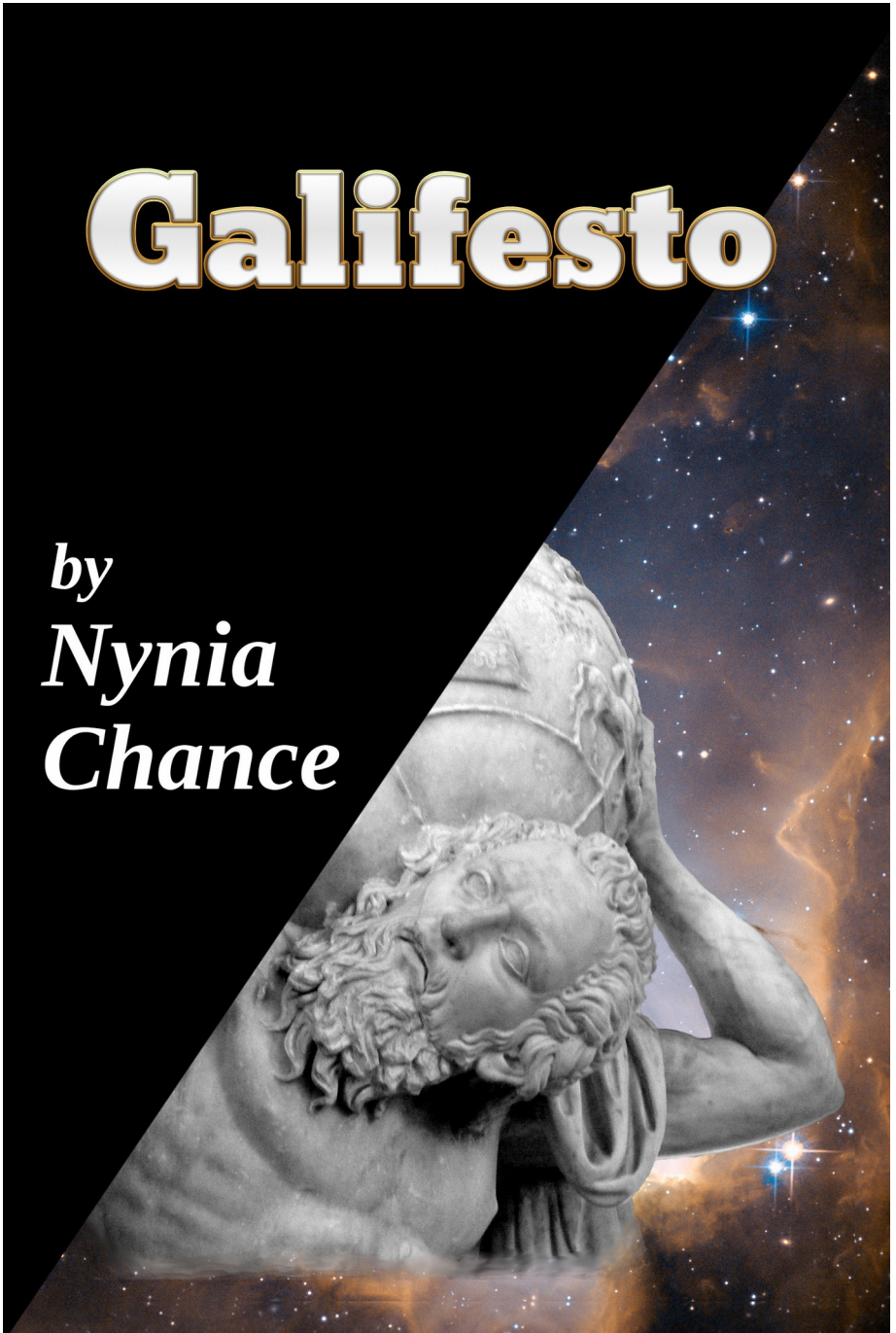


Galifesto

by
Nynia
Chance



Galifesto

A Love Story

by

Nynia Chance



Nexus of Now Media
Hollywood, Florida
U.S.A.

Note Regarding this version:

This document has been formatted to closely mirror the experience of the printed format. An image of the Atlas appears where blank pages appear in the printed book, so that this document may mirror the pagination.

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Dedications

This book is written in honor of George Orwell, in gratitude for the many ways his works have influenced me. His words have helped shape my hopes for our world, and inspire me to strive toward their fulfillment.

Galifesto was also inspired by the need for an alternative view of humanity than that shared by Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, so I must dedicate this book to Ms. Rand, as well. I wish the conclusions of her life had brought her the joy and peace all human beings deserve.

Primarily, though, this book is dedicated to you. You are blazing your own path through this world, and it's my sincerest wish that your trail will leave it better than you found it. May my words help you discover thoughts and experiences that are, if not exactly what you're looking for, precisely what you're ready to find.

Thank you, most kindly, for all the good you do.

Nynia Chance



PART ONE:
The Unexamined Life



Chapter 1

What Is Truth?

I can't remember when I first realized that in our struggle for a better world, there is no "Us" and there is no "Them." There's only team We the People, each striving in our own way against that feeling of something not-quite-right. I certainly never saw myself as a leader on our team. I always figured that lasting change had to come through someone special and important, someone larger-than-life. So when I found myself...

Wait. Hold that thought. I'd probably better start at the beginning. My beginning, that is; I don't remember farther back than that.

I was born Elizabeth Franklin, the newest patriotic Member of the Incorporated States of America. Okay if you want to get technical, I was born nameless, and my innocent little heart was wide open to all the world. Isn't that kinda daunting, now that you think about it? That as babies, even the most cruel of us started off so pure and tender-hearted?

Well anyway, I was born, then my parents named me and clothed me and set about their business of raising me in their image. Come to think, I wasn't even a Member the day I was born. I wasn't automatically registered in the Central Member Database, because I was naturally born at home due to the values of home-birthing – fundamentalist and financial – without a registered home-birthing nurse or doctor.

Remember, only specifically licensed professionals could register a birth in the CMDDB. Of course, even if we had such a doctor there at the house, they still couldn't have logged on from there. See, we were in a rural factory town without any Innet. All we had was the town Infranet you could use for work or school if you could afford a computer, which of course we couldn't. Therefore, like most babies not born in a hospital, I wasn't registered until the next day when my

father went to the factory office to get all the paperwork done and they sent their staff medic around to verify the info. Since you're not a Member until you're in the CMDB, I was, technically, born stateless. Not like all that sort of thing meant anything to me as a kid. I don't even remember my folks ever mentioning it, and I can remember pretty far back.

Let's see, as far back as I can remember... My earliest memory is standing in a dirt yard, looking up at two men on a half-finished roof of a partly-built house. The sun was bright behind them, making it late afternoon of a hot day's work. We didn't know then how toxic the cheap building materials were, so I was allowed to wander and play while they worked. I wanted to help, so I picked up the corner of a piece of Cemeprex leftover from the scaffolding and tried throwing it toward them so they could use it. I thought one of the men was my dad, though I could have been mistaken. Ha, wouldn't it be so perfect if in my very first memory, I was mistaken? What a great setup to a recurring punch line that would be!

Anyway, I had to have been less than two years old, and that had to have been the small three-bedroom house my family built to house me and my six brothers and sisters. They had been granted a land-lease by the factory due to my dad being a shift supervisor, and because of how many we were. With me there was nine, which was far too big for the family dorms. Funny thing is, my mom was also the seventh in her family, though not the youngest. That made me the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, if you wanted to count it that way, which I always secretly did. I had heard something like that before and it sounded to my young ears as though it should mean something.

And when you're the tail end of a long line of hand-me-downs, what you want more than anything is a feeling that you mean something.

Oh, it wasn't as bad as I'm sure that makes it sound. I always knew my parents loved me, and did their best by me. I also had some of my own things, even if I had to share them now and then. I could see from early on how not everything worked out the way I'd have liked, but I also realized it didn't have to be that way for me to be happy, and know I was loved.

For example, I never really believed in Santa Claus, though I can't clearly remember why. Maybe it was because by the time I was old enough to recognize the name "Santa," I was also old enough to recognize the uncle or neighbor in the Santa suit. I do remember mildly resenting the realization that the adults were trying to lie to me. But, since I knew it was important to them, I kept my little secret and

played along. It seemed to make them happy, and I felt their happiness was worth protecting as long as I could.

This leads to my second-earliest clear memory. It was Christmas morning, when my siblings and I used to wake up early and rush to see what Santa brought us. We always had our stockings filled with the unshelled nuts, an orange and a candy cane, with a small present underneath that we could play with. This kept us busy until my mother and father woke up and we opened our gifts from under the tree: two each, one from our parents, and one from one of our siblings.

I knew exactly what I'd find under my stocking that year. I had asked for only one thing, a small thing, so trifling that even around six or seven I knew it wouldn't be too expensive. It was a Snuggly Wugglys coloring book that came with its very own stickers, and I even already had old crayons I could use with it. My little black and white plastic Pawprince Panda was my favorite thing in the whole wide world, and it spent all of Christmas Eve clutched tightly under my pillow. At dawn's first light I held it tightly in my little hand as we ran to go meet and color in its playmates in the pages.

But they weren't there to greet us. Under my stocking was a coloring book with entirely different animals, with a similar-but-not-included packet of animal stickers taped to it. In my stocking was a note from Santa in my mom's perfectly looping handwriting:

Dear Lizzy,

I'm very sorry, but the North Pole has run out of Snuggly Wugglys coloring books this year. I know you are very good with colors and I hope you enjoy this book just as much. I picked out the stickers just for you.

Love,

Santa Claus

It's a little heartbreaking now, when I feel an echo of the sting I felt then. I feel freshly sad for that Christmas child, not because she didn't find what she wanted, but because of how matter-of-factly it all sank in. My little girl heart ached less for the loss of the Snuggly Wugglys coloring book with matching stickers, and more from knowing how much it must have pained my mother to have to write that note. People say that children should be spared the heartaches of adulthood, but they're too sharp to be protected fully. They know.

And that's what makes my grown-up heart ache a little now, thinking of all the lessons that child learned that nobody ever intended to teach her. Little Lizzy just accepted that in life, you just don't get

what you want, no matter how badly you want it. And sometimes, the more you wanted it, the less likely you were to have it. Somewhere along the line, my heart also learned that if you didn't get what you wished for, it's because you weren't good enough, and didn't deserve it. Those were terrible lessons that took me years to unlearn. But at the time, I couldn't see things any other way. To me, that's just the way life was.

The upside is that because Little Lizzy knew Santa was a myth, she didn't really believe that Santa had the power to grant all things to all children, as long as they behaved in a way that pleased him. Thinking about it, she could have felt a guilty sting of wondering whether she'd failed Santa by not being good enough for goodness' sake. But she knew it wasn't a capricious denial of her heart's desire by an all-powerful supernatural force of gift-giving. It was just a human failing, a case of bad timing: a disappointment, but not a cosmic injustice. If there was a Santa whose job it was to give children exactly what they asked for, Little Lizzy was sure he would have granted her wish.

I mention this because I now realize that I probably should have been a little more clued-in as to how different my perspective was from what it "ought" to have been, even as early as that. Since I knew I saw Santa in a very different way than I was expected to, I probably should have thought to question whether I also had a different view of God.

The parallels between Santa and God are so obvious to me: all-knowing, all-wise in judgment, all-loving of children but strict and unmoving if they transgress. Behave, and you will be granted all the gifts you could ask for. Misbehave, and you have but coal to look forward to... and fire and brimstone and... you get the idea. I can't believe I never saw it before.

You see, God played an even stronger role in my childhood than most of the rest of the I.S.A. at the time, if you can imagine that. He was as omnipresent in my world as Santa Claus in December. As you may already have guessed based on sibling counts, I'm from a very long, very religious line with very fundamentalist ideas about families. Namely, they should be begun as early as possible, grow as large as possible, and do battle for the church as much as possible, and then some.

I know what you might be thinking. You may think "battle," and figure, "Oh, yeah, like I battle traffic, or battle with an urge to finish that dessert." If so, you vastly underestimate the extent to which my Christian community felt bullied, besieged and belittled by the "outside world." To us, everything was viewed in terms of a literal war

between the forces of Good and Evil, and we were soldiers on the front lines. I know most in the Puritanic Party *talk* about the secular world as a diabolic enemy out to destroy the work of Jesus Christ, but where I'm from, we tried to *do something about it*. I was raised to quite literally do battle for Christ in thought, in word and, if so called, in physical deed.

Forget that the Puritanic Party effectively controlled both law and law enforcement through obstinacy and obstruction, with the Pragmatican Party talking a weak game of opposition before folding at half-time. We still felt isolated and hunted by an amoral majority whose war on righteousness mandated that we stay ever watchful for our enemy the Adversary.

Inevitably, we found the enemy everywhere. We didn't feel the Puritanic Party as a whole was pure enough in its devotion to what we considered the proper Authority. Those we didn't consider Puritan enough were invariably called Pragmatic. That is, all who disagreed with us were automatically deemed agents of the Adversary, and therefore the evil antithesis of all we stood for. Every perceived slight, every sense of rejection, every disappointment from the world was seen as evidence of the Adversary's dedicated mission to destroy everything we held dear.

In this spirit, I dutifully looked to the poster next to the bathroom mirror every morning as I brushed my teeth, imagining myself with a Belt of Truth under a Breastplate of Righteousness that guarded my heart from sin. My thoughts were guarded by the Helmet of Salvation, knowing I was kept safe by the Shield of Faith. I prepared to keep always at the ready the Word of God as a Sword to cut through the evils of the world with its piercing point of Truth. Somehow I never consciously noticed the shoes labeled "Gospel," which is funny because I never realized the poster left off what was probably the most important word in the armor as named in scripture: Peace.

I spent every morning concentrating on preparing for war, when I should have been thinking of how I could let my footsteps be guided by the Gospel of Preparation for Peace. Though on some level I believe I was, because despite all my thoughts of battle, in my heart I always knew peace. I found the teachings of Christ to be so filled with love and kindness, I just couldn't feel any other way. Even while listening to sermons intended to threaten us with the thick glare of fire and brimstone if we went astray, somehow I only saw a shining path of light and joy back to our Father's welcoming arms.

The truly surprising thing is that I honestly had no idea how rare my perspective was in my community. I really can't imagine how I

managed to keep that tranquil hope in my heart. Our church taught that we were in the End Days before Armageddon, and the adults tried to prepare for those dark times from a frightfully early age. The warnings and watch-cries were frequent and detailed, and often their eyes shone with a joyful anticipation as if for an upcoming birthday party.

The sermon I remember most came when I was probably about nine or ten. I was staying with a girl from my Sunday School while my parents traveled with a Church group to go do battle against some attempt to use government money to bring back Godless public schooling. I was really excited about the stay-over with Judy, since she was pretty and talented and popular, while I never really had any friends who weren't grownups. It was an awkward time for me, since I was the only girl in my class who hadn't hit puberty.

Later I found out that "delay" was probably in part because we relied on homemade toys and survived mostly on our own homegrown produce and the dairy products we traded for with a neighbor. We couldn't afford the company store prices for the kinds of dairy and meat and other manufactured food that made up what everyone considered the "normal" American diet, let alone all the plastic toys. You know, everything that was normal, back before we knew all the effects that stuff had on child development.

Since we didn't know, at the time I just felt a little deprived. When you're poor like we were, you couldn't just pop over for a candy bar if you wanted, you had to save for it. So, at the time, I was sure there was something wrong with me. Yet Judy never seemed to judge me for it, and that made me love her all the more.

The first night I stayed over, her family gathered together and her father read to us from the Book of Revelations. He then talked to us about the dark days soon to come when the Adversary would unleash the armies of evil, and waves of fire would cover the Earth. He stressed that we must always be watchful, preparing every moment to be worthy of the grace that would spare only the chosen from such nightmarish devastation.

