day every week. I know all the literature by heart. I can recite the Books of the Bible in order and know many scriptures by memorization. Kathleen and I volunteer at every function. We serve more than most of the other members do. I, I...”

“You just made my point,” he said. She thought she detected a smile on his face. His ugly face, she now realized, somehow unable to see past the deep pot mark scars and shiny, greasy dark hair falling over his brow. She wondered if he could sense her deep dislike she harbored towards him—her bad attitude.

“You are too immature. Both of you. Look at the trouble you’ve caused. One of you is guilty of fornication—one of you that we know about. You are both whores, and you know what the Bible says about whores, don’t you? You’ve let Kathleen be a bad

influence on you and on Faith, too. Thank goodness she's out of there. Now she'll be marrying a Christian minister and truly become a servant of God."

He finished the sentence but Rachel imagined more and that his unspoken words continued, "Unlike the two of you."

"I'm sorry," was all she could muster. Her mind was too confused. Nothing made sense. Suddenly she realized that he made her feel the same way her mother did—weak, defeated, and hopeless. How could that be, she wondered. He was God's minister. Her mother was excommunicated, possessed by the devil. He'd said so.

"You just want to be baptized so you can marry Malcolm. Don't think I'm not wise to you. He's not the man for you. Malcolm is leadership material and he needs a mate that is also leadership material. That's certainly not you. You need a more mature man who can handle your immaturity and guide you to a better spiritual life."

Rachel's jaw dropped. "I'm not asking to be baptized so I can get married," she said.

He didn't believe her. She could see it on his face. He was annoyed that she'd responded to his comment, so she shut up. She tried to look away from him. Suddenly she wanted to laugh out loud. She wanted to tell him, *Okay, don't let me get baptized. I'll go out and fornicate or something. That will make you happy.* But she didn't say anything.

She looked back down to her lap. She'd carried her Bible inside with her. *How ridiculous I must look*, she thought. She resolved, from now on, she'd never ask about baptism again. If God wanted her, then somehow, it would be worked out but she was never going to ask Mr. Critchett again. It hurt too much.

"Come back when your journal is full," he said, dismissing her with a wave of his arm. She left, hurrying past Alberto and everyone else. She went to her seat and

gathered her coat and bag. She stuffed her Bible inside. Kathleen approached.

“Are you okay?” Kathleen asked. Rachel shook her head.

“What are you going to do?” Kathleen asked, sensing her friend’s desperation.

Rachel looked her in the eye. “I don’t know. But right now, I just want to get out of here.”

Kathleen nodded. “Me, too. Come on.”

The two girls walked the few miles it was to their apartment. It gave them a sense of independence. Freedom. Asking members for a ride had seemed such an inconvenience for the members. They drove out of their way. They made room in a crowded car. No, the girls both wanted to be independent—they wanted to stop feeling guilty, and feeling so dependent on others.

There was a baptism celebration that night but Kathleen and Rachel didn’t attend. Audrey stopped by the next day to see them. “Are you two okay?” She surmising that the minister had told them they couldn’t be baptized.

Kathleen motioned for her to come inside. “Sure. We’re fine,” she said.

“Where’s Rachel,” Audrey asked.

“She went for a walk. She said she was going to commune with God outside today, so I assume she went to the park.”

“It’s not safe for a young girl to be out by herself,” Audrey said. “How long has she been gone?”

“An hour or so. She’ll be back soon. You want some coffee?”

Audrey nodded. “I’ll get it myself,” she said. “What are you doing?” She eyed Kathleen’s apron splattered with paint drops.

“I’m painting,” Kathleen said. “Come. I’ll show you.” She led Audrey into the living room. She’d set up a

makeshift easel in the corner and was painting a mountain scene with an old horse and buggy carriage in the tall green grass in the foreground.

"That's pretty," Audrey said. "I didn't know you painted."

"I gave it up for a while, but now I'm going back to it. It was the one thing that gave me peace of mind."

"Then why did you give it up?" Audrey asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I guess because I thought it was too worldly," Kathleen said sarcastically.

"What's with the attitude?" she asked.

"What fucking attitude?" Kathleen cried. "You mean the fact that everyone thinks I'm a whore! That I fornicated with some guy in the world? *That* attitude?"

Audrey didn't react as strongly as Kathleen expected and perhaps hoped she would. Apparently she'd heard that same frustration before. She did have two teenage sons. Instead, she put her arm around Kathleen. "I know you're not a whore, Kathleen," she said softly.

Kathleen wiped a tear from her face. "Well, you're the only one thanks to that fucking Alice Andrews! That lying bitch! Why isn't her lying a sin? Huh? Why isn't she being punished for telling lies about me and ruining my reputation?"

The teapot whistled. Audrey turned the stove off and poured her coffee. She was thinking about an appropriate response and not in any hurry to answer such a delicate question. Finally, she sat at the table and motioned to Kathleen to sit down, too.

Kathleen poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. Her hands shook as she poured the milk. She sighed.

"Mrs. Andrews is our elder," she said.

Kathleen protested, "I don't care who she is," but Audrey raised her hand to wait.

"She galls the heck out of me, too," Audrey said. "You would not believe the demands she makes on me

and the things I have to do for that woman. Sometimes I could strangle her, which of course isn't very Christian of me." She glanced a grin at Kathleen. Kathleen grinned back.

"But what bothers me is that you're saying that you weren't fooling around with that guy, what was his name?"

"Billy."

"If that's true, why didn't you speak up before this?"

Kathleen took a sip of her coffee. She waited a long moment. "You have to promise not to tell anyone," she said, looking intently at Audrey.

Audrey nodded reluctantly.

"It was Faith," Kathleen said.

"Faith?"

"Yes. Billy was Faith's boyfriend. She was the one who went out to my mother's car to meet him. Alice thought it was me because I lent Faith my coat."

Audrey sat back in her seat and thought this new information over for a moment. "I see." She took a large gulp of her coffee.

Kathleen nodded to her that indeed it was true.

"And you can't say anything now because it'll look like you're lying," Audrey said.

"Do you really think anyone would believe me? Over Alice and Mr. Critchett? Plus it will ruin Faith's opportunity to go to the college and hook a minister," Kathleen said.

"Did Faith?"

Kathleen looked at her, stricken that she suddenly realized she was betraying a promise. "I am not a whore, and neither is Faith or Rachel," Kathleen stated emphatically, avoiding a direct answer. She wasn't sure what Faith had done, actually. "It's all lies by that old bat, Alice. What is her problem, anyway?"

"She's jealous," Audrey said.

"Jealous?" Kathleen didn't believe that.

Audrey nodded. "She looks at you girls and sees all the mistakes she's made in her life while you have such wonderful opportunities ahead of you. She just can't stand that."

"She is an old bitch," Kathleen said.

"That's not nice," Audrey said sternly.

"I know. But I don't feel very nice and it's her fault I don't feel nice."

"Love your enemies. Pray for those that spitefully use you. Remember?" Audrey asked.

"That's a lot easier to say than do," Kathleen said.

"Well, you have to ask God for the strength. He makes up for what we lack," Audrey said.

Rachel came in the door. She overheard Audrey's last comment. "Strength for what?" she asked.

Kathleen looked at Rachel. "I told her about Alice's lies." She waited for Rachel to respond, waited for her to get mad at her for breaking a promise they had both made to Faith.

Rachel sat down between Audrey and Kathleen. "I'm glad you did. It's time someone knew. Faith didn't want you to take the blame for her. If you ask me, it's not Alice's fault." She looked at both women.

Kathleen gave her a look, like that wasn't a logical statement. "What are you talking about? Alice is the one who lied about us!" Kathleen said.

"I've been thinking about this a lot and if you ask me," Rachel said, "it's Mr. Critchett's fault for listening to her."

Audrey's expression was shock. No one spoke against a minister of God. She wanted to say something but couldn't put it into words quickly enough.

Rachel continued after pausing to let her two friends think about her words. "I think he listened to Alice because it's what *he* wants to hear about us. I think he knows exactly what kind of person Alice is." Rachel

looked directly at Audrey. “Why does Alice get such special treatment?”

Audrey gasped, suddenly feeling very put-on-the-spot. She knew why Alice got the special treatment or at least she suspected why, but saying it aloud would sound so bad. She hadn’t thought about it consciously before and now, she was wondering herself.

The doubts lasted only seconds, though, as she soon recognized the source of all doubt was Satan and it was her job as the elder, converted person to help these two with their attitude, not allow herself to be drawn into it as well. These were certainly inappropriate comments from both Kathleen and Rachel. “What did he say to you two girls, anyway?” she asked.

“He said we were whores!” Kathleen said. “Jeez, haven’t you been listening?”

Rachel added, “He told us to keep a journal of everything we do, of our prayer and study and he’d look it over to see if we are ready for baptism.”

“You mean, he asked you to bring your bathing suit and towel, and then told you that you weren’t ready to be baptized?” Audrey asked trying to cover up her surprise.

Both girls nodded.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Rachel said.

“I didn’t want to be baptized anyway,” Kathleen added.

Audrey looked at them sadly. “That’s not right,” she muttered. “Both of you girls are just as ready for baptism as anyone else. He didn’t give Lorna such a hard time about it.”

“Maybe that’s because Lorna was getting married,” Kathleen stated. “If being baptized means I have to get married, I’m just as happy to stay unconverted.”

Rachel thought about Mr. Critchett’s words, accusing her of wanting to be baptized in order to marry Malcolm. “I’ve wanted to be baptized since the first day I attended

services,” she said to both women. “I wanted it long before I ever met Malcolm or anyone else. I even stopped seeing Malcolm when Mr. Critchett told me to. We don’t even speak now.” A tear slipped out of her eye and rolled down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away.

“That’s a shame if you ask me. You two were so cute together,” Audrey said.

“I’m not the right girl for Malcolm,” Rachel said, suddenly bursting into tears. She felt so humiliated, so inadequate. She had to tell her closest friends.

“It’s all right,” Audrey said, trying to comfort her. “I think you’re perfect for each other.”

“Well, that’s not what Mr. Critchett says. He’s says I’m not leadership material. He says I need an older husband to guide me spiritually,” Rachel cried.

“Ben?” Kathleen blurted out.

“Oh, God, no!” Audrey said. It was so spontaneous, they all laughed.

“He’s my age,” Audrey said. “He must be close to forty. He’s way too old for you.” Even as Audrey spoke the words, she thought about all the young women in the church who had indeed married much older men—men whom she felt should be looking for wives nearer her age but of course, that was never going to happen for her. She wondered if she would ever be married again, and felt a deep longing for her husband.

Rachel wiped her face. She looked at her two friends. “There is no way I would ever, EVER, marry Ben. I’d rather die.”

Audrey looked worried. “Don’t talk like that,” she scolded. “God never tests us more than we can bear. Remember the scripture?” Audrey was now speaking not only to her two young friends but also to herself and her predicament and her own sense of hopelessness.

Rachel said, “First Corinthians 10, verse 13. God promises to make an escape. But I can’t see any way out.

Not if they tell me to marry Ben. I don't think I can take any more tests. I've turned my back on my little brother when he needed me. I don't even know where he is, or if he's okay. I feel so guilty all the time. No matter what I do, I'm always bad, somehow." She shook her head sadly. "Maybe Mr. Critchett is right. Maybe I'm not really being called."

Audrey and Kathleen hugged Rachel. Pent up emotions of anger, indeed rage and frustration bubbled to the surface and spilled over and Rachel sobbed uncontrollably for several minutes. Audrey and Kathleen comforted her, and hugged her, and cried with her. When she stopped, she felt relieved. The pressure seemed to have been released.

"I always feel better after a good cry," Audrey said.

"You cry?" Kathleen asked.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with crying. It's natural to feel these things but you have to trust God to deliver you. Just remember to always put your faith in God." Audrey said.

She glanced at her watch. "I have to go. The ladies are waiting for me. Are you two going to be all right?"

Kathleen nodded and Rachel smiled.

"Promise you'll come to me if you have any more bad days," Audrey said. "I'll always be here for you."

Chapter 13

*He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is Love.
Hebrews 4:8*

As became their routine, both Rachel and Kathleen often talked about their feelings and their attitudes. They prayed together for God to help them, and to grant them understanding, maturity and wisdom. They desperately wanted to be virtuous women.

Gradually, they began to recover from their anger but neither of them wanted another episode like they'd experienced that weekend. Both vowed not to ask Mr. Critchett again about baptism. If God really wanted them, then God would make it happen. That, they decided, was going to be their faith.

Rachel and Kathleen helped with Passover preparations. There were small glasses used for the wine ceremony that had to be specially washed in hot sudsy water and dried with clean unused towels. They were assigned the task, along with some other women. It took them a couple hours in the evening, and Deacon drove them back to their apartment when finished.

The next night was Passover—an observance done late at night. Kathleen and Rachel were assigned the task of overseeing the children's room during this most holy service.

The ceremony was secretive. Members arrived in somber moods and didn't greet each other with customary hugs and kisses. They simply nodded, eyes diverted or looking down. After turning the children over to Kathleen and Rachel, the parents would walk into the auditorium and close the door behind them.

Rachel and Kathleen read Bible stories from the church's children's book which contained vivid colorful images of Bible events and characters. The children enjoyed being read to and Rachel and Kathleen took turns.

When they stopped to give the kids some snacks, Rachel motioned to Kathleen to come over where she was changing the diaper of an infant. The little girl was about a year and a half. "Look at this," Rachel whispered. She pointed to the child's bottom. It was black and blue.

"That must hurt," Kathleen whispered back.

"I could never do that to my baby," Rachel said. "How can a little baby be so evil as to deserve to be bruised like that?"

Kathleen shrugged. "They are born evil. You know you have to root it out of them—break their spirit. That's what the Bible says. I don't know. Maybe it'll make sense when we have our own children."

"You really think so?"

"I don't know but what are we supposed to do—turn them in for beating their kid? Who are we going to tell? They all do it."

They returned to reading stories. When the Passover service ended, the people came back to the children's room to gather their young ones. Rachel watched as a young father picked up the little girl with the bruises. He hugged her and she hugged him back.

Rachel tried not to stare but watched them leave. She felt confused. These parents appeared affectionate to their children, and the children obviously loved their parents, yet they were bruised. She decided that she'd pray about it and ask God to help her understand. That was her immediate remedy and worked for the moment.

Rachel and Kathleen knew the Passover service involved drinking wine and eating unleavened bread and foot-washing ceremonies, but beyond that they could only

observe the participants who left just as silently and somberly after it ended.

Over the next few days, Rachel and Kathleen talked a lot about the children and the doctrines and for the first time, both expressed out loud their concerns. On Wednesday they skipped the women's meeting with an excuse about working late. When Audrey stopped by to pick them up, they told her not to come for them on Saturday because they wanted to walk and enjoy the spring weather.

Kathleen and Rachel arrived at the last minute for services that Saturday and planned to sit in the back of the auditorium. But Ben was waiting at the door and smiled when he spied Rachel. He said rather impatiently, "I thought you weren't coming."

"I'm not sitting with you," Rachel said firmly, surprising herself.

The color drained from his face and his big smile faded. "But I saved you a seat right down front so we can hear everything. Pastor Driscoll is giving the main sermon today. I thought we could talk to him after services, you know, about you getting baptized." Ben rambled on awkwardly.

Rachel turned abruptly. Kathleen thought her friend was going to slap this man, she looked so peeved. "My spiritual life is NONE of your business!"

"But, I didn't mean, I" ... Ben looked surprised.

"Leave me alone."

He was immediately sad, and Rachel thought she perceived anger. He walked away towards the front of the auditorium. After the encounter with Ben, they hurried to the back where there were empty seats.

Many young mothers sat in this section with their children so as not to disturb the service. It seemed like a

good place to avoid too much conversation, which was the girls' intention today.

Audrey spotted them and hurried to sit in the seat beside them. She whispered, "How are you girls doing? I've been worried about you."

Both Rachel and Kathleen said simply, "Fine." Then services started. Pastor Driscoll was the main speaker for this Holy Day Service—The First Day of Unleavened Bread. It was a high Sabbath.

He spoke about the True Church—the Body of Christ. Ephesians 4:4, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;" He explained that there is only one True Church. Other churches were merely counterfeits, designed by Satan to deceive the unbelievers. Verse 5, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism,"

Rachel didn't write down any notes this time. She put her pen on her notebook and sat back in her chair and listened. The words Driscoll was reading from Ephesians 4:4 seemed to echo inside her head. "One Church. One Spirit. One Body. One Faith. One Baptism."

Driscoll turned to Ephesians 5, "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; (verse 2) And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savor."

He explained that this was the meaning of the Passover Service, that Christ had been the perfect sacrifice, substituting himself for us to atone for our sins. We are undeserving of his sacrifice and must appreciate it sincerely and somberly. We must not take it lightly—that would be an unpardonable sin. It was the greatest blessing to be a Child of God.

Children that God loves so much that he sacrificed his only son, Jesus, for our sins. He explained how the Old Testament rituals were a shadow of the real sacrifice to come later, when Jesus lived on this earth. We no longer

were required to make animal sacrifices, now that the old covenant had been fulfilled.

The drinking of the ceremonial wine, done only at this sacred time represented the blood of Christ shed for our sins, and the eating of unleavened bread represented the body of Christ, broken so that we might be healed.

He turned to numerous scriptures and explained the ceremony of washing feet—symbolic of our servitude to The Church and to each other.

He returned to Ephesians 5 and read the next verse (3) which caught Rachel's attention, (verse 3) "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints;" He skipped to verse 5, "For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Verse 8) "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light."

He read much of the remaining verses in Chapter 5 of Ephesians. He made special note of verse 22, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. (23) For the husband is the head of the wife..."

Rachel glanced at Kathleen. She rarely took such extensive notes as Rachel but she usually wrote scriptural references with short notes. Today she seemed to be listening more than writing, too.

Kathleen looked at Rachel. Each knew what the other was thinking—did marriage mean the end of freedom? Did it mean that you were somehow the property of your husband? Was it a step back, as if you were a child? And could they submit as was required by the scriptures?

Doubt showed on both girls' faces. Doubt and guilt, because maybe Mr. Critchett was right—maybe they just weren't good enough to be true members of The Church.

Rachel's mind wandered briefly. She thought about how Ben had come to services today and it was obvious he intended to sit with her. She didn't like feeling controlled by him. She thought about how she had told him flatly that she didn't want to sit with him. He had looked crushed but complied and sat down front next to some of the other single men.

As she sat with Kathleen and Audrey near the end of an aisle in the back, it felt like a small victory and she inwardly smiled. It was a rare moment when she truly felt in control, even just a little. It felt good. She realized that she wanted control of her own life.

Driscoll talked about the love within The Church—love that can result only from God's Holy Spirit. There was no real love outside of God's True Church, not from friends or family. The only real love was within The Church. Rachel's mind drifted for a few moments as she thought of her two brothers and her father and how much she missed them and loved them.

When she turned her attention back to the sermon, Driscoll was reading scriptures telling the brethren to encourage one another, to greet each other with a kiss, to forgive the transgressions of others.

He talked about the need to monitor your thoughts and diligently root out any bad attitudes. He read Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Rachel jotted down this reference. These words soothed her mind and she thought perhaps if she studied them more, she might improve her bad attitude. She needed to purge wrong thoughts from her mind and replace them with good, wholesome thoughts. She knew

that was what was holding her back from true conversion—she hadn't purged evil thoughts from her mind.

Thus started the Spring Holy Days, led with the Passover service, and followed with The Days of Unleavened Bread. In a couple months, they would observe yet another Holy Day, Pentecost.

During the week of the Days of Unleavened Bread, which started after Passover, everyone was forbidden to eat anything containing leavening. You must clean your home thoroughly and get rid of any crumbs. Every food item in your cupboards had to be read to check the ingredients—those with leavening discarded. The lesson was to clean all sin out of your life.

Rachel thought that perhaps as they cleaned the leavening out of their apartment, she and Kathleen would be able to expunge the bad attitudes they were both experiencing.

She was pleased when Driscoll announced that he would be back for the Last Day of Unleavened Bread. She thought he'd been coming up to New Hampshire more frequently lately, and it was a welcome change. She found herself dreading Mr. Critchett's long, disparaging and condemning type of sermons.

Driscoll's sermons always made her feel better. He seemed to be a much more cheerful person, and she hadn't heard him refer to women in such negative ways as Critchett did.

She remembered that he'd told her it was up to Mr. Critchett when she could be baptized. She wondered if they could move to another church area and someone else might be overseeing her spiritual growth. She made a mental note to ask Kathleen about that idea. Of course, like everything else, they'd need permission.

“I’d like to go home right away,” Kathleen whispered to Rachel as they were singing the final hymn. Rachel nodded.

As they gathered their things, Kathleen tapped Rachel and nodded down front. Ben was talking to Mr. Critchett. Both men glanced up towards Rachel as they talked. She felt a sudden chill—a fear actually. Rachel grabbed Kathleen’s arm. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

People were talking and standing around. There was to be a special social this evening so members were in no hurry to leave. Kathleen and Rachel didn’t plan to attend.

As they passed the doors to the auditorium, they saw Pastor Driscoll talking with Audrey and Deacon in the hallway involved in a very animated three-way conversation. No one else was nearby.

The two girls stopped talking as they walked by not wanting to disturb them. Rachel whispered to Kathleen, “I wonder what they’re talking about.”

Kathleen nodded. “Pastor Driscoll looks pretty angry. We better get out of here.”

Driscoll, Deacon and Audrey were so absorbed in their own conversation they didn’t notice Rachel and Kathleen as they quietly walked past and hurried out the door.

Chapter 14

That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:7

No one asked Kathleen or Rachel where they were or why they weren't at the social. On Sunday, Audrey came by for coffee and to check on them. She didn't stay long.

Next Sabbath was the last Day of Unleavened Bread. Driscoll returned to give the afternoon service. As he headed toward the front of the auditorium, he noticed Ben hovering around Rachel. "Why don't you find someone more suitable—nearer your own age," he said, a little impatiently. Ben looked disappointed.

Kathleen painted each evening after they'd eaten their dinner. She told Rachel that it was her way of expressing herself. Rachel was surprised when Kathleen set up an easel because she'd thrown out all her paints earlier.

"What made you change your mind?" she asked, admiring the landscape Kathleen was painting.

Kathleen shrugged. "I decided it wasn't wrong to do artistic work, as long as it glorified God."

Rachel nodded. "That seems logical," she said. She figured Kathleen's mother had brought the painting supplies from home. She was always bringing stuff for Kathleen at services.

Rachel began writing in her journal every night, starting another diary which she hadn't done since her mother had threatened to use it against her father. She'd burned her diary then and not been able to keep one since

but now it was once again her friend—her confidant and writing in it helped her make sense of things.

Wednesday night Women Meetings continued. Audrey would pick them up and they would squeeze in the back seat with two older widows Audrey also transported.

Alice always sat in the front seat with Audrey. The old lady never said hello to the girls. They were sure she hated them. The ride was only a few miles. They made small conversations with the two old ladies who sat in the back with them.

One was Desiree, a very thin lady. They guessed she was at least eighty, but no one knew for sure. The other was Beulah, a short, overweight woman who had vision problems. She wore a blond wig, which the girls had giggled about, because often it would be on crooked and straggly gray hairs would be sticking out of it.

Seven weeks and one day later was the next holy day—Pentecost. Two weeks before this, in mid May, there was a knock at the door late on Monday night. It was Alberto. Mr. Critchett wants to see you,” he told Rachel when she opened the door.

Rachel grabbed her sweater without a word. She didn’t want to go but didn’t feel she could say no. She determined not to react to anything he said to her this time. She would expect the worst. These were her thoughts as she walked quietly behind Alberto to the car parked on the opposite side of the street.

Critchett sat in the front behind the steering wheel. Alberto opened the back door and Rachel got inside. Alberto stood outside by the front door this time.

Critchett gave her a hateful look. *He really doesn’t like me*, she thought and pulled her sweater tightly, feeling chilled. “You are to marry an older man,” he announced. She tried not to react. She swallowed and listened.

“You are not to even consider Malcolm as a potential mate,” he snarled. “I’ve been watching you. I know your

evil mind. You think you can play up to unsuspecting young men like Malcolm.”

Rachel wanted to object. She wanted to tell him that she'd obeyed his orders and hadn't even spoken to Malcolm. They didn't even exchange glances. They kept both the letter of his command and the spirit of it.

Critchett paused for a long moment as if expecting her to react. He looked almost disappointed when she sat quietly. She wondered if he wanted her to say something. *What if he wants me to rebel, so he can say I'm rebellious and suspend me?* she thought. Her heart beat increased—panic instinct—she felt a real sense of danger.

“You will grow to love Ben after you're married,” he told her. “You can't be baptized until you accept the fact. You *will* marry Ben.”

Rachel didn't know what to say.

Critchett studied her expression. “I can see that you are in a rebellious attitude,” he said.

“No, I am not,” Rachel whispered, looking down at her hands.

“If you are disobedient, you will be suspended, or possibly excommunicated like your mother and your brother. I suspect you are infected with the same demons as your family. You must pray, fast and repent.”

Again, she sensed that he wanted her to respond. She feared that he was setting her up so that no matter what she said, he would suspend her for being rebellious. She wondered if this had happened to the other women who were put on suspension. His suggestion that she was plagued by demons instantly panicked her further and she wondered if this could be the reason why she struggled so much with her thoughts and attitudes. Was she giving in to the work of demons?

She swallowed and silently prayed, *God, please help me. I don't know what to say.* She looked up at Critchett. “I don't think I am ready to marry anyone,” she said. “I will

pray and ask God to help me understand and believe what you're telling me."

Critchett frowned. "Are you questioning my authority?"

"No. Not at all," Rachel says humbly. "I will pray. God will help me but I'm not ready right now to get married. Not to anyone. Not to Ben. Not to anyone."

"Your mother told me all about you," Critchett said. "How selfish you are—how boy-crazy you are." He elongated the word boy.

Rachel blurted out, "You excommunicated my mother because she was possessed by demons. She is a liar." She wished immediately that she could take back her words, not because they were untrue but because she'd let him know he was hitting a nerve with the subject. And she knew her tone was defiant. She saw his face grow hard, angry.

"Get out!" Critchett yelled, waving his arm toward the door.

Rachel was startled at his forcefulness. He repeated it even louder. "Get out, you unclean woman!"

Alberto had already opened the door. Rachel got out and ran back inside her apartment. She locked the door and leaned against it breathing hard.

"What did he want?" Kathleen asked.

Rachel was shaking. "He said I have to marry Ben."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I wasn't ready to marry anyone, and that I'd pray about it."

"That was good," Kathleen said. "How could he be critical of that answer?"

"I don't know. But I do know that he's out to get me. I really think he was baiting me. I think he wants to get rid of me."

Kathleen's expression grew somber. "You think he wants to kick you out of the church?"

Rachel nodded. "I wish I could just run away."

"Why don't we?" Kathleen said. "We could relocate to another area like we talked about doing."

"He'll never let us," Rachel said.

"We won't tell him. I bet Mr. Driscoll would welcome us in the Boston area. Why don't we check it out?"

At the Wednesday Women's Meeting, Kathleen told Audrey that Critchett wanted Rachel to marry Ben. Audrey looked very concerned. "I don't know what to do," Rachel said. "I can't marry Ben. I don't even like him!"

"Be patient and don't agree to anything yet," Audrey advised. "I'll talk to Deacon. Try not to worry."

Mr. Critchett was very cool when he passed Rachel in the auditorium the next Saturday morning. He looked the other way and stomped past. He slammed down his briefcase so loudly that others looked up with concern.

Audrey came over and sat down beside the two girls. She noticed Critchett's behavior. "Don't worry," she whispered to Rachel, "You won't be forced to marry Ben."

Critchett gave a blistering anti-woman sermon, Quoted I Peter 3:1 and other scriptures. "A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike. " Proverbs 27:15 His tone was very hostile. Proverbs 31:3 He talked about widows overeating—he told the audience how he emptied their refrigerators and threw away their food.

Some of the elderly widows in the audience started to cry. "Fat cows," he called them, as his stringy, greasy hair fell into his face. He belittled them for being weak in character, gluttons, lazy. Spit flew out of his mouth as he raged on about the evils of women. Women who tempt men, as Eve did in the Garden of Eden. As some of the women in the audience continued to do to this day.

“Turn to I Timothy Chapter Two,” he instructed the congregation. “Starting with verse 9, In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with *shamefacedness* and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; And verse 10, But which becometh women professing godliness with good works.”

He raised his voice even louder and said, “Verse 11, Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.” He paused and repeated the verse slowly emphasizing each word. Then he said, “Verse 12, But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, **BUT TO BE IN SILENCE.**” He was now yelling, his head shaking and his arms waving frantically.

He paused to catch his breath. The room was hushed. All eyes were watching his performance, some with fear, some with hurt, some with shame.

In a normal tone, he said, “Verse 13, For Adam was first formed, then Eve. Verse 14, And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived **WAS IN THE TRANSGRESSION.**”

He paused, then said, “The woman is the one who sinned. Do you understand what that means? Women are the root cause of sin, the very sin that led to the need for our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, to be sacrificed on the Cross!” The room was silent.

He continued, “Verse 15, Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.”

He looked around the room, his eyes wild, almost gleeful. “If you women want to be saved in childbirth, you must continue in faith. Some of you have compromised on the will of God and gone to doctors and sought out medical care when the Bible clearly tells you—commands you—to put your faith in God during childbirth. It’s time to change that. You women must submit yourselves to your husbands and to God! And you men—how dare you

call yourselves Children of God when you let your wives rule over you! You are the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church. Start acting like it.”

People were solemn after the service ended. Rachel and Kathleen told Audrey they wanted to walk home. “It’s spring and the weather is nice, and it isn’t dark yet. We hardly ever get to go outside now.”

“Are you sure?” Audrey asked. “I’d be happy to take you.”

“You have to transport the widows,” Kathleen said. The elderly women were already waiting for Audrey. It seemed everyone was anxious to leave after this service. “We’re fine. We want to walk.”

The next Wednesday Women’s Meeting started off quietly. Nancy told the group, after introductions, that she was troubled with them—some of the women were obviously not living up to their Christian standards. She cited problems and scriptures. Rachel noticed that Madeleine was wiping her eyes. They wondered what was wrong.

Finally, Nancy told the group. “Esther went into premature labor on Sunday. She had a little girl. She named her Joy. Little Joy died yesterday. She lived only three days. Esther is very upset. We need to help her. Pray for her. Send food. Be there if she wants to talk.”

Ruth raised her hand before Madeleine could pull it down. Nancy nodded. “Did Esther sin? Is that why her baby died?” Ruth asked.

Madeleine gasped, “Ruth!”

Nancy didn’t seem to have an answer. The women looked at her, waiting. Finally, Nancy said, “The baby was two months premature. She couldn’t survive outside the womb. We don’t always understand God’s will. All we know is that God has taken little Joy and we must trust that it is to fulfill His purpose.”

Ruth wasn't satisfied but Madeleine held her daughter's hand tightly to her side. "That's enough questions," she whispered loudly.

"Is there going to be a funeral?" Marianne asked.

"Just a private ceremony. They prefer to grieve alone."

"How's her husband taking it?" Laura asked.

"He's doing okay. We need to pray for both of them. Let's pray right now." Nancy led the women in prayer.

Chapter 15

*For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.
Galatians 3:26*

In the two weeks since Critchett's late night counseling of Rachel, he hadn't said anything to either of the girls. It was now Pentecost – early June. Because it was a special Holy Day Mr. Roberts was the main speaker in the morning service, with Critchett giving the sermonette, Alberto leading the prayers, and Malcolm the new song-leader.

Rachel watched Malcolm. She smiled when his magnified voice sounded off key. These hymns were not traditional and were hard to follow for anyone. But Malcolm smiled broadly as he waved his arms in time to the music.

Mr. Roberts's sermon was about love. He defined three kinds of love: agape, philia, and eros. Philia is brotherly love, the root word of the city Philadelphia. Eros is romantic love, love between a man and a woman. Agape is different—it is godly love. Godly love is present only in the True Church—by gift of the Holy Spirit. It surmounts any other love—the love of parents or family, or friends. Rachel and Kathleen found his sermon very interesting.

Driscoll came for afternoon service. He had to hurry up from the Boston church area. At lunch members joked about having faith and that everyone was sure he'd make it in time. Sure enough, he arrived just moments before he was scheduled to speak.

Rachel and Kathleen were happy when he gave the sermon. This afternoon, Roberts gave the sermonette prior to Driscoll giving the sermon. Afterwards, Driscoll

mingled with the brethren, joked with them and didn't go in the back room for counseling as Critchett did.

When he passed by Rachel and Kathleen, he stopped. "How are you two young ladies doing?" he asked with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Rachel blushed. Kathleen answered for both of them. "We're fine. We really enjoyed your sermon."

He nodded. "When are you two going to get baptized anyway?"

Both girls looked surprised and could hardly think of an answer. "Well, we want to, but," Rachel started to say, blushing.

"We have been hoping to, but," Kathleen said but stopped because she couldn't think of an answer she'd want to speak aloud. All the two girls could think of was Critchett's vehement denial of their inquiry. They both shrugged.

"What are you waiting for?" Driscoll asked again with a smile. He seemed to be enjoying their responses.

"We're waiting for permission," Rachel said. "You told me Mr. Critchett would say when I could be baptized, and I'm still waiting."

"Ha," he said, scratching his chin, thinking for a moment. Deacon was standing nearby. "Hey," he said, calling to the man. "Come over here a minute."

Deacon came over and listened for his instructions. "Is your tank set up?" Driscoll asked.

Deacon nodded. "Just have to add the water. Only takes a few minutes."

"Good," Driscoll said. "What is a good time for you? I'm staying over tonight with the Roberts'. Can we do a baptism in the morning?"

"Sure," Deacon said. "Who?"

"These two young ladies right here." Driscoll answered.

Kathleen and Rachel smiled. "Really?" Rachel asked.

“Of course. We can’t lose two fine upstanding young women like you two.” He leaned closer to confide to them, “But I must warn you, once you’re baptized, watch out for the men. They’ll hound you day and night!” He had that twinkle in his eye.

Deacon smiled broadly.

Rachel blushed again. Kathleen just smiled. “That won’t be a problem. We’re good at saying no,” she said.

He nodded. “Good. I’ll see you tomorrow at Deacon’s then. What time?” He turned to Deacon.

“How about 10?” Deacon said.

“Ten it is.” Driscoll smiled victoriously and headed to the next group of members.

Audrey had overheard the conversation and now congratulated the girls. “See, I told you everything would work out all right.”

Rachel smiled. “I’m so glad Driscoll is going to be the one to baptize me.”

“Me, too,” Kathleen said.

“I think we should celebrate,” Audrey said. Deacon nodded. “How about pizza?” she asked. “At my apartment.”

“I’ll bring some wine,” Deacon said. “And I’ll give the girls a ride.”

Rachel and Kathleen could hardly contain themselves. They told everyone the good news. Even after they got home that night, they talked late, too excited to sleep.

The next morning, the girls headed over to Deacon’s house. It was close enough for them to walk. He had prepared everything. His tub was in the basement—a rather large, coffin-shaped box that was waterproofed with plastic lining, and filled with water. “I put in all cold water,” he teased when the girls came inside.

His wife, Judy, was sitting at the kitchen table sipping coffee and reading the Sunday paper. Rachel and Kathleen

had never met her. She had been a non-being to them, someone that until now, they really didn't think about.

Deacon introduced the girls and his wife smiled. She gave them a strange look, as if she knew something, a sense that could be mistaken for superiority or snobbishness but it really wasn't.

Rachel wondered briefly about Deacon's wife. He spent so much of his time with the brethren and church activities. How did she feel about that?

She concluded it must be hard to be married to an unconverted spouse and not share the knowledge of The Truth and God's Holy Spirit. It was so much better to be married in the Church.

Deacon led them into the living room first where Driscoll was sitting and chatting with Audrey. Several members had come to witness the baptism. It was considered a joyous occasion—much better than the day of one's physical birth. It was the day of one's spiritual birth—the day one truly became a Child of God.

Rachel and Kathleen were so happy. They both smiled broadly. For Rachel, it had been a long wait. She'd given up. She felt that even if Mr. Critchett had told her she could be baptized that she would have doubted, but since it was Mr. Driscoll she was certain it was truly God's will.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Roberts were also present. Nancy had brought some freshly baked whole wheat muffins for everyone. Audrey had brought cookies. Deacon provided a coffee pot in the corner.

