

CHAPTER ONE

TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

“Have patience. Your time will come soon.”

I hear the words in a still, small voice, as if they are riding on the wind.

The voice is unlike any other I've ever heard. It is gentle, calming, and encouraging. I stop and look around the church parking lot to try to see who could have said those words. But I see that I'm all alone, with no one in sight. So where did the voice come from? Was I just imagining it?

I continue walking, trying not to think about it. However, the words still linger in the air. Then I know that those words are not something I should ignore. They were said, and whoever whispered them sent shivers down my spine and breathed life into my soul. Words as simple but as powerful as those could only have been said by someone who truly cares about me and loves me in a way that no one else ever can.

As another breeze blows lightly across my skin, I know who spoke the words. It was God.

Earlier that night

It's Wednesday night and I'm sitting in youth group listening to our youth pastor preach a lesson he titled 'Teaching Believers'. From the first words he says, I know it's a sermon that's really going to speak to me.

“Evangelism doesn't end with a prayer or a profession of faith,” he says. “The Great Commission in Matthew 28 tells us to make disciples, baptizing new believers and teaching them to obey all of Jesus' instructions. It is an honor to introduce people to Jesus, and it is an even higher honor to lead them into a lifelong walk with Him.”

I sink down in my chair. I really don't like this subject because it reminds me just how bad I am at witnessing to others about Christ. However, I keep listening.

"It's important that you don't fear awkwardness when witnessing to others," Pastor David continues. "Don't wait for someone else to do what you are called to do. Tonight we will be looking at Colossians 1:24-29."

I absorb what he says and take notes, all the while feeling worthless. Here he is preaching about how, as Christians, we are called to share Christ with others and lead them to salvation, and I just feel dejected that I always seem to mess it up.

I zone him out for a minute and take the time to pray. "God, please place someone in my life that I can witness to. Someone who I can actually talk to about these things without messing up. Please give me a chance to redeem myself after all the times I've failed you. I'm ready, just give me someone. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

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Around eight o'clock the following Tuesday morning, I wake up to the sound of my cell phone ringing. I recognize the ringtone and know it's my best friend since 6th grade, Ashley Foster. I reluctantly get out of bed and answer her call.

"Hey," I say, still half-asleep.

"Oh, my goodness!" Ashley screeches. "Melanie, I need to come over!"

"Look, Ashley, I just woke up."

"Oh, did my phone call wake you up?"

She doesn't give me a chance to say yes.

"Anyway," she continues. "It's super crucial that I come over, like, right now!"

I sigh. "Can't it wait, say, four more hours?"

“Absolutely not!” Her response is so loud, it hurts my ears.

I decide to voice what I’ve been wondering this whole conversation. “Exactly what is it that’s so important?”

I can practically hear her roll her eyes. “It’s already August 25th! We start high school tomorrow! We have to be prepared!”

The tone of her voice implies that she had to bite her tongue to keep from saying “Duh!”

“What do we have to do to ‘be prepared’?” I ask her.

“You’ll see when I get there.”

Before I can object, she hangs up.

Well, that’s great!

She wakes me up when I’m still incredibly tired, and then she practically tells me she’s coming over right now. Instead of complaining and using up the little bit of time I have left before the doorbell rings, I’m going to get dressed and cleaned up.

When the doorbell rings, I open the door and Ashley bursts in. She’s the type of girl that just does whatever she wants without really thinking about how it will affect her or others. I love her, but the fact that she’s like that has become increasingly more annoying to me lately.

“Hey, how are you? You look cute!” she says in one breath.

She pushes past me and heads toward my room. Some people say she’s ADD, but she’s been tested. It turns out she just gets so excited about stuff that she has a one-track mind about it. It can get kind of out-of-hand sometimes. I get to my room shortly after her, but she’s already started tearing apart my closet.

“What are you doing?” I ask as she continues tossing my clothes onto the floor. “I’m trying to find something for you to wear on the first day of school.”

I grab the dress she's about to drop on the floor out of her hand.

"I already have something picked out."

I proudly hold up the dress in my hand. She frowns, then grabs it and throws it on the ground.