When it was through it was time for bed, yet naturally we couldn't sleep right away. Instead we lay there quietly, while I tried to get comfortable in Judy's large, but unfamiliar bed. Soon, though the quiet was disrupted by the heart-wrenching sound of my friend crying quietly into her pillow. More concerned than embarrassed, I touched her arm and asked her what was wrong.

"Lizzy, I don't want to see the world covered in fire and war. I don't want to die! I'm just so scared!" Her voice was quiet and hushed, but earnest. You see, we took these things as literally and imminently

as the adults, perhaps even more so.

Even so, I was surprised when I heard she was scared. Not just because I had admired her so much, but I sincerely saw nothing to fear. When I thought of the End Days when God brought finality to the human experience, I couldn't imagine it as a painful or troubled time. Sure, I know the adults talked about the Armies of Darkness and Torment, but I really didn't believe God would let His innocent children be harmed by such things, just to allow His son to return to us. My God was a loving God, and I welcomed thoughts of His warm embrace reaching the physical world with His son's return, imagining it would be as peaceful and beautiful as I believed He was. I moved closer to my friend so I could gently hug and comfort her.

"Judy, please don't be scared. It will all be okay. This is the Gospel, from our Father in Heaven. He really is our Father, and that means He loves us and won't let anything horrible happen to us. So when the time comes for Jesus to rise again, it will be happy and beautiful, just like He is. I'm really looking forward to it!" My warm hug and utter confidence apparently soothed her. We loved and trusted our own fathers, so it was easy for us to project that comfort onto a Heavenly one. She smiled at me and wiped her tears, then we talked about comics and school as we drifted off to sleep.

I found out later we were the lucky ones. Our fathers were faithful in our church, but they weren't as... earnest, shall we say, about some of the harsher points of our church's teachings. Sure, children were little chore-doers and employees-in-training who were to be seen and not heard. Women were expected to be dutiful servants to their husband's will, as proxy of God's will, tasked by Heaven to raise up perfect little soldiers for God and country. Technically, only one person's opinion mattered, and when the father was absent, it was up to the mother to enforce his will.

Though this was generally how things were in our house, it wasn't as strict as it could have been. Weeks were long and filled with school and church functions, Saturdays with chores, and Sunday with the dreary oppressive weight of the Bible and boredom.

Don't get me wrong, I loved reading the Bible, but something about Sundays made it seem less like a joy and more like being grounded one full day a week. We had a very strict interpretation of Keeping the Sabbath, which is to say nothing but religion could happen on that day. And we had a pretty strict interpretation of what counted as religion. Not even playing games together in the yard as a family could qualify.

But even so, Judy and I, we were the lucky ones. We were asked

what we thought sometimes, and we got nice, if small considerations now and again. Our mothers had benign opinions, but they weren't cowed into trembling silence for fear of their husbands lashing out at them with words or fists. Our fathers were devout, but they took the teachings with a kinder, Christlike heart.

I still remember the first and only time my father had spanked me. I was five, and had just started preschool a couple weeks before. He didn't know this at the time, but I had seen a girl named Felicity spanked a few days prior, because she slapped another girl in our class who had taken a toy she wanted. The teacher made Felicity lift up her denim skirt and hit her several times with a paddle. We saw a couple bright red welts on her leg, so I could only imagine how much worse it was where the paddle hit the most.

Felicity screamed and cried, and we were all frozen still, terrified into wide-eyed silence. I started to walk over to her to hug and comfort her, but the teacher threatened me with the paddle and ordered Felicity into the corner. Her parents were furious and tried to sue the school, but the state had given schools the power to override parental refusals to hit their children. Further, the laws had made them immune to lawsuits or even reprimands for hurting the children entrusted to their care. Felicity's family couldn't afford any other school, and both parents had to work so they couldn't homeschool her. The little girl had to stay in a school with the teachers who terrorized her.

Like most of the kids I saw who were subjected to school-administered violence, over the years Felicity just got into more and more trouble. The administrators said they hit the children because it was kinder than suspension or expulsion, but I couldn't imagine they'd suspend a five-year-old for acting up in the first week she was ever in a classroom.

I thought of Felicity every time I heard a sermon talking about the importance of "correcting children with the rod, not out of anger, but out of love," knowing from experience that the rod didn't generally make a child feel the self-correcting spirit of love. Instead, it taught us that if we made mistakes, the people in whom we placed our most sacred, innocent trust would hurt us for it. We learned that missteps deserved physical and emotional pain as a punishment, setting us up to repeat those feelings of hurt in our lives over and over again. I know spanking is supposed to be just a harmless disciplinary tool, but in truth, we must admit that hitting is hitting. To a child's mind, and I've heard it argued that also in our adult subconscious, there's no hard line between different types of violence. Hitting is hitting, and either it's always wrong, or always right.

That is why we kids demonstrated that violence begets violence, growing to turn that destructive streak onto ourselves, on others, or both. Parents and teachers told stories of how badly they'd been beat as children and held it out as a great example of how much good it would do us too. But it seemed to me to be a nonstop cycle of violence, like any other kind of hazing. It seemed like a terrible disease that wouldn't stop until everybody was hurting one another instead of helping each other right our wrongs.

I eventually learned that not every kid took spanking as hard as I did, like one of the kids from my neighborhood I still keep in touch with. She told me once that she didn't mind the spanking so much, as it was the only time her mother really touched her. So to her, it became a togetherness thing. She would find herself acting up just so her mom would give her that physical contact she so dearly craved. But she still wouldn't spank to her kids when she grew up. She said that she would hug them and be patient with them and listen to them, helping them learn how to behave through love. Even if they were bad like she thought she was, she was sure she'd be able to find a way to teach them through love. And though it's been super tough on her sometimes, she still manages to hold back her hand of anger. Instead, she extends it as a guiding comfort for her children's troubled times.

I don't even remember what it is that I did that made my parents so upset with me they decided I needed to be spanked. But my father told me that he was very disappointed, and that he had to spank me. I remember thinking, "Nobody is making you, you're choosing to," and being very disappointed in him, too. Then he put me over his knee and hit me with his belt on my pajama bottoms a few times, and it stung and hurt. But I didn't want to cry and scream like the girl at school, so instead I bit my lip really hard. I've heard that children learn to hold back from showing their true feelings at a depressingly early age. The worst is actually for boys, who learn to hide their needs and feelings as early as four, because of how they're treated when they don't. I think I can relate to that.

Whatever the reason, I was very angry with my father for taking advantage of how much bigger he was, for hurting me instead of helping me to behave. I thought he was being a bully, but I didn't want to say it, knowing that adults never seemed to care how children feel. But I guess the hurt and betrayal showed in my eyes, because I remember seeing my father looking back at me with surprise, quickly followed by regret. We never talked about that, and I guess he figured I'd never remember. But I know he remembered, because he never hit me again.

And that's how my father both lost and earned my lasting respect while I was still very young. The way I understood things, he had lost my trust when he hit me, then regained it when he hugged me and chose never to do it again. I didn't even realize then just how hard it is for parents to break away from that cycle of violence towards those they love most dearly in the world. To be honest, it doesn't take much moral strength to abstain from something that doesn't even tempt you. But to turn away from something you find so compelling that you hardly feel there's any other choice: that takes the strongest moral character.

Unfortunately my school district never found that strength. At least Felicity was transferred to another district before high school, when the discipline also started including strip-searches or even arrests for trivial infractions like talking back to a teacher once too often. They had also started attacking children, even preschoolers, with the electrocution-gun Fazers used by school police. In another district, a couple of children had even died after being Fazed without so much as a warning by truant officers who went after them for skipping school. The Authorities said that it was important to give school cops Fazers instead of guns to protect kids from being shot, but you can't honestly tell me the truant officers would have shot at those children. Rather, it seemed pretty clear that Authorities were starting to use Fazers to force children into submission instead of going to the effort of trying to talk to them. I guess it was too much to ask those responsible for children's safety to handle their jobs like mature, responsible adults.

There was another reason Felicity's parents felt they couldn't afford to leave her at risk for school-administered violence. The year before, we had lost another school friend to child abuse. Doris's death wasn't at school, but it was a tragic reminder of how far things can go once you start down a particular path in anger. Doris's father had started taking a paddle to her when she was only six months old, so when one of his "punishments" of his own daughter finally went too far, we were all horrified but not surprised.

So yeah, Judy and me, we were the lucky ones.

I was also lucky in that my parents valued my education, despite my being female. To this day I'm not sure why, since even grade school was so expensive, yet education so undervalued that educating girls was a poor investment. On average, women earned half to two-thirds of what a man was paid for equal labor. Besides, I was expected to become a full-time mother. At the time I assumed my parents thought I'd be a good homeschooler for my own children, or would have teaching to fall back on if it turned out I couldn't have kids. It

never occurred to me that it may have been simply because they were proud of my potential and wanted to help me fulfill it.

No, I didn't see any reason to be proud of myself, not ever. Judy was pretty and talented, while all I had going for me was being smart. Somehow I never worked out how to relate to others my own age, and this meant Judy was my only friend apart from a few adults who weren't teachers or preachers. Because I never talked to my peers, I didn't realize what an exception it was that adults were so encouraging to me. Young ladies were supposed to be educated enough to be able to raise up good recruits for the army of God, of course, but rarely were they pushed to excel. Yet I was encouraged to read as deeply and broadly as I wished, and to really think about what I read and pray about what it meant to me. My parents taught me that if I did this, I would be led to truth and God's path for me.

I heard this encouragement as literally and broadly as I took everything else, which by now you may rightly suspect means I didn't exactly hear it the way it was intended. I was rewarded at school and at home for reading and writing well, so I developed a love of learning. I was rewarded in church and at home for my love of reading and interpreting religious texts from the Bible, so I developed a love for religion.

The unintended part is that I developed a love for learning about all religions, not just my own. In my grade school library I began devouring books on ancient religions, finding with great interest echoes of lessons and stories that I had found in the Bible. There was the Egyptian god Osiris who had died and resurrected and was keeper of the dead. There were the Roman mysteries of Mithras, hinting at an untold story of his resurrection and salvation in an afterlife. Greek mythology was the most engrossing, with its personification of everything, and how their gods playing direct roles in lives of mortals. Those stories were much like I imagined God's hand was always moving through our own lives.

One story I found particularly compelling was that of Atlas. I had remembered hearing that he was ill-fated to shoulder up the burden of the Earth, much like Jesus Christ, so I somehow always had a picture of him as a tragic martyr to whom we owed symbolic gratitude. But when I read his story in my grade school library book, I found out he had actually fought against the Greek gods and was defeated with the rest of the Titans. His punishment was to shoulder up Heaven on his back, to keep it forever above and separated from the Earth. If Atlas shirked his task, the Earth would not come crashing down; rather, it would finally attain Heaven.

So to my Christian analogies, I then thought of Atlas more like the Adversary: a tormented traitor in the Heavenly War who was cast out and tasked to keep Earth down below, testing and strengthening us so that we could make our own way back up to the right hand of God. Yet while I quickly tried to adapt the story to my customary cosmology, it was the first time I was aware of having made assumptions based on what people had told me that turned out to be easily verified as untrue. Of having treasured a belief that proved utterly backwards, once I finally bothered to check it out for myself. After that, it started to sink in that maybe I should start being a little more open to seeking out truths that may contradict what I thought I knew. That maybe I should start approaching others' beliefs with a mind that was a little less fixed.

I can't say I actually changed my mind on much at that age, but I did start laying a stronger foundation of religious scholarship, however rudimentary. My religious searching continued farther and broader, as far as the tiny "Fiction – Mythology" section could take me. Once that was exhausted, I put myself on the lookout for more I could learn. I began seeing truth everywhere I looked, and tried to evaluate it in its own light. Rather than fitting all I found into the framework of my Christianity, I started to see the tranquility in Buddhism, devotion in Islam, wisdom in the Tao te Ching, and so on and so forth.

I figured I wasn't too good for any good idea, no matter who had it first. I felt in my heart that I was following God's plan for me, to learn to see His face through others' eyes. And since I felt my parents so proudly supporting my religious scholarship, I imagined they'd always be proud of what I found so long as I kept searching and praying for truth.

Eventually, inevitably, I would learn how heart-breakingly wrong I was. This painful realization came during my senior year in high school, as I was working to set up the... Oh wait, I'm getting ahead of myself again. Goodness, so sorry, but that does bring me back to where all that started.

It began all the way back in high school, right before my senior year. I was so very proud that I was able to go to high school all the way through, since not every kid was able to renew their tuition and I didn't have a full scholarship. I got a partial tuition voucher from the factory due to my grades and my dad's position, and because I was always able to get letters of recommendation. But it was still a bit of a struggle to keep up. As I said, my family was pretty poor compared to most people, even in a factory town. Poor enough that even though nobody ever said anything, I knew what we were.

It may sound silly, but I was kinda proud of our poverty, and all we

accomplished despite it. Even though everybody said that all it takes to be rich is to work hard and keep your nose clean, I saw it another way. My father worked every day but Sunday, and despite the few hours we had with him, I could see he wasn't dirty or lazy or all the other things that were said about the poor. Instead, I saw him as virtuous and self-sacrificing, as a good man should be. Despite all the visiting preachers essentially teaching that Jesus loved the greed of the wealthy and rewarded the faithful with riches, I always remembered His embrace of the poor. After all, Jesus said it was harder for a rich man to enter heaven than for a fully-laden camel to pass through the small gatehouse door, the "eye of the needle." That camel had to be relieved of its burden, then go down onto its knees to make it through. Clearly, He didn't approve of wealth-hoarders, and valued those who continually struggled, which I thought included me.

I hardly had any right to feel so virtuous by virtue of my adversities, since I never knew what real struggling was. We had to make it on just my father's paycheck, but as a supervisor at least his hours and pay were regular. We always had our tiny-but-comfortable home, and food to eat, even if sometimes that meant sharing with family and church members through hard times, both ours and theirs. And my parents always found ways to pay for things that were important for my education. I didn't even have to work to help pay the bills, though from middle school onwards I did always have some kind of job at the school to get free breakfast and lunch, and to help pay the portion of tuition the factory vouchers didn't cover.

Most kids had some kind of job, but thanks to family connections and being the seventh in a long line of student employees, I was able to get work in the school office for a few hours a week. It was indoors, and it let me learn valuable office and computer skills, which meant I had less competition each year for even better jobs. I felt a little guilty for all the other kids since there were always more of us needing work than the school had openings, but the same was true for the outside world as well. The school taught that there not being enough jobs to go around was a valuable lesson on how to make it in life, and at the time I took that at face-value. Every advantage I had, I personally earned through hard work and perseverance, I had thought, so the other kids would just have to work harder.

The rest of my tuition was covered by my participation in the Future Officers of the American Military, a.k.a. FOAM. Tuition would actually have been fully covered by FOAM if I'd signed an Intent to Enlist and joined the Military as soon as I graduated. But I had planned to be married and start a family at that point, so instead I just

participated as much as I could. I was on the marching team, was in all the clubs, scored near-perfectly in every FOAM class, and otherwise threw myself fully into every opportunity it had to offer. There, I wasn't just another meek little girl who never fit in. I was the driven cadet who rose through the ranks at a rate that surprised even me.

Commander Keane was the first adult I'd ever met who didn't seem to judge my capabilities as being more limited than a boy's. He had the misfortune to be there for my nervous breakdown crying fit during my first year, brought on by all the pressures to be scholastically and spiritually perfect. He never held it against me though, or even mentioned it as he supported me in ways that I'd never seen a young woman supported before. And over time, my fellow cadets came to support me just as strongly, with camaraderie I had never before imagined I'd ever enjoy. We were a team, all for one and one for all, and it felt so good to be a part of it.