"Well, here they are. Are you two all ready for the big plunge?" Driscoll was in a jovial mood. "I warned these two young ladies that they'd have to fend off all the bachelors who'll be hounding them day and night." Everyone laughed. "What do you think? Ready?"

"I'm ready," Kathleen said.

"So am I," Rachel said.

“Well, let’s not keep them waiting. Besides, the water might warm up,” Driscoll said, winking at Deacon.

“I added some ice cubes,” Deacon replied. Everyone laughed again.

Once downstairs in the basement, Rachel and Kathleen went behind a curtain and came back outside in bathing suits with a towel wrapped around them. Embarrassed, they were anxious to get into the water. Driscoll stood beside the large tub. He was wearing Deacon’s waist high waders.

“Who’s first?” he asked.

Rachel stepped forward, since she was already in front of Kathleen.

She climbed the small stairs and stepped into the water. It was cold but not unbearable. She stood beside Driscoll.

“You can hold your nose if you like,” he said. “I have to hold you under long enough to prove you’ve left your old life behind.”

“Okay,” Rachel said. “She hadn’t thought about that but remembered that the whole body must be submerged.”

Driscoll looked at the small audience gathered around. “You all make sure she’s totally under the water. You’re my witnesses.” They all nodded.

“Rachel, do you accept that Jesus Christ is your Saviour, and that he died because of your sins?”

Rachel replied, “Yes.” She was starting to shiver, partly from cold, and partly from nerves.

“And do you profess that you desire to become a Child of God, to be adopted by the Father into his loving family?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“And do you, Rachel, promise to leave behind your old self, to purge sin out of your life and live according to the Laws of God for the rest of your natural life?”

“Yes,” she said again, this time her teeth chattered.

“Then I hereby submerge your physical body in water so that you die of this life and that you may be born again as a Child of God, his faithful servant, to obey his commandments,” Driscoll said, as he held Rachel’s back and gently pulled her down under the water.

Rachel held her nose and closed her eyes. She was submerged for a few seconds and then pulled out of the water. “Congratulations,” Driscoll said. “Welcome to the family of God.”

Everyone clapped. Rachel smiled. “Thank you,” she said to Driscoll. “Thank you so much!” She wanted to hug him but instead hugged Kathleen when she got out.

Driscoll repeated the same ceremony with Kathleen. Rachel wrapped herself in her towel and watched her friend’s baptism. She thought how great it was that the two of them could share the same baptism day. Still shivering, both Rachel and Kathleen went back behind the curtain and dried off as best they could and put their clothes back on.

Driscoll had to leave so he said a quick good-bye to everyone. Audrey offered to drive the girls home and they were cold and damp, so they also left right away, after thanking Deacon and everyone for coming.

Rachel said good-bye to Judy, too. Judy was still reading her newspaper at the kitchen table. She pulled it aside and smiled at Rachel. “You have a nice day, dear,” she said, going back to her article.

As soon as Audrey dropped them off, Rachel and Kathleen took warm showers and redressed. “I’m going to the park,” Rachel told Kathleen.

“I feel like painting,” Kathleen said. “How long will you be gone?”

“An hour or two. It’s such a beautiful day—I just want to be outside.”

Rachel walked to the park a few blocks away. Her feet barely hit the sidewalk as she skipped along. She was so happy. It was almost a floating sensation she experienced, as if she were truly walking on air.

She was sure the sun was smiling just for her—that God was smiling down on her and saying, “well done, my new daughter!” She smiled back. “I am so happy,” she thought.

As she walked, she prayed silently—thanking God for answering her prayers and for calling her to be chosen to know The Truth. She vowed to live her life in this moment—to always feel this warmth and love—from God. She was sure she could obey. Now she had God’s Holy Spirit to help her. Now she would finally be a Child of God.

She marveled at how wonderful she felt—happier than she could ever remember in her entire life. No wonder the brethren were so special, she thought, because they had experienced this feeling, too. It was worth the wait, and the anguish.

Back at the penthouse Kathleen pulled out her canvas and started painting. She, too, was overcome with the wonderful power of God’s love. While she hadn’t expressed her desires as openly as Rachel, she’d always wanted to be baptized.

Now she felt special, too. She was a person of value. She knew this because God had chosen her, and God loved her, just as she was.

She began to think that her talent for painting was a gift from God and wondered how she could use it to glorify God. That would be a goal for her now, to paint, but to do so to glorify God, to honor God and praise him. She would paint beautiful scenes of the world he had created. Majestic mountains, picturesque valleys, waterfalls, streams, wildlife and forests.

Both girls felt such warmth, such love. It would stay with them for some time to come, and sustain them for what was to come. For this day, however, they both just basked in this wonderful feeling of rebirth and love.

Two weeks later, Ben came up from Boston to attend services, with the excuse that Faith needed a ride. She'd flown into Logan from college for her summer vacation. She planned to stay with Kathleen and Rachel until the following weekend, when her folks would come down from Vermont and take her back home with them.

Kathleen and Rachel waited for Faith at the door, and were anxious to tell her the news about their recent baptism. Big smiles and hugs as the three girls are reunited. "Guess what?" Kathleen said.

"Congratulations," Faith said.

"How'd you know?" Rachel asked.

"Ben told me. He said Mr. Driscoll came up last week and you two were baptized in your own special ceremony. That's great. Welcome to the Family of God," Faith said.

Rachel glanced at Kathleen. "Welcome?" Kathleen asked. "Are you baptized, too?"

Faith nodded.

"When?" Rachel asked. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"It was just before Passover," Faith said. "I knew how much you wanted to be baptized, Rachel. I was hoping to tell you like now, when you'd also been baptized."

Ben stood near the door expecting a greeting but the three girls ignored him, so taken up with their own conversations. They headed into the auditorium to find three seats.

"I can't wait to hear about college," Kathleen said.

"We can talk tonight," Faith told her. "It's time for services to start. Sorry we arrived so late but Ben wanted to attend the morning service in Boston first. I stayed with the deacon family last night. It seems like a long trip,

and to tell you the truth, I am anxious to rest. Let's not do anything tonight. We can talk and catch up."

"Sounds good to me," Rachel said.

Alberto, who was leading songs for today's service, went to the microphone and asked people to find their seats.

Malcolm gave the sermonette followed by Mr. Critchett, who talked about God's authority in the church. "We must obey God's Apostle, no matter what," he preached. "We must trust God to lead his ministry. It's not for any of us to judge or question. It is for us to trust—to have faith."

He quoted scriptures and admonished about the chain of authority. Children must obey their parents. Wives must obey their husbands. Men must obey God's ministers.

Even the ministry has a chain of authority—from the Deacons, to the Local Elders (as was Critchett) to the Elders (Mr. Roberts), Pastors (Driscoll), Evangelists, and finally God's Apostle, Russell W. Sherburne.

He repeated, one must not question the authority of God's ministers. They are inspired of God, and even if we don't know the reasons for their orders, we must obey—that is our duty and requirement. Obey authority. Submit yourself to the will of God.

The three girls had intended to leave after the services ended but everyone wanted to talk to Faith. She was somewhat of a celebrity—one of the few young people to have been chosen to attend the college at headquarters, where ministers are trained and ordained.

Faith seemed to like the attention. Rachel and Kathleen noticed that she acted mature—more confident than before. She held her head high, smiled kindly at the brethren, hugged the older women and kissed the young babies.

Even her voice was more mature somehow. She spoke with that same confidence that Nancy spoke with when she led the women's meetings, like she knew things, like she had wisdom beyond her years. College had indeed changed her, and Rachel and Kathleen felt it was a good change. Their friend had left them last fall, unhappy and reluctant. She had returned a new person, happy, confident, and converted.

When they finally got home, it was nearly 8pm. They made sandwiches and iced tea, it being a warm July night. The two windows at the end of their Penthouse apartment were opened and a fan blew air inside one, and outside the other. It made a low humming background that added to the lazy, relaxed mood the three girls were in.

"Tell us what college is like," Kathleen asked.

Faith smiled. "It's the most wonderful experience. I thought it was going to be like, well, like my growing up had been. You know, controlled. But it wasn't at all. We have a lot of freedom—sometimes too much."

Rachel glanced a worried look at Kathleen. Faith noticed and laughed. "Don't worry. For some reason, when I knew that they trusted me, I didn't need to do any of those things. It's hard to explain. But they guide you to want to make the right decisions. Everyone is supportive. There are a few kids who don't make it."

"Why?" Kathleen asked.

"They can't do it." She shrugged. "I guess they just aren't being called. But when they told us we were free to do whatever we wanted, with no curfews or chaperones, I was shocked. Even more, I was shocked to discover that I didn't want to do anything—I guess it's because it was my choice and I didn't feel forced into it. Does that make any sense?"

Rachel nodded. "I think so. It sounds like you didn't feel rebellious because they weren't making you do things—they let you decide."

“That’s it. And you know, when it’s my decision, I discovered that I really do want to do the right thing. I want to wait for my husband—to be married to a man who serves God, and to serve beside him.”

“Sounds like you have been bitten by the big M complex,” Kathleen teased.

Faith grinned. “That’s not a bad thing. I used to think so but now I understand. I think it’s because I am baptized now. God’s Holy Spirit has helped me to understand.”

Kathleen and Rachel both nodded. “We feel it, too.”

Rachel glanced at Kathleen, suddenly remembering their conversation with Audrey. It was as if Kathleen read her mind. Kathleen shook her head slightly as if to say, don’t mention it. Rachel didn’t.

“So, do you have any special big M in mind?” Rachel asked.

Faith blushed. “Well, now that you mention it, there is someone I really like. He likes me, too. We’ve dated a couple times and I can tell he’s feeling the same way as I am, but of course couples aren’t paired until next spring. I think he’s going to tell his advisor that he likes me, though. I’m quite certain of it.”

“What’s his name?” Rachel asked.

“David. He’s a couple years older than I am, and he comes from the New York area. He was raised in the church, too. His parents are a lot like mine.”

“Controlling?” Kathleen asked.

“They mean well,” Faith answered. “I’ll probably do the same thing. When you know the potential mistakes kids can make, well, you tend to be controlling. Maybe they weren’t controlling enough.”

“Are you going to tell David about Billy?” Kathleen asked.

“I can’t,” Faith said, suddenly looking uncertain.

“Don’t you think he should know?” Rachel asked.

“It’s really none of our business,” Kathleen said, noticing Faith’s demeanor and regretting bringing up the obviously touchy subject.

“No, I don’t think he should know,” Faith said. She looked at her two friends. “You know that ministers must marry virgins.”

“Is that a problem?” Kathleen asked abruptly.

Faith clenched her teeth. “You can be a virgin,” she said, “starting the day of your baptism—when you are born a new person. I am a new person—not the old Faith you two remember.”

“That sounds like a good plan to me,” Rachel said, glancing at Kathleen, a please-drop-the-subject look. Kathleen nodded back.

“Please, please keep your promise,” Faith said. “If, well, I really love David. I don’t want to lose him. If he knew, you know that I had a boyfriend in the world before, it would be difficult.”

Kathleen thought for a moment. “If he loves you, that shouldn’t matter to him. Like you said, you weren’t converted then.”

“You don’t understand. It’s a big deal to them. They are serious about marrying only virgins. It’s in the scriptures. Leviticus 21 verse 13 says, *And he shall take a wife in her virginity.*” She looked from Rachel to Kathleen. Both girls nodded somberly.

“Can they tell if a girl is a virgin?” Rachel asked.

Kathleen laughed.

Faith looked stricken, then laughed, too.

Because it was the week of the fourth of July, the plant where Rachel and Kathleen worked was closed, so the three girls spent the whole week together. They picnicked in the park, took long walks, prayed and studied together. Rachel and Kathleen didn’t tell Faith about what

Mr. Critchett had said to them. They decided not to because she was so different now.

Friday night was her last night with Rachel and Kathleen. Her parents would be coming for her tomorrow at Sabbath services. Since the sun set late, after 8 p.m., the three girls had time to do more before the Sabbath started.

They decided to cook outside on a small barbecue grill they'd gotten at the local grocery store. Faith made some whole wheat cookies, with honey and carob, a recipe she'd learned at college. She told them about the many classes she'd taken on proper, Christian homemaking. They were impressed.

Finally, they climbed into bed and continued to talk. "I'm going to miss you," Rachel said. "It hasn't been the same without you, has it Kathleen?"

"No. We were the three musketeers. But we are happy for you, Faith. You've changed so much. I'm impressed."

"You two have changed, too. I was worried, you know," Faith said.

"Worried about what?" Kathleen asked.

"That I'd come back and you would still not be baptized."

"Why did that worry you?" Kathleen asked.

"Well, I wasn't sure how you'd feel about that—what with me going to the college and probably marrying a minister, and, well, you know."

Kathleen and Rachel were silent.

"It's no big deal," Faith added. "I want you to know you'll always be my best friends, no matter who I marry."

"It sounds like a big deal," Rachel said. "Maybe it's a bigger deal to you than it is to us."

"What do you mean?" Faith asked.

"Why are you so focused on marrying a minister? It's as if that's all you think about?" Kathleen asked.

Faith was quiet.

Rachel asked, “Faith, are you okay?” She thought her friend was crying but it was dark and she couldn’t see.

“I’m sorry,” Kathleen said. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s okay,” Faith said. “I haven’t thought about this. You’re making me think about things, things I want to forget. But you’re right. I think the reason I want to marry a minister is so I can serve. I want to spend my life serving the brethren. I just want to do the right thing—I want to make amends for my sins.”

It was Rachel and Kathleen’s turn to be silent.

The three girls sat together at services the next day. Faith’s parents had come down to pick her up. Audrey sat with her three boys down front. Following the service, Faith’s parents wanted to leave right away—it was a long ride back to Vermont. The girls had time for a brief, but tearful, good-bye.

Audrey noticed Rachel and Kathleen, standing in the doorway, watching Faith and her family drive away. “She’ll be back,” Audrey said.

“Listen, why don’t you two come over to my apartment for dinner tonight? I’m having a group over and it’ll be fun.”

It turned out that Audrey had Desiree, the elderly woman, Deacon, and a young family with two children over to her apartment for dinner. She’d prepared the food the day before and it was quickly ready once they arrived. Even the table had been set—they just added two more places for Rachel and Kathleen.

The young family was from another church area and was traveling through New Hampshire on their way to a new place where he’s been transferred in his work. The young family didn’t stay late but left soon after they’d

eaten. The two youngsters were fussy, obviously tired from the long day at services.

Desiree enjoyed the little ones. Several times she pulled them close and hugged and kissed them, in a grandmotherly way. The kids were shy but didn't pull away or cry.

Rachel asked Audrey, "Does Desiree have any grandchildren of her own?"

"I don't know," Audrey said, realizing how little she actually did know about Desiree. "If she does, she's never mentioned it. I think she's a spinster."

Deacon talked with the young father, asked him about his job, if he knew certain people in the church he was from, how long he'd been in the faith.

Audrey's three sons talked mostly amongst themselves. Randy sat next to Rachel, and smiled at her often. She wondered when his crush would wear off. Audrey grinned. Kathleen rolled her eyes.

Deacon offered to drive Desiree home. It was nearly ten o'clock and the old lady was tired. He thanked Audrey for the dinner, cuffed lovingly at the boys and told them to behave their mother, and grinned at the two girls. "You two want a ride, too?"

"We should go," Rachel said. Kathleen nodded.

"I can take them home," Audrey said. "If you want to stay, I can take you back in the morning."

"We don't want to put you out," Rachel said, remembering how she'd felt that first week a year ago when she'd stayed with Audrey.

"It's no problem," Audrey said. Both girls sensed she wanted them to stay. Maybe it had something to do with their conversations before. Kathleen shrugged.

Deacon nodded and headed out the door with Desiree. "Thanks for the food. See you next week."

Audrey looked in the refrigerator and pulled out another bottle of wine. They had already finished two

bottles of Lambrusco. Wade gave his mother a disgusted look but she didn't see him.

"Another glass anyone?"

Kathleen hadn't finished her first glass. Rachel held her empty glass out and Audrey poured some wine. Then she filled her own glass. "Leave the dishes. I'll do them tomorrow."

"We can help," Rachel said. "It'll only take a minute."

"Let the boys do them," Audrey said. "Boys, you can put them in the sink. I'll wash them tomorrow."

Wade started gathering the dishes and noisily putting them in the sink.

"Careful you don't break them," Audrey called as she headed into the living room, carrying her wine glass and the new bottle. "Come on girls; let's go in here where we can hear ourselves talk."

Randy followed and snuggled next to Rachel.

"Bed time for you," Audrey said.

"Mom," Randy protested.

"You know it's way past your bed time. Now say good night and off you go."

Rachel gave Randy a hug. He gave her a slurpy kiss on the cheek. She laughed, wiping her face. Randy was delighted and smiled as he went upstairs to bed.

Terry and Wade finished clearing the table. Terry headed upstairs without a word. Rachel and Kathleen guessed the last thing a thirteen year old boy wanted to do was be part of a girl-talk conversation.

Audrey didn't notice. She'd finished her glass of wine and was pouring another. She looked at both of them to see if they were ready for more but they weren't so she put the bottle back on the coffee table. She put her feet up and relaxed.

Wade came in and sat in the chair across from Audrey. "Mom, don't you think you've had enough to

drink?" he said. He spoke with a voice and manner too mature for his age.

Rachel noticed he even looked older than fifteen. She realized for the first time that he was behaving like the man of the house—that he was feeling in fact, that he was and had to be, the man of the house.

"Watch your attitude," Audrey snapped.

Rachel and Kathleen were embarrassed. They both began to think they should have gone home with Deacon.

Wade's face hardened. "I want to go home," he said to his mother.

"What? You're not going to start this again," Audrey said. "We have company."

"We always have company, Mom. That's what you do. Haven't you figured it out yet? They all just take advantage of you—you're their servant. They walk all over you, and you don't have time for your own boys. I want us to go back to Dad."

Audrey sipped her wine. Rachel noticed that Audrey's eyes were glassy. Her face was flushed and she waved her wine glass as she put it back down on the table.

Rachel had never seen anyone drunk before but Kathleen had. Kathleen grabbed Rachel's arm and motioned to the door. "Maybe we should leave," she whispered. "I don't like this."

"You are out of line, young man. Keep this up and I'll have Mr. Critchett come over and have another talk with you!"

Wade looked as though he was going to burst into tears. His jaw twitched and quivered. He shook his head in disgust, stood up, and went upstairs.

Audrey watched him leave, a perplexed look on her face.

"Young boys are hard to raise by yourself," she said to Rachel and Kathleen. "Don't pay any attention to him."

He's just in one of his moods. He'll get over it." She poured more wine into her glass.

Kathleen couldn't contain herself. "Audrey, don't you think you've had enough to drink?"

"You, too? What's with you people? Can't a person relax? I've been on the go all week, waiting on this one, and that one, and I just want to relax. The Bible says to drink a little wine for your stomach's sake. That's all that I'm doing."

"A LITTLE wine," Kathleen said.

Audrey sat the glass down. "Maybe you're right." She tried to sound serious but then giggled. "Naw, I think I can hold my wine pretty well." She picked it back up and took a long sip, licking her lips. "That's good stuff. Lambrusco is my favorite wine."

The three talked for a few minutes but Audrey soon fell asleep on the couch. Kathleen whispered to Rachel, "let's go home."

"How?" Rachel said. "It's almost ten miles from here."

"Let's walk. It'll take a couple hours. There's a full moon. It's beautiful out. We can easily walk home. I want to get out of here."

Rachel nodded. They silently gathered their Bible bags and quietly closed the door behind them, after leaving Audrey a note on the kitchen table, thanking her for the dinner and letting her know they had gone home.

They walked along silently for a while. Then Rachel spoke. "I'm worried about Audrey."

"Me, too," Kathleen said. "She drinks too much. My grandmother is an alcoholic, and so is my father. Audrey needs help."

"What can we do?"

Kathleen shrugged. "I don't know. I think it's up to the person who over drinks to do whatever it takes to

stop. They have to hit bottom first. That's what I've heard. Audrey is a long way from bottom."

Rachel looked at Kathleen. "Really?" She wondered how far bottom was.

Kathleen nodded sadly.

Three hours later, at nearly 2 am, the two girls arrived at their apartment. The cool summer night air had invigorated them enough to walk the distance, talking about the various events in their lives, their recent visit with Faith, Audrey's situation, the young family with the two little children. But they were happy to be home, and soon sound asleep in their own beds.

Returning to work the next week was almost pleasant. Routine had a soothing nature to it. Wednesday Women's Meeting was much as they all were. Nancy would lead the meeting, careful to read scriptures and guide the women with advice about how they should behave and how to be a Christian home-maker.

She brought in recipes for whole grain foods and articles about the harmful effects of white flour and white sugar. Honey was recommended instead. Some of the women shared their recipes and know-how on the subject, too. It was one of the staple dogmas of the Church, even though it was not one that had been documented in a lot of the church literature. It was one of those word-of-mouth truths they shared.

Ben once again attended the services in New Hampshire the next week. He brought a bouquet of flowers for Rachel. She put them in a vase on top of the reception table. "When is he going to get the message?" she fretted to Audrey.

Audrey laughed, giving Rachel a warm wink. Rachel sat with Kathleen and Audrey. Ben sat down front. He didn't ask Rachel to sit with him, which relieved her

because she would have said no, and it wasn't a pleasant experience.

After services, Alberto approached Rachel who was talking with Miss Haley. "Mr. Critchett wants to see you," he said.

"Me?" Rachel said, surprised.

"Yes. Follow me."

When Rachel went inside the counseling room, she saw Ben sitting in the far side of the room. He had a nervous grin on his face. She groaned silently.

Critchett nodded to her to sit down. She complied.

"Now that you are baptized, I suppose you're eager to get married," he said to her in an accusing tone.

"No," she said in a calm tone. "I am not anxious to get married at all." She ignored Ben and deliberately avoided his gaze.

"I have come to see that you need a strong hand—a mature hand to guide you in The Truth," Critchett stated matter-of-factly.

Rachel sat silently, looking him directly in the eye. She was not going to marry this man no matter what he said to her.

"You need to set a date in the next month."

"Excuse me?" she said. "Set a date?"

"You and Ben. He's the person you are to marry."

"No." Rachel said. She thought she detected a smile trying to form on Critchett's face. "I'm not ready to marry anyone."

"Did I ask you if you think you're ready?" Critchett snarled. "I will decide when you're ready. If I say you're ready to get married—you are ready."

She sat silently, biting her lip. She suddenly felt her throat tighten and knew if she tried to speak, she'd likely cry. She was determined not to cry—just as she'd been determined not to cry when her mother used to push her. She took deep, discreet breaths.

“You will learn to love Ben,” Critchett said. “No doubt, you will thank me one day, when you’re older and more mature. He’s the right man for you.”

Rachel sat silently.

“Are you doubting the wisdom of God’s minister?” Critchett asked, a hint of glee in his voice.

Rachel shook her head.

“Then you two get together and set a date.” He motioned for them to leave.

Rachel hurried out of the room. She ignored Ben who called after her. Despite her response in the counseling room, he was smiling. He was winning his prize. Alberto watched the two hurry by.

Rachel spotted Audrey talking with Alice. She ran over to her. “I need to talk to you,” she said, breathlessly. Alice gave her a hateful don’t-interrupt-me look. Rachel added, “Privately.”

“Excuse me,” Audrey said.

Rachel pulled Audrey by the arm in a hurry to go outside where they could talk privately. “Mr. Critchett just told me I have to marry Ben!”

Audrey looked at her, wanting to disbelieve what she was hearing, perhaps hoping it was a joke but she could see by Rachel’s desperation that it was no joke.

“He said we have to set a date in the next month. Ben was sitting there in the room.”

“What did you say?” Audrey asked.

“I told him I wasn’t ready to marry anyone but he said I have to.”

Audrey looked worried.

Rachel glanced around. “Audrey, I am NOT marrying Ben. I think I’m going to run away. What else can I do?”

“Now, look,” Audrey said. “I’ll think of something. You don’t have to marry Ben. That’s just nonsense. You just be cool until I get back to you.”

Rachel nodded. "I'm not going back in there with Ben looking for me. Can you ask Kathleen to bring my stuff home for me?"

Audrey nodded. "I think you're right. Better avoid him for now. I'll tell Kathleen."

"Thanks," Rachel said, tears forming in her eyes. She turned and ran down the road towards their apartment. Since she didn't have her bag, she didn't have a key to get inside. She went around back and sat on the grass, waiting for Kathleen. It wasn't long before Kathleen arrived.

"Audrey told me what happened," Kathleen said, finding Rachel out back. "Are you all right?"

"I've decided that I'm going to run away," Rachel said. "I have to. There's just no way I can marry someone I don't love. Ben gives me the creeps."

"I understand," Kathleen said. "Audrey thinks there's a way out of this. Give it a few days. If you have to run away, I'll go with you."

Rachel smiled. The two girls hugged. "Thanks," she said. "I'd do the same for you."

Then she frowned and pulled away from Kathleen. "What about your family? Kathleen, I can't ask you to leave your family. And it may mean excommunication from the church. You can't come with me."

"It won't mean excommunication. We'll go somewhere where they don't know us and start over. Mr. Driscoll will understand. He'll help us." Kathleen's words were reassuring.

The next day, there is a knock at the apartment door. Rachel glanced at Kathleen. It was an ominous knock. "Maybe we should pretend we're not home," Kathleen whispered. Rachel nodded. She didn't want another visit with Mr. Critchett. So they sat silently.

Another knock. Then a voice. "Rachel. Kathleen. It's Audrey. Let me in."

Kathleen opened the door. "Sorry, we didn't know who it was."

"I don't blame you. Deacon called Driscoll last night after I told him. Here's what he said. He's going to talk with Ben this week and tell him to stop coming up here and bothering you. He was really put off about it, actually."

"But what about Mr. Critchett telling me I have to marry him? How does that help me?" Rachel asked.

"Mr. Critchett is under Mr. Driscoll's authority. He has to take orders, too, remember. Driscoll said not to worry about it. He's going to take care of it. He said to tell you that you don't have to marry anyone you don't want to marry. He said he's seen too many unhappy unions. We don't need another."

"Really?" Rachel asked.

Audrey nodded. "See, I told you to have faith. God won't tempt you beyond what you can bear."

"And we were getting packed and ready to run away," Kathleen joked.

Audrey looked concerned. "I hope not," she said, "unless it was to flee to the Place of Safety."

The three laughed. "I'm happy to see you smile," Audrey said. "Look, I have to do some things for the widows. Are you going to be okay?"

"Fine. Now. Thanks to you." Kathleen said.

"Thank you, Audrey. I was really worried," Rachel said.

Audrey hugged her. "I know. It was written all over your face." They laughed again. "Oh, and one other thing: he said you can date whoever you want, including Malcolm. Isn't that great news?" Audrey left.

Rachel and Kathleen hugged and jumped up and down and laughed. They were so relieved, and so happy. "But what will Mr. Critchett's reaction be to all this?" Rachel worried aloud.

Kathleen tried to reassure her that everything would be all right but deep down, she wondered, too. Somehow, she couldn't see him being the sort to acquiesce to this turn of events without some retaliation.

At services that following week, Rachel and Kathleen were relieved when Ben didn't show up. Audrey sat with them.

Deacon gave Rachel a knowing wink when he passed by their seats. He spied Malcolm walking by and pulled him over by the arm. "Hey there, young man. Aren't you going to greet your sister in Christ?"

Malcolm blushed. He didn't know that he'd been given permission to talk to Rachel again, and he didn't know what to say. Deacon whispered to him, "it's okay. Mr. Driscoll said you two can date again if you want to. So go ahead, say hi to her."

Now it was Rachel's turn to blush. "Hi," she said, and hurried to settle into her seat. Malcolm shrugged and sat down front with his buddies, Alberto and Joel.

Kathleen was still whipped about Joel. Almost as if none of these events have happened, the two girls resumed discussions about Malcolm and Joel. But things had changed. Both girls had changed. They weren't so young. They weren't so silly.

And Rachel wondered about Malcolm. She hadn't allowed herself to think about him, and now that she could, she realized how much she missed him.

Critchett came up behind Rachel and Kathleen. "You may think you've won," he whispered to Rachel, "But it's not over, yet. Headquarters will be hearing about Driscoll's meddling, and some of the other things he's been doing in the Boston Church."

There was a threatening tone in his voice. Rachel felt her stomach tighten but she didn't look at the man. She looked down instead. He paused, as if wanting to utter something more but then walked on.

Faith came back down to Concord and attended the church picnic the following Sunday. She was heading to Boston to fly back to college with a family visiting from the Boston area church.

Rachel and Kathleen admired Faith's new demeanor since she'd been away to college, at least as much as they could admire her. She acted so mature and confident as she talked with Alberto and Joel and the other young men. They all acted so eager around her, like she was a prized trophy.

"Jeez, why don't they roll up their tongues? It's disgusting!" Kathleen told Rachel.

"You're just jealous because Joel's talking to her," Rachel teased.

Joel was talking to her. He wanted to know all about his friends at Headquarters, did she know them, how were they doing?

Faith had her long blonde hair tied with a black velvet bow, so pretty, with her long flowing light violet-colored sundress. Sewing was one of the classes at the college, and Faith had made herself several outfits, all fitting the Proverbs 31:22 description, *She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.*

"My mom has a sewing machine she never uses," Kathleen said. "I think she'd lend it to us." Rachel nodded.

Finally, it was time to say good-bye for yet another year. As Faith gathered her bags to go, she turned one last time to her two friends. "I'm really going to miss you."

"We're going to miss you, too. But you have a lot to look forward to," Kathleen said with a grin.

Faith smiled. "I'll keep in touch."

After Faith left, Rachel walked some of the young children around the park. There was a small pond where ducks and geese were swimming and the children were thrilled to throw pieces of bread to them. Rachel was so caught up in watching them, that she didn't notice when the young men began playing football nearby.

Alberto was somewhat of a football star, having played when he was in high school. Malcolm was smaller than Alberto, and more agile, and surprised the others with his athletic ability. They didn't know he'd grown up in a city playing sandlot football with his older brother and his friends.

What Rachel didn't know was that Malcolm was very much trying to impress her. When the ball landed in the water not too far from where she is standing he rushed to make a spectacular catch and instead fell headlong into the pond.

"Hi," she said as he passed her on his way back, dripping and a bit sheepish.

He blushed and ran back to his friends. There were some muffled comments as he returned but she couldn't hear them.

Kathleen and Rachel were assigned to serve the food at the picnic, and when everyone had their food, they both grabbed a plate and sat down on the grass to eat. Alberto, Joel and Malcolm walked over and Alberto asked, "Mind if we join you?"

"Sure," Kathleen said.

It was a warm day. The sky was deep blue, and a light breeze cooled everyone off just enough. Joel sat next to Kathleen, by convenience not by design.

Rachel was convinced that Joel had no clue that Kathleen was madly in love with him. *Maybe I'll tell Malcolm someday*, she thought smiling, and *he can clue in Joel*. Alberto sat down beside Joel. Malcolm stood

awkwardly for a moment, and then sat down next to Rachel.

“Hi, again,” she said shyly.

“Hi,” he said, and then concentrated on his food, as if to avoid conversation. She was a little hurt unsure why he’d act that way. Kathleen winked at Rachel. She smiled back and shrugged, not sure who was happier, she or Kathleen.

Joel piped up with, “Isn’t that Faith terrific? She’s the perfect Christian girl.”

“Yeah,” Alberto agreed. “She’s the type of girl I’m going to marry—a really converted and virtuous woman.”

“Man, I wonder if I’d have a chance with her,” Joel quipped.

Alberto playfully punched him in the arm. “You’ll have to stand in line, buddy!”

Rachel caught the aghast look on Kathleen’s face. She visualized Kathleen attacking Joel and Alberto and nearly laughed. Kathleen gave her a look, like what’s-up-with-you, then realized her own expression must show her feelings. She rolled her eyes.

“I’m going to get some dessert,” Alberto said, standing up. Joel went with him.

Malcolm finished his drumstick and wiped his face and hands on his napkin. He started to stand up, and Rachel touched his arm. “Can we talk?” she asked.

He looked around nervously and said, “Let’s go for a walk.”

The two headed back over towards the pond, feigning to feed the ducks. He threw a piece of bread, which the ducks immediately seized with a lot of wild squawking.

“What did you want to talk about?”

His coolness bothered Rachel. Unsure, perhaps it’s too late. Perhaps he didn’t like her anymore. She didn’t answer.

"I don't want to stand in the way of Ben," Malcolm suddenly blurted out.

"What?" Rachel was too amazed.

"I know you've been dating Ben. I've seen the flowers he brings you. I understand," Malcolm said.

"I don't like Ben," Rachel said.

Malcolm stopped throwing the bread and looked at her. He tried to determine if she was being truthful. She sensed this and wondered how to convince him.

"I've seen you flirting with him," he said.

"Flirting? Where did you ever get an idea like that?" As soon as Rachel uttered the words, she knew exactly where he'd gotten the idea. She swallowed her anger and turned to Malcolm.

"I have never liked Ben. Mr. Critchett tried to make me marry him. But I refused. I would have run away first."

Malcolm looked genuinely surprised. "But, I thought,"

"You thought wrong," she said firmly. "Mr. Driscoll intervened. He told Ben to find someone else and leave me alone. He said you and I could date again if we wanted to."

"I know that," Malcolm admitted. "He told me I could date you, too, if I wanted."

Rachel looked at Malcolm for a long moment. Then he reached for her hand, and smiled. "You want to?"

"Want to what?" Rachel asked coyly.

"Date?" he said with a big smile.

She nodded, smiling back.

Malcolm ran off to play football with his buddies again. Kathleen caught up to Rachel. "So, tell me what happened? Are you two back together again?"

Rachel smiled. "We're going to date again."

"That's great. And my true love is in love with Faith. Ain't life a bitch?" Kathleen said.

Rachel could see Kathleen was kidding around. “Faith is starting to get on my nerves, too,” she said. “I don’t know how much more of her example-setting act I can take.” Both girls giggled.

“I’ve made a decision,” Kathleen said, suddenly getting serious.

“What?”

“I’m going back to school.”

Rachel looked at her with amazement. This was totally unexpected and she realized that her closest friend didn’t share all her secrets with her. “When?” she asked.

“I can get my GED if I finish up some classes at night. It starts in September, and I’ll have to miss Women’s Meeting.”

Kathleen waited for Rachel’s response, almost as if she needed someone’s approval. Rachel smiled.

“I think that’s a great idea, Kathleen.”

Kathleen nodded. “So do I.”

Chapter 16

*There is a difference also between a wife and a virgin.
The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord,
that she may be holy both in body and in spirit:
but she that is married careth for the things of the world,
how she may please her husband.
1 Corinthians 7:34*

True to her word Kathleen began evening classes in September, working towards her GED. To Rachel's surprise, Kathleen confided in her that she wanted to go to college and study art, maybe to become a teacher some day.

It didn't exactly fit with the church life-style, but Rachel supported Kathleen's decision. Work was an allowable excuse for missing non-Sabbath church activities so Kathleen was "working" on Wednesday nights when she missed the Women's Meetings. Rachel always filled her in on what took place.

She observed that during her visit that summer, Faith behaved a lot like Nancy, the minister's wife, and she mentioned it to Kathleen.

"They probably learn to act that way at the college," Kathleen suggested.

"What if Nancy is more like Faith," Rachel asked.

"You mean what if she had done stuff before?" Kathleen replied. "We don't really know what Faith did, though. All we know is that Billy was her high school sweetheart."

Rachel nodded. "I guess we shouldn't think like that but it just occurred to me that maybe they are so much more righteous because they have so much more to repent of than the rest of us. I find that ironic, don't you?"

Kathleen nodded. "Faith seemed to really be getting into it."

"We have to make sure we aren't jealous of her," Rachel said, thinking aloud.

"Jealous? Are you kidding? I wouldn't want to be a minister's wife. Would you?" Kathleen asked.

"We're supposed to want to serve," Rachel answered. "But I really wouldn't want everyone looking to me for answers. Sometimes Nancy seems a little frustrated."

Kathleen grinned. "Is Ruth still asking questions?"

Rachel smiled. "She just asks whatever she's thinking. I have to admit, sometimes I wonder those same things."

"Well, I don't think there's any danger that either one of us will be a minister's wife," Kathleen said. "Especially me."

"What do you mean?" Rachel asked.

"Well, Malcolm is obviously being groomed for something," Kathleen said.

"Malcolm?"