"Hey!" I grab her shoulder and turn her towards me. "You can't just barge into my house, uninvited, and start throwing all my clothes on the floor! Stop right now and clean this up, then we can talk about what to wear tomorrow!"

She looks at me for a few seconds then nods. "You're right. I'm sorry."

She wrenches free of my grip and starts cleaning up the mess she made. "I just get so excited about stuff like this."

"Really?" I mumble. "I hadn't noticed."

Another annoying thing about Ashley is that she's pretty materialistic. She wasn't always like this, though. It's fairly recent. As soon as she hangs up all my clothes, we both sit down on my bed.

"Are you ready for high school?" Ashley asks. "It's going to be a big change."

"I guess I'm ready. You're right though. High school is going to take a while to adjust to."

She sighs, and I can tell that she's calmed down a little bit.

"Just think," she says, "A fresh start, an opportunity to turn things around. No one has to know how we used to be." She avoids eye contact.

In middle school, Ashley and I weren't popular at all. We were in our own little group, and no one bothered to label us. In eighth grade, Ashley started to change. All of a sudden, she became fed up with not being noticed. She began to dress and act differently. Ever since, it's

been hard to stay her friend. She acts like just because I'm not changing with her, I'm not good enough for her anymore. She just won't give up on becoming popular.

She's turning into a different person. The smart, adventurous, and fun-loving Ashley that I became best friends with three years ago is now dull and materialistic. It's as if she changes who she is to fit what those around her want her to be.

I always admired how stubborn she was when it mattered, but now I don't like that her stubbornness is unnecessarily directed at me. However, she is how she is for a reason. She's been through a lot, and she took our middle school experience way harder than I did.

Her toughness is sometimes just a charade. On the inside, she can be falling apart, which is why I'm still her friend. Because I truly understand her and she needs someone who knows when she's hurting. Just like anyone else, she needs support. Lately, though, I've been starting to question if my decision to remain her friend is actually a good decision after all.

I take a deep breath and choose my words carefully. "I don't want to change, though, because being popular isn't important to me anymore."

She slowly looks up at me. "Do you want to be a nerd the rest of your life?"

I shrug. "There's nothing wrong with being smart."

I remember a time when she agreed with me on that, but like I said, things have changed.

Now, she just rolls her eyes. "Melanie, with the right clothes and a touch of make-up, we will fit right into the popular crowd."

I sigh. There is no way that she's going to back down, but I'm not going to argue with her right now.

"Ashley, I don't want to talk about this with you right now."

She stands up. "Will you ever want to talk about it? Will you ever want to face the fact

that you need to change?”

She pauses for a second, waiting for my response. I’m not going to answer, though, because I’m done having to deal with her treating me like this. If I don’t say anything, maybe she’ll just leave. Leave my room, leave my house, and leave me alone. Just as I suspected, moments later, she storms out.

I watch her wait outside to be picked up, but I don’t go out there and say anything to her. I need some space. I need to be away from her for a while so I can figure out how to deal with her. Right now, I’m too tired for all of this.

After she gets picked up, I walk back into my room and lay down on my bed. I grab my Bible and go straight to the topical index. However, I can’t find anything on “frustrating friends who insist on you becoming as shallow and materialistic as them.”

Bummer.

I bow my head to pray.

Dear God, please help me to have patience with Ashley as she changes. Help me to know what to do about all this because I really don’t want to lose her. She’s all I’ve got. In Your Name I Pray, Amen.

I sigh and put my Bible down. I ignore the fact that I’m all dressed and cleaned up and go back to sleep.

The next morning, I’m up early to get ready for school. I hop in the shower and then blow-dry and straighten my hair. I glance at the revealing outfit Ashley chose for me, and I wonder how an outfit like that ever ended up in my closet in the first place. I push it aside and grab the cute sundress I had picked out instead. I roll my eyes at the make-up she left for me and head to the kitchen for breakfast.

When I'm finished eating, I brush my teeth and slip on some flats.

I grab my backpack and yell at my older brother, "Let's go!"

It's time for high school, and I have to embrace it.