Outside of FOAM, Judy was still my only friend, but I didn't get to see much of her through most of high school. I was super busy with work and school, and she was busy with... well, being Judy. Each year she was our grade's class Executive Officer and top cheerleader, as popular as when we were children, but I couldn't resent her for it. She was still the nicest person I knew, and was kind to me whenever she saw me.

So I was super excited to begin our senior year, as we'd finally have a shared activity that would give us more time to see each other. She was, of course, elected Student Executive Officer for the whole school. And quite surprisingly, to me anyway, I was made Student Commander of the whole FOAM unit. This meant I also had a voice at Student Council meetings just like the real Supreme Commander of the American Military had a voice on the real Executive Council of the American government. However, in the Student Council, we each got to vote instead of like in the real world where the Incorporated States of America Chief Executive Officer made all the final calls. This meant that I felt a real level of responsibility, which I took pretty seriously. While I was of course proud to represent FOAM, I was even more excited to be able to work directly with Judy on important student issues.

Of course, it also meant I'd get to work with the Student Assistant Officer, Derek Channery. I'd had a secret crush on Derek for as long as I could remember, but I'd never had the nerve to talk to him. It wasn't like he was some super sports star or the kinda guy all the girls swooned over, but I think that's what made me like him more. He was cute in a way that was, I dunno, real, and with a personality that was

truly kind when he wasn't busy clowning around. He was super smart, super funny, and had a good heart that you could just feel every time he laughed. I knew he'd never even consider liking me "in that way," but that didn't keep me from giggling inwardly just a little when I thought of being able to see him at least once a week during the upcoming school year.

Judy and I wanted to get together before the school year started, so we could catch up on each other's life and plan out our top priorities for the upcoming year. So, right after I got back from the FOAM boot camp, she invited me over to her place so we could talk. She had said that she had one project in mind that she just knew I'd want to come together on, so she and I could present it to the Student Council as a team and make it happen. I tried to play it cool, like my opinion on... well, anything was asked all the time, trying to remind myself that she was my friend long before she was Student Executive Officer. That made it easier for me to handle when she dropped the bomb of her Grand Plan.

"Liz, I think the school should have a program that lets students keep coming to classes if they get pregnant." Her eyes were so bright, her voice so breathlessly excited as the words tumbled out, that I couldn't quite connect them to what was actually being said.

"Um... don't they already have a school for that?" I was working slowly, trying to feel out the minefield I suddenly saw before me.

She gave me a double-take, obviously surprised at my reaction. "You mean the 'pretto'? Don't you think they'd rather keep going to the same classes with their same friends, instead of having to go off and leave them behind?"

So far, she hadn't seemed to see the problem with her plan, so I tried to be tactful. "Um, don't you think they'd rather be around other people with their same problem? You know, a kind of support network?"

She just blinked at me in confusion, as though we were having different conversations. "Their friends *are* their support network! Do you think they really *want* to be bussed off to some dank little one-room so-called 'school' to be preached at about what horrible irresponsible sinners they are, like being sent off to some kind of convent?"

I have no idea what was on my face, but it triggered something in Judy that made her pause and blink again, this time with disbelief. "Wait... Liz, do you have a problem with this?"

My own disbelief could no longer be contained. "Judy, you're asking me to support teen *pregnancy!*" Immediately, I wished I'd tried

harder to contain myself, because I then saw something I never, ever even imagined could happen.

Judy got furious.

“No, Liz, I’m asking you to support pregnant *teens!* You know, mothers? Of little babies?” I started to try to stammer something conciliatory but she waved her hand to bat away my protest. “No, no, I don’t want to hear it. You spend all this time picketing and handing out pamphlets about how women must be required to give birth to every potential baby, but you won’t do a single thing to help them when they’re actually pregnant. And once the babies are born? They can just rot away from starvation and disease for all you care.” Her eyes were flashing with a fire that seriously took me aback.

Both the accusation and her anger stung me, deeply, and I vainly tried to defend myself against it. “Now that’s not—”

“Really? *Really?! When’s the last time you picketed to provide infant nutrition? Health care for moms and babies? Child care so they can get a freaking job because you people won’t freaking push for a freaking paid leave so babies can be with their mommies when they’re so tiny and helpless and need them the most?*” Her tears were welling up, but her tidal wave of anger surged stronger. “You say you’re pro-life, Liz, but you won’t lift a finger for the living. If you spent half all that time and money on actually helping moms and babies, you wouldn’t need to spend the other half on fighting abortion because moms could fight it themselves. Moms wouldn’t... girls wouldn’t...” She couldn’t continue. Her tears finally won out.

They took me over, too. Something had happened, something terrible enough to make Judy so deeply upset that she’d cry in front of me for only the second time in our lives. I leaned forward to hug her just like the first time, and we both sobbed, though I didn’t know why. I wasn’t even angry anymore. I just knew my friend was in pain, and I wanted to make it better.

For I don’t know how long, her “I’m sorry”s overlapped my “It’s okay”s, until finally the tears subsided enough to let her speak. She wiped her eyes and hugged me tighter for a moment before pulling back.

“I’m sorry, Liz, I really am, that wasn’t how I wanted this to go. It’s just, you’re so tenderhearted, I wanted to give you something to focus on that I thought might really mean something, that might help. You know, might make a difference.” She paused there, trying to rally the strength to say the words she dreaded having to share. Finally, she took a deep, shuddering breath, and almost whispered in her exhale, “Marissa’s dead.”

The news crept through me like a glacier in my veins, leaving me cold and numb. Marissa. Marissa Langley. Cheerleader, track star, life of the party Marissa Langley. The person I had been jealous of all through high school because I imagined she had nonstop parties and money and a hundred times more Judy-time than I did. Gone. No. It was impossible.

“Are you serious?” I felt like an idiot as soon as I heard my voice, but fortunately Judy was still more concerned about how I felt than what I said. “I mean... how? *Why?*”

She was quiet for a moment, then started in slowly. “Well, it’s... you have to promise to keep this a secret. I mean, some people may find out eventually, but you can never ever tell anyone at school. People are already talking suicide, or car accident, but her parents are saying medical emergency. Which is kinda true.”

I just kept my mouth shut, trying not to say anything else stupid in the ages it took for Judy to get where she was going.

“Okay. Um, she got pregnant. And she was scared. I didn’t know, I...” she choked a moment, then brought her voice back under tenuous control. “She didn’t want anyone to know. She didn’t want to hurt anybody with it. She just... she wanted it to just go away. So... she tried to make it all go away.”

Heaven help me, I was still confused. “I don’t get it. I thought you said she didn’t kill herself.”

“Oh no, she didn’t! She never would have killed herself! She just, well, you know how you can’t, I mean, girls can’t, um, at least not without their parents and a doctor’s recommendation?” She was trying hard to tell me without actually saying what had happened, and it took me a while to figure out what she’d meant.

My breath caught in my throat as realization slowly dawned. “She... she tried to... um, have a... an...?”

I couldn’t finish, so Judy continued. “Yeah. I don’t know who or how or what, but she tried to do it on her own or something. I don’t – I don’t know the details. I didn’t want to ask. She tried to go to a hospital and then a clinic when... well, when she had trouble afterward. But it was too late.”

I was numb. I couldn’t feel anything... No, I felt *something*. I felt cold. I didn’t *like* Marissa, but that wasn’t her fault, it was just, well, maybe I was jealous. I felt guilty. I felt sick.

I then felt Judy’s hand on my knee as she continued. “Her parents called me because I was her best friend. They wanted to know if I knew anything was going on. I... I wish I did. I pray to God, I wish I did. I didn’t know what to... I went in her room, and found her

journal. Her parents... they couldn't, so they let me have it. I didn't want you to feel bad, so I thought maybe if you... if we, you know, could make things right. Maybe help the next person, so she doesn't..." She trailed off, looking earnestly toward me, though not directly at me.

I started to think I saw what she was thinking, and then realized she was thinking more than she was saying. There was more to the story. Something involving me.

My suspicion must have shown its questions on my face, because suddenly Judy looked away as she searched for an answer she could give me. Then I noticed she wasn't just looking away, she was looking at something specific. Something on her desk. A journal.

I realized what Judy was trying to avoid telling me. Marissa must have written things about me in her journal, hurtful things that Judy couldn't bring herself to say.

I decided to spare her that pain.

Chapter 2

What Is Receptiveness?

“Liz, you don’t want—”

Judy protested as I moved to grab Marissa’s journal, but she didn’t try to stop me. I think that as much as she thought I should know what was in it, she was grateful she didn’t have to be the one to tell me.

The shock I felt while reading Marissa’s thoughts kept me from clearly registering the exact words, but I wouldn’t quote her directly anyway out of respect for her privacy. Yet I believe she’d want her story told, so I’ll paraphrase the important bits as best as I can remember, so I can try to convey to you what I learned.

After all, it was reading her journal that set me down this amazing path I’ve walked. And for that, I think she deserves for her story to be told. I owe her that, don’t you think?

Diary of Marissa Langley

January 1st

Happy New Year! Another year, another diary. I used to hate getting these for Christmas every year, but Dad’s right, it is important to learn to keep a record... a record of everything I’m never telling him! Tee hee!

Last night was okay, not great. A bunch of us juniors had a party because the seniors had theirs, and I thought it would be great cuz J and I could hang out and see if we could get D and K to split off and hang with us and I could like see if he wanted to mini-double-date there or something without Dad ever knowing. I’m almost 17 you’d think I’d be allowed to date! But then he still wouldn’t let me go out with K cuz his mom’s not married and they’re not Christian which got me an official Talking To about the kind of oxen friends I need to be yoking myself with. Serves me right for not keeping my mouth shut

when he asked if there were any boys in our group. Ugh!!

Anyway, so then stupid L had to show up and cling on J all night so it was like her and J versus me and some other cheerleaders instead of J and me and D and K. Gawd, I hate her. I don't know who invited her, anyway. Probably J. I swear I don't know what she sees in her. She probably feels sorry for her but anyway it ruined everything. Nobody even had the nerve to spike the punch. I mean then it's gross and almost nobody drinks it but it's a tradition!! But noooooooo, Captain Godsquad would've narc'd and we all knew it.

I did get to dance with K though. A lot. He hung out with me instead of J and D and L and I thought he was just being nice at first but then we got to talk when we sat to eat and Oh Emm Geez he touched my hand when we talked! And when it was Midnite he KISSED ME!! Gawd, I hope nobody saw and tries to tease me about it. I swear, I'd just die!

January 14th

I finally managed to "just happen" to bump into K again in the hall. We didn't have any classes together this semester, and we have a different lunch period, so I didn't know when I could see if he, like, actually liked me. I said hey, and he said hey. Just when I thought he'd forgot about New Years he asked if I was doing anything tomorrow nite. WORKING!! UGH! But I didn't want to tell him that I have to work so much cuz I don't want anybody to think I'm white trash so I just said yeah, family stuff. Which is true in a way so it's not like I was lying. He must've thought I was blowing him off cuz he just said okay and then went to class.

It's so unfair. Kids aren't supposed to have to work close to full time, especially girls! I don't even just have to work enough to pay for track & part-time cheer anymore. I barely even have time for track & cheer cuz I have to pick up enough hours to pay daycare for Rascal. I mean Mom and Dad don't say it like that but I can do the math, geez. At least I can do my homework there sometimes, and work schedules me so I have enough time to get home and sleep before school or my next shift even though there's no law that says they have to.

And at least Mom & Dad don't make me homeschool so I can watch him 4 free like they talked. If I couldn't do track & cheer & see J & my friends every day I would just die.

Gawd I hope he doesn't think I was blowing him off.

January 19th

I SAW HIM AGAIN! It was right after Civic Duties class, he was

near where my locker is. I don't know where his is, maybe it was just a coincidence. But he asked if I was doing anything later. I said track and then stuff. He said how about tomorrow and I said no I wasn't doing anything! Me and J were supposed to go do a movie after cheer but stupid Godsquad and her are doing some church ice cream social thing she forgot about and invited me to but I wouldn't be caught dead at. Seriously.

Anyway so we're going to a movie. I didn't tell Dad it's not with J anymore. Mom's got her long day tomorrow so she won't even notice to ask. So it's not like I lied. It's not like it's any of their business anyway. IT'S JUST A MOVIE!!

January 20th

In late. Tried to sneak in but Mom had just gotten home. She was busy with Rasc though cause he'd woken up and wanted to have some mommytime so she was helping him practice sitting up and he was laughing. She asked how the movie was and I said fine but I needed to sleep cause I have cheer and then work tomorrow. So gonna sleep.

P.S. HE KISSED ME AGAIN!!!

February 10th

Got yelled at. I was late home from work last night and I said some folks from work wanted to hang out after and since it was a free ride home instead of the bus I couldn't say no... That made it a little better but I was still in trouble. Mom had a regular day and said she was hoping since I had a shorter shift that I'd babysit so she could do errands in the evening but she never told me that so whatever.

I do feel guilty though because the folks from work were me and K since he met me there when I got off so technically we did leave from work... But I didn't elaborate. She doesn't need me to "add to her aggravation" as she loooooooves to say.

And yeah, maybe you're keeping count but I'm not so I don't remember which date this was. I was keeping count but now I'm all dizzy in the head over him and can't even think straight. He treats me so nice, and shows me respect. He asks what I'm thinking and then listens like he cares, and then later he'll bring something up he remembers I like. And he likes that I work he says it shows I'm mature and he likes women who can take care of themselves. He says he's sorry I have to work so much though and that he will try to come visit when he can cause it's on his way to where he works at D's dad's old-fashioned pharmacy. And he brings me treats and sandwiches from there that are super delish.

Boys just don't treat girls like he does. He's super special like that. I know I've written that a billion times but I mean it, he's really really really special.

He asked me if I can make sure to be off work on the 14th so we can do something. I was like "Okay!" and then I realized.... VALENTINES DAY!!! Our first Valentines!!!! So I'm gonna see if J won't mind if I cancel practicing a cheer we're working on so I can sneak in a shift swap so I can have off.

Valentines. Gawd what am I going to get him?! Do girls give boys things or do only the girls get presents? I'll make him heart shaped cookies or something so I won't look stupid either way.

February 14th

You won't believe this. I still don't believe it. Oh gawd. I'm still dizzy. This must be a dream. Oh forget it I'm going to sleep. IF I CAN!!! WML... Write More Later...

February 15th

Okay. I can't believe I'm telling anyone this, even just my diary, but I swear if I don't tell something I'm going to just die!

Okay. Valentines Day. So he takes me out to this nice dinner at some Italian place on the other side of town so nobody we know will be there. It was super duper fancy, with breadsticks on the table before you order kind of thing. Then after, we drive to a park where we eat the cookies I made and he gives me this little box. Yeah, a box too little to be anything but jewelry!! I tried not to be too excited just in case I was wrong and held my breath as I opened it.

IT WAS A RING!!! I swear it looked like a diamond ring in white gold, super duper expensive. He said really quickly not to worry it was just silver and cubic zirconium from the case by the front of the pharmacy but he thought I might like it. I said I loved it and he said he was glad because he wanted to ask me something. He wanted to know if I'd be his girlfriend! Like, for serious real girlfriend!!

It was a promise ring!!! I said yeah but I had to wear it on my right hand so nobody would be suspicious and I'd pretend I just got it cuz I liked it and he said that was cool. I said I love you and he said I love you too! We said THE L WORD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

So then he hugged me and I hugged him and then things got hot again and then he said before things went any further he wanted to make sure I knew he loved me and if he ever does something I don't like to just say. That was like impossible but I said okay. And then, well, he did stuff I liked... a lot.....

I know, I know, I did that whole ceremony thing with my dad about how I'd save myself and all that, but we're in love and we're exclusive and I'm wearing his ring so it's like we're practically married we're just too young to tie the knot. I don't even know if it was sex exactly because, uh, the train didn't get all the way into the station.

