

Stories of hope & inspiration in uncertain times.

Young Women with Gumption

Teen Romance in the Heartland of America

Stories of Diversity & Romance for Young Adults



INSPIRATIONAL TEEN ROMANCE

Currently Seeking Representation

cathleenellis.com

Teens fall in love and discover strength from family and friends. They uncover hidden talents and find initiative (gumption) to improve their lives. With a desire to make a difference in the lives of others, a 'what now' event initiates the need to seek help from loved ones. Topics of suicide, illnesses, death, and abandonment, are wrapped in mysteries to solve. The characters discover that sorrow can be a source of growth.



Cathleen Ellis has been writing young adult romance since 2013. She is currently seeking an agent to represent all of her titles. Each title is approximately 40,000 words. Her 26th title (*Ornament*) is now ready for publication. Cathleen's stories stem from a lifetime of working with youth. A long career in education at all levels has served as the catalyst for her reality-based fiction set in the American heartland.

Teen Romance in the American Heartland

Inspirational Teen Romance

Cathleen Ellis

Author of 25 books

Dear Agent,

Gumption is defined as “shrewd or spirited initiative and resourcefulness.” Since 2013, Cathleen Ellis has been writing coming-of-age stories for high school readers. *Gumption* is the consistent theme. Young women must overcome hardships and in doing so develop character and find a sense of identity. They discover love and deeper relationships.

As conflicts arise, young women are faced with a ‘what now?’ decision that changes the course of their lives. *Gumption* is what empowers them to face life-altering decisions with grace. The characters show *gumption* to resolve conflicts and seek help from loved ones displayed by acts of loving-kindness.

Topics of suicide, illnesses, death, and abandonment, are wrapped in mysteries to solve. The characters discover that sorrow can be a source of growth. The characters are diverse: Caucasian, Black, Hispanic, Eskimo, Canadian Indian, Iran-sunni Muslim, Asian - a more accurate reflection of America today. Each title takes place ‘on location’ in these ‘heartland’ states: Montana, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, and Georgia.

To date, twenty-five titles have been published and she is currently seeking a publisher for her 26th (titled *Ornament*). Cathleen has made a sizeable investment in the publication of her work, which will benefit the publisher she signs with. The publisher will benefit from a backlist of 25 additional titles, ready for rapid launch.

Her books are geared towards the audiences of Hallmark & Lifetime television, which we can imagine would be likely targets for eventual adaption to screen.

Her stories of wholesome romance mirror the values of the American heartland and appeal to the growing ‘normcore’ audience uncovered by Colleen Hoover.

The average word count of each title is 40,000 words.

If you would like to request a review copy, please let me know or visit her website at www.cathleenellis.com to learn more.

Cathleen can also be reached at author@cathleenellis.com.

Thank you for your consideration.

Katrina Marsh
Talent Agent, Wise Media Group
Author Representative

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Young People in Love in the Heartland of America

YOUNG PEOPLE IN LOVE IN THE HEARTLAND OF AMERICA



A Scarf of Promise



Teen marries her sweetheart. He dies in an on-the-job accident. She raises their baby, studies to be a nurse and knits a scarf. Coming upon an accident, she helps victims and meets a man who is also assisting. They fall in love and marry, joining two families together on his ranch. Besides nursing she serves as the coroner in her county. The scarf she knit is sent to a military person based in Afghanistan. After her husband's brother dies in the conflict, the scarf returns home. Her husband comes to realize that the scarf his brother wore was knit by her. (Colorado)

Castle in the Air & Making Our Way (Sequel)



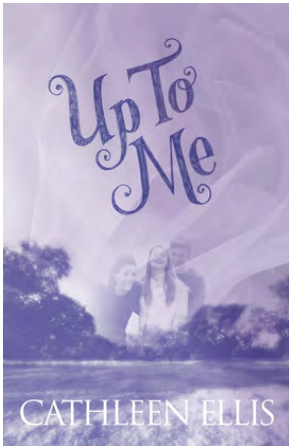
Two young teens who are friends dream of having boyfriends. They find their special guys. Pregnancy takes one teen to another location where she studies to be an X-Ray technician and becomes a single parent. The other teen attends college to study agriculture. In the sequel, the friends, now adults, renew their friendship. One friend meets a love from the past. The other friend loses her police officer husband in a domestic incident. Each woman finds her prince. (Kansas)

Kara's Love

College student's parents die together in an accident. The debt on the family ranch requires her to sell it. The teen quits school, with only her student teaching semester left. She's broke and becomes a nanny to four children whose mom and baby died in childbirth. Their dad is a medical doctor with a resolved alcohol condition. She loves the children and their dad and they love her. After a time she leaves the family, completing her student teaching and begins teaching. The doctor pursues his dream of a medical position at a university working with the athletes. He searches and finds that position. He and his former nanny love each other and marry. She continues working with young people as well as becoming a mother. Her detective work helps reveal the identity of her biological father. (Colorado)



Up to Me



A teen's single mom, a policeman, dies in a shootout. The teen's two friends (one Black) love her, offer her support, and help her go forward. Her aunt moves in, disrupting the teen, forcing her to accept that she is too young to live by herself. Emancipation offers her the chance to complete her education on her own. Her Black friend and family offer her a home with them when she returns from college breaks to become a doctor. (Georgia)

The Jenny/Ann Trilogy



Christmas Bright

A 19-year-old very young college student graduates and teaches. She meets a widower with a young daughter. They marry and have a son. The husband dies in a suspicious skiing accident. The single mother meets a military officer and falls in love. They marry and move to Hawaii. They have sons. Years pass. The mom's stepdaughter prepares for a teaching career but disappears. Her family never gives up hope in finding their loved one. (Colorado)

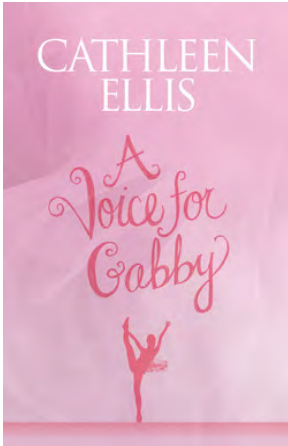
Baskets on Christmas Lane

The daughter from "Christmas Bright" loses her family, friends, and her old life because as a college student she witnesses a murder. She identifies and knows the killer and his brother. Jenny, now Ann, is immediately placed in the Federal Witness Protection Program with a new identity and replacement parents. She finishes school and becomes a music and choral teacher working with Black students. She continues to grieve over her losses, but a neighbor (Black) helps her to cope. She meets a young lawyer. They fall in love and marry. She can never reveal to anyone who she really is. (Georgia)

Together Now

14-year-old and her four friends (Black, Hispanic) love music and drama and write a play. They sing and dance in their play performance. Community theater offers them a chance to expand their abilities. One friend moves away. The four remaining become like couples, with alcohol and sexual temptation carrying them along. Years pass as the students attend college. Two of the teens lose parents. In going through her mom's (Ann's) possessions after her death, the teen discovers through a secret diary that her mom spent the past decades in the Federal Witness Protection Program. The daughter faces the dilemma of how she will handle that information because her dad is still alive. (Georgia)

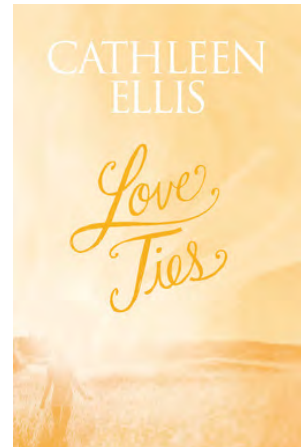
A Voice for Gabby



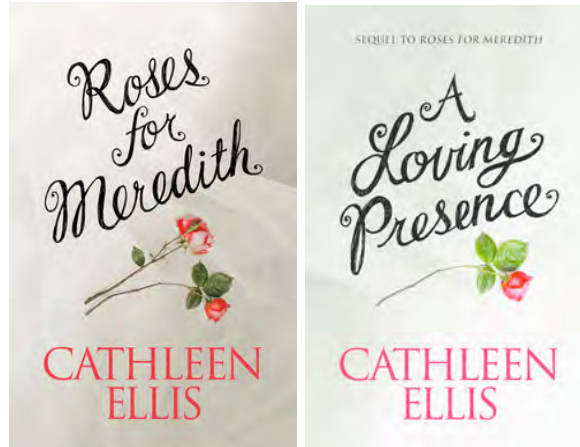
15-year-old suffers a brain injury in a van accident that kills the rest of her spirit team members. She cannot speak and has no memory. Through rehab she relearns how to read and write and must review everything through eighth grade. Her professor's dad assists her. A fellow teen gains her friendship and becomes supportive of her as she regains her speech slowly. She retakes ninth grade and begins to catch up with her classmates. A new spirit team forms and she becomes a member. When her guy friend suffers an injury, she helps him with his rehab. She and her guy friend care very much for each other. During a sports assembly, she dances with her spirit team. At that moment she realizes what a miracle of life she is. (Georgia)

Love Ties

Over a hundred years love intertwines four young women. Caring for their land and loving their men thread through their hopes the teens have for their families and their futures. A young couple meet, fall in love, and join their land parcels together on the northeastern plains. The woman imparts her love of this thriving land to her granddaughter. The granddaughter settles on land in another county after she marries. They adopt a child who carries this love of the land and family on. That child locates her biological parents, works in the construction field and falls in love while building a school. Four women care deeply for the land they live, work and build on. And they love their husbands. (Colorado)



Roses for Meredith & A Loving Presence (Sequel)



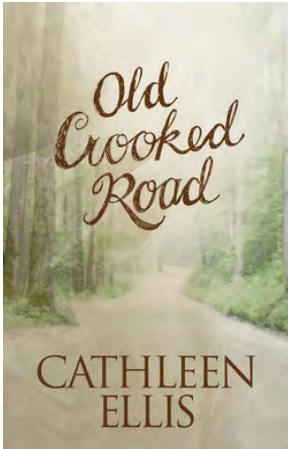
Roses for Meredith

16-year-old college freshman, an Air Force ROTC cadet, has two guys who love her. When her mom moves out of the family home, her dad asks her to return to the farm to help. She quits school, planning to return soon. She runs the home, caring for her dad and a Down Syndrome brother. She helps out at a flower shop. The man who loves her from the past reappears. He commits suicide, unable to reconcile his love for her after he marries someone else. The man's brother comes into her life while she still is at home. A cadet (Hispanic) from school spends time with her after she returns to college. The two men now in her life meet at a Thanksgiving meal. The cadet realizes he's not the only one who loves her. He dies in a crash of the plane he pilots. The teen's anguish continues until the other man comes to comfort her. She begins to have hope for her career in chemistry with the Air Force. (Iowa)

A Loving Presence

In *A Loving Presence*, the sequel to *Roses for Meredith*, the career Air Force officer and the man who comforted her (in the previous novel) meet each other after twenty years. She and the man communicated only by Christmas cards over those years. She returns to the community where she grew up to work with students in high school chemistry. The man who communicated with her farm's corn and is a state representative for his district. In this adult love story, they fall in love and join their lives together. An error in judgment causes the woman to almost abort their baby. The couple reconciles. They move on and she helps him advance as a representative to the U.S. House of Representatives. (Iowa)

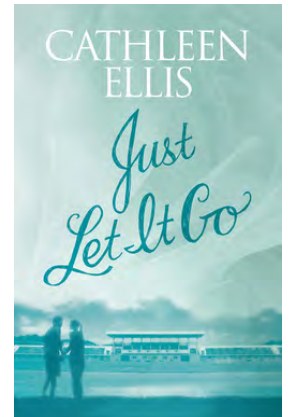
Old Crooked Road



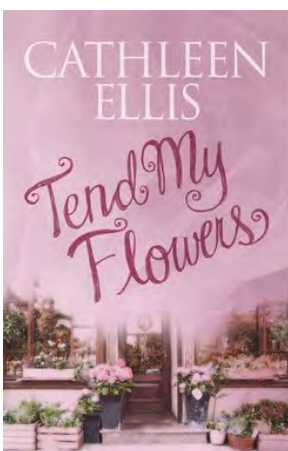
16-year-old attends school and helps at home after her mother walks out. She and her dad play guitar and sing. She works as a nurse's aide at the local hospital. Her desire is to be in the medical field. She and another teen date. She gets pregnant, they marry and she loses the baby. Now divorced she pursues her nursing career, including receiving her Nurse Practitioner license. In California, she works for a non-profit clinic and sees the progression of AIDS in younger men. An opportunity to take over a clinic brings her to Georgia. There she saves lives, including one man's with a life-threatening leg injury. When he recovers, they date, fall in love and marry. She keeps her dream alive, to care for the sick. (Georgia)

Just Let It Go

14-year-old Hispanic sophomore copes with her new school and new city. Her grandma becomes her legal guardian after her mom goes to prison on drug charges. The teen is the equipment manager for the school's football team. A boy who notices her at mass introduces himself to her and her grandma. They become good friends who share a love of football and aeronautics. One morning as she and her grandma walk away from their church they get shot, and survive. She develops friendships with two other teens (one Sunni Muslim from Iran) as they run cross-country together. The teen dates one teen's brother (Sunni Muslim from Iran). She goes to Space Camp, her dream of aeronautics coming closer. She and her now very good friend from earlier decide on schools they want to attend. He helps her see how far she's come since she came to live in Georgia.



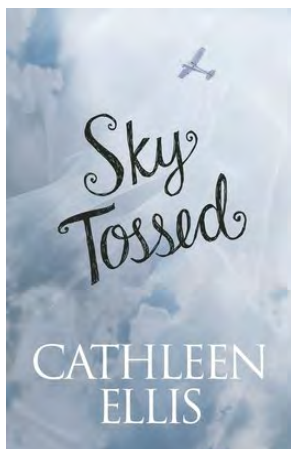
Tend My Flowers



15-year-old leaves high school to work in her mom's flower shop. Her mom dies in a car accident, and the family consents to donate her organs. She takes over the flower shop with her uncle and an assistant's (Hispanic) help. Her uncle is a wounded warrior still in rehab. While out on a flower delivery, she witnesses an accident. She again sees an EMT she first met when he came to her shop to order Christmas flowers for his mom. She attends classes at night and gets her GED, and preps for taking the SAT and ACT. She dates the EMT. She sells the flower shop and attends college to pursue her nursing degree. She learns that a student she dates received her mother's kidney. Through those years her relationship with the EMT grows. They want to marry, once she's earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing. He is now a paramedic. A Flight for Life with him on board crashes. Their destinies

change. (Iowa)

Sky Tossed



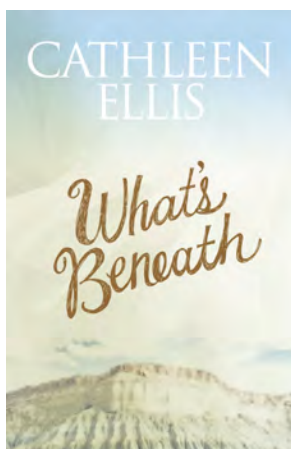
15-year-old copes with the death of her mom. She works hard at her studies. She takes a community college welding class and has a job for the summer. Another teen becomes her friend. He encourages her to pursue her dream of college and a nursing career. He goes away to college and commits suicide. She moves on with her life, getting a military scholarship to help her with her finances. She wants military officership as well as becoming a nurse. Two different men love her. One man she loves decides to be a Peace Corp volunteer. The other man is assigned to pilot training. She reports soon to her nursing assignment at an Air Force Base after her graduation and commissioning. She goes home to a surprise, a note and decisions to be made. (Iowa)

Humble Task

16-year-old leaves her toxic family situation. Her boyfriend and grandpa encourage her to pursue her dream of being a nurse. She becomes a nanny to a family in Montana. The professor's parents want her to succeed. She gets her GED, attends college, and studies nursing. After graduation, she works as a nurse in a community hospital where she meets a veterinarian who's been kicked by a horse. They have a loving, conflicted relationship. They share a goal of health care for people and animals. (Montana)



What's Beneath



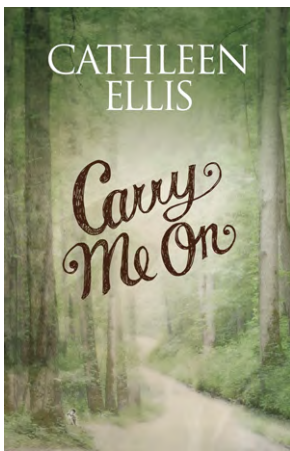
On nearby ranches a young man loves the 14-year-old girl next door. She dreams of becoming a geologist. For a time disappointment and evil lurk around her and the land on which she and her family live. Two other young men help give her the courage to find her way forward. She graduates and begins her college dream. (Colorado)

Shadow to Sunshine

After her mom dies, a teen lives with her veterinarian grandma while her green-beret dad deploys. She accepts her new high school, helps in her grandma's animal clinic, and takes dance classes with friends (one Black). She meets the brother of one of the girls. One of her dancer friends has recurring leukemia and dies. The brother helps the teen resolve an old mystery involving an athletic banner. The girl is interested in microbiology and studies at the University of Wisconsin. When she graduates she gets swept up in the pursuit of finding a cure for AIDS. And she finds love. (Georgia)



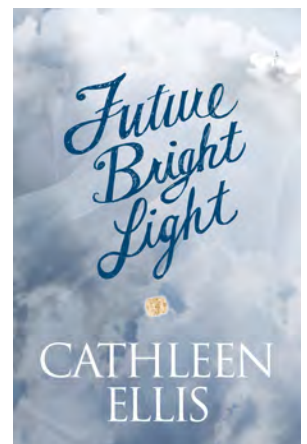
Carry Me On



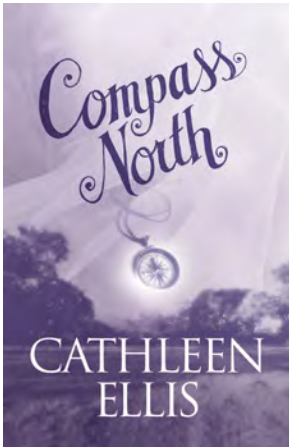
A teen transforms her attitude, work ethic and appearance with the help of her new friend (Black). She gains strength by working on a hiking trail and gains new friendships. Her friend moves away, is raped, becomes pregnant, and gives the baby up for adoption. The first teen loves her friend who's gone and honors her by studying hard in school and helping out at a cafe after her mom is injured on the job. She spends time with a boy she met working the hiking trail. She gains confidence as he goes away to school. In her senior year, a fellow teammate on the school's cross-country team dies and three others are injured in a car accident. Her strong friendships support her as she goes away to college. She finds love. (Georgia)