"Are you nervous?" my brother asks me over the sound of the radio.

I reach over and turn it down. "I don't know. It'll be a new experience."

My brother nods. "It's really not as bad as it seems. It's just that there will be a lot more people than you are used to from middle school. Just keep in mind that first impressions mean a lot."

To mask the awkwardness, he turns the radio back up. Maroon 5 blasts from the speakers. I relax while I still can.

I get to school just before first period starts. I head straight to class, ignoring all the new people around me. When I get to the classroom, there is a sign on the door instructing all students to pick a random seat to sit in. I decide to sit at the front of the room in the middle row. Sometimes I have trouble seeing the board, so I try to make things easier for myself.

I grab my glasses out of my new gold purse and put them on, just in case. Someone yanks them off my face. I wonder if I've found a new bully, but I spin around and just see Ashley.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"I keep telling you to get contacts!" she says. She gasps.

"What are you wearing?"

I smile at her. "A lacy beige sundress."

She just stares. "It's a cute dress, but it's not the kind of thing popular people wear."

"I already told you that I don't want to be popular."

She gives me a disgusted look. I glance at her outfit. She's wearing tight skinny jeans that

hug all her curves, and a low-cut designer t-shirt that does the same.

“What happened to you, Ashley?”

She doesn’t answer. She gives me one last long look and walks off. I guess she never did accept who she was in middle school. Not being able to let go of the past can be haunting.

When the bell rings, the class quiets down. Ashley chose to sit by a whole bunch of pretty girls in revealing outfits who she probably assumed are either popular or could help her become popular.

Our Biology teacher, Mr. Walsh, starts talking about the rules of the class. “I have two major rules. One, don’t talk while I am talking. Two, no texting in class.”

I notice that Ashley and the girls she’s sitting by have pulled out their phones and are trying to secretly text. I roll my eyes. I guess this is high school.

When first period is over, I scan the hallways for Ashley. We have all the same classes except for fifth period, so we promised each other that we’d walk to class together. I know that we got into a fight yesterday, but that doesn’t mean we have to stop being friends. I at least want to try to sort things out. I finally spot her walking with the same girls she sat with in first period.

“Ashley!” I call to her.

She doesn’t respond. Popularity really is important to her. I wonder how her obsession will affect our friendship. As the girls go their separate ways, I see that Ashley is now walking with a boy.

Wow! Maybe those girls can help her become popular, even with the guys.

After school, Ashley comes over to my house in an attempt to fix things between us. We talk things out, and then she stays for a little while longer so that we can talk about other things.

“He is amazing!” Ashley says when I ask her about the boy from school.

“But you barely know him.”

She rolls her eyes. “So what? I can already tell. Plus, I have a feeling I’m going to be getting to know him real well.”

I fall back onto my bed. How come I repel boys and she makes a guy friend on the first day of high school?

“Hey, what’s wrong, Mel?”

I decide not to tell her what’s bothering me. I don’t want to ruin her happiness. “Nothing is wrong. So, tell me more about this boy.”

“His name is Cole Livingston. He has lived in Indiana his whole life, but he moved three times before coming to Indianapolis. He is fourteen years old. He plays football and is really popular. Also, he is really nice, funny, and cute.” She replies quickly, in one breath.

Gosh, she makes him sound so perfect. How does she even know all that about him? It doesn’t matter. It seems like he and Ashley would be cute together, but where does that leave me? The entire first day of school went by without any guy even saying hi to me.

I think that’s just plain rude. It’s not like I had the courage to say hi to any guys, either. Even Cole didn’t so much as introduce himself, and I ate lunch with him and Ashley. I guess I shouldn’t be too offended by guys avoiding me. They haven’t had much time to get to know me and like me for who I am. I’ll give it some time.

It’s the second day of school. I’m bored out of my mind in fourth period, listening to the teacher talk about the same things she did yesterday. Geometry is pretty boring at first. I glance over and see Ashley talking with Cole. They sit right next to each other and talk a lot without getting caught. I sigh and put my head down on my desk. I say a silent prayer to God, asking him to help me with my self-esteem.

