

Thinking Makes It So

by

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Thinking Makes It So

Rebecca Campbell

Chapter One

_____ God is dead. At least, he better be- otherwise, Avery Wang was screwed. Avery prided himself in being the one person in his god-forsaken (joke intended) private Christian preparatory school who saw the world for how it really was. Just like every other student in 2nd to 12th grade, Avery's parents had shipped him off to be indoctrinated 24/7, rather than just part time. The only difference was, Avery saw things for how they were, and the other students didn't.

He scoffed to himself as he saw the other students wander like sheep throughout the day, wide smiles on their faces, naively accepting anything they were told by their teachers and church leaders. How they simply frolicked through their days, blissfully unaware of the lies they gorged themselves on and framed their whole lives around. If they only knew the truth, they would be as skeptical and analytical as Avery. They would see lies and hypocrisy of it all. They would-

The bell rang, signifying the end of the lunch period. Avery sighed and his spirit sank even lower. He threw away the crusts of his sandwiches and shuffled in a crowd of laughing students to his next class- science, if it could be considered that.

A mere two years ago, science used to be Avery's favorite class. Because of his vested interest, he bought some books to do extra, out of class reading. That was when he first realized the discrepancies between what he was learning in school and what some of the other books were saying. Topics like evolution and geology were very different from the two perspectives. Perplexed, he brought them to his science teacher, Mr. Lemonwest, in hopes of a simple explanation. What he received, however, was the complete opposite. His teacher called the principal and they had a private discussion, before telling Avery that the books he had bought contradicted God's word. "And", they told him, "if it is not of the Lord, it is of the devil". So,

under that reasoning, they encouraged Avery that it was God's will to give up the books and try reading selections from the school library instead.

Avery did not do that.

Curiosity spurred on by the reaction of his superiors, Avery made it a point to seek out scientific books from both purely scientific perspectives, and also those with a religious bias. Thus began Avery's research. After weeks of late nights, rainbows of sticky notes, strange images of Darwin and layers of sediment echoing in his dreams, Avery finally concluded that the evidence was overwhelmingly on science's side. In fact, it almost seemed to Avery that the religiously-minded scientific books were less informational and more defensive, whereas unbiased texts simply stated what research has proven and what it hasn't.

Avery approached his teacher again, this time, prepared to defend his argument. To his surprise, however, he did not get one. The balding man stood quietly as Avery explained what he had done and what it led him to believe. When he finished, the teacher simply said, "Let us pray," and bowed his head.

"Dear God," he began, "We come humbly to you to ask for your guidance. It is obvious that your beloved son, Avery, is struggling with his faith. Lead me to be a wise speaker on your behalf, and please be with Avery as he is in his time of need, and remind him of your holy presence in everything. Amen." Mr. Lemonwest raised his head and smiled benevolently at a very confused Avery.

"Riddle me this, Avery," the all-knowing teacher waggled his finger, "where does ultimate truth come from?"

"Uhm... God?" Avery guessed.

Mr. Lemonwest's eyes lit up. "Yes! And what *document* do we have today that tells us what God thinks?"

Avery let out a sigh he hoped wasn't too audible, and deadpanned, "the Bible?" slowly realizing that his arguments were not going to be taken seriously.

"*Ex-actly.*" Mr Lemonwest beamed, satisfied. "So, whenever you begin to feel pulled all different ways and the truth gets muddied up by the world, you always have the Bible to check your facts against." The teacher bent down slightly, so that he was eye level with Avery. "Look for God, Avery. Look for God and he'll reveal himself to you."

Avery answered through clenched teeth, "Yes, sir."

In his defense, Avery did look. He looked high and low for signs of God. He read and fact checked all types of literature, hoping that God would one day show up in his dormitory, and confirm to Avery that there was nothing to worry about, that he was real, and that Avery and his family were on the right track to end up with him in heaven forever. Apparently, though, God was busy. After more months of his research and pondering, Avery realized that perhaps it wasn't that he wasn't looking hard enough or didn't have enough faith, maybe God just wasn't there. It was a tough pill to swallow.

After all, following God gave everyone's life an inherent, meaningful value. You could be sure that God did have a plan for your life, (and afterlife!) whether you had it figured out or not. Without the faith that an omnipotent deity was watching over you and had your personal interests in mind, the overwhelming meaninglessness of the Universe could be an unsavory shock to anyone's emotional well-being.

So, Avery did what any teenager would do, and moped through a good few weeks completely awash with nihilism, complete with a soulless stare and dark music playlist. After

giving it some time, however, he came around to the idea that the only thing that was even more pointless than there being no God is giving up on everything because of its pointlessness. And thus a new mission was born- sharing what he learned with others. The constraints of religion no longer held him back, and so he set out to break others from them as well.

On this particular afternoon, Avery had an appointment as a tutor. He glared at the gothic chapel he passed on his walk. Or, as he called it in his head, the crap-el. The nickname didn't faze the imposing steeple, although it's dramatic height made Avery feel it was looking down on him, all-knowingly. He got a similar sense from many other buildings around campus. Large, imposing, all-knowing, judgemental. He chalked it up to the gothic architecture, trying to make every observer feel small and dumb. Avery much more appreciated the library, stuffed to the brim with books, and smelling of must and coffee.

As he walked in, he considered the fact that the team of tutors the school recruited were students with the highest grades in a class. Avery theorized that this way of selection was highly flawed- most students who did well just sort of "got it" and rarely practised, which makes for bad tutors. He tried his best, though, because he enjoyed spending time with the younger students and helping them learn. His favorite young student, a boy named Leo, was very inquisitive and always gave Avery a run for his money.

"So what number do you think goes here?" Avery asked Leo.

"Uh, nine?" Leo suggested, as he squirmed in his seat.

Avery laughed. "No, Leo, you can't just guess a random number. C'mon, look. It's eighteen divided by six. What number is that?"