Future Bright Light

A teen (half Eskimo/Inuit) discovers a special pin in her deceased dad's jewelry box. Through revelations regarding the pin, she discovers a new family member. She fulfills herself through her music, dance, and theater. Her old pal and a talented boy share her musical delight. She loves them both. Diligent studying ensures her entrance into the university she desires. As a new music teacher, she prepares instruments and music to bring back band, orchestra, chorus, and a cappella to a school system that lost the programs due to a lack of finances a few years ago. She makes a decision about the man she loves. (Georgia)



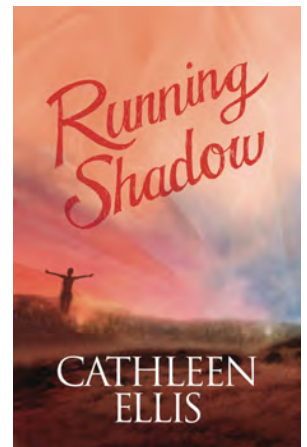
Compass North



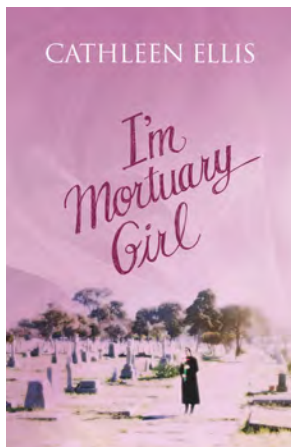
A teen witnesses a fatal accident. The victim is her boyfriend, just days after his return from an IRA conflict in Northern Ireland. “I must save those I can; I must save those I can”, her mind repeats over and over. Those words remain with her, continuing to propel this teen into the future. She fulfills her desire to become a nurse. She moves to Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic and works for two years in a hospital there. Returning home she rediscovers the love she had in the past for a veterinarian. The vet and the nurse marry, joining their future hopes of aiding ill folks and sick animals. (Iowa)

Running Shadow

A teen (half Siksika Indian-Canada) suffers the loss of her parents in a plane accident. With encouragement from her Black friend and mother, and her aunt she accepts the challenges of her new home and school. A young man spends time with her through high school and college. She donates a kidney to her ill aunt. After her internship and final college semester, she accepts an engineering position in Canada. While at home she attends a dance and feels a touch on her shoulder. (Georgia)



I'm Mortuary Girl



A teen speaks out, “Gran tells me to never back down from who I am and what I want to do. I’ve pretty much made up my mind. I want to go to mortuary school. I want to become a mortician.” Her dad shouts back, “That’s the most morbid, unbelievably cracked brain idea I’ve ever heard of.” The teen pursues her dream of being with the man she loves and fulfills her desire to become a mortician. (Iowa)

Back To Now



While unconscious from a blow to her head in 2006 a 16-year-old's mind travels back to 1946. She takes over the body of a 19-year-old who suffers from amnesia. The teen copes with the older girl's life, caring for a child, husband, and another family. The younger teen shares with her mom about who she is in her mind. The family band together to understand what's happened to the older teen and pray that she will recover her memory. The younger teen wakes after 56 hours. She has a vivid memory of the older teen in 1946. She shares that memory with her friends (Hispanic and Vietnamese) and family. Determination propels her to search for the older teen. Every sense tells her the older teen still lives. She finds the older teen (now in her late 70's). They meet and become friends. Wonder awaits the younger teen on her first day at her university. (Iowa)

Ornament

Haylee sails with her friends and grandpa. She loves two sail mates (Hispanic). She experiences extreme danger on a sailing with her friend who has cancer. She completes Plebe Summer, accomplishing her admission to the U.S. Naval Academy to become a Seabee. (Georgia)



Reader Reviews

“The action and conversations are fast-paced. Realistic to life. Shows how characters deal with all kinds of relationships and challenges. Nice to be able to read what happened to characters in the previous book.”

“Nice to read a book where a person shows faith in the Lord and uses it to guide their lives. Good wholesome reading.”

Market Analysis

Target Audience

Ages 15 & Up, 8th Grade and Up

Genres

Young Adult Romance, [New Adult](#), Time Travel, Coming of Age, [Normcore](#) (Colleen Hoover)

Comparable Authors

John Green

Maureen Johnson

Kasie West

Colleen Hoover

Competitive Titles

The Fault in our Stars - John Green

Hazel Grace Lancaster, a 16-year-old with thyroid cancer that has spread to her lungs, attends a cancer patient support group at her mother's behest. At one meeting, Hazel meets a 17-year-old boy currently in remission named Augustus Waters, whose osteosarcoma caused him to lose his right leg. Augustus is at the meeting to support Isaac, his friend who has eye cancer. Hazel and Augustus strike a bond immediately and agree to read each other's favorite novels. Augustus gives Hazel *The Price of Dawn*, and Hazel recommends *An Imperial Affliction*, a novel about a cancer-stricken girl named Anna that parallels Hazel's own experience. After Augustus finishes reading her book, he is frustrated upon learning that the novel ends abruptly without a conclusion, as if Anna had died suddenly. Hazel explains the novel's author, Peter van Houten, retreated to Amsterdam following the novel's publication and has not been heard from since.

Hazel learns that Augustus had written an obituary for her, and reads it after Lidewij discovers it amidst Van Houten's letters. It states that getting hurt in this world is unavoidable, but we do get to choose whom we allow to hurt us, and that he is happy with his choice, and hopes she likes hers too. The book closes with Hazel stating that she is happy with her choice.

Love, Life, and the List by Kasie West

What do you do when you've fallen for your best friend? Funny and romantic, this effervescent story about family, friendship, and finding yourself is perfect for fans of Sarah Dessen and Jenny Han.

Seventeen-year-old Abby Turner's summer isn't going the way she'd planned. She has a not-so-secret but definitely unrequited crush on her best friend, Cooper. She hasn't been able to

manage her mother's growing issues with anxiety. And now she's been rejected from an art show because her work "has no heart." So when she gets another opportunity to show her paintings, Abby isn't going to take any chances.

Which is where the list comes in.

On the Fence by Kasie West

She's a tomboy. He's the boy next door.

With three older brothers, Charlotte Reynolds, aka Charlie, has always been more comfortable calling the shots on a basketball court than flirting with the opposite sex. So when her police officer dad demands she get a summer job to pay for the latest in a long line of speeding tickets, she's more than a little surprised to find herself working at a chichi boutique and going out with a boy who has never seen her tear it up in a pickup game. Charlie seeks late-night refuge in her backyard, talking out her problems with her neighbor and honorary fourth brother, Braden, sitting back-to-back against the fence that separates them. Braden may know her better than anyone. But there's a secret Charlie's keeping that even he hasn't figured out—she's fallen for him. Hard. She knows what it means to go for the win, but if spilling her secret means losing him for good, the stakes just got too high.

By Your Side by Kasie West

What do you do when you fall for the person you least expect?

When Autumn Collins finds herself accidentally locked in the library for an entire weekend, she doesn't think things could get any worse. But that's before she realizes that Dax Miller is locked in with her. Autumn doesn't know much about Dax except that he's trouble. Between the rumors about the fight he was in (and that brief stint in juvie that followed it) and his reputation as a loner, he's not exactly the ideal person to be stuck with. Still, she just keeps reminding herself that it is only a matter of time before Jeff, her almost-boyfriend, realizes he left her in the library and comes to rescue her.

Only he doesn't come. No one does.

Instead it becomes clear that Autumn is going to have to spend the next couple of days living off vending-machine food and making conversation with a boy who clearly wants nothing to do with her. Except there is more to Dax than meets the eye. As he and Autumn at first grudgingly, and then not so grudgingly, open up to each other, Autumn is struck by their surprising connection. But can their feelings for each other survive once the weekend is over and Autumn's old life, and old love interest, threaten to pull her from Dax's side?

Promotion Plan

Our primary strategy is to leverage TikTok (#booktok), following the lead from similar successful authors who are using the platform to grow their readership.

Reviews: We will continue to offer complimentary review copies to reviewers of similar titles. We use Goodreads and other sites that facilitate reviews (LibraryThing, Reedsy, etc.).

Bio

Cathleen Ellis has worked with young people her entire life: Beginning as a teacher (elementary, middle & high school, adult basic education); school administrator (three years as Dean of Students, Bonanza High School, Las Vegas, Nevada); 22 years at Colorado State University (CSU). She spent seven years with the U.S. Air Force helping commission students into the Air Force through the Aerospace Studies program. While employed at CSU, she attended classes herself, earning a BS in Natural Resource Recreation and Tourism in 2000.

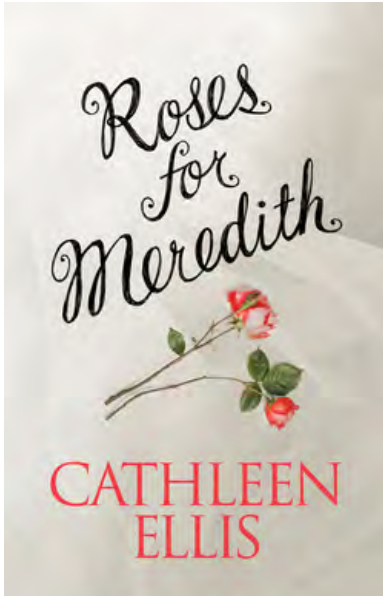
“Young people are our future; their abilities inspire me. What rocks my world is sharing about their loves, life changes, and their initiative to move forward with their educations. They want to serve.”

She worked eight years as a volunteer in the Emergency Room at Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Cathleen Ellis is a Colorado native. She and her husband, John, live in the northern part of the state. They have four sons, three daughters-in-law, and four grandchildren. Cathleen draws the inspiration for her love stories from the lives of young people with whom she has lived and worked her entire life.

Sample Chapters

Excerpt from *Roses for Meredith*



“Please, I want you to work hard, keep trying, your hopes and dreams,” he looked into her eyes, “will continue to unfold.”

“I don’t want him to go; I want him to stay with me,” the tape played round and round in Meredith’s head as she held hands with Colin in church and as they ate the delicious brunch. Colin stood next to her by her car in the restaurant parking lot.

“Meredith, you are in my thoughts and prayers, and I love you.”

He watched her eyes looking up to him and the smile on her face.

“And I love you, Colin.”

They came into a strong hug. Colin’s lips descended on hers. They held in that kiss for a very long time.

“Godspeed, Colin,” Meredith smiled, her eyes filled with tears.

She watched him nod, get in his car and head east to Iowa. Meredith drove out in the country to think about the past few days. She glanced ahead and out the right-side window. A clear blue sky held her gaze. She pulled over and got out. In her hand she carried the red rose, now beginning to open up. Meredith searched the skies, for a plane that might be flying up high. She saw none. She smiled to herself, holding the rose.

“Thank you God, for my life,” she shouted up to the sky.

Meredith watched, her eyes following the rose as she pointed it to the sky, from left to right, searching, searching.

She would keep trying, as she always had, as Colin suggested to her, as her future unfolded.

Excerpt from *Carry Me On*

"May I keep the Bible?"

"Course, Gavin, I hope it'll give you comfort as you encounter tough spots in your future."

"I'll miss you," Gavin held her close as they stood on Lori's front porch.

"And I'll miss you, I'm glad we saw the movie together, seems to make this parting a little easier."

"Hey, we'll see each other over the holidays next Christmas. I'm gonna stay on in Atlanta and do fall semester before I come home."

Lori looked up into his eyes. He held her gaze and caressed her lips with his own. They kissed. Lori felt the ache, in her heart, and in her groin.

"Let him go, let him go," her mind screamed.

"Good luck and God bless, Gavin," she whispered to him.

"To you also, carry me on, along with my love and my prayers," he kissed her on top of her head, "for you."

She heard the choking in his voice. They hugged and she let herself in with her key. She turned and smiled up to him. They nodded to each other.

Once she got inside her throat engorged as tears erupted in her eyes. That night she cried, and prayed for Gavin, that school would go good for him. She did not fall asleep until after 2 a.m. And she woke up at 5, and to work by 6 a.m. By 2 in the afternoon she felt herself dragging.

"You OK?" her mom whispered to her as they placed their orders with the cook.

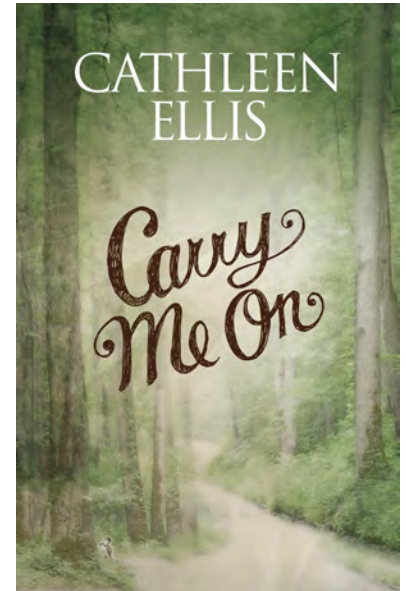
"Nope, didn't sleep last night, until 2."

"Gavin?"

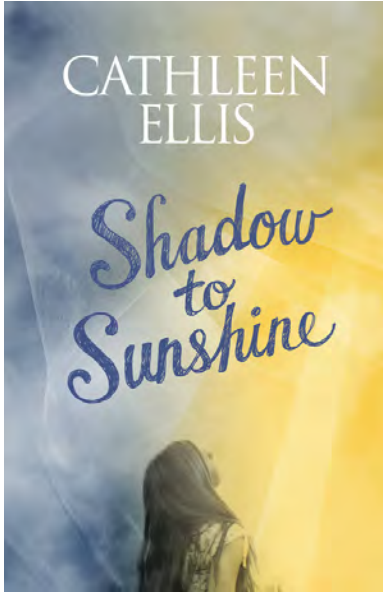
"Yeah, Mom, my first love, man, it's hurts."

She watched her mom smile and nod to her in understanding.

"Time," her mom added.



Excerpt from *Shadow To Sunshine*



They headed out early with the 1:30 appointment time clearly in mind. The trip to Altanhoot took them the planned four+ hours. The map from Mrs. Sarison directed them to the university's athletic department. She would be there to meet them with the athletic director and the football coach. When Cassie and Luke arrived, two more people joined them. Mrs. Sarison introduced the teens to all of them.

The reporter from the Altanhoot Recorder asked for permission to take Luke and Cassie's picture holding the banner. A university photographer also joined in with his request.

"Of course," Cassie smiled to them.

They all walked out to the football field where the photographer took shots, and the reporter kept asking questions while Cassie and Luke held the top of the banner.

"Oh, my gosh," Cassie whispered to Luke after the first picture was taken, "I never expected all this."

"Me neither," Luke shook his head, "uh, I think it's kinda a big deal for them."

"Yeah, seems to be."

"Let's head on back. I'll share with you what Sam and I want to do with the banner."

Don, the athletic director smiled to Luke and Cassie and indicated the university photographer and the city report should follow along.

"Except for photos and some athletic statistics from the university library archives we've never gotten a foothold on the athletic programs from the early days of this school. A fire before WWII took most of the history available about sports here. This is a superior huge find for us, thanks to your persistent search and the help of Mrs. Sarison."

He nodded to her and smiled to them.

"As I said earlier, I'll show you what Sam and I've thought about, with checking in with the university president who's an avid all-sports fan."

He walked with all of them to the 10-year-old field house, where athletic teams wrestled, played basketball and volleyball. He strode up and down the huge hallway with two entrances into the field house arena.

“Look at all the space available along these walls.”

“We’re thinking,” Coach Ewing spoke up, “and already have planned for this particular wall space,” he pointed along the wall, left to right and up and down, “for a metal case enclosed with glass that several student built. It’ll house the banner before and after we display it out on the football field. That’s for our home games. I kinda got this vision that the banner got displayed somehow back in the 20’s, like someone running across the football field with it. The football announcer’ll tell the story of how it got returned to us, that now we’re Harriers for mascot, a change of mascot from the old days.”

“Yeah, I concur with coach. That’s what we’re planning on doing, before our home football games. As coach suggests the announcer talks about the banner. Then we’ll display it with maybe a cheerleader running, holding the banner, running across the field.”

“Wow, the covered case will keep the banner material from completely disintegrating.”

“That’s right, Cassie, I imagine we’ll only be able to do this for four or five years, then it’ll be kept in this case,” the athletic director pointed to the location of the case, “oh, and there’ll be a plaque next to the case explaining the history of banner, how it was found again.”

Coach spoke up, “The two students finished the case, and with the help of our building/ground crew we’ll have it up before the first game.”

Luke nodded to them all, “It’s outa sight that you place significance on the banner.”

Don smiled to him, “We’ve got a big hole in our history at the University of Triberiar. We’re very grateful to you two, Cassie, especially on your follow-through on your granddad’s request.”

Ornament - Book Summary

Haylee, a sophomore, possesses the initiative to prepare through high school for entrance into the U.S. Naval Academy. While jogging on a path behind her home she notices a red ornament on a nearby pine tree. She sails in her Grandpa Oren's sailboat with him and her friends, Witt, Jillian and Seth. She volunteers at after-school camp helping young students with reading. Haylee talks to her dad, a Seabee officer who died in a restoration project. She meets Ty. They connect in shared grief, him for his dead mom, and she with her dad. Ty talks of his dream of becoming a Coast Guard officer attending the Coast Guard Academy.

At a Christmas morning potluck Haylee notices Witt slumping and lurching. She follows his progress after he has a brain tumor, a medulla blastoma, removed. She and her friends assist Witt with his recuperation.

While sailing with her Grandpa a water spout sweeps Haylee overboard. She struggles in the water as waves almost overturn the sailboat. Her grandpa casts a rope on a ring to her, and she catches it.

Haylee, Ty, and Jillian help build a trail enhancing conservation near Ony Springs. That activity increase the teens' camaraderie. And Haylee discovers a second red ornament on the pine tree. She learns that Witt put both bulbs on the tree. He shares with her, "You ornament my life."

Proms, meals and times spent together enhance Haylee's life and the lives of her friends. They love each other, strong friendships. Haylee's gumption leads them all. Fear of failing motivates Haylee more than it motivates her friends. Ty and Witt love Haylee, also in a sexual way. But she tells them that nothing will keep her from her intended goal. Haylee's work ethic, strong study skills and her determination to succeed are examples her friends emulate. They all learn from her. They share love, grief, fear, bravery, sexual feelings. Haylee's grandpa sparks her patriotism to serve her country.