I need to truly believe that I don't need a boyfriend to complete me. Once I know that in my heart, things will be a lot better for me. It's hard, though, knowing how happy Ashley is with Cole. They're not even dating, but they are always in a good mood when they're together.

I can't help thinking that life would be so much better for me if I had a boyfriend. That's why I've been praying more lately. I need to get it in my head that God is enough. He is the One that completes me. I don't *need* a boyfriend now, but it'd be nice if I had one.

I listen to Ashley talk about Cole on the phone for a half hour after school. I don't hear most of what she says because I'm too busy pitying myself. Eventually, she says something that catches my attention.

"He and I both think that one of his friends has a crush on you."

This is news to me. I haven't noticed any guy even glance my way.

"Don't lie to me, Ashley. I'm not in the mood."

Ashley sighs. "Meet me at my house in half an hour."

"What? Why?"

There's no answer. She already hung up. I toss my phone onto my bed and flop down next to it. That was so random of her. I wonder what she's got planned.

I go find my brother. "Chris, will you drive me to Ashley's house?"

He looks at me for a second and grabs his keys off his dresser. "Sure, I'll pick you up at six."

I stop him before he goes out the door. "Wait, I don't have to be there until four. We don't have to leave for another ten minutes."

He smirks at me. "That's ten minutes for me to change my mind."

I would say something witty to that, but I don't feel like walking five miles to Ashley's

house. Instead, I agree to leave now. We get in the car and say nothing on the way there. Chris drops me off ten minutes early. I ring the doorbell and Ashley's brother, Alex, opens the door a minute later. I've always thought Alex was cute and nice, but so are a lot of guys I don't have a chance with. Besides, he's a grade older than me. I smile at him as he welcomes me into their house.

I haven't been to Ashley's house in a while. Usually she comes to mine. That's another reason I was surprised when she invited me over.

"She's upstairs with some guys," Alex says as he points to the staircase.

I smile at him. "Thanks, Alex!"

He smiles back and then walks off into the kitchen. I wonder if his parents are home. Their parents aren't especially strict, especially when it comes to inviting guys over. My mom doesn't really like me going over to Ashley's house because she never knows if there will be guys there or not.

I made sure to check with her before I came, though. She reluctantly agreed to let me go, but only because she knew my friendship with Ashley was practically in shambles and she wanted to give me a chance to fix it. I head up the stairs, not knowing what to expect. Alex said she was with some guys. How many and who are they?

My question is answered when I get into Ashley's room. There are two guys. I recognize one of them as Cole, but I don't know the other one. Ashley sees me and comes over to give me a hug.

"Glad you could make it on such short notice, Melanie."

I just smile.

"You remember Cole, and this is his friend Derick Hudson." I wave at both of the boys.

Cole just sits there and ignores me, but Derick says hi. I smile at him and then take Ashley's hand and lead her into the hallway.

"Isn't this great?" she asks. "I was able to get Cole's friend over here too!"

I sigh. "This wouldn't happen to be the friend that supposedly likes me, would it?"

Ashley just smiles at me.

"You could have told me! I look terrible!"

Ashley gives me the once-over and smiles. "You look great!"

I start freaking out. "Ashley, I'm not prepared to go in there and start flirting with some random guy!"

"It's not that hard! Just ask him about himself. Most guys love talking about themselves. If you're lucky, he might ask you about yourself, too."

I go back into Ashley's room and sit down next to Derick.

"Do you know why I'm here?" he asks me as soon as I sit down.

I shake my head. "Are you saying that you came without Ashley giving you a reason?"

He nods. "Well, kind of. She said Cole was coming, too, so I figured I'd come so I could hang out with him." He notices the look on my face. "What?"

"No offense, but are you seriously friends with him? He's so rude!"

Derick shifts uncomfortably. He leans in and lowers his voice so only I can hear him. "I don't know what's gotten into him, but he's usually nice. I've noticed lately that he's changed a lot. I miss the old Cole."

He looks sad, and I feel sorry for him.

"I know how it feels to have a friend that's changing from the person they were when you met them to a friend that looks extremely different now."

He perks up. “You do?”