"It's obvious that Mr. Critchett has something in mind for him. Surely you've noticed how much he's doing? Leading songs, giving sermonettes. You know, he will probably be a Local Elder, or at least a Deacon," Kathleen said.

"I never thought about that," Rachel said, suddenly worried.

Kathleen laughed. "So you see, Faith may not be the only one with the big M complex."

"That's different," Rachel protested. "Local Elders haven't attended the college. It's not the same."

"Sometimes they're sent to the college after they are ordained," Kathleen pointed out. Suddenly she realized that their lives and time together could drastically change.

Rachel glanced at Kathleen. "I don't think Malcolm would want to do that. He's shy like me. I don't think he wants to be a Deacon or minister."

“Keep telling yourself that,” Kathleen quipped.

Malcolm asked Rachel to a movie and dinner the week following the picnic in August. They picked up where they had left off earlier in the year, almost as if nothing had happened. But of course, something had happened.

Both were careful about what they said and about how they acted. Malcolm told Rachel they should not be too obvious in public, especially at Church and not flaunt their affection for each other. He even suggested that sometimes they sit apart at services. Rachel was puzzled but agreed to his suggestions.

They dated regularly and attended Church functions together. Only once did Rachel sit with Kathleen and Audrey, though, as Malcolm had suggested. Deacon had teased Malcolm about it. Quite the matchmaker was Deacon. So they sat together at services.

Rachel’s fears about Mr. Critchett’s retaliation subsided when he kidded them from the pulpit during a service. She hoped they had passed his test and now would be free to pursue their relationship on their own.

Kathleen became totally engrossed in her school studies. The two friends prayed and studied together less frequently.

Soon it was time once again to begin thinking about going to the Feast of Tabernacles at the end of September. Members were filled with anticipation and excitement, making travel plans, scheduling dinner parties, and packing.

Mid September a new girl moved in with Rachel and Kathleen. Amanda. She was in her mid twenties—a little older than they and had a car of her own.

She had been living in Vermont and was rather secretive about her past. Rachel and Kathleen didn’t pry. All they knew was that she had been a member for a couple years but this would be her first Feast of

Tabernacles. They enjoyed being able to fill her in on what it was like.

“You will have to fight off the guys,” Kathleen said.

“Why would I do that?” Amanda replied.

Rachel glanced at Kathleen. Amanda had long hair, nearly to her waist. It was straight and dark brown. Her face was plain, in a wholesome way, and she was tom-boyish in her mannerisms, like she might have worked on a farm or done some kind of outdoor activities. She was tanned and rugged but not overweight. Built for having babies, Madeleine would say. They were sure the guys were going to flock around her.

But she was a terrible driver, continually pumping the gas with one foot and braking with the other. She would be driving to the Feast and both Kathleen and Rachel were concerned. They discussed it privately and concluded they must tell her. Kathleen volunteered to explain it to Amanda. Rachel was glad. She feared confrontation and offending their new roommate.

The issue so worried the two that they decided to talk to Amanda that weekend, even though they would not actually be leaving for two more weeks. That way, if something happened, they still had time to find another ride.

As they drove to a church activity on Sunday, Kathleen offered to drive. “I have my driver’s license,” she said to Amanda. “I’d be happy to drive.”

“That’s okay,” Amanda said. “My dad was pretty emphatic that he didn’t want me to let anyone else drive my car,” she said.

Kathleen frowned. “Well, Amanda, uh...”

Amanda had reached her car and was opening the driver’s side door. She stopped and looked at Kathleen. “What is it?”

“We didn’t want to say anything,” Rachel said, coming to Kathleen’s rescue.

“But, you drive terribly,” Kathleen blurted out.

Amanda stared at the two. Finally she said, “Really? I’m a bad driver?”

“Well, it’s just that you constantly pump the gas and brake pedals. It makes us car sick, especially on long distances,” Kathleen said sincerely, hopefully.

Amanda closed the door to the car. She stood there, thinking for a moment. Kathleen and Rachel felt bad. Then Amanda smiled. “You mean I’ve been making you car sick and you never said anything before now?”

They both nodded. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know. I’ve only been driving for a few months. My younger brother taught me, and well, he didn’t like to ride with me either. I thought it was just him.”

Rachel looked at Amanda. “We really appreciate having a ride. For over a year, we’ve had to bum rides off the brethren. We really do appreciate it.”

“I know,” Amanda said. “Here,” she handed Kathleen the keys. “Just one thing, well, maybe two.”

“Sure,” Kathleen said, taking the keys.

“Don’t tell my Dad if you ever see him, and maybe you could show me how to drive right sometime?”

Kathleen laughed. “I’ll certainly try.” She had her doubts, though.

Inside the car Amanda stated, “To tell you the truth, I don’t really like to drive. It makes me nervous and it would be nice if you’d drive when we go the Feast, too. I have been worrying about driving so far and through so much heavy traffic.”

Rachel glanced at Kathleen. Both were thinking, *Amanda’s not so bad. I think we’re going to like her.* “You’re going to really enjoy the Feast,” Rachel said.

“And we have more money this year because we’ve been working and saving our second tithe for a whole year so we’re all going to have a great time,” Kathleen added.

Everyone buzzed with talk of their Feast plans. Audrey would be transporting two of the widows along with her three sons in her station wagon.

The three girls would follow a caravan led by Deacon. He was going to make sure the females all made it safely, and they were relieved not to be traveling all the way to Pennsylvania by themselves.

Several other cars would be in the caravan: Justin and Corinne, the young couple who'd been married the previous year, Madeleine and her husband and eight children in a large old station wagon that was the only vehicle they could afford large enough to carry the whole family, and another family with three small boys.

Malcolm would be traveling with Alberto and Joel and two other young men. They were leaving the day before having been assigned responsibilities to help with set-up at the auditorium.

Rachel said good-bye to Malcolm after the Sabbath service. They agreed to get together once they were settled at the Feast. Each had the other's lodging information.

The next morning, the girls were packed and parked in front of Deacon's house where everyone was meeting for the trip. Wade, who now had his driving permit, was driving Audrey's station wagon. He sat behind the driver's seat, quietly taking it all in.

Randy was sitting in the back seat with Audrey between him and Terry. Alice was sitting in front by herself and Desiree was wedged next to Terry in the back seat. The back was packed with luggage and Feast necessities.

Soon everyone was ready and they drove off. It would take over eight hours of driving and with no mishaps, they'd arrive by mid afternoon. Deacon wanted to drive straight through but the young family had convinced him to stop at a couple rest areas. He had

reluctantly agreed. Audrey was grateful, knowing Alice and Desiree would need stops, too.

The girls chatted happily as Kathleen drove. Both of them had turned nineteen during the summer but birthdays were not celebrated in The Church. Ecclesiastes 7:1, "A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth." Amanda confided that her unconverted Dad had given her the car for her last birthday. She wondered aloud if she should have accepted it.

Kathleen and Rachel both said, "Yes!" at the same time.

"Tell me about the Feast, again," Amanda asked.

"It's hard to explain," Kathleen said.

"Tell me about the guys pursuing the girls part," Amanda said.

"Well, if you're looking for a husband, you're going to the right place," Rachel said. Kathleen laughed sardonically.

"What's wrong with finding a husband?" Amanda asked, a little defensively.

"Oh, nothing," Kathleen said, "as long as you're ready. I'm just not ready."

"Unless it's you-know-who," Rachel teased.

"Who?" Amanda asked.

Kathleen gave Rachel a please-don't look.

Rachel smiled. "I'm just teasing."

Amanda forgot about Kathleen. "Well, I'm almost twenty-two. I think it's time to settle down. I'd love to have a family of my own."

"That does sound pretty nice," Rachel said.

"You're going to be the first one to get married," Kathleen teased Rachel.

"You and Malcolm?" Amanda asked.

Rachel blushed. “Well, we haven’t discussed marriage. We’re just dating. And then you know the minister has to give his approval.”

She still remembered Critchett’s stinging words that she wasn’t right for Malcolm. Deep down, doubt haunted her. She tried to push it aside in her mind but it often popped up, like now, and she was suddenly silent, lost in her own thoughts.

Amanda and Kathleen chatted happily unaware of Rachel’s inner turmoil.

Am I good enough for Malcolm, she wondered. Am I?

Being the responsible Deacon that he was, he made sure everyone was safely delivered to their accommodations at the Feast site. Audrey and the girls had adjoining rooms in the same hotel, and the three boys were in the room on the other side of the hall. Desiree shared the room with Audrey, and Alice had her own single room across the hall.

They had arrived just before three in the afternoon, making very good time, as Deacon said.

Terry was already running outside looking the facility over. He was excited that there was a pool and recreation room. Randy asked to go with Terry to see the pool, and Audrey told Terry to keep an eye on his younger brother.

“Wade, why don’t you go with them,” she said, watching the two run off. Wade went inside his room and closed the door without answering.

Audrey shrugged. She turned to help the widows with their bags.

“If you need us,” Kathleen said, “just let us know. We can help you out.”

Audrey smiled. “Thank you. We’ll be fine.”

“I need some help with my key,” Alice said impatiently. “I can’t get my door unlocked.”

Audrey turned to help her. Desiree went inside and began unpacking her neat suitcase, placing her clothes in a nearby drawer.

Rachel, Kathleen and Amanda brought their bags into their room. Rachel and Kathleen would share one of the large beds and Amanda would have the other.

There was a preliminary service tonight to welcome everyone to the Feast of Tabernacles and kick off the festivities. Since over 10,000 members were in attendance, parking took quite a long time.

The girls decided to leave early and spend some time looking around and finding good seats. They were too excited to hang around the room.

Rachel was hoping to find Malcolm. It would be difficult this first night—there was always so much confusion. They'd planned to meet the next morning in a special section, and then find seats together.

Kathleen was going to take Amanda under her wing and they planned to sit together with Audrey and her boys.

Once they parked and got to the auditorium, all the memories of the last Feast came flooding back. The lighting, the cool cement floors, drafts wafting around your legs, kids scurrying by with their parents. There were young teenagers gathering in small groups, talking and laughing. Elderly members, some with walkers, made their way to the special section reserved for them, down front where they could hear better.

Rachel and Kathleen paused briefly to look around and take it all in. Amanda was nearly overwhelmed. She'd never seen so many people. She kept fretting, "I hope we can find my car. That parking lot is so big."

Kathleen teased her. "Don't worry, Amanda. We can always wait until everyone else leaves and your car will be the only one left."

Amanda believed her. Kathleen and Rachel laughed. “Don’t worry. We know where the car is. Look, I wrote down the parking lot numbers,” Kathleen said. As the driver, she had assumed the responsibility.

Amanda relaxed a little but was obviously nervous about the whole experience. She looked around the vast building, with its rows and rows of seats, sectioned in large areas with walking aisles.

“How do we know where to sit?” she asked.

Kathleen rolled her eyes at Rachel. “Just follow us.”

“What if I get lost?” Amanda said suddenly looking panicked.

“See that corner over there,” Rachel pointed. “That’s the lost and found section. If you ever get lost, just go over there. We’ll find you.”

“Okay,” Amanda said, doubtfully. “Do you see anyone we know?”

Rachel and Kathleen looked around. Indeed, there weren’t any familiar faces in the crowd. “They are all friends,” Rachel said, “We just haven’t gotten to know them yet.”

“Look, there’s Audrey,” Kathleen said, pointing towards the front. “Let’s go sit with her.” They watched as Audrey walked down the aisle.

Rachel noticed there was something different about her—Audrey had changed somehow from when she first met her. She walked more slowly. Her hair, always tied in a tight bun, was falling loosely around her shoulders. It was straight, black with gray streaks, more gray, Rachel thought. Do people get gray in such a short time? She’d known Audrey for less than two years.

Wade followed behind his mother. Rachel thought he looked so sad for a teenager. He never smiled and rarely spoke. She decided he wasn’t just pouting. He was quiet for some other reason, perhaps sadness. That was it, she

thought, Wade missed his father. Audrey always said what a wonderful man he was—what a great husband and father he was. No wonder Wade was so sullen, Rachel concluded, feeling sorry for the young man.

Terry followed behind Wade. Randy was walking next to his mother, trying to hold her hand but she was carrying too much. He clung to her dress instead, as if frightened by the large room.

It must seem even bigger to a small child, Rachel thought, remembering the little girl she'd found last year, crying and waiting all alone for her father. She wondered what had become of the little girl. Did her father marry that young woman? Was she nice to the little girl?

She glanced around, hoping she might catch a glimpse of her. Maybe, before the Feast was over, she'd see her again. She wanted to know the little girl was okay. She had often awoke in the night, thinking about her, wondering if she should have done something but she couldn't think what to do. She didn't know them. Perhaps the brethren in their church would help the little girl.

The three girls caught up to Audrey. There were still some seats so they put their things down to reserve them. It would be twenty minutes before services started. "We're going to show Amanda around," Kathleen said.

"You girls have fun," Audrey said. "It's the Feast. It's time to enjoy yourself."

Rachel glanced at Wade. He was sitting, looking straight ahead, expressionless. Randy looked up at Rachel, expectantly. "Would you like to come with us?" she asked.

He smiled broadly. "Don't go giving those girls a hard time," Audrey scolded but smiled gratefully at Rachel. "You sure you want a kid following you around?"

Rachel nodded, and Randy took her hand.

"Where did Terry take off to?" Audrey said, looking around.

Amanda was relaxing now. The room was alive with excitement. The musicians on stage were warming up. Someone was testing the PA system. Rachel remembered that the young men were going to be helping with set-up and wondered if she might see Malcolm.

They headed down front to look at the podium. It was decorated with large bouquets of flowers. The front rows were reserved for ministers and their families, with ties along the isles to keep others out. The girls noticed the women, tidying up their children and getting settled in their seats. They had the “minister’s wives” look about them, organized, prim and proper.

“Look, there’s Alberto,” Rachel said, pointing to the back of the podium.

He headed their way. “Hi,” he said. “You made it all right.” Rachel and Kathleen noticed he was checking out Amanda. She’d dressed up for the Feast a little more than the few times she’d attended services back home. She smiled at him. He smiled back. “Have you found seats yet?”

“Yes,” Kathleen said. His smile faded.

“Have you seen Malcolm?” Rachel asked.

“Yes. He’s around here somewhere,” Alberto said without looking at her. He was scanning the room as if he was looking for someone. “I’ll see you later,” he said, heading up the aisle.

Pastor Driscoll and his wife and two sons were getting settled in the front row. He spied the girls and nodded to them. Rachel blushed and smiled back. Then the girls headed back to their own seats. It was time to sit down.

Rachel was disappointed that she hadn’t found Malcolm but that was what they had expected the first night. The next morning, she waited in the section they’d stipulated. As it got close to time to sit down, she began to think he wasn’t going to show up. Then she spied him, hurrying her way.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said.

She was so happy to see him; it didn’t matter why he was late. They found their seats and sat together through the first day of sermons. During the intermissions for lunch and dinner, both had assigned duties that first day, so their only time together was during the services.

That night back at the motel, Kathleen told Rachel that Amanda was on a date. “It didn’t take her long,” Kathleen said.

“Did you meet the guy?” Rachel asked.

“No. She met him when I wasn’t with her. But she said she’d be late tonight. They were attending the singles party.”

“Maybe we should have gone,” Rachel said, meaning, maybe Kathleen should have gone.

“And be a piece of meat on display?” Kathleen replied. “No thanks.”

“It’s not that bad,” she protested unconvincingly. It surprised her when she realized that it was how she felt, too.

Kathleen spent more time with Audrey and the widows. She helped Audrey get them back and forth to the restaurants, sometimes driving Audrey’s car for her.

Audrey would have her glass of wine upon returning from services, claiming it settled her stomach before going out to eat but by the time they were ready to leave, Kathleen decided it was safer for her to drive. Wade didn’t want to go out to eat. He and Terry would order pizza or Italian sandwiches and stay in their room watching TV, or go to the pool or recreation rooms. Randy followed his mother.

Kathleen confided to Rachel yet again that she thought Audrey had a problem with alcohol. Rachel had seen Audrey drink but she wasn’t sure it was a problem.

“Trust me, I know,” Kathleen said. “I lived with two alcoholics. Audrey *has* a problem. A BIG problem.”

“Do you think that’s why Wade is so unhappy?” Rachel asked.

Kathleen looked at Rachel. “You noticed that, too?”

Rachel nodded.

“I don’t know,” Kathleen said. “It can be awful hard living with someone who’s an alcoholic.”

“Audrey’s not an alcoholic,” Rachel said. “She’s just trying to cope.”

“You sound like my mother,” Kathleen snapped.

“Well, she’s our friend. She’s helped us so much. We have to do something. How can we help her? Should we tell someone?”

Kathleen shrugged. “I don’t know. I think we should talk to Deacon. Maybe we should confront Audrey and tell her. Give her a chance to see it for herself.”

“Let’s do it when we get back from the Feast,” Rachel suggested.

“Yeah, right,” Kathleen said.

Amanda returned from her date and that was the end of the conversation.

“How was your date?” Kathleen asked.

“It was okay. Look what he gave me.” She held out a jewelry box.

Rachel groaned. “You should give it back, Amanda.”

“Why? He said it was a Feast Gift—he said it was a tradition.”

“Jewelry is considered a gift that signifies possession,” Rachel said.

Kathleen glanced at Rachel, surprised by this. “I agree with Rachel,” she said. “I wouldn’t accept jewelry from anyone, unless I planned more than a casual meeting at the Feast. Do you like this guy?”

“Well, he’s not Mr. Right, if that’s what you mean,” Amanda said. She opened the box. It was a pretty bracelet. “Do you really think I should give it back?”

“Yes.” Both Rachel and Kathleen said in unison.

Amanda sighed. “Okay. I’ll give it back to him tomorrow. He’s planning to take me to lunch.”

“What’s he like?” Rachel asked.

“He’s older,” she said with a dreamy look on her face.

“How much older?” Kathleen asked.

“Older,” she said, shrugging.

Kathleen turned to Rachel. “So how is it going with Malcolm? I hardly see you at services anymore.”

“We’ve been sitting together because he’s so busy, it’s the only time we can see each other. But tomorrow night he’s free and we’re having dinner together.”

“Sounds serious,” Amanda said.

Rachel shrugged. “We’ll see. I really do like him a lot.” It was the first time she’d stated her feeling aloud. She smiled. She liked the sound of that.

The next day Malcolm met up with Rachel a few minutes before services. “Come with me,” he said. “I’ve reserved two seats nearer the front. We’ll get to see better.” They ended up a few rows behind the ministers section.

As they settled into their seats, Pastor Driscoll was getting settled in the front. He glanced at them and smiled—a rather mischievous smile. Rachel blushed.

“When are you two going to get married?” he said, rather loudly so they could hear him over the commotion. Several people turned and looked their way. Rachel blushed more, and Malcolm blushed, too. He shrugged.

Driscoll laughed loudly, and his wife pulled his sleeve, “Leave those kids alone,” she teased.

When the commotion died down, Malcolm whispered in Rachel’s ear, “Do you want to?”

She looked at him surprised. She knew what he meant. “Really?”

He nodded.

Her heart started to race and a big smile grew on both their faces.

“So, do you?” he repeated a little nervously.

She nodded. “Yes! Yes! I do want to.”

“Let’s talk to Mr. Driscoll after services,” he said.

Both of them could hardly concentrate on the service. As soon as the last hymn was sung and the final prayer Amen-ed, Malcolm hurried down to Mr. Driscoll.

Rachel stayed in her seat and watched nervously. The two men talked. Driscoll looked awfully serious. Malcolm grew serious and nodded a lot. Driscoll talked more, gesturing but she couldn’t hear his words—the room was too noisy.

Finally, Driscoll glanced at her. She felt her face grow hot. He smiled and patted Malcolm’s arm. Malcolm nodded and headed back to Rachel.

“Come on,” he said.

“What did he say?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you all about it at dinner. Let’s get out of here.”

Rachel slipped closer to Malcolm in the car as they drove to the restaurant. She didn’t care about food. She just wanted to know what Driscoll had told Malcolm. He glanced at her and smiled broadly. She knew it was good.

Finally, they sat at a table. Malcolm had asked for a quiet spot but the room was full and they had to take what was available. It was near a fireplace where logs were burning, casting an eerie glow and warmth their way.

Malcolm ordered a bottle of wine. Rachel reminded him that she was underage but he ignored her. “They know we’re church people,” he said. “Besides, we need to celebrate.”

“So Pastor Driscoll said we could get married?”
Rachel said.

Malcolm nodded. “And that’s not all.”

“What?” Rachel said, “Tell me, please.”

“He’s going to perform the ceremony.”

“Wow,” Rachel whispered. “I am really happy about that. Is he going to come up to New Hampshire or are we going to go down to Boston?”

Malcolm grinned. “He’s going to do it here.”

“Here? You mean now, during the Feast?”

“You want to do that, don’t you?”

Rachel nodded.

“I don’t know about you but I can’t wait to get married. I’ve loved you since the first time I saw you,” Malcolm said.

“Really?” Rachel asked, suddenly wanting to know that he did in fact love her. “You love me?”

He nodded. “Yes. Very much!”

When Rachel told Amanda and Kathleen later that night, they were both excited. Kathleen seemed genuinely happy for Rachel but suddenly realized their time together was ending abruptly. “Where are you going to live?” she asked.

Rachel admitted she didn’t know. She thought Malcolm had an apartment in the same complex where Audrey lived. Maybe they would live there.

“What are you going to wear?” Amanda asked.

“They have wedding dresses here for the night of weddings. I have to go tomorrow. Mrs. Driscoll has offered to help me pick one out.”

“Guess Kathleen was right—you’re going to be the first one to get married,” Amanda said.

“It’s not as if they don’t know each other,” Kathleen said. “She’s been whipped over Malcolm for almost a year.”

“More important,” Rachel said, “he’s been whipped over me.” She smiled. “I have to go tell Audrey.”

Of course Audrey was thrilled. The same could not be said for Randy, who abruptly threw a tantrum. “You can’t get married,” he cried. “You can’t. I’m going to marry you. I told you that. You can’t marry someone else.”

Audrey was dismayed by his behavior and scolded him.

Rachel sat down next to Randy. She didn’t like adding to the little boy’s anguish, she knew he’d suffered a lot already.

“Randy, I’m much too old for you,” she said.

“I don’t care!” he protested.

“I’ll be gray and feeble when you’re still young,” Rachel said, teasingly. “But you can be in my wedding if you like.”

“I can?”

“Yes. You can be the ring bearer.”

“What’s a ring bearer?”

“It’s a very important job. You have to carry the ring, and when the minister says it’s time, you give it to Malcolm and he puts it on my finger. Would you like to do that?”

Randy nodded, wiping his eyes. He hugged her very tight. “But I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too, Randy. I will always love you. You’re a very special little boy.”

“Thank you,” Audrey said. “I don’t know how to handle these boys anymore.”

“It’s okay, Audrey. Please let me know if you need anything. You know, I think we’re going to be neighbors.”

“That’s right,” Audrey said, brightening. “Malcolm lives nearby. Are you going to live there when you’re married?”

“Well, I’m sure we will at first,” Rachel said. “Maybe I can help you with some of the chores you do, and you’ll have more time to spend with your boys.”

Audrey turned away and Rachel thought she was crying. Then Audrey went to the end table and picked up an empty glass. “This calls for a celebration,” she said.

The wedding would take place on Thursday night, after the day’s services. Driscoll had arranged for a private ceremony at Mount Airy Lodge—where the ministers stayed.

His wife took over preparations and helped Rachel. The ceremony would be in a small function room and everyone was to arrive by 7 p.m.

Kathleen was to be Bride’s Maid. She had a formal gown, white with blue and purple flowers. She put a flower in her hair, too.

Rachel had a bouquet Mrs. Driscoll had put together from a flower arrangement left over at services. Randy was dressed in a dark brown suit. He seemed almost as nervous as the bride and groom. Malcolm had asked Alberto and Joel to stand up with him, and they were milling about, waiting nervously for everything to begin.

“Are you ready?” Mrs. Driscoll asked Rachel, putting the veil on her head.

Rachel nodded. “How do I look?”

“You look beautiful, dear,” the woman replied, giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Brides are always beautiful—remember the church is the bride of Christ. You will be subject to your husband just like the Church is subject to Christ.”

Rachel nodded.

Mrs. Driscoll had a similar twinkle in her eyes as her husband. Rachel figured they must be very compatible. The older woman leaned close to Rachel and whispered,

“Honey, you know what I tell my husband when he says he’s the head of the household?”

Rachel looked at her expectantly. “What?” she whispered back.

“I tell him, you know what we do to heads, don’t you? We flush them!” The woman giggled. Rachel laughed, too.

“There, that’s better. You looked too serious. You should be happy. This is your wedding day. You are happy, aren’t you, dear?”

Rachel nodded. “Yes. I love Malcolm very much.”

“But what?” Mrs. Driscoll asked wisely.

“But, well, I just hope I’m the right wife for him.”

“What an odd thing to say,” she said, standing back and studying the young woman before her. “Why wouldn’t you think you were the right wife?”

“Well, I mean, I wouldn’t want to be a burden to him.”

Mrs. Driscoll shrugged. “Last minute jitters—that’s what you have. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine once the ceremony is over. Come on. Everyone’s waiting.”

Rachel followed Mrs. Driscoll to the small function room. Kathleen gave her a big smile. Rachel noticed how pretty Kathleen looked. And there was Joel, just a few feet away from her, standing nervously. He looked more nervous than Malcolm. Rachel felt a sudden urge to giggle but she choked it down.

Alberto was standing next to Malcolm, tall and brawny in his dark suit. He looked down at the floor as if he didn’t want to look at Rachel.

She felt her face flush, wondering what he must think of her, that maybe she wasn’t good enough for his best friend. She gulped. *I hope Mrs. Driscoll is right—I hope I don’t feel these doubts after the ceremony*, she thought.

There was Deacon and Audrey, standing with several others, all friends. She smiled at them as she passed by.

Then she passed Mr. Critchett. He stood wedged in the aisle where she walked partially blocking her way, and she stopped briefly. He looked her in the eye but said nothing. She thought she detected a smile but what kind of smile? Was he happy for her, for Malcolm? Was he letting her know he was wise to her?

Unease flooded her body and she thought she might faint but he stepped back in line and she passed by. Mrs. Driscoll let go of her arm at this point. Standing in front of her was Malcolm. He was smiling, and maybe shaking a little, she thought.

Driscoll grinned. "We were beginning to think you'd changed your mind," he quipped.

Rachel laughed, feeling tension release.

"Let's get this show on the road," Driscoll said. "Where's the ring?"

Randy proudly held out the ring. "Good boy," he said. "You just hold on to it until I tell you, okay?" Randy nodded.

It happened so fast that Rachel barely realized the ceremony's passing. Driscoll read some scriptures about marriage. He asked Malcolm, "Do you, Malcolm....take this woman, Rachel...."

She heard Malcolm say "I do."

Her heart was beating hard, so hard she thought her chest might burst. Her knees were shaking and she feared others would notice but her gown was full, hopefully hiding her annoying symptoms.

Driscoll turned to Rachel and said, "And do you, Rachel...faithfully promise and covenant with God, in the presence of these witnesses, to take Malcolm....to be your lawful wedded husband, for the remainder of your natural life, and as God has ordained, to submit yourself unto him

as unto the Eternal, to be subject to him in everything, and to reverence him?”

Rachel gulped. “I do.”

“Inasmuch as the Scriptural example in all cases of ordination, or setting apart, is by the laying on of hands, I now join your right hands, and by the laying on of my hands, ask the Eternal God to unite you as husband and wife.”

There was a pause. Rachel barely breathed. “Let us kneel.”

Driscoll prayed for God to bless this union, to bless the womb of Rachel, and to give both of them wisdom and a bond of love. He asked that God protect them from the ravages of the world which would try to destroy their marriage. He concluded with a plea for God to pour his Holy Spirit on these two young people that they might serve him faithfully throughout their lives together.

“Let us rise.”

Rachel and Malcolm stood up. She glanced at Malcolm. He was somber.

“By the authority of Jesus Christ, I now pronounce you HUSBAND and WIFE!”

They stood there awkwardly for a moment.

“You may kiss your bride,” Driscoll whispered.

Malcolm slowly raised Rachel’s veil. Rachel knew he truly loved her. She could see it in his eyes. She would never forget how he looked at her at that moment.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. She nearly fell over. Everyone laughed. The partying began.

Chapter 17

*For he that is dead is freed from sin.
Romans 6:7*

I'm really going to miss you," Rachel said as she put the last of her things into Malcolm's trunk.

"I won't be far away," Kathleen said, trying to sound strong.

"You're like a sister to me," Rachel said, hugging her tightly.

Kathleen wiped a tear off her cheek. "We'll always be sisters in the Lord."

Rachel and Malcolm had barely gotten home to their apartment when the phone rang. Rachel heard Malcolm say, "Yes sir. Yes sir. I will." It was Critchett and he wanted to see Malcolm right away. Malcolm rushed out the door.

Rachel unpacked her things and put them away. She explored her new apartment. It was only three rooms: a kitchen, living room and one bedroom. She could tell Malcolm had tried to tidy up but when she opened the oven, it was crusted with burnt on drippings. "Yuck," she said, but was happy at the same time--the apartment needed a woman's touch--hers. There was a pile of wedding gifts in the corner of the living room. She smiled. She liked her new home

Malcolm had been the first occupant in this new section of the apartment complex and had moved in when he was baptized and relocated to the area from his home in Maine. Audrey lived about a block away. Several of the widows also lived in the complex, and two church families, including Justin and Abigail. She suspected they would be

spending time together. Justin was the musician, and Malcolm needed practice in his song-leading.

She smiled. She liked everything about Malcolm. He was perfect, she concluded.

“Not much for dishes,” she surveyed. There was very little food in the refrigerator but there was a grocery store a few blocks away. She checked her purse and found a few dollars. *I’ll go and get something special for our first night in our home*, she thought.

She scribbled a note to let him know where she was and hurried out the door. It was the first time she locked the door to her own home and she paused to remember the moment.

When she returned about an hour later, Malcolm was back. “Where have you been?” he demanded.

“I went to the store,” she said. “I left you a note.”

“I didn’t see any note.” His tone was challenging.

Rachel cringed. She didn’t like this change in Malcolm’s demeanor. *Why is he so angry, she wondered? What did I do wrong?*

“It’s there, on the table,” she said meekly, pointing to the kitchen. “I have to put the food away,” she said walking around him.

He followed her into the kitchen. He paced. His face was hard and his fists were clenched.

Rachel sat the bag on the table and started to take out the items. Malcolm suddenly rushed at the table and pushed everything onto the floor. “Listen to me when I’m talking to you!”

Rachel fell back to the counter, too amazed to speak. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “What did I do?”

Malcolm paused to gather his thoughts. She could see confusion on his face. Finally he pointed at her. Slowly he spoke, “Don’t you ever do anything without asking me first. Do you understand that?”

She nodded. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to make dinner. I wanted to make something special for our first night." She broke off, tears filling her eyes.

"Clean up this mess," he said, and went into the bedroom and closed the door.

Rachel hurried to clean up the milk that had spilled on the floor. *Spilled milk! Who cares about spilled milk? I spent all my money to fix dinner for him. Why is he so angry?*

Such crazy thoughts filled her mind. The meat was still good and the vegetables were fine. *I can still make a nice dinner. Maybe Malcolm would feel better if I fix something nice.*

More illogical thoughts, she knew they were but the whole thing was so illogical, she couldn't make any sense out of it. She was shaking. She was desperately trying not to cry. That would be so immature.

Maybe something bad has happened. Maybe Mr. Critchett had given him some bad news. Surely something is wrong and he didn't mean to take it out on me. I'm supposed to help him. That's my job.

The bedroom door opened and Malcolm came out. She thought he looked like he might have been crying. "I had to pray," he said. He looked around the room.

"I'd like to start dinner," Rachel said.

"Go ahead."

He retrieved his briefcase from the couch where he'd put it earlier and put it on the kitchen table. He opened it and took out his Bible and some notes. "I have to prepare a speech for Men's Meeting Tuesday night. It's going to take a lot of time." He spoke without looking at Rachel.

Why doesn't he look at me? What's wrong with me? She sighed, turned and started cleaning vegetables.

"What are you cooking?" he asked.

Without turning around, she answered, "Meatloaf with baked potatoes."

"As long as you don't cook soup."

“What?” She turned around, surprised.

“I don’t want you to ever cook soup. I hate soup. My mother always made soup, so I’m ordering you—don’t ever cook soup.”

That sounded so silly to her she almost laughed out loud. “Okay,” she said, turning back around.

That’s how it started. Rachel mentioned it to Audrey the next day. “I think there’s something bothering him,” she said.

“Just newlywed blues,” Audrey said. “You have to get used to someone. You never really know a person until you live with them.”

Rachel thought about her two roommates. It was true, Faith had turned out differently than she’d expected. So had Kathleen. People keep secrets, she decided. It was all right if Malcolm had a secret. That would explain his behavior. Maybe someday he’d tell her but she wouldn’t push it.

Malcolm worked late Sunday and Monday night to prepare for his speech at Men’s Meeting on Tuesday. The honeymoon seemed to have ended abruptly.

Tuesday night, he returned from the meeting well after midnight. Rachel was in bed but not asleep. Malcolm undressed and climbed into bed. He sighed deeply, turned over and went to sleep. Rachel lay awake for a long time.

Malcolm prayed and studied before work. He spoke little, as if he had something important on his mind. Rachel wanted to talk to him but thought better. She made him breakfast and prepared his lunch.

“We have to talk when I get home from work,” Malcolm said as he grabbed his lunch bag.

“What about?” Rachel asked.

He didn’t answer. “I’m late.” He hurried out the door.

Rachel re-cleaned her small apartment. It almost sparkled. She was bored and wondered if she should have kept her job for a while. Married women weren't supposed to work. But there wasn't much to do and waiting for Malcolm to come home was making her anxious. All day she wondered what he wanted to talk to her about.

Finally, Malcolm came home. He seemed in an urgent mood. "Sit down," he said, motioning to the kitchen table. He sat down opposite her but didn't look at her.

"I have something," he started to say, and then shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "There's something I want you to do," he said.

Rachel sensed his unease. "It's okay," she said. "I'm happy to do whatever you want."

He looked at her. She saw guilt on his face. She saw that he didn't want to ask her to do this thing, whatever it was. Then his face hardened with resolve. He cleared his throat. "You know the wedding presents that people gave you at the Feast."

Rachel nodded. "Yes, I've already written thank-you notes to everyone. They were so generous."

"I want you to give them all away."

"What?"

"Don't give me any attitude," he said angrily. "You heard me. I want you to give all of the wedding presents away. Start with that food processor you like so much—you can give that to Mrs. Critchett. She's a lot more mature than you are and she'll appreciate it."

Rachel felt her face grow hot. It was bad enough that he wanted her to give away all the wedding presents but now he was insulting her, telling her she was immature. She pushed down the anger and hurt. She looked at him. He didn't look so perfect to her anymore. *How had that happened, she wondered. Is this what Audrey meant when she said you don't know anyone until you live with them?*

Then a thought pained her so much she almost fainted—*What else do I not know about Malcolm—the man I am married to for the rest of my life?*

“I’ll be happy to give them away,” she said softly.

“Start tomorrow,” Malcolm said. “When I get home, you can tell me who you’ve given stuff to—There’s families within walking distance right here in the complex. Start with them. Don’t forget Mrs. Critchett.”

That was it. He got up and went into the bedroom to pray.

Rachel tossed and turned all night. She finally got up and went into the living room. She sat in the darkness, letting it surround her like a comforting black velvet blanket.

She imagined she was somewhere else—maybe at home with her brother and her father. It had been so long since she’d seen them, or even thought about them. Now she wished desperately that she could just call up and say, Dad, help me. I don’t know what to do.

But, of course, that wasn’t possible. Then she remembered that she had a loving father in heaven. She knelt down by the couch and prayed. The next morning she felt better.

Malcolm dressed and left for work in a much brighter mood. He gave her a kiss on the cheek when he left. It was the first affection he’d shown since they returned from the Feast—their brief three-day honeymoon.

Rachel packed up the food processor. It was still in the original box, unused. She would have to carry it to the Critchett house, about two miles away. She thought for a moment. It would be very heavy. Should she ask Audrey for a ride? She decided not to risk upsetting Malcolm by doing something he hadn’t specifically authorized. In the end she used a sheet to make a backpack and headed across town on foot.

When she arrived at the Critchett household, she rang the doorbell, hoping that it wouldn't be Mr. Critchett who answered.