Witt (Hispanic) dreams of the University of Georgia and is admitted into Civil Engineering. He continues to heal from his cancer. Seth (Black) serves his country as a member of the Marine Corps. He and Jillian (Black) understand their own special abilities. Jillian begins studying at the community college while still working at a café. Ty attends Swab Summer, after graduation, is successful, and is officially admitted to the Coast Guard Academy. Haylee completes Plebe Summer, and is officially admitted to the Naval Academy in the Mechanical Engineering program. The preparation she completed in high school helps her to survive and thrive at Plebe Summer, the most difficult experience of her life.

Haylee establishes new friendships at the Academy. A Christmas homecoming after her first semester finds her joyful and happy. She returns to her family and her special friends.

Ornament - First 3 Chapters

This title is not yet published.

“I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.” ~ Louisa May Alcott

Chapter One

August 2004

Haylee jogged along the path she created in back of her townhome the summer before. It ran for a quarter of a mile to the front and behind her. The path belonged to her mixed-use subdivision. She asked permission and got it from the homeowner's association to make the path. Sometimes her friends Witt, Seth, and Jillian ran with her. But today she moved along alone, savoring this last week before classes started for her junior year.

“I didn't see that before. Am I blind or what?”

She stopped jogging, seeing the stirring up of the dust from the dried grass to the side of the path. Haylee stood, looking over at the nearby forest of eastern white pine trees mixed in with the white birch.

“I'm looking at you, shapely little pine, but,” she moved near to the tree. “I see a red Christmas ornament on you. Someone wishes you an early Christmas. I wonder who put this pretty ornament on you?”

She turned and walked back to the path.

“I'll keep track of this special tree. Hey, there is someone somewhere,” she paused, looking back at the tree, “sending a message?”

Witt's mom dropped him by the Maylaird home. Christy walked out to greet his mom.

“Grandpa Oren'll take good care of Haylee and Witt. It'll be one last chance for them to sail with him before classes start. I'll drop them off at the dock where Oren keeps the boat. He'll meet us there. Then I'll pick them up late tomorrow morning and bring Witt home. This is Witt's fifth or sixth time sailing with them, right?”

“Sixth,” Witt's mom, Tonya, nodded. “He likes going on the sailing trips so much. Your father-in-law, he's so great with the kids.”

“Yeah, well Haylee's his only grandkid, so he enjoys having one of her friends along on each trip.”

“That's right, Seth and Jillian have sailed some.”

"A nautical outfit, for sure," Christy laughed. "We'll make sure Witt has fun."

"He talks about his trips for days after."

Tonya drove off, and Christy returned inside to find the two teens going through the gear each would take for the overnight trip on the boat.

"The bus leaves in a half hour," Christy announced.

"Thanks, Mom, please give us a five minute warning."

"Got it."

"Hello, Witt."

"How're you, Sir?" Witt asked as he shook hands with Haylee's grandpa.

He nodded to Witt, "Ready to sail, maties, you ready to assist?"

"Yes, Sir," Haylee and Witt spoke in unison as they smiled to Grandpa Oren.

Through the years Haylee's guests always addressed her grandpa as Sir. She got to call him Grandpa Oren. That was the rule. Oren Maylaird served 30 years, veteran of the US Navy, a Seabee the entire time he served in the military. He taught his sea mates well, and because of that, they really knew how to handle a sailboat.

Oren expected each of them to wear light-colored, long sleeve shirts, and light-colored cotton long pants, with a wide-brimmed hat. Sunburn and dehydration became immediate enemies to passengers on the boat. They slathered the small parts of their exposed skin with sunscreen after they got on board and stowed their gear in watertight bags in the lower compartments.

"We're off," they all hollered after they got the sails up and adjusted. Oren steered, getting them away from the shore, motoring them out into Lake Oconee.

Through the rest of the day they watched the clouds, ducking in and out in front of the sun. The wind speed varied and the breeze flushed hot on their bodies. They steered the boat windward, up into the direction from which the wind blew. They sang to tunes Oren played on his ukulele. And they talked about their futures.

"What about you, Witt?"

"Think Georgia Tech, engineering."

"Good for you, always need engineers."

Everybody knew what Haylee wanted.

"I'm gonna be a Seabee someday, like my dad, and my grandpa."

Students made fun of her at school, for several years now, about wanting to be a Seabee. They looked at her, their eyes weird, uncomprehending,, "So what's a Seabee, anyhow?"

Keep her cool she explained, "Naval Mobile Construction Battalion."

They gave her that look again, the googly eyes, "What's that mean?"

"Seabees build stuff, like bridges, hospitals, whatever the military needs, like in emergencies; they show up and build it."

"Like the Army Corp of Engineers?"

"Uh huh, like that, except Seabees are Navy."

"Oh."

The nasties changed the subject by then. It used to be that Haylee got sad about what people said. Now it didn't bother her. She had a plan.

The teens swam for 45 minutes, during that afternoon, out a certain distance and then back to the sailboat. They went back and forth until they completed their time. The wind shifted as they pulled up the anchor, fixed the sails and headed out.

On the sailboat that evening the three of them ate bowl after bowl of shrimp creole, the dish Oren always brought for the evening meal. Haylee supplied cookies and bread, and Witt furnished sodas for the teens. Oren always drank one glass of red wine, to go with the shrimp creole dish.

Witt asked him about Oren's retirement.

"Love being able to sail as much as I want, living in Frayton, close to Lake Ocanee, but not too close. It's great to be just 45 minutes away from Haylee and Christy in Ony Springs. Byron died just a few weeks after I retired. So it was kinda a no-brainer to move to their direction. Christy got a teaching job, working with middle schoolers in Ony Springs. A lot happened after Haylee's dad died, in '98, with the whole family shifting locations. But I'm real happy with how it's turned out."

"Switchin' gears, how's your plan, Haylee?"

They sat out on the boat deck, the sea calm and the skies star-studded, a blue black background. Haylee still got goosebumps as she gazed at millions of stars shining down on them.

"Updated, as of now, Grandpa Oren, here goes."

"Let's hear it."

"PSAT, taken last fall, did good. Pre-calc taken, calc starting this fall."

“For me, too,” Witt replied.

Oren nodded to him and winked.

“Second year Spanish coming up, which I’ll continue my senior year, third year, ‘cause I know I’ll someday work in countries with Spanish speakers. And Witt, your Spanish is awesome, wish I could speak like you. Uh then U.S. History, AP, for both Witt and me, a computer class, English with emphasis on effective writing; it’s got American literature in it. For fun I’m in a mixed chorus, ‘cause I love to sing.”

“So you’ll have no breaks during the day?”

“That’s right, Witt, in and out; I have so much homework. And then I’m a volunteer again this year three days a week at after-school camp at Jensen Elementary. I mostly help with the reading, students who need assistance with that. One little guy, Carlo, I’ve worked with him, now two years. His reading’s improved so much. I’m super proud of him. And he appreciates me, hugs at the end of every day that we work together.

Uh, I work out when I get home, the running, sit-ups, pushups, getting ready for the physical training I’ll have during the summer, after graduation.”

“You really are planning on Annapolis?”

“Oh yeah,” she eyed her grandpa, “Everything I do now is getting me ready for the Academy.”

“And,” she heard from Witt as she watched him raise his eyebrows in questioning.

“I know exactly what you’re gonna ask me so I’ll go ahead and answer.”

She gazed at his dark good looks, black hair, deep tan skin, a total Costa Rican presence.

“If for some reason on I don’t make it, it’ll be Georgia Tech, engineering, like I would be doing at the academy, and the HOPE.”

“I’ll get the HOPE, if I keep up my grades. What an opportunity for Georgia high school students, to help with tuition, throughout college,” Witt added.

“That’s right, if you continue to make grades at your Georgia university, for you young folks, that scholarship, a tremendous opportunity.”

“That’s right, Sir, it certainly is.”

“Oh, one more thing for me this fall, I’ll take both the SAT and ACT. My scores there plus my grades, those are items the Academy will look at to evaluate my competitiveness for Annapolis.”

“Poker tonight?”

“Nah, Grandpa Oren, not for me. You and Witt head down and play cards. I want to stay up on deck. I need to talk to dad.”

“OK, kid, I know Byron always likes to talk to you.”

Haylee sat on the bow as the boat slid with quiet sloshing through the water. She looked up and oriented her eyes to the south sky. There it was. His star shone so bright and clear this night.

“Dad, oh Dad, I know you hear me, there you are, my star in the night sky.”

She pointed up with her hand to his star, then brought her hand to her heart and patted it three times.

“This’ll be my last jaunt for a while. My classes, after-school volunteering, and some weekends helping out my Girl Scout troop. Sheesh, I’ve learned so many leadership skills, imparting the courage, confidence, and character the younger girls are gonna need. Dad, I certainly couldn’t ‘a done it without the help from the older girls and my leaders. My friends understand me, but other kids think I’m an odd duck. And I am.”

Haylee stayed quiet for a bit. She stood up in slow fashion, feeling a little stiff in her legs and back from sitting on the hard deck.

“And I know you’re thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’; uh huh, my Navy education is paid for; mom can save that money for stuff she needs in her life. You know, mom’s got to teach a bunch more years. And Dad, it’s been nearly six years now since you were lost to me. But, like I’m gonna do, you were doin’ what you loved, you a Seabee officer helping out with Hurricane Georges, in the Caribbean, disaster recovery.”

She nodded her head as tears spurted from her eyes. She waited until her crying stopped. With clearer eyes she went below, to the little cubby area where the girls stayed, bunk beds always ready for guests. It took her a little time to get settled for sleep. She said her prayers for all the folks she loved, but the image of her dad remained in her mind.

“I miss you Dad, the most when I’m sailing out in the waters,” she whispered.

Haylee smelled the bacon frying and heard the coffee percolating. Her grandpa probably roused up much earlier; he loved his mornings up on deck when the lake calmed. But now he cooked a big breakfast for the teens and him. She dressed in her day’s nautical outfit, white on white, rubbed in sunscreen, and brushed her long reddish brown hair.

She gave her grandpa a kiss on his cheek.

“Sleep well?”

“Took awhile, dad remained front and center in my mind.”

“You’ve always said you miss him most when on the boat.”

“Yip.”

“Go wake up Witt. He’s still sleepin’ so hard.”

“Yeah, the boat lulls him to really deep slumber.”

“Breakfast, bub,” she announced as she peeked in on him. He slept on the top bunk, with her grandpa on the bottom bunk.

“Thanks, I’m gettin’ up,” she heard his froggy voice, “I’m starved.”

She shook her head at his starving comment. Seth seemed the same way. They represented human garbage pits, eating every food set within sight.

“Storm’s a brewin’ aways to the north,” Grandpa Oren spoke up.

“We’ll sail out, then, soon’s we eat and clean up.”

“Correct.”

The trip back to shore went extra quick with the sailboat slicing through the waves like a knife through softening butter. Haylee steered the whole way, and Witt and Oren manned the sails.

Haylee watched her mom wave to them from the Maylaird boat dock location. After anchoring the boat and tying it securely to the assigned boat post the three sailors hopped off the boat.

She stood alone, away from the sailboat and moved away from the dock. As she looked out onto the lake, she remembered her always statement when she got off the boat after a trip out on the waters.

“You said it, dad, I’m here, on solid ground, safe and sound,” she spoke out.

Witt joined Haylee as they stood together, near Oren and Christy.

“We loved it, an awesome day, yesterday.”

Oren nodded to his daughter-in-law, “Truly a fine trip, the weather perfect.”

“Fair weather, following seas.”

The teens and Oren nodded to Christy as she spoke.

“A blessing, good and true,” Oren smiled to Christy and turned to give Haylee and Witt his engaging smile.

They said their goodbyes and hugged Oren.

“Have a good school year, you two; be diligent in your studies, in preparation for what’s to come.”

Oren waved to them as he turned, walking back on the dock to his boat.

All the way to Witt’s home the question rolled around in her head, “When, when will I see Grandpa Oren again? Dad certainly was his father’s son. I remember little mannerisms, same in both of them, even though I was just 10 when dad went to his true home.”

Haylee got out of their car to help Witt with his gear.

“Best sail we’ve had,” he whispered to her as they hugged.

“For sure, take care, Witt.”

“Yeah, take care.”

Haylee and her mom waited for him to open his front door. He turned and waved to them, smiling big.

“Such a special buddy, pal, friend.”

“You’re a lucky young lady, Haylee.”

“I sure do know that,” she turned and smiled to her mom.

“I’ll leave you off at home and then I’m headed to the Food Pantry. This is the last week I can volunteer there, then it’s back to meetings and preparing for my youngsters.”

“Mom, I want to thank you, just like the whole community thanks you, for helping out at the Pantry. I can tell you they will miss you when you leave. You’re a really hard worker.”

She looked over to her mom.

“Uh huh, for reals, I remember helping you a couple of times this summer. There are many people in our little town who need help.”

Christy turned for a moment to her daughter. Haylee saw a big grin on her mom’s face.

In early October the Girl Scout leader asked her to stay after the younger girls finished their project that Saturday morning.

“The Ony Springs mayor approached me about you. She understands you’re trying for an appointment to the Naval Academy and the importance of community volunteering. She would like you to join her and several other folks to gather information about adding another section to the upper Rail Trail.”

“I’ve loved that trail since I’ve hiked it with my mom. The first few times, magic, especially at the fairy garden. It’s a great opportunity for little ones to hike, a gentle uphill, all the way.”

“Well, you want to be a builder; this would be an opportunity to do that.”

Haylee nodded to her leader, “That’s exactly the kind of activity I would love, next summer?”

“Yes, let me share this information with you.”

The next Wednesday afternoon Haylee met with Mayor Langdon, a Spring County Conservation Corp leader, a county land manager, and two students from a nearby community college. She got permission to miss her volunteering at Jefferson for that afternoon.

Haylee felt both excitement and a little concern as she left the meeting. Next summer, at 16, she could drive to the trailhead and not need her mom to help out. The mayor indicated that the grant for the additional trail building was in progress, with final word coming at Christmas. The mayor also asked Haylee, one community college (cc) student and a person in the land management office to meet with her early on a Saturday in several weeks.

They assembled at the trailhead and hiked up the trail. The evening before a quiet rain fell for a short time. The hikers appreciated their rain gear. They carried trail equipment. Haylee held on to clippers to cut back smaller branches that grew from the summer before. She passed the fairy garden the original trail crew created three years before.

“It looks so good; the little wood statues, they’re holding up really well from the weather and falling stuff,” she spoke out to the group.

They arrived at Log Landing, the end of the Rail Trail.

“So, here we are, and the young man who’ll be in charge of the trail clearing, he’s already been up here. You’ll see the orange tie strings placed where we’ll create the trail.”

Slow and sure, the group moved ahead, following the orange ties.

“This’s gonna be hard work, once we get started.” Haylee thought, as they hiked along, over downed trees and through areas of dense brush. She shook her head, “Duh, Haylee, this’ll be nothin’ compared to the disasters we’ll have to clear, down the road, when I’m finished with school, when I’ll be a Seabee.”

Haylee raised her head and started smiling. The shining sun warmed her and the other hikers. Within an hour they walked to the end of the proposed trail, a meadow ahead of them.

“The meadow, this whole area, beautiful.”

“For sure, Mrs. Langdon, it’ll be fun to work on this, provided we get the money for paying the trail workers, uh, the grant that you’ve applied for.”

“Yes, and all trail workers will go through an application process. We have to make certain they can meet the physical requirements of trail work, but most especially the ability to withstand the humidity and heat of a north Georgia summer.”

The group sat together in an area they cleared with their cutting equipment. They drank water and shared snacks with each other. Then they started down. Haylee watched the clouds above them darken from white to steely gray. The trip down the new trail plan went quicker. They hiked at a stronger pace as the storm grew more ominous looking. Haylee gazed up at the clouds changing color from gray to deep purple, with the wind whipping the clouds along.

She made her way home with her mom as she heard rain pitter-patter on her windshield and the top of the car.

“I’m one lucky kid; grandpa kept two vehicles, and he gave me the sturdy little sedan. I wonder if he planned on giving it to me all along?” she asked her mom as Haylee drove to her space. Her car sat next to the garage of their townhome.

“Yes, Haylee, I believe he planned that.”

“What a super fine grandpa, that’s for sure; I gotta let him know that often. I just have this year and next.”

“We’re blessed beyond measure to have him in our lives.”

“I’m sure, God’s plan.”

“Thanks for picking me up, Mom and letting me drive home. By the end of November, it’ll be so great, me able to drive myself around.”

“A big change, Haylee, for both of us.”

“I like her so much, but she just seems not to be interested in guys. Isn’t she a special friend of yours, Witt?”

“Totally, all through school since she moved here, her, me, Seth, Jillian.”

“You know each other so well.”

“Hey, if you’re interested in her, man, ask her out.”

The guys walked along the sidewalk until they got to their cars in the school parking lot. Soccer practice ended, and they needed to get home.

“Easy for you to say, but hard for me. And Witt,” they stood by Ty’s car, “you always shared that you love her, always have. But so have I admired her, from afar, she’s athletic, beautiful, smart, and those big brown eyes of hers,” he stopped.

“Yeah, I could just drown in those pools.”

Ty sighed, “Me too, I wonder why I like girls who’re such a challenge?”

“I dunno, but I know you’ll figure it out. She’s a super busy person, with her commitment to prepare for the Naval Academy, the physical piece being huge “

“She’s seriously considering the Academy?”

“She is, taken all the necessary steps, academically; she wants engineering as her major.”

“See ya; I’m definitely going to ask her out.”

“Good luck, Ty.”

At the end of her Tuesday school day in November Haylee turned from her locker with her loaded backpack slung over her right shoulder. She brightened as she watched Tymer Shotler walk to her.

“Walk you out?”

“Course, soccer over?”

“Uh huh, pretty much, a rough season.”

He opened the heavy school front door for her.

“I’m on my bike today; Tuesdays I don’t volunteer at Jefferson.”

She turned to him at the bike rack.

“I’ve always wanted to get to know you, Haylee; could we meet sometime before Thanksgiving, like at that cozy little café on Main Street?”

Haylee nodded up to him, “That would be fun. You know we’re in the phone book, call me and we’ll set up a time, OK Ty?”

“Nice, I’d like that. I’ll check my schedule.”

“Have you taken the ACT and SAT; I thought I saw you in that monster group that took the ACT?”

He nodded, “Yeah, I know I saw you before the test several weeks ago, but there were so many of us.”

They agreed to meet up at the café Ty suggested on a Saturday. Haylee decided to ride her bike. The sun shone warm over her shoulder as she headed for the café. She locked her bike in a nearby rack and shook out her hair smashed down by her helmet.