I nod. “Yeah, Ashley has changed a lot lately, too.”

For a while after I say that, Derick and I talk about Cole and Ashley. We shift to talking about ourselves. It turns out that he’s a really nice guy. He has lived in Indianapolis all his life, and he turned fifteen earlier this month. He is popular like Cole, but he doesn’t play any sports. He’s also really funny and has made me laugh a few times so far.

We stop talking for a moment when Ashley and Cole come back in about twenty minutes later. I don’t know where they went, but I had just noticed they were gone about ten minutes ago. I take their return as my cue to wrap up my conversation with Derick. I stand up and face him.

“It was nice meeting you Derick.”

He smiles. “The pleasure is all mine, Melanie.”

I blush. “Well, I have to go now, but I guess I’ll see you at school.”

“Wait!” He reaches out and grabs my arm just before I leave the room. “Let me give you my number so we can keep in touch.”

I’m surprised and thrilled at the same time. I’m glad I made a good impression on him. We swap numbers and I say good-bye to Ashley and Cole. I call Chris to come pick me up.

Once I get back home, I call Ashley to talk to her about Derick.

“Isn’t he cute?” she asks.

Of course he is! He has shaggy brown hair and silver eyes. He’s pretty tall and has the most amazing smile!

I don’t tell Ashley all of this, though. Instead, I keep it simple.

“Yeah, a little.”

She laughs. “Was I right? Did he ask you about yourself?”

“Yes, but I just gave him the basics.”

“Well, that must’ve been enough, because he gave you his number!”

“Yeah, call me pessimistic, but there’s no way I have a chance with him. He doesn’t like me like that.”

She sighs. “That’s just because he doesn’t know you that well yet. You guys just met. I must confess that when I said he liked you, I was lying. I just wanted you to get to know each other so that maybe he would end up liking you. I can tell that you’ve been lonely lately, so I wanted to help.”

That’s sweet of her. It’s nice to know she still cares even though we haven’t been as close lately.

“Well, thanks for trying, but it’s no use. I’m not even allowed to date.”

I leave out the part about not really being emotionally ready, either.

“Don’t let that hold you back, Melanie. You’re a smart girl. You can make this work if you really want to.”

CHAPTER TWO

A WHOLE NEW BALL GAME

The next day at school, Derick is waiting for me at my locker. First period just ended and I always go to my locker afterwards. I wonder if he knew that. He smiles at me and watches me as I open my locker.

“Hey Derick,” I say politely.

“Hey!” he replies.

“So,” I say, as I get my books for the rest of the day out of my locker.

“Um, I wanted to ask you something,” he says.

“Go ahead.”

“I was wondering if you wanted to go bowling with Cole, Ashley, and I on Friday night.”

Why would I pass up an opportunity to spend time with a guy as sweet as Derick?

“I’ll have to ask my mom, but I’ll text you tonight and let you know.”

He smiles. “Okay, great.”

I start to walk away, and he follows me. “Why are you following me?”

He chuckles. “I’m not doing it on purpose, we just happen to be going the same way.”

Curiosity gets the best of me.

“Let me see your schedule.”

He digs it out of his backpack and hands it to me. It turns out that we have every class together except for first hour!

“Wow! I didn’t know we had so many classes together.”

He smiles. “While you try to figure out whether or not that’s a good thing, would you like me to help you carry some of your things?”

I hand him one of my binders and we keep walking to class, making small talk along the way. Honestly, I love how casually flirty he is. It's really cute. I don't want to like him too much just yet. I need to look before I fall.

After I eat lunch with Derick, Ashley, and Cole, I cruise through the rest of my classes on autopilot. About thirty minutes after I get home, I start on my homework. A couple of hours later, my cell phone rings. The caller I.D. says it's Derick. I didn't think he'd ever actually call me.

"Hey," I say casually when I answer.

I wonder what he wants.

"Hey," he says. "Did you finish your French homework?"

Ah, that's what.

I trust that he's not going to just use me for answers, and we go over it together for a half hour. My mom comes into my room and tells me that dinner is ready. I say good-bye to Derick and follow her into the kitchen.