But I do know what I know it was. It was wonderfully perfect. He was holding me and saying how beautiful I was and I was looking into his gorgeous eyes and feeling just perfect. Everything was perfect. I finally know what all those movies and songs are saying, because finally everything in life seems just so perfectly right. Because he's in it.

Soooo all that garbage in school about how getting too close to a boy will tempt him to go all out of control and ruin your life was just another load of junk they try to use to pretend what they're saying actually matters, like how algebra will be used every single day of your adult life. I wish at school they would tell us about sex instead of just why we should never ever ever think about having it. And how girls will be utterly destroyed if they're not careful cause boys can't help themselves from sinning, instead of telling us what exactly that so-called sin involves. That way I'd at least know if I've actually done it! At least I don't have to try to find out about all those horrible diseases sex makes you come down with because he said it was his first time, too.

I did make him promise not to tell anybody, and he said okay. Which means he really does love me because when a boy has sex everyone is all "Yay woohoo aren't you a stud!" But when a girl has sex everyone calls her a slut and talks bad about her and you hear people say "I hope she gets pregnant!"

Which you know makes me really angry. I don't think you can get pregnant from what we did, but now I'm actually thinking about that for the first time ever. I mean that's just mean! Wishing some girl gets pregnant just for doing something that makes her feel special and loved like K makes me feel! And wishing some innocent little baby gets stuck with a mom everyone treats like a slut and can't go to her real school or do anything cuz she has to get a job to pay for her baby. Then she can't even spend time with him because she has to work all the time like my mom does cuz we're like the only country in the world who won't pay for moms to have time with their babies, like even Sudoamerica does. We're the richest, greatest country in the world you'd think we could spare a little so teeny tiny babies don't have to go to daycare or even almost starve to death like this one girl's baby whose family was way poorer than mine and couldn't even afford

formula and she couldn't feed him her milk herself cuz she was working.

I mean America can't say America's children are our most precious resource if we just treat them like puppies we don't want and put by the side of the road hoping someone else will take care of them. And then we say how it's the mom's fault for having sex without being richer. Babies are way special, and I think American babies and mommies deserve better. I don't care if people call that Commie talk, they obviously have never seen their mom hiding exhausted tears after a long day working and not even seeing her little baby before he has to sleep.

I wish my mom didn't have to work so much. She says once they pay off dad's medical bills and her student loans she can go part time but that will be like forever. I still think nurses should be able to get hospital care discounted or for free for their families like I can get free coffee at work but whatever.

I think I hear Rascal up. I'm gonna go tell Mom to go to bed early, and I'll play with him and get him back to sleep. He'd want to stay up if she gets him and they both need rest.

February 19th

I finally got to see K again after work tonite. I got off a little early so we could hang out a bit before he drove me to the bus stop by my house so I could walk in like normal. Since it's super duper faster than the bus that meant we had time together! We didn't get to do anything more than kiss and stuff because "my little friend's here." Gawd I was so embarrassed. At first he thought I was saying I didn't want to but that wasn't it.

But that answers The Big Question! What we did wasn't sex because I didn't get pregnant!! I was actually getting kinda nervous because sometimes I'm not always "on time" but this time it was a little early thank gawd. So even though I was embarrassed we were both relieved because even though we didn't say anything I know we both were thinking it. He said something about maybe we should find out how we could sneak a condom or something for next time but I said don't worry about it. We'll just keep doing what we were doing and anyway the class at school said they have a big failure rate so it's not worth it. I guess it's just if you want to keep stuff from being kind of messy, like a bib, ha ha ha. And I don't mind that part.

So we agreed it's not worth the trouble. Why risk getting caught with something that won't even help and risk getting expelled?

March 21st

Okay, I don't want to worry you, but "my friend" isn't here yet. I mean I'm not really worried, because okay we've been doing a little more but we still stop doing THAT thing "before the fat lady sings" because K asked a friend you know just hypothetically and he said for sure that if you do it that way it means you're in the clear.

Even so, I was glad I had work today so I didn't have to think about it...

March 25th

Good news – my friend's here!

Bad news – we had a date tonite!! Sad face!

April 26th

Had a great day at school today. J decided to run for Student ExOff, big surprise, but she asked me to be her campaign manager! BIG surprise!! I was so excited I wanted to tell her about me and K but then thought no cuz she might change her mind so I could spend more time with him. We still sometimes do stuff in a group but he is so good about not letting on.

Oh gawd there's so much to do, I hope I can keep up.

May 24th

NEWS FLASH! J WINS STUDENT EXOFF IN A LANDSLIDE!

I mean sure she's won every year but that's why we weren't sure cuz maybe people would want a change. D won A-Off which is cool cuz I know she woulda been bummed if he didn't. He was secretary in freshman year I don't know if I mentioned back then, which I hope I did cuz he was so funny about people teasing him for being a boy secretary. Even though like no school has a girl Prez but since it's J and everybody loves her nobody seems to think about it. But anyway we weren't sure if he'd win either. We all went out to celebrate. When we toasted soda to their win D kissed J and then K leaned over and kissed me and I didn't even have to pretend to be totally flustered and embarrassed. They thought it was cute!

J asked me after if maybe K and me are going to start going out and I said I dunno maybe let's just focus on her win.

OUR win she said! WE WON!!!!

July 1st

I've been so busy with the year end and then some extra work and taking care of Rasc during the day and then I didn't write for an extra

week cuz we went on vacation and I totally forgot to bring you! Sorry!!

But I think I should have had a visit from my friend by now. Maybe it's cause we were traveling to the other end of the state. It was a little tough cuz Rascal's teething but not too bad. Got to see Gramma and Grampa, they got some time off from work for our visit which was nice, they have a nice boss. He even told them to wish me a happy birthday.

Oh! My birthday! I'll write more tomorrow cuz we just got in. But funny thing? My birthday present from Gramma and Grampa was – get this – life insurance. No joke. They say it'll be worth actual cash-in money someday but right now it's a "breadwinner backup plan" and a tax vehicle or something cuz I'm still under 18. Better than dowdy old clothes I guess.

Anyway WML.

July 9th

Okay now I'm really worried. I for sure should have had my friend visit by now. I let K think I had it when I was on vacation because I don't want him to freak out until I know for sure. Plus I know he wants to apply for the military and be an officer someday or something and I don't think they let you if you get your girlfriend pregnant and aren't married. I don't actually know.

I wish he wouldn't do military, cuz then he'd be like Captain Godsquad in that stupid "I'm so better than you" uniform but I bet he'd look good in it come to think. And then I guess at least he'll be able to get out of here and have a job in the military and maybe even college someday like they say, so he doesn't have to get stuck at the factory like everybody else lucky enough to even have a job. There's just no way out of this dirthole for people like us unless you join the military.

Which come to think of it, that actually wouldn't be so bad. Yeah he can get into the military and I think they pay pretty decent, enough to get married and have a family and then I could be a military wife and maybe go with him if he gets stationed overseas and get the freak out of this freaking loser town! Maybe see if godless Commie Europa is really as sinful as they say! Tee hee!

O.K for sure I'm not telling him until I know. Gawd I hope I'm not pregnant. Not now. Just not now.

O.K I'm freaking out I'm gonna stop and go for a walk or something.

July 12th

All right, I'm probably going to have to burn this whole diary when this is all over, but I don't have anyone else I can talk to so here we go.

I'm pregnant. I'm almost positive I'm pregnant. But I don't feel this magic little miracle of life like they always say, so I think it's not too late to stop it. I heard there's a pill you can take to stop from being pregnant if you take it before you're supposed to get your period but I don't even know if that's true. I know it makes people mad to talk about so it's hard to get real info. I mean it's not even like it's an abortion if you take it before you'd miss your period and be pregnant but whatever some people just hate girls having sex without having a baby. I think it's too late for me anyway cuz I'm like two weeks late. Oh, gawd.

I don't know what to do. I tried today to go to the Family Planning near where I work to see if I could get some info, you know, hypothetically. For a friend. I think it's illegal for a girl to have an abortion or even to talk to a girl about an abortion only her parents, but I don't know. I don't think they actually do them there but I know they'll at least know about it, and what my options are. Since it was near where I work I figured nobody would see me who knows me anyway.

Fat chance. There was this big group of people there with signs and stuff. There were a couple people from my church but I've been working during church for months so I didn't think they'd recognize me. But you know what killed it?

STUPID GODSQUAD WAS THERE! She had this moronic sign like "Jesus Loves Your Baby" or something stupid like that. I mean of course Jesus loves babies, why does that mean you have to stand on a corner yelling at people who have to decide whether they can have them? And she was there all smiling and looking around like she was at some kind of parade. I was standing there like a block away, fuming mad and wondering what I was going to do about it. Then a woman stopped next to me and says Oh great. and I'm like Yeah no kidding. And I look at her and she's I dunno a little pregnant I guess. You know the kind of round where you don't think it's just fat because her arms were real skinny.

She looked really upset though. "You going to the Family Planning" I asked her and she said yeah. She looked like she didn't want to talk about it then she said something I won't write here and said "I have an appointment. I have to (something) find out if I can stay (something) pregnant or if I have to (something) end it so I can

(something) start trying again. They don't think the baby will make it to (something) seven months so it's either (something) take care of it or keep on going until I have to (something) give birth to a dead baby. (Something!)"

As she kept talking she was like less sad and more mad, cause she was looking at the protest group and got madder and madder. So she said "(Something) it!" and just started walking the rest of the block to the Family Planning.

When she got almost to the door, it was like someone threw a quarter pounder to a pack of pit bulls. A bunch of them ran at her all yelling, calling her a traitor to her baby and stuff. And I'm like WTF I know older girls at work who have their checkups there, what if she just wanted to go on the pill or something? (I don't know if you have to stay on the pill if you're pregnant, but anyway most people go there for the doctor or to plan when to GET PREGNANT not stop being pregnant.)

I was waiting for her to start yelling at them but she just started crying. They surrounded her and yelled at her and she started crying so hard she sat down on the sidewalk and just held her face. Then somebody came running out of the clinic and started yelling and a couple big guys came out behind her to help her up and the crowd finally went across the street.

And stupid Godsquad was still standing there with her stupid sign, watching everything with this dumb look on her face. I left before anybody saw me, but I wanted to go up to her and tell her what a horrible hypocrite she is. She pickets in front of the Family Planning because she doesn't think girls should have sex if they're not married. Why doesn't she picket people who take the lord's name in vain? Or lie to their parents? Or work on Sunday? Those are all commandments that come before the adultery one so since God thought they were more important you'd think Godsquad wouldn't just focus on the one that lets girls feel good about themselves like K makes me feel.

That's what I need to focus on. I can get through this, and then K and I are going to have a beautiful future together far away from Godsquad and her stupid mob who hates girls choosing their own future instead of just sitting at home popping out babies to get all of them beat up by a husband with anger issues. I'm going to ask J again why she hangs out with her sometimes but I know she'll just say again that she has a good heart and I just don't understand her. I wish I could tell her about this but whatever. Jesus said that by your works you shall know them, so sooner or later J will see L for who she really is. Someone who makes a mom fall apart because she has to find out

whether she can keep her baby.

Gawd I hate her.

July 27

All right. I have a plan. I figured out a way I can take care of this while Mom's still out of town and I can borrow the car. I thought a lot about this and I'm going to take care of stuff and then tell K and maybe J. I'll make a nice dinner and have a picnic or maybe at his place since he'll be left alone there next week cuz his mom has to go help open another restaurant somewhere and train the waitresses. And he won't have to worry because it'll be all taken care of.

It's funny, now I'm really looking forward to in the future when we're all graduated and K joins the military and has a job and then maybe when we're ready this baby can be born. Cuz I don't believe babies get souls until they're going to be born, since god knows everything and loves innocent little babies. And if the Godsquad Mob is right and their god really will put a baby in hell just because it wasn't born the way they want it to be, then their god can go to hell with it. I refuse to believe in any haters, especially anyone who can hate a baby.

Wow, I've grown up so much. I never really thought about wanting to be a mom before. I guess I just figured I'd end up working at the factory like my dad and get married and, I dunno, just kinda keep going. So in a way this has all been a life-changing experience.

It's hard though. But I'm trying not to be scared. It's easier to be brave when you're being brave for somebody else, so I'm thinking of how I will be able to keep working and go to school (and not the pretto, ugh) and help out with Rascal, and help K make it through until he's 18 and can join the military, and help J get ready for next year, and keep learning to be a better person for when it's time to get out there and make things happen for my own little family when K and I travel the world. I'm ready to get my act together, and start making myself into a future mom who can really make it for her baby, maybe even make a difference.

Yeah, I can do this. Look out world, here I come!!!

That was the final entry.

What's weird is that at the end there, I had started feeling her optimism. I actually started to hope she would pull out of it at the last minute, deciding to keep the baby and overcome all the challenges lined up against her. I forgot that I already knew how the story ended.

Then it all flooded back to me, and I felt the crushing weight of her

misery and guilt... Wait, no, it's important I keep honest. My misery and guilt. Before I read her diary, I was ready to kindly and patiently tell Judy about how God punishes those who turn against His will. I had a sermon all ready about how Marissa's sins condemned the soul of her child before it was even conceived, and how she now would join her baby in Hell, and all these other things that I'd heard a thousand times but never really stopped to think about.

But then I remembered that the villain in Marissa's story was me. I remembered that day in front of the Family Planning, the last time I had heard all those words I was ready to repeat to Judy. It was the day before I went off to summer boot camp, so I hadn't had much time to really process what had happened that day. Suddenly though, it was all as fresh and clear as though it had happened only hours before.

I remember that woman still, the one who was just at that right level of pregnant that you might think was considering an abortion. Now, I realize that was often the earliest a woman could overcome all the maliciously petty hurdles the Puritanic Youth and I had fought to put into law, but I didn't know that back then. Along with everybody else outside that clinic, I was convinced that this was a healthy but amoral woman trying to do secondary birth control... until she freaked out, crying about heart defects and stillbirth.

I had never seen anyone crumple like that, so utterly crushed of all hope. I also had never seen Brother Foley, the protest leader, turn so... so vile. His eyes shone and his lips curled as he started screaming at her about her sins that brought shame and torment unto her baby, sins that caused God to curse it with a Mutation, and that someday she'd join the baby in Hell. And as I sat in Judy's room with the memory of his ugly hatred of this woman so vivid and fresh, I started to wonder how often I had looked that way to someone else. Like I had to Marissa.

One of our greatest handicaps is our inability to see ourselves through others' eyes. Our greatest vices are therefore invisible to us, along with our greatest virtues. I always saw myself as trying to push the Gospel of Peace out into the world, and all I ended up doing was pushing someone away from finding any peace at all. I believed firmly in my heart in a God of Love, but my actions had made Marissa feel hated.

Suddenly, I remembered Atlas, and how completely wrong I had been about his story. I had always thought of myself as shouldering up the burdens of those on Earth. In the end, though, I had kept at least one person from feeling the love of Heaven. I was so busy trying to do Jesus' work, I forgot to follow Jesus' example of reaching out to even

the greatest of sinners in compassion and Lovingkindness. Maybe if I would have instead helped Marissa into the clinic to talk to somebody, maybe she wouldn't have felt so alone. Maybe someone could have shown her there was a chance for a future with her baby, and she'd be here with us now, planning how we could all help her make it work. Maybe I could have hugged her, listened to her, and helped her build that future. Instead...

Instead, I felt heavy and dizzy and didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do.

And then I did.

"Judy, we're going to make your program happen. Marissa's tragedy won't be for nothing; it will lead to something decent in this world. Something good. No other young woman will ever be lost and alone like that again. Not on my watch."

Judy had been sitting there watching me with silent dread over how the journal would impact me. When I spoke, her beautiful smile brightened her face with happy relief. She hugged me tightly and whispered in my ear, "You're so strong. I KNEW I could count on you."