As she walked into the café, she thought about the days left before her tests, written and driving. After that, she hoped to possess a license to drive her car. Haylee looked around and spotted Ty waving to her from a small table in the back.

“Thank you for coming, Haylee.”

She watched his smile and looked into his deep-set brown eyes. She nodded and sat down opposite him at the little square table for two. They decided on milkshakes and ordered.

“My Saturday morning’s been kinda tough. I’ve been a Girl Scout quite a while; I said goodbye to everyone at the meeting this morning. The whole organization’s being reorganized, starting this year, 2004. It’s time for me to move on, but I’ve learned so many leadership skills, beginning with courage, confidence, and character. I must have those qualities to survive the Academy. So I’m grateful for Scouts. What about you, your day so far?”

“Helping dad clean up; we finally got a house to rent, been living in a two bedroom apartment, since after mom died.”

“Where’s your place?”

“On Christmas Lane, a small 3-bedroom, 2-bath ranch with a single car attached garage. Some of the homes, well the landlords, some don’t care, just want the rent money. Our’s distressed and dirty, outside paint ok, but inside really needed paint and a big sanitary cleanup. It’s unbelievable how some people live.”

She watched him shake his head, lines creasing his forehead.

“So Dad and I working on painting and cleaning, nonstop since soccer ended. He’s turned the yard over to me. Whew, a jungle mess, I did find some grass underneath the leaves and weeds. I’ve even mowed it twice. Bringing the front and back yards up to speed, I’m doing that while it’s still nice, before the really cool nights.”

“Yeah, it’s unbelievable what a little effort can do to improve a place.”

“Haylee, all we can do is rent. Mom’s death and the illness before that, it wiped out what little savings my folks had. But my dad’s got a real good job now, mail carrier in town, Federal job, a pension with medical benefits for him and me. He really can get 20 years in, and retire with an actual pension.”

“Isn’t that such wonderful news for your dad, and you?”

“Yeah, it is. And U.S. Coast Guard Academy, my sights are set there.”

“Wow, good for you,” Haylee nodded and smiled to him. “Did you know I’m trying for the Naval Academy?”

“Uh huh, Witt keeps me filled in, ‘cause I’ve been interested in getting to know you for a long time.”

“I imagine you wonder about me and an academy.”

“Yeah, I do.”

She watched his bright eyes scrutinize her.

“Yeah, don’t want my mom’s life to continue to be a struggle; dad served as a naval officer so she does have a benefit there. She’s a teacher, and without her masters she makes just enough for us to be comfortable. College tuition and room and board would be a stretch for her. So I need financial aid. And the Naval Academy, they’ll help me, my tuition, room and board, and a monthly stipend.”

“How much time will you owe after you graduate?”

“The Navy needs me to be an officer for at least five years. But I intend to stay on longer, a career officer. What about the Coast Guard Academy?”

“Like you, I’ll come out an officer, owe five years, and I for sure need every bit of financial help I can get. I want civil engineering. Without the appointment I’ll really struggle.”

“Eligible for HOPE?”

“I am, but it’s the room and board that’re killers; HOPE takes care of tuition.”

“Most of all, Ty, I want to serve my country. I saw firsthand what my dad did, and grandpa before him.”

“What kind of work did they do?”

“Both Seabees, Grandpa Oren, enlisted, 30 years of service, and my dad, Byron, an officer, both NMCB, that’s Naval Mobile Construction Battalion.”

“You mentioned that your dad served; is he still with you and your mom?”

He watched tears forming in her eyes as she shook her head in slow motion.

She pursed her lips, “‘98, in the Caribbean, Hurricane Georges, died in the disaster recovery effort.”

“I’m so sorry, gosh, we have stuff in common, losing a parent. You were?”

“Ten.”

“My mom’s been gone since I was 13.”

“And I’m so sorry, Ty, just three years for you.”

“Yeah, her cancer, aggressive, moved so fast; she left us after six months, just figuring out why she was so ill so fast took time. And, when she knew her time line, she just stopped all treatment, except for the pain. We took several little trips, dad, mom, and me, before Hospice moved a hospital bed into our living room. We were with her as she went to her eternal home.”

Haylee grabbed a tissue from her pocket, “I’m told that losing a parent is the most difficult situation that a young person will face. Despair caught me up for several months after dad died.”

“Same for me, despair, plus dad and I lost our home, paying off her medical.”

“Mom and I didn’t have to face that.”

Haylee watched tears dribble down Ty’s cheeks. He mopped his face with several napkins. She touched his hand as it rested on the table. They sat in silence for a little while. Haylee recalled the picture of her dad resting on her bedside table. He wore his dress uniform, so handsome, outside so he had his hat on. Mostly she thought of his smile; he lit up her world with his smile. And in thinking of him just now, she smiled big, returning that smile.

“You’re thinking about your dad.”

“Yip.”

So, what’s it to be for you, your major?”

“I want mechanical engineering; the Academy has that.”

“You been building stuff?”

“All my life, everywhere dad got based. My dolls sat in the corner. I read books about the Panama Canal, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Hoover Dam. I played with big Legos, then little ones, blocks and logs. I built bridges and buildings with my Erector sets. I moved to making little furniture, then bigger stuff. And the other thing, being a Navy brat, my patriotism is so strong. I love my country. I still get goosebumps when I hear our national anthem, or when we sing patriotic songs. Grandpa Oren, he helped stamp into my brain about how so many folks gave their lives for you and me to have the freedoms we’ve got. You must have some of that patriotic streak in you.”

“I do have, otherwise I’d never even have had the slightest desire to try for an academy. Witt’s always wondered where I get that; guess it’s from my grandpa, who served, and who talked to me about his experiences. He was after Korea.”

They walked out together and made their way to the rack where she locked up her bike.

“May I see you again?”

Haylee looked up to him, "Right, I enjoyed our time together now."

"Me, also, hey, why don't you plan a place and time."

"I love the Rail Trail; let's hike that."

"Great!"

"I'll call you; we'll work out the details."

"Hug?"

"Course."

They hugged and held on for an extra second.

When she stepped away from him, she gave him her wide smile, reserved only for special folks.

"He's so strong," she gazed up at him, her thought for him.

"And she's so exactly special," that thought zoomed through his mind as he smiled to her.

"You four, so awesome, thank you for being here. Please think of this effort, as doing small things, with great love."

Christy smiled to them. Jillian, Seth, Witt and Haylee exchanged looks and nodded.

"You asked for help. We're here for you, Christy," Seth smiled.

"I'm grateful to you, letting you know that; you're missing your own Thanksgiving celebrations.

Four volunteers called in sick the day before Thanksgiving. Each year the Food Pantry prepared a noon Thanksgiving dinner for folks in need throughout the Ony Springs community.

"Fun, helping," Haylee spoke out as she went from table to table with water, milk, or coffee for all the guests.

She tried to speak to folks at each table, asking them what drink refills they needed and wishing them Happy Thanksgiving. The Food Pantry had a large room equipped with tables and chairs. Meals got served in the room three week days a week. A special celebration occurred on Thanksgiving Day, with both turkey and ham served with all the usual vegetables and other trimmings. Pies helped to add to the delicious foods. Most of the time pudding and a cookie made up dessert. The crowd this year overflowed the room.

"I am blessed beyond measure, to have enough food to eat, thank you mom and dad," Haylee kept thinking as she helped with the meal.

She even saw a special light of gratefulness in some eyes, along with smiles, as she moved around the room.

"We ran out of everything, had just enough to get everyone fed," the pantry coordinator spoke to all the volunteers as folks left.

"I saved back two pumpkin pies, if anyone wants a snack. You all must be starved. I know your families will save you a plate, for when you get home. Thank you for helping out," she nodded to the twelve helpers assembled around her.

Part of the group did kitchen cleanup. Haylee's group removed the tablecloths along with paper plates, plastic silverware, and cups placed into the monster trash sacks. Then they swept and mopped the floor in the entire room. They washed down the tables and wiped all the chairs used. The coordinator wanted the area sanitary and clean for the next meal, to be served on the Monday after Thanksgiving week.

After the volunteers ate their pie, they took down the large Happy Thanksgiving poster and put it away for next year.

"Who needs a ride?" Christy asked as they got ready to leave. Both Seth and Witt had their parents pick them up.

"Thanks, Christy, for taking me home. My folks got invited out to their friend's home."

"Jillian, your folks'll be home before long?"

"Yeah, I'll be OK; I'm tired from helping out. So I'll rest. And

Haylee, you need to know that I've applied for working on the addition to the Rail Trail."

"That's great, Jillian, it would be so great if you could help; it'll be awesome to be outside to help out, not stuck inside like during the school year. I hope you get it; the grant did go through, that's mainly for paying the trail crew. I've also applied; Mrs. Langdon will let us know, after the first of the year, who's made it. That way kids who didn't get the trail work job can apply other places for the summer. Most everybody our age works somewhere."

Haylee and Jillian got out of the car and hugged.

"Happy Thanksgiving, dear girl," Christy spoke out from the driver's seat.

Jillian waved to Haylee's mom. They waited until Jillian opened her door and went in.

"Jillian's just about your best friend, girl, that is."

"I remember my first day of elementary school here, after we lost dad, and you got a teaching position. You hugged me and headed off to middle school, just half a block away. My

teacher asked Jillian to partner with me, to get me through those first rough days. I wondered how she could be so understanding, of me losing my dad, a new town and a new school. Within a few days of getting to know her Jillian shared that her folks adopted her. She just learned to walk, before that, in foster care. So I began to understand her special caring.”

“Right, Haylee, a little unusual, a white couple adopting a mixed-race baby. For sure they saw something special in this little girl, as I did as soon as you and she, well, started having play dates and you grew really close. But you also had your special friend, Witt, and she had her special friend, Seth.”

“And we all just joined up together, the four of us, becoming special friends, all of us with each other.”

Christy pulled into the driveway of their townhome.

“I’ll let you out and then go into the garage. It’s really tight on your side. Haylee, thank you so much for helping me today, a tough spot, with help missing.”

“Mom, thank you for volunteering for this Thanksgiving dinner event every year. You don’t have a lot of time for volunteering during the school year.”

“That’s true, but I enjoy this so much; now we have Christmas to look forward to with Grandpa Oren.”

“So how’re you feeling about everything?”

Haylee stood in the kitchen with the phone to her ear, “Yeah, totally awesome, I’m a driver now. Both the written and driving test, they went good. Glad mom rode part way home with me. We dropped by her school so she could pick up her own car. Driving away from the school, gollie, all by myself; it hit me then, the responsibility of driving, of being a driver. I super hate that I have such a late birthday; all of you have your licenses, been driving for, like almost a year more than me.”

“Oh, boohoo, worse things could happen.”

She heard him speak in his fakey sad voice.

“You’re right, Witt. I’m still gonna ride my bike on days that I volunteer at the school. It’s quicker to zip on my bike and get there fast. Yeah, bike riding has its perks, short cuts and stuff like that.”

“Congratulations, Haylee.”

“Thanks.”

"You're like my big sister, need your advice. I want to go out with this sophomore girl. I'm a little scared."

"Dude, what have the four of us talked about, the dating stuff, if you don't ask, how will you ever know?"

"And if she says no."

"Yeah, well remember, again, what we've talked about."

"Uh huh, if there's no interest, then she's not worth my time."

"That's right, go for it, Witt. You know how special you are to me; I love you, as I love Jillian and Seth. Bub, it's time to spread your wings."

"Or like your grandpa says, spread my sails."

"Right-o."

"OK, I'll keep you posted."

"Hey, guy, you don't have to do that. This is your personal life; we don't tell each other everything."

She scanned the trailhead parking lot for his car. Haylee didn't see it. She got her backpack from the backseat, applied sunscreen, and settled her cap on her head, pulling her hair through the opening in the back of the cap.

"Hey, looks like you're ready."

She turned and looked up to him, "I am, thanks for meeting me here. We really lucked out 'cause Sunday afternoons, this place can jam up. One of the items on the agenda for the trail addition is to add about ten more parking spaces."

They started up the trail, Ty leading. He slowed down and turned his head back to her.

"You know, 10 more spaces will fill up quick. That'll give the trail more use; have the powers-that-be thought about how much they want to grow this trail?"

He turned back around as he asked. He paused for a moment and began hiking ahead.

"I don't think so; it'd be a shame if it becomes too popular. The county, who owns this property, will then have to look for ways to keep it cleaned up and maintained."

"Sounds like a volunteer effort to me."

“Right, down the road, that’s what’ll happen. We’ve created this, so now maybe hikers’ll come.”

“Whew, and another mile to hike up, when the new trail’s constructed. I think the timeline is to complete it in four weeks.”

“Did you apply for the job, Ty?”

“I did, yeah, I know we won’t know until next year, but I’ll really appreciate it if I get the job. My dad, he needs every extra penny I can help him with.”

Before nearly an hour passed they arrived at Log Landing, the end of the trail.

“A good workout, Haylee, you really hustle along, after I let you go first.”

“I know this trail so well; mom and I did it often when we first moved here, then less as time’s gone on. It helped us both, with our sadness, somethin’ about being outside in the beauty of the forest, a calming, a steadying place.”

They sat together, exchanging the trail mixes they brought, Haylee’s with chocolate chips, almonds, round oats, and raisins. Ty brought a mix of dried bananas and dried apricots. Haylee sipped her warming water and watched him do the same.

She turned more into him, facing him.

“I’m struggling, maybe all of us our age do, with love. I’m bearing my heart, opening up, to you, someone I don’t know very well. I thought about it at church this morning, didn’t pay good attention to our reverend, like in the sermon. But I thought about who I am, and what I love.”

“Share, what are your loves?” he asked her in a quiet voice, looking into her brown eyes.

“God, my country and community, my mom, my grandpa, the memory of my dad, my friends, Witt, Jillian, Seth.”

“My list’s like yours, God, my country, my dad, the memory of my mom, Witt. It’s a small list. My grandparents, both sets, are far away, distance-wise. And they all disapproved of my mom marrying my dad.”

“What happened?”

“That my mom married beneath her. Her parents came to the simple wedding my folks had. But after that, there was little communication, even after I was born.”

“What about when your mom got sick?”

“They talked to her a few times on the phone.”

“And your dad’s folks?”

“Overseas, they work in agriculture; they were in the Peace Corps, stayed on after that. They brought dad back when he started elementary school. But they never forgot their experience, so went back to South Africa after dad graduated from high school.”

“Sounds like he learned independence real early.”

“He did, and it’s served him well. But stuff happens,” he gazed at her, shaking his head, his lips pursed in a thin line.

Haylee noticed early on as she began to know him that he had a reserved and serious attitude.

“Yeah, both you and me, we’ve been dealt serious hands in our young lifetime.”

“That’s for sure, but, Haylee, as our minister shares with us several times a year, it’s what a person does now, that’s now, what am I gonna do, like with the hand I’ve been dealt.”

“I’m not religious, Ty, but I can tell you one thing, at least for me. God loves me, and I love him. He will not leave me, or forsake me. He is with me, right alongside of me. I do feel His presence, just like I feel dad’s with me, right now. I believe in my heart that God takes care of me, of you, of all of us.”

“Yeah, I feel real positive that He has a plan for my life. It came to me, about a year ago, that there was an answer to my dilemma of my future education. I don’t even know anyone in the Coast Guard, but I contacted a recruiter. And I started working out, like you have, swimming as much as I can, the running, push-ups and sit-ups. And my school work, it improved drastically, ‘cause I know that stats are serious about the academy. CG Academy accepts only one in nine applicants. My major, there, engineering, that’ll be my ticket to my future, that much God and I’ve talked super a lot about. God loves me, and I love Him; that became crystal clear after mom died. My despair cleared as I got my future thoughts kinda straightened out. And I’ve stayed on my path. Illicit drugs, driving problems, alcohol issues have absolutely no place in my life, heading for an academy. Soccer and track keep me focused. And I sing in our church choir. I love the singing; we practice before the 10 a.m. service on Sunday mornings. Me and one older guy, the only males in the group.”

“I bet the ladies love having you there. You’re not just a good-looking face, you have a voice to match.”

“Have you heard me sing?”

“Nah, but you hum; I’ve heard you several times. Hummers have good voices.”

Ty laughed an infectious laugh at her comment. She got caught up and joined in the laughing.

“And how in the world would you know that?”

“From listening to singers, to songs that have humming in them.”

“How about you?”

“I read music, Ty, but I have a low voice, that doesn’t carry well. So I leave the singing to others at church. I am in the choir at school. I’m a tenor there. Our choir director tolerates me ‘cause we’re short on tenors.”

They stood up and packed away their snacks and water.

“Head down?”

“Would you like to see a bit of the trail ahead? I was with folks who scoped it out a few weeks ago.”

“Sure, five minutes, OK?”

“Right, I know you need to get back. My homework’s not done either.”

“You’re understanding, Haylee.” He paused, “I, I really like you.”

She stood, looking up to him and smiling.

“And I really like you.”

They came into a hug and held on.

“Oh my gosh, that felt so good,” he whispered as he stepped back from her.

She nodded and gave him her widest smile. He watched her big brown eyes fire up, smoldering. They got on their backpacks, and Haylee led the way through the underbrush. They followed along the orange ties the explorer group placed along the proposed trail route.

Haylee turned around after five minutes.

“Yeah, I can see this is gonna be a lot of work.”

“We’re keeping the trail narrow, so just one person at a time can hike.”

“Haylee, I have my application in for the trail work this summer. It would be a great experience, and maybe one of the last times I would work on the land.”

“So that makes you, me, and Jillian all applying. It’d be great to be able to possibly work with you on the trail construction.”

“Yeah, we’ll know after the first of the year.”

“Uh huh, Mrs. Langdon will contact everyone who’s applied, whether they get the job or not.”

They kept up a good pace returning down the trail. As they neared the trailhead Haylee stopped Ty. They stepped off the trail.

“Every year my mom and I go down to Marietta National Cemetery. A state veterans cemetery exists there. It’s where dad’s buried. We take a wreath, go before Christmas. I asked mom; this year I want to go without her. Would you like to come with me? And I could return the favor.”

Chapter Two

Haylee looked up, facing him, waiting for his next words. He hesitated and thought for a moment.

“Gosh, My mom, she’s buried right here in the Ony Springs cemetery. Dad and I didn’t know what else to do. And this is where he plans to remain. Yeah, would you come with me to visit her grave?”

“I’d be happy to.”

“I hadn’t thought about a Christmas wreath for mom; that’s a super idea, and yes, I’d be glad to go with you to the Veterans Cemetery in Marietta. You obviously know the way.”