"Where is everybody?" I ask her.

She sighs. "Your brother and your dad are at work. It's just you and me tonight."

Oh, this could be awkward.

We both sit down in our usual spots at the table. Since we are sitting next to each other, the other side of the table is completely empty.

Yeah, it's awkward.

My mom breaks the silence. "Would you like to pray, Melanie?"

Usually my dad prays, but he's not here, so I guess I will this time.

"Sure, I'll pray."

We join hands, but we can't form a circle. It feels weird. Just because the tradition of praying before dinner isn't complete without all four of us, we're still going to pray.

"Dear Lord, thank you for this day and thank you for this food. Please bless it to nourish our bodies. Amen."

It's ironic that I asked God to help this food nourish us when it's pretty much all carbs. My mom made spaghetti and meatballs and set out some butter to go with the French bread.

As I fill my plate, she asks me a question.

"Who were you on the phone with?"

I shrug casually. "He's just a guy from school."

"How come I haven't heard about this guy before?"

"Well, I've only known him for a few days."

She nods. "What's his name?"

Dang! She asks a lot of questions!

"His name is Derick Hudson."

With that, the subject is dropped. For the rest of dinner, we talk about school, church, work, and life. We finish eating around 6:00. Afterwards, I go to my room to relax. Right after I get settled with my book on my bed, my mom calls to me from the kitchen.

"Mel, we need to leave for church in a few minutes."

I almost forgot that it's Wednesday night. I need to get my church stuff together. I grab my Bible out from underneath my bed and zip it into my Bible case along with my journal and pen.

When I come out of my room, I go to the garage to see if my mom is already in the car.

Before I can check, I hear her yell from her bedroom, "Get in the car, I'll be there in a

second!”

I do as she says and climb into the passenger side. About two minutes later, she gets in the car, too. As we drive to church, I think about Derick and whether or not he’s a Christian. Surely he must be, since he seems like such a nice guy.

Truth be told, I can’t say for sure either way. He hasn’t told me about his religious views. Come to think of it, I never really mentioned mine either. That’s strange because my relationship with God is what defines me. It’s usually one of the first things I tell people about myself.

Anyways, I’ll ask him after we become better friends. If I ask him now, when he undoubtedly still has some walls up, then I might not get a straight, honest answer. I have to wait until he becomes comfortable with me and our friendship because I don’t just want a casual answer that may or may not be true.

Even now I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ve only known him for two days. Call me crazy, but I have a feeling that someday he and I will be good friends. I finish collecting my thoughts as we pull into the church parking lot right before 6:30.

My mom and I go our separate ways once we get into the church, since the youth center and the worship center are at opposite ends of the building. As I walk down the long hallway to the youth center, my phone buzzes.

It’s a text from my friend, Bella. She’s one of my friends from youth group.

‘Are you coming tonight?’

I smile. ‘About to walk through the doors.’

The youth center is packed when I walk in. The feeling of being overwhelmed is one that I know all too well in this place. There are always so many people, and for a moment every time I come in I feel like I can’t breathe. I find Bella and she’s a familiar face in a sea of strangers.

I've been going to this church for a while, and even though I know the names of most of the people, I don't actually know them.

I walk over to Bella and she gives me a hug. I follow her to her seat and set my Bible case down on the seat next to hers.

"How has your week been so far?" she asks me.

"Pretty good, I guess. I made a new friend."

She smiles. "So soon? That's great! You should bring your friend to church sometime."

Maybe I will.

Before I have a chance to ask her how she's been, the microphone makes a high-pitched noise, getting everyone's attention. Our youth pastor calls us all up to the front to worship. After singing a few praise songs, we all take our seats for the lesson.

"Tonight we are going to look at Luke 24:13-27," Pastor David says.

I hear pages turning as people open their Bibles to Luke 24. The first slide of the PowerPoint on the screen above Pastor David's head reads, 'The Bible as a Novel-Luke 24:13-27'.

That seems interesting. I'm curious to see how this will unfold.

"Like every book, the Bible has a beginning, middle, end, problem, solution, conflict, climax, and so on," he says as I copy down the contents of the next slide into my journal.