Leo pulled a calculator out of his backpack and tried to begin typing numbers in, but Avery pulled it away. “You need to know this, Leo. You won’t be able to use a calculator on your test.”

Leo huffed. “Why is that a rule?” he whined, “it’s not fair!”

“Well, in life you’re going to need to know how to do things like compare prices, and do your taxes, not to mention whatever math skills you might need for a job, and you won’t-”

“What, I won’t have a calculator then?” Leo guessed, a precarious eyebrow raised. “Yeah, it’s not like I’ll have a small, convenient device with me at all times where I can do things like calculate numbers or search on google, or call my mom, or play pokemon... oh wait,” Leo paused for dramatic effect, “EVERYONE HAS ONE OF THOSE!!”

Avery hung his head in defeat, but also to hide his laughter. When he looked up, Leo had his arms crossed and “checkmate” practically written across his forehead.

“To be honest, I totally agree with you,” Avery sympathised, “but look at it this way- if you fail fifth grade because you don’t know how to divide, I really doubt your mom is going to want to buy you a phone for Christmas.” Leo’s face fell. “It’s okay, though, because that’s what I’m here for. All you need is practice, and I’ll be here to help. Let’s go ahead and get started. Do you know what six times two is?”

Before long, almost all of the tutoring session had passed. Leo just had one more question before they parted ways- “Why do numbers work?”

“What do you mean?” Avery asked for clarification.

“I dunno, like how come two is two and how come one plus one always equals two?”

Avery looked in the distance for a bit, as he tried to think of an answer. “It’s... hard to say,” he began, “It’s not like science or something, where there is something else happening

under the surface. They're just sort of like... laws of the universe. They're just always there and they always work."

Leo wasn't very happy with this answer, but he quipped, "I guess that's just the way God made them," and smiled at Avery.

"Well, I don't know about that," Avery said.

"Of course he did! God created everything!"

"Oh yeah?" It was Avery's turn to challenge the boy. "Then who created God?"

Leo looked at Avery as if he were stupid. "That question doesn't even make sense. God is just God. He's the one that made everything."

"Where did God come from, then? Is he an alien from another planet?"

Leo just laughed at his tutor. "You're funny, Avery. See you next week."

Avery shook his head as Leo skipped away. He admired his spunk and liked his attitude of challenging everything. It made him sad to see Leo resign himself to the beliefs of everyone else around him.

Chapter Two

Catherine Mellark always woke up at 7 am. This was partly from habit, but also because her bed was placed right across from the window, so every morning, the sun rose from its slumber and landed right into Catherine's sleepy eyes. When she awoke, she softly padded to the bathroom, and peered into the mirror, tucking her thick stripe of gray hair under the dark brown. When she glanced up, she saw a new addition to the bathroom- a sticky note on the mirror that read "You are fearfully and wonderfully made". Catherine forced her lips upward to give her reflection a half-hearted smile, and untucked the gray, forcing down her inner critique of the genetic fluke.

As she walked over to her friends' table for breakfast, one of the more outgoing group members, Hannah, called out to her. "Look, Catherine, they have pancakes today!" Catherine beamed. Everyone knew pancakes were Catherine's favorite, especially alongside her usual cup of tea and a small bowl of fresh fruit. Catherine got her breakfast and sat down with her friends, who were tittering about whatever happened to be the latest exciting gossip.

"You guys know our new track coach?" Sylvia asked.

"The hot one or the fat one?" Hannah threw back. Sylvia hit her on the arm.

"Hannah!" she exclaimed, disapprovingly. Then, with a change of heart and a self-indulgent smile, "the fat one."

Hannah laughed, and Catherine asked, "What about her?"

Sylvia leaned in and continued in a low voice, "I heard she got fired from her last job because she slept with a teacher."

"Really?" Catherine was aghast.

Sylvia raised a mischievous eyebrow. "I wonder which teacher she'll sleep with here."

Hannah gasped and said, “Ooh, maybe Mr. Clarke.”

Sylvia laughed. “You think she’s super into old men?”

“Maybe it’s like a sugar daddy situation,” added Catherine. “I can’t imagine really wanting to be a high school track coach when they grow up- maybe that’s just how she gets in.”

The trio laughed. “I mean, it would make more sense if she was sleeping with him for money rather than pleasure.” Sylvia mused.

Hannah and Catherine both wrinkled their noses. “Sylvia, do me a favor and NEVER mention the word ‘pleasure’ in reference to Mr. Clarke ever again,” Hannah demanded.

“Are you sure?” Sylvia teased, “You don’t want to imagine being with Mr. Clarke- *William* - and wrapping your arms around his thin, wrinkly body...” Catherine checked her watch and began to collect her things.

“Trust me, I hate to interrupt,” Catherine said, “But I better head to class.”

Hannah stood up immediately. “Well, I don’t hate to interrupt, and I think we all should go to class.”

“Okay, okay, I get the message,” Sylvia said. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Catherine admired all the buildings on her way to class, like she did every day. They were all so beautiful and intricate, like they jumped out of a fairy tale. Her favorite was the chapel, with its colorful stained-glass windows and steeple pointing to the heavens.

The morning passed fairly uneventfully for Catherine. She always ended up getting called on in class, because she was one of the few people who both did the reading and assignments, and could come up with and articulate her own thoughts on any subject at hand.

“So, class, what would you say the *theme* of *The Great Gatsby* is?” Mrs. Gentry, the eccentric, bird-like English teacher, asked the class. “Anyone?” she chirped, as she walked

slowly around the classroom, making eye contact with every reluctant student in her class.

“Maria! Why don’t you tell us what you think.”

The slumped girl glanced up and mumbled, “The American Dream.”