“Yeah, pretty much by heart, so many times, but this would be my first one driving, good practice for me to drive in the Atlanta area. It would be an all-day trip. I’d treat for lunch on the way home.”

They held hands as they finished the hike, down to Pippin Corner, the start of the trail. They walked to her car.

“Please get some dates in mind, not a lot of weeks now before Christmas.”

“I will and I’ll contact you. This has been so fun, Ty. This is the kind of stuff I love, outside, being active.”

“But you must miss your sailing?”

“I do, but I don’t enjoy it, in the winter, when the water’s so freezing.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

They hugged, a short hug this time.

“Take care.”

“You also, Ty.”

He watched her back up and wave to him. She drove off.

“My heart sings,” he shouted out.

Haylee started dinner that evening in early December. She waited for her mom to hang up her coat and put down her school bag. Haylee started jumping up and down near her mom. Christy watched her daughter's joyful smile.

"I got the mail."

"You got your official scores."

"Right, oh Mom, both sets on the same day."

Christy grabbed her daughter's hands and they jumped up and down together.

"Pleased?"

"Yes, yes, I'm over-the-top pleased. With my grades, and these scores, I'm gonna be able to apply to the academy."

"Next fall, right?"

"Yes, but I gotta keep up with everything, my schoolwork, cut back my volunteer hours at the school next fall, so I can really concentrate on my physical training. "

"You have your plan, Haylee, and that is so wonderful for you."

"I'll start the vegetable; the pork chops need 20 minutes more in the oven."

"I'll put my stuff away and come make the salad."

"Thanks, Mom."

She noticed her mom's tired eyes, reminding Haylee how much she needed a break from school herself. But the same thing could be said for her mom. Christy worked with young people. Haylee knew from her volunteer work at the elementary school, that teachers made tremendous efforts for their students.

When her mom stepped back into the kitchen, Haylee went up and hugged her.

"You do so much, Mom, for me, for your students, your school, your community, grateful, so grateful, thank you."

"Gosh, Haylee, thanks, that's just the pick-me-up I needed right now, with Christmas looming near."

Haylee met Ty at his locker.

"We're running out of time; Christmas is close, and we haven't gone to our parents' graves."

“That’s right, I’m just thinking ahead, Haylee, what about Sunday afternoon for mom’s grave? And next Saturday, make it a day, and go to your dad’s grave.”

“Let’s do it. That way I can report to my grandpa that we visited dad.”

“And I can let my dad know we’re visiting mom.”

“Your dad, doesn’t want to visit?”

Ty shook his head, “Now that I’m driving, it’s something he wants me to do on my own. He’ll visit on his own time. He’s already seeing that we have just a year and a half left together. And he understands the need for him and me to begin to go our separate paths.”

“Gosh,” Haylee looked up and gave Ty a wide-eyed look, her forehead lined, “time really is getting away from us. I’m so totally wrapped up in preparing for the future; I’m kinda losing sight of making each day count.”

He kept eye contact with her, but remained quiet. Then they walked out together.

“I’ll check in with my mom; I’m pretty sure she’ll be OK with us going to Marietta.”

“Please do that; then let me know, take care, Haylee.”

She waved to him and headed for the bike rack.

They decided to meet at the entrance to the Ony Springs cemetery. Haylee looked up, seeing the sun begin to peek through the gray clouds.

“Thank you sun, it’s always more pleasant when you’re out, warming us, and cheering us up.”

She strode toward Ty as he placed the wreath on the hood of his car. He straightened the red bow and turned toward her.

“This is so hard for me, Haylee, I miss my mom so much.”

She saw his red eyes, knew he must’ve been crying as he drove to the graveyard. She reached up and gathered him in her arms as she raised up on tiptoes. He stood that much taller than her.

“I’m so sorry, Ty, I believe, like for me with dad, that your mom’s still with you, in your heart, right now, and for the rest of your life.”

She stood down and moved a step back from him.

“I, I know mom’s with me. As time goes on though, I have lots more good days than I had for the first six months after she died. Sports, scouts, and school saved my life. Like I told you, Dad

struggled, with the finances, and basically losing everything, our home, savings gone. But I can report that he's doing better."

"I bet it helped to get your little home where you're at now, to get it fixed up the way your dad wants."

"Yeah, it's cozy. Maybe a Christmas tree this year, we just didn't feel like it before."

"Ready to go see your mom?"

She watched him blow out a big breath and smile to her.

"Let me get oriented; with all these beautiful trees it's hard to get my bearings. Oh yeah, let's head this way."

He held her hand and carried the wreath with the other one.

"Over here. I use the angel statue on top of that grave to find her.

Haylee stood back as Ty leaned over and touched the face of his mom's grave. He knelt down and placed the wreath against the headstone. She heard him whisper to his mom and begin to hum.

She listened as he continued. She began to smile. He hummed "Be Still My Soul". She remembered the melody, from a piece, "Finlandia." She walked forward and touched his shoulder. He moved his arm back and touched her hand with his. She stood next to his kneeling figure for a time. He let go of her hand and stood up.

"Memories?"

She watched his deep-set brown eyes.

"Yeah, a swirl of her last days, her loving us and us loving her until she could no longer speak. She had big brown, expressive eyes, like yours. I could often tell what she was thinking, especially when she could smile, right after the morphine shot, before she dozed off."

"So I remind you, of your mom?"

"It's your eyes, those pools of shining brown, your eyes."

"I want to give you more time with your mom. I'll take a walk around the edge of the cemetery and meet you back at our cars, OK?"

"Thank you, I want to talk to her out loud."

Haylee walked at the edge of the property, all the way around.

"The city keeps up this area real nice, very calming, with the trees, nice for Ty's mom," she spoke out as she neared her car.

In this distance she saw him striding toward her.

“You already have a military bearing, Ty.”

“Yeah, thanks, scouts helped with that. But you also stand up so tall and straight, eyes forward, and you walk fast.”

“It’ll help prepare us for our training to come.”

“Thank you for meeting me here. I’ll see you at school, but know that I look forward to riding with you to your dad’s resting place.”

Christy sat at the kitchen island, working on her lesson plans.

“Mom, that was so hard, being with Ty. His grief’s still quite raw, but he’s really trying. It comes to him like to me, the grief in waves, splashing up on him, and then the wave losing its grip. I need a hug.”

Christy stood up and turned to her daughter. They stayed in the hug for a long time.

“Thank you for being with him; he’s done a lot of grieving on his own. I don’t know if he and his dad got counseling.”

“A little, soon after she died, but not since then. Life just gets in the way. But Mom, Ty is pleased with the little home they rent, and his dad’s got a good job. They’re making it, little improvements all the time.”

“Same with us, Haylee, you’ve got a mighty lofty goal in mind. And I know you’re getting lined up to meet with your congressman.”

“That’s the next step, for sure. Most important, day by day, make grades, keep working out, keep volunteering, be happy, be with friends.”

“That’s it, Haylee. I got our tree; it’s in water out back. Would you like me to bring it in, help me decorate it?”

“Yes, Mom, I’d like that very much, to help with the tree. My Christmas spirit’s definitely missing this year. I’ve gotten your present, but the four of us decided we’re past presents. I want to do a little celebration at our home, while Grandpa Oren’s here, with Witt, Seth, and Jillian. They’ll all be around with their families during the Christmas break. Oh Mom, next year, seniors, who knows where we’ll all be.”

“That’s right, celebrate your friends; we know, tomorrow, it’s an unknown.”

“Live well today,” she gazed to her mom, smiling.

Haylee went to her room to do her homework. She and her mom agreed to do the tree decorating in an hour.

“This isn’t such a long trip,” Ty said to Haylee as she glanced at him.

She made the right hand turn into the Marietta Veterans National Cemetery. He watched her make her way to her dad’s grave after they drove by an entrance kiosk.

“You do know your way around.”

“Been coming here since 1998. This resting place is for military veterans and certain others. It’s where dad wanted to be, he told mom.”

“Yeah, the family has to know what needs to happen to a deceased military officer.”

“Mom finally shared with me, there’s the will and power of attorney, all kinda stuff, just in case.”

“Right, dad and I found all that out, after mom passed. Dad hired an attorney and a CPA, so complicated with no will for her, and the enormous medical expenses. She had life insurance; that helped so much.”

“We’re here.”

They got out of her car at the section housing her dad’s grave. She carried the wreath with the small red bow secured to the underneath wire.

“This is just such an awesome place; Dad resting with his fellow patriots, in such a serene location.”

Ty looked ahead, and then turned and turned through a full 360 degrees. He saw the same simple gravestone, so many of them he stopped trying to count.

“This place, jinormous.”

They walked along in the aisle between the graves. He and Haylee moved along at a slow pace. She counted, the way she and her mom did all through the years, to locate her dad.

She looked over to the right.

“Hi Dad, I brought your wreath. I know, I know, it’s Christmas in heaven, right?”

Ty watched as she knelt down and set the wreath to the side. She moved her arms and hugged the gravestone.

“Sending you a Christmas hug, Dad, like I do every year when I come here. I’m crying; I miss you. I have my friend, Ty, with me. He promised to come with me. I went to his mom’s grave with him a few days ago.”

She turned and leaned over to pick up the wreath and place it against the front of the grave. She got up and shook her legs, stiff from kneeling. Haylee moved back a few steps to observe the grave.

“Festive, Dad, what do you think, Ty?”

“Very fine, your dad’s remains are in a very grand place. I’ll leave you alone for a little while. I’m going to walk away, listen to the wind as it whispers to all these fine folks.”

After a few minutes of walking he turned around, almost not seeing Haylee off in the distance.

“God,” he spoke out, “I feel enormous responsibility going to be placed on my shoulders, on Haylee’s shoulders, and it will be soon. Our lives’re gonna change in ways we’ll not be able to fathom, but they’ll happen, the changes.”

Haylee began to run to him as he approached her. He saw her flaming red eyes and heard her raw breathing as they hugged.

“This’s always so hard, Ty, I’ve the little girl sadness I had after his death. I’m a young woman now, but it still hurts super bad, like right now.”

They moved away from each other. He gazed at her and then over the simple white gravestones, exactly the same. She mopped her face and blew her nose.

“I’m ready to go. Dad and I chatted. I told him I’d have a Merry Christmas down here.”

“That’s good; ready to head out?”

“I am.”

“What a beautiful day, the clear sky, a soft breeze.”

“God warms us with his sun.”

They held hands as they walked to her car.

“Thank you for inviting me; I haven’t known how others deal with their sorrow. This’s been eye-opening for me.”

They stopped for lunch at the little café in a town near their home.

“Mom and I usually come here, like we’re doing, for lunch, after visiting dad. That beautiful place where we were, they’re closing it soon.”

“Because?”

“Almost at capacity, establishing a new Georgia Veterans cemetery near Canton, Georgia.”

“Didn’t realize so many wanted to be with comrades.”

“Veterans are a special breed, I’m finding out. Mom stayed in touch with several military families my folks knew. We went and visited two families after dad died. I began to see similarities in what the active duty men wanted for their lives, and for if they died. We talked in blunt terms, about death, and what would happen then.”

They dug into their cheeseburgers, fries, and milkshakes. Haylee had chocolate and Ty had strawberry.

Haylee drove down Christmas Lane to Ty’s home. She glanced at the homes in this area. She remembered what Ty said about the condition of the homes. It did look like improvements got made, appearance-wise, yards better kept. But she could guess what the insides might look like.

“Your place, it looks good; you talked about how you and your dad really improved on it to make it your home.”

“Thanks, and I’m so happy, dad’s consented to get a little tree. That’ll really help Christmas spirit at our home.”

He leaned across and kissed her on the cheek.

“Thanks for having me come along. Grieving, it takes a long time, and it comes back on a person.”

“That’s for sure. Grandpa Oren really wants to meet you while he’s here for Christmas. He’s very interested that you are trying for Coast Guard Academy.”

“And I sure want to hear what he has to say.”

Ever since Christy and Haylee moved to Ony Springs they organized a potluck Christmas morning brunch for their friends. Grandpa Oren, of course, always came for Christmas, helping celebrate. The first year Jillian brought her parents. After that, as the teens did group things together, Seth and Witt came with their parents and sometimes other family members. Christy invited several of her single friends from school.

Haylee gazed around at the hungry crowd as they filled their plates and moved to a spot where they could sit and eat. Earlier she fixed the wassail. The apple, pineapple and spice smell wafted through the entire first floor of Haylee’s home. She brought paper cups of the hot liquid to guests who wanted to try the delicious and healthy drink. Witt sat with his parents at the fireplace

hearth. They dug into their plates of food. Haylee handed the wassail cups to Witt's mom. She set them down in a spot where they wouldn't get knocked over.

"I'm so glad you could come this year, Tonya and Frank."

Witt's dad smiled to Haylee, "We look forward to this brunch every year. And, as always, we want to hear Oren's adventure that he'll share with us this holiday season."

Something seemed odd about the way Witt sat at the fireplace. Haylee decided to watch him later. She wondered if he felt OK.

"Dude, you look like you're making your way through that pile of food."

"Haylee, super delicious," Witt looked up to her with that same intensity he always gave her.

Once she and her mom felt satisfied that everyone ate, they fixed a plateful of food. Haylee drifted over to where Jillian, Seth, and their parents sat in chairs. She sat on the floor in front of them. A lively conversation ensued, the kids and their college plans, and their parents, talking about majors and future job prospects. Many in the group this day worked as educators, so students remained their major emphasis.

The four friends moved over to Grandpa Oren for his story. They sat in a semicircle on the floor in front of him. He spoke in a loud voice for the entire group to hear.

"Your early days, in the Navy, that's what we want to hear about this year," Seth asked.

"So, in 1966, at 18, I joined the Navy. There was a draft at that time, because we were fighting."

"In Vietnam," Jillian added.

"Correct, Jillian," Oren nodded and smiled to the entire group.

"By joining the Navy, I had a little bit of say as to what I might be doing in the war effort. It wouldn't be like some guys I went to high school with. They waited until their draft number came, and the Army scooped them up."

"Infantry," Witt spoke out.

They all watched Oren nod his head.

"So glad I spent time on a ship. But I loved what I did, the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion, so I worked on land some. We're the Seabees, building whatever needed to be built, sometimes near the fighting, but often on other tasks, bridges, moveable hospitals, aircraft parking and runways, helicopter landing zones. We handled construction on many wartime needs, it seemed. Vietnam and the Gulf War, I was there. And there'll be a new generation of Seabees, with the conflict in the Middle East now. That'll be you, Haylee."

"I sure hope so, Grandpa."

"Disaster, what was your first real disaster, that's when we hear about the Seabees, and the Army Corps of Engineers?" Witt's dad asked.

Oren went on to explain his first hurricane damage effort, recovery of the sanitary water supply and the return of electricity, mostly by portable generators during the first days of the recovery.

"Do we know how blessed we are, at this glorious time of year?"

"We do not; we especially need to be grateful. What about a bit of "Joy to the World?"

Oren began singing with Christy, and the whole crowd joined in. Haylee looked around at the happy smiles, folks singing along. When they finished, everyone broke into applause.

"Thank you Grandpa Oren, for showing us a bit of your life. "

"Yes, thanks, and the four of us are getting our weekends lined up to visit you on your sailing ship," Jillian spoke out.

"Sounds wonderful, Haylee'll be my contact, go through her. This year, let's spend night times reading the celestial sky above."

The four of them looked to each other and smiled back to Oren.

"Yeah, we're definitely ready to read the skies. I think that orienting will be so fun and informational, gosh, getting lost, if you have the sky," Jillian trailed off.

"Absolutely, if the clouds won't interfere, you'll know where you are, helping you on a land surface, if ever you're not sure your location."

Haylee added, "That's on land or sea, the skies with us always."

Folks helped themselves to seconds. Haylee went around again with drinks. In years past during the next few minutes the four teens exchanged presents.

This year Witt spoke for the group.

"We're big kids now; each of us donated the money we would spend on a present to our respective churches. It's the right thing to do. And something we've talked about continuing doing; our churches have so many tasks they accomplish, for their congregations. And they always need the funds, always."

Oren clapped his hands, "You four, good, it IS the right thing to do," he emphasized.

Haylee heard the other adults nod and murmur their agreement. The group said their goodbyes until just Witt and his parents remained. Haylee observed everyone while they gathered together. She kept a special eye on Witt.

Something wasn't right about his actions. He seemed slow to answer questions when the four were together. And she could not help but notice how he slumped over as he sat. Witt usually kept his back erect; she wondered if he did not feel well.

"Witt," he stood in front of her as they got ready to leave. Then he lurched to the right. Haylee caught his shoulder and assisted him to stand up straight.

"Witt," she said for the second time, her eyes imploring his.

"I know," he nodded to her, "I've an appointment with a head guy day after tomorrow, referral from our family doc. Whatever it is, it's come on fast. You know, we finished soccer not that long ago."

She tried to smile and joked, "Maybe you took one too many headers."

He smiled to her, "Uh huh, yeah, that, and I had a couple serious crashes, somebody's shoulder into my head, for one."

She hugged him, stepped away and looked into his eyes.

"Promise me, whatever happens, you will communicate with me. We got our little flip cells, but you know you can leave a message on our land line. I love you, Witt. God watches over you."

"And cares for us all, I love you, Haylee."

They hugged again.

Christy noticed the intensity of their conversation and kept Witt's parents with her in the kitchen area. She sensed by the way they looked at each other that something was going on, something different from their times together in the past.

"Mom and Dad, ready to go?"

They hugged Christy and joined Witt at the front door entrance to the great room. Haylee exchanged hugs with them and wished them Merry Christmas.

Haylee and her mom completed the kitchen cleanup with Oren's help. She excused herself as her mom and grandpa watched a Christmas Day football game.

"I need to get outside, gonna do a run along my path," she shared with them as she got ready to leave in her running outfit.

She stretched out and knocked out her pushups and sit-ups in the grass of their small back yard. After a couple more stretches of standing on tiptoe and pulling her arms and fingers up and up, she headed out to the running path she loved.

"Merry Christmas, Dad, you've been on my mind. If there's wassail in heaven, I hope you're having some," she spoke out.

She picked up her running and decided to do the two plus miles moving along at a faster speed. The wind snatched her ponytail, flipping her long hair around and smacking her in the face.

“Whew, sure glad I waited a bit after I ate. Otherwise I’d be bent over in a side ache.”

She looked ahead and to the right. In a little while she would turn around and head back. Her vision blurred as she passed the pine tree she called her outdoor Christmas tree. Double, she saw double, two red objects on the tree.