Mrs. Critchett opened the door. She looked surprised. Rachel had never looked that closely at this woman. She was plain, with curly hair, quite gray for a woman who must not be more than thirty-five. She spoke with an accent—being from England. Rachel thought the woman was very private, the sort who preferred to be alone, not at all like Nancy, the other minister's wife who was outgoing.

Mrs. Critchett held a small wooden paddle in her hand. "Yes?" she said, holding the door as if to shut it suddenly if need be.

"I have something for you," Rachel said, suddenly feeling terribly embarrassed. But she had resolved to do this thing, and to do it with a good attitude. She'd prove to her new husband that she was indeed a truly and deeply converted and faithful woman—that in fact she was and would become the Virtuous Woman he wanted.

"What?"

Rachel pulled the large box off her back and unwrapped it. Mrs. Critchett was the one who now looked embarrassed. "Why are you giving this to me?" She recognized that it was one of Rachel's wedding presents.

"I want you to have it," Rachel said firmly. "Please." Her last comment was more a plea, and Mrs. Critchett seemed to understand. She nodded and took the box and closed the door.

Rachel stood there for a moment. Then she shrugged and headed back to her apartment. There was more to do.

By the time Malcolm got home from work, Rachel had given away just about everything. Bedding went to Desiree, the elderly lady who was always cold. She'd

seemed quite pleased and Rachel was sure she didn't realize it was a wedding present.

She'd given Abigail the pots and pans set, and to Audrey the new toaster oven. Audrey had protested, but when Rachel explained the situation, she acquiesced with the promise, "I will save it for you anytime you want it back."

Rachel was pleased with her obedience, and surprised how easy it had been to give it all away. She was proud that God had given her the strength to part with material possessions. *I'm beginning to understand this assignment*, she thought, *and I can see where it's been good for me.*

She was eager to tell Malcolm. "I gave everything away," she said as he came through the door.

He looked a little puzzled, and then nodded. "That's good. What's for dinner?"

Rachel was disappointed. She was certain he would have been impressed. "I haven't started it yet, I just got back from the last drop-off."

"Well, from now on, I want you to have dinner ready when I get home from work. Is that clear?"

Rachel nodded. She went into the kitchen and started to prepare food but it was hard because tears flooded her eyes and she could barely see. She refused to let him see her cry—she stifled her sobs, pulling her emotion deep inside.

"How's it going?" Kathleen asked at services that weekend.

"Great," Rachel lied.

Kathleen looked at her doubtfully. "It's me, Rachel. You can't fool me. What's wrong?"

"It's not easy to adjust, that's all," Rachel said, hoping Malcolm wouldn't overhear. "I have to get used to being a full-time housewife."

Kathleen sensed it was more than that, but let it go. She gave Rachel a hug and whispered, “Call me if you need anything.”

For the next few weeks things seemed more normal. Malcolm relaxed and spent time with Rachel. They began to pray in the evening together before bed. He practiced his speeches and sermonettes on Rachel. She loved it. He even asked her to write up some things for him, so she spent time looking up scriptures and references in literature and putting it together for him. She felt productive, like she was truly helping Malcolm.

It wasn't to last. Late one night, after they had gone to bed, the phone rang. Malcolm once again had to hurry to Mr. Critchett's house. When he returned, he was obviously agitated.

“What's the matter?” Rachel asked.

When he looked at her, she thought he might hate her. “What did I do?” she whispered, shocked.

“Mr. Critchett said you are holding me back,” Malcolm said. “He said you are not leadership material.”

“I'm so sorry.” Rachel believed him instantly without question. She'd heard these hateful words before but she was dismayed that Mr. Critchett was telling Malcolm. *Why doesn't Mr. Critchett counsel me directly?* Then she realized that it was the husband who was responsible for the wife. It was the chain of authority.

“What can I do to change?” Rachel asked, looking down sadly.

“He said you don't smile enough—that you set a poor example for the other young women at church. You're giving them the wrong idea about marriage. You're supposed to be happy.”

Rachel wasn't sure what to say. “I don't smile enough?” She felt like laughing. This was what had upset Malcolm so much.

“You think this is funny?” he bellowed.

“Well, of course not,” she said, suddenly fearful. Where was this rage coming from? She didn’t want to believe someone could hate her so much, yet profess to love her.

“You do think it’s funny. Well, we can fix that. I have some things for you to do and we’ll see how funny you think it is then.”

Rachel looked at Malcolm. “I’m trying to be a good wife,” she choked out. “I really am. I don’t want to hold you back.”

Tomorrow, I want you to clean the oven. It’s a mess. And you can’t use any cleaner—just your own elbow grease. When I get home, I’m going to inspect it and see if it’s spotless. It better be.”

Rachel looked at him incredulously. He had never cleaned the oven in all the time he lived there and she’d had little success cleaning it. She had planned to buy an oven cleaner the next time she had enough money but now this command. She bit her lip. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll clean it.”

Rachel stood up. “I’m going back to bed,” she said.

“Sit down!”

She complied. “You’ll go back to bed when I say you can. I’m not done.”

He proceeded to spend over an hour telling her how a virtuous woman was supposed to act. He gave her the assignment of analyzing all of Proverbs 31, to look up every word in the Bible lexicon and to give him a thorough report. She was to write up how she could incorporate the principles into her life and role of wife.

When they finally returned to bed, it was nearly 1 am. Both were exhausted. Still, Rachel didn’t fall asleep. She lay there, staring at the ceiling, watching as the morning light rays slowly filled the room. *Will there be an end to this? Surely, it can’t get any worse.*

Critchett gave Malcolm orders, too. He had to sell his car and donate the money to the church. It wasn't worth a lot but it meant that he would have to ride a bike to work, and Rachel would have to walk for groceries.

Deacon came by to give them a ride to services. He often brought a dozen eggs with him, which Rachel appreciated. Giving three tithes on an already meager income made money tight. She had to work hard to maintain the food budget, especially when they entertained, as they frequently did on the weekends. She began to skimp on her own meals but Malcolm didn't notice.

Then Rachel made a big mistake. It was after Sabbath services, as they were about to leave. Rachel was talking with Kathleen about a letter from Faith. "Rachel, it's time to go," Malcolm said.

"Just a minute," she said.

"Now!"

"I'll be right there."

He took her arm and pulled her. Kathleen watched in disbelief. "Ow! What are you doing?"

"Our ride is waiting. You have no business keeping Deacon waiting. When I tell you to do something, you do it immediately."

"I'm sorry. We got a letter from Faith and I wanted to hear it."

They sat in the back seat as Deacon drove them and some others back home to the apartment complex. Everyone sensed the tension. Malcolm was silent all the way home. Rachel wondered what punishment he'd think up this time. He didn't think up any. He simply went inside the apartment without paying any attention to her.

"Malcolm, I said I was sorry," she said. "I won't do it again. Honey?"

Malcolm turned to her. His face was long. His eyes dark. "Don't you ever embarrass me like that in public

again!” His voice was low and deliberate. But Rachel was devastated by the look in his eyes. *He hates me. My God, he wishes he had never married me!* She was absolutely certain of it.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed.

He pushed by her. “I don’t want to hear it.” He went into the bedroom and closed the door.

She sat on the couch. Her mind was numb. Her whole body was numb. *I wish I would die. I wish my heart would just stop beating.* There were no tears.

She started to get up to go into the bedroom and talk to Malcolm but then stopped. *He doesn’t want to talk to me. How could he want to talk to me—I embarrassed him in front of everyone. I am a disobedient wife. Now everyone knows.* Humiliation overwhelmed Rachel. She started to rock in her seat. She hunched her back. Nothing soothed her pain.

She sat there for three hours waiting for Malcolm to come out. He didn’t. She finally tapped on the door and asked him if he wanted dinner. He didn’t answer. It was late. He hadn’t even come out to use the bathroom. She was convinced that he hated her.

She opened the door. Malcolm was lying in bed, appearing to be asleep. She undressed and slipped in beside him. When she reached for him, he turned away. She could hear him breathing, long sighs. It was unbearable.

“Please hold me,” she whispered. He only pulled further away. His body was telling her—go away—I don’t want you.

Rachel lay there for a while. Then she got out of bed and put on a robe. She went out of the bedroom and closed the door. She pulled at her hair, and pushed at her head with her hands. She whirled around and around, finally landing on the couch, where she slid down to the floor, sobbing quietly.

“I want to die,” she said. “I just want to die. The only escape from sin is death. Please, just let me die!”

Rachel sobbed for several hours. Just before dawn, she looked at her hand. She slipped off her wedding ring and examined it. *It's just a piece of metal—a golden ring, why did it hurt so much?* She slid it back on her finger.

I can't do this to Malcolm, she thought. I can't hold him back from his calling to serve. It would be better for me to die. It would be better for him—a gift, if I were dead. He'd be free to marry someone who won't hold him back.

Her mind argued with her, *but it's wrong to kill yourself. It's a sin.*

Rachel was torn. She no longer wanted to live. She'd failed. Her mother hated her. Mr. Critchett had told her she was evil. Now, the one hope she'd had—a chance to make a better life as a Christian family—she'd failed at that, too. She had ruined everything. She was a burden to her husband. She was a terrible failure.

But a tiny, very tiny voice deep inside kept trying to be heard. “God loves you—don't forget that,” it said. She couldn't hear it at first—the noise of her pain was too loud.

“I want to die, please, just let me die,” she moaned.

Then a calmness came over her. The whole world was so quiet, as the deep nighttime darkness began to melt into morning. *It would be all over, before Malcolm even wakes up, she thought. He'd be free. That would be my gift to him. He'd be free to find the right wife.*

She slowly got up and went into the kitchen. She quietly pulled a sharp knife from the drawer and went into the bathroom. *No sense making a mess, she thought.* She removed her wedding ring and put it on the sink.

It struck her as humorous—here she was ready to commit suicide and didn't even want to leave a note to explain why. She felt unworthy of even a note—what

vanity would make her think anyone would care why she died.

The little voice pleaded, “God loves you, don’t forget that.”

She held her arm over the tub, knife ready to slice. She wasn’t afraid. She was so calm. A warmth came over her. She smiled as tears flowed down her face. Her pain would soon be over.

The little voice cried—“it’s wrong. It’s the coward’s way out! You must not do it. It’s a sin to kill yourself. God will be disappointed.”

Rachel sat back on the floor. *I would sin even in death. Is it possible that God still loves me? Will I disappoint God by killing myself—failing yet again? Could it be that He forgives me, that He knows I want so desperately to be a good person? I just don’t know how. I don’t want to sin—I don’t want to.*

Light was beginning to shine through the kitchen window into the bathroom door. In the dim light, despite an overwhelming desire to end it right then, Rachel made a deal with herself. *I will die, she thought, but not physically. The Rachel everyone knows will leave this body—will die, as she was supposed to at baptism. I will be no more. But I will allow my body to remain, to serve my husband and to serve God. There will be no more Rachel.*

Rachel felt a great stillness, as if the world had stopped. The little voice quieted. She dropped the knife. The noise that had filled her head all night finally subsided.

She looked at the morning sunrays and saw a very different world. Everything looked different. She stood up. There was her wedding ring on the sink, sparkling in the early light. She numbly replaced it on her finger. It didn’t matter anymore—there was no Rachel to feel the pain.

Malcolm was moving about in the bedroom. Rachel retrieved the knife, placed it back in the drawer, went to the stove and turned on the pot of water for coffee.

Suddenly Rachel knew it was going to be easier now. Vanity was gone, resistance was gone, there was no reason to rebel, because she was gone.

Chapter 18

*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction,
and to keep himself unspotted from the world.
James 1:17*

The calmness that Rachel experienced that morning stayed with her—it was lasting and didn't wear off as her baptism euphoria eventually had.

When Malcolm got up that morning, Rachel didn't say anything to him. She knew he would need time to recover from the terrible thing she'd done, from the way she had embarrassed him in front of the brethren.

And she had no doubt that he would come to see that she had truly repented—that he would have no more problems with her. His service was what was important. From this point on, she would make sure it was all about him. Not her.

She was encouraged by her new awareness. She felt empowered by her decision, and somehow in a strange way, she felt in control for the first time in her life. What happened that night was her secret.

Her resolution worked. There were more tests to come but now they were easy. She was surprised how easy it was to submit.

Never again did Malcolm treat Rachel as harshly as he had that particular night. Gradually he got over his anger, and perhaps hurt that she'd behaved so badly. She wondered if he thought she was deliberately trying to hurt him. She began to question her own motives and thought

perhaps she had done it deliberately. You could never trust your own thoughts. It didn't matter now. Nothing mattered, because she was a new person.

He often corrected her but she humbly took it, eager to please him. Sometimes she smiled to herself, wondering if he noticed the new person she'd become—so different, so obedient and so humble.

Rachel was assigned to help Audrey with the widows. Malcolm was busy with many tasks assigned by Mr. Critchett. Church life kept them both very busy.

Kathleen became pre-occupied with school and spent less time with Rachel at services. Rachel worried about her but she knew that Kathleen was a strong person. She believed that Kathleen had been the strongest of the three especially when she was accused by Alice. She concluded that the experience has made Kathleen stronger and more mature. Rachel doubted that she would have been able to endure such a thing, at least back then. Now she could do anything God required of her.

Mid December, Kathleen hurried over to Rachel as she was putting her coat on the rack before services. "We need to talk," she said urgently.

"Now?" Rachel asked. "Services will be starting in a minute."

"Meet me back here right after?"

"Sure. Is something wrong?" Rachel asked.

"I hope not."

Rachel was distracted during the service wondering what Kathleen needed to discuss. Finally the last hymn was sung. Malcolm was busy with some of the men down front. Rachel hurried back to the coat rack. Kathleen was waiting.

"Here, read this," Kathleen said, handing Rachel a letter.

It was from Faith. Even though Rachel no longer lived there, it was addressed to both girls.

It read: Dear Kathleen and Rachel, I have some terrible news. They have assigned marriage partners and my assignment is not David. We are both crushed.

I can't stand John, the man they've given me to. He is such an obnoxious jerk.

I pleaded with them to change their mind but all they said was that I would learn to love John and that they knew better than I who was best suited to be my mate.

I am thinking of running away, or worse. I don't know what to do and I have no one to turn to.

Please write to me. I need your help.

Rachel noticed that the handwriting wasn't Faith's usual neat style. It was as if she scribbled the note in a hurry. She remembered how she felt about Ben and suddenly realized how terrible Faith must feel.

She looked at Kathleen's concerned face. Both were thinking the same thing, What are we going to do?

"We could tell Mr. Driscoll," Kathleen suggested. "He helped you and Malcolm."

Rachel doubted that he could be much help when it came to decisions made at headquarters. She shrugged. "It might be worth a try."

"Maybe Audrey or Deacon will have an idea," Kathleen said hopefully.

Rachel sensed Kathleen's desperation for their friend. She reached for Kathleen's hand. "We should pray and ask God to help, and to give us the wisdom to know what to do."

Kathleen nodded. "Okay, I agree with that but we have to *do* something. We can't let Faith ruin her life. What if she ends up with," She stopped in mid sentence as

if she suddenly realized what she was thinking was too awful to say aloud.

Rachel finished the sentence for her, knowing exactly what her friend was thinking. “With someone like Mr. Critchett.”

Kathleen smiled, grateful Rachel understood. Rachel nodded. “I know. I’ve often wondered how Mrs. Critchett stands him,” she whispered.

“She doesn’t exactly seem very happy,” Kathleen whispered back.

Some people were passing close by and might overhear, and the two realized that this was an inappropriate conversation. “What are we going to do to help Faith?” Kathleen whispered, watching the people walking away.

Rachel sighed. “I wonder where they will be assigned. If it’s near here, perhaps we can help her deal with it.”

“But she can’t marry that man. Rachel, you of all people must understand that.”

Rachel thought about her own rebelliousness when she’d first married Malcolm just a few short months ago. She knew that women could indeed learn to live with someone, even someone who seemed mean and cruel. That was how she had felt when Malcolm began correcting her and overseeing her spiritual life, that she had married a cruel and mean person, not someone who loved her. She had felt betrayed—a bad attitude, she now understood.

But she had learned to deal with it. Perhaps that was the lesson women were supposed to learn—that they could grow spiritually, even in an adverse marriage situation. Spiritual growth was more important, indeed, better than one’s personal happiness. She looked at Kathleen and doubted that she would understand that yet.

“Let’s go talk to Audrey,” Rachel suggested.

Audrey was sitting at the receptionist table where she handled any paperwork that was needed. She collected

the tithe envelopes and any donations to the ministers. Brethren would often bring gifts and offerings for the ministry. It could be fruits and vegetables, or baked goods, or even hand crafted items like furniture and artwork. Mid winter, people would often bring preserves and canned goods.

“Can we talk to you,” Kathleen asked her.

“Sure,” she said. “Sit down. I’m not busy right now.”

Kathleen sighed deeply. “We got a letter from Faith. She’s being forced to marry someone she doesn’t like. We want to do something.”

Audrey looked surprised. “That’s headquarters business. What could we possibly do?”

“You helped me when Mr. Critchett tried to force me to marry Ben,” Rachel said.

“That was different.”

“How?” Kathleen asked urgently.

Audrey looked uncomfortable. “Listen, I feel sorry for Faith, too, if she thinks she doesn’t want to marry this man. But we can’t question headquarters. She knew when she went to college that marriages were arranged there. Besides, only the best go to college—this man can’t be all that bad.”

“Can we talk to Mr. Driscoll?” Rachel asked.

Audrey shook her head doubtfully. “I’ll call him tonight if you want me to but don’t expect much. He told me that he interceded in your case Rachel because of the mitigating circumstances.” Audrey immediately looked worried and looked at some papers in front of her on the table, mumbling about finding a pen.

“What mitigating circumstances?” Rachel asked. Kathleen listened silently.

“Um, I didn’t mean it that way,” Audrey said, blushing.

“What did you mean?” Kathleen asked.

“It’s okay,” Rachel said to Kathleen. “She doesn’t need to explain anything.” Rachel could see they had put

Audrey on the spot, and since she had been spending time with Audrey recently, helping her with her tasks, she knew that Audrey had a lot on her mind. She didn't want to put any additional stresses on her. "Come on, let's go ask Deacon," she said, pulling Kathleen away.

"What mitigating circumstances?" Kathleen asked Rachel, overcome with curiosity.

"It doesn't matter," Rachel answered. Her curiosity was gone. She no longer questioned things, because deep inside she felt she no longer mattered. She was accepting of everything. That's what she needed to do at all times—accept that things are the way they are, and that God is in charge. Trust and have faith.

Besides, she wasn't sure she would want to know—it frightened her to think there was anything more than what she already knew—that Mr. Critchett didn't think she was the right wife for Malcolm.

Kathleen was puzzled by Rachel's reaction. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Rachel nodded, and smiled. "I'm fine. It's Faith we're concerned about, remember? Come on, there's Deacon."

They repeated their plea to Deacon. He shook his head. "I have confidence in headquarters," he said. "They'd never match up two people who weren't good for each other. Faith has to grow up. It's her duty to be a good wife. She's had the training, and now she must do the service."

"But," Kathleen protested.

Deacon gave her an impatient don't-question-God's-authority look.

Kathleen and Rachel went to the back of the auditorium and sat together to draft a response to Faith. They decided to pray about it and ask God to intercede

on her behalf. They were sure the right thing would happen, just as it had for Rachel and Malcolm.

After several drafts, they had a final version. It was quite simple,

Dear Faith,

We are sorry that you've been assigned to John instead of David. We are both praying and fasting to ask God to help you through this trial. You must have faith in God and his ministers, whom he fills with his Holy Spirit and whom he gives greater wisdom than we can understand. Please don't do anything without telling us. Sometimes we make hasty decisions that we later regret. This is too important to be hasty. We want to help you.

Your loving sisters in Christ,

Kathleen & Rachel.

"I'll go home and rewrite it," Kathleen said, "and put it in the mail on Monday."

"Good." Rachel noticed Malcolm down front looking for her. "I have to go."

Early January, Rachel got up to prepare breakfast for Malcolm before he left for work. When she stood up, she got dizzy and had to sit back down on the bed.

That's odd, she thought and waited a moment to get her bearings. When she stood up again, she fainted. She awoke a few moments later, Malcolm sitting beside the bed looking at her.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He looked worried.

"Of course," Rachel said. "I feel fine, it's just that when I stand up, I get dizzy."

"Why don't you rest. I can make my own breakfast this morning."

Rachel protested. "It's my job to take care of you." But when she stood back up, she immediately got dizzy. She looked at Malcolm sadly. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong."

Malcolm gave her a kiss on the forehead. “You’ll be all right—just rest. I’ll call Audrey to come and check on you.”

“Don’t do that,” Rachel said. “She’s so busy. Don’t bother her with me. I’m sure it’s just a bug or something. I feel fine, it’s just that I can’t stand up.”

Rachel tried to stand up several times more during that day, and the next, and the next. By the third day, she was not only frustrated, she was very bored.

Audrey came to visit her each day. She’d sit and talk for a while, and make Rachel some lunch or tea. She helped her get to the bathroom before leaving, always telling her to call—the phone was next to the bed—if she needed anything. Rachel never called.

She read her Bible, hand-sewed some kitchen aprons and potholders, and stared at the ceiling. Finally, on the fourth day, she got up and didn’t feel dizzy. She was fine.

Malcolm was relieved, although he never doubted that she would be fine, so he had told her.

Rachel was happy to be able to get back to work. She made Malcolm his breakfast and packed up his lunch. Then she poured herself a glass of orange juice. Her stomach immediately rejected it. She raced to the bathroom, just in time. *Oh no*, she thought, *I’m really sick*.

The nausea passed and Rachel felt perfectly fine for the rest of the day. She even went out and helped Audrey tend to the widow’s needs. Mrs. Edmonds needed help cleaning and preparing her meals. She was very old, Rachel guessed perhaps ninety, and nearly blind. She tended to be irritable sometimes, impatient, as if she was mad at the world. But she was also appreciative and always thanked Rachel for coming by to help her out.

When she returned from Mrs. Edmond’s apartment, Rachel decided to cook something special for Malcolm since she hadn’t been able to make him a nice dinner in

several days. She pulled a pot roast out of the freezer and began to thaw it in some water.

She peeled some carrots and started them boiling on the stove. They didn't smell right and Rachel wrinkled her nose, trying to avoid breathing in the aromas. And when she browned the meat in some butter, she began to feel nauseous once again. She barely finished getting the meal ready before collapsing on the bed.

"Are you okay?" Malcolm asked when he saw her.

"No," she moaned. "I'm sick."

"Perhaps I should call Mr. Critchett so that you can be anointed," Malcolm said.

"No," Rachel replied. "I'm sure it's just a bug, and it's going to pass soon."

It was Wednesday night—Women's Meeting night but Rachel just couldn't go. Malcolm explained it to Audrey when she came to the door to get Rachel.

Audrey had a grin on her face when she went into the bedroom and saw Rachel on the bed. "What's so funny?" Rachel asked, holding her stomach.

"You're pregnant girl!" Audrey said.

"What?"

"You are going to have a baby," Audrey repeated.

Rachel looked at her incredulously. "You really think so?"

Audrey nodded. "I've had three of my own. You got all the symptoms."

Rachel smiled. It was her dream come true—she was going to have a baby. Then she remembered her dizziness and nausea. "Am I going to be sick for the whole nine months?"

Audrey laughed. "No, it usually lasts a few months at the beginning."

Rachel smiled. "It's worth it."

Audrey nodded. "It certainly is."

Malcolm was standing in the doorway. Rachel smiled at him. Audrey left and Malcolm came into the bedroom and sat down on the bed next to Rachel. "I love you so much," he said softly.

Rachel smiled. "Are you as happy about this as I am?"

He nodded. "Just make sure it's a boy," he kidded.

"I'll do my best," she said. He leaned over and hugged her.

Audrey told the women at women's meeting that Rachel was pregnant. Now she was the subject of their buzzing. She thought about the meeting as she rested that night feeling pleased that now at last she would be part of the women's group.

And there were several other young women having babies, too. Abigail had announced just two weeks earlier that she was expecting, as had Esther. All of them would be coming due within a few months of each other.

There would be lots of playmates for this crop of kids. Rachel fantasized about her new baby-to-be. She vowed to love him and protect him and make sure he had a happy home—a Christian home.

It turned out that someone else was happy to hear the news, too. Mr. Critchett. Malcolm told Rachel, after a late night counseling session, that Mr. Critchett had told him it was good that she was pregnant. She would be an example to the other women.

"What did he mean by that?" Rachel asked curiously.

"He said that you can't go to a doctor. You have to wait until he says it's okay to go."

Rachel didn't see a problem with that. There was an old country doctor that most of the church women used. He was the only doctor who'd do home deliveries.

And there was a mid wife that the Massachusetts area church women often used. Some women just had the

assistance of other church women. Home delivery and natural childbirth were the most important thing. As long as she didn't go to the hospital or get medical treatments, she was sure she'd be all right. And she felt so good, it didn't occur to her to worry.

Once the dizziness and nausea passed, Rachel felt wonderful. She was so excited about being pregnant that her inner happiness seemed to radiate from her face. She was able to resume her normal activities within a few weeks.

Some of the other brethren seemed worried. One of the long-time members, a man whose wife had delivered three sons at home, offered advice. "You can always call the paramedics at the last minute—they are trained to deliver babies. If you wait until the last minute, they won't have time to take you to the hospital."

Desiree and Mrs. Edmonds asked every time they saw Rachel how she was feeling and if she knew yet how she would deliver the baby. They were worried but Rachel didn't share their concern, nor did she share with them the fact that she had been ordered by the minister not to get medical help.

She knew absolutely that she was faithful, and the Bible promised that she would be saved in childbirth. She had no doubts whatsoever.

Her enthusiasm was infectious and soon the widows were all working on baby sweaters and booties and other wardrobe items for Rachel's new baby.

Faith never responded to Rachel and Kathleen's letter. They wondered what to do and talked about it whenever they saw each other, at church activities and Sabbath Services.

Both had prayed and fasted for their friend. Rachel was confident that it was working out but Kathleen was doubtful. She didn't express her doubts to Rachel sensing

a change in her friend. She wasn't sure she liked the change but she had to admit Rachel was radiant and so happy now.

Late February Rachel was anxious to resume having company for dinner after services as they often did before her dizzy spells. She suggested to Malcolm that they have a group of young people, perhaps Alberto and Joel along with Kathleen and Amanda.

She'd asked Kathleen about it, and she was agreeable. Rachel knew that Kathleen would do just about anything to spend time with Joel. Rachel was surprised at Malcolm's response.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," he said.

She thought for a moment, and then confided to him, "You know, Kathleen has a huge crush on Joel. Maybe we could, you know, help them get to know each other."

Malcolm shook his head. "Joel isn't interested in Kathleen."

It sounded so final. "Well, he doesn't have to be interested right now—he doesn't really know her," Rachel reasoned aloud.

Malcolm shook his head again. "Joel knows her as well as he wants to know her. He told me he isn't interested in Kathleen. She's damaged goods. Joel wants to marry a virgin. Everyone knows Kathleen is madly in love with him. It's so obvious. He's embarrassed by that. I don't want to put him on the spot by having him come to dinner and setting him up with *her*."

It was the way he said "her" that bothered Rachel. "Kathleen is my best friend," she said, stopping before adding, "And she is a virgin." No sense bringing up the subject of Billy's visit—it was a sore spot, still, even for Malcolm.

"You might want to think about finding a new best friend."

Rachel felt a pang. It was the first such pang she'd experienced since "that night". She didn't say anymore, fearing an order might be the outcome—an order to abandon her friendship with Kathleen. She suddenly worried how she would explain this to Kathleen.

The very next Women's Meeting, Kathleen sat down beside Rachel. "So, how are you feeling?"

"Great," Rachel said. "But I'm not very big yet."

"You're only three months pregnant," Madeleine said, overhearing the girls. "You'll start to show in another month or two."

"So," Kathleen said, "are we having a dinner party at your house? What did Malcolm say when you asked him?"

Rachel's face drained of color, despite her best efforts to conceal her feelings. Kathleen knew immediately something was amiss. "What is it?"

Rachel tried to fib. "Malcolm doesn't want to do it right now—maybe later."

"Come on, Rachel. This is me, your best friend. Something's up. Does Joel have another girlfriend?"

Rachel could see the panic in Kathleen's eyes. "No, Malcolm didn't say that," she said quickly.

"Does Malcolm have a problem with me?" Kathleen said suddenly, her voice a whisper.

Rachel swallowed hard. "No, of course not."

"Then what?" Kathleen demanded.

Rachel looked her friend in the eye. She couldn't lie to her. Kathleen knew her too well, and lying was a sin. She had to be truthful, no matter what.

"Malcolm said Joel's not interested in you, Kathleen. He just doesn't have the same feelings for you as you do for him. You can't force the chemistry if it isn't there."

Kathleen was crushed. Rachel immediately wished she hadn't said it. It sounded so cruel. She patted Kathleen's arm. "He's not the one for you, Kathleen," she said.

“He thinks I’m a slut, doesn’t he?” Kathleen’s jaws quivered.

“No, no, he doesn’t,” Rachel said, trying to sound convincing. She glanced around. Other women were busy in conversations of their own. Rachel whispered, “He remembers Billy.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “Maybe if you explain it to him.”

Kathleen was stricken. Words weren’t necessary to see she was terribly hurt, and angry. “It’s that Alice and her big mouth,” Kathleen said, in a rather loud whisper. Some of the women glanced at her.

“Shhhh...” Rachel said. “Don’t make trouble for yourself.”

There was defeat in Kathleen’s eyes. Rachel wanted to comfort her friend. She wished she hadn’t told her. She wondered if Joel would have said it to her face if Kathleen had spoken to him. Somehow she was certain he would. Maybe now Kathleen would at least be prepared for his rejection, and move on in her life.

Rachel changed the topic. “Have you heard anything from Faith yet?”

Kathleen shook her head. “I have to go,” she said, standing up. She left without another word to anyone.

Early March, there was a knock at the door in the middle of the night. Rachel thought it was probably Mr. Critchett with another of his late night counseling session for her husband.

It was Wade. Rachel could hear Malcolm and Wade from the bedroom, and when she realized who it was, she quickly pulled on her robe and went into the living room. Wade looked worried, old for his age.

“I need your help,” he said. “Can you come now?”

“What is it?” Malcolm asked, already putting on his winter coat and boots.

“It’s Terry. The police are at the apartment.”

“Terry?” Rachel asked from the doorway to the kitchen.

“What happened?” Malcolm asked.

“He’s got into trouble. They want to arrest him. Hurry, we have to get him to come out of his room before something bad happens.”

Malcolm glanced at Rachel. “Go back to bed. I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

“Maybe Audrey needs me,” Rachel said.

He shook his head. She could see that he didn’t want to put her in any harm. The thought alarmed her.

“Be careful,” she said, rushing to him, and giving him a hug.

Rachel watched from the window as they hurried away.

Malcolm returned after two o’clock in the morning. He looked so tired. Rachel had gone to bed but was unable to sleep. She decided to pray and then she read a few scriptures, wondering what was wrong.

“What happened?” she asked, as he got ready to return to bed.

Malcolm sat down on the bed. “The police came. They took Terry. He had broken into some of the apartments in the complex and stolen things.”

“What did you do?”

“I couldn’t do anything except help Wade talk to Terry. He was barricaded in his room and the police were going to break the door down to get him.”

“How is Audrey?” Rachel asked.

Malcolm shrugged. “She was asleep.”

“Asleep? Through all that commotion?” Rachel asked.

Malcolm frowned at her as if she should know Audrey wasn’t asleep because she was passed out from booze. No one wanted to actually say it out loud but now they

would have to face it—Audrey was having some big problems with alcohol.

“Wade is pretty shook up. Poor kid. He has the weight of the world on his shoulders.”

“Why didn’t he call Mr. Critchett?”

“I don’t know. He called me and I was glad to help. When I suggested he call Mr. Critchett, he insisted that he didn’t want to do that. He doesn’t like Mr. Critchett.”

Rachel remembered when she’d stayed with Audrey that first time, and how angry Wade had been when Mr. Critchett called him out to the car for counseling. She’d been puzzled by his reaction—anger. One should be honored when a minister of God takes the time to work with you one-on-one. She knew her own interactions with this minister had been difficult. She looked at Malcolm, searching for an explanation.

“What’s going to happen to Terry?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t know for sure. The police officer I spoke with was very nice. He thinks that Terry will end up at The Youth Detention Center. He said that Terry is a very troubled young man.”

“Poor Audrey,” Rachel said. “We should pray for her.”

Malcolm agreed, and they both knelt down and prayed for Audrey and her sons. Malcolm was exhausted. They went back to bed for a few short, restless hours of sleep.

The next day, Rachel hurried over to Audrey’s apartment. “How are you doing?” she asked.

Audrey shrugged. Her eyes were red and Rachel knew she’d been crying. There was an open wine bottle on the counter. It was only 8:30 in the morning. Rachel didn’t know a lot about alcoholics but she knew drinking at breakfast time wasn’t a good thing for anyone.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” She put her arms around Audrey.

Audrey was trembling. Rachel had never seen Audrey be anything but strong. Sure of herself. Confident. Today, she was so vulnerable, it was unnerving to Rachel.

“It’s Wade,” Audrey sobbed. “He’s so mad at me. I don’t blame him. How’s he to understand—he’s just a kid.”

“Where’s Wade?” Rachel asked.

“He’s gone. I don’t know where. He threatened to leave and go back to his father.” Audrey looked Rachel in the eye. “I couldn’t bear to lose my boys.”

Rachel swallowed hard. “It’s going to be all right, Audrey. God will help you. Remember, he never tests us beyond what we can bear.”

“And he provides a way out,” Audrey added. “But to tell you the truth, Rachel, I am beginning to wonder...It’s been over four years since I left my husband in Louisiana.”

“Don’t talk like that, Audrey. You mustn’t lose faith. You’ve come so far and done so much. You’re a Deaconess now. People depend on you.”

From behind them, a loud male voice spoke. “She spends more time with the brethren than she does with her own family! Do you really think that is what God wants?”

“Wade, you’re back,” Audrey cried. “I was so worried. Where have you been?”

“Where you should have been if you weren’t so drunk. I’ve been at the police station trying to help Terry.”

Audrey looked stricken. Rachel drew back. She couldn’t think of anything appropriate to say and glanced at the door to escape but Audrey had a strong clasp on Rachel’s arm.

There were tears in Wade’s eyes. “You say that you want to obey God but God tells you to put your family first. Doesn’t the Bible say that a man and woman should forsake all and cleave to one another?”

Audrey stared at him. He's never verbally questioned her religious beliefs to her before. "I must obey God's will," Audrey whispered.

"All you think about is saving yourself. Have you ever once thought about Terry and Randy and me? What about saving us, Mom? What about *our* welfare? Does that even matter to you at all?"

Audrey stared at him in disbelief. She looked confused, befuddled. All she could say was, "but, but I, I..."

Wade shook his head in disgust. "You're drunk, Mom. Look at you, you can't even talk."

"No," she said. "I haven't had anything to drink." She looked around the table like a lost person who wonders where they are.

"If I could leave, I would go back to Dad. He cares about us. He gave us a good life. We didn't have to live off charity. You didn't have to wait on a bunch of old hags who take advantage of you day and night. And the only reason you do it is because they are all leaving their money to the church when they die. Can't you see these people are just using you? For God's sake, Mom, you had it made, and so did we. We were happy, Mom. Why did you take us away? Why did you ruin our lives? Why did you destroy our home? We were happy with Dad."

Now Wade was crying. He turned aside and regained his composure.

"Please don't leave, Wade," Audrey pleaded. "I need you. I love you. You're my son. I can't lose you."

These words seemed to fuel Wade's anger. "Dad loves us, too, Mom. He misses us. He didn't want to lose us. Why do you believe this twisted notion that God wants to destroy our family? I don't want any part of a cruel God who would do such a thing."

"Don't talk like that," Audrey said, at once both startled and bristling.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I can’t leave. I can’t abandon Terry and Randy. They need someone to take care of them, and it sure ain’t you! You’re too busy taking care of everyone else to be bothered with us.”

Randy had been upstairs. He stood in the door, his eyes red and swollen. When he saw Rachel standing next to his mother, he ran to her and threw his arms around her.

Rachel hugged him tightly but he didn’t want to let go. He sobbed. She felt so sorry for him. And for Audrey. And for Terry and Wade.