Mrs. Gentry would not be satisfied so easily. “Okay, well, I’m glad you read an analysis for this book online. Does anyone have any original thoughts and can back them up with the text?” She was greeted with silence. After a few more moments of uncomfortable peering, Catherine had had enough of the torture, and raised her hand slowly. Mrs. Gentry was ecstatic.

“*Thank you, Catherine!!* What would you say the theme is?”

“Well, I think it’s about hope. Nick says that Gatsby is the single most hopeful person he’s ever met, and I think all through the book, Nick and Gatsby kind of have this hope that everything will work out, and it culminated until the end when Gatsby dies, then Nick loses all his faith and hope in the people in New York, and I guess people in general.” When she finished talking, she noticed that all but two other students were paying attention to what she was saying. She didn’t know if it would be better or worse if everyone had their eyes on her.

Mrs. Gentry thanked her and went on, talking about other themes, and the role of hope in the book, and Catherine put her head down to take notes through the rest of the class.

At lunch time, both the girls’ school and the boys’ school were allowed to leave school grounds, so Catherine met up with her boyfriend, Samuel. They found a picnic table and began to unpack their lunches.

“Oh hey, my mom mailed me some cookies and gave me strict instructions to give you some,” Samuel said, with his signature lopsided smile, as he handed her a baggie with a few, mostly smushed chocolate chip cookies.

“Aw, that’s so sweet! Tell your mom I said thanks!” Catherine exclaimed. “How’s your day so far?”

“Awesome!” Samuel said, eyeing Catherine’s strawberries, “In second block, my teacher let us out early, so I went to the gym and just played basketball with David. What about you?”

Catherine groaned. “It’s so annoying that I always have to talk in class. No one ever knows what’s going on.”

“Well, that’s just because you’re so smart, babe. You have to carry the rest of the school with your wit and intelligence.” Then, deciding he couldn’t help himself, asked, “Are you going to eat your strawberries?”

Catherine handed them over. “Thanks, Sam.”

“Oh hey,” Samuel suddenly remembered, “do you still want to study in your room tonight?”

“Yeah!” Catherine agreed. “Feel free to come over whenever.”

Later that night, Samuel and Catherine were sitting in Catherine’s bed together, the intent to do homework dissolving into the night.

“You know, as much as you wanted a roommate you were best friends with, I have to admit I enjoy that we don’t have someone else here all the time,” Samuel mused, with Catherine’s legs in his lap.

Catherine laughed. “Yeah, which is good considering how weird she ended up being. I don’t even know where she is most of the time.”

“Well, like I said,” Samuel smirked, as his voice dropped and he leaned in close, “I’m not complaining.”

Catherine smiled and leaned in to bridge the distance between them. Their lips met, and Samuel put his hand behind Catherine's head and pulled her even closer. When they broke away, Samuel couldn't help the large grin on his face.

"What?" Catherine asked, feeling the effects of his infectious smile.

Samuel bit his lip and looked down. "I still get butterflies every time we kiss." He looked back up at Catherine. "Don't you?"

"Of course," Catherine agreed, chuckling as she kissed him again.

At this, Samuel playfully pushed Catherine onto her back on the bed. She laughed and he laid down next to her. They continued to kiss, snuggled up together, until Catherine pulled away and put her head on Samuel's chest. She sighed contentedly. Samuel placed his hand on her side.

After a few minutes of silence, Catherine worked up the courage to say what she'd been thinking about for a while. "I'm excited for when we get married," she told Samuel, blushing as she spoke.

Samuel smiled at the top of her head. "Why's that?" Then, quickly, "I mean, I am too, of course, but why do you mention it?"

"Um," Catherine blushed harder. "You know, because once we're married we can share everything with each other." After a pause, she continued, "we can be intimate together."

Samuel considered this for a moment, and then said, "Well, you know, we don't necessarily have to wait."

Catherine shifted sideways, to get a better look at Samuel's face. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I don't know," Samuel shrugged, and looked into the distance. "I was just thinking... you want to marry me, right?"

Catherine sat up a little. “Of course I do,” she said.

“Well, I want to marry you, too,” Samuel replied. “So, if you think about it, is there really much difference between the two of us *doing stuff* now versus later? I mean what would it really change, doing it right before the wedding versus right after, you know?”

Catherine was silent. Samuel continued, “plus, I mean, sometimes when we’re together and we’re kissing... you just make it difficult for me to want to wait.” Catherine still didn’t say anything. “Anyway, just think about it,” Samuel said. “Besides, it would be lots of fun.” He smiled.

The next morning, before getting breakfast, Catherine called her mom.

“Hi Sweetie!” she said when she picked up. “How are you?”

Upon hearing her mother’s voice, Catherine let a breath she didn’t even realize she was holding. She smiled. “I’m good.”

“How is your second year going? Do you have much homework yet?” Catherine’s mother peppered her with questions.

“Yeah, I have a lot of homework, but other than that everything is good.”

Catherine’s mom let out a satisfied sigh. “That makes me so happy to hear. You know, around this time last year was when you called me crying and saying you wanted to go home. Catherine and her mom both chuckled at the memory. “But what did I tell you? I told you that you’ll have a much better education there, much more focused on the right things, not like that public school you used to go to. I said it was just growing pains, and that God was there, holding your hand along the way. That it would get better with time.” They both reflected on this. “Now

look at you,” Catherine’s mom continued, tearfully. “You’re totally adjusted, with a bunch of great friends, and *Samuel*. They’ve really been a blessing, haven’t they?”

“Yeah, they have,” Catherine agreed. There was a moment of silence. “So, um, Mom, I realized the other day that you never actually gave me the Talk.” Catherine forced a fake laugh.

“The talk?” Catherine’s mom asked. Then, after a beat, “Ohh, the *Talk*.” She laughed. “I guess you’re right. I gave you a book though!”

“Oh, yeah, that’s true, I forgot about that.”