“What did I see?”

She returned down the path, then stopped as she observed the pretty white pine.

“Two ornaments, who in the world?”

She first touched the ornament she saw on the tree in August.

“Hey, little guy, you’ve stood up to the rain and the wind mighty well. Let me look at you.”

She moved to the ornament on the tree that was new to her.

“I run out here nearly every week. Someone placed the ornament on the tree in the last week. What’s the message?”

She paused, “God, do you think someone needs help? I gotta ask my friends, but I know other people run the path, folks who don’t want to pound the asphalt or concrete.”

Haylee moved back away from the tree. An overwhelming sadness swirled around her. Her throat engorged, gagging her, and tears spurted from her eyes. She sat down a little away from the tree.

“My overwhelming need to ask,” she paused, “how can I assist?”

She spoke out as she raised up from sitting there for a few moments.

Haylee completed her run after two more waves of sadness washed over her.

“Mom, mom, where are you?”

“Up here, Haylee.”

She bounded up the steps and stopped at her mom’s partially closed bedroom door.

“Can I come in?”

“Course.”

Haylee went up to her mom and began crying so hard she had trouble catching her breath.

Christy took Haylee in her arms.

“You’re distressed, something on your run.”

She watched her daughter nod as they hugged.

“Let’s sit down here.”

Christy handed her tissue. She noticed her daughter’s sweating and beet red cheeks, from running, and from crying.

“Two ornaments, Mom, two ornaments.”

Haylee settled down enough to tell her mom the story of the red ornament she found on the pretty pine in August, before school started.

“Meant for me, or anyone running along the path?”

Christy shook her head, “Please just keep checking; perhaps an answer will come for you, or for whomever the ornaments are meant.”

“I think it’s an especial cool holiday idea; I just wonder why I cried so hard.”

“I truly believe that so many unexplained things happen, to us, with us, all around us. Maybe the answer to your crying will come out, one day.”

“I’m seeking out God. He’s all knowing,” Haylee gave her mom a small smile, “Maybe He’ll share.”

Christy touched her daughter’s cheek.

“Grandpa Oren, he’ll be back from the senior care home soon.”

“Yes, he always goes to visit at the holidays, one World War II, and one Vietnam conflict veteran.”

“Tomorrow, Ty comes to lunch, and gets to meet Grandpa. There’s interest, both ways, with those two. I can’t wait for the conversation.”

“You’ll learn a lot, Haylee. Grandpa’s got so much experience, so much to share.”

“Lunch first, then I want to get to know you, Ty.”

“Thanks, sir, I’m starved.”

Haylee, Ty, and Oren fixed sandwiches of lunch meat and cheeses. They helped themselves to mixed salad. Ty made another half sandwich, and Haylee put more salad on her plate.

“Wait for cookies?”

“Yes, please, I got full,” Ty smiled to Haylee. “Delicious.”

“Yeah, ready to get comfortable in the great room?”

The three of them settled, Ty and Oren across from each other in the comfortable chairs, and Haylee on the couch. Haylee refilled their cups with coffee.

“Haylee’s shared a little that you went with her to her dad’s grave in Marietta. That was special.”

Oren nodded to Ty and smiled to him.

“Right, and Haylee came with me to my mom’s grave here in Ony Springs.”

“You’re wanting the Coast Guard Academy. I’m curious to know why you’re thinking of that academy.”

“Those military men save lives out in the waters. They don’t get a lot of press, like pilots, or the Seals. But it’s the kind of job I’m excited about, being out there protecting our people, and our waters. What Haylee’s told me about the Seabees and their efforts, that’s the academy she wants.”

“When did you get interested in your future, college, other training?”

“Mom died when I was 13.”

Ty went on to share his next years and what he and his dad endured.

“I loved Scouts. I decided I needed to prove myself; got Life, led my troop of over a year. In one of the last talks I had with mom she mentioned turning my sadness over losing her into a positive, forward force, getting my Eagle.

She asked me to try; it’d be a goal to achieve, putting aside my sadness. It kinda stayed in the back of my mind, because she remained at home until her death. So seeing her reminded me of what I could possibly do. Fast forward in time, checking with my adult leader, he asked me about an Eagle Leadership Service project. And I had one all planned out. It fit all the Eagle specifications and so I went for it.”

“You had to lead, but you could not participate in the actual work to be done, right?”

“That’s correct, Haylee.”

“What’d you accomplish?”

“Oren, our non-profit Food Pantry here needed shelving for placement of canned and packaged food that would not be an immediate need.”

“A storage unit?”

“That’s right.”

Ty saw Oren nod.

“So, I worked with the Food Pantry coordinator, got rough drawings from her about what she needed. This shelving needed to be permanent, set against the wall in an area of the pantry she planned for storage, with easy access. I took her drawings to my Woods teacher at the middle school I attended. Mr. Everson worked with me and assisted me in drawing out the shelving. He suggested I talk to the lumberyard in town, to tell them the need and what my project would have to do.”

“Unbelievable,” Ty shook his head, “that lumberyard donated the materials for the Food Pantry effort. A lumberyard employee, also an assistant Scoutmaster with our troop, worked with my Scout group. I led the whole effort, but I could not help. I learned a heck of a lot about constructing a shelving unit, along with the rest of my Scout troop. And the good thing turned out to be that the shelving unit could be deconstructed in several pieces and placed in another location, semi-portable, like. Oh, plus the safety issues, using saws and other equipment which the Scouts were able to borrow or bring from their homes. The pantry coordinator wanted the shelving not to be painted or stained, just left natural.

It turned out to be an all day Saturday project. Ten of my Scouts worked on the project. I’d been their leader for quite a while. So we knew each other pretty well. That day I realized how important adults are to the efforts of young people. Without Mr. Everson and Todd, from the lumberyard and an assistant Scout Master, we wouldn’t have had the expertise to handle everything. I remain super grateful to several Scout parents who donated pickups to deliver the wood from the lumberyard to the food pantry.

It’ll remain forever one of the proudest accomplishments of my life, managing this project. I went back a month later. The coordinator showed me what she and the pantry volunteers worked out for foods for the shelving unit. I even got a nice note from the coordinator after we got done. I shared it with my troop.”

“Your first taste of leadership training, on a project.”

“Right, Haylee, but you did lots of leadership stuff in Girl Scouts.”

“I did, and it gave me the confidence to try for something bigger. But I never did anything like your project. I can imagine, one day, leading a bunch of Seabees, on a disaster mission.”

“You two,” Oren moved his eyes from Ty for Haylee, “one day, I’ll hear you share about the places you’ll go, and all you’ll accomplish.”

Oren looked to Ty.

“Perhaps you would like to join me on my sailboat, as soon as I can sail, in March, and of course I’d invite another of my four sailing buddies.”

“That’d be me, Witt, Jillian, or Seth,” Haylee nodded.

“I’d like to teach you what I’ve taught Haylee and her friends. Plus, like with them, this year I want to work with them on night celestial navigation. They’re all pretty well acquainted with our skies.”

“Yes, sir, I would really like to start sailing. It’s what I want to do. And to get assistance from you, to learn all of that before Swab Summer, totally awesome. Whoah, that is, if I get into the academy, that’s the summer program before entry.”

“Haylee, don’t you have a similar summer before your first year at your academy?”

“I do, Plebe Summer.”

“Sir, I know Haylee’s heard all this, but tell me your military history.”

“As I’ve shared with others, I began my Navy career in 1966.”

“Wow, during Vietnam.”

“Right, and I spent 30 years, as a Seabee.”

Ty turned to Haylee sitting on the couch, “So that’s where the Seabee comes from.”

“Uh huh, I had a Seabee dad, a military officer.”

Oren went on to share highlights of his Seabee life and several of the construction projects of which he was most proud.

“So the mobile hospitals, that was the greatest effort, from your perspective.”

“Most fulfilling, the medical staff and patients just flowed in as we got piece by piece put together. It was an amazing process.”

“I could listen to you for all day, but I need to get home. I promised dad I’d fix pizza. Being in the postal service, during the holidays, is physically and mentally super demanding. Dad’s a mailman, delivering to front doors and mailboxes. So dad’s tired. Things’ll slow down. It’s a tough time of the year, ‘cause mom died during the Christmas holidays, and dad’s job.”

“You didn’t get your cookies, Ty, can I wrap up a little plate for you?”

“Dad, and me, also, we’d appreciate that. They’re no homemade cookies at our house.”

The three of them rose and took their coffee cups to the kitchen. Oren and Ty looked at a calendar to determine when they might meet again, this time on the sailboat in the spring.

“Don’t want to put you on the spot, but your grades and your board scores?”

“Sir, I did very well on my boards, and my grades keep improving. I spiraled down when mom died, but I’ve learned how to manage my time much better. Scouts helped so much with that, being a leader. And I’m doing the exact same physical training that Haylee’s doing.”

“So, like Haylee, you’ll apply in the fall?”

“Yes, I’m excited.”

Ty gave Oren a big grin. And Oren saw a special shine emanating from Ty’s deep-set brown eyes.

“Grandpa Oren, I’m excited.”

“So much for both of you to look forward to.”

Ty shook Oren’s hand, “Thanks again, for helping me. I’m feeling pretty secure in what I plan to do with my life.”

Haylee watched Ty’s smile. She walked him out after he donned his coat.

“Here’re your cookies.”

“Thanks so much, Haylee, your grandpa, I really like him. I’m so stoked about my plans.”

He gave her a sideways hug, holding the cookies with one hand.

“Let’s get together over this break; I’ll call you, and this has been great.”

Haylee took the phone call late that afternoon. She and her grandpa decided on pizza that night. Christy got home from an after-Christmas gathering of members of her church group. She watched Oren hold his granddaughter in a hug. They sat on the couch, and Christy heard her daughter’s sobs. Oren high signed Christy that he had this.

She hung up her coat and took her purse to her room. By then Haylee quieted.

“We gotta start the pizza, Grandpa Oren.”

They got up and he held her shoulder as they crossed the great room to the kitchen.

“Haylee, you OK?” her mom watched her red-veined eyes and burnt red cheeks.

“No, Mom. Witt’s bad sick. Tonya called.”

“Want to share?”

“After we eat; Grandpa Oren’s making the salad. Pizzas will be ready in 20, fixed just the way we all like them. I’m gonna head to my room and pray, and fix up a little. I’m kinda a snotty mess.”

She tried to smile to her mom, but could not.

Christy set the table and chatted with her father-in-law.

“All I can say,” he stepped next to her, “is that I’m here for you both, for the next however long it takes.”

She turned and touched his shoulder, nodding, “Doing small things, with great love.”

“As Mother Teresa did, always.”

They stuffed themselves with pizza and salad. Once Haylee cleared plates, she brought decaf coffee for all of them.

“Grandpa’s heard this.”

Oren touched his granddaughter’s hand, “Go ahead.”

“Tonya called me from Northside Hospital in Atlanta.”

Haylee watched her mom shake her head, tears in her eyes, as well as in Haylee’s.

“Witt’s having surgery, first thing in the morning. I remember, Haylee, at the intense conversation you two had as you stood by the front door on Christmas morning.”

“Oh, Mom,” Haylee groaned, stinging tears filling her eyes.

“So Christmas evening Witt fainted, and a little later stumbled and fell. The ER admitted him to Ony Springs hospital. Next morning his folks drove him to Northside Hospital in Atlanta. They’re prepping him for surgery. He’s got a tumor growing super-fast on the lower back of his brain. From what Tonya says it’s a kind of brain tumor young people get, a medullablastoma. The doc thinks it caused Witt movement and balance issues.”

“I know I was shocked to see how bent over Witt was, sitting on the fireplace hearth at Christmas brunch.”

“Right,” Haylee acknowledged to her mom, “before he left we shared how much we loved each other, our kid friendship continuing to grow as we aged into our teen years.”

“What can we do, Haylee, besides pray?”

“Pray, yes, and I want to be with Witt after his surgery. He’s calling me in a little while. I want to tell him that I will be there, from surgery on, whatever it takes to help my friend get well.”

“I’ll take Haylee; we’ll get a place nearby and stay two days, to see how it goes.”

“My goodness Oren, I know you had plans, for before New Year’s.”

“Witt’s like a grandson I never had, just like Haylee’s friend, Seth, and Jillian, like another granddaughter. I’ve been very blessed to have these four youngsters in my life.”

“Do your friends know, Haylee?”

“Right, Tonya’s spoken to either them or one of their parents.”

“Witt.”

“Oh Haylee, can’t talk long. I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Keep me in your prayers, please.”

“Witt, I’m coming to Northside, to be with you and your folks.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be there for you, like you’ve been there for me.”

“Whose?”

“Yeah, Grandpa Oren, we’ll stay two days, see how it goes.”

“Haylee, I’m fading, I, I wanted to tell you.”

“Go ahead, Witt, your voice is, is.”

She felt the hot embers of her burning eyes.

“You, you ornament my life.”

“What?”

“You, you Haylee, ornament my life.”

Haylee remained quiet for a time.

“Uh, you who put the pretty red bulb on my pine tree, in August?”

“Uh huh, and another, a couple of days ago. I just barely hobbled along the path to put it on the tree.”

“Oh Witt, a wondrous little tree.”

“I’ll wake up, and you’ll be here.”

“That’s right.”

“Bye.”

Haylee hung up the phone and put her head down on the counter. All their lives they never said goodbye. They just said, “See ya.”

The hot tears from her eyes covered the counter where she laid her head. A soft touch rested on her back.

“Sweetie, OK to sit here with you?”

“Course, Mom,” Haylee raised her head, turned and looked at her mom.

“God, help Haylee,” Christy gathered her thoughts, praying.

“Mom, do you think God’s gonna take Witt home, to heaven, with dad and all who’re there?”

“Can’t answer that, but I’ve looked at a bit of research, getting the whole tumor, and possible a dose of radiation often helps a patient do a full recovery, especially in young people, who bounce back from stuff like this.”

“Yeah, we’re all in pretty good physical condition; Witt doesn’t do any weird stuff.”

They stood together and hugged.

“Gotta go get packed; don’t know how long his surgery’ll take, so Grandpa Oren and I plan to go after we check in to our place to stay. I figure he should be out of recovery by the time we see him.”

Haylee watched her mom nod her head, “That’s sounds about right; you must prepare yourself for every possibility, sweetie.”

“I know, Mom, I’m aware of just enough that it could be anything from his dying to a complete removal of the tumor.”

“And we can pray about the tumor.”

“Yeah,” she looked deep into her mom’s brown eyes, “that it’s benign. And also if it’s not, that radiation and/or chemo won’t really screw up Witt’s system.”

“Go, your head’s on straight, you know God’s in charge.”

Haylee touched her mom’s shoulder, “I know, yeah, I know.”

All through that night Haylee flipped from side to side, in her mind and in her tummy. About three a.m. she peeked at her clock and fell asleep again. She dreamed about Witt, walking into his home. His head bandaged, he used a cane. And he thanked her for being with him at the hospital.

She roused at 6 a.m. with a pounding frontal headache.

"I sure know why this's happening."

In her sweats she ran out the back patio door of her home and across to the running path. As she passed the pine tree, she saw the two ornaments, moving a little with the breeze on this early December morning. After 15 minutes of pushing herself she slowed as she got ready to turn and run to her home.

She showered and donned her traveling clothes.

"I'm really hungry," she spoke out and she headed down to the kitchen for coffee, cereal and a muffin. She saw her grandpa through the patio doors standing outside and having a sip of coffee. She went out and kissed him on his cheek. They hugged.

"Sweet babe, how was your run?"

"Super, I had such a headache when I woke up."

"Stress?" he touched her shoulder.

"Right, Grandpa Oren, you certainly can read me."

"Yeah, my interest in you, always and forever."

"Well, I sweated out the ache."

"Good, the car leaves in an hour. And we'll return late morning day after tomorrow."

"Uh huh, don't want to have you dealing with afternoon rush hour traffic in Atlanta."

"Hey, I don't mind."

"I know. What you want to do New Year's Eve?"

"Taking you two fine ladies out to dinner. And then a toast of champagne at midnight. I'll stay for the football games on New Year's Day."

"Plus the Rose Bowl Parade."

"Wouldn't miss it."

"Is Ty visiting?"

"Right, with his dad, on his last day before spring classes start for all of you. We'll go out in the boat, if the weather cooperates."

"You know Witt will be at home for several weeks. I already told his folks I would bring home his school work during that interval. He'll miss a lot, but he's, thank goodness, taken his boards, and is early admitted to Georgia Tech."

"I'm concerned about the HOPE for him."

"Yeah, he's really gotta keep up his grades during this time, so he has a chance at the scholarship."

"He figured out what his grades gotta be to maintain his GPA."

"Maybe he's getting a little ahead of himself."

Haylee sat down in a chair opposite of where her grandpa sat in the patio chair.

"Maybe, but like I say he's in the storm, but he knows how to sail his ship."

"Haylee, that's God willing."

"I always have to remember that, Grandpa."

She reached across and took her grandpa's hand. They recited the "Lord's Prayer" together, their prayer for Witt.

After their drive from Ony Springs to where they would stay for two nights, they checked in to their rooms. Oren insisted that he have a separate hotel room from Haylee's.

"She's a young adult now," he shared with Christy when he made the reservations to see Witt after surgery.

"Thank you, Oren, for doing this, paying for the rooms, and being with Haylee. She's never seen any situation like this before. She and Witt are so close. We've had the talk about," she paused, "if he doesn't make it through all this."

Haylee held tight to Oren's hand as they walked down the hall to the nurses station on the surgery floor where Witt would be. They learned that he got moved to his room from recovery. And they could visit with him for a short while.

Haylee heard voices from the partially open door to his room. She peeked in to see Tonya standing next to Witt's bed. His dad sat in a chair nearby.

"May we come in?" Haylee whispered.

"Course, Witt's been asking for you."

Haylee moved forward, shook his dad's hand, hugged Tonya, and looked down to Witt.

"You came, you really came."

Haylee heard his groggy voice. She sat with care on the side of his bed and looked into his eyes, huge and brown-black, his face she knew and cared about through their friendship years.

The lump in her throat enlarged, choking her, as she looked over his bandaged head. She smiled; he could see her. He gave her a weak smile back. She took his hand and held it in her own.

“You gotta rest. We’ll come back, Grandpa Oren’s here.”

“Great, hi Sir, Haylee, you will see me tomorrow?”

“Tonight, and yes, all day tomorrow, between your rests, heading back the next morning. I’m hoping to be able to walk beside you as they get you up and moving.”

She squeezed his hand and let go of it.