Though quiet, her words rang like bells in my ears. I had never guessed, never even imagined that she would see me that way, that anyone could ever see me as... Here was my hero, counting on me to be hers...

I then swore to always be the person I saw through Judy's eyes.

Chapter 3

What is Strength?

I got my first taste of taking a leading role in politics during that last year of high school, and quickly learned its unsubtle flavors. The political spotlight starts off sweet, but the aftertaste quickly sours it. It's bitter medicine, but somebody's got to take it if the system is to get healthy.

We put together a meeting with the Student Council a couple weeks before school started to talk about the agenda for the year. We'd met with Derek a week earlier, once he got back from summer vacation. His family had enough money both for Interstate Travel Licenses and to use them, though at the time I didn't see how it could be worth the cost since nowhere could be better than home. He had brought me back a souvenir, which was truly nice of him because he didn't know me that well. It was a broad, green tree leaf preserved in silicon, and I treasured it instantly for more reasons than its being the first real "live" green leaf I'd ever seen.

Whenever I looked at that leaf, I imagined more than the lush green forests I knew had once covered America. I imagined Derek's sparkling eyes winking like they did when he had handed it to me. He joked that he'd vacationed in the Garden of Eden, but got hungry for some fruit salad so he was kicked out. When I flushed and flustered he laughingly but sincerely apologized if the blasphemy was in poor taste, and I pretended that was my problem. I'd been trying hard to be rid of my huge crush on him since I'd discovered he and Judy had been flirting with the idea of going out. Thou shalt not covet thy best friend's crush, and all that.

The more I got to know him, the harder it was for me not to keep falling for him. Derek was the one who expanded on our original plan to help young women, growing it into a broader peer-counseling Teen Support Program. He said it might seem less of "just a girl's thing" if

he pitched it as a counseling option for all kinds of issues students might have, which annoyed us just a tiny bit because we knew he was right. People did listen more when a suggestion came in a male voice, particularly when the issue was considered “female,” such as anything to do with babies or children, and even figuring out how you felt about an issue and what to do about it. Not everybody saw it that way, but we already faced a very real hurdle in convincing two of the Council members to go along with the plan.

“All we need to do,” Derek explained to the group, “is give them an ear to talk to. Someone who can listen to what they’re going through, maybe help them work through what they think their options are. We can even get them excused from class, if needed, so they’ll have time to talk. You can get passes worked out from the office, can’t you Lizbet?”

I blinked for a moment as I realized he was looking at me. Had he just given me a nickname?! I suddenly felt so cool, yet flushed, that I almost forgot my heart wasn’t supposed to skip beats for him anymore. I nodded and mumbled something affirmative.

“Awesome. We’ll get passes for students who want to volunteer to counsel and for those who need to talk. We’ll also meet with the volunteers in a weekly lunch meeting or something. The program will train them on how to listen objectively and make folks feel comfortable that their secrets will be kept, well, secret.”

“Whoa, whoa, wait.” We all turned to look at Richard U. Foley II, surprised at the vehemence of his interruption. Yes, the firstborn of Brother Richard Unwin Foley, who had pressured the School Board to select his son to be Student Chaplain. Brother Foley had named his son with the expectation he would second to none but his father. Accordingly, Richard had obstinately refused to be ‘junior’ to anybody.

Richard’s position entitled him to a vote on the Student Council, giving his opinions more than just moral weight. Again, this wasn’t exactly the way the real government was set in principle, though it was close enough to how the government worked in practice. The Supreme Chaplaincy of America was just an advisory role on paper, but we all knew it wielded influence way beyond advisory, and that kind of influence trickled all the way down to high school level. That meant that whatever Richard’s concerns were, they carried more than just moral weight. “Are you honestly suggesting that we instruct these volunteers to keep what those problem kids tell them... secret? As in, not even report it to the School Chaplain?”

Derek didn’t even flinch, obviously more prepared for this

objection than I was. “Yes, Skippy, I’m suggesting exactly that. Because as students, we’re not obligated by pesky things like the Full Disclosure laws that affect school authorities. It’s just friends talking to friends, only these are neutral third-party friends who aren’t all tied up in whatever the issue is.”

Richard leaned back, his eyes narrowing a little as the wheels turned in his head. Finally, he conceded a little too quickly with a hint of a smarmy grin. “Okay, fine. They can use the conference rooms too, so they won’t be interrupted.”

“Hoooooold onnaminnit, Ricky, nuh-uh.” This time it was Gig. Okay, his name was really Gavin Irving Geary, but he’d been called Gig since before I ever met him. He was the surprise win from the elections, having run for Student Financier not because he thought he could win, but because he wanted to make a point. He ran on what he called the Dollars to Donuts platform, which was just a series of posters of donuts named for different student programs, with varying sizes of holes in the middle. As one of the few kids in school whose parents were Pragmatican, I guess he felt important ideas were being unheard and decided to grandstand in order to air them. Since he wasn’t hampered with trying to play to the majority, he had a ton of fun making some pretty cutting jokes about how underfunded our scholastic and nutritional programs were, compared to the sports and religion clubs.

So yeah, nobody expected him to have the slightest shot at winning. But then, nobody expected his opponent’s father to be suddenly transferred to the Accounting department of a factory in another state, leaving Gig unopposed well after the deadline to enter the race. Hence, Student Financier “The Gigster” joined the Student Council, much to the dismay of many a member of the Young Bankers of America. In fact, I think that was the only year they didn’t hold a big snobby party congratulating the winner at what passed for the town’s country club.

Regardless of how he was elected, Gig’s vote on the Student Council was equal to Judy’s, Richard’s and mine. Since Derek could vote to break a tie we could have forced our plans through, but we agreed it would be best if everyone on the council agreed. Well, five out of six, anyway.

The sixth person on the Council was Tricia Knox, Student Council Secretary, but that made her the custodian of the minutes, not a voting member. She, too, was a surprise candidate since she never seemed that engaged in school activities. But when the future valedictorian runs for an office nobody really wants, she can’t help but win. Tricia

hadn't even looked up from the computer at that point, keeping her head down as she rapidly transcribed our conversation.

Punctuated by the light clickety-clackety of Tricia's typing in the background, Gig continued, "Are yooooou honestly suggesting that the conference rooms aren't bugged, keeping tabs on all the so-called private conferences?" He smirked at the indignation Richard feigned, a smirk that faded in the face of the righteous anger Judy voiced.

"Gig! That's ridiculous! You know the school refuted that rumor."

I glanced at Judy and saw that she was as surprised at Gig's comment as I. Then I looked to Richard and saw the glance he also shot her. I still didn't know much about the "who" and the "how" of interacting with people in social situations, but being a wallflower gave me plenty of time to watch the "what" and the "why." And the "what" of Richard's glance to Judy was smug amusement with condescending undercurrents, implicating a moderately sinister "why."

The conference rooms were bugged. They were bugged, and the info was passed along, or at least knowledge of it was passed along to Richard, maybe because of his father, or maybe just because he was Student Chaplain. Either possibility upset me a great deal. Everything that went on in those rooms was supposed to be confidential between the students and the school official meeting with them, with any necessary info shared only with their parents.

That's why it was such a big deal when our star quarterback claimed he had confided privately to a trusted teacher that he was abstinely gay, and that it couldn't have been the teacher who had outed him to his family, church and school, getting him expelled. He swore there had to be a school Spy. Within weeks he was arrested for allegedly attempting suicide, then died in custody under what the police said was self-inflicted head trauma. It was all very sudden, but his allegations still got out to the paper and even the statewide radio. I couldn't be sure how this all could have involved Richard, or perhaps even his father. Regardless, I didn't want anything to do with anything that gave him that unnerving, self-important grin.

While I was busy sorting out these realizations, Gig had started to elaborate. "Oh come on, don't tell me you haven't heard about the time—"

"Hey, let's not get sidetracked with silly rumors that were debunked two years ago," I interjected. "Because the conference rooms are usually used for school-related stuff, like discipline, and have a pretty harsh association, I just don't think students will be comfortable to talk in there. Since we've all agreed the talks are to be confidential so students feel like they can open up, I think we should

have them away from the main buildings, but of course within the approved school-hours perimeter. That way everybody can relax and deal with whatever they need to deal with, and then get back to class. Are we all Aye?

I looked around, nervous that my abject ineptitude in bluffing would give away my extreme discomfort with the bugging issue. Fortunately, I must have come through convincingly enough, because the “Ayes” rang out. I couldn’t tell if Gig even cared about the issue, but he did seem pleased to vote against Richard’s objections. Even Richard had to grudgingly agree, lest he be forced to explain his reversal in light of Gig’s accusations. Judy instructed Tricia to record the vote in the official minutes, and we moved on to ratifying the school activities schedule for the year.

I found it hard to pay attention through the rest of the meeting, caught between wondering about the implications of Spying at the school, and inwardly glowing about successfully maneuvering to get the Teen Support Program started in a way that bypassed any such concerns. I was surprised at my smooth handling, and was glad the controversy had gone away so quickly and painlessly.

Yeah, I was naive back then.

It was only a couple of days before the issue resurfaced, right after church the following Sunday. Our church was hosting a potluck for the area so kids could mingle before starting classes in the upcoming year. Homeschooling kids were also invited, and plans were made to keep them involved in various activities. Since my schedule that year was already way past full, my parents and I planned to skip the gathering and go straight home. It still hadn’t quite sunk in what it meant to be not just Student Commander of FOAM, but also the highest-ranked female cadet in the history of my church group.

So when I was asked to stay and lead the opening prayer, I was too stunned by the idea to even consider refusing. I had never prayed on behalf of anyone else before; even family prayer was always led by my father. I felt a huge weight to represent each person in the audience before God, and plead to Him on their behalf. As I walked up to stand before the crowd, I tried desperately to feel prepared.

Before opening my mouth, I opened my heart to hear their needs that I might pray for them to be fulfilled. I thought of those like my father who struggled through long, hard days in return for the chance to barely make it from paycheck to meager paycheck. I thought of those like my oldest brother who struggled through cold, worry-filled nights as he and his wife sought enough work to provide for themselves and their children despite battling cancer. I thought of

those like my sister who struggled with pain and loneliness for the husband they'd sent off to the ongoing wars in Arabiya, in hopes that through service to America they would be granted a future together protected from illness and starvation.

It may sound odd, but I count it a blessing that I grew up in a community with so many shared troubles and pain. We struggled, sure; but through pulling together we found that our problems weren't so great that we couldn't tackle them together. It was the way the earliest American communities had made it in the New World, and this communal sharing was the firm foundation on which our country had been built. I was proud to be part of that tradition.

Through community, I had learned that we each bear burdens that weigh us down, and the only way to lighten them was to share them with those around us. Our greatest enemies were silence and shame, for if we allowed our pain to divide us, we would be conquered by it. As I reflected on this, I found the strength to pick up the burdens of all those gathered, if only for a moment, and offer them up to God. I didn't know what I was going to say, but I had Faith I'd do my best. After all, when Wisdom and Experience fall down, Love and Sincerity usually rise up to carry us through.

So there I stood as straight and tall as I could, and in a voice a little less quiet than usual, I began to pray. "As we gather in community, we offer up our thanks for all we enjoy. There is much we each have that has enabled us to be here today, and for this we are grateful. There is also much yet that we hope to receive, and we pray for loving aid as we seek it. We pray for help and guidance, that we may find our way through the troubles and darkness toward a way of peace and light. We pray for strength and wisdom, that when we face the challenges before us, we may see clearly the path of truth and have the courage to walk it. Finally, we pray for love and support, and offer our own to others. No matter the nature of our inevitable stumbles, we pray that we shall recognize we are not alone, and accept help as readily as we offer it to others. This all we pray, in humble sincerity. Amen."

As I prayed I felt my heart unfold and fill, and when I opened my eyes they were wet with misty tears that I was barely keeping back. A little flustered and embarrassed, I quickly moved to sit down as the coordinators started directing the groups.

On my way through the crowd, someone caught me and hugged me with a quickly whispered "Thank you." Only after she had moved away did I realize it was Tricia Knox. I hadn't really met her before the Student Council meeting those few days earlier, and I certainly had never before noticed her at a church gathering. But just as I started to

follow her, suddenly wanting to get to know her better, that “settled” issue from that same meeting caught up with me.

“Thank you for the beautiful invocation, Sister Franklin. As always, you showed a real gift for speaking right to the heart.” I hope I didn’t roll my eyes, but I know I felt like it as soon as I heard Richard’s voice. He wanted something, and it was clear I wouldn’t escape hearing what it was.

“Thanks, I just wanted to give it my best.” I let my annoyance be trumped by my discomfort at receiving compliments. I forced a smile, trying to be gracious.

“That’s one of the most commendable virtues a woman can share with the world, always trying to give it her best.” His smile was wide, just like his father’s, and I could see how so many people could mistake the gleam in his eyes for sincerity, if they wanted to. But as much I had wanted to do the same in the past, at that moment I couldn’t allow myself the luxury.

Mistaking my discomfort for humble shyness at the intended compliment, his grin broadened. “Yes. Very commendable. That’s why I hope you’ll be active in the Teen Support Program this year, helping get it started. You have such a potential for reaching out to people and doing the good work. My father suggested it would be a better direction of your time for a while, speaking to people one-on-one instead of gathering with the group.” He spoke with implied layers of meaning, which I ran through quickly in an attempt to keep up.

I couldn’t quite guess what he was getting at, and it made me nervous. Did he realize I no longer had a stomach for picketing health clinics? That I had strong suspicions regarding possible school Spying and how it may involve him? Did he want to involve me with that, and if so, was it government-sanctioned, or was it... *Spying*? Not that I thought the Foleys were secretly Arabiyan Espionage Agents like Spies were supposed to be, but the government took a very dim view on unsanctioned wiretapping and the like by individuals.

Just when I was starting to wonder if I had to look forward to a Domestic Security Services squad whisking us both off to ask “some hard questions,” he reached forward and put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. He leaned forward with what was likely his best attempt at a comforting smile. “I know it sounds daunting, but my father has experience in working with troubled youth, and wants to offer his support – our support – in talking you through the challenges. You know, go over the students’ issues, help work through the Right Way, find the best solutions...”

Suddenly, my discomfort took a different turn, making me almost

wish the DSS would burst in after all. He was standing a little too close, and something discordant in the air indicated he wanted to get closer. I couldn't help but flush, and stammered out, "Thanks, I'll have to think about it, FOAM needs a lot of my time, and... and I'll let you know."

My stammering must have given him entirely the wrong impression, because he punctuated his "You do that" with a quick wink and a smarmy smile. I backed away a few steps with a hurried goodbye, then resumed my quest to find my parents so we could walk home.

When I found their chairs empty, I realized they must have assumed I was staying and had gone home without me. I didn't begrudge them that, since Sunday was the only time my father had off from work. It was also one of their few remaining opportunities to enjoy private time in the home they had built for our family. When I graduated and moved out, my parents would be relocated to the Adult Dorm if none of my siblings moved their family back to stay with them. I didn't think that was fair, since my father and his friends had built the house themselves and he'd always kept up the payments for the land. Besides, factory officers each had their own houses despite the fact that only one of them had a child, and that one officer's child was off at boarding school.

It didn't matter what I thought, though. The factory owned the land so the factory got to say who used it and how. Actually, the government owned the land, but it always did what the factory owners wanted. We had to purchase or rent every public resource back from the factory, down to the water we drank. They were the ones who got the rights to our water in the Resources and Austerities for the War Deal, back when the Global Trade Financiers Organization required the I.S.A. to eliminate public services and auction off their management rights to private companies as a condition of bailout loans so we could maintain our War on Tyranny.

Since the Global Trade Financiers Organization had enforced the privatization of natural resources all across the world, people with money could buy bottles of clean water taken from overseas villages, leaving those villagers dry as their bones. Though expensive, the bottled water was a pretty attractive option in our town since our own water tables were piped right into the factory. The leftover water was reprocessed to filter out some of the muck and chemicals before adding new chemicals back in, then put into the pipes for public use.