Another moment of silence passed. “So what makes you bring this up?”

Catherine racked her brain. “Oh, Hannah and Sylvia were just talking and joking about theirs, and it made me realize I didn’t have one.”

“Well... do you want one?” Catherine’s mom asked. “Do you have any questions? You know, it’s much better to ask me than to look it up on the internet.”

Catherine’s cheeks burned. “I guess... I don’t know. What is it *like*?” she asked, timidly.

“Hmm, okay.” Catherine’s mom replied, as she considered. “It’s sort of like eating food when you’re hungry, or scratching an itch.” She thought for a moment, then added, “It feels better for men, though.”

“Really?” Catherine asked.

“Yeah, it’s just much easier for them to reach orgasm. On the other hand, if they get aroused and don’t reach orgasm, it’s really uncomfortable for them, almost like it’s painful, because of the swelling. Once they get aroused, they really need to orgasm.”

Catherine almost regretted asking. Her mother continued, “That’s why it’s important to be careful around boys. You don’t want to put yourself in a compromising position.” There was an

awkward silence. “Not that you’d ever do that, though. I know you’re walking with the Lord.” She smiled on the other side of the phone. “I’m so proud of you.”

After a day that went by similar to the previous one, a little after 6:00 pm, Catherine walked into the lobby of the church for the mid-week evening service. She saw where students from both schools were grouped up, talking and laughing. She looked around until she spotted Samuel and her friends from afar. She watched Samuel deal out cards, his curly hair flopping around on the top of his head. She saw Sylvia trying to sneak a look at David’s cards, and heard Hannah’s laughter ring out as she realized what was happening. Catherine couldn’t contain her huge grin. She walked over, and was immediately welcomed in and was dealt her pile of cards.

An hour or so later, the doors of the worship center were opened and the students rushed in. As the music played, Catherine and her friends searched for empty chairs. Eventually, she got a seat nestled between Samuel and Hannah, and Sylvia was already making friends with the stranger sitting next to her. The student pastor, Pastor Mike, walked up to the stage and thanked the musicians. He was a man fairly recently hired by the church, which the older and more perceptive students could easily tell made him especially eager to prove himself, which was accentuated by the clothes he wore- the trendy street clothes looked out of place on the 40 year old man with thinning hair.

“Good evening, everyone! How is everybody doing tonight?” Apparently unsatisfied with the scattered clapping and occasional “woo” he received, he asked again. “That’s all you got?! C’mon, how are ya’ll DOING tonight?” The fuller applause and screams were, apparently, an acceptable answer.

“Alright gang, so I know Wednesday nights are super social and fun, a lot of you use this time to hang out with your friends and visit with them. And that’s great! We really love that, we want that for you guys. But God has really just put this burden on my heart, and I wanted to talk to you all about it.

“These Wednesday night services need to be about more than just catching up on what Susie said to Bryan last week. They’re for you to catch up with what Jesus is saying to you. If you have accepted Jesus into your heart, then you have a line connecting you to God. Jesus is the most important friend of all. He will guide you when you are lost, and show you which direction to take. And if you don’t have Jesus in your heart, well, maybe tonight’s the night. Bow your heads with me.”

As the pastor began his prayer about how to accept Jesus into your life, Catherine stared at her shoes. She had accepted Christ as a child, the same as most people she knew. She wasn’t sure she felt a relationship with God that was as close as what Pastor Mike had, but she had a lot of other things going on in her life. These weren’t conscious thoughts, but she didn’t really feel like confronting her religion and changing up her life, but this made her feel guilty, of course, so she typically just avoided thinking about it.

After the prayer was over, Pastor Mike invited those who made a decision to find an adult in the back to talk about it, and the band began to play music once more, the students now singing and clapping with even more fervor.

When the service was over, people began slowly trickling out of the worship center, still buzzing with the transformational energy of the service, but most often also turning conversations back to the subjects they were on earlier in the night. Samuel, however, would have none of it. He turned to Catherine.

“What did you think of the message?” He asked, with his large, handsome grin that Catherine could never help but to smile back to.

“Yeah, it was good!”, she said, shifting her eyes, as not to meet his, “I think it was super true.”

“That’s exactly what I thought! I really want to live that out every day. You know what I should do? I should start my own bible study group!”

Catherine’s stomach sank a bit, as she realized she would likely be much more involved in this group than she wanted to be. Samuel went on.

“It would be such a great way to get people together, because it could be like a fun, social thing, but then we would also study the Bible! And it would be a great way to reach out to people who haven’t accepted Jesus into their hearts,” he rattled on, then exclaimed, “Babe, I’m a genius!” and kissed Catherine on the forehead as she laughed.

Before long, Samuel had spread the word amongst their friends, and everyone couldn’t wait for the first meeting.

Chapter Three

Much to Catherine's secret dismay, once the ever-charismatic Samuel told their friends about his idea for the bible study, everyone was completely on board and planning was immediately underway. Everyone exchanged ideas about where it should be held, what food to offer, how to get the word out to as many people as they could, and most importantly, what scripture would be taught.

Hannah suggested just getting a pre-planned bible study kit and following along, but Samuel disagreed. He thought that it would be more impactful if they took turns picking things to speak about and presenting them to their peers. That way, he reasoned, we could talk about things that actually affect our day to day lives and how we can use the Bible to gain perspective on it. Eventually, Hannah agreed.

One by one, each of the issues was worked through and solved: the Bible study would be held in a multi purpose room on the boys' side of school, David was in charge of food (with plans to ask a dean to fund a few boxes of pizza to get students to come out), and the friends designed a couple of posters with compelling slogans like, "Got Jesus?" and "FREE PIZZA!!!" to be hung up around both campuses. The first date of the bible study was set to be the following Thursday evening.