Witt closed his eyes.

“We’ll step outside with you folks,” Tonya indicated.

The four of them decided to chat at the hospital cafeteria while Witt slept. They ate and talked.

“Test results on the tumor will be back in the morning. So Haylee, you and Grandpa Oren will get to hear the news, whatever it will be, before you head north to home.”

“How did the surgery go?” Oren looked from one parent to the other.

“He’s young, so it went well; they’re very pleased so far. The surgeon indicated he removed the entire tumor.”

“When to come home?”

“Haylee, if all goes well, just a couple of days at Northside.”

“And at home?”

“For a couple of days a home health care person will check on him. He’ll visit a physical therapist, to make certain his walking and posture are up to speed.”

“Think he’ll be able to run track?”

“He runs hurdles, so if he can get back in condition, possibly.”

“Won’t that be a good incentive, the workouts and all?”

“Yes, Haylee, one thing though, he won’t be doing the push-ups and sit-ups the four of you used to do.”

“Well, that was to get in shape for the Academy. But maybe he can still run with us. In the hurdles he’s running and picking up his feet.”

“He is, at that, maybe low hurdles this season, he did high hurdles last track season.”

“One incentive for Witt to get well, come sailing on the boat as soon as he can, in March or April,” Oren suggested.

“We certainly hope that will be the case,” Witt’s dad nodded, smiling, “for our son.”

“Yes, our hope and prayer,” Tonya looked to her husband and touched his arm.

“Ready to go back?”

“I am; is it OK if I go up and be alone with Witt for a few minutes, before you folks come? It’s kinda awkward, with all of us there.”

“Go, we’ll be up in a little bit,” Tonya smiled as Haylee got up and carried her satchel out of the cafeteria.

“Pretty incredible, how those four kids care for each other. You, Oren, have kinda been the overarching reason for that. They all love sailing, with you for these past several years. They’ve learned teamwork, worked on safety issues, but most important, they’ve had fun. You make it educational and interesting for them. And look what’s happened. You have a granddaughter who one day may go to the Academy, continuing your love of sailing and of the sea.”

Oren nodded to Witt’s parents.

Haylee returned to Witt, but he slept. She pulled the comfy chair as close to his bed as she could without disturbing the necessary tubing. She put her hand on the bed where he could see and reach it. In about five minutes she felt him grasp her hand.

“Thanks for coming back. Where’s everybody?”

“Giving us some alone time.”

“I can’t wait to come home, to see you and Seth and Jillian.”

“To be determined when you’ll be back to school, but I’ve tasked myself with being the deliverer of your homework.”

She felt his grasp tighten on her hand.

“I really don’t want a teacher coming; I think between you bringing the work and me playing catch up, I’ll make it until I can return to classes, Haylee, oh Haylee.”

He stopped talking.

“You OK?”

“My grades, that’s the most important, the most important item of my recovery.”

“Oh, don’t you think the physical therapy will be important?”

“Yeah, but not the most important thing.”

The three adults came into the room, seeing Haylee turned to Witt, and them holding hands.

“Hey, don’t let us interrupt.”

“You aren’t, Mom and Dad, we’re just talking about the importance of my grades this semester.”

“Folks, he’s getting tuckered. The nurse will be floating in soon. I’ll say my goodnight, Witt, and I’ll see you in the morning. I’m so super happy about how you’re doing,” Haylee beamed a smile to him.

“I’m gonna get better every day.”

“Don’t want to touch your face or head, so I’m blowing you a kiss.”

“See ya.”

Haylee stayed in his line of vision as she blew the kiss. He waved to her, “Got it.”

They said goodbye to Witt’s parents and walked down the hall holding hands.

“Color in his face looks good; I’m prayin’ so hard for his recovery.”

“As am I, Haylee. What now, dear granddaughter?”

“Visit tomorrow, go home the next morning, rest up for a day or so, then back to my pt. Oh, and go out to dinner with you and Mom on New Year’s Eve, and welcome in 2005. I think spring semester’ll be more important than all of next year.”

“Because?”

“Universities basically have a kid’s junior year to go by; no miracles happen fall semester senior year. Most College Board scores are in. I’m really tired.”

“Let’s eat at the restaurant in our hotel. Then it’s lights out for me.”

“Yeah, I’m going to sleep. I’ll contact Seth and Jillian when I get home. I told them that no news was good news. That’s the standard we always used.”

Haylee knocked on her grandpa’s hotel door. They hugged and he let her in to his room. As with everything her grandpa did, his room looked completely ship shape. His bedspread had no ripples, completely tight.

“Gotta be able to bounce a quarter off the bed,” he used to tell her, from his Navy days.

All his actions remained deliberate, everything on the boat, it's what she loved so much about him.

“You're always and forever my role model, Grandpa Oren.”

She held his hand as they went to the hotel coffee shop for breakfast. Haylee ordered two scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, and toast for her meal.

“Wish I could eat like you do, Haylee, you're so slim and trim. I gotta start watching how much I eat.”

“And eat healthy.”

“Right.”

Haylee finished first and asked for a refill on her coffee.

They walked the mile and a half to Northside. They decided the back and forth walk seemed perfect, enough time to collect their thoughts and get ready for Witt.

His parents greeted them just outside Witt's room.

“He had a rough night, last night. The pain medicine made him sick. He did have a light breakfast this morning, eggs and toast. And he's keeping that down, sleeping now. But he insisted that we wake him up so he could see you folks.”

“We'll sit in the surgery waiting room for a half hour. Then we'll stop by.”

“Witt mentioned that he'll be able to get up and move about today, maybe walk a little with you up and down the halls.

“How's his balance?”

Witt's dad smiled to him, “Better than we expected.”

“But he's got to work on his posture; he got bent over the last couple of days before his surgery.”

“Tonya, won't the physical therapy help him with that?”

“Yes, and just making a conscious effort for shoulders back, head erect and look straight ahead.”

“See you in a half hour.”

Haylee spent the rest of the day with Witt. His parents and Oren left to run a couple of errands. Everyone planned to have dinner with Witt in his room that evening.

The teens took three walks that afternoon, the first two with a medical person near them. But the third and longest walk, Haylee and Witt went, just the two of them. The nurses restricted them to just the third floor of the hospital, but there was a lot of area to walk. And they had their instructions about what to do if Witt started to feel unwell.

“I’m very proud of you, Witt.”

“I done good.”

She waited in the hall while the nurse checked him and had him give her his fluid count after he went to the bathroom.

The dinner together for the five people went well. Haylee and Witt sat next to each other on one side of the bed. Oren sat on the other side, and Witt’s parents got the chairs.

“You ate some, solid food.”

“Food tasted good; I asked for scrambled eggs, bacon and toast.”

“You had a big day, Witt. Grandpa Oren and I’ll split and be back early tomorrow. We’ll walk back to the hotel and then check out and head home.

The next morning Haylee and Oren returned.

“Overdid it yesterday; they’re reducing my pain meds a bunch, but I did sleep better last night.”

Haylee and Witt visited for 15 minutes and then said see ya at home. They hugged, and Haylee waved at his door. Her eyes misting surprised her as she waved. But she also saw that his eyes teared. She and Oren passed his parents coming down the hall.

“So, so appreciative of you coming, Haylee, and of you Oren, for bringing her.”

“Witt’s a favorite sailor of mine.”

They all smiled and hugged.

Three days later Witt came home. He asked Haylee for dinner. They had not seen each since the morning she left.

“A favorite meal of mine, hamburger and fries,” Witt commented as they ate dinner.

“Bet your mom’s been fixin’ all your favorites, especially her fabuoufajitas.”

He gave his mom a grateful smile and head nod.

“Dad makes sure I’m drinkin’ all the fluids I need to, for the meds I’m taking.”

“Been in touch with Seth and Jillian?”

“Yep, they plan on coming over tomorrow. They want to help you with my homework situation. Jillian’s in one of my classes.”

“That’s so great; she’ll be invaluable to you, take notes as well as get the homework.”

“What’d the docs tell you about school?”

“Check in with the doc here; if it goes OK, I’ll only miss a week of school.”

“Oh wow, that is totally awesome, Witt, so much better situation than you’d figured.”

“That’s for sure.”

“You look good, but can tell that something happened, it’s in your dark eyes.”

“I know, a lot of it is being tired, which I’m feeling right now.”

“I’ll help your mom clean up, sit here and talk to me for a minute. Then you’ll head up to bed, right?”

“Uh huh, I’ve just started sleeping better; being home, it just feels wonderful.”

Haylee and Tonya made quick work of the dishes as Witt sat, watched them, and talked.

“I just want everything back to normal.”

“Course, here’s my hug and I’m off, sure love having wheels.”

Tonya saw her to the front door.

Haylee hugged her and stood back, “The miracles of modern medicine, the ability to take nastiness from a person’s brain.”

“Witt’s our miracle,” she smiled to Haylee.

“Indeed, a miracle.”

Haylee hummed Christmas carols on her drive home. She checked in with her mom and shared how well Witt seemed to be doing.

“God, please help Witt get well, if it’s Your will. Help my friend Witt,” she prayed and fell asleep.

Chapter Three

God helped Witt as Haylee prayed. During the one week Witt remained at home, the first week of the semester, he kept up on his homework. Haylee came by, after school, on Monday and Tuesday. Jillian handled homework and helped him with his assignments in the class they had together. That happened Wednesday. Haylee finished the rest of the week, with Seth coming by with her on Friday for the final homework for him to finish for class. The next Monday Witt would join them at school.

By the end of January Haylee, Ty, and Jillian learned they had jobs for one month of the summer, late June to late July. They would help with the construction of another mile of the Rail Trail, from Log Landing to the as yet unnamed end of the trail. And they would also assist with the addition of more parking spaces at the trail head.

Everyone got back in the groove of school. Haylee joined the cross country team. Spring break came, with the warming Georgia breezes and the trees leafing out. The pollen count remained high. As Haylee did her runs with her teammates, she found the dry green gook on the ground. It seemed to filter up into her face as she ran. Sometimes she held a tissue over her nose.

“We’re all breathing this stuff.”

She stopped in her thinking, “Good grief, remember Witt, no more whining. He’s still working his recovery.”

And they started to sail with Oren again. Ty went out alone with him three times early in the spring and learned about the boat and equipment. He steered the boat, his dream, to sail.

Haylee and Jillian joined Grandpa Oren in late April for sailing after Haylee’s Saturday’s cross country meet. And at night they practiced celestial navigation. Seth went with Haylee two weeks later for a day of Sunday sailing. Witt declined the sailing but worked on his low hurdles for track.

Haylee heard him explain as they left school together one afternoon, “It’s too much; I gotta concentrate on just one thing at a time plus my school work. But I’ll call Oren and try to set up a sailing for this summer.”

“How’s school going; I’ve stepped back from asking all the time?”

“I’m happy with my grades. I think I’ll be in solid shape, having early admittance to Tech a year from fall.”

Witt turned to her as they neared the bike rack. Haylee needed to head to her cross country practice.

“But I have you to thank for lots of parts of my recovery. You helped me so much those early days, that week I wasn’t in school.”

“Yeah, and so did Seth and Jillian.”

“It’s a great night to be out on deck, Grandpa Oren. I’m glad I’m staying by myself. I wanted to work with you on the sextant, tracking the angle between celestial bodies and the horizon. I know we’re not that far out on the lake, but I’ve learned about where I’m located on land, based on the stars.”

“I knew you’d appreciate learning about this navigation technique.”

“I’ve been checking out the classes at the academy. It looks like they’re gonna drop the celestial navigation course.”

“Oh Haylee,” he paused and shook his head, “I guess it’s because of all the fancy technological advances, the equipment that helps ascertain the navigating the skies.”

“I don’t care, Grandpa, I’ll always know how to navigate, using everything you’ve taught us. And hey, here’s what I see ahead. Yeah, the technology’s great, but when it breaks down, then what?”

“You are wise, Haylee, what you’ll do is rely on what you learned in celestial navigation with me, until all the fancy dancy techno stuff is up and running again.”

“Yeah, the world kinda stops when the internet crashes, or some other system goes haywire because of hacking or the latest virus.”

“I see you understand that technology is really grand.”

“Uh huh, until it isn’t, like at school, system crashes, can’t get my paper printed during my lunch time in the library.”

“It’s a different world for you young people today.”

“Still, we gotta learn from all of you who came before us. I’m whack-a-doodle tired, gonna turn in. I talked to dad a little bit earlier.”

She stood and patted her grandpa on the shoulder as he sat on the deck.

“Enjoy this beautiful night.”

“Thanks, I will and then I’ll turn in.”

“What about prom?”

“Are we going as a group?”

“Guys,” Haylee eyed Witt, then Jillian, then Seth, “Ty asked me to go with him. Can we join you wherever you end up at the dance?”

“Course, Ty’ll make five. I guess he sorta knows us, right Haylee?” Witt questioned her.

Haylee nodded to them as they stood together in the student parking lot. “He does, and he knows about the friendship the four of us have for these many years.”

On prom night Haylee wore a pale blue long dress with capped sleeves.

“You look as if you just stepped out of a garden, such a lovely dress,” Christy smiled and took her daughter’s hand.

“And wearing your hair down, just a little curl, it’s so lovely.”

After Ty arrived, Christy took their picture as he presented her with a white carnation wrist corsage.

She captured another shot as they looked to her, smiling.

“So young, beautiful and ready for their next experiences,” Christy thought. An image of Byron, Haylee’s dad, came to her.

“Hope you’re able to watch your daughter, at the beginning of her prom date, with a young man who also may be academy bound.”

“Mom, are you talking to dad?”

“Yeah, and how do you know?”

“It’s a look you get on your face, when you’re thinking of him.”

“My mom, I have to look at her picture now; the memory’s getting fuzzy.”

Haylee stepped away from Ty.

“Sheesh, the same deal with me; I gotta look at his picture to really remember.”

He shook his head to her, “You were young, 10, that’s a while ago.”

“Have fun, and that’s coming from all parents involved, wherever they are,” Christy nodded.

The five of them danced, and talked, and had chips and dip and many yummy cookies along with the lemonade. Haylee looked around at the changed gym, a complete underwater scene, along with a replica of the hulk of an old sailing ship.

“Our junior decorating group, they did an awesome job.”

“Yeah, and we worked, remember, the leader had us help in shifts. She really knew how to get the job done.”

Witt looked to them as they all sat together, taking a break from dancing.

“You guys, so awesome, what you all have learned from Oren. The sailing with him is such a great idea, a gift he’s given you.”

Seth smiled and nodded, “That we can improve on, and pass along to our friends, and later to our own kids.”

“But Ty, you and Haylee, will really sail, part of your training for the work you’ll do at your academies and beyond.”

“That’s right, Jillian, it’s gonna be such an outa-sight experience, at least for me. But what I want to know is, what’ll you guys do, for school later?”

“Georgia Tech for me, engineering,” Witt said.

“Maybe UGA for me, something in forestry, park management, not sure,” Seth added.

Jillian shook her head, “You all have your futures planned; I just don’t know. I’ll start at a community college close by. But I haven’t pursued the HOPE. A college degree may not be what I want, possibly an AA in some part of business. You guys aren’t gonna believe this, but I love my part-time job, that’ll end in a month. I do two 10 hour days at my uncle’s café, that’s weekends. I enjoy being a waitress, and I’m good at it, I’ve found out. But I want to do my part in the trail work of the Rail Trail. It’ll be interesting, creating a path for folks to enjoy, being outdoors, it’s such a beautiful area.”

“My folks don’t want me going to After Prom. If you’d care to join me, you all are invited to my home for pizza, pop, and a few games of poker. We’ll stop at midnight. I know you have curfews.”

“Witt, wow, that sounds so great; we’ll be with friends. That’s what matters ‘cause we have the prom honoring us next year.”

They were all in agreement with his plan. The five of them spent their time dancing with each other and with other teens at junior prom.

Ty held Haylee close in a slow dance.

“I’m happy to be with you, Haylee. You’re fairy light in my arms.”

She looked up into his dark eyes, “This is a special time for me, with you, Ty. I like you so much.”

“And I like you. There’s so much ahead for us.”

“So many people we will get to know, and care for.”

“Let’s enjoy.”

They ate and ate, the pizza, brownies, and chocolate chip cookies. Some cleaned up and thanked Witt's parents for the delicious chow. Several got the poker chips set up and the two decks of cards shuffled and ready to go.

At five of midnight Tonya announced that the party needed to conclude. The teens took turns hugging her after they stowed away the chips and cards.

"This was so fun, and a safe way to be with friends after a prom," Jillian declared.

Everybody gave everybody hugs. They all said goodnight to Witt.

"We're still concerned about you," Haylee whispered in his ear.

"I know, and I'm still improving. Prayers answered."

"That's for sure."

Jillian drove Seth home. Ty held Haylee's hand as he walked her to her front door.

"Wonderful, wonderful, to be with you like this," Haylee looked up into his deep-set eyes.

"So many emotions, whirling around in my head, for you, for knowing that this is what will be for now."

"Our futures will take us away from each other."

"For now, for now," he leaned down and gave her a soft kiss.

She gave him back a soft kiss. Haylee felt a hot jolt in her groin.

They kissed each other again.

"Did you feel something of what I felt?" Ty asked her.

"I did. Uh huh, I need to go inside." She paused, "I'll always remember this night."

He nodded to her and kissed her on top of her head.

"See ya."

"See ya, be safe getting home."

He walked down the sidewalk, stopped, and turned to her, waving.

She waved back.

Most important, she met Daniel Sorner, her congressman. He indicated the paperwork he received was in order. He knew she had several more recommendation letters to add to her

packet for forwarding to the academy. Hayley communicated for several months with his assistant who worked on academy assignments.

“Thank you for your application; I will recommend you for the Naval Academy and will write a letter to that effect. You are a fine student, and I feel certain you have the makings of a naval officer. A third generation Seabee you plan to be; that’s just such a grand story about your grandpa and your dad.”

She watched his smile to her. She nodded.

As she stood up from the interview, he stood and added, “Our country thanks your dad for his brave service.”

She shook his hand and left the office.

Haylee thought through the interview, and everything she did to prepare her application.

On her drive home, she spoke out, “I think I have at least a chance to get in. I’ll have several more recommendation letters to send in, after trail building. The military takes a special interest in young people wanting entry into an academy, especially kids whose parent died in the line of duty, like dad did, during that hurricane.”

Three weeks before school let out Witt began to feel sick again.

“You’re headed back to the specialist at Northside, right?”

“Yeah, for more tests. They thought they got the whole mass. Help me with homework, like you did, after my surgery, when I get back?”