"The Bible is a romance and break-up story. In Genesis 1:8-19, God and humanity 'break up.' Also, Genesis is where the plot is established."

Hmm, this is a different but intriguing way of looking at the Bible.

"The Bible also has a plot twist. The plot twist happens in Matthew." He poses a question. "What or who is the plot twist?"

In unison, everyone says, “Jesus!”

“Exactly! The plot twist answers all the questions that had been asked. It helps make the story clearer.”

That makes sense. Jesus did exactly that.

“It was prophesized that the one to crush ‘The Serpent’ would be a human prophet descended from Abraham and David. In John 1:14, it is written that Jesus is human. Also, Deuteronomy 18:15 is where Moses writes that a prophet like himself will be sent by God. Jesus was the only one sent directly by God, so Jesus was a prophet. Matthew 1:1-17 is a record of the genealogy of Jesus and proves that Jesus is descended from Abraham and David. Romans 16:20 says that God will crush Satan. Since Jesus and God are one, Jesus will crush Satan.

“After looking at these scriptures, we see that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that prophecy and many others. In my opinion, that particular prophecy is the basis of the Bible. It’s what the story is built around.

“However, know that it isn’t just a story. Hebrews 4:12 says, ‘For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart.’ Also, that prophecy foreshadows the New Covenant that is explained in Isaiah 9:6-7, Jeremiah 31:31-33, and Ezekiel 36:24-27.”

He gives us a few minutes to read those passages on our own. In that time, I read them and write down the other notes from the screen.

Pastor David continues, “Some of the plot lines are a restored people and the removal of the curse. In Isaiah 11:6-10, God describes a peace that will follow once the curse is removed and the people are restored.”

He has a lot of notes, so I have to write fast. That's good because it keeps me engaged.

"In the end, Jesus is the curse breaker, which is shown in Galatians 3:13-14. It says that he broke the curse by dying on the cross. If you read Luke 23:44-46, that is when the curse is truly broken. That is the end of the beginning, as there is still much to come."

After he says that, we close with a prayer.

That was a fascinating sermon. I've never looked at the Bible that way, so this gives me a new perspective.

When we get home, I go straight to my room and put in a Matthew West CD. I lie down on my bed and listen to a few songs before I start to doze off. I hear a knock on my door that wakes me up.

My mom walks in and sits down next to me on my bed. "You went to bed without turning off your light or your music or saying goodnight."

"Sorry," I mumble. "I wasn't expecting to fall asleep."

My mom smiles. "That's usually what happens when you lay down late at night," she says playfully.

I roll my eyes. Realizing something, I sit up. "Hey, mom, Derick wants to know if I can go bowling with him and some friends on Friday night."

She thinks for a second. "I don't know, honey. I don't know him, and you barely do. Who would be chaperoning?"

I shrug. "I'm not sure if there will be any adults with us, but I know that Ashley will be there."

"Hmm." She pauses for a moment. "Okay, you can go..."

"Great! Thank you so much!"

I reach out to give her a hug, but she stops me. “I wasn’t finished talking.”

“Oh, sorry.” I pull back.

“You can go, but only if there’s an adult chaperone.”

Instead of arguing, I grab my phone off of my night stand and text Derick.

‘I can only come Friday night if there’s an adult chaperone.’

I show my mom the text and, satisfied, she kisses me goodnight then leaves. Right as I’m about to turn my phone off for the night, Derick texts me back.

‘Okay, well, my mom is coming with us.’

I smile. ‘Great! So what time should I be there?’

He texts back a minute later. ‘We’ll pick you up around 7:00.’

I reply, ‘Okay, can’t wait! ☺’

I turn my phone off. I get up to turn off my music and my light. Then I change into my pajamas and officially go to bed.

I wake up early Thursday morning feeling sick. I stumble, still half-asleep, into the bathroom. I find the thermometer under the sink and put it in my mouth to check my temperature. After about a minute, it beeps.

I pull it out of my mouth and see that it reads.

101.7! That’s terrible! How did I even get sick? I was fine last night!