Even the piped water was hard to afford, though, and some brave or foolish people secretly dug wells into the contaminated water table

and rigged their own filtration system. The risk of disease was pretty scary, but even scarier were the fines or jail times you faced if you got caught. Our taxes paid to build the pipelines and maintain the treatment plant, but not for the use of the water itself. The factory hated the idea of ordinary people in any way threatening the huge profit margin built into their rates, and they paid good money to make sure the laws protected their usury.

At least the water bills were cheaper than the energy bills, but I won't even get into that right now. Plus, irrigation and a home garden permit were also cheaper than what the rare produce cost at the store. No matter how often taxes were raised to increase farm subsidies, it didn't seem to do anything to help us get healthier, affordable food. The bulk of the money went to pay the huge agricorps not to grow crops, or to grow more crops for fuel instead of food, stuff like that. I'm still not sure how we even survived, normal folks like us. When the basic necessities of life are at the mercy of the so-called Free Market economy, only the Marketeers are Free; the rest of us are held captive by them.

So there I was, standing on church property, the one piece of land in the town the factory didn't have any say over, wondering what I should do with my day so as not to interrupt my parents' rare time alone together. Having nowhere else to go, I went looking for Tricia to see if I could get to know her a little better, maybe make connections to help us through the year with the Student Council. After all, connections were what this event was for!

I found the group of young women my age and was surprised to find Judy with them. She was talking with several homeschoolers about the school activity schedule, trying to help them join in. I hadn't seen her at church earlier so I thought she'd miss the event, though I should have known better. Whenever an activity needed participation, Judy would be right in the middle of things to make it happen.

She waved me over, but I politely waved her off. I didn't mean to be rude; I just was tired of talking about a calendar of dances and such that I had no interest in attending. Judy nodded to me, and I resumed my search for the elusive Tricia Knox. I knew she didn't exactly win the secretary election because she stood out in a crowd, but I hadn't thought she'd disappear into one so easily. Still, I kept at it, sure that someone as conscientious as she wouldn't leave until the event was through.

I was delayed several times by people coming up to chat, and I was privately embarrassed by how few of their names I could remember. However, they all knew mine and seemed quite happy to see me,

something that still took me aback. Finally, I caught sight of Tricia as I politely disengaged myself from another group. She had just finished dishing up a small plate from the potluck table. I grabbed a few things onto a plate for myself and asked if I could sit with her while we ate.

“Sure, if you’d like to.” She tucked her chin as she said it, her bashful gesture doing nothing to hide the hopeful invitation in her eyes.

I then realized I wasn’t the shyest person in the Student Council, and laughed at us both. “I’d love to. Maybe between the two of us we can work up enough ‘outgoing’ to actually have a conversation rather than just sit here quietly being shy at each other.”

She scoffed politely as we sat down on a thin blanket spread on the ground. “Oh, please. No way are *you* shy.”

I boggled at that. “Wow, really? I mean, do I really come off so, um, un-shy?”

She opened her mouth, then stopped herself. Then she quickly looked down at her plate, poking at some kind of salad with her fork as though the words she was searching for may be hiding underneath. “Well, I mean, you have always seemed kinda... I mean, like you think you... I mean...”

I sighed. “I come off like a self-important know-it-all, you mean. Great.” As her picture of me came into clearer focus, I recognized it as something I should have seen long before, especially after Marissa’s diary. I did usually try to speak with conviction, but even now I have trouble keeping it from making me sound obnoxiously opinionated. I do sincerely try my hardest, but it’s a struggle I still face.

Tricia did me the kindness of trying to protest. “Oh no, I mean...” She then laughed, half-nervous, but also half-amused... or relieved. “I mean, I never knew you that well. I guess it’s just that you’re so self-confident, and not many people are. But I was afraid after the elections that I was going to be sitting there having to listen to two Richards bullying and bossing Judy, steamrolling Derek, and, well, getting into irritating fights with Gig.” When she saw me wince at the thought she put her hand on my arm and patted it. “Don’t worry, it’s obvious now you’re not like that. You really care about people, and that’s what counts.”

I smiled slightly. “I hope so. Though speaking of Student Council, I’m starting to wonder what I’ve gotten myself into.”

“Oh, me too, believe me.” Her smile faltered for a moment before brightening again. “But hey, now you know you’ve got a friend there! That is, I mean...”

I laughed as I reached over to take her hand in a comforting

gesture. “Yes, Tricia, let’s be friends. You’re a good listener, and you don’t mind telling me that I sometimes come across badly, let’s put it like that. Observation and honesty are both things we all need more of. Hey...” I looked around casually, checking to make sure we couldn’t be overheard by anyone. She leaned closer, curious, but following my lead in trying not to look too seriously interested as I started talking slightly softer.

“I might be volunteering to take the lead in helping set up the Teen Support Program, so I can try to make sure it gets put together in a way that will actually help people instead of...” I trailed off, wanting to confide in someone but unsure of what to say.

“Instead of letting you-know-who turn it into another way he can try to wheedle secrets out of students that they’d rather not share?” Tricia gave me a wry grin that assured me the message had come across loud and clear. She then nodded to me with encouragement. “I really think you should. Judy’s way too busy, and Derek means well, but the other two would want to fight with him on it just because they’re argumentative and he’s a guy. Gig doesn’t fight with gals and, well, it’s obvious ‘the other one’ has a soft spot for you already, so...”

I cringed. “So it’s better me than anybody else, yeah. I just hope...”

Tricia watched me sympathetically for a few moments until it became clear I wasn’t sure exactly what I was hoping. Then she gently placed her hand on my arm and gave me a warm, “Me too.”

I suddenly realized that I had a new, true friend, one I could count on. This bolstered my courage for what I knew I would have to face, and soon.

Chapter 4

What is Lovingkindness?

First thing the next morning I embarked on a quest to conquer my dread of the unknown. After a fortifying breakfast of rice and raisins, I set out to resolve a matter I knew I would have to set behind me before I could begin the Teen Support Program. After checking the routes and schedules, I headed straight for the bus stop to begin my journey to the Family Planning clinic.

A comprehensive and efficient public transportation system was hardly a priority for the city's private contractors, which by now surely must go without saying. There simply wasn't that much money to be had from those who couldn't afford any other way to travel. The meandering bus route gave me plenty of time alone with my jumbled thoughts, trying to sort out what I would say. Time didn't help me though, and I was just as lost when I arrived. I had rehearsed some things over and over, but they sounded rough and jumbled in my mind. Finally, I figured I'd better just let my heart speak for me and hope for the best, trying not to wonder how bad it could be.

The fears rushed back at me as soon as I set foot onto the first step leading up to the clinic. The door was swung open by one of the large men who volunteered to play "bouncer" against, well, people like me, and for a moment I wondered if there was a picture of me by the front desk. But by the look on the man's face, I realized that I'd parked myself in front of those steps often enough that everyone there already knew my face. A "Wanted" poster was completely unnecessary.

The apologies that must have shown in my eyes and on my face seemed to reassure him. Even so, he remained wary as he stepped back to hold the door open for me, wishing me a good morning as he did. With quiet thanks, I stepped past him into the entry, trying to adjust my eyes to the dimmer light.

The waiting area was half-full of women of various ages as well as

a few children. I fidgeted at the receptionist's window, trying to pull off the trick of not really looking at people without seeming like I was avoiding them. Fortunately, the receptionist soon returned to her desk, a sharp sigh expressing her recognition.

"And how may I help you today, hm? Need some posterboard and markers? Borrow a thesaurus for a snappy new slogan?" Her voice was doctor's-office soft but sharp, with what seemed to be a genuine touch of patient amusement warring with her annoyance. When I blushed and stammered for words, her amusement briefly gained the upper hand before being overruled by a guarded concern. With a softer, earnest tone, she asked, "How *can* I help you?"

After a careful breath, I tried to repeat what I had practiced the whole trip over. "I wanted to come in to apologize. I feel very strongly about my beliefs, and I'm going to keep fighting for them. However, I regret participating in the bullhorn-bullying of women when they are at their most vulnerable, and I won't be doing it again. Please forgive me, and may God bless you." I didn't look directly at her while I spoke, but as I finished I turned my eyes to hers. Sincerity can't be mumbled into thin air if it's to be taken as genuine, and I knew it.

I couldn't read her expression, which was odd for me, but I could feel her own sincerity in her "Thank you." After a moment, while I struggled for what I had planned to say next, she continued. "I would like to talk more about your beliefs, if you're willing. Do you have a bit of time? There's a spare room here, I can get you some coffee or tea or water..." Her eyes brightened when I assented, then her mouth and feet started moving so quickly I almost skipped to keep up. "Great, back this way. My name's Margie Cammile. Can I get you anything? Okay, just let me know if you change your mind. Here, let me clear off this table for us... there, have a seat. I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

I didn't believe I had said, and quickly replied, "Liz Franklin."

She shook my hand, then resumed her rapid patter. "Lovely to finally meet you, Liz. About your prior visits out front. I understand you have some very strong feelings about what you believe goes on in here, versus what you believe your Bible says should be allowed to happen."

I just nodded, having nothing to say about the obviousness of her statement.

She nodded back at me, her voice lowering and slowing a pace. "About that. I've read your Bible backwards and forwards several times, studying every bit of it and comparing notes with your signs and slogans out front. And I've got news for you: yours is not the only

interpretation out there, not even of the translation you use.” The tone was gentle statement, but the words sounded to me like fighting challenge.

Now, it didn’t matter to me whether she used the centuries-old Biblical translation read in my church, or if she read from one of the “revisionist” ones. The way I saw it, every Biblical word was in stalwart support of our fight against everything that clinic stood for. I tried to keep my tone as even as hers, which was easier than I had expected. “I think every version of the Bible is pretty clear on the matter.”

She smiled at that, with a hint of mirth. “Yeah, and so do I, but in an entirely different way. Let’s be honest. Though abortion existed when the Bible was written, it’s never specifically addressed as a sin, not directly and not by name. So all anyone has to go on is what they find in the texts that either supports or contradicts a supposition based on how they choose to interpret any given verse. So let’s go through a few of those interpretations to see what they actually say for themselves. You game?”

I shrugged at the futility of her little exercise. “All right, if you want.”

With a quick, sharp nod, she launched back into her rapid patter. “Okay, the first and most fundamental platform used against abortion is the ‘thou shalt not kill’ commandment. Now, I’m rather a fan of this idea, since I’m personally against all killing as a matter of principle. But there’s a few problems with using the commandment as stated in the Bible as a prohibition against abortion. Firstly, the original Hebrew word is ‘rasach,’ meaning murder, an illegal killing. It’s a relative term, not an absolute prohibition on ever taking a life. This is very clear when you consider the numerous times where God kills, instructs others to kill, or generally endorses a killing.”

I leaned back in my chair, my arms reflexively crossed across my chest. “Punishing sin with death is not the same thing as killing an innocent baby, unless you want to try to tell me God ever commanded that particular atrocity.”

Margie paused, biting her lip hesitantly as she eased into her reply. “Actually, Liz, it’s your Bible telling you that. In the First Book of Samuel, God commands His people to destroy Amalek, specifically calling for the killing of infants and children. In Numbers the commandment was to kill every male including babies, and every female who had ever been with a man, including those who were pregnant. Hosea claimed to speak for God in saying He would punish rebellious Israelites by slaying their unborn with miscarriages, which

was reiterated by Isaiah. In the Second Book of Kings, the retribution was carried out, with the children's brains bashed out and pregnant women's bellies ripped open, killing them and their children... all to carry out the will of God."

I was completely unprepared for the cavalcade of atrocities Margie was describing. Slumping down in my chair as I tried to sort things through, I shook my head to clear it and tried to get back to my point. "That's... that's all horrible, and I'll have to look into those claims, but that isn't what we're talking about. That was all war, which isn't the same as murder. And abortion was always considered murder."

My emphatic point was dismissed by a click of Margie's tongue. "Quite the contrary, actually. The earliest councils of Christianity only outlined penalties for women who underwent abortion if it was related to what was considered a sexual crime. It was treated as a part of wanton behavior as they saw it, and certainly not as murder. Even after the earliest centuries, official opinions of the church varied, but it wasn't consistently counted as murder until relatively recently. We can go back even further with your claim of 'always,' as God's chosen people themselves had not treated abortion as murder under the laws of God, in no small part because they didn't consider it as killing an individual person."

Seeing my skepticism, Margie elaborated. "Abortion was, and remains, completely legal under Jewish law. As commanded in the Book of Numbers, a baby is not counted as a person until thirty days after birth. People aren't even allowed to observe the Laws of Mourning for a loss prior to that day, as the Laws simply don't apply to a non-person. This is further referenced in Exodus where the penalties are given for men who are fighting and do accidental injury to a pregnant woman, causing her to lose her child. If there's no injury to the woman, the offender is fined whatever the husband wants. If the woman herself is injured, then it's eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, just like a murder."

I nodded, "I'm aware of that one, it applies to injury to or loss of the infant too, supporting my point. If it results in a premature birth with no harm done, then there's just a fine."

She shook her head. "I don't know where you heard that interpretation, but since we can reference the actual laws from Jewish tradition and those of the countries that copied them at the time, we have proof that's simply not the case. Premature birth in almost all cases meant death for the infant, hence there being a fine for the loss of the father's property according to the laws. Only if the woman was also harmed were there penalties for doing harm to a person, because

only the woman was considered a person under the law.” She paused, then continued, sympathetically. “I can tell this is all very hard for you to hear right now. I can loan you some books if you’d like to read up on it for yourself.”

I wasn’t sure what my face showed, but I suspected it showed just how much I wanted to utterly reject what I was hearing. It simply flew in the face of all that Brother Foley had taught us. Fortunately I did remember what Brother Foley taught, and could bring up what I felt was Biblical proof that God considered the unborn as a full person, regardless of what the laws of humans might decree.

“Well, okay, so maybe human laws didn’t recognize the unborn child as a person and therefore the victim of murder, but God certainly did, and does recognize that we are full people even in the womb. Did not Job say to God that He was his Creator, even in the womb?”

Margie only shrugged. “So? I’m still a baker even while mixing flour and sugar, but they’re still not cookies until they come out of the oven. Until they’re baked, they’re just dough.”

I rolled my eyes, evading her point. “Okay, then how about when Jeremiah was told by God that He knew him before he was formed in the womb, and was consecrated before he was born? Or Psalm 139, where David speaks of being known even in the womb, obviously meaning that God knows us before we are even born?”

A hint of mischief gleamed in her eyes as she recited portions of that scripture, “‘Thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.’”

Unsure of where she was headed, I nodded slowly. “That’s the gist of what the verses say, yeah. You see what I mean?”

The soft chuckle she gave me was more patient than amused. “As it happens, I do. Now I’ll share what I mean. First, did you notice that bit about being wrought in the lowest parts of the earth? When those verses were written, the common belief was that babies were formed within the earth and then placed in the womb to be born. So if you are going to take a literal interpretation, then you have to take this verse to mean that God formed David inside the earth, where He knew him, and then afterward he was placed in the womb.”

I scoffed, almost laughing. “Obviously that’s not what’s going on here. It’s a poetic turn of phrase.”

“Oh, really, we’re taking strict interpretation of the Bible and turning it into poetic license now?” Margie’s eyebrow arched with a challenging quirk. “Then how about the following verse, ‘In thy book all my members were written, when *as yet there was none of them.*’

There's no poetic interpretation here, is there? David is clearly stating that God knew each and every part of him, before any of him even existed. This means that God's knowledge of David predates any physical existence, meaning that this verse is talking about knowing the soul as separate from the body, even before it was in the womb to be knit together. Simply put, Psalm 139 states that foreknowledge of the soul is wholly independent of any physical formation. The soul alone holds the identity known by God, having nothing to do with the body that eventually houses it. It says absolutely nothing about when that soul and body become joined into life."