Audrey looked at Wade. He returned her look, seeing that she was defeated, old, tired. Her hair was disheveled and uncombed. She looked confused. Her eyes full of tears, which started to flow down her face.

Wade’s anger softened. It was obvious he loved his mother, and that caused him even more pain. Rachel saw that Wade was sad and torn and confused.

“Mom,” he said softly. “Please don’t cry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Randy looked at Wade. “You’re mean,” he said hatefully to his older brother.

Audrey pulled Randy close. She hugged him. “I’m so sorry,” she sobbed. “I don’t know what to do. I just don’t know what to do. I love your father. If we have faith, God will reunite us—I’m certain.”

Wade’s face hardened again. He turned abruptly and left.

Rachel told Audrey to rest. She’d visit the widows today and see what they needed. Audrey never reneged on her duties but today she was grateful and nodded to Rachel.

Randy clung to his mother as if fearing to let go. Rachel patted his cheek and gave him a kiss. “I’ll come check on you later, okay?” He nodded.

As much as she disliked Alice, Rachel had to visit her that morning and see what she needed. When Alice opened the door, she was surprised to see Rachel.

“Where’s Audrey?” she demanded with a glare, looking Rachel up and down as if to evaluate her.

“Audrey’s not well, today. I’m filling in for her.”

“Hmm.” Alice stood there for a moment. “She’s been hitting the bottle again.”

Rachel was surprised, and it showed on her face. Alice looked pleased. She liked to shock people. “Well, come in then. Let’s get started.”

Rachel helped Alice change her bedding and clean her kitchen. She scrubbed her bathroom, noticing that Alice was actually quite capable of doing these chores herself.

She avoided conversing with Alice. Wade’s words echoed in Rachel’s mind as she worked. She had never thought about why Audrey was assigned this specific group of elderly women to take care of. She had assumed it was the Christian thing to do.

She wondered about his challenge that God would want to break up families. Lorna’s family had been broken up because her mother had previously been married, similar to Audrey, for only a short time. Lorna’s mother had eight children, who were now separated from their father, just as Audrey’s boys were.

Rachel was also puzzled by his comment about the widows. She’d heard about the arrangement where the widows left their estates to the church and in exchange they were being cared for by church members. She wondered if there were more to the story and what Wade had meant.

She thought about asking Alice but decided not to. Every time she conversed with Alice, she regretted it. The old woman was simply not nice.

“How’s your friend?” Alice said, as she sat and watched Rachel work.

“Huh?” Rachel said, looking up.

“Kathleen?”

“Oh, she’s fine.”

Rachel returned to her scrubbing. She could feel her face flush and wished she could prevent it. The last thing she wanted was for Alice to know that her words had any effect on her.

“What’s she up to these days now that you don’t live with her?”

“Amanda lives with her now,” Rachel stated matter-of-factly.

Alice groaned. “Amanda.”

Rachel scrubbed a little harder. She evaluated the floor. It looked clean enough.

Alice pointed. “There’s a spot you missed over there.”

“How are you feeling now that you’re pregnant?”

“I’m feeling very good,” Rachel said. Alice actually sounded concerned about her.

“You better be careful not to lift heavy things,” Alice said. “That’s how you lose babies you know. I ought to know. I had several miscarriages.”

Rachel breathed in slowly. “How many children do you have?” she asked, trying to sound interested.

“Six.”

“Do you ever see them?”

“No.”

Rachel glanced up. The old lady looked quite unhappy.

Rachel stood up and stretched her back. She surveyed the old lady’s kitchen floor, quite pleased with her work. “How’s that?”

“It’ll do,” Alice said. “For now, until Audrey’s feeling better.”

Rachel smiled and thought *you're quite welcome*.

"You can't leave, yet," Alice said when she realized Rachel was gathering her things.

"I have to visit Desiree," Rachel said, glancing at the clock. It was getting late.

"You haven't had lunch."

"That's okay," Rachel said.

"No it most certainly is not. You're eating for two now. You have to have some lunch. I insist."

Reluctantly Rachel agreed, only to discover that it was she who would prepare the lunch. She made them each a sandwich and cup of tea.

Alice pointed out that she shouldn't drink tea while she was pregnant—milk was better. Rachel nodded, and drank the tea.

"If you ask me, Audrey has a spiritual problem," Alice said as she munched on her sandwich.

Rachel felt her hairs bristle on her neck. She bit her lip and didn't respond. No matter, Alice just kept on talking. "She's got a bad attitude, with a capital A."

Rachel thought that perhaps Alice could take the capital A from her name leaving her with the letters lice, and the thought struck her funny. She looked away so Alice wouldn't see her grinning.

"I think spiritual concerns are for the ministers," Rachel stated.

Alice bristled. "Well, you haven't learned to respect your elders too well, have you, dear? I may have to speak to the minister about *your* attitude."

Rachel smiled at the old lady. It didn't matter to her if Alice did say something to the minister. *Go ahead*, she thought. Inwardly, Rachel was pleased that she had such confidence—knowing that she could endure any punishment or humiliation.

Alice was unnerved by Rachel's demeanor. She wasn't making this young lady afraid or angry.

Rachel detected something in Alice's expression. She thought it might actually be fear. She remembered Audrey's explanation that Alice was jealous of the young women because they had opportunities she hadn't had as a young woman, because they would have the chance to live their lives as converted Children of God. But Alice had lived a long life, with six children. How could she be so jealous? It was a puzzlement.

"You tell that young friend of yours she better watch herself. I'm quite aware of what she's up to," Alice said as Rachel gathered her things to leave.

"What young friend of mine are you referring to?"

"That roommate. Kathleen." Alice said impatiently, knowing that Rachel knew full well to whom she was referring.

"Kathleen's the nicest person I know," Rachel said calmly, looking the old lady squarely in the eye. "She's kind, honest, and thoughtful, and has strong character."

"Humph. I doubt that," Alice said. "I can tell these things, you know. It's a special gift I have. Like I knew you were pregnant even before you did. I could sense it."

Rachel suddenly wondered if Alice was truly insane. It would make it easier not to dislike her. She smiled.

"See you later, Alice. I have to go now."

Rachel knocked on Desiree's door. Rachel smiled as she noticed Desiree peeking from behind the curtains to see who was at her door. She answered after a long pause.

Desiree had a broad smile on her face. "Come in, dear," she said, in her sing-song voice.

"I'm here to help you out. Audrey isn't feeling too well today."

"Oh, no. I hope she's all right," Desiree said, suddenly worried. "She does too much. I told her that. She has

her own family to take care of.” The old lady shook her head sadly.

“I’m going to talk with Malcolm and see if there’s some way we can relieve some of her work load,” Rachel said, suddenly feeling a mature-take-charge attitude. She was sure that Malcolm would share her concerns about Audrey.

“Have you been checked out yet,” Desiree asked.

Rachel blushed. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.” She smiled at the thin old lady. “What can I do for you today?”

“I don’t need a thing,” Desiree said. “If you’d like something to drink, I can get it for you.”

Rachel thanked her and headed to her next assignment: Mrs. Edmonds. It was nearly two when Rachel knocked on Mrs. Edmonds’ door. It took several minutes for the old woman to answer. Rachel could hear movement behind the door while she waited.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Rachel.”

She opened the door. “Why so it is. What can I do for you, dear?”

“I’m here to help you out. Audrey isn’t feeling well today.”

“I know. Alice called me.”

Rachel cringed. Alice. “Well, can I come in?”

“Sure, but I don’t need anything done today. You should rest, dear. You’re in the family way now.” The old lady smiled.

Rachel smiled back. “I know. But I feel great. Audrey said you need some help cleaning. What can I do for you?”

Mrs. Edmonds glanced at her kitchen doubtfully. Rachel stood up. “Do you need help with the dishes?”

“No.” She was very abrupt.

“Mrs. Edmonds. I’d like to help. Really. It’s okay.”

She looked doubtful. "It's not that, dear," she said, her voice softening.

"What is it?"

"I don't think Mr. Critchett would like it if I let someone other than Audrey help me. He was quite specific about that."

Rachel stood for a moment dumbfounded. Despite its illogic, she clearly understood what this old woman was saying. She was afraid to disobey Mr. Critchett.

"What exactly did he tell you?" Rachel asked.

The woman looked nervous. "Come here. I want to show you something."

She took Rachel into the kitchen and opened up her trash can. Inside were containers of frozen food.

"What is it?" Rachel asked, confused.

"He was here."

"Who?" Rachel knew she meant Mr. Critchett but she asked anyway.

"Mr. Critchett." Mrs. Edmonds whispered, impatiently.

"He was?" Rachel was still confused. What did this garbage can have to do with his visit, she wondered.

"He did this," the woman said, nodding toward the trash can.

"Did what?"

"He threw away all my food! Just look."

Suddenly, Rachel thought Mrs. Edmonds was going to cry.

"Why did he do that?"

Tears welled up in Mrs. Edmund's eyes. She looked like someone whose dignity had been stripped. She was so ashamed.

Rachel was startled by her look—and concerned. Mrs. Edmonds was one of the nicest old ladies she knew, despite her impatience at times. She usually figured the elderly woman didn't feel well or something was bothering

her and dismissed her curt words. She knew that Mrs. Edmonds meant no harm to anyone.

“He said I was fat,” she whispered, looking down at the floor.

Rachel was shocked.

“He just came in here and yelled at me. He opened my refrigerator and threw all my food in the trash. He told me to write down what I eat and not to buy any more prepared food.”

Rachel reached for Mrs. Edmund’s hand and took it into hers. She looked the old lady in the eye. “It’s okay,” she whispered.

“Well, it might be okay but I can’t just go to the store and buy more food. I don’t drive, and poor Audrey, she’s waiting on so many people, I hate to bother her.”

“When did he do this?”

“Yesterday.”

“What have you eaten today?”

Mrs. Edmonds shook her head. She sat down at the table and held her head in her large, arthritic hands. “I haven’t eaten. I don’t know what to eat.” She was shaking all over.

Rachel scanned the refrigerator. There were some eggs and cheese left, and a partial bottle of milk. “I’m going to make you something to eat.”

“That would be so nice but do you think it will be okay with Mr. Critchett? I don’t want to make him angry again.”

Rachel looked at her and smiled. “You need to eat, Mrs. Edmonds.”

She nodded, and smiled gratefully. “I am awfully hungry.”

Rachel pondered whether or not to tell Malcolm what she’d learned that day when he got home from work. She

decided to pray about it first, and wait for some guidance, a sign from God to help her make the right decision.

One thought kept haunting her: Why was Mr. Critchett deliberately treating Mrs. Edmonds that way?

Buried way down in her mind was a possible answer that she couldn't acknowledge: So she would die and the church would get her estate.

Chapter 19

*For we through the Spirit wait
for the hope of righteousness by faith.
Galatians 5:5*

When Rachel arrived at services Kathleen hurried over and grabbed her arm and pulled her aside. Malcolm continued inside the auditorium without a word. He was leading songs today and focused on assigned tasks to finish before services started.

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“I figured out how Faith can get out of marrying John.”

“How?”

“All she has to do is tell him she’s not a virgin.” Kathleen nodded as if she were proud of herself for thinking of it.

“I don’t know,” Rachel said. “We don’t know that for certain.”

“Come on, Rachel. You were there. She had a miscarriage.”

“It might have been a difficult period for her. She never actually said she was pregnant.” Rachel knew her words were ridiculous even as she spoke. Now that she’d experienced morning sickness she realized Faith had gone through the same thing that summer two years ago.

Kathleen frowned. “Well, I’m going to write to her and suggest it. Do you want me to put your name on the letter?”

Rachel hesitated.

“Never mind. I’ll do it myself,” Kathleen said abruptly. She started to walk away.

“Wait, Kathleen,” Rachel called. She caught up to her and they walked into the auditorium together. “Let me think about it.”

“Don’t think too long. I’m mailing the letter on Monday.”

It was the first Day of Unleavened Bread. Rachel had not only cleaned all the bread crumbs out of her own apartment but had helped Audrey clean each of the elderly widow’s apartments as well.

Mr. Driscoll gave the sermon with the theme “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” Galatians 5:9. He read numerous scriptures on the subject of the Days of Unleavened Bread and told the congregation they must now remove sin from their lives as they had cleaned the leavening out of their homes.

He advised that no matter how diligent they were over the next week, they would ingest leaven somewhere. It was hidden in many foods. So it was with sin, no matter how diligent they were to root out all the sin in their lives, they were unable to be completely successful.

It is only through the Holy Spirit that they might be saved, Verse 22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

He read verses 24 and 25, “And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts, If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”

Rachel listened to his words, realizing that she had indeed experienced these things in her life, and felt confirmed that she was truly converted, that God’s Holy Spirit was working in her. Things were making sense now, things that she had just accepted before, like giving up her own self to serve her husband. It had led to unexpected happiness and joy in her life. She glanced at Malcolm who sat beside her. *Once I crucified my flesh and my sinful thoughts, God blessed me.*

When it came time for the special Holy Day offering, Rachel reached into her bag and pulled out the old silver

dollar her father had given her so long ago. She'd been saving it, deep down perhaps hoping to someday see her father again. She'd been hanging on to a little bit of her past. She was ready to let it go completely now. By placing that coin in the collection basket, she felt a great sense of relief.

That evening, Malcolm and Rachel were having a group of brethren to dinner. Jordan and Gayla, a couple from the Maine Church would be staying overnight before leaving for their homes the next morning. They had been members for many years. Gayla was the lady who never conceived. Rachel remembered her from the few Women's meetings Gayla had been able to attend.

Also present at their dinner party was Justin and Abigail. She was due in late July, and being a small person, was very large already. It was obvious she was uncomfortable, and the summer heat bothered her. Her face was puffy, her ankles swollen but she was cheerful.

They talked about preparations for the birth. Abigail was going to use Mrs. Landry, the midwife in Rhode Island. They'd made arrangements with a church family in the Rhode Island area to go to their home for the delivery. Abigail had been to see the midwife several times and been assured her pregnancy was going well, although at the last meeting, the midwife had expressed some concern about the swelling.

Abigail described the bed pads she'd made. They were constructed from heavy gauge plastic trash bags, with absorbent materials sewn to one side. Abigail had used old bed sheets and cotton quilt material. Rachel decided she better make some of her own and thanked Abigail for the information.

Gayla had been listening to the two young women. Jordan told the group, "I still hope we'll have one of our own. I'm praying that God will bless my wife's womb."

Gayla looked down embarrassed and murmured, “don’t forget I turn forty next month.”

Chewing his food and studying his wife, he said, “Abraham’s wife conceived when she was ninety. I guess if you have faith, anything is possible.”

His innuendo was not missed by anyone sitting at the table. Gayla blushed. Later, as the women cleared the table and washed the dishes, Gayla confided to them. “My husband believes that it’s all my fault that we haven’t conceived, but I’m not so sure.”

Abigail quickly said, “I’m going to add you to my prayer list.” Rachel said, “me, too.” Rachel felt great sympathy for Gayla and wondered how she would feel in her shoes. Here she was with two young pregnant women and herself denied a baby.

When Gayla went into the bathroom, Rachel told Abigail. “Your answer to Gayla was so good. I didn’t know what to say to her.”

She was quite surprised at Abigail’s response. “Well it’s obvious that she has an attitude problem. No wonder God hasn’t blessed her.”

Rachel didn’t know what to say.

Abigail changed the subject. “I am working hard to help my husband become a Deacon,” she said. It was so matter-of-fact.

“You want your husband to be a deacon?” Rachel asked.

Abigail seemed equally surprised at Rachel’s response. “Well, of course, don’t you?”

“I hadn’t given it a lot of thought,” Rachel said. “I guess if it’s God’s will.”

“Why do you think Mr. Critchett is always counseling them?” Abigail asked.

“He counsels your husband, too?” Rachel asked, immediately feeling embarrassed.

“Of course, at all hours. He often comes late at night to get Justin.”

This was new information to Rachel. She decided she'd ask Malcolm about this later when everyone was gone. She wondered if he wanted to be a Deacon.

When Gayla came out of the bathroom, it was obvious she'd been crying. “Are you okay?” Rachel asked.

“You have no idea how much I long to have my own baby,” she said. “I just ache for a baby.” She shook her head. “I'm afraid it's never going to happen,” she whispered.

The next day, after Jordan and Gayla left, Rachel asked Malcolm about Abigail's comments. “Do you want to be a Deacon?”

Malcolm seemed a little flustered by her question. “Well, if that's what God wants me to do,” he said.

She wasn't convinced he was that excited about it. “You do a lot of things,” she said. “You lead songs and give sermonettes. You handle the youth activities. You're an officer in the Men's Club.” She looked at him thoughtfully. “Mr. Critchett is always counseling you. Abigail said he counsels Justin late at night, too.”

“Don't you ever talk about that to anyone!”

“What?”

“Do you understand?”

“Yes, of course. What's the matter?”

“You women shouldn't be gossiping about such things. You're treading on thin ice. If Mr. Critchett finds out, well, you remember what happened to Marianne, don't you?”

He looked down at the Bible he was studying.

“You didn't answer my question,” she said softly. “If your goal is to be ordained a Deacon, I want to help you any way I can.”

“That's not for us to decide.”

“Abigail said she really wants Justin to be ordained.”

“She said that?” Malcolm looked surprised.

“Yes, and she thinks it’s important to seek service. She’s trying to help him by being a good wife.”

Malcolm thought for a moment. “Justin is a good guy. He handles all the music. I would be happy if he’s chosen to be a Deacon.”

Rachel sat for a moment, then asked, “Malcolm, do you want me to do something to help you?”

“No,” he said without hesitation. He shook his head. “I’m not trying to be anything. If it happens, fine, but I’m not pursuing it. It’s up to God not you or Abigail.”

Rachel thought that she was quite certain, after seeing how hard Audrey worked to the neglect of her own family that being a Deacon or Deaconess was more than she could do once her baby was born and secretly she hoped that they weren’t chosen. She sensed that Malcolm felt the same way. *Abigail doesn’t realize what she’s wishing for.*

Rachel’s pregnancy was showing now that she was seven months along. Her baby would be born sometime the first of September. Several of the brethren were more urgent in their inquiries about her plans for delivery, and perhaps uneasy by Rachel’s nonchalant responses. She wasn’t worried about it.

Mr. Critchett continued to tell Malcolm that she must not see any doctor or medical person, not even the midwife. He insisted that Rachel would be an example to the rest of the women, some of whom were too anxious to seek medical care—all-be-it limited care for their home deliveries

Sometimes Rachel wondered how extensive Mr. Critchett’s orders were concerning her. One day in particular, she began to wonder about this.

She usually walked the several blocks to the grocery store when she needed something. She didn’t want to add

to Audrey's workload and she enjoyed walking. Now that she was getting into the latter part of her pregnancy, it took longer to make the trip and she found she could carry smaller amounts.

Several of the widows were shopping one day and spotted Rachel in the store. Another young woman in the church, Ann, was transporting them that day. Rachel didn't know her too well as they had recently moved here from Maine.

"You can ride back with us," Desiree said.

"That's okay," Rachel replied. "I like to walk." She looked at her basket and thought it would be nice to get a few heavier things if she had a ride.

"You shouldn't be walking so far by yourself," Mrs. Edmonds scolded. "You're riding back with us."

"Are you sure?" Rachel asked.

"Of course."

"Well, I think I'll get a few more items then."

Rachel hurried to find the things she needed. Now she had two bags of groceries, and she wheeled her carriage out to where the old ladies were getting into a car.

"Thanks for the ride," Rachel said.

Ann stepped out from behind the car where she was loading grocery bags into her trunk. "You can't ride with us," Ann said abruptly. She offered no explanation.

"What?" Rachel was surprised.

"Of course she can," Desiree said. Mrs. Edmonds repeated the sentiment.

Ann shook her head. "No, she can't. I'm only allowed to transport the widows."

The old ladies looked shocked. "You can't make her walk all the way home when there's plenty of room for her in the car."

"That's okay," Rachel said. She felt something that had been suppressed for a long time—anger. And hurt.

She quickly fit the two bags into one heavy bag, and lifted it out of her carriage.

Ann went back to loading her trunk. Desiree and Mrs. Edmonds looked disgusted. “It’s okay,” Rachel assured them. “I like to walk.”

“That’s too heavy for you,” Desiree protested. “At least let us take the bag for you. We can leave it on your door.”

Ann shook her head.

Rachel wanted to get away from there as fast as she could. Adrenaline pumped in her veins and she found the heavy bag quite light—at first. She headed out with a quick step, so that the ladies wouldn’t worry about her.

In a few moments she saw Ann’s car pass her and head up the hill towards the apartment complex. Rachel slowed down. Her side was starting to hurt. She set the bag on the sidewalk for a moment and caught her breath. The hill looked so large. Her arms were aching. She rubbed them, then bent over and picked up the grocery bag.

Every step she took, her arms ached worse and her side throbbed. Slowly, she climbed that hill, putting one step in front of the other, ever so slowly until she turned the corner and saw the apartment complex. She hoped no one would see her.

Finally, Rachel got to her apartment. Her face was red and her heart was racing. Sweat saturated her clothing. Her breaths were short and labored. Her side hurt so much she could barely pick up her feet to walk.

Anxiously, she unlocked her apartment door and went inside and closed the door, locking it after her. She dropped her grocery bag on the floor by the door and lay down next to it. She tried to breathe slowly, hoping to relax and catch her breath.

All she could think was, why? Why did Ann act like that? Did her husband command her not to give anyone, including Rachel, a ride?

She tried not to dislike Ann. If she'd been in that same position, she reasoned, she'd probably have done the same thing. But if she'd just carried that heavy bag for her—how could that have violated whatever order she'd been given?

After a half hour, Rachel calmed down, both in body and mind, and told herself to forget about it—and not to hold a grudge against Ann. That's exactly what she did.

At the next service, Rachel asked Kathleen if she'd sent the letter. Kathleen nodded but Rachel could see there was some uncertainty on her friend's face. She looked at Kathleen and said, "I think you did the right thing. I'm sorry I didn't sign it with you. It's time for Faith to tell the truth. The truth will set her free."

Kathleen smiled. "I have something to show you," she said.

Rachel watched Kathleen rummage in her Bible bag, and finally pull out a paper. It was her GED Certificate. Kathleen held it out proudly.

"Wow," Rachel said. "This is great, Kathleen. You did it."

Kathleen nodded. "That's not all."

Rachel looked at her friend. She could see a mischievous look in her eyes. "I'm going to start college this fall."

Rachel wasn't sure what to say. "You're going to college?"

"Yes. The State University. It's right near my mom's home. I can still come to services. She'll give me a ride."

"What about Amanda?" Rachel asked.

“She’s getting married. Didn’t you know? Someone from the Boston area that she met at the Feast of Tabernacles last fall.”

“I am so happy for you, Kathleen,” Rachel said. She hugged her.

“So, have you figured out how you’re delivering your baby yet?” Kathleen asked. Lately, she’d joined the growing group of concerned members.

Rachel wondered if she were the topic of conversation among them, and then thought perhaps that was exactly what Mr. Critchett had intended when he said she would be an example.

Rachel shrugged. “I’m not sure but it will work out.”

“You haven’t made any arrangements?”

Rachel shook her head. “I’m still waiting for Mr. Critchett’s permission. Malcolm says he’s sure it’ll be soon.”

“Look at you,” Kathleen said. “You’re huge. You can’t wait much longer. Esther told me that the doctor who does home deliveries will only do them for women he’s been seeing during their pregnancy.”

Rachel felt a twinge of concern. “Really? I didn’t know that.”

Kathleen nodded. “And where will you go if you plan to use the midwife? She’s in Rhode Island. You have to arrange for a place in advance.”

“It will work out,” Rachel stated confidently.

Kathleen dropped the subject.

“Besides,” Rachel said, smiling. “I feel absolutely wonderful. I’m sure everything will be just fine. Don’t worry.”

The July church picnic took place at a local park as it had for many years. Deacon was always excited about this event. He’d bring a large grill he’d made years before just for this picnic. Rachel offered to help him cook the food.

Audrey was also in charge of food preparations, and planned a huge desert table.

Small children ran about laughing and hollering. The widows settled under a shade tree in their folding lawn chairs. The young men engaged in a game of flag football, Malcolm leading one team, and Alberto the other. They were fiercely competitive, yelling and carrying on as if it was a game of great importance.

Kathleen arrived and offered to help. “You shouldn’t be doing all this work in the hot sun,” she said to Rachel.

“I’m fine,” Rachel assured her.

“Did you hear that Abigail is in labor?” Audrey asked.

“No. Isn’t she early? Is she doing okay?” Rachel asked.

Audrey shrugged. “She and Justin left for Rhode Island late last night. That was the last time I heard from them. She must have delivered her baby by now.”

Rachel felt her stomach flutter—excitement. The time was drawing near now. She was only a few weeks behind Abigail’s due date. She glanced at Malcolm, running about with his buddies in the football game.

“I have something for you,” Kathleen said. “It’s in my mom’s car.”

“Go ahead, Deacon said. I don’t need you right now.”

Rachel followed Kathleen to her mom’s station wagon. Kathleen opened the back door and pulled out a painting. It was a beautiful mountain scene—from the White Mountains of New Hampshire.”

“It’s so beautiful,” Rachel said.

“It’s your late wedding gift.”

“You painted this for Malcolm and me?”

“For you. For my best friend.”

Rachel felt her throat tighten. She hugged Kathleen. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Rachel showed Malcolm the painting when they got home later that afternoon. "Let's hang it in the living room," she suggested.

"Now? I'm tired," he said.

"I'll do it then. How about here?" She held it over the couch.

"Sure, if you want to."

Rachel found a hammer and tack and when Malcolm saw her struggling to hang the painting, he did it for her. She stood back smiling. "It fits perfectly," she pronounced.

Late that night the phone rang. Malcolm was sound asleep. Rachel reached for the phone and answered. "Hello," she said hoarsely.

She sat up in bed. "When?"

Malcolm woke up. "What is it?" he asked.

Rachel grew pale. "Yes, we'll call them. Thanks for calling us. Okay. I'll tell Malcolm."

She hung up the phone.

"What is it?" Malcolm repeated, both irritated and worried.

"It's Abigail. She's gone into convulsions and they've rushed her to the emergency room."

"That's terrible," Malcolm said, sitting up beside Rachel. He noticed she was trembling.

"They said the baby might die." She looked at Malcolm. "They don't think Abigail will pull through."

"Let's pray for Justin and Abigail," he suggested. They both knelt down beside the bed, and Malcolm led them in prayer for their friends.

"We're supposed to call the Round Robin," Rachel said, and ask everyone to pray for Abigail and her baby.

"I'll do it. You rest," Malcolm said.

He went into the kitchen and retrieved a list of phone numbers. Twenty minutes later, he climbed back into bed. They both stared at the ceiling, silently.

"I'll help you find someone," Malcolm finally said.

“Huh?”

“For your delivery. Don’t worry, Rachel, as soon as Mr. Critchett says it’s time, I’ll help you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The last week of July, Kathleen and Rachel enjoyed a very special surprise when Faith came unannounced to services with her new husband, John. The three hugged and talked excitedly. “Look at you,” Faith said, pointing at Rachel’s large belly.

“It won’t be long and you’ll look like this,” she teased.

Faith frowned. “I’m not ready to have a baby,” she said.

Kathleen glanced a worried look at Rachel.

“So, when do we get to meet John?” Kathleen asked.

“He’s giving the sermonette today,” Faith said.

“Can we all sit together?” Kathleen asked.

“Sure,” Rachel said. “Let’s go down front and save our seats before they are all gone.”

Rachel was glad to sit down. Faith and Kathleen suspected so, and they decided to continue their conversations from their seats.

Faith was not her usual happy self but despite their curiosity, but neither Rachel nor Kathleen wanted to pry. They didn’t have to.

“I hate him,” Faith blurted out.

“What?” Rachel asked.

“You heard me. I hate him.”

Kathleen didn’t know what to say and looked to Rachel.

“It can’t be all that bad,” Kathleen offered.

Rachel gave her a look that said maybe that’s not the best comment to make.

“You don’t know how bad,” Faith said. Her expression was blank.

“What happened to David?” Kathleen asked.

“He married someone else. They live in California.”

“Faith, what can we do?” Rachel asked.

Faith looked at Rachel and Kathleen for a long moment. Her face was hard. She was beyond tears. It was as if she were stiff—a shell, smiling on the outside, empty on the inside.

“There’s nothing anyone can do. I have to live with this.” She looked down. In a barely audible whisper, she added, “It’s punishment for my sins.”

“You can’t talk like that,” Kathleen said. “You weren’t even converted back then.”

Faith looked down silently. “I should have taken your advice. I should have told the truth. I think John suspects. I think that’s why he hates me so much. He knows I wasn’t a virgin when we got married.”

Rachel glanced around. She noticed Malcolm was looking her way. She smiled at him, hoping he’d not notice the intensity of their conversation.

A minister’s wife was supposed to always be cheerful. She feared for her friend. Then she spotted a stranger, talking with Mr. Critchett. That must be John, she thought. He looked ordinary enough. Thin, not very athletic but at least average in attractiveness.

She wondered what Faith disliked so much about him but knew immediately how differently someone can act when they’re alone with you.

“Have you told your parents how you feel?” Rachel asked.

“They told me to grow up.” Faith sniffed. She took a tissue out of her purse and wiped her nose. “They have *no* idea,” she said.

“Where are you going to be sent?” Kathleen asked.

“John is going to assist Mr. Roberts.”

“That’s great. We’ll be able to see each other,” Rachel said.

Faith brightened a little. "I have really missed you two."

"I'm sorry to talk about myself so much. Tell me what is going on with your lives. I can see Rachel that you have a lot happening."

Rachel smiled. "The baby is due any time now."

"She still doesn't know who's going to deliver it," Kathleen said in a scolding tone.

"You don't?" Faith asked, concerned.

"It's okay. Mr. Critchett said he'll tell Malcolm when I can seek help. It's a test of my faith."

"They don't do it that way at headquarters anymore," Faith stated.

"What do you mean?" Kathleen asked, suddenly concerned even more.

"They go to the hospital for childbirth."

"They do?" Rachel asked.

Faith nodded. "They made the new rule because of all the lawsuits."

Rachel's stomach ached. She groaned and rubbed her belly.

"Are you okay?" Kathleen asked.

"Yes. I've been getting these cramps a lot lately but they don't last. I think the baby is so big, he's pushing on my internal organs." She smiled. "He moves a lot. I can feel him kick. Sometimes it even hurts. He's so strong."

"You sound awfully sure it's a boy," Kathleen said.

"Malcolm really wants a boy."

Rachel and Kathleen soon learned at least some of what bothered Faith about her new husband. During his sermonette, he used his wife as an example of how the men in the church ought to correct and teach their wives. She was moody, pouted, immature, he told the audience until he took charge of her spiritual life. He pointed

toward Faith and said, "You can see how happy she is now." Faith obediently smiled on cue.

When Malcolm and Rachel finally retired for the evening, Malcolm told her, almost as an afterthought, "By the way, Mr. Critchett says it's time for you to make delivery arrangements."

Rachel sat up in bed. "When did he say that?"

"Today."

"Well, did he say how we're supposed to make arrangements?"

"No. He just said to go ahead and do it."

Rachel lay back down. She moved her stomach to a more comfortable position with a pillow under her knee. "We can't use the doctor."

"Why not?" Malcolm asked.

"He won't take anyone at the last minute. He requires that you go to him early in the pregnancy so he can monitor everything."

"Well, maybe he'll make an exception," Malcolm offered.

"I don't think so. But I'll call him on Monday if that's okay."

Malcolm nodded. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll find something."

"There's always the midwife in Rhode Island," Rachel said. "We'd need to find a place, though."

"Maybe Justin and Abigail will have a suggestion."

"Abigail should be well enough to visit by now," Rachel said. "I'll call her tomorrow."

The next day, Rachel called Abigail. She was in good spirits for someone who'd come so close to death. She invited Rachel to come over. She wanted to show her their new son.

So Rachel headed out to walk across the apartment complex to where Justin and Abigail lived. Their apartment was identical to hers and Malcolm's but in the older section of the development. Abigail had fixed it up nicely. She was breast feeding her newborn when Rachel knocked on the door.

"Come in," she called.

Rachel opened the door and peeked inside. Abigail waved her inside. "Isn't he just adorable?" she cooed.

Rachel smiled. "He looks perfect."

"He is."

"Are there any problems from the birth?" Rachel asked.

Abigail shook her head. "God delivered me."

"Was it awful?" Rachel asked.

Abigail watched her nursing infant as she answered. "I don't remember much. Justin said I was unconscious most of the time. He said Mrs. Landry was wonderful but she couldn't deliver the baby. I had retained too much fluid."

"How was the hospital?"

"It was fine. They didn't make me do anything I didn't want to. Of course, I had a cesarean section."

"I didn't know," Rachel said.

"They had to. Justin said the doctor told them I was going to die in just a matter of minutes—that they got me there just in time. They weren't sure about saving our baby. But as you can see, we're both fine. Thank God."

"I am glad. You know, we all prayed for you. They activated the Round Robin."

"Justin said they did. I'm sure that helped."

Abigail looked up at Rachel. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Great. But I wanted to ask you about Mrs. Landry, the midwife. I need to make arrangements for my delivery."

“It’s about time. My advice, if I’m ever pregnant again, I’m going to the doctor right away. Mrs. Landry said this whole thing could have been avoided with proper care. Since I’ve had a problem already, I’m sure they wouldn’t want me to go through this again.”

“I understand they’ve changed the rules about childbirth at Headquarters,” Rachel said.

“Really? I think that’s probably a good idea. You might want to go to the doctor just to make sure you’re okay before you go into labor.”

Rachel nodded. “I was wondering if you could give me Mrs. Landry’s phone number, and maybe the place where you went.”

“Sure. It’s over there on the coffee table. But I don’t think the people we went to want to have any more deliveries at their house. They were pretty upset with what happened to me.”

Rachel nodded. She picked up the paper and put it in her pocket.

“Would you like to hold him?” Abigail asked.

Rachel smiled. “Sure.”

Chapter 20

*Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing,
if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.
1 Timothy 2:15*

The following week Kathleen confronted Joel. She was talking with Rachel when she spotted him in the back of the auditorium. "I'm going to tell him the truth," Kathleen announced to Rachel, and promptly headed in his direction, with resolve in her steps.

"Wait," Rachel called after her. She watched as Kathleen reached Joel and asked him something. He looked uncomfortable but nodded. She could see Kathleen talking and guessed what she was saying.

Joel shifted his weight. He was saying something very animated. Kathleen was looking at him and Rachel wondered what was being said.

Then Joel abruptly walked away. He didn't look back. Kathleen was left standing by herself. Rachel hurried to her side.

"What happened?" she asked.

Kathleen had tears in her eyes. "He didn't believe me," she said.

"It's not meant to be, Kathleen. You've got to let him go. There will be others."

"But I really love him," Kathleen said.

Rachel thought the comment nonsensical. How could she love this man who never paid the slightest attention to her?

"What really bothers me is that he was so angry at me. It was as if he thought I was doing something to him," Kathleen said.

"He's a big jerk," Rachel offered.

"He's leaving."

“Joel is leaving?”

“He’s going to move back to Headquarters in California. He told me he’s leaving next week.”

Rachel wondered if Malcolm knew about this. He hadn’t told her. Kathleen looked crushed but Rachel had no words of comfort that appeased her friend.

Later September, despite her now overdue delivery date, Rachel still assisted Audrey with the widows. She organized croquet for them every Tuesday afternoon and after gathering them together in Audrey’s back yard, she would serve them refreshments.

Rachel contacted Mrs. Landry who had said she would deliver her baby if she could find a place in Rhode Island. Another church family agreed to allow them to use their home for the birth. Alberto offered the use of his car and Audrey offered to go along to help. Everything was falling into place.

Rachel had several bouts of false labor. She began to think that her baby was never going to be born—the baby was now two weeks overdue.

Abigail commented to her at Women’s Meeting that her ankles looked a little swollen but Rachel dismissed it as over concern based on her own ordeal. The weather was unseasonably hot and Rachel was uncomfortable but she still felt great physically.

After Sabbath services, Rachel and Malcolm attended a barbecue at one of the brethren’s homes. It had been a lot of fun. When she tried to help out though, everyone said no, even Malcolm. So she sat down and watched the festivities. *That’s silly*, she thought. *I feel perfectly fine.*

Malcolm and Rachel returned to their apartment after eleven and immediately went to bed. Rachel wasn’t tired. She was wide awake and lay there for a while. She didn’t think Malcolm was sleeping either.