Catherine lay awake that night, anxious. She felt like a fraud. It made her feel so guilty that her boyfriend and her best friends were all so excited and really enthusiastic about the bible study, and the prospect of becoming closer to God and leading others with them, while Catherine honestly just wanted a break from God for a while. Or did she? Her feelings were so conflicted- it's not like she hated God, she just didn't want to have to think or worry about him for a bit. But isn't that worse than hating God? She thought of the bible verse, "Because you are

lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Catherine tossed and turned. Finally, she was so exhausted that all she could do was promise herself she would talk to Samuel about how she felt. Maybe he would have some answers.

As good of a plan that was, it naturally was unable to happen. In the following days, Samuel and her friends were always all together, and always excitedly discussing details for the bible study. What kind of pizzas should we get? What about drinks? We should make a schedule of who is preparing the message for each week. Maybe we should ask some of our favorite teachers to speak! We should invite Oprah to speak. No, we should invite Tom Brady to speak. We should get back on track. Should we have a theme? What about decorations? What should I wear?

Catherine’s body felt heavy. She loved all of her friends so much, and she was happy that they were all excited and smiling, but she also felt out of place. She wanted to feel what everyone around her was feeling, but she was just on another wavelength. The worst part was that she wasn’t sure her friends would understand if she tried to explain how she felt. Feeling lonely is always sad, but she was sure that feeling lonely while surrounded by your best friends has to be one of the most gut wrenching feelings to exist.

Before she knew it, the day had arrived. Catherine spent all afternoon helping with the setup- moving chairs, putting up streamers, listening to Samuel’s message over and over (and over) again, and then getting ready with Hannah and Sylvia. She tried her best to feed off of the excitement of the people around her, but it was slowly crashing as she stood by herself while people arrived, slowly but surely filling up all the seats. Catherine stood near the back of the room, regretting her sundress and holding a cup of sweet tea, trying to look some combination of busy and disinterested.

“So, no friends, either?”

Catherine turned around. She saw an attractive asian boy wearing a sympathetic smile.

“No- I mean, yes... well, I-”

“It’s okay,” he interrupted her. “Believe me, of all people, I understand being on your own.” Taken aback by this personal statement, Catherine didn’t know what to say. “My name is Avery,” he said, offering his hand.

Catherine shook it. “I’m Catherine. And I do have friends.”

Avery laughed. “Sure. Nice to meet you, Catherine-with-friends.” There was an awkward lull, so he spoke up again. “Look at all these people,” he said, gesturing to the room. “Isn’t it all so stupid?”

“What do you mean?” Catherine asked, her guard going up already.

Avery stared out to the seats filled with chattering students. “All of these sheep. They just go about their lives, day in, day out, with all their little routines and all of their friends and all the stupid gossip. They never just take a break from it all and think! Have you ever read *Fahrenheit 451*?”

Trying to dodge his assertions, Catherine half heartedly chuckled and said, “Well if you think that, you’ll enjoy the sermon tonight, it’s about-”

“Oh, Jesus, don’t even get me started on the sermon,” Avery laughed, “If you’ll excuse the irony.”

Catherine’s face began to warm. “What do you mean?”

“Honestly, the reason I’m here is just to laugh at the circus. I mean, first of all, all these kids just accept things as true because their mommies and daddies said so? Like, come on. Have they even questioned, even a little bit, whether the Bible is true and God is real?” Avery looked

out at the students as he spoke, his voice unabashedly growing more insistent and repulsed with every word. “Yet they base their entire lives and- they believe- their eternities! On this,” he gestured flamboyantly, “religion! Without even stopping for a second to think.”

Catherine’s stomach tightened. She did not trust this boy in the least, but at the same time, she felt almost comforted by his words. They felt familiar to her thoughts and somewhere inside of her, she was almost encouraged by the fact that he seemed to understand how she felt about God.

Avery glanced at Catherine, and continued filling the tense space between them with his diatribe.

“Plus, who even started this bible study?” Catherine whipped her head around to stare at him, which Avery noticed, and doubled down. “They’re the worst of all! It’s one thing to have all the adults at this god damn school forcing this stuff down our throats, but to hear it from our peers? And besides, who do they think they are? It’s so narcissistic to assume that you know so much more about *God* and *Jesus* than everyone else that YOU deserve to be the one to tell everybody else about it. You know? What idiots.” Avery turned and glanced at Catherine expectantly.

“Well, you know what?” she began, anger coursing through her body and seeping from her words. “At least they’re doing something positive. And trying to help and connect with others.” She almost walked away after that, but decided to stay and really speak her mind. “And you know what else? It makes complete sense why you have no friends. Everyone else here is just minding their own business and having a *nice time* and there is literally no reason for you to judge them so harshly for doing nothing wrong. Maybe you’re just jealous because you have no one to just talk to about nothing. At this rate, you never will.” Catherine spun on her heel and

walked up to the very front row of chairs and sat next to her friends, where they had saved her a seat and asked her where she had been. Catherine felt immediately relieved and secure in their presence. Avery watched her go.

As Samuel walked up and stood in front of the room, prepared to speak, Catherine's thoughts were still racing. She could not believe the nerve of someone to say things like that! Just because she happened to be standing alone for one minute, Avery had assumed that she had no friends, and on top of that, assumed that she, like him apparently, thought that she was above everyone else, and that they were all brainless algae because they... what? Were religious? Were talking to their friends? Watch TV? What a ridiculous and outrageously offensive way to think about other people. As thoughts flew around in her head, Catherine slowly realized something. This is what not believing in God was like. This is who she would become, if her faith slipped- a rude, judgemental person who scoffed at everyone around them. Catherine vowed to speak to Samuel that night. She refused to become that person.