"I, uh..." I hadn't thought of it like that. I didn't quite know how to respond, though Margie hardly waited for me to find my words.

"In fact, this is further supported by the story of the very first man, Adam. The way the Bible tells it, Adam was formed fully of clay, and only when the body was fully knit together did God place a soul into it, breathing into his nostrils. And to jump to the New Testament where you like to go when the Old one doesn't support your arguments, there's the verse stating that a body without breath is dead. Clearly, a body does not have life until it is breathing. Do babies breathe air in the womb?" She smiled playfully at that.

I actually hadn't heard that verse in such a context before, and I was getting quite exasperated with being so constantly knocked off my scriptural feet. I sped up my thoughts. "Well, no, but they get oxygen in the blood, and..."

Her smile turned to laughter. "Oh no, no-no, no you don't. Not again. Using the Bible as an unerringly absolute moral guide is an all-or-nothing proposition. You have spent hours out there arguing a brutally word-for-word literal application of the exact phrasing in your translation of the Bible as reason to dictate to strangers what they can do with whom, and how. You can't now start playing the 'well, it means to say' game, with your selective claims of poetic license. Getting oxygen in the blood is not the same as breathing, which is specifically what your Bible states, breath."

As soon as I caught myself wanting to keep playing the "it means to say" game, as she put it, I started to realize how that would open the door to challenging other arguments I was about to make. I could have deflected them with more literal applications, sure; but it would have been inconsistent and I knew it. Absolutism, to have any integrity, must be applied absolutely.

I tried another approach. "Heartbeat. The heart beats, and there's brain activity. That's how we know there is a person before birth."

She smiled conspiratorially as she leaned forward to whisper a

moment, “That’s not in the Bible, you know. But as a quick aside, yes, a developing organism does require functioning circulation and neurons to go about the business of knitting itself into a body. Even single-celled organisms engage in stimulus-response, and process impulses and nutrients. But are heartbeat and brain activity all that’s required to make something a person? How about something like being able to move a computer joystick to select a drawing seen only once, a few seconds before?”

I blinked, unsure what point she was trying to make. “Yes, thinking and memory also make a person a person, but a heartbeat and brain activity are the foundation.”

That made her chuckle and shake her head slightly. “Well, since I was actually talking about something a pig is able to learn after only a few tries, what you’re saying is that animals are people, too. That means you abstain from pork, right? Yeah, I didn’t think so, and that leads us right back into Biblical absolutism, and applying your stated values consistently, not just in ways you like. In the founding of Christianity it was declared that Christians weren’t to be bound by all the Old Testament laws, but there are Christian groups who feel somewhat differently, such as the one you belong to. Your group argues that every single word in the Bible – Old and New Testaments – is to be followed to the letter, and yet they still eat pork and wear clothes made out of more than one type of fiber, in violation of those very laws. If your group were truly honest with yourselves, not only would you follow all of those types of rules, you’d also follow the law in Numbers about counting someone as a person only after they’ve been alive for thirty days. Before then, no loss, no mourning, right?”

Seeing that I failed to find any humor in her joke, Margie shrugged apologetically. “All right, I don’t think that’s right, either. But it’s Biblical, so it has to remain on the table in a Biblical discussion. As does – and I really hate to have to bring this up – but Biblical abortion has to come into play here, too.”

I stared at her quizzically, trying not to boggle. “Biblical what?”

“Abortion. Specifically, the ritual of Sotah, also brought to us in Numbers. Apparently, God gave Moses instructions on what a jealous husband is to do when he suspects that his wife has been unfaithful. He is to strip her down to the waist and let loose her hair before dragging her to the courtroom. In their custom, he was instructed to treat her the way they treated harlots even before she’s accused, let alone convicted of anything. The priest will then mix up a potion and have her swear an oath to God before drinking it. If she’s innocent, no harm done, she bears children, all is well. If she did sleep with another man, though,

well, in the words of your favorite translation, her belly will swell and her thigh will rot.” Margie grimaced before finishing, “A more accurate translation of the original words states her womb will discharge and her uterus will drop. I’d say that’s a pretty close description of an abortion.”

Whatever she had read in my face, it was enough for Margie to tread carefully as she wrapped up that thought. “Yes, well, and this was the commandment of God, that a jealous husband and a priest should take matters into their own hands, rather than leave it to God to slay the embryo Himself via miscarriage without their intervention, which means... Nevermind, I believe you know what this means. Since up to a third of all pregnancies spontaneously miscarry before reaching ten weeks, some may argue that God doesn’t always leave it up to human intervention. So if you are going to argue that it’s a commandment of God to never allow a pregnancy to terminate prematurely, you are going to have to give me a new reason why.”

By that time, I was turned around and upside-down, tired of feeling like she was playing games with my religion. I summoned the fire back into my eyes as I sat up straight and dealt what I had always believed was the ultimate trump card. “Because my Faith tells me so, in the convictions of my heart.”

The gentle sparkle in her eyes spread into a genuine smile. “The convictions of my heart say God grants each of us power and responsibility over our own flesh. It is the government’s role to preserve our freedom to fulfill that responsibility. It is between a woman and her moral compass to judge whether she should bear a child. It is up to the rest of us to Love One Another as we respect that freedom without trying to get the government to take away what God has given her. We must Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and Render unto God what is God’s.”

Seeing me bristle at her quoting the Bible back at me again, her smile grew more warm, but firm. “My faith in this is as strong as yours, Liz, and my reasoning as great. Your faith has no power over me, nor should it. No more than mine over you.”

My indignation spilled over, “But my Faith comes from God.”

“And my faith comes from my god.”

She was gentle but firm, while I was feeling less of either. I shook my head. “But... there’s only one God.”

“If that’s true, then either one of us misheard, or we’re both right, or we’re both wrong. Unfortunately, until a divine being comes here and settles the matter in person, all we have to go on is what we feel in our own hearts. In the end, our heart is the only authority we can rely

on, and it's our duty to remain true to that authority alone. Divine Truth is so much bigger than us. I try my best to discover and honor Truth, but I'm not so arrogant to believe I've mastered it."

She laughed a little as she said that, so I thought she was mocking me until I saw the sad warmth of compassion in her eyes. She was deeply sincere, and something in her expression implied her convictions were borne through painful experiences that she had grown from rather than succumbed to. She showed a hint of sadness, yes, but also exuded a quiet and patient strength.

I'd never been spoken to in this way. I'd never seen anyone spoken to in this way. I'd seen shouting of competing scriptures, barrages of traded insults, even crumpled sobbing in the unyielding face of Biblical absolutism. But not calm, patient contradiction of one of the central tenets of my religious dogma, citing competing faith as a matter of mundane fact, not condemnation.

Faith – I'd believed up 'til then that the Spirit of Faith would always lead one unerringly to truth, if one but opened one's heart. Yet, here she was claiming to be led by Faith, and that it led her down a different path than it had me. Could one be deceived into a false Faith by a firm enough desire to believe something that wasn't true? And if that was possible, what assurance had I that it was she who was deceived? I mean, if I was to be completely honest? I had to figure out the nature of her desire to support abortion, learn her motives so I could get a better read on it. There had to be a way to be sure it was she who was too close to the matter to be objective, not I.

I couldn't come up with a way to ask, so finally I just said, "I still don't get why Pragmatians would be so in favor of something so awful as abortion."

Margie slowly shook her head at me, completely taken aback. "Wow, there's so much wrong with that, I don't even..." After looking away for a few moments with a furrowed brow, she took a breath. "Okay, taken in order. For a start, I'm not Pragmatican."

"Well maybe you aren't in the Party, but..."

"No, I mean it, I'm not even Pragmatic. I know this might boggle your mind, because Puritans like to call everything outside their belief system Pragmatic. Like the word means 'maliciously evil amoral comic book villain who wants to dress your children in vinaigrette and devour them whole' or something equally ludicrous. And I know why that feels satisfying. When you smack a big label on something, it covers up what's actually there so you don't have to look at it. Pragmatians do it, too, and they sound just as smug."

My desire to protest was trumped by the ring of truth in what she'd

said. It *did* feel good to call something I didn't like Pragmatic, just *knowing* that meant it was wrong and I was right, ending the discomfort at my ideals being challenged. When my entire sense of self was built around the conviction that my every belief was enshrined within a bastion of unassailable truth, it touched a raw nerve when someone questioned it.

I suddenly saw how quick I had been to anger earlier, how personally insulted I had felt at her disagreements. This latest realization spun my head around, making me wonder aloud, "Whose side are you on, then?"

Her wry smile returned before she responded. "I'm not entirely on anybody's side, because nobody's entirely on mine. I know it's a little silly, but I like to call myself Principalian. My one loyalty is to my principles, because it's nobody's responsibility but mine to fight for them. Once you put your loyalty to something outside your own principles, you've lost your integrity. And that's why I could never be Pragmatican. I'm too much of a Compassionate Realist, doing everything I can to work with the foibles of the world as it is, in my efforts to help people make their place in it a little better."

She shrugged, as if in acknowledgment of what a gargantuan task that was. "Meanwhile, the Pragmaticans are so busy working to not let the Best become the enemy of the Possible that they make even the Good impossible by not bothering to try for it. Even a few tax dollars might still trickle down to helping women be tested for cancer and get the barest basics of medical care if the Pragmaticans who control allocations to charities like Family Planning weren't so terrified that someone might call them Pragmatic just for proposing it in the budget."

She saw my confusion about the mention of cancer and such, and quickly clarified, "You should realize that over ninety-five percent of what goes on here is health screenings and routine medical treatment for women, and sometimes men. We also have healthy baby programs, providing everything from checkups to teaching new parents how to care for them, helping improve or even save those precious little lives. It's the only chance at any kind of preventative care so very many people have, especially with the astronomical costs of health care even for those lucky enough to have steady jobs. Even those with insurance can't always afford the huge up-front deductibles they'd have to fork over before insurance would even start to pay a portion of their doctor visits, so they come here."

Passion warmed her voice as she leaned forward on the table. "The people who are trying to shut us down are working hard to take away

the only chance our clients have to take care of themselves. But then, the health and survival needs of women and the impoverished have always been sacrificed on the altar of political and personal agendas. The blame and shame is always heartlessly laid on those who are giving all they have just to survive, instead of on those who for personal gain abuse their power over the powerless. Just think of the world we would have if more people behaved like Jesus, instead of wantonly throwing his name around as justification to rob and harm those he valued most: children.”

She paused only for a short breath to let that sink in before charging forward. “And that leads to your second point. I hate abortion. Nearly everyone I know hates abortion. I have never met anybody *in favor* of abortion. I personally feel it’s a horrible, horrible thing for a person to have to even consider. No, not because of ludicrous anti-abortion rumors that they routinely cause long-term health or mental problems, which have repeatedly been exposed as utterly untrue. I hate it because I love babies, I love motherhood, and I hate any person being in such a terrible situation that abortion seems the best of all lousy options. I get this freshly heavy, oppressive feeling, every time I counsel a woman who may need one.”

My eyes narrowed cautiously. “If you hate it so much, why would you even consider trying to make it legal, let alone help make it available?”

“Because I hate the alternatives more.” The last word had vehement emphasis. “There are far worse things than a safe and legal abortion for a woman who has searched herself and decided she needs one.”

I still didn’t see it. “The alternative to abortion is not having sex if you’re not ready to be a mother.”

She arched an eyebrow at me. “Are you arguing against birth control itself, now? Because if so, you should have said not mother, but *parent*.”

That wasn’t what I’d meant, but she wasn’t far wrong. “Okay, fine, parent then. It’s wrong for men too, as explained in the Bible where it teaches that birth control is wrong. Onan had, uh, spilled his seed, and was struck dead for his wickedness. This time, the Bible is inerrantly clear in what God’s opinion is.” I hate to admit to you that I was feeling just a bit smug despite myself, as I had finally settled back onto the firm, rock-hard foundation of Biblical clarity.

And then, naturally, Margie exposed the quicksand beneath my feet. The sparkle of mischief had returned to her eyes as she snapped up my point and split it apart. “You know, you are absolutely correct,

so let's examine what that story explains about God's opinions. In the story, God had put a man to death for wickedness, and the man's brother Onan was commanded to 'lie with' the widow Tamar to produce her a son. But Onan didn't want to father a child who would, in God's eyes, belong to his dead brother, so he 'spilled his seed on the ground' to avoid honoring his promise, and was killed for his sin. The widow then did all she could to honor God's commandment that she bear a child despite her father-in-law's attempts to keep her childless, and his hypocritical attempt to execute her while pregnant, but that gets into another matter entirely."

I made a mental note to read up more about that story of Tamar and her father-in-law, trying to keep up as Margie went on. "Regardless, the story of Onan was about one man making a commitment before God to father a child, then trying sneakily to break his word. It had nothing to do with every sperm connecting to an egg and then becoming a breathing baby. If that was God's will, then he wouldn't cause up to a third or even half of fertilized eggs to fail to implant, let alone that large number of early-term spontaneous miscarriages. Plus, and I don't know if you know this, but the way men are made, not only do virtually none of their seeds make it to sprout, as it were, there's times they can't avoid a little bit of spilling, so to speak. Therefore, it's pretty obvious that God didn't intend for us to take this story out of context like that."

I didn't know what she meant, and I could tell it touched on topics I didn't want to talk about, so instead I went back to the point I had been trying to make. "This time the message was spelled out. We can't go picking and choosing when to have a child. It is up to God when a child is to be born, and it's a sin against God and that child to try to take matters into your own hands."

Her playful smile returned. "And yet here you are, trying to do exactly that, and force a woman to bear a child. Even if her own religious beliefs instruct her that God wishes for her to use the medical blessings granted her to not bear a child, you would take away the agency of choice you believe God grants to each of us. Just like Onan, you would play God with whether or not a child comes into being."

I wanted to accuse her of teasing me again, yet I could tell she was quite sincere. "But when they're preventing a child from being born..." I trailed off.

She shook her head as she corrected me. "Preventing a child from being formed in the first place. I know some in your group like to choose their own terminology by calling emergency contraceptives or even all contraceptives 'abortion pills,' but contraceptives only prevent

a pregnancy, not end one. For example, the emergency contraceptive pills don't interfere with fertilized eggs, they merely interfere with ovulation and fertilization. Without those, you can't get pregnant any more than putting milk and spices in a cold pan can get you an omelet."

With a shrug, Margie went back to her train of thought. "Regardless, neither The Pill nor the Emergency Pill can possibly terminate a pregnancy that never began."

I couldn't think of any new ways to argue about that point. So instead I moved back a step further, to the commandments regarding sex itself. "But from the very beginning, Adam and Eve were commanded to be fruitful and multiply. We have an obligation to bear children; it's the purpose of sex, and the whole purpose of marriage!"

Her brow arched again. "Are you accusing the Bible of not saying what God really meant again? Because the commandment was to populate the earth by having children, that's it. God didn't say have as many children as humanly possible, nor only to have sex for that purpose. Not even in the commandment to Noah was that said. God didn't say never to use a method of birth control such as withdrawing or the sponge, which we know were used in Biblical times, thanks to the Onan story as well as the Jewish Talmud. Yet when the Bible wants to record a commandment of God, it spells things out in pretty certain terms what God means to say. Trying to put words into God's mouth is one of the faults ascribed to the Pharisees, who were accused of adding on to God's laws and then punishing people who didn't follow their man-made rules."