“I need a drink of water,” she said, climbing out of bed.

The first pain hit her suddenly, and she stopped after only a few steps towards the door. She grabbed her stomach, hunching forward. Malcolm hadn’t noticed. Rachel slouched back to the bed.

“Didn’t you want some water?” Malcolm asked.

“I changed my mind,” Rachel said, feeling very uncomfortable. She felt a dull ache growing in the middle of her back. She groaned.

Malcolm turned towards her. “Are you okay?”

“Just more false labor,” she said, hopefully. She knew Malcolm was tired and it was late. She lay very still wishing the pain to subside. It didn’t. She groaned with the next contraction. “I have to get up,” she said urgently. She was becoming very uncomfortable.

Malcolm helped her out of bed. “Come sit at the table,” he suggested. “I’ll get you some water. You’re probably just hot—this heat is unbearable.”

Rachel didn’t say anything. Halfway to the door water gushed down her legs. She stopped in her tracks. “I think I’m really in labor.”

“I’ll call Audrey,” Malcolm said. “Alberto said we could use his car. And he can help drive. He knows the way because he’s been there before.”

Rachel stood where she was, not wanting to move, as Malcolm made the two hurried phone calls.

“What about Mrs. Landry?” Rachel asked.

“Oh, yes,” Malcolm said. “Thanks for reminding me. I better bring her phone number with us just in case.”

Rachel leaned against the bureau.

“Don’t you want to lie down?”

“I’m afraid to move.”

“Here, I’ll help you.” He gently helped Rachel back to the bed where she awkwardly lay down. No position provided any comfort.

Soon Audrey and Alberto were at the door. They bustled about. Audrey gathered Rachel's already prepared suitcases which contained baby clothes and the necessary birthing paraphernalia that Abigail had described to her. Alberto gathered some pillows and blankets and took them to the car. Malcolm hurried to and fro, fretting about what to do next. Finally, it was time to get in the car.

Malcolm helped Rachel stand up. She took a few steps and a contraction came. She stopped until it passed and wobbled the rest of the way to the car.

"Are you sure about this?" Audrey asked. No one answered. They all got into the car—Malcolm and Rachel in the back, Alberto and Audrey in front. Alberto drove.

Rachel slipped in and out of sleep most of the way to Rhode Island. She woke when contractions came. She was so grateful for the pillows. Her back ached so much she could barely stand it and constantly shifted in the seat to find a comfortable position. It was a futile effort and she was thankful when she fell asleep.

They travelled for three hours as Rachel fell in and out of consciousness with each contraction. Rachel awoke and realized the car was stopped and the two passenger side doors were open. Alberto and Malcolm were outside with a flashlight looking at a road sign. Audrey was sitting in the driver's seat. She looked in back and asked Rachel how she was doing but Rachel couldn't answer. She was in the throes of another contraction.

When Malcolm and Alberto got back in the car Audrey told them, "We're stopping at the next place!"

They did. It was a motel. Malcolm hurried to register two rooms. Audrey explained to Rachel they had gotten lost trying to find the home of the brethren who'd agreed to allow them to have the birth there. As soon as they got settled, Alberto and Malcolm would retrieve Mrs. Landry. That was the new plan.

Malcolm drove around to the back of the motel. He helped Rachel out of the car. It felt good to stand as it relieved some of the pressure on her lower back but she immediately had another contraction. They were close and strong and all she could do was stand there hunched over until it passed.

It took several minutes to get into the motel room. After phoning Mrs. Landry who was wondering where they were, Alberto and Malcolm left immediately to retrieve her.

Audrey sat next to Rachel, who was lying on the bed. Rachel asked her to get the pads she'd made to protect the bedding. She did. Rachel asked her to help her remove most of her clothing—she was so uncomfortable. She was left with a loose-fitting cotton dress. “Can I hold your hand?” Rachel asked.

Audrey held Rachel's hand. Another contraction started, and Rachel groaned loudly. She knew she was in a motel room and couldn't scream or make too much noise. She tried to be as quiet as she could but most of her body's actions were out of her control. She squeezed Audrey's hand tightly but Audrey never let go.

“I think I might have a bowel movement,” Rachel whispered apologetically when she woke from another brief sleep.

“Don't worry about it,” Audrey said, glancing at the door. She was wondering where Malcolm and Alberto were. To Rachel it had been only a few moments but Audrey knew they'd been gone for over an hour. She worried they'd gotten lost.

Finally, the door opened. Malcolm escorted Mrs. Landry to Rachel. Rachel was just waking as another contraction began. She looked up at the old woman peering down at her. Mrs. Landry had Bell's palsy. Half of her face was paralyzed. Her left lip hung down, and spit was drooling down the side of her chin. Her left eye was

nearly closed from drooping muscles. Rachel had the urge to laugh. The scene was so bizarre. But she didn't get a chance because the contraction grew unbearable.

Mrs. Landry cursed under her breath. "We can't move her," she said to Malcolm. "It's an emergency. I'll have to deliver the baby here." She began to open her black bag and organize things on the bureau. Audrey helped her push the delivery mat under Rachel.

"Get some towels," she instructed Malcolm. Alberto had gone into the adjoining room.

Malcolm stood next to Rachel. "How are you doing?" he asked. She looked up at him. He was so concerned. She smiled faintly. "Okay," she said. "Can I hold your hand?"

He offered her his hand and she squeezed it as hard as she could as the contraction grew. Her pain was agonizing. Then she dozed back into sleep.

Mrs. Landry woke her before the next contraction. "I want you to do something," she said. Rachel nodded. "I want you to wait until the pain peaks. When it reaches its worse point, I want you to take a deep breath and push as hard as you can. Can you do that?"

Rachel nodded. Soon, the contraction began and grew in intensity. Rachel focused on the pain to judge when it was at the worst point, then she took a deep breath and pushed.

She felt so much better. She felt in control of her body and immediately was grateful to Mrs. Landry.

This scenario repeated itself several more times but nothing was happening. Rachel looked at her large abdomen. "Is this right?" she said pointing. She wasn't very big and she could see the outline of the baby's body lying straight across her stomach.

Mrs. Landry cursed again. She told Audrey, "When she starts to push, you push on that side and I'll push on

this side. We need to get the baby into the birth canal. He's not in the right position."

Audrey nodded somberly. Malcolm kept his eyes on Rachel and she knew that he was praying. She tried to smile but her face was too tired from groaning and pushing. Her throat was so dry. "Can I have some water," she asked.

Mrs. Landry got her a glass of water. "Just take small sips."

The water was refreshing. *I can do this. It'll all be over soon. Tomorrow it will all be over.* Another contraction began. She paid no attention to Audrey and the midwife who were both pushing on her stomach. All her attention focused on the contraction and pushing. She squeezed Malcolm's hand as hard as she could. Somehow it helped her. Finally the baby was going into position but Mrs. Landry was very agitated.

It was now nearly four o'clock in the morning. Rachel's contractions had been only a few minutes apart for several hours now. Her water had broken back in Concord, NH. It seemed so long ago.

Time was mixed up for Rachel as she kept falling into deep sleep, constantly telling herself it would end soon. She focused on that thought repeating it to herself as she lost consciousness, then waking to tremendous pain. Her back ached so much but she couldn't do anything about it. Mrs. Landry told Malcolm to rub her back and he did and she'd fall asleep again.

Each time she awoke she pushed as hard as she could. Each time nothing seemed to be happening. Finally, she felt the baby moving down. She was certain that she would have a bowel movement. She couldn't worry about that now. Everything was too overwhelming. Then with a big push she felt the baby come out.

Everyone was silent. Audrey watched as the midwife did something. Rachel was aware that Mrs. Landry was

busy but she couldn't see what was happening. She felt such relief. It was so quiet in the room.

Malcolm stared. He thought he was seeing his new baby's head until the baby had a bowel movement. Then the color drained from Malcolm's face. Rachel realized something was wrong, but she couldn't tell what was going on and didn't want to believe something was wrong--she couldn't bear anything more. She was at her limit. It was like the eye of the storm—calm. There was no pain. She didn't want to move lest the pain start up again.

Mrs. Landry bent close to Rachel's face. "You must push, dear. One more big push."

"I can't," Rachel whispered. She was too hoarse to talk.

Mrs. Landry checked the baby. She was pressing on his skin. "Push. You must push now!" she said.

Malcolm held Rachel's hand. His looked anxious. Audrey whispered prayers. Rachel glanced at each of them wondering what was wrong.

Mrs. Landry leaned back toward Rachel. "I am very sorry, dear," she said tenderly, "this will hurt but I have to do it."

Then Mrs. Landry reached inside Rachel, who was already stretched to the limit by the baby's body which was half-way out. She was trying to untangle the umbilical cord.

"Stop! I'll push! I'll push. Please, stop!"

Rachel gasped a big breath of air and pushed with all her might. Then she gasped again and pushed some more and again. Malcolm held her hand. She squeezed harder and harder. She pushed.

Mrs. Landry pulled. Audrey prayed. Then the baby popped out. Rachel could feel the baby's body between her legs. Wet, warm, and lifeless.

Mrs. Landry worked feverishly. She cleaned out the baby's mouth. She pulled the baby up by the heels. She whacked the baby's back. But the baby didn't respond.

Rachel knew something was terribly wrong. Audrey and Malcolm held their breath. Rachel watched as Mrs. Landry whacked the baby's back even harder. She thought the woman would hurt her baby. Then the baby gasped and started crying.

Rachel could see the relief in the old lady's eyes. She watched as Mrs. Landry cleaned the baby and swaddled it in a newborn blanket. Mrs. Landry asked Rachel, "How are you doing?"

Rachel smiled weakly. "Fine, I think."

"Would you like to hold your beautiful new baby girl?"

Rachel's eyes widened. "I have a girl?"

The old woman nodded, smiling. "And she's perfect. Eight and a half pounds. You have a big baby, dear." She handed the baby to Rachel.

Malcolm smiled down at both of them. Rachel forgot all the pain of her delivery. She just stared at this bundle in her arms. When she looked at Malcolm she saw tears in his eyes.

"She's beautiful," he said, giving Rachel a kiss on the forehead. "You did great! You are so brave."

Rachel smiled. "What are we going to name her?" They'd only discussed boys' names.

"You pick the name," Malcolm said.

Rachel thought for several moments then looked up at Malcolm. "How about Grace?"

"I like that."

Rachel looked at Audrey. "Meet Grace," she said.

Audrey smiled. "She is beautiful, Rachel."

Rachel laughed. She thought, *I knew that God would save me. I knew it.*

Things changed after Gracie's birth. When she got back home to their apartment there were presents from the brethren waiting by the door.

Audrey came over to help Rachel the first few days. Rachel protested but secretly she was glad. Audrey showed her how to bathe her newborn, how to hold her properly, and burp her. She'd never thought about burping a baby before. If Audrey hadn't showed her how she was certain she'd never have thought about doing it.

Gracie was healthy. Rachel took time to regain her strength after the birth.

Over the next few days, members would stop by and leave casseroles or cakes and cookies for Malcolm and Rachel.

Kathleen was one of the visitors. She came to the door mid afternoon when Gracie was just two days old. "May I come in?" she asked.

"Of course," Rachel said.

"You look wonderful," Kathleen said as if she was surprised by this fact.

"What did you expect?"

"When I heard you'd had a breech birth, I didn't know what to expect," Kathleen answered. "Was it terrible?"

"I honestly don't remember the pain. It's like the scripture says—you forget when it's over. Would you like to hold Gracie?"

Kathleen held the baby for nearly an hour. Gracie slept soundly. "Look how long her lashes are. I'd kill for lashes like that," Kathleen said examining the tiny infant. "And her fingers. Look at her nails—they are so sharp and so thin."

"She is perfect, isn't she?"

"I'm happy for you," Kathleen said. "I really am."

"You sound like this is good-bye," Rachel said suddenly solemn.

“Well, I’m on my way to college. I’ll still come to services. My mom is going to bring me every week but I won’t see you so much.”

“You’re starting a new life. I’m very proud of you, Kathleen. You are so strong. I admire you.”

Kathleen blushed. “Gee, don’t get all syrupy on me. Must be those gestating hormones,” she said.

“We are both starting a new life,” Rachel said. “You are going to college. I have a little girl who needs me to care for her.”

“Don’t forget Malcolm. He needs you, too.”

“And Malcolm.”

“Are you happy, Rachel?” Kathleen asked.

“Why would you ask that?”

Kathleen shrugged. “I just wonder sometimes. I don’t think I could ever submit the way you do. I’m too stubborn.”

“You are stubborn,” Rachel teased. “But when the right person comes along, it will all work out. You have to believe that.”

Kathleen paused for a moment. “I want to believe it.”

Rachel didn’t attend services for a few weeks so as to not expose her newborn to germs and viruses. She felt very protective of little Gracie.

But she had one problem Audrey couldn’t help her with. She couldn’t share it with anyone—she was too ashamed. For some reason she found herself unable to be as affectionate to her new baby as she thought she should be. It didn’t feel natural to her to cuddle the baby.

She fed her and watched her and did all the proper care-taking but love and affection were difficult. She couldn’t understand this. She knew she loved her new baby and had been so excited about being a mother. She hadn’t anticipated feeling this way.

This wasn’t the only time she had this problem. She also had difficulty telling Malcolm she loved him. He often

told her he loved her and she worried that he'd notice she didn't tell him the same words. They just stuck in her throat and wouldn't come out. So she'd nod or say, "me, too." But never, "I love you."

And she felt the same way towards her new baby. She worried that she wouldn't be able to tell her little daughter she loved her.

Rachel prayed about it. She sat in a chair holding Gracie watching her sleep. *I don't understand what's wrong with me. Why can't I be affectionate? God, please help me.*

Rachel stood in front of the mirror in the bedroom. At first she felt self-conscious even though no one else was there except her baby. She looked at her image in the mirror. She mouthed the words, "I love you." She didn't say them out loud. She just mouthed them.

She took a deep breath. Then she spoke. "I love you." She looked at herself. She felt so awkward. The words sounded fake and foreign to her. She repeated her exercise. "I love you." Then she looked at Gracie and said, "I love you."

Rachel smiled. She knew she could do it. She practiced for several days, then the moment of truth. She decided it was time to tell Malcolm. That night with Gracie snugly tucked into her crib, Rachel gave Malcolm a big hug. "I love you," she said feeling a wave of embarrassment.

Malcolm replied, "I love you, too."

Rachel smiled. *He doesn't even know how hard that was. I don't think he noticed that I never said it before—that this is the first time.* "I love you," she repeated. "I love you so much."

Another change was about to happen. Malcolm got a phone call. It was Alberto. Malcolm spoke in a hushed but excited tone. When he hung up the phone he turned

to Rachel and announced, “Mr. Critchett is being relocated!”

Six months later there was another Round Robin call. Brethren were asked to pray for a small child. Little Samantha was gravely ill. Rachel had seen her at services, tied with cloth restraints in her infant carrier. She had a terrible rash covering her entire body and would scratch until her skin was raw.

This night the brethren were told she was near death. The parents were distraught but trusted God to heal their child. Mr. Roberts had administered the anointing cloth ceremony. Everyone needed to pray.

“I wonder if I could do that?” Malcolm said after he hung up the phone.

“Do what?” Rachel asked.

“Could let Gracie suffer like that.”

Rachel looked at Malcolm startled at the thought. She was startled to hear her husband voice any doubts about a church doctrine.

Malcolm explained it to her. “I can have faith for myself but what if my faith isn’t strong enough? Should my child suffer and die because I lack faith? Shouldn’t it be me who suffers and dies? No, I don’t think I could do what those parents are doing.”

Rachel didn’t comment. She thought about it. She remembered Faith telling her that Headquarters had changed the childbirth doctrine. Maybe the healing doctrine would be changed, too.

“I wonder what their neighbors must think,” Rachel said.

“It’s a wonder no one has turned them in,” Malcolm stated.

“Would the government take Samantha away from them?”

“I don’t know,” Malcolm said, “but maybe it would be better if they did.”

Mid December Audrey called Rachel. She could tell that Audrey was crying. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Wade,” Audrey sobbed. “He’s gone.”

“I’ll be right there,” Rachel said. She hung up the phone, bundled little Gracie in her snowsuit and headed towards Audrey’s apartment carrying her diaper bag with her.

She let herself in and Audrey was sitting at the kitchen table. Randy was standing beside his mother. Rachel noticed how big he’d grown since she first met him. She was pretty sure he’d gotten over his crush on her. She gave him a pat on the head and sat down across from Audrey.

“What happened?”

“He left last night. He just packed a suitcase and went out the door.”

“Dad sent him a bus ticket,” Randy added.

“So he planned this?” Rachel asked.

Audrey nodded.

“Well, you know he’s seventeen now. He has been unhappy, Audrey. Maybe his father will help him sort things out.”

Rachel unbundled Gracie and held her on her lap. The baby cooed and looked around.

Audrey poured wine into a juice glass. Rachel watched, concerned. “That’s not going to help,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Audrey said. “I’m losing my boys. I lost my husband and now I’m losing my boys. I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong. I try so hard.”

“You aren’t doing anything wrong, Audrey,” Rachel soothed.

“He said I was selfish,” Audrey said.

“He’s said that before, Audrey. He’s a teenager. You know that’s a hard age.”

Audrey shook her head. “No, he’s right. He said I care more about my own salvation than I do about my own children. He’s right.”

Rachel sat thoughtfully not sure what to say.

“How can that be right? How can I be so selfish? What good is my own salvation if I lose my sons? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Rachel wanted to comfort Audrey. “You’re a good person, Audrey. You would never hurt anyone. You are always helping people.”

Audrey gulped down her wine and poured another glass.

“Would you like me to take Randy today?” Rachel asked concerned for him. He shouldn’t see his mother like this.

“Sure, go ahead. He’s better off with you. He’s better off with anyone else but me.” Audrey slurred her words.

Randy started to cry. Rachel put her baby on the living room couch and asked Randy to keep an eye on her so she wouldn’t fall. She then helped Audrey upstairs to bed. “I’ll take Randy to my apartment. Call me when you’re ready for him to come back.” She pulled the quilt over Audrey and gently tucked her in.

Audrey grabbed Rachel’s arm. “He told me why he left,” she whispered. There was a wild look in Audrey’s sad, dark, eyes that immediately frightened Rachel.

“He said Mr. Critchett sexually assaulted him.” Audrey released Rachel’s arm and fell back to the pillow. She offered no more information.

Rachel stared at Audrey. *What? Assaulted him? What did that mean?* She stared for a long moment before retreating quickly downstairs, gathering her baby, and taking Randy back to her apartment. *I’m going to ask*

Malcolm about this. He must know something. He'll explain it. I'll ask him when he gets home.

Rachel's mind reeled through the day. She was anxious for Malcolm to return home from work. She had so many questions. *Why had Mr. Critchett left without so much as a good-bye? I wondered at the time but never asked.*

Did he make sexual advances to other men? Did he do it to Malcolm? Was that why Critchett had disliked me so much and made things so difficult for me? So many questions filled her mind she could hardly concentrate on Gracie and her chores.

Audrey picked Randy up later in the afternoon. "Thanks for watching him. I'm sorry I behaved so badly."

"It's okay. You have a right to be upset. You've been through a lot."

"I'm not making excuses," Audrey said. "I'm done with excuses."

"What do you mean?"

Audrey shrugged. "I have to run. Thanks again." She gave Rachel a hug and was out the door before Rachel could ask her more about her revelation.

Malcolm arrived home a little past five. It was Men's Meeting night and he was in a hurry to get ready.

Rachel followed him around trying to think of the best way to ask him. "Was Mr. Critchett gay?" she blurted out.

Malcolm turned towards her, his face pale. "Who told you that?"

"Was he?"

Malcolm nodded.

"How long did you know?"

"Since before we were married."

She looked at him, stunned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You would have blown it."

“What do you mean?” she asked. Gracie began to cry from her crib and Rachel picked her up comforting her as she followed Malcolm.

“What do you mean?” she repeated.

“Can we talk about this later?”

“No. I need to know, Malcolm.”

He frowned. “Remember when he told me I couldn’t talk to you?”

“Yes, he told me the same thing. I thought it was a test of our obedience.”

“I realized that I’d been talking about you too much. He didn’t like that. I had to make sure he didn’t think I liked you or he would have prevented our marriage. He almost did.”

“I don’t understand. He was jealous of me? Is that what you’re telling me?” She felt her face growing hot.

“That is exactly why I couldn’t tell you. Just like you’re reacting now, that’s what you would have done. That’s what he wanted you to do. He wanted to get rid of you. You would have given him an excuse to put you out of the church.”

“He wanted me to crack, to rebel? That’s why I had to do all those crazy things like give away our wedding gifts? So he could kick me out of the church—and have you to himself? That is so sick!”

“I couldn’t tell you. I’m sorry, Rachel. Maybe I should have told you but I didn’t know how you’d take it. Joel said I should explain it to you but I knew you’d be angry.”

“Joel knew?”

“Critchett had his favorites.”

“Is Joel gay, too?”

“No way! He was totally disgusted. That’s why he left.”

“I wish you had told me, Malcolm. I thought you didn’t love me. I thought you didn’t even like me. It was terrible.”

“I know it was hard for you. He was testing me to see if he could get me to crack. He was testing my loyalty. When he tried to, you know, make a move on me, I told him it was wrong and I wouldn’t do it. He was worried that I’d tell. I promised him I wouldn’t if he’d get help. He was testing me to see if I’d do what he said. That’s why he told me to make you do all those things.”

“I don’t understand, Malcolm,” Rachel said.

“When I wouldn’t,” Malcolm searched for the right words, “you know, have anything to do with him, he got angry. He would call me out late at night and viciously correct me to see if he could get me to rebel and then he would have been able to excommunicate me. He always made sure to have a witness like Justin or Alberto.”

“That’s why you were always so upset?” Rachel asked.

“It blew my mind, Rachel. I couldn’t imagine God’s minister doing what this man was doing. I thought I was going crazy. He was always telling me that our marriage was a mistake. I had to prove him wrong. I had to show him that you were obedient and faithful. I am sorry that you had to do all those things, that I had to make you go through that but I didn’t know what to do. If I told you the truth, you would have gotten upset, like now. I knew that. He might have kicked us both out of the church to keep his secret. I’m just so proud that you were strong enough to endure. God saw us through the test.”

“He didn’t let me have prenatal care. What if I had died?” Rachel whispered. “What if our baby had died?”

“Don’t think like that.”

“He did all this—so—so—he could, so he could what? So he could get me out of the way and have some perverse advantage over you knowing you wouldn’t be able to remarry. I don’t understand, Malcolm. I don’t understand!” She just looked at Malcolm.

“Rachel, I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry. Don’t be like this. It’s over now. He’s gone.”

Rachel went into the bedroom and closed the door.
Malcolm went to the door. "Rachel?"
"I need to be alone," she said.
He hesitated. "I'm late for the meeting. I have to go.
We'll talk when I get home."

Chapter 21

*What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath
faith, and not have works? Can faith save him?
James 2:14*

Three years later...(1975)

Joel returned from Headquarters occasionally for a visit and always stayed with Malcolm and Rachel. He told Malcolm and Rachel a lot of things that other members didn't know about how all is not as it seems.

God's Apostle lived a lavish lifestyle, wore diamond cuff links and collected expensive works of art. And all those pictures of him meeting with world leaders to spread the gospel were staged. Joel explained how Russell was positioned strategically so that he could get his picture with these people. There were no secret meetings with world leaders and Russell wasn't well-known among world leaders as the literature described.

After Critchett left the area Malcolm began to do better at his job and was promoted several times. Even though they still gave three tithes and special offerings to the church they were able to afford a larger apartment and a used car.

Malcolm taught Rachel how to drive and she often escorted the widows to do their errands. Audrey was still a Deaconess but her duties were growing and others were assigned to help her.

Rachel got a call one morning from one of the widows—Mrs. Peters who was nearly blind. She sounded desperate on the phone and asked if Rachel could come over soon. So Rachel packed up Gracie and headed to Mrs. Peter's apartment. When the old lady opened the door Rachel told her, "It's me, Rachel."

“Oh, yes. Come in dear.” The old lady seemed embarrassed.

“What’s wrong?” Rachel asked.

“Well, I’ve been cleaning this morning,” she stopped and looked back towards her kitchen.

“Is something wrong?”

Mrs. Peters giggled nervously. “Well, I just can’t seem to get it clean.”

“Get what clean?” Rachel said, removing Gracie’s jacket. “You play right here with your toys,” she instructed Gracie, who sat down on the floor with the bag containing her toys.

“I can’t ask you to clean it,” Mrs. Peter’s said.

Rachel put her arm around the old lady. “It’s okay. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Well, then, come here, I’ll show you.” She led Rachel into her bathroom and pointed to the toilet.

“What is it?”

“There’s a stain and I can’t get it off. The more I scrub, the bigger it seems to get.” The old lady blushed.

Rachel bent over and examined the seat of the flush. “Mrs. Peters, you’ve scrubbed right through the finish!”

“What? You mean it isn’t?”

Rachel laughed. “No, it isn’t dirty. It’s just the wood underneath the white paint.”

The old lady looked relieved. “Thank you dear. I’m so relieved. Come to the living room. I have some cookies for you and Gracie.”

Kathleen became very involved in her college studies. Rachel surmised that she also had made friends at college because she attended services less frequently and a distance grew between them.

Rachel was busy with church activities and little Gracie. She missed Kathleen but accepted the change as inevitable. When Kathleen did come to services she still

sat next to Rachel. Sometimes she took Gracie for a walk. Gracie called her “Auntie Kathleen.”

Rachel didn’t tell Kathleen what Joel revealed about the church. When she saw the framed photographs of the Apostle meeting with world leaders on the reception table she wondered if the other brethren should know about the problems.

Both she and Malcolm discussed whether or not they should tell others but Joel had warned them not to tell anyone. It was grounds for excommunication—being disloyal to the Church. It was best to wait patiently for God to rectify any wrongs in his ministry—that was the chain of authority. They decided prayer and faith was the best course of action.

Kathleen graduated from college in May. She was excited and asked Rachel to come to the graduation ceremony. Malcolm didn’t want to go but agreed to allow Rachel to go and even offered to watch Gracie for the day. Rachel arrived just before the exercises started and found a seat. After the ceremony, Kathleen found Rachel. Kathleen’s mother and father had come to see her graduate, too. Her father gave Kathleen a hug but her mother stood back just watching. Rachel noticed her mother looked upset but didn’t have any idea what might be bothering her. Kathleen’s parents went home shortly after the ceremony.

Kathleen took Rachel’s arm excitedly. “Come here,” she said, “I want you to meet someone.”

Standing with a group of graduates was a rather tall man. He smiled as Kathleen approached. “George, this is Rachel my best friend.”

George smiled at Rachel and reached to shake her hand. She noticed how large his hands were, and rough, not what she expected from a college student. “I’ve heard

so much about you,” George said. “I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Rachel smiled and gave Kathleen a puzzled look. She had not heard anything about George.

Kathleen smiled back. “George and I are planning on getting married. We’d like you and Malcolm to come.”

“What?” She barely realized how her reaction sounded to George.

He laughed. “Kathleen told me you’d be surprised.”

Rachel took Kathleen by the arm. “We need to talk,” she said. The two women went into the cafeteria and got coffee.

“I know what you’re thinking. He’s not in the church,” Kathleen said when they got settled at a small table. “But I love him. And he loves me.”

“But you know you can’t marry a non-believer. Kathleen what are you thinking?”

“Rachel, I’m not going to find the right man in the church, and I’m sure I don’t want to be matched up with someone. Look at Faith. She’s miserable. I can’t do worse than she’s done. George is a wonderful man. He’s funny. He’s a sculptor, and shares my love of art. We’re a perfect match. Frankly, I believe God sent him to me.”

Rachel thought for a few moments. “Have you told him about the church?”

Kathleen breathed deeply. “He knows I’m religious. He wants to come to church with me.”

Rachel looked at her friend. She thought for a few moments. “You have to know it won’t be easy. The brethren won’t understand.”

“So? I’ve never exactly fit in like you have Rachel. You’ve got a great husband and a wonderful little girl. It’s my turn. Can’t you be happy for me? It’s important to me that you understand. I don’t care about the others but you’re my best friend.”

“I understand. You know I’ll always stand behind you.”

“So you’ll come to my wedding?”

“I’ll have to ask Malcolm. I think he’ll at least let me come even if he’s busy.”

“Will you be my bride’s maid?”

“Of course.”

“We’re getting married next Sunday,” Kathleen said blushing.

“So soon?” Rachel scanned her mind to see if there were any events planned at the church.

“It’s going to be a simple ceremony. George’s mom and dad would be there. And you and Malcolm,” Kathleen said hopefully.

“What about your mother and father?”

Kathleen looked away. “My mother said she won’t have any part in my marrying a nonbeliever.”

“I’m sorry,” Rachel said.

“She’ll come around. How can anyone not love George? He’s perfect.”

“You really love him, don’t you?”

“Who knows, maybe George will become converted?”

Rachel shrugged doubtfully. “You can’t count on that.”

“It happens,” Kathleen insisted.

Rachel thought about Audrey and Lorna’s mother. It hadn’t happened for them.

“You know that if your husband comes between you and God, you’ll be forced to choose.” Rachel stated.

Kathleen’s smile faded. “I know.”

“Do you think you can live with that, if it happens?”

Kathleen shrugged. “If it happens I’ll deal with it then. For now I just want to enjoy this moment.”

“There you are,” George said, spying them from the doorway.

Kathleen smiled. “We’re just catching up.”

As Rachel suspected Malcolm didn’t want to go especially when he learned that Kathleen was marrying someone from the outside.

He didn’t want Rachel to go either but reluctantly agreed she could go if she wanted to--it was up to her. She’d have to explain it to the brethren if they didn’t understand. She was grateful to be able to attend.

On Sunday morning she packed up Gracie and headed to Kathleen’s wedding. She dressed Gracie as a little flower girl. Kathleen was pleased. And she brought Kathleen a present—a new set of cooking dishes.

It was a simple civil ceremony. George’s parents seemed nice. A few of Kathleen’s friends from college were present. It was all over in a few short minutes and Kathleen and George were saying good-bye to leave for their honeymoon.

Rachel hugged Kathleen at the doorway. “ God bless. Call me when you get back,” she whispered in her friend’s ear. She and Grace watched as they drove away on their honeymoon.

Rachel and Malcolm were hoping for another child but so far Rachel hadn’t conceived. Abigail had a second baby more than a year ago, a little girl. This time she went to the local doctor early in the pregnancy. She had another C section but no one said anything. Abigail was so tiny and everyone assumed a natural birth wasn’t possible after her difficulties with the first baby. But Rachel suspected that Abigail worried about it hurting her chances for obtaining her goal of becoming a deaconess, or worse, her husband’s chances.

Little Gracie turned four in August. Birthdays were not celebrated but the date was duly noted. “You’re a big girl, now,” Rachel said to her that morning. Gracie sat on the floor with some toys but wasn’t her usual active self.

Rachel felt her daughter's forehead. She had a fever. "You're not feeling well are you, sweetie?" She got Gracie some fruit juice.

Gracie fell asleep mid morning and Rachel put her in her bed. She got her Bible and sat in the chair next to her child and silently read. Rachel kept checking Gracie but Gracie just slept through most of the day.

"Grace is sick," Rachel said when Malcolm arrived home that evening.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked.

"She has a fever."

"It's probably just a bug. You know little kids catch everything going around."

Rachel nodded but she was worried. Gracie was always healthy. She'd never been sick before other than a little cold or snuffle.

When Grace wouldn't eat that night Rachel told Malcolm she was going to sleep in her room and keep an eye on her. Malcolm agreed.

The next morning Malcolm woke Rachel when he tiptoed into the room. She was asleep in the chair, her Bible on her lap. "How is she?" he whispered.

Rachel looked at the little girl. "She's sleeping. Once in a while I hear her whimper but she doesn't wake up. She hasn't eaten anything since the day before yesterday. I'm worried, Malcolm."

He reached over and felt her face. Grace did have a fever. Her cheeks were pink and she breathed shallowly. "Maybe we should call the minister and get her anointed," Malcolm suggested.

"I'll call this morning," Rachel decided.

Malcolm nodded in agreement. "Call me at work if you need me," he said. "I can get a ride if you want to keep the car."

"Okay." She didn't expect to go anywhere with her sick daughter but she appreciated that he wanted to help.

Grace didn't improve. Her fever got worse through the day and she tossed and turned in restless sleep. Rachel stayed by her side vigilantly. She called the minister soon after Malcolm left for work. Nancy answered. "It's Gracie," Rachel said, holding back tears. "She's very sick. Can your husband come and anoint her?"

"What's wrong with her?" Nancy asked.

"She has a high fever. She sleeps all the time and won't eat. I'm really worried," Rachel answered.

"I'll tell him. I'm sure he'll come as soon as he can. Try to get some fluids into her. Don't let her get dehydrated."

"Thanks," Rachel said and hung up the phone.

Mr. Roberts knocked on the door later that morning. Nancy was with him. "How's Grace?" he asked.

"She's in her room. She's very sick. I'm worried. I'm really worried."

Roberts looked at the sleeping child. He knelt down beside the bed. His wife knelt beside him and Rachel joined them. He pulled out a tiny vial of oil and poured it on a cloth. He held the cloth over the child's forehead and prayed.

"Dear Lord, Please watch over little Grace. She's very sick and needs your healing power. We ask that you also grant to her parents the faith and strength they need to trust you with their daughter. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen."

Nancy said, "Amen."

Rachel looked at Grace. She thanked them for coming, and then resumed her vigil beside Grace's bed.

When Malcolm came home from work Gracie was no better.

"We have to do something," Rachel said.

Malcolm sat down on the bed beside his daughter. Her breathing was more labored than when he'd left that

morning. She was sleeping but would gasp for air and jolt or convulse every once in a while.

“Do you want to take her to the hospital?” Malcolm asked.

“I’ve been praying all day,” Rachel said, her voice cracking. Mr. Roberts came and anointed her this morning. He said he’d call the Round Robin if she didn’t improve by tomorrow.”

Malcolm stood up and took Rachel in his arms. “I can’t let our little girl suffer,” he said. “Not if it’s because I don’t have enough faith to save her.” He looked deeply into his wife’s eyes.

Rachel felt a sense of relief.

“You pack her up. I’ll get the car started,” Malcolm said, grabbing his keys.

“Should we call the hospital?” Rachel asked.

“We’ll take her to the emergency room,” Malcolm answered.

Two hours later a white-smocked doctor approached them in the waiting room. “Your little girl is going to be fine,” he said. “But you didn’t get her here any too soon.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Rachel asked.

“She has meningitis. It’s very serious. Without medication she could develop blindness, mental retardation, or other handicaps, or worse.” He looked sternly at the two young parents.

“But you said she’s going to be all right,” Rachel said, trying to hide her fear.

“We’ve given her an antibiotic. It should start taking effect pretty quickly. We’ll know for sure she’s out of the woods by tomorrow morning. You should go home and get some rest.” The doctor noticed the dark circles under Rachel’s eyes.

“No, I want to stay with Gracie,” Rachel said.

“Is it okay if we stay with her? She’s never been away from her mother. She might be frightened when she wakes up,” Malcolm said.

The doctor nodded. “As soon as they get her settled the nurse will come get you.” He gave Malcolm a reassuring pat on the arm.

Grace slept soundly through that night. An IV had been put into her tiny hand. “Your little girl is in good hands,” the nurse said. “She’s a healthy youngster. She’ll get better. You’ll see a big improvement tomorrow once the medication starts working.”

After the nurse left the room, Rachel commented to Malcolm, “Everyone is so nice. It’s not at all what I expected.”

“I know. It makes me wonder about all the things we’ve been told.”

The next morning Gracie opened her eyes. Rachel was asleep in the chair next to her. Malcolm was sitting across the room. “Mommy?”

Rachel awoke. She smiled broadly and looked at Malcolm. They both hugged Gracie. “Where am I, Mommy?”

Malcolm left for work shortly after that. Rachel stayed with Gracie. The doctor came in around ten. “I see you’re feeling better,” he said to Gracie.

Gracie clung to Rachel. “It’s all right, sweetie,” Rachel said. “He’s here to help you. You’ve been very sick.”

The doctor smiled at her and she smiled back. “We have no medical records for your daughter.” He spoke while examining Gracie.

“She’s never been sick before.”

“How long have you folks lived in the area?”

“Five years.”

“Where was Grace born? There’s no record of her birth in this hospital.”