The bible study was a huge success. Plenty of people came out to see what it was about, and Samuel more than delivered. He was a great public speaker- the perfect mixture of passionate and articulate. Catherine couldn't help but beam with pride while he spoke, and afterwards, when people asked him questions or congratulated him on a job well done. Catherine helped Hannah and Sylvia take down the decorations and put the chairs back where they belonged, then they headed back to their rooms while Catherine waited for Samuel to finish greeting his adoring fans. He gave her a wide, full-toothed grin when he saw her.

“So, what did you think?” he asked.

“I think it was amazing,” Catherine returned his cheesy smile. “What do you say we go celebrate?”

“Sounds good! But only if it's ice cream.”

Catherine agreed. “I think we can make that happen.”

A few minutes later, the two were seated at a booth in Dairy Queen, Catherine drinking a strawberry milkshake, and Samuel, after a change of heart, munching on the chicken tenders and french fries he ended up getting with his hot fudge sundae. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Samuel spoke up and asked Catherine if she thought there was anything he could have improved on with his speaking. She said no, and after a few more minutes, she asked him if they were planning on decorating and having food every time. He said no. A few more minutes of silence passed as Catherine was trying to muster up the courage to talk to Samuel about her lapse in faith.

“Hey... Samuel?” she began, softly. Samuel furrowed a brow and asked what was up. Catherine took a deep breath. “I’ve, um... lately, I think I have sort of been... struggling with... my faith,” she looked down at her milkshake to avoid eye contact. “And I don’t know what to do.”

Samuel let out a sigh of relief. “That’s all? You scared me! I thought you had cancer or were breaking up with me!” he exclaimed. Catherine looked up at him, tearfully. “What have you been feeling?” he asked, more seriously this time.

Catherine took a deep breath. “I don’t know... I mean, it’s hard to describe, I guess. I guess I just feel like I’m not as... *into* everything as you and David and Hannah and Sylvia? Like I don’t really feel that same excitement and energy about God as you all do.

“But you do believe in God, right?” Samuel asked, concerned.

There was a pause that was long enough that Samuel shifted uncomfortably. “I mean, yeah, I guess I believe in him, but I just don’t feel like I have any sort of personal connection

with him, you know? Like I assume he's just like... watching over me all the time or whatever, but I don't see signs of him wherever I go, and I don't feel him speaking to me or anything.

Samuel nodded understandingly. "I know what you're saying."

"You do?" Catherine looked up at him with hope in her eyes. "Please tell me I'm not going to hell forever," she said through a wry smile, only half joking.

"No!" Samuel assured her. "If we went to hell for questioning our faith here and there, we would all be going there." Catherine relaxed slightly. "Look, I think your main issue is that you assume that faith and belief are just passive things. You don't see or feel God, so you start to wonder if he exists, right?" Catherine nodded sheepishly. "That's okay! It's perfectly understandable to do that with most things, but God isn't like most things. Sometimes, you have to have faith without being able to see Him. That's why it's called faith! Otherwise, everyone would be a Christian, right? Is this making sense? You don't have to feel God for him to really be there." Samuel looked at Catherine for a response.

"I guess it's just sort of hard to accept that something is true without being able to observe it in any way," she said softly.

"Well, how about this," Samuel said, as he held one of her hands. "Let's pray about it." They both closed their eyes and bowed their heads. "Dear Lord, I know that you see Catherine struggling with her faith, and I know that you love her- even more than I or her friends or her parents ever could. So, I humbly ask that you will help her where she is falling short. Show her your greatness and your mercy, Lord. Show her signs of your love, and open her eyes and her heart to receive you. Amen." Samuel looked up to see a few tears fall from Catherine's eyes. "Hey, it's okay," he said, and he moved to sit next to her and give her a hug. "Everything's going to be okay."

Chapter Four

After the night she spoke with Samuel, Catherine felt a huge weight lift from her shoulders and there was a new spring of optimism in every step she took. Every time she looked around, she saw God smiling at her. The leaves on the trees turning into a symphony of colors! Rain that stopped just as soon as Catherine was about to step outside! She and Sylvia wore the same T-shirt at the same time! It seemed that Samuel was right- once she opened her eyes, God was all around her, and she could feel his presence.

Catherine also started spending more time in the Bible. She added on 30 minutes to her morning routine to just pray and spend time in God's word. Every morning, she rubbed her thumb across the inscription of her name on the front cover. The bible was given to her before she left for school, by her tearful mother and stoic father. There was a note written inside that read, "To Catherine. *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11*" Catherine smiled sadly. She might not have always been the best Christian, but she knew that if she focused on what God had in store for her, she would be okay.

She also began to really pay attention and take to heart what Pastor Mike had to say, (skinny jeans and all), and she could feel it transforming her life. She felt more at peace with her relationship with God, and she felt more in tune with his will for her life.

She began to be able to share the joy of the bible study with her friends, and even helped them prepare what they would speak about. She felt that her relationships with everyone in her life grew even stronger, which she thanked God for every day. Sometimes she even thought to herself that if she had known how much better her life would be after submitting fully and wholeheartedly to God, she would have done it a lot sooner!

Before long, Samuel even asked Catherine if she would like to speak about her struggles and triumph with her faith at bible study. Catherine was hesitant at first.

“Oh, I don’t know...:” she said with a soft chuckle.

“Come on, you’d be great!” Samuel insisted.

Catherine insisted otherwise. “I mean, I’ve just never really been great at public speaking. You’re much better at it than I am.”

“*Catherine,*” he persisted with a smile, “You think God cares about how good of a public speaker you are? Of course not! You’d be sharing your story to bring glory to God- that’s all.”

Catherine couldn’t help but imitate Samuel’s infectious grin. “Fine,” she said, “As long as you take me to get ice cream afterwards.”

Samuel pumped a fist in the air. “Yes! That’s my girl!”