I go into my mom’s room to let her know that I’m sick. Even though she’s fast asleep, I know I have to wake her up. She jerks awake once I tap her shoulder a few times.

“What...what do you need?” she asks.

“I have a fever.”

“What?” She sits up. “Are you sure?” She feels my forehead.

I nod. "I checked it." I hand her the thermometer that still has my temperature on the little screen.

Concerned, she gets out of bed and walks into her bathroom. I wait outside the door for her to come out. A few seconds later, she reappears holding a bottle of acetaminophen.

"Take two, and we'll see how you feel in a few hours. For now, go back to bed and try to get some sleep. You can't go to school today, and you need to rest if you want to get better sooner."

Since my mom is a nurse, I listen to her.

I hope I don't have to miss out on bowling with Ashley, Derick, and Cole tomorrow night.

Around 1pm, my fever breaks. I take a quick shower and settle onto the couch in front of the TV with a bowl of hot soup. My mom walks into the living room and sees me all dressed and cleaned up.

"Mel, are you feeling better?"

I smile. "Yeah, my fever broke a little while ago."

She kisses me on the forehead and walks into the kitchen.

"You know, you can't go to school tomorrow, either. You have to wait twenty-four hours after your fever is gone before you can go back to school."

"What? But I feel fine!"

She shakes her head. "Sorry, honey, those are the rules."

I sink into the couch some more and continue to watch TV. "Well, will I be able to go bowling tomorrow night?"

She just looks at me. "Didn't I tell you that you couldn't go without an adult chaperone?"

I nod. "Derick texted me last night saying that his mom was going to come with."

My mom hesitates for a moment. “Well, I don’t know his mom either.”

I jolt up. “Aw, come on, mom! Please just let me go! I’m sure his mom is just fine!”

She sighs. “Fine, you can go, but I’m coming with you.”

I decide not to argue. It’s better than not being able to go at all.

Since I can’t go to school Friday, I sleep in until 11am. I go into the kitchen and get myself some lunch. My mom is at work, so I’m home alone. I watch TV, read a book, and play on the computer until my brother gets home from school.

Shortly after that, I get a call from Derick.

“Hello,” I say.

“Hey, are you okay? You weren’t at school yesterday or today! Are you able to go bowling with us tonight?” He sounds worried.

“Relax! I was sick, but I’m fine now. Yes, I’m coming tonight, but my mom is coming with me. She’ll be home around 6:30, so we’ll meet you there at seven.”

“Are you sure you don’t want us to pick you guys up? Our car is big enough for all six of us.”

I think about this for a second. “Okay, you can pick us up at seven. I’ll see you then!”

After we say goodbye, I shoot a quick text to my mom, updating her on the change of plans. I relax for a few hours longer, and then Chris calls me in for dinner. Usually, my dad eats with us, but he had to work late tonight.

“I made chicken patties and ravioli,” Chris said. “There are also some peas in a container on the kitchen counter.”

We fill up our plates and then sit down on the couch. Since no one else is home, we choose not to sit at the dining room table. Instead we just watch TV while we eat.

It's about 6:30 when I finish eating and both my parents get home. My mom and I have to immediately start getting ready to leave in a half hour. I'm pretty much ready to go already, but I need to polish a few minor details.

Right around seven, our doorbell rings. I open the door and see Derick standing there. His face glows in the light of the setting sun. His hands are in his pockets and I feel like I'm melting under his gaze. I try my best to keep myself composed.

"Hey!" I greet him casually.

"Hey. Are you ready to go?"

He takes a step closer and my heart skips.

Lord, please help me to not go crazy over Derick! Like my mom said, I barely know him!

"Yeah! Just let me go get my mom."

Before I can even turn around, my mom appears next to me.

"Is this Derick?" she asks.

I just nod. Derick and I stand there awkwardly as my mom briefly looks him over.

Finally, she smiles at him and holds out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Melanie's mom. Please call me Mrs. White."

Derick shakes her hand. "Mrs. White, it's nice to meet you. Shall we go now?"

He motions towards his mom's car in our driveway. We wait as my mom locks the door behind her, and then follow him to the car.