“I will, for as long as you need to be away from school. Super important, Witt, that you keep up those great grades, whatever me, Seth, Jillian, can do to help.”

Haylee got up from the table out on Witt’s back patio. She took both glasses and got them more lemonade and more sugar cookies from the kitchen.

They sat together in the quiet, hearing the mourning dove speaking to them from his perch on a neighbor’s roof. The breeze soothed their warm faces.

“Know what I think, Witt?”

“Nope.”

“I think you’ve pushed yourself too hard, tried to do too much this semester. That surgery, stuff like that I expect takes a terrible toll on a body. They were working in your brain, for cripes sake. It’s gotta change what’s goin’ on with you. I think the doc’s gonna make you take it easy for

the next weeks. You and your folks should take a much needed vacation, during this summer, coming up very soon.”

“To the mountains, small hikes, fishing, soaking up the sun and summer flowers and sounds,” he gazed at her.

“And maybe even back away from the running for awhile, I always wondered about the low hurdles.”

“It sure felt good to run hurdles, but, well, we’ll see.”

“Hey, Witt, I’m just super overly concerned about you.”

“Hey, it’s God, Haylee, it’s His plan.

“I know; I fight that all the time in my own life.”

“I think of Oren, as he shared years ago when we started sailing, “I’m not afraid of storms. I know how to sail my ship,” he nodded and smiled to Haylee.

She drank the rest of her lemonade and got up.

“Stay there, I’ll see myself out. Good communication, with our phones, you’re always in my thoughts and prayers.”

“As you’re in mine; you guys’ll start next week, right?”

“Yup, the trail work begins.”

She bent and kissed him on his cheek. He took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Water, you sprayed? I’m looking at your feet; I see boots. I told you tennis shoes, not acceptable. I already sent a possible trail helper home. He did not wear boots, so he’s out. Do you all understand about our work?”

Haylee heard Jed’s peeved-sounding voice as he gazed around at the remaining nine members of the trail workers.

“I think we all do, Jed; the paperwork made it very plain. You’re concerned about safety issues, and I’m, for one, glad we’re wearing helmets like timber crews have. I appreciate that you have these for us to wear.”

“Thanks, Dave, you’ve all signed waivers of liability. And the session with the mayor explained this project. It’s challenging, but it’s also fun to see what we create, for folks in our community who might like to have hiking closer by than it once was. So far, the established Rail Trail gets a bit of use.”

“And we love hikin’ it,” Haylee spoke out.

The rest of the group clapped and spoke out in agreement.

“Before we go, a quick explanation, again, of the Rail Trail. Back in the day logging occurred here. So much timber got cut that the timber company brought in a train to bring it down from the mountains to the base of operations. That’s still called Pippin Corner, where we stand now. And the old end of the trail is Log Landing. That’s where the loggers loaded the train for its journey down the mountain. Now that we’ll add another mile to the trail, it’s gonna be named Log II at the end. We’ll finish creating a three mile hike, for folks of all ages.”

“Was there a sawmill here at Pippin Corner?”

“Yes, Jillian, there was. The employees of the sawmill got provided housing in town, on Christmas Lane. They paid a small fee to live in the houses that the sawmill built for them. ‘Course, when the timber company stopped cutting the wood, and bringing it down, the train, as well as the sawmill, ceased operation. Trails like this are being developed in places in the U.S. where similar situations existed.”

“What a grand story,” Jillian said as she clapped for Jed. The group joined in, acknowledging the history and preservation aspect of their project.

Equipment got shuttled up to the end of the trail, Log Landing. The crew spent that entire day preparing for the work they would start on Tuesday. They took breaks every hour, to rehydrate, apply sunscreen and insect repellent. An hour after lunch exhaustion set in, the heat and humidity of that June day caught them all off guard. They spent the last hour after they descended in their groups planning the work of the next few days.

Jed went to each group to assess how they got along with their work. He gave each group the same message, “You gotta work together; each of you three must perform, understand?”

After two days of hacking their way through foliage in the slightly uphill area, the group stood together on that Thursday morning.

“We’re not making the progress I anticipated. This is a heck of a lot harder.”

“Yeah, think we gotta change up what we’re doing,” another worker spoke up.

“That’s correct,” Jed nodded as he looked around at the trail workers. “I can see that you feel we’re not making much headway.”

“Let’s start measuring out the trail width, that standard is 18” to 25” or so.”

“Plus making sure we’ve got clearing on either side of the trail.”

“Like you said, Jed, 12 inches, the standard on each side of the trail.”

Haylee spoke up, "For sure we'll feel better if we see an actual trail being developed behind us. The front group can continue to hack, cut, saw, and tear away the shrubs and foliage in our way. And the next group clears the junk the proper distance away."

"Uh huh, I think it's gotta be that way. Three groups with three different tasks, and we need to change out the front group, that's really difficult work, change it every day."

Jed looked around at the group, "This the way you want to handle it?"

He looked into the faces of his work crew. He saw some nods, with several having blank expressions.

"We'll rotate the front task. I'll work alongside each of the three groups, to see how it's going."

For the rest of that day the procedure they decided upon seemed to work. They stowed the equipment they were allowed to at the head of the trail. The tired, sweaty, and uncomfortable group stood together in the parking lot.

"We'll still have the parking lot, correct?"

"Yup, that'll be the fourth week, hoping we'll speed up a little," Jed nodded to them.

"This hasn't been much fun," Haylee thought as she stowed her gear in her trunk. "Maybe I can help somehow, singing?"

On her drive home she shook her head, admonishing herself.

"Girl," she spoke out, "you can't fix everything, or anything; you gotta stop thinkin' like that. What would dad say?"

"Do what you can," she heard in the back of her mind.

It was dad.

She felt like each foot lifted with sticky asphalt on it, as she made her way upstairs to shower.

"Don't lie down, hit the shower."

She sang an old Beach Boys song she loved, "God only knows how much I love her."

The song improved her spirit. And the shower helped soothe her.

On Friday the groups tried the new effort. By the afternoon they all agreed that progress continued, better than before. On the way down they all commented about how pleasant the

new trail seemed to them. Everyone seemed in good spirits; Monday was the 4th of July and a day off for all of them.

When the trail crew passed the fairy garden Haylee made a mental note to stop there on the way up on Tuesday. She wanted to clear twigs and rearrange several rocks that got moved off the edge of the path. Haylee gave all seven wooden statues a quick look as she passed. The paint on the fairies and the wizard looked good to her.

She remembered again the first time she came to the fairy garden, with her mom. At her new school Haylee's mom learned about the trail. And the fairy garden, magic for Haylee, at her young age. She loved fairy stories. She snapped out of her reverie as she watched Ty stop by her car.

They talked in quiet voices. Haylee insisted they be just workers at the Rail Trail. But now they were off duty.

"May I see you?"

She looked up to him, "That would be fun; this weekend I'm on the boat with Jillian. Then Mom and I'll spend the 4th with Grandpa Oren at his home. But maybe we could meet for a milkshake sometime next week at night."

"I'll look at my schedule with Dad, and we can talk Tuesday, OK?"

Haylee beamed her biggest smile to him and nodded.

"Have a good break and Happy Fourth of July."

Ty returned with, "You have fun."

"Thanks for inviting us."

"I wanted to do something with the four of us since we didn't meet over the Fourth and the summer is getting away from us."

Seth, Witt, Jillian, and Haylee sat around the table on the patio. They demolished the chicken breasts Haylee cooked up. Witt brought potato salad his mom fixed. Jillian made chewy brownies for dessert, and Seth furnished sodas.

"You guys finally got to me."

Seth looked from one friend to the next, around the table.

"What're you sayin', Seth?"

"Your examples, the physical training, the discipline we've learned from sailing with Sir."

“Explain.”

“Talked to a recruiter, Marine Corps, I’m enlisting as soon as I graduate. I want that life, the VA benefits after I’ve served. I’m not HOPE material, but I have a brain. Yeah, I can see all your raised eyebrows. My future’ll be where I’ll be needed.”

“You’re needed, that’s for sure, Seth, but with the conflict, you know you’ll be overseas, into the thick of it.”

“Yeah, and I’m a patriotic son-of-a-gun. I want to serve. Haylee, you want the academy. I’ve been right at your side, in your training, and your avoiding all the bad crap, the booze, the drugs, watching my driving. I want to have a clear record when I graduate from high school.”

“Have you thought about, maybe, moving from being enlisted and going through officer training after you’ve been in for a few years?” Jillian asked.

“I have, and it is a way to officership, not the way you’ll do it, Haylee, but a way. And I think it’ll help in that I’m minority, a mixed black and Eurasian person.”

“That for sure maybe can help in your advancing,” Witt nodded, agreeing with Seth.

“All of us, we’ve used each other as good examples. But I gotta share one issue, our hormones. We’re still discovering sexual feelings, in ourselves and in each other. And there are so many guys and girls out there in the world.”

Haylee paused and went on, “It’s gonna be hard, how to deal with sex, with our plans for our lives.”

“I’m not screwing a lot of girls, just to get experience. I’m in it for a girl I can respect, who respects me, who cares, about now, about the future,” Witt said.

“That’s right, I want to love, and to be loved. That’s God, my family, myself. Love is the answer,” Jillian nodded to them.

“We’re just so blessed to have our relationships with each other.”

Seth added, “Yeah, blessed beyond measure.”

“We won’t be getting together as much, from now on.”

“Right, Witt, we aren’t little kids anymore. Jillian and I struggle with the trail work.”

“But it’s so good, finding out what hard work really feels like,” Jillian spoke.

“Yeah, it’ll give me a hint about what I might be doing out in the world as a Seabee.”

They stood up together and helped bring in the food, plates and all the other items from the patio table. Once they cleaned up they all walked out to their cars. Haylee looked from one friend to the next.

“Guys, I wonder, will we ever meet like this again?”

Tears formed in her eyes as she shook her head. They came together in a group hug.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Witt choked on his words.

They held on to each other.

“Each day’s precious.”

By day’s end of Thursday of the second week of trail building the workers started to get excited about their efforts.

“We’re two days ahead of schedule. And I’m lovin’ learning the songs, singing helps us. It was a great idea, whoever thought of it,” Jed looked around at the remaining seven workers.

Someone shouted a name; everyone clapped.

“We’re down to seven; injuries’ve hampered us a little.”

“Yeah, we’ve all learned not to overdo it. Breaks are critical,” Ty spoke up for the group.

Ty walked Haylee to her car as they all headed home.

“I’m sailing with your grandpa this weekend.”

“I’m glad the two of you get along so well. He’s really excited to see your progress, and your future plans for the academy.”

“Let’s go out to a movie next Saturday night.”

“I’d like that, Ty. I need to talk to you about stuff before school starts. Senior year, it’ll be so important.”

“Come through the park with me. I have a favorite place to sit.”

“That’d be great. It was a cool movie, a high school mixed race football team learning to get along.”

Ty and Haylee walked from the downtown movie theater to the beautiful park set in one area near the edge of Ony Springs. The summer eve cooled down, and a light breeze floated into their faces. Nearby flowering trees tickled their noses.

They found a park bench with a back to lean against. A tall light lit up the park and the path ahead of them.

"I love the trail work. It's what I'll be doing, something like that."

"Most of what I'll do will be connected with water, so I'm not so much on board with our work, but it's beautiful on the trail, and I get to see you every day."

"Yeah, we're even on the same team, some of the time."

"I like what Jed does, mixes up the groups so we get to know each other. Jillian's such a hard worker."

"Well, she'll work in a café; that's totally grueling, especially during busy times."

Ty took her hand and put it on his knee. He covered her hand with his own.

"So, what's the stuff you wanted to talk to me about?"

She turned to face him.

"I love four friends, you, Witt, Seth, and Jillian."

"But, not in the same way."

She smiled to him, "Yes, in the same way. I must let go of each of you, very soon. The five of us are going in very separate directions. I got a lot of emotional untying I must do."

"Memories of us?" he asked.

"Right, that's what it'll have to be. And so, I do not want to date you anymore. I want us to be friends, if that is possible. But the crazy, hot and steamy physical stuff, I can't have that with you. I won't; my future is too critical to me. I'm finding that I have a loyalty to Witt which seems to be putting him front and center of all of my friends. Ty, I thought, really thought, that he might die on the operating table, while they were taking out his tumor. I prayed and prayed. God's giving him another chance at his life. I want to be there for him, for this last year, and then I gotta let go. I care about you Ty, but I love Witt, a special bond. His friendship's long standing, since we were 10."

Haylee watched Ty's eyes. She sensed that he understood. She detected no flash of anger in his deep-set eyes.

"And when he got sick again, near the end of the school year, ooowww, I thought God might take him. Can you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Course," she saw tears in his eyes. "Mom, terrible hard, hope gone, God taking her, but taking her home."

He sobbed and then quieted. They hugged and held on.

“So, this means, I should see other girls, uh, women.”

“You need to, to find out what we’re like.”

“What about Jillian, would you be OK if I asked her out?”

“Uh huh, nice, I know she likes you, sees all that you do on the trail, your strength, your initiative to take on tasks, as I do.”

“I would need to tell my dad that she’s mixed race,; but she’s so fair-skinned and has beautiful shiny black straight hair.

“She works really hard on her appearance; the straight hair is through huge effort on her part.”

“Her family, her folks, white?”

“Uh huh, Jillian’s adopted.”

“Yeah, people are starting to do that, adopt a child of another race.”

“Right, at times it’s hard to find a white child who meets a family’s criteria.”

“She must have.”

“Yeah, her family story, how she came to be with her parents. It’s heartwarming. She’ll share with you.”

“I’m glad we’ve had this conversation. Sounds like all this’s bothered you for some time.”

“Fighting all the time with my conscience, should I talk to you, or what.”

“You shouldn’t do anything against what you feel is the right thing to do.”

Haylee smiled to him, “Yeah, that’s why we’re having this conversation.”

“What else?”

“Excited, I met with my congressman, Daniel Sorner. His office and I’ve been exchanging paperwork for a while now.”

“That’s right, you need the endorsement of a congressman, to support your attempt to gain admission to the Naval Academy.”

“I haven’t heard you mention any endorsement. What’s your situation?”

She watched him shake his head.

“I don’t need a congressional endorsement. But I can tell you, next summer, Swab Summer, like your Plebe Summer, is a critical piece in my placement at the Coast Guard Academy.

It's where they determine, and I find out, if a candidate has what it takes to make it in, and through the academy. It's like what you'll go through, your plebe time."

"I'm getting so excited."

He watched her brown eyes sparkle, livening up.

"We gotta get through senior year. But we'll have Mr. T. for Calc II; he's so awesome, and Mrs. Bertern for AP physics. They're both taskmasters, tough, but like what we'll have all through our academies."

"We're lucky to have super teachers like them."

"Yeah, in a small school like ours."

"Gosh, it's gotten late, I need to get you home."

"I'll make my midnight curfew, easy."

Once Haylee got in bed, she turned to her window. She always opened the curtains for gazing out at the night sky.

"Dad, I've done it, told Ty we'll be friends."

It wasn't her dad's star that she gazed at, but it was OK. She knew he understood.

The next two weeks of trail building went by fast. The crew worked on the trailhead parking lot, the expansion. That happened after they finished to the end of the trail, now named Log II. The last three days Haylee helped put the finishing touches up at the end of the trail, arranging logs where hikers could sit and look out at the mountains around them. They cleared a large area, so that a group of 20 or so could gather, for food, and for talks and lectures that might eventually be added to the trail activities. She helped transport equipment back to the trailhead. Wednesday and Thursday of the last week she and two other workers hiked the trail up and down, twice the first day, once Thursday.

"Whew, I now know what it feels like to be a pack animal, 'cause that's what I'm doing yesterday and today."

The other two transporters agreed with her.

"Tomorrow, we're all looking forward to Friday, our last day."

They stored this equipment in the trailer the mayor's office set up prior to the first day of trail work, over four weeks ago. Haylee watched the remaining trail crew smile and express their feelings about the whole trail experience.

“Oh wow, somethin’ I’ll never forget, a group effort, lots of sharing,” Jillian spoke up to Jed as he stood in front of them.

“Teamwork, pretty awesome teamwork,” Ty gazed around at the group.

Haylee nodded and smiled but said nothing. Others in the group shared their thoughts about the effort.

“Parking lot, it’s gonna be fine; we have eight more parking places,” Jed nodded to them.

“What about tomorrow?”

“Report at the usual time; we’ll do a quick trip up to look at our efforts.”

“And Mrs. Langdon?”

“Tomorrow, she’s joining us at 1 p.m. to hike up and back.”

“Some friendships’ve been paved, doing this project,” Jed added.

“That’s for sure,” David spoke up. “We learned a lot about each other.”

He smiled to the group, “I don’t know about you, but I think this’s been a lot of fun, hard work, but fun.”

“This summer job, a positive addition to my college application.”

“My hope’s that lots of people can enjoy this hike.”

Everyone clapped at Haylee’s comment.

“Catch of ride home with you?”

“Sure, Jillian, I didn’t realize, uh.”

“Yeah, I caught a ride here with Jed. My car’s outa commission for a little while. I told my folks I’d pay for half of the cost of updating the maintenance on it before school. But I need my check, the final one, from our work here.”

“Sheesh, that’s right, we do get paid one last time. It’s gone so fast.”

“I’ve really liked working outside; I’m building up muscles for carrying plates of food!”

“Right, Jillian, you’re working in the café during this fall.”

“Yeah, Wednesdays, from school’s out until close, and then on Sunday. That day it’ll be 6 to 2 p.m. That’ll give me time to get homework done when I get home.”

“You’re ambitious.”

“Gotta get ready, in a year, community college, and I’ll still work part time at the café, plus my classes and homework.”

After Haylee let Jillian off at her home she drove a little slower to home.

“Her folks just can’t help her; she doesn’t have the grades for HOPE. But she’s not complaining; Jillian will figure out what she wants to do. Hey, I’m gonna hafta work, gosh, so hard. But my deal is I think I know what I want to do. If it is to be, it is up to me.”

Haylee nodded her head as she drove her car up into the driveway. Later she would put it in the garage.

“Mom, I’m confident in my driving ability, maneuvering my car in the garage, leaving enough space for you,” she spoke out.

Friday, the last day of trail work, started out cloudy. The crew headed up, doing last minute cleanup of the lower trail and making certain the upper mile got cleared to everyone’s satisfaction. And Mrs. Langdon hiked up and back, keeping pace with the trail workers. Haylee saw the smile on her face.

“Job well done,” she nodded to the crew and Jed as they met at the trail head.