Later, however, Catherine found that, like most things, once she was away from Samuel and contemplating the situation on her own, she grew doubtful. Not only was she still nervous about speaking in front of so many people, she barely knew what she would say. Sure, she had her story about how she was unsure about God and her relationship with him, and then how she turned it around for the better, but that’s sort of... it. She made a mental note to look through all of her quiet time notes to see if there were any she could speak about.

After a few days (and late nights) of coffee runs and frantically flipping through the Bible, the day of the bible study arrived at last. Catherine opened her eyes for the first time that day and began to get nervous. She tried to push her racing thoughts and worries out of her mind and just focus on the rest of her day, but she couldn’t help but feel her racing heart even as she simply sat in class and took notes.

Hannah must have noticed Catherine's anxiety, because she told Catherine she was praying for her, and while Catherine appreciated the thought, it did not help much. The minutes of the day dragged by at a snail's pace, until finally, *finally*, classes were over and Catherine and her friends had nothing before them but the bible study.

Catherine tried to distract herself by helping with everything else needed in the bible study- she moved chairs, set up tables, meticulously arranged food and drinks, hung up decorations, and then promptly changed her outfit five times. All the while, her friends nervously watched on. Hannah and Sylvia whispered between themselves that it was time for Samuel to work his magic. As soon as people began to arrive, which put Catherine on the brink of a panic attack, Samuel went to speak to her.

"So, it's no secret to everyone that you're very nervous." Catherine stopped pacing to look at him with concern. "It's okay! I just wanted to pray over you."

Catherine gave him a smirk. "Hannah did that this morning. I don't think it worked." Samuel laughed.

"Get over here," he grinned and held out his hand, which Catherine reluctantly accepted. He closed his eyes and began to speak to God. "Dear Lord, I want to thank you for Catherine. She is my best friend, besides David, and she means so much to me. But I know she means even more to you. God, you have watched Catherine, as I have, transform from someone in a lost and hopeless place into one of joy and blessings. I only ask now that you instill in her the bravery that can only come from having the truth in this world and culture of lies. There are many people out there, preaching things that are not of the Bible and of you, Lord, but what Catherine has to say tonight is not like what others are saying. It is a story of transformation, and the light and joy that only faith in you can give. Help Catherine to truly feel that and share it with others tonight,

so that we may lead others to you. Amen.” Samuel raised his head and was pleased to see Catherine smiling and looking much more calm than before.

“Thank you,” was all she could manage, before she went in for a huge hug. After the hug, Samuel stood up and looked at Catherine.

“Alright, are you ready for this?” he asked. Catherine smiled and nodded yes. Samuel went up to the front of the stage to quiet the crowd and introduce Catherine.

“Good afternoon, everyone! I hope you all have had a great week so far, and it’s about to get even better! We have a very special person leading bible study today, Catherine. Some of you may know her as my girlfriend, but I have also had the pleasure of knowing her as a sister in Christ. She has an amazing testimony tonight, but I don’t want to do all the talking! Catherine, come on up.”

Catherine felt her cheeks warm as she walked in front of the students and Samuel walked back to his seat. She cleared her throat and began unsteadily. “A, um... a few weeks ago, I was sitting out where all of you are right now, but I was really doubting all of this religion stuff.” She got a few chuckles, and with the beginning over with, the momentum was on Catherine’s side, and she began to gain confidence in her words. “I kept telling myself that it wasn’t that I hated God, or didn’t want to be a Christian anymore, I just didn’t really feel that connection that I felt like everyone around me had. I didn’t have the same *feeling* everyone else did. But I didn’t say anything for a really long time, because I was afraid that everyone would judge me, or tell me to just go figure it out on my own, or kick me out of the church or something.” That statement got laughter. The students liked Catherine.

“But I’m so glad that I finally did talk to someone. I learned that having a relationship with God isn’t really about all the stuff that you might think it is. It’s not about rules or feeling

like you're one with God all the time or all of your life problems being solved. It's about really spending time in God's word and listening to what he has to say. God is trying to speak to all of us. We just have to find him and listen. Jesus is here. And he wants a close relationship with each and every single one of you. Will you let him into your life? Will you look and listen for him everywhere? Will you open your heart and mind to have a relationship with the one who created you and has a purpose for you? I did. And it's the best decision that I've ever made."

The students burst into applause, and Catherine beamed. Samuel came up to speak about how to accept Jesus into your life, and Catherine made her way back to her friends, who excitedly told her how amazing she did. Samuel wrapped up his acceptance prayer, and the bible study winded to a finish. The people who didn't leave immediately grouped around Samuel to ask him questions or to tell him that they had accepted Christ. Catherine smiled at this, and her and a few others began to clean up the room. She was picking up some loose pieces of trash when a young teen walked up to her.

"Oh, hello!" Catherine said, to break the awkwardness. The boy just looked at her with terror in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

The boy spoke softly and with a quiver of anxiety. "Um, I was just wondering..." he took a deep breath, "can you help me with my faith? Or, my relationship with God, I guess. I mean, I don't know, exactly, I just..."

"Yeah, of course! Come here, it's okay. Let's sit down somewhere." Catherine threw away the trash she had collected so far, and led the boy into the hallway outside. "Okay," she said, "Let's start at the beginning. What's your name?"

The boy seemed slightly calmer, but he avoided Catherine's eyes. "Isaac," he muttered.

“Nice! Like the Isaac in the Bible, right?” Isaac nodded but looked more miserable, so Catherine changed the subject. “Alright Isaac. So tell me about what you’re struggling with and I’ll see how I can help.”

Isaac finally looked at her and began pleadingly. “I was born and raised in a Christian family. My dad is a pastor. I swear I’m a good person. I never lie or cheat on my tests or anything. And I’ve never even seen a bottle of alcohol.”

Catherine smiled virtuously. “Well, I think you know as much as I do that none of those ensure that you’re saved.”

“Trust me, I know. That’s why I wanted your help,” Isaac stated, uncharacteristically boldly.