She'd wagged her finger to make her point, then waved her hand as she continued. "Also, the earliest Christian missionary, Paul, told the Corinthians that spouses were commanded to share themselves with each other, and not just for making kids. It was for strengthening the connections among partners, which sex is fantastic for. There's such a closeness that grows between two people who join together in mutual love and respect, both psychologically and through biochemical responses, and he advised them to forge such bonds. And then there's the Songs of Solomon extolling the divine bliss of such sharing. I know that section of Christian scripture embarrasses some people, but the spiritual metaphors of physical experiences make it one of my favorite parts of the Bible."

At that point I blushed, because it embarrassed me that the Songs of Solomon were even in the Bible. Whenever we got a new Bible in our church, we actually stapled that whole book shut, but I still had happened to catch a glimpse here or there of a word that made me turn

beet red. I didn't want to have to admit another point of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible I wanted to consider, so I just left it alone, shifting uncomfortably in my chair.

Margie's compassionate smile returned at my attempts to not let my reaction show on my face. "Tell you what, let's move on. Let's instead say for the moment that you are absolutely right, that abstinence is the best possible choice in the entire universe, and that everybody who ever has sex not wanting to be a parent is absolutely in the wrong and sinners before God. And then let's pretend that their commitments to God are even any of your business in the first place." She paused. "You with me so far?"

"Yes, go on." I was grateful for the topic shift, and curious where she was going.

She leaned forward again, hooking one forefinger onto the other as though counting. "First, let's deal with those who don't choose to have sex. The anti-choice laws pushed in this state still grant the option of abortion if the woman can prove the sex was against her will. Without getting into how messed-up the Burden of Proof laws have gotten and how awful survivors are treated, just generally speaking – how do you feel about that?"

I grimaced, because I knew there were those who always considered sex the fault of the so-called temptress, blaming a woman who was raped for the atrocities visited on her. "Well, I don't like it, but if it wasn't her fault, then..."

"Bingo. So pregnancy is a matter of *fault*, a *punishment* for having sex. Bearing babies is a punishment." She watched me as she said that, and was satisfied at the return of my indignation.

"Hey wait, no, I didn't mean that."

She then held her hands up questioningly. "Then why is it more okay for an abortion if the woman was raped than if she had a sudden impulse of passion, or a condom broke? If you feel that all abortions are the murder of a potential baby, what's the difference?"

I paused to consider, since I remembered there were those who didn't want any exceptions for outlawing all abortion or even birth control... those like Brother Foley. "Well, I think the law was passed that way because they had to make a compromise. There are of course those who don't think it should still be legal, but they didn't want to seem heartless, since they knew they wouldn't win."

"Heartless is a good word there, but I didn't ask about what's legal. I want to know what you think: is there a difference?" She rested her chin on her hand, watching me closely as I considered.

"Hmm. You know, I think there is a difference. I think it's because

the baby would have to be born into the horrible circumstance of... well, you know." I trailed off, not wanting to even think about it.

"Yes, unfortunately, I *do* know. But fortunately, rapes don't always result in pregnancy, or the population of this town would be..." Her eyes started to flinch with pain again, but she blinked it away. "Nevermind, that's another tangent. What you're saying is, the circumstances for the baby matter here."

I almost asked what she was going to say, but decided to also remain on the topic at hand. "Yes, they'd have to."

"And since the woman is the baby's mother, the circumstances she can provide the baby matter as well, yes? Yes. So. What about women who choose to have sex, but they can't afford to become mothers, or already have children to support? After all, over half of abortions are for women who are already mothers of children they fear would be made destitute if their scant resources were stretched even thinner. So let's say they used every precaution while honoring Paul's request they have sex with their husbands, but contraception failed. They suddenly find themselves pregnant but without a means to pay for the prenatal care and delivery, let alone the baby's food and medicals once born. Remember that these days about one in four people can't get enough work, and twice that many have one or more jobs but still aren't getting paid enough to reliably provide for their family without help. Throw in another mouth and they all may end up on the street, even if nobody gets sick and all the breadwinners can keep working. Do you see the impact of those circumstances, too?"

I was thinking again of all the kids who couldn't find work through the school and had to find other ways to cover their tuition, or drop out. I then thought of what prospects they could possibly find out there, competing with a dozen or more adults also desperate for any job that would take them. I didn't like their odds. "... I think I do."

"For many, if not most, of these women, if they had a way of caring for these babies, they wouldn't be so afraid of the pregnancy ruining two or more lives. Given that they don't choose to be poor, poverty is another involuntary condition that turns women to abortion. There's also the women who are on their own, and all the doors that would close on them as single mothers. It's not merely having no help with childcare and bills, there's the stigma against them in the community as well as the workplace, and it's all perfectly legal..."

"...yeah. Yeah," I mumbled glumly. Even married mothers didn't get far at work, since it was assumed they'd put more focus on their family's needs than the factory's. Though the company demanded to be their highest priority even though it didn't have any loyalty or even

concern for them. In fact, even childless women were treated almost as badly sometimes, as though it was expected they would become pregnant at any time. I hadn't realized before that moment how terribly unfair it was. Remembering how even being pregnant even once got them treated, I almost pre-answered my next question. "Wouldn't it be better to give the babies up for adoption to someone who could give them a better life?"

I could tell she saw I was already wavering on that point, through her small, knowing smile. "If a woman can't afford to keep her child, she usually can't afford to be pregnant. We have been able to connect some young women with adoption programs that can help with the bills, but they can't help with the social and economic costs of bearing and then giving up a child. Unfortunately, there aren't homes for every baby, or every type of baby, and not every woman finds carrying a baby to term to then give it away an option for them. Of course, we haven't even talked about the situations where there are lethal defects, or if a woman's life is in serious danger due to a pregnancy. Do you think a woman should be forced to carry a dead or dying baby to term, or lose her own life or that of an endangered twin because you are against the idea of terminating any kind of pregnancy?"

That actually gave me some serious pause, because I thought of how many in my church had faced that question and answered in the affirmative. Women were routinely denied medical care for their pregnancies, which they were encouraged to have as often as possible. Any form of contraception was considered sinful even for married women, as God alone would grant or deny pregnancy in accordance with His plan. And we appointed ourselves God's personal caretakers in this plan, but only to a point. We claimed personal responsibility to ensure armies of children were brought forth for God, but not, as Margie had pointed out, to help care for those children once they were born.

It was also considered sinful for a woman to seek medical treatment even for fatal complications to pregnancy, as it meant she would be playing God with how the pregnancy turned out. Men would get treatment for anything and everything no matter the cost, though. It was believed that God blessed His children with greater understanding of how to allow Him to channel His healing grace through their work for the benefit of things like heart attacks and even backaches. But God's blessings did not extend to using medicine save the life of a mother or her baby.

I'd never really bought into that bit. I just couldn't believe that God wanted us to make a woman's children motherless... motherless,

that is, until the widower replaced her, often by a much younger woman. I had always had a problem with that, too, but I'd never let myself seriously think about it before that moment. As the anger and resentment started to well up inside me, I tried to find a way out of it, a way to explain how medical procedures to terminate a pregnancy could never be the work of God, and yet... I just couldn't find a justification for picking and choosing again.

Seeing I was lost in my own turmoil, Margie sighed again, then quickened her pace as she skipped ahead to her point. "The fact is, there are so many circumstances that can lead a woman to feeling she needs an abortion that there will always be those who feel so strongly that they're going to find a way. We were blessed with personal accountability for our own choices for a purpose, and we can't force others to use that power how we want them to, any more than they can force us to deny our own religious convictions to comply with theirs. Regardless of what you think of their reasons, there will always be women who will find even illegal abortion a safer option than pregnancy, however hard you try to convince or force them not to. This has been true throughout history, and I'm afraid it will be true for many years to come."

I snapped back to the conversation, raising my hand to slow her down. "That still doesn't make abortion right."

Nodding in acknowledgment, she slowed her words. "No, the existence of something doesn't determine its rightness. However, the rightness of something also doesn't determine its existence. For example, I said I'm against all forms of killing, and I meant it: the death penalty, war, I find all of it to be reprehensibly immoral. However, there are many people who are wholeheartedly in favor of these and other kinds of killing, even while fighting tooth and nail to outlaw abortion by arguing 'Thou Shalt Not Kill.' I accept this. People aren't going to always be where you'd like, so you need to meet them where they are if you're to have any hope of helping them. If you're serious about preventing abortion, you'll have to quit trying to force your choices onto other people, because obviously that isn't working. As long as women believe abortion is their only option, there will be women who choose it. Instead, give them better choices, and I guarantee you that people will make them."

I looked at her askance, trying to be clear on what she was suggesting. "They'll choose to keep their babies."

She nodded emphatically. "A lot of them, oh definitely, yes. Not all of them, no, but a very great number would much rather be a mother with options. And many more would benefit from help in making sure

they have access to what they need to prevent pregnancy to begin with.”

I frowned. I wasn't sure if I was ready to change my long-held position on something that I had always been told might encourage women to have sex that wasn't for creating families. “But what if I'm still against birth control? Or even just against The Pill and stuff for someone who isn't married?”

I expected her to be frustrated or take offense, but she just gave a matter-of-fact half-shrug. “You mean, what if you're against those things, and also if you feel it's your personal duty to decide when and how another woman has the spiritual and legal right to share or not share her body with another person? Well then you're going to have to make a choice, and not about whether she has sex, because contraception has nothing to do with that. Here in America about one in three women have had an abortion, even with all the barriers to access. Yet in the heartland of Europa where they've implemented comprehensive sex education and made contraceptives widely available, the annual per-woman abortion rate is less than one third of ours. Time and time again, it has been proven that when women are empowered with the knowledge and resources to take care of their own health, they don't have more sex, but they do have far less pregnancy and disease. So you need to learn to live with either the idea of women having safe sex you don't like, or the idea of women ending unwanted pregnancies as a result of sex they're having anyway.”

She smiled at that, but not unkindly. “Further, you absolutely need to support accessible health services for women, even if someday one of them may want to have a choice not be pregnant. Because you can't just make contraception and abortion hard to access, or even illegal, and think that makes it go away. All it usually does is make women feel even more helpless and alone, lost in a confusing maze of myths and lies about what is really going on with their bodies. That's the worst way they can feel in times like those, because instead of getting help to figure out their options, they are vulnerable to back-alley solutions that can end up pretty ugly. When women don't have access to counseling and safe options, too often they're easy prey for—”

“I KNOW!” Margie jumped as I shouted, both from what I said and how I said it. Even I was surprised at how strongly the guilt and anger from Marissa's pointless death had boiled over within me.

I then felt cold again, and looked down a moment before quietly admitting, “I know... knew Marissa Langley. She... she tried to come here for help or even just some information, someone to talk to, that last day I was out there. The fact I was here, it scared her off, so she

didn't... she couldn't..." I trailed off and wiped at my eyes in an attempt to stop the tears from streaming down my face, not sure what I wanted to say.

I couldn't see Margie's face, because I refused to look up. Soon I felt her hand on my shoulder, squeezing it. After what seemed like a long while, she softly said, "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Why are YOU sorry?" I looked up to her, and saw tears in her eyes as well.

Those eyes smiled sadly as she gave that soft little laugh I've since come to learn was her way of keeping her pain in perspective. "Here I was, trying my darnedest to help you see that even our sincerest attempts to shape our world can have terrible, unintended consequences for those around us. I had no idea you've already learned that lesson far more keenly than I have ever had to face. I'm *so* sorry."

I gave up trying to stop my tears, instead letting them flow freely as I sat silently a few moments to process all she'd said. Finally I found my voice again. "Except I hadn't. Learned it, I mean. Until just now, I... no, I guess maybe yeah, on some level I had learned. I just didn't realize it."

She squeezed my shoulder once more, then pulled over a box of tissues and offered me one before taking one for herself. "You have a wonderfully strong heart, Liz. You owe it the chance to open up to as many different experiences and perspectives as possible, so it can process them all. Only with a full understanding of your world can it lead the way to the best path for you."

I arched an eyebrow, my tears finally subsiding. "Even the perspectives of people I think are full of it?"

She laughed again. "Especially those, since you never know when someone might help you find a truth you never would have found on your own, whether they mean to or not. Those are the people some call the 'master teachers.'"

She paused, regarding me closely. "You've done really well, you know, considering the epistemic closure... sorry, the echo chamber you grew up in. In this town, it's easy to spend your whole life surrounded by people who agree with you and will help you shout down those who don't. That's a hard environment to grow up in if you want to learn how to find truth for yourself." She then smiled at me with genuine support and understanding, even respect.

Given all that I'd said and done, I couldn't believe she was for real. "You do realize I'm the gal who spent much of her life shouting about what terribly evil people you all are."

With a quiet smile she closed her eyes briefly, then opened them with a sweet sigh. “You’re also the gal sitting in front of me now, drying fresh tears and mulling over a fresh perspective. Part of meeting people where they are is recognizing where that is: not in your perception of the past, not in your hopes for the future, but as you find them in the here in the now.”

I tried to see myself through her eyes, to figure out where she saw me as being, as well as where she thought I had been. “Why didn’t you come out to share any of this all those times I was standing out front?”

She raised her finger to make a point. “Because you can’t teach a person anything; you can only be there while they teach themselves. When someone’s not ready to consider something, nothing you say will reach them. When they are ready, the teaching will find them – if not through you, then any other way it can. Today just happened to be the day you were ready to learn, and I just happened to be here when you did.”

While I sat there pondering my lifelong efforts to teach those who didn’t want to be taught, she went on. “You’ve had a chance most people don’t take these days: to re-examine one of the most fundamental pillars of your worldview. Rather than finding ways out of it, you came here to grab hold of that chance and see where it would lead you.”

She leaned forward onto her forearms, her voice dropping. “But wherever you go from here, you’ve had a glimpse into the underpinnings of your most cherished principles. Let that new insight work itself over inside you. Find out what you can grab hold of in your own heart to make reality, and let everything else stop standing in your way.”

I had also leaned forward, and sat there for what may have been a minute or more, both seeing and not seeing her. So much of where I had cemented my feet felt as though it had crumbled beneath me. When you’ve spent your whole life imagining your every perspective was sculpted from immovable firmament, that can be a physically dizzying experience. Finally, all I had to offer was a whispered, “Thank you.”

“If you wish to thank me, take what you’ve learned and apply it to your life. I’ll bet it also helps the lives of those around you in the process, so long as you stop trying so hard.” She winked at me, but I hardly noticed.

I sat up straight, jabbing my finger forward as I suddenly remembered why I had come. “Actually, I came to get info so I can go over it and organize it. I mean, for girls or boys who might be in a

situation where you have info that could help them, so other students might know what to tell them.”

It was as though I had just told her Santa Claus was on his way, he just needed directions. She jumped up to grab some pamphlets from behind her, talking about which ones were for which situations, and that I could get more whenever I needed them, and other specifics I really can't recall right now.

By the time I left, I had a pretty good idea of what was legal for the clinic to discuss with a minor without their parents present, and felt freshly bad about how much the laws I had supported were designed to make kids and even adults feel miserably alone. Yet rather than start fighting with myself over it, I let that feeling push me harder to help open doors for those who might find themselves hurting and just needing someone to talk to. The laws didn't apply to kids talking with friends and fellow students, so there was an opening to get some real information circulating to fight all the disinformation and rumors that had filled the void. I still didn't want people going off to have premarital sex, but I was starting to realize that God didn't put that responsibility into my hands. Instead, He gave me this opportunity to reach out to His children when they did fall, in whichever way would best help them where they were at.

I had decided that Margie was right. Only I could fight for the truth I found in my own heart. And now, my heart was instructing me to support my sisters and brothers in love and compassion, trying to find new ways to help them heal their situations. Wasn't that the example set by Christ, after all? He embraced even the most dire sinners and worked to help them find a path out of their dark places, regardless of the mistakes that had led them there. If I was to follow Christ's Greatest Commandment, to Love One Another – how could I have done anything less?

This has been the first of 21 chapters and 477 pages in Galifesto: A Love Story. Please visit Galifesto.com if you wish to purchase a complete copy!