“She was born in another state,” Rachel said suddenly hoping he wouldn’t ask any more about her birth.

He nodded and looked at Rachel. “Is she up to date on her immunizations?”

Rachel shook her head. “We don’t believe in them.” She looked away. “I’ve heard about really bad side effects.”

The doctor seemed to think about this for a few moments as he continued to look Grace over. “I understand,” he finally said, breaking the unbearable silence. “You know in the early years sometimes immunizations did have adverse side effects. They have been perfected now and rarely are there any complications.”

Rachel nodded nervously.

“It’s something to consider,” he said. “She’s a beautiful little girl. It would be too bad to lose her to a preventable disease.”

Rachel looked alarmed. Her heart began to race. Was her daughter in danger? Could it be worse than what had just happened? She thought about the children in the church a few years back who all had whooping cough. They had been so sick all winter.

“There’s a free clinic at City Hall on the first Thursday of the month,” the doctor told her.

He started out of the room and stopped to look at Rachel. “It’s something to consider. I can see that both you and your husband are good parents and you love your child. Think about getting her immunized. I have three children myself and they are immunized. Believe me, I love my kids and I’d never put them at risk.”

Rachel never considered that she was putting Gracie at risk by not having her immunized.

“Grace can go home tomorrow,” he said. “Just keep giving her the antibiotic until it’s all gone. I’d like to see her in my office in two weeks to follow up.”

Rachel nodded. He handed her a card. "Call my nurse. She'll schedule an appointment." He paused. "It isn't easy being a parent," he said. "I know how scary it is when they get sick. You're little girl is going to be fine." He smiled reassuringly.

"Thank you," Rachel said. "Thank you for everything."

Rachel told Malcolm what the doctor had told her when he came back to the hospital after work. Gracie was asleep after enjoying the attention of the nurses through the day. Rachel told Malcolm how caring they had been to both her and Gracie. Malcolm thought these things over without comment. They left for the night.

"What should we tell people if they ask about Gracie?"

"Just say that Gracie is feeling better. They don't need to know we took her to the hospital."

"Do you think we should have her immunized like the doctor suggested?"

"Yes," Malcolm said. "I think he's right. We should do whatever we can to give Gracie every chance at good health."

Rachel was relieved. She decided the same thing but wasn't sure Malcolm shared her views. It would be their secret, not to deceive the brethren but to protect them from losing their faith. She decided she and Malcolm weren't yet ready to tell people how they felt about faith healing.

She remembered Wilma and the first time she'd experienced a death in the church. She remembered others, women who died from breast cancer, and the lady at the Feast who'd told her she'd run to the doctors if she had it to do again just weeks before she passed away.

She was grateful now that the woman had spoken to her even though at the time it had bothered her so much.

Just last spring there was the sad death of Mr. Goodhue—whose two boys found him dead on their sofa. He'd had an epileptic seizure.

Rachel knelt in prayer that night before going to bed and thanked God for intervening and saving Grace. Malcolm joined her.

Rachel returned to services two weeks later after Grace had fully recovered from her illness. She noticed Audrey was missing from the receptionist table. No one seemed to know where she was and why she was absent. Rachel thought perhaps she was sick so she called her apartment as soon as she returned from services. There was no answer.

"I think something's wrong," she told Malcolm.

"She's probably out visiting," he said. "Call her back tomorrow."

"Maybe we should go and check on her," Rachel suggested.

Malcolm was tired. It had been a long day. She could see he didn't want to go out, and it was getting late.

"I'll go," she said.

"No. I'd rather you didn't go out by yourself. I'll go over with you tomorrow morning. Don't worry, Rachel. Audrey is fine."

Rachel tossed and turned through the night. Something kept her from sleep. She remembered what it was in the early morning hours and sat upright in the bed. Malcolm rolled over.

How could I have forgotten? Rachel thought. *Poor Audrey. She must think no one cares about her.*

She glanced at the clock on the night stand. It was 3:30 am. *I'll have to wait until morning. I'll go see her first thing.*

Rachel was up at five. She prayed and studied for over an hour impatiently waiting for Malcolm to wake up. Finally, he stirred.

"I have to go check on Audrey," Rachel said, urgently. "Can you watch Gracie?"

"What's your hurry?" Malcolm asked.

"I remembered Friday was the day Terry was supposed to be released from the Youth Detention Center."

Malcolm sat up wide awake. This was the second time Terry had been incarcerated for getting into trouble. "Oh no. I completely forgot. I should have gone with her."

"Something must have gone wrong," Rachel said. "I'm going over to her apartment."

"Be careful, Rachel. Call me if you need me."

Rachel hurried out the door. She started the car and drove across town to Audrey's apartment. There was a light on in the kitchen. Rachel knocked.

A long moment later Randy opened the door. Rachel thought she had gotten him out of bed. "Is your mom at home?"

He nodded. "She's asleep."

"Can I come in?" Rachel asked feeling she'd panicked for no reason.

Randy stood aside. It was 7 am and he was still sleepy and went back upstairs to his bedroom. Audrey was sprawled out on the couch. Two empty wine bottles lay on the floor next to her. A tipped over glass lay on the coffee table.

Rachel's heart sank. Audrey began to stir and noticed Rachel standing in the doorway.

"Are you okay?" Rachel asked.

Audrey sat up slowly holding her head. "No. I'm not okay, Rachel. I'm the worse mother in the whole world. How can I be okay?"

“Where’s Terry?”

“Gone.”

“I’m sorry I forgot he was getting out on Friday,” Rachel said.

Audrey shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. He didn’t come here. They shipped him back to his father in Louisiana.”

“What?” Rachel sat down in the chair opposite Audrey.

Audrey nodded. “The nice friendly warden told me I was a no-good mother and that Terry would be better off with his father.”

“Audrey, you’re a great mother.”

“No,” she shook her head. “No, I am not.”

“You can’t blame yourself. It’s not your fault.”

“Ha,” Audrey laughed. “Then whose fault is it? God’s?”

Rachel stared at Audrey. “Of course not, Audrey. It’s no one’s fault. These things happen. They happen to everyone. Life isn’t perfect. We have lots of tests.”

“What about Randy?” Audrey said looking towards the stairway.

“Randy?”

Audrey nodded. “He’s almost ten. He misses Wade and Terry. He doesn’t remember a lot about his father. Do you know it’s been almost eight years since I left him?”

Audrey leaned forward to emphasize her words and repeated, “Eight long years!”

Rachel wanted desperately to console Audrey. “You have to be patient. Have faith,” she said.

“I have been patient. I do have faith. Maybe that’s not the problem. Maybe the problem is that I’m just plain stupid. Maybe Wade was right—I should have put my kids before God.”

Audrey looked both sad and overwhelmed. Tears fell down her face. Her long black hair was now streaked with grey and flowed over her shoulders in stringy lines.

Rachel reached over to Audrey and gently pushed her hair out of her face. She looked Audrey in the eyes. "Malcolm and I are here for you," she whispered. "We're praying for you, Audrey."

Audrey blinked as if coming back to reality. "Thank you," she whispered back.

"Would you like me to pray with you right now?"

Audrey nodded. The two women knelt in the living room. Rachel started the prayer, "Lord, please look down on us your handmaids and have mercy on us. Please send your Holy Spirit to fill us with strength and hope and faith."

Audrey sobbed quietly. Rachel continued. "Lord, your servant Audrey is filled with sadness. She loves her sons and misses her sons terribly. She needs your love to help her through this trial."

Audrey injected, "and my husband,"

Rachel glanced at her.

Audrey said, "I love and miss my husband, too."

Rachel suddenly wanted to cry with Audrey. She felt such sadness for her friend. She sensed the years of loneliness and heartache Audrey had experienced.

"Lord please help Audrey to reconcile with her husband if that be thy will."

When Rachel was confident that Audrey had regained her composure she left to return to her own apartment. Malcolm was waiting for her having fed and dressed Gracie. Rachel told him what had happened. They both prayed again asking for help for Audrey.

By late summer Kathleen had begun to attend services regularly and to Rachel's surprise and delight, George

accompanied her. He was a little stand-offish at first but soon the friendliness of the brethren won him over.

Kathleen told Rachel that George had begun studying the literature and was even talking about baptism. She also told Rachel that she was pregnant.

Gracie played with the other little children in the auditorium before and after services. One was the little girl who'd been so sick with the skin disease three years before. She'd recovered but walked with a limp and was small for her age, not much bigger than Gracie.

Rachel suspected that the little girl was handicapped in other ways, too. She'd been put in a special education class at school. Her parents seemed to wear their daughter's ailments like a badge—proud that they'd had the faith to trust God to heal her even in the face of such dire circumstances. The other brethren often commented on their strong faith.

When Rachel saw Gracie playing with the little girl it struck her how her own daughter's life might have turned out if she and Malcolm had followed such a course. She knew this was a bad attitude but the thought stayed with her.

After Gracie recovered from her illness Rachel took her back to the doctor for a checkup. She confided to the doctor that she thought she was pregnant and he recommended an OBGYN for her.

Malcolm didn't hesitate when she explained it to him. "Go," he'd said. "I want you to go to the doctor for your pregnancy. I don't want you to go through another birth like Gracie. I couldn't do it either."

"You?"

"I think you nearly broke the bones in my hand when you squeezed during contractions."

"Why didn't you say something?"

Malcolm put his arms around her. “How could I complain when you were going through so much pain? I figured I deserved some, too. I don’t ever want to put you in that kind of situation. Never again.”

Rachel put Grace in a stroller that Thursday afternoon and headed to City Hall. She had her daughter immunized, the first in a series of three shots she’d need.

What she didn’t know was that Abigail had seen her go into the clinic. Abigail called Nancy Roberts.

That Sabbath the sermon was about Faith Healing. Mr. Roberts raved about those who lacked faith and the unthinkable act of putting “monkey pus” into their children.

Rachel glanced at Malcolm. He didn’t seem the least bit bothered by it. She wondered was it aimed at them? How did anyone know they’d gotten Gracie immunized?

When the service ended Rachel stood up. Mrs. Roberts was sitting directly behind her. “Hi,” Rachel said to her.

Nancy smiled back nervously.

Rachel leaned forward as if something had taken control of her body. She whispered to Nancy, “I don’t believe the healing doctrine anymore.”

That was all she said and she stood back up and continued to gather up her stuff. *Why did I say that? I don’t care. It’s true.*

Nancy stared at her with a look of alarm on her face and maybe something else. Rachel thought she detected anger and maybe fear.

Later Malcolm came over to Rachel who was watching Gracie play with the other children in the foyer. “We’re going to the Roberts house for dinner tonight,” he said.

She thought about what she’d uttered to Nancy. “Why?”

Malcolm shrugged. “He just asked me. It’s okay with you?”

“Sure.”

It turned out that Mr. Roberts had a reason for the invitation. Nancy acted as if nothing was wrong. She was her usual cordial self—entertaining as a good minister’s wife was supposed to do. Her children ran around the house playing loudly but she ignored them. Finally Mr. Roberts told them to settle down. They pretty much ignored him, too.

Once seated at the table Mr. Roberts spoke directing to Malcolm. “I understand you have some problems with the healing doctrine?”

Malcolm looked at Rachel. She bit her lip nervously.

“Well, now that you mention it, yes, we do.”

Rachel was impressed with Malcolm’s confidence especially when talking to a minister. Despite her nervousness she was proud of him.

“I can understand that,” the minister said. “I have some concerns about it, too.”

Both Rachel and Malcolm were amazed by this response after the sermon he’d given that afternoon.

“But I have to caution you,” he said, very sternly. “The brethren are not ready for this. Change is coming but it has to be handled correctly. That is the job of God’s ministers. Not you.”

Malcolm nodded.

“Change?” Rachel asked.

The minister nodded. Rachel sensed that his wife was not at all happy with the way this conversation was going. She’d shifted in her seat, gotten up a couple times, given her husband a look—even scolded her children. Now she cleared her throat.

“Look,” Mr. Roberts said. “I’ve gone to the emergency room myself. Last spring when I overdosed on

vitamins, I was sure I was having a heart attack. I went to the hospital but I wouldn't want the brethren to know that."

Rachel thought, *then why are you telling us?*

As if reading her mind he said, "You two seem to be ready to understand that some of the doctrines may change. Others may find it challenges their faith. We have to be careful not to offend any of God's Children."

"I think I understand," Malcolm said. "But why did you give that sermon today if you don't really believe it yourself?"

It was Mr. Robert's turn to shift in his chair. "I had to give that sermon. Someone told me you'd had your child immunized at the free clinic."

Rachel wondered who had seen her. She felt her face grow hot.

Nancy looked at Rachel disapprovingly.

Then Roberts stated, "We have our concerns about faith healing, too, but we don't throw it in the face of the brethren. You must be careful and discreet. And I have to instruct you that if you express any negative views about church doctrines there will be severe consequences."

There was a threatening tone to his voice. Rachel and Malcolm both bristled at it.

"We don't plan to express our views about healing to anyone," Malcolm said. He glanced at Rachel and she nodded in agreement.

"Good. As long as you understand." The minister said dismissing the subject.

"Now let's enjoy this wonderful meal Nancy has prepared."

Nancy smiled.

Chapter 22

*Be not far from me; for trouble is near;
for there is none to help.
Psalm 22:11*

Faith and John attended services in New Hampshire at least once a month. John spent most of his time travelling between the Vermont church and the Maine church as Mr. Roberts had done before. Roberts had taken over pastorship of the New Hampshire church after Critchett's departure.

Rachel and Kathleen noticed Faith seemed depressed. It was understandable. She'd miscarried twice since she and John were married.

Faith confided to her two friends. "He tells me that it's my fault that I miscarry," she said as they talked after services. Gracie played nearby with Abigail's little boy.

"How can he say it's your fault?" Kathleen asked.

"He told me that he knows I wasn't a virgin when we got married." She looked down at her hands.

"That's crazy," Kathleen said glancing at Rachel. "He couldn't know anything like that."

"You were right," Faith said. "I should have told him before we got married. He holds it against me. I think he hates me."

Rachel's stomach churned. "Faith," she whispered. "You shouldn't think like this. It isn't good. Look at you. You're so thin, and pale. You're going to ruin your health."

"It's true, Faith. We're worried about you."

"I know it's hard at first," Rachel said. "When Malcolm and I were married, I thought he hated me. I couldn't do anything right. But it worked out. Now we are very happy." *I can't tell her what I did—how I actually stopped myself from feeling anything. It sounds so crazy.*

"You never told me you were having trouble," Kathleen said.

"I was embarrassed, like Faith. I felt I was a failure. And there were other things, things I still don't want to talk about."

"Not even to us? We're your best friends."

"This isn't about me. It's about Faith."

"Rachel's right. You need to get help, Faith. Is there anyone who can help you? What about Mr. Roberts?"

Faith looked at Kathleen. "Do you really think I want to talk to him about this?"

"Well, what about your mom? She's been in the church all these years. Maybe she can help you. Someone needs to talk to John and set him straight on how he's treating you. It isn't right."

Rachel looked at Kathleen impatiently. "Of course it's right," she said. "He's her husband. He's the head of the house. He can treat her any way he wants. You don't understand how it works."

"That's not what the Bible says," Kathleen retorted. "The Bible says that a man should love his wife as the Lord loves the Church."

Rachel smiled.

"What's so funny?" Kathleen asked.

"I was just remembering what Mrs. Driscoll told me on my wedding day," Rachel answered, now giggling.

"What?" Faith asked.

"She said that when her husband tells her he's the head of the house she tells him you know what we do to heads don't you?"

Faith and Kathleen waited for the answer. “We flush them!”

They all laughed.

“I don’t think John would appreciate that,” Faith said still giggling. It was nice to see a smile on her face.

“There’s plenty of time for having babies,” Rachel said. “Try not to worry about it. Work on your health. Exercise. Get rest. When you’re well you’ll be able to carry a baby full term. We’re both praying for you.”

“Have you been to a doctor?” Kathleen asked.

Faith shook her head.

“But you said things had changed at Headquarters,” Rachel said.

“I know. But John thinks I should conform to the old rules. I think he’s punishing me. I think he wants me to suffer.”

“Jerk!” Kathleen said.

“Don’t talk like that. Someone will hear you,” Faith said.

Gracie started to cry and Rachel hurried over to her. When she returned Faith had gone to talk to some ladies and Kathleen was talking to George.

The following week Mrs. Peters was found dead in her apartment. Audrey had gone to help her clean and shop for groceries and discovered her in bed. Evidently she’d died in her sleep that previous night. Funeral arrangements were made and a service was scheduled on Sunday. Many of the brethren attended. Mr. Roberts gave the eulogy.

“Who are all those people?” Malcolm asked nodding towards the parking lot.

Rachel saw a group coming towards the graveside where the service was being conducted. A woman marched up to Mr. Roberts who had stopped to see what was going on.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

“We’re conducting a funeral service.”

“This was my mother. I have made arrangements for her funeral.”

Mr. Roberts stood firmly and looked directly at the woman. “We are sorry for your loss. Mrs. Peters was loved by everyone who knew her. We are having the service for her because that’s what she wanted.”

“That’s what you brainwashed her into thinking she wanted,” the woman yelled.

A man standing next to her took her hand. “Come on,” he said. “Don’t make a scene.”

The woman glared at Roberts. “You haven’t heard the last of this,” she said. “I’ll see you in court!”

When she left the brethren whispered amongst themselves. Mr. Roberts spoke out loudly, “Don’t worry about that. We’re here to say good-bye to our sister, a Child of God, who is now waiting in her grave for the return of our Lord. We need to be happy that she died in the faith.”

Everyone settled down and the ceremony was finished without further interruption.

Faith later told Rachel that the woman’s family was challenging her will which she’d changed when she moved to the apartment complex. It turned out that she had considerable assets and her family had wanted her to live with them all along.

Rachel remembered the old lady’s concern about her stained toilet. She wondered if the old woman had been of sound enough mind to make a decision like that—cutting out her family from her will. The thought gave her a very uneasy feeling.

“Don’t worry,” Faith said noticing Rachel’s demeanor. “The Church has special lawyers who handle this kind of stuff all the time.”

The uneasy feeling grew more intense. “Do you think that’s right?”

Faith looked at Rachel, puzzled. “Of course. Mrs. Peters wanted to leave her estate to the church to help pay for The Work. That was her wish. Her family doesn’t have any right to change that just because they’re greedy.”

“Faith listen to yourself. Doesn’t that sound, well wrong to you?”

Faith stared at Rachel for a long moment. Rachel thought she detected something perhaps an epiphany or insight but Faith just shook her head.

“No. It’s always been that way. The Work comes first.”

Mr. Driscoll was the main speaker at services this week. It was after the holy day and well into November. Rachel wondered what special occasion had brought him but she was glad because she enjoyed his sermons much more than the others.

John’s sermons were reminiscent of Mr. Critchett’s. Mr. Roberts was a good enough speaker but he didn’t show a lot of enthusiasm or creativity. Sometimes she got sleepy and had a hard time concentrating. That never happened with Driscoll.

And today was no exception. Driscoll started his sermon with an announcement: “I have good news! God’s Apostle, Russell W. Sherburne, has been given new truth. I am here to share that new truth with you today.”

Everyone sat up in their seat. New truth from the Apostle. That hadn’t happened in a long time, not since he’d revealed that the prophecies were not for today but would be happening in the future—perhaps sometime before the end of the century. Previously people expected to see the Great Tribulation begin by the mid 1970’s which had obviously come and gone.

Mr. Driscoll looked about the room with a triumphant expression. He rather enjoyed this role—being the first to tell the brethren about new truth. “Turn to I Corinthians 7 verse 12,” he said.

Driscoll started reading the scriptures. “But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away.”

Rachel’s heart started to pound. She immediately sensed the meaning of these words even before Driscoll explained them. She looked about for Audrey. There she was sitting a few rows back. Randy was sitting next to her. He was so big now.

“Verse 13,” Driscoll continued, “And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.” He paused and looked about the room. Everyone was silent, waiting for his explanation.

“Verse 14, For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.”

“Verse 15, But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.”

Malcolm glanced at Rachel and she saw that his countenance was one of confusion. Rachel noticed that many people looked perplexed.

Driscoll smiled. “A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases,” he repeated very slowly. “God’s Apostle, through God’s Holy Spirit, has had a revelation. God no longer wants families to separate because of worldly marriages. He wants all families to be reconciled.” The room started to buzz. People were talking excitedly.

Rachel felt butterflies in her stomach. She glanced at Audrey. She was pale. Randy was whispering to his

mother excitedly. Audrey was shaking her head. Then she brightened. Her prayers had finally been answered.

Rachel smiled. The commotion eventually subsided and Driscoll continued his sermon about divorce and remarriage. He explained that the doctrine had been changed. People were no longer obligated to leave their mates if one had been previously married. The Apostle had learned a new truth. We were to all rejoice and thank God.

It was unbelievable. Rachel had never heard of such an event in the church.

Deacon didn't seem pleased by the news. His face was hard. Change was difficult and he'd been loyal to the doctrines for so many years. Malcolm noticed too. "I don't think Deacon is happy about this," Rachel whispered.

"It may be difficult for him to accept this new truth but he'll see. It's such a blessing to so many families. Even he has to admit that God's Apostle speaks for God in these End Times."

As soon as the service ended Rachel ran over to Audrey and hugged her. Audrey cried with joy. "We're going home," she told Randy. He was smiling broadly. "I am going to go call my husband right now. He's going to be so happy."

"I knew God would answer your prayers," Rachel said.

"Thank you." Audrey looked at Rachel. "You've been a good friend. So many times my faith waivered and you were there for me."

Rachel smiled. "Go home and call your husband."

That night after Malcolm and Rachel had gone to bed the phone rang. Malcolm answered it. It was Randy. He was crying desperately.

"Hold on," Malcolm said. "I can't understand you." He listened, frowning.

“What’s wrong?” Rachel asked.

“Randy, we’ll be right there.”

“It’s Audrey. Something terrible has happened.”

When they arrived at Audrey’s apartment the ambulance and police cars were parked out front. A policeman stopped Rachel and Malcolm at the door. Grace was asleep in the back seat of their car.

“What’s happened?” Rachel said trying to see past him.

“I’m sorry folks but you can’t go in there.”

Randy ran out the door and threw his arms around Rachel. He was sobbing uncontrollably.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Are you a friend of the family?”

Rachel nodded.

“Do you know who the next of kin are?”

She looked at the police officer. “Next of kin?”

“We need to notify the next of kin. The little boy isn’t able to say much because he’s so upset.”

Randy was sobbing uncontrollably. “What happened?”

“She killed herself. Do you have any idea why?”

Rachel was shaking. She hugged Randy tightly.

“Why don’t you come inside and sit down?” the officer said.

“I’ll stay with Grace,” Malcolm said returning to the car.

Rachel led Randy inside. There were people in the bathroom examining the body and taking photos.

Randy sat beside Rachel still sobbing. She kissed his damp hair on the top of his head. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Finally Randy began to stop crying. “What happened?” Rachel asked softly. The policeman was sitting in the chair next to them.

Randy wiped his nose on his sleeve and sucked in air. He looked at Rachel. His eyes were so sad.

“She called my Dad when we got home,” he said sobbing some more. “He told her it was too late. He got married two months ago.”

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Poor Audrey.”

“Do you understand what’s going on?” the policeman asked.

Rachel was pale. She knew she couldn’t possibly explain to this stranger what had happened to Audrey.

“We need to call her minister,” Rachel said.

“What about the boy?”

“I can take him home with us,” Rachel offered.

The policeman nodded. “I want to go home with Wade and Terry and my Dad,” Randy sobbed. “Can I go home? Please.”

Rachel found the phone number to Audrey’s ex-husband on the coffee table. “I’ll call his father,” she told the policeman. “He lives in Louisiana.”

The policeman nodded. “Can I have your name? We need to put this in our report. The boy’s a minor. Are you sure you want to take the responsibility?”

“Yes. He knows my husband and me. We’ll make sure he gets back to his dad and his brothers.”

The policeman stood up. The paramedics were bringing through the body wrapped in a dark plastic bag. Randy cried loudly and Rachel hugged him tightly.

“Let’s go,” she said leading him back to their car.

Rachel cried when she told Malcolm what had happened.

The policeman came by the next day to check on Randy and informed Rachel that the minister she’d told them to call never came to Audrey’s apartment or returned their call.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

Rachel gave the policeman Randy’s father’s phone number. “We called him last night and he wants Randy to

come home right away. His older brother Wade is coming to get him today. He is also claiming Audrey's body." The policeman thanked her for helping and left.

Rachel thought about her call to Audrey's former husband. He'd sounded so concerned and wanted to bury her. Rachel realized Audrey had been right—her husband did love her. He'd waited as long as he could but had simply given up that she would ever return. Who could blame him? He had waited over eight years.

Wade arrived later that afternoon. His eyes were red and swollen and he didn't say much. He never had said a lot. He'd taken the first flight when they got the news. Wade had gone to his mother's apartment and gathered Randy's things and a few things of his mothers. The body would be shipped to Louisiana by train.

Rachel thought that Wade looked good despite the terrible circumstances. He'd grown into a handsome young man.

Rachel hugged Randy when he was ready to leave.

Wade thanked Rachel and Malcolm for taking care of Randy. He seemed in a hurry like he was anxious to get away and return to his father and, Rachel thought, put this awful mess behind him.

Randy clung to his older brother, who was now twenty. Such sadness these boys had known. Such anguish. Rachel watched as the cab drove out of sight.

And now the Apostle said it was all changed. Rachel wondered, *had it all been a mistake?*

Rachel was hurt by the brethren's reaction to Audrey's suicide. Alice was the worst. She criticized Audrey openly for losing faith. "I could see that Audrey was falling away," she'd tell the other brethren. They'd nod as if agreeing with her.

“She let down on prayer and Bible Study,” Deacon would pronounce as if warning others to beware.

Rachel hated the bitterness that grew inside her every time she heard comments about Audrey.

Finally at one Sabbath service she could contain her anger no longer when Alice proclaimed that she’d told Audrey to repent on many occasions.

“How can you say that about Audrey? She spent all her time waiting on you and taking care of you?”

Alice bristled. “Well, maybe you should watch your own attitude. You spent a lot of time with Audrey.” She pressed her lips together defiantly.

Kathleen pulled at Rachel. “Come on,” she said. “Don’t waste your breath on that old bitty.”

Rachel was trembling. “I don’t understand,” she told Kathleen. “I thought the brethren were filled with love. Where is the love for Audrey? She was our sister in Christ. A Child of God. She sacrificed so much for them. She waited on them day and night. She neglected her own sons to cater to them. How can they say these things about her now that she’s dead?”

Kathleen hugged Rachel. “Don’t worry. They are angry. They know that Audrey lost faith--it frightens them. They’ll get over it. You’ll see. It’ll be all right.”

Rachel struggled with this. Over the weeks, she prayed and fasted but felt no better. Every time she saw Alice she felt her skin prickle. She was thankful when Abigail offered to take care of Alice so she wouldn’t have to deal with her. Abigail was still working so hard to be ordained and with Audrey gone there was now a need for another Deaconess.

Rachel wondered. She questioned. Sometimes she wished for the days when she didn’t feel emotions so profoundly. She remembered that dreadful night when she’d been so desperate at the door of suicide.

Why couldn't you hold on, Audrey. Why didn't you call me? I could have told you there was hope, that it was God's will, that everything would work out. We could have prayed together. I was so sure I'd never be happy but it worked out. You had to hang on to faith. Oh Audrey, why didn't you let me help?

Audrey may not have been able to return to her husband but Rachel reasoned she would have been free to find a new mate—someone in The Truth. If only she'd not given up.

"I feel so guilty," Rachel confided to Kathleen.

"There wasn't anything anyone could do," Kathleen said.

"We used to pray together like you and I did when we shared our penthouse. Remember?"

"You did?"

"What good did it do?"

"Don't talk like that, Rachel. We can't understand God's plan. We have to trust that everything will work out."

"Audrey was lost in the end. She lost everything. She lost her salvation. She lost her faith. She lost her family. She lost her life." Rachel looked Kathleen directly in the eye. "Explain to me how that is God's plan."

"You have to pray and fast. I'll pray for you, too. These thoughts are not good."

Eventually Rachel put all these questions on the back shelf in the far dark reaches of her mind as she had so many times in the past. She knew it was wrong to question or doubt.

It didn't help when Joel called them from Headquarters with the news that God's Apostle was engaged to a divorced woman.

What's more his new bride wore make-up so another new truth was soon announced. Modest make-up would be allowed. Few of the women wanted to start wearing it

though with the exception of the young women and teenagers.

Malcolm and Rachel discussed the topic often. He told her she had to get over Audrey's death. He prayed with her.

She knew that deep down he was struggling, too.

Chapter 23

He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

Proverbs 28:13

Kathleen and Rachel spent a lot more time together both of them being pregnant. Kathleen was due in March. Rachel in June. Kathleen was using the doctor who did home deliveries. Rachel went to an obstetrician in Concord.

“You can have a natural delivery at Concord hospital,” Rachel told Kathleen one day in February when she was visiting.

“I didn’t know that,” Kathleen said doubtfully. “It’s not the same as a home delivery.”

“Sure it is. The only difference is that if something goes wrong they have everything they need to help you. Remember what happened to Abigail?”

Kathleen nodded. “I wonder if Esther’s first baby would have lived if she’d had prenatal care.”

“Who knows?”

Rachel remembered Gracie’s birth. She thought about Audrey showing her how to take care of her newborn baby. She sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Kathleen asked curiously.

“I was just thinking about Gracie’s birth. I hope this baby is as healthy.”

“You’re feeling well?”

“Oh, yes. I feel just fine. And I haven’t gained a lot of weight. The doctor says I’m very healthy.”

Kathleen patted her now large belly. “That makes two of us.”

George announced that he wanted to be baptized a few weeks later. Rachel congratulated Kathleen. Malcolm and Rachel attended the baptism at Deacon's basement. Mr. Roberts officiated. Several others were baptized at the same time and a party followed.

Faith was there the following week. John gave a fiery sermon about child-rearing. He was annoyed by "all the brats". Faith was unusually quiet even for her. Rachel and Kathleen both noticed.

"Are you all right?" Kathleen asked.

Faith nodded.

"Are you sure?" Rachel asked.

"Look at the two of you," Faith said, a feigned smile on her face.

Rachel thought it must be hard for her seeing both of them pregnant wanting a baby of her own so badly. She remembered Gayla's lament. It was such a disgrace to be barren.

"I will never have children," Faith said to the two of them.

"Don't talk like that," Rachel scolded.

"No, I won't. I have cancer."

Rachel and Kathleen sat there stunned.

Finally Kathleen whispered, "Cancer? Are you sure?"

Faith nodded.

"What kind?" Rachel asked.

"Cervical."

"How do you know? Have you been to a doctor?"

Faith nodded. "I've been diagnosed with cancer. I've known for several weeks now but I didn't want to tell you and spoil your happiness."

"What does John say?" Rachel asked, her mind reeling with this tragic news.

"He doesn't know."

"You have to tell him," Kathleen said.

“No. Not yet.”

“What are you going to do?” Rachel asked.

“I’m going to pray that God heals me.”

Kathleen glanced a worried look at Rachel. “You can get treatment,” she said.

“I’ve already broken so many of God’s laws. I want to die with dignity. It’s the least I can do.”

“You’ve given up,” Rachel said.

“Perhaps. I just don’t feel like fighting the cancer. For what? To live with a man who despises me? To make love to someone I can’t stand to have touch me? I’m happy the end is coming. I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Faith, you can’t give up,” Rachel choked. Tears welled in her eyes. “You can’t.”

Kathleen had a stricken look on her face. She motioned to Rachel. “I need to talk to you.”

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“I found a lump in my breast,” Kathleen said. “It started soon after I got pregnant.”

“Kathleen! I can’t take it if both of my friends have cancer.”

Kathleen shrugged but she looked worried. “I’m scared,” she whispered. “I’ve never been so scared.”

“Maybe it’s just something that came with the pregnancy,” Rachel suggested.

Kathleen shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“What are you going to do?”

“After my baby is born I’m going to get a biopsy.”

“Don’t wait. Do it now.”

“I will.”

“Good. Let me know what I can do to help you.”

“What about Faith?” Kathleen asked.

“We have to try to convince her to get medical care. You know she’s going to die if she doesn’t.”

Kathleen looked at Rachel. It was true. She couldn’t think of anyone who’d ever been healed of cancer.

Now that Faith had confided her secret to Rachel and Kathleen, they were alarmed at the deterioration they noticed in her health. She was pale and thin. Her hair was dull and limp. She moved slowly reminding them of Wilma so many years ago.

No matter how much they pleaded with Faith she refused to seek medical care. She pronounced that she would have faith to the end—thy will be done. Period.

Kathleen gave birth to a healthy baby boy in March. They named him George after his father. Kathleen was radiant. George senior was beaming.

It was Rachel's turn to show a new mother how to care for her newborn. She spent several days helping Kathleen after the birth. She was relieved when Kathleen told her she'd made an appointment for a biopsy.

"Don't worry," Rachel had assured her. She was sure it wouldn't be cancer.

But Rachel knew immediately the news was bad when she saw Kathleen at services. Kathleen didn't have to tell her. Rachel sat stunned and silent.

"Does George know?"

Kathleen nodded. "I told him when I heard the test results."

"What does he say?"

"He is torn."

"Torn?" Rachel could feel her anger growing.

"Shhhh..." Kathleen said glancing around. "I don't want anyone to know."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Kathleen said.

John had come to services alone. Both Rachel and Kathleen were concerned and asked him how Faith was.

He was short tempered with them. "She's fine. Just a little under the weather."

Rachel wanted to scream at the man: *Can't you see she's dying?*

"I'm going to call Faith tomorrow," Rachel told Kathleen.

"Let me know how she is," Kathleen said.

Faith answered the phone when Rachel called the next day. She sounded so faint, so weak. "Are you okay?" Rachel asked.

There was a pause. "No."

"I'm coming over there," Rachel said.

There was another pause. "Okay."

Malcolm was surprised when Rachel told him she wanted to go see Faith. It was at least an hour's drive away.

"Are you sure," he said, eyeing his wife's large tummy.

"I'll be fine. Faith is sick. She needs me."

"What about John? Isn't he supposed to take care of his own wife?"

Rachel frowned.

"What's the matter?" Malcolm asked now growing concerned.

"Faith has cancer, Malcolm. She's dying and she won't get any help." Rachel felt a tremendous relief having told him. She hated keeping Faith's secret just as she hated keeping Kathleen's secret, too.

"Are you sure?"

Rachel could see by his face that he already knew it was true. He'd commented about Faith's appearance several times. Everyone noticed how frail she'd become.

"I have to go to her," Rachel said desperately. "Before it's too late."

"Be careful," he warned handing her the car keys.

Rachel called Kathleen and told her about Faith. Kathleen's husband told her he'd meet Rachel at the interstate so Kathleen could go with her.

It took a long time for John to answer the door when Rachel knocked. She thought perhaps they had disturbed him during his prayer hour or something. He didn't seem pleased to see Kathleen and Rachel standing here.

"We're here to see Faith," Rachel said pushing past him.

"Just a minute," he said closing the door.

"Where is she?"

"She's in her bedroom."

Kathleen and Rachel hurried upstairs and found Faith lying on her bed. She was pale, barely conscious.

Rachel took her in her arms. "Faith," she cried. "Faith, please don't die."

Faith opened her eyes and smiled at Rachel.

"Hi," she said cheerfully.

"Are you in pain?" Kathleen asked.

Before Faith could answer Rachel said, "We need to get you to the hospital."

She looked at Faith who was gazing at her. Her face was peaceful. She smiled, "yes, I am in pain but I can bear it. Sometimes it's much worse than this."

Rachel swallowed. "We're taking you to the hospital. Please, Faith, let us take you to the hospital. They can help you."

"You're not taking her anywhere," John said from the doorway.

"It's not your decision," Rachel said, surprising herself at her assertiveness. Kathleen was standing beside the bed.

"It's Faith's decision." Kathleen said looking at her sick friend.

"I trust God to heal me," Faith whispered.

“But you’re dying,” Rachel cried falling to her knees on the floor beside Faith’s bed.

“I’m not afraid to die,” Faith whispered stroking Rachel’s hair.

“I’m afraid, Faith,” Rachel said looking her in the eye. “I’m afraid to lose you.”

“I think you both should leave!” John said. “You heard her decision.”

“No,” Faith said raising her hand. “I don’t want my friends to leave. They can stay with me.”

“We’re not going to leave you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Faith told Rachel. “I’ve made my peace with God and with John.” She glanced at her husband.

Rachel looked at John. He stood rigidly at the door. She saw no concern for Faith, not the least and she was sure he didn’t care if she lived or died. Maybe he even hoped she would die. Then he’d be free to marry someone else—a virgin. Rachel tried to quell her rage.

Suddenly Faith began convulsing. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell backwards on the bed. Rachel panicked. Kathleen tried to hold Faith still. John stood there watching.

“Call an ambulance!” Rachel yelled.

He stood there.

“Call an ambulance!”

“No. You need to go. This is none of your concern.”

“She’s our friend. We’re not going to let her die.”

John turned and walked out of the room. She heard his footsteps down the stairs and then the closing of his office door. He was going to leave Faith to die alone.

Rachel looked at Kathleen and then ran to the phone. She called an ambulance. The paramedics arrived in a few moments. Kathleen let them inside and showed them Faith.

John stayed in his office with the door closed.

“You ride with her,” Kathleen suggested. “I’ll drive your car.”

Rachel held Faith’s hand all the way to the hospital. Faith woke and looked around confused until she figured out she was in an ambulance. She smiled at Rachel.

“Hold on,” Rachel said. “We’re almost there.”

“It’s too late,” Faith said.

“Don’t talk like that,” Rachel said.

“Rachel, look at me.”

Rachel glanced down afraid of what she would see.

Faith smiled. “I already know it’s too late.”

Rachel couldn’t believe her ears. “No,” she cried.

Faith took Rachel’s hand in hers. “I sinned,” she said calmly.

“No,” Rachel cried. “no.”

“Listen to me Rachel. I was pregnant that summer but I didn’t miscarry.”

Rachel looked at her friend in disbelief. “What are you saying?”

“I gave myself an abortion,” Faith said her voice quivering.

Rachel stared. No words formed in her mind. She was stunned.

“God forgives me. I know that now. But this is the price I must pay for my sins.”

“Oh, Faith. Please don’t say that.”

“There are things worse than death,” Faith said to her friend.

“No,” Rachel cried. “Please, Faith, what would be worse than death?”

“Falling away from The Truth,” Faith answered. “Losing faith.”

Rachel shook her head. “No. No,” she cried.

“It’s okay, Rachel. I’m ready to die.”

Rachel gave birth to a baby boy in June. They named him Trevor. He was as healthy as Gracie had been and just as large but this time she delivered her baby at the hospital without any complications.

Malcolm hugged her tightly, having been by her side through the childbirth process once again. "You're the bravest person I know," he whispered in her ear.

Gracie was totally thrilled with her new baby brother. Rachel and Kathleen spent lots of time together. "Do you think Georgie and Trevor will grow up to be best friends like their mothers?" Kathleen asked one day.

Rachel smiled. "That would be nice."

Both of the women thought of Faith and at the same instant missed their friend. If only the three of them had shared this moment.

John hadn't taken long to remarry. His new bride was already expecting after only a month of marriage. She was hardly old enough, Rachel had told Kathleen with disgust.

"I guess he got his virgin," Kathleen had replied.

They were glad that John was being relocated in a few months. It had been difficult for Faith's parents and when they learned from John the truth about their daughter they despised him.

Mr. Driscoll had recommended John be transferred to another church area for everyone's peace of mind.

Kathleen had decided after Faith's death to have a mastectomy. The cancer was too aggressive and not responding to other treatment. Seeing Faith pass away had caused Kathleen to face the harsh reality of her own illness. It was a difficult decision.

When the brethren first heard about Kathleen's decision to have surgery she had been shunned especially by the women. They avoided her at services and church functions. And they were quick to offer condolences to George.

Rachel had told Kathleen not to worry, they would get over it. She wanted desperately to encourage and protect Kathleen.

Rachel and Kathleen got together the day before the surgery. “I want to dance at little George’s wedding,” Kathleen told Rachel. “I want to bounce my grandchildren on my knees.”

Rachel hugged Kathleen. She understood. Secretly she was so happy Kathleen was getting medical care.

She didn’t tell Kathleen about the phone call that morning before she arrived at her house. It was Nancy. She said she wanted to come to talk to Kathleen—to convince her not to go through with the surgery. She sounded hysterical. “She’ll die,” she’d cried into the phone. “If they operate the cancer will spread and Kathleen will die.”

Rachel had surprised herself with her response. It was as if someone else was speaking through her.

“No,” she said. “Don’t come.”

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the phone. Rachel continued. “Kathleen has made her decision. She needs the support of her friends and family. If you can support her decision and offer encouragement then you’re welcome but don’t come to cause her to second guess what she has decided to do. It’s her decision and we should support our sister in Christ.”

Nancy had abruptly hung up. Rachel knew repercussions would follow but it didn’t matter. Her friend was getting medical care. That’s all that mattered.

George had been less supportive than either Kathleen or Rachel expected. Rachel wondered if he was trying to prove his faith to the brethren. She thought perhaps those who spoke with him whispering in the corner were influencing his viewpoint.

There were a few who still regarded him suspiciously like they weren't sure he was really converted or just going along to please Kathleen. Rachel wondered would Malcolm give in to such pressure if she had a medical crisis.

Rachel visited Kathleen at the hospital during the day. Ruth would baby-sit Gracie and the two infants, Trevor and Georgie.

As Kathleen was just coming out of the anesthesia with Rachel sitting next to her hospital bed in walked a group of the church women led by Nancy. Rachel was pleased they'd decided to offer Kathleen some support. She knew it meant a lot to her friend.

Alice watched as Kathleen pulled herself to a sitting position obviously in pain. "Well, I guess this puts a stop to your athletics," Alice said referring to the fact that Kathleen was still fit and trim and very active in outdoor sports like biking and rock-climbing with George.

Rachel glared at Alice.

Kathleen didn't appear to have heard the remark. If she did, it was of no concern to her at that moment. She weakly thanked everyone for coming.

Nancy put a vase of flowers by her bed. "We're all praying for you," she said giving Rachel a hateful look.

Rachel took care of little George while Kathleen was in the hospital. Big George came each night to eat with them and visit his son. Rachel wondered why he wasn't with Kathleen and finally she asked him.

He clenched his fists and squared his jaw. "I can't look at my wife right now."

"What do you mean?"

"She's disfigured her body—the temple of God's Holy Spirit."

Rachel looked at Malcolm who was equally stunned by George's statement. She gave him a you-talk-to-him look. Malcolm nodded.

Rachel took the babies into the kitchen. She didn't know what Malcolm said to George but he soon grabbed his hat and was out the door. Rachel saw tears in his eyes.

"Thank you," she said to Malcolm.

He hugged her.

"Would you still love me?" Rachel asked.

Malcolm held her out with his arms and looked her squarely in the eye. "Don't ever doubt that," he said. "I'll always love you no matter what."

She smiled. "I'll always love you, too."

Chapter 24

*...if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought:
But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it;
lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.”
Acts 5:38-39*

In a few months Kathleen recovered sufficiently to return to church services and activities. She never resumed her weekly visits to Rachel's house. Neither of the women spoke about the cancer to each other or anyone else. Somehow it just seemed like the way it was supposed to be. Something had changed. Or perhaps a chapter in their lives had ended.

Rachel prayed for Kathleen often and during one of those prayerful moments it occurred to her that perhaps she'd been the friend Kathleen needed at that critical time in her life and now that need had passed. They were both moving on.

It was at a regular Wednesday Women's Meeting that the subject of Kathleen's surgery was discussed openly for the first time. Undoubtedly it had been discussed a great deal privately.

Rachel imagined the comments—like Kathleen had lost faith, or Satan tempted her, or Deacon's favorite answer to everything, Kathleen had let down on prayer and Bible Study.

Ruth was now a beautiful young woman. She rarely sat with her mother, Madeleine, anymore. Instead she sat with another young girl in the church. It reminded Rachel of herself with her two friends when they were teenagers and new to The Truth. Both were professing to be a child of God. Indeed it seemed a long time ago.

Ruth raised her hand when Nancy asked for any comments or questions. When she saw Ruth's hand she frowned ever so slightly. "Yes, dear."

"I was wondering given that the Apostle has changed some of the major doctrines if the Faith Healing Doctrine is different now? Is that why Kathleen lived when she had cancer and Faith died? I mean, God promises to save us if we trust him for healing but I can't figure out why Faith died when she trusted God and Kathleen lived when she went to the hospital."

Ruth sat down. She had a somewhat satisfied look on her face. Her mother glanced at her and frowned but Ruth pretended not to notice.

Nancy sat quietly for a moment. Finally after careful thought she spoke. "You can have faith even if you make the wrong decision."

Rachel was shocked. Here was her friend, Kathleen, sitting in the room and Nancy was saying she'd made a mistake to have medical care. She wanted to speak but couldn't.

Nancy continued. "Sometimes we are influenced by outside forces," she glanced at Rachel, "and we don't realize that it's Satan trying to trip us up and cause us to fall away from The Truth."

Rachel felt her face grow hot. She looked towards Kathleen who was staring at her hands on her lap. She remembered the conversation she and Malcolm had with Nancy's husband about healing. *How could Nancy say these things when she must know better?*

Then it occurred to her that Nancy had not agreed with her husband. She'd been agitated. Rachel decided that Nancy still believed in faith healing—it was her husband's opinion he'd expressed that night, not hers.

Alice raised her hand. "I knew that was what happened," she said. "I knew that Kathleen was pushed to go to the doctor."

Why doesn't Kathleen say something, Rachel wondered. Why doesn't she tell them the truth—that it was her decision—that I supported HER decision?

But Kathleen was silent. Rachel thought she might be crying. Rachel's heart ached.

Nancy nodded at Alice's remarks. Nancy said, "Whoever allows doubt and questioning into their mind has put themselves at great risk spiritually. They are toying with things that will hurt them far more than being sick or even dying. They risk losing their eternal salvation and becoming a lost child."

Alice spoke up, "I'd bet that Audrey was influenced by that same evil spirit."

Rachel stared at the room. Women looked away from Rachel deliberately but she knew everyone of them believed it was her fault. Her fault that Audrey had killed herself and that Kathleen had lost faith during her illness.

Rachel looked around landing her eyes on Kathleen. Kathleen slowly looked at her. Her eyes filled with tears and Rachel knew that Kathleen was not free to defend her. She'd be scorned, too. And now that George was a member she risked losing everything. She risked losing her marriage.

Rachel stood up silently and gathered her Bible. Her face was hot but she held back growing emotions. She held her head up and went out the door to her car.

Once she shut her car door she burst into tears and cried for several minutes. Then she drove home.

When Rachel told Malcolm what had happened she was surprised by his response.

"The Roberts are hypocrites," he stated. "Don't go to those Women's Meetings anymore."

She knew that was exactly what she was going to do—stop going.

Kathleen called Rachel the next day. “Are you all right?” she asked meekly.

“Kathleen,” Rachel said happy to hear her friend’s voice. “Of course I’m all right. What about you? Did they say more after I left?”

Kathleen was silent and Rachel realized there was more said, but she also didn’t want to hear it. “That’s okay, Kathleen. I think they are afraid. What you did when you went to the hospital and had surgery, maybe they think that they’d be tempted to do the same thing. It scares them.”

Kathleen thought for a moment. “Maybe they wonder if all those who have died waiting for faith healing, well, maybe they should have gotten medical help, too.”

This thought frightened both women.

Rachel mumbled, “Maybe.”

“I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am that I didn’t say anything,” Kathleen said. She sounded like she’d been crying.

“Don’t even give it a thought,” Rachel said trying to sound positive. “I don’t care what some old bitty like Alice thinks about me.”

“You’re stronger than I am,” Kathleen said.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes,” Kathleen said. “You’ve always been the strong one. Remember when you threw away your White Bible—the one your grandmother gave you?”

“Yes,” Rachel smiled at the thought of her grandmother.

“And I threw away my paints?”

“Yes.”

“Well, when you left to go for your walk in the park, I went down to the garbage can and pulled my paints back out.”

“I wondered how you had afforded to buy new paints when you started painting again,” Rachel said.

“You meant it. I always admired that about you. You were so sincere. So many times I felt like a fraud.”

“You were never a fraud. Kathleen, I felt the same way. I think Faith did, too.”

“But you were so devoted, so determined to be baptized. You inspired me and now I’ve...”

“Don’t think like that. You are the one who had cancer. All I did was stand by you.”

“You did a lot more,” Kathleen said. “You gave me hope.”

There was a long silence.

“Is everything okay?” Rachel asked.

Kathleen paused. “It’s George. He thinks I shouldn’t,” she stopped mid sentence.

“Shouldn’t what?”

“He says I have a lot to do with my new baby,” Kathleen said awkwardly.

Rachel surmised that George didn’t particularly like Kathleen’s friendship with her. That explained why her regular visits had stopped.

“Don’t worry about it,” Rachel said feeling a pang of sadness. She remembered how she’d worried that Malcolm might forbid her to be friends with Kathleen years ago.

“I liked George a lot better before he was converted,” Kathleen said dryly.

Rachel laughed. “Be careful what you wish for, huh?”

Kathleen chuckled. “Be careful what you pray for. God might give it to you.”

“What’s George doing?” Rachel asked.

“He’s constantly testing me. To see if I’m repentant and humble. I always think of your story about Mrs. Driscoll. Sometimes I just want to tell him to go flush it!”

They both laughed.

“He’ll get over that,” Rachel said confidently. “He’s just insecure right now.”

“He wants to prove to everyone that we’re true believers. I think he really wants to be accepted by the brethren,” Kathleen said. “I never saw this in him before we were married.”

Rachel thought. “You really don’t know someone until you live with them. It was the same with me and Malcolm,” she said.

“Really? You never complained.”

“I found ways to hide the truth even from myself,” Rachel said. “I told myself that God would take care of everything. All I had to do was be an obedient wife.”

“A virtuous women,” Kathleen replied. There was a spark in her voice that reminded Rachel of the old Kathleen—feisty and independent.

“You are,” Rachel said.

“Thanks. You know you’ll always be my best friend.”

When Rachel hung up the phone she smiled. “You’ll always be my best friend, too, no matter what the future brings.” She said this aloud as if finishing Kathleen’s thought.

At the beginning of February Joel called. It was Sunday morning. “You have to watch 60 Minutes tonight,” he told Malcolm. The conversation was short and he wouldn’t elaborate, just insisted they watch it.

Mid afternoon the phone rang again. It was Madeleine’s husband, activating the Round Robin phone message system. He told Malcolm to call his list of numbers and warn them not to watch the 60 Minutes program that evening. When Malcolm asked him why he just repeated his message and hung up.

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“I’m supposed to call the brethren and tell them not to watch the show tonight.”

“Are you going to?”

Malcolm nodded. “I have to call.”

“No,” Rachel said, “are you going to watch the show tonight?”

Malcolm paused for a second then nodded. “You bet I am!”

It seemed an extra long day as Rachel and Malcolm waited for 8 pm. They rarely watched television and the set they had was an old one but they were able to get the channel 60 Minutes would be on.

Just as the program started the phone rang. Malcolm answered. “I know. I’m watching it. Okay.” He hung up.

“What was that?” Rachel asked.

“It was my Dad,” Malcolm said.

Rachel was surprised. They hadn’t seen Malcolm’s parents since Gracie was born. The relationship was strained. They’d tried to “talk” to Malcolm and discourage him from the church.

The program started with its usual teasers at the beginning. The segment on their church began with Mike Wallace narrating and pictures of Headquarters in California. The screen panned a view of the college and the new Auditorium the brethren had worked so hard to finance—a building Russell told them would enable him to impress the world leaders with God’s message. It was a magnificent building. Rachel and Malcolm were mesmerized.

Mike Wallace was not interviewing the Apostle or any of the evangelists. His interview was with the church’s lawyer—a man named Stephen Richardson, or as Mike Wallace said in his distinct voice, “Stephen Richardson, Esquire”.

Malcolm and Rachel had heard of him but didn’t know much about him. He was Russell’s legal advisor. God’s True Church was often the subject of frivolous lawsuits—attacks by Satan.

The segment about the church lasted for twenty minutes going by much too quickly. Mike Wallace asked

the lawyer questions about lavish expenditures of the Apostle. He asked about church doctrines mentioning faith healing and tithing. Stephen Richardson did what all good lawyers do: he dodged the questions masterfully.

At the very end of the segment Mike asked Stephen what proof he had that Russell had changed. Stephen looked confused. “Changed?”

“Yes,” Mike said with that got-cha look. He held up some documents. “Russell was convicted of fraud forty years ago in another scam. He was a door to door salesman who scanned people into investing in some fraudulent enterprise. Only he ran into the wrong people and was sued and lost in court.”

Stephen Richardson offered a weak explanation. “That’s just propaganda by the church dissidents,” he said.

But Mike was ready. He held up more documents. Proof of deaths in the church—deaths of children, women, elderly, because they didn’t get simple health care. He pointed to reports that showed Russell himself frequently received medical care, in fact the best money could buy.

Stephen shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “More propaganda.”

Mike smiled. “How do you explain this?” he said holding up yet another document. “It’s a lawsuit filed by the family of an elderly widow who left all her estate worth millions of dollars to the church just weeks before she died.”

Stephen Richardson stood up. He yanked the microphone off his lapel and stomped out.

Mike smiled triumphantly. That was the end of the segment.

Malcolm and Rachel stared at the TV as the break began. They were stunned. The phone rang. It was Joel.

“Did you see the show?” he asked, excitedly.

Malcolm replied. “Yes.”

“What did you think?”

“It’s pretty amazing,” Malcolm said somberly.

“There’s a lot more. I’m sending you a tape of the whole interview. It was smuggled out of the studio. Richardson had secretly taped it. And a friend of mine has made copies. You can’t tell anyone where you got it.”

“Okay,” Malcolm said dumbfounded by Joel’s comments.

Joel hung up. Malcolm told Rachel what he said. She looked at Malcolm. “Do you think we should listen to it?” she asked.

Malcolm shrugged. “We’ll decide when it comes.”

To say “all hell broke loose” would be an understatement. The Round Robin was activated the next evening. Everyone was told to bring as much money as they could put together even if they had to take out a loan, to Mr. Roberts’s home by ten o’clock the next evening. Satan was attacking the Church and God’s Work. Now was the time when all members must sacrifice.

When Malcolm got the call he told Rachel, “I can’t ask the brethren to bring more money when they don’t know what’s really going on.”

Rachel agreed. “What should we do?”

Malcolm thought for a moment and then called Alberto. “Can you make my calls on the Round Robin?”

“Thanks.”

Tuesday night Men’s Meeting was canceled. Instead, Roberts asked all the “leading” men to come to his house for an emergency meeting. Malcolm described to Rachel what happened when he got home.

“Everyone was asking Roberts about the 60 Minutes show. They wanted to know how much of it was true.”

“What did he say?”

“He didn’t deny any of it. He just said there had been problems at Headquarters for years.”

“I bet Deacon said it was because they didn’t pray and study enough,” Rachel said.

Malcolm laughed. “How’d you know?”

Rachel shrugged. “What else?”

Malcolm explained that Mr. Roberts was very concerned about the church finances. “He said they are very worried about donations dropping off. He asked us if his pay from Headquarters were to stop would we tithe directly to him.”

“What did you say?”

“I went along with everyone else. You know Alberto. He was all gung-ho. Whatever the minister says he’ll follow. And Justin and Deacon were the same. Everyone agreed to tithe to him if his pay from Headquarters stopped.”

He looked at Rachel. “That’s what he was worried about—his paycheck!”

Rachel could see that Malcolm held the minister in great disdain. It occurred to her that his experience with Critchett had left him disappointed and bitter. She was not the only one who’d suffered at the hands of the ministry.

“Would you tithe to him?” she asked.

Malcolm shook his head. “I told him privately that he’d not get one cent from us until he started telling the brethren the whole truth.”

“What did he say?” Rachel’s eyes widened.

“He just looked at me. He looked so desperate, so pathetic.”

Joel’s copy of the complete 60 Minutes interview arrived two weeks later.

Chapter 25

*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing,
but inwardly they are ravening wolves.
Matthew 7:15*

The church began having bake sales and car washes to raise money for Headquarters. Members were asked repeatedly to give more and more money and to obtain loans if they could. It was suggested that they donate part of their second tithe savings for attending the Feast Days. God would understand.

Malcolm and Rachel began watching the evening news hoping to see more reports about the church but there were none. Malcolm had friends at work who asked him about the 60 Minutes Program. When he told Rachel, she was surprised.

Of course they recognized the church because Malcolm had observed so many of the customs—the Holy Days and avoiding Christmas, Easter and other traditional holidays.

What surprised her more was how supportive some of his colleagues were. He told her how they comforted him and made him feel welcome, normal.

On November 18, 1978, something much worse than the 60 Minutes show happened. It would stun Rachel and Malcolm beyond anything Mike Wallace had said. It would shake them loose finally from the bonds of this church.

It was Jonestown, Guyana.

Rachel felt a chill over her body as she watched the news coverage. All the bloated bodies—mothers with infants and small children. Men, young and old, were lying

in piles next to one another, small paper cups littering the ground nearby.

She shuddered as she listened to tales of mothers feeding their children purple Kool-Aid, of young zealous believers forcing those who were too frightened to drink the poison.

There they were all those people, in a wilderness setting— just like the description of the Place of Safety. And Jim Jones had told them, just as Russell might well have said, God had revealed that they were to wait for Christ in their graves.

“Oh, God,” she said breathlessly. She slouched forward in her chair. “That could be us.”

Malcolm watched the terrible scene in equal horror. He knew Rachel was absolutely right. He could visualize Alberto and some of the others, zealots, forcing brethren to drink the Kool-Aid.

It was not a far stretch that in this desperate time Russell might tell the brethren to sell all they had and board a plane to the wilderness Place of Safety. There he could have absolute power just as Jones had over his followers.

Malcolm could hear the words so often repeated at services, “We must obey God’s Apostle, no matter what, right or wrong.”

“What are we going to do?” Rachel asked pulling little Trevor close to her. Gracie climbed up on the sofa next to her mother sensing something was wrong.

“What is it, Mommy?”

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Rachel said as she hugged her.

Malcolm stared at the television.

It was very difficult after nearly ten years to simply let go. Especially when you’d been trained to believe that “falling away” was the greatest sin. Could God fix this

problem in the church? Of course. Malcolm and Rachel still believed this.

They deliberately arrived late to the Sabbath Services that week to avoid talking to the brethren. It made it easier to tolerate some of the hostility targeted towards them.

The brethren were in crisis. Sometimes crisis brings out the best in people, sometimes the worse.

Joel had called them and warned them. "If you think, you stink," he'd said. Rachel began to understand.

"Friendships in the church are only Sherburne deep," he warned. "Beware of those you think are your friends."

Mr. Driscoll gave the sermon. He was working hard to hold the church together. Mr. Roberts was falling apart. Driscoll came to help calm things down.

His sermon was like words filtered from a faraway place to Rachel. She barely heard him and could not concentrate on his message. She didn't even turn to the scriptures.

She sat there, little Trevor in her lap, and Gracie between her and Malcolm. *This is my last Sabbath Service*, she thought. *I will never see these people again. This is the last time.*

Rachel looked around the auditorium. Faces were somber. The joy of God's Holy Spirit was missing. Kathleen was walking little Georgie in the back because he was restless. She felt Audrey's absence, intensely wishing so much to see her face and her sons sitting next to her as they had for so many years. And she missed Faith. Faith was gone.

These thoughts raced through her mind. She felt numb as if she couldn't feel anything. She wasn't sad. She wasn't angry. She was empty.

When the last hymn was sung she glanced at Malcolm and knew he felt the same way.

“I’m going to talk to Driscoll,” he said.

Rachel followed kids in tow. Driscoll looked at the two of them. He had that same sparkle in his eyes—that mischievous look.

Malcolm asked him about what was happening at Headquarters.

Driscoll didn’t answer his question. He leaned close to both Malcolm and Rachel. “What are you two still doing here?” he said. “Why don’t you move on with your life?”

Malcolm looked at Rachel. She knew they hadn’t moved on because of her. Malcolm was ready and had been ready to leave for some time. He’d been waiting for her.

Now she understood that. For one spouse to leave often meant the family broke up even after the Apostle’s new truth about divorce and remarriage. Malcolm hadn’t dared risk losing Rachel.

Rachel handed Trevor to Malcolm and turned to face the auditorium. “You stay with Daddy,” she told Gracie.

She walked over to Alice. “Would you drink purple Kool-Aid if the Apostle told you to?” she asked the old lady.

Alice glared at her. “How dare you question my loyalty!”

Rachel turned to Abigail who was holding her newest baby. “Would you feed purple Kool-Aid to your children?”

Abigail looked horrified and turned away.

There was Alberto with his wife. She stopped and asked them the same question.

The indignation showed on both their faces. “We must obey God’s Apostle no matter what—right or wrong!” Alberto bellowed.

Rachel spotted Deacon talking with Desiree. “Would you two drink purple Kool-Aid in the Place of Safety if Russell told you to?” she asked.

Desiree looked frightened. Deacon looked disgusted and took Desiree’s arm muttering about demons and witchcraft.

As they walked away Rachel realized he had spent so many years and so much money in the church--he had so much invested in his faith that he just couldn’t admit it was wrong. *The more you give up and the more you sacrifice, the more difficult it is to leave,* she thought.

Malcolm caught up to Rachel. “Are you ready to leave?”

Rachel took one last look around. There was Madeleine with several of her children. Kathleen was standing next to George who was holding their baby as they talked with brethren. Ruth was chatting happily with her girlfriend.

Good-bye everyone, she thought and turned to Malcolm. “Yes. I’m ready now.”

The next day the Round Robin call came in. Rachel answered the phone. “No,” she said. “I can’t call any of the brethren and ask them to give any more money. It’s not right. They don’t know all the facts.” She hung up the phone.

“Is that okay?” she asked Malcolm.

He took her in his arms.

“You did exactly what I would have done.”

Two hours later Roberts drove up. He knocked on their door and Malcolm invited him inside. “Are you here to answer our questions?” Malcolm asked.

“You better put those questions on the back shelf of your closet. Even I can’t ask those questions. No, I’m

here to warn you,” he said. There was fear on the minister’s face. And anger.

“Warn us of what?” Malcolm asked.

“If you say anything, anything about all these rumors you’ve been listening to and all these doubts you have about the church, the brethren will *never* forgive you!”

“We can’t lie to people. If anyone asks us what we know we will tell them. We’re not going out and talking to them but if they ask us, we can’t lie to them. They have a right to know the truth.”

Robert’s expression hardened. “Then you leave me no choice. You two are hereby excommunicated. You will not be allowed to attend any church services or activities. No one will be allowed to even speak to you. If they see you on the street they will cross to the other side.”

The man’s face was red and his voice shrill.

Malcolm smiled. He opened the door.

“Leave,” he said, very calmly.

Roberts looked as if he could explode. He hurried out and sped away.

That night Alberto and Deacon were parked on the street near Rachel and Malcolm’s home. Malcolm told Rachel they were watching to make sure no one talked to them.

No one did.

Rachel made one phone call. She called Kathleen to explain what had happened. George answered the phone and was very short with her. “Kathleen isn’t available.”

“Would you please tell her,” Rachel said pausing. Then she said, “Please tell her I called to say good-bye.” He hung up the phone.

Kathleen never returned her call.

Rachel didn’t expect her to.

Chapter 26

*But the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit,
whom the Father will send in my name,
he shall teach you all things,
Luke 14:26*

That next Saturday, the Sabbath Day for them for so many years, Malcolm asked Rachel about going to visit his parents. She had thought it a good idea. There were bridges to mend and now was a good time to start.

His mother and father were overjoyed. Their happiness was enormous. “My prayers have been answered!” his mother proclaimed. “I prayed every day that you would get out of “that church.”

Malcolm apologized to them for putting them through so much worry. Rachel was thankful they didn’t know everything like how Gracie was born.

Malcolm was happy to be home. He phoned some of his old high school buddies. The children took to this new concept of Meme and Pepe quickly. Malcolm’s parents couldn’t cuddle little Trevor and Gracie enough. Rachel smiled. She was happy for Malcolm.

Malcolm hung up the phone after talking extensively to one of his old friends and noticed Rachel was not in the room. He found her in the back bedroom. She was wiping her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry to spoil your excitement,” she said. “I am really happy for you.”

Malcolm sat down on the bed next to her. He suspected what was wrong.

His mother came to the door. “What’s the matter with Rachel?”

Rachel looked at Malcolm. "My grandparents are both dead now," she said. "I haven't seen my brothers in years. I'm not even sure where they are. And the last time I saw my father, well I don't think he wants to see me."

Malcolm gave her a hug. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize. This must be hard for you. I was just so anxious to see my family."

"And they have welcomed you," Rachel said. "I am so happy for you. But I can't go home."

Malcolm stroked her hair. "I love you," he said. "We're your home now."

"I know," Rachel smiled through her tears. "I can't help how I feel."

"Why don't you try to locate your brothers?"

"Really?"

He nodded. "I'll help you."

"Thanks."

His mother wanted them to begin attending the Catholic Church as Malcolm had been raised. She was sure that would cure whatever was bothering Rachel.

"Mom I know you mean well but don't push us. We don't want to belong to any church now."

His mother frowned. It wasn't quite a complete victory but then she brightened. At least they were out of that church. The rest would come in due time. She was sure of that and nodded to Malcolm. "I won't push you," she said.

Over the next few months things calmed down with the church. Rachel and Malcolm began moving on with their lives. Malcolm was quite ready and moving on happened naturally and quickly for him.

It was more difficult for Rachel. She didn't second-guess their departure from the church. She harbored no desire to return. The new freedom was intoxicating.

They had more time, more money, and more energy for raising their family. Soon they were shopping for a home in the country.

Through all this excitement and change Rachel struggled. She reviewed much of the old church literature pointing out the glaring errors to Malcolm when he got home from work. He listened patiently.

She discovered messages in the Bible that were quite different from the teachings of the church. She read about love and forgiveness. These words were soothing, but she had a deep empty spot inside.

She wasn't sure how to mend, or what to mend. The only thing she did know was that organized church, no matter which church, was not the answer for her—not now, and probably not ever.

Rachel found some books about religious cults. She was surprised to see how many attributes her past church shared with these abusive organizations. It helped her heal but still there was that empty spot. If she could describe it with words she would have said that her heart literally ached.

“Perhaps you miss your friends,” Malcolm suggested one night, when Rachel explained how she was feeling. “I never thought much about it. I have friends at work. But your friends were all in the church. You must miss Kathleen.”

Rachel considered this. It was true. In fact the church had been her whole family since her teenage years when she'd left her mother and moved in with Kathleen and Faith.

She had to admit she did miss Kathleen and Faith. But she wouldn't put Kathleen in a difficult position. Contacting her would mean that she'd violate the strict order not to talk with anyone who is excommunicated.

No, she understood how Kathleen felt. She'd done the same thing to her own brother many years before.

"I really feel badly about my brothers," Rachel told Malcolm. "I never told you what I did when my brother was kicked out of the church."

Malcolm looked at Rachel concerned.

"He came to my door and pleaded with me to let him in. I listened to him crying and didn't even answer. Mr. Critchett had told me I couldn't even acknowledge him." Tears filled her eyes as she remembered how sad and desperate he'd looked when he walked back to his car. "I wish I could go back. How could I do that to my own brother?"

Malcolm hugged her and comforted her. "He understood, Rachel," he said trying to convince her. "That's the way it was in the church."

"But I feel so guilty," Rachel said.

"It's all over now," Malcolm replied. "We are free of all that. Why don't you try to find your brother like we talked about at my folk's house? I know you want to. You'll feel better if you tell him how sorry you are. Just telling my folks I was sorry made me feel so much better."

"You felt guilty?" Rachel asked.

"Oh yes. My mother can be pretty determined. And I had to tell her off on several occasions and sometimes hang up on her when she'd call. I feel really bad I did those things now. I know she was just worried about me."

"I don't know," Rachel said thoughtfully. "Maybe I'm afraid to face my brother. What if he doesn't forgive me?"

"Pray about it."

"What?" Rachel was very surprised.

"Why don't you pray about it? Ask God to help you."

"You pray?" Rachel asked incredulously.

Malcolm blushed. "Yes."

“But aren’t you afraid to lapse back into the cult-mind?”

Malcolm shook his head.

“I can’t,” Rachel whispered. “I just don’t believe any more.”

Malcolm reached for his wife’s hand and took it lovingly into his own. “I don’t know if there is a God or not,” he said. “But if there isn’t, no harm is done, right?”

Rachel nodded.

“And if there is a God then why not ask for help? That’s how I look at it.”

Rachel thought about this. “I don’t think I could. I’m afraid. I don’t know...”

“Try it. It can’t hurt.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she said doubtfully.

The next day Rachel packed up the church literature and put it in a box in the basement—designated for the next trip to the dump. She wiped her hands symbolically as much as physically of the baggage from the past.

Six months later the mailman beeped and Rachel saw that he had a package that wouldn’t fit into the mailbox. So she ran outside to get it. “Thanks,” she said as he handed it to her.

Rachel examined the brown paper wrapped item. There was no return address. “I wonder what this is,” she said to herself as she walked back into the house.

“What is it, Mommy?” Gracie asked. It was a Saturday and Grace, now in second grade was home from school.

“I don’t know, sweetie.” Rachel got out the scissors and cut open the package. Inside was her old white zippered Bible. There was a note:

Dear Rachel,

I hope you are well and your family is well, too. Little Georgie is growing so fast. We are all fine.

Remember when we threw away our things back in the Penthouse apartment? I told you that I rescued my paints but I also pulled out your old Bible. I know it meant a lot to you, and to be honest, I never thought you should have thrown it away. Please forgive me.

I know I shouldn't have interfered. While cleaning some stuff out for the Days of Unleavened Bread I came across it and thought you might like to have it back.

Love, Kathleen.

PS George doesn't know I wrote to you and it's best to keep it that way. You understand.

“What is it, Mommy?” Gracie asked, touching the white Bible.

“My grandmother gave this to me when I was a young girl,” she said.

Rachel unzipped the Bible. It was like going home. She smiled. Her favorite passages were marked, scriptures she'd loved and read so many times before joining “that church”.

“Why are you crying, Mommy?” Gracie asked pulling on her mother's sleeve.

Rachel knelt down beside the little girl and showed her the Bible. “My grandmother told me that it wasn't the book that counted, it was the love inside.”

She smiled at Grace who really didn't comprehend what her mother was saying.

Rachel sighed. “You watch your little brother for a minute. Mommy needs to do something in the other room.”

Grace nodded and turned her attention to Trevor, her favorite past time, playing with her little brother.

Rachel went into her bedroom and paused. She took a deep breath and knelt down by the bed. Her heartbeat

increased and she felt her face flush. Her palms were sweating. She wiped her hands on her dress.

She looked up. "God," she whispered. "I don't know if you're there. I don't know if you can hear me or if you even care. I don't know anything anymore."

She wiped a tear from her cheek. "I need your help. I've lost my faith and I am so empty," she whispered choking back her tears. "Please, Lord, please help me."

Rachel stood up. She felt better. She didn't know if God had heard her or not but it didn't matter. Somehow she just felt better.

She held her grandmother's Bible and realized that it wasn't God who had done all those terrible things to the brethren. It had nothing to do with God. God is love. That's what the Bible said. She didn't need any man to teach her; God knows those who are his; His church wasn't an organization or a building; and just because a church claimed God's name for their deeds didn't make it so.

Rachel realized that God was never part of "the church" to which she'd belonged for so many years.

Everything crystallized in that moment and Rachel knew she was on the road to recovery. Her white Bible was open and she glanced down at a scripture she'd underlined many years ago.

It read: In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.

She knew that God loved everyone--we are all God's children. How had she been so foolish to believe that any man or organization controlled someone's spiritual life?

She had found faith once again. In fact faith was always there, just hidden by all the distractions. This time faith wasn't manufactured by some bizarre church doctrine. It was real.

Summer 1979

Malcolm waited with Gracie and Trevor while Rachel performed her private ceremony. It was a beautiful summer day with a light warm breeze and the sky was a deep blue.

She stood over her grandparents graves after planting some peach colored tulips—her grandmother’s favorite flower.

“I love you, Grammy and Grampy,” she said. “I’m so sorry that I cut myself off from you. I miss you terribly.”

She wiped away a tear. “You would have loved Gracie and Trevor. I tell them all about you.”

Her two brothers stood beside her.

The End.

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