Catherine almost whooped for joy. “You want me to help you accept the Lord into your heart?” she asked. She couldn’t believe it. She was going to go from questioning her faith to creating disciples in just a few short weeks!

“No- well maybe, it’s just... I... I’ve been having these feelings lately. I know they’re bad, but I just can’t seem to get rid of them. I feel so guilty all the time and I don’t know what to do,” he hung his head.

Catherine was puzzled. “So, is the feeling... guilt?”

Isaac shook his head. He took a deep breath, and without looking up, stated, “I’ve been attracted to other guys.”

There was a tense moment of silence, and eventually Isaac looked up to see Catherine smiling at him. “What?!” he demanded.

“I’m sorry, I just- is that it? You made it seem like you murdered someone!” she began to laugh softly, and although Isaac still looked worried, he also couldn’t help but smile.

“But- I thought you would think I’m a terrible person. Being gay is a sin.”

Catherine shrugged. “So is divorce, and a bunch of other stuff that people still do. Look, I think it matters more that you have a relationship with Jesus. All he cared about was us loving each other, so that’s all I care about, too.”

Isaac looked at her gratefully, and opened his mouth to speak, when the door flew open. Catherine turned around to see Samuel. “Hey babe, there you are. You ready to go get ice cream?”

“Yeah, just give me a few more minutes,” Catherine said, to which Samuel gave a goofy salute and wink, and left the way he came. Catherine turned back around to see Isaac looking as frightened as he did in the beginning. “What’s wrong?” Catherine asked.

“Please don’t...” Isaac looked away, ashamed. “Please don’t tell him about- you know, what I told you.”

Catherine furrowed her brow. “Why not?”

“I don’t know, I just have a feeling that he won’t react the same way you did. I don’t want people to start being weird around me.”

Catherine felt for Isaac, but she was sure that Samuel wouldn’t do anything bad. Still, she wanted to reassure Isaac, so she nodded, and said, “Sure!”

After a few more reassurances (and a joke or two to lift Isaac’s spirits), Catherine said goodbye and made her way back to Samuel. The two of them drove to Dairy Queen, Samuel excitedly chattering and Catherine in a thoughtful silence. When they arrived and began eating their celebratory treats, however, Samuel asked Catherine about what he had seen. “Oh, so what were you and that guy talking about? Did you help him accept God?”

Catherine shook her head and paused for a moment. Although it pained her to go against what Isaac had asked of her, especially a mere fifteen minutes after, she really thought Samuel would feel the same way she did about the situation. “No, he was just telling me about how he felt really guilty because he felt attracted to other boys.”

“Hm. That’s always a tough situation.” Samuel looked into the distance thoughtfully, then turned to his prodigy. “What did you tell him?”

“Oh, I just told him that God just wants us to love each other, so it wouldn’t matter to me or him, as long as he had accepted Jesus and was living by his word.” Although she assumed Samuel would agree, she couldn’t help but look up at him for approval. He looked tense taken by surprise. “Samuel?” she asked, softly. “What is it?”

Samuel looked back at Catherine. “Is that really what you think?” he asked her. Catherine’s heart began to race.

“I mean... yeah. Why? What do you think?”

Samuel sighed. “Catherine, it says in the Bible that homosexuality is a sin. It’s just not acceptable.”

Catherine was taken aback. “Well, maybe, but people in the Bible had slaves and women’s rights were nearly nonexistent. Plus, divorce was a sin. And Jonah just got eaten by a big fish. And lived.”

“What are you talking about?” Samuel demanded.

“Look, I’m just trying to say that the Bible might not be an objective, timeless guide to exactly how the world should be.”

Samuel didn’t reply at first. His brows furrowed as he thought. Then he leaned forward and spoke in a soft voice. He finally said, “The *Bible* is *God’s word* and it should be treated as

such. I'm disappointed that you don't see it this way, and that you told that boy that his sin was okay as long as he was a nice person."

Catherine was silent, and she looked only at her slowly melting ice cream. Samuel's voice softened. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" Catherine gave a small yet unconvincing nod. They finished their ice cream in a tense silence.

Chapter Five

Isaac, meanwhile, walked back into his dorm room with his head high and his body buzzing with energy. Avery looked up from his computer immediately and gave him a puzzled look. Isaac beamed and announced, “You were wrong about everything.”

“Well, that’s a first,” Avery quipped with a smile. “What happened?”

Isaac sat on his desk and began the story. “So, there was this girl who talked about her faith, and she seemed really genuine, so I went to talk to her after. I... admitted to her that I was struggling with sin, and she told me that what really matters is just having a relationship with God, and that there are a lot of things in the Bible that are sins, but they’re normal now.”

“I’m going to refrain myself from proposing for the 27th time that that is because everyone just cherry-picks from the Bible and that it isn’t an actual guide for morality, especially not in the 21st century,” Avery winked at Isaac.

“We agreed to disagree,” Isaac asserted, to which Avery put his hands up in surrender. “But anyway, I’m so glad I went and talked to her. She was so nice and I really felt so accepted and happy.”

Avery smiled in spite of himself at the sight of his friend’s peacefulness. “That’s awesome. Who was the girl?”

“Um... I can’t quite remember her name, but she had brown hair with a gray streak in it, and I think she was dating the guy who is in charge of the bible study...”

Avery’s insides twisted. Could it have been the girl he spoke to? He couldn’t believe that someone who seemed to be questioning religion and cold to strangers was the same person who spoke publicly about her faith and was so comforting to Isaac. But then again, how many people

have gray streaks in their hair? He didn't know how to feel, but he decided that he couldn't tell Isaac about it. He didn't want to ruin Isaac's newfound peace. He put on a smile.

Chapter Six

Samuel was indignant that he had to set up the meeting that he did, but he was impassioned and insistent that the right thing must be done. He and David walked up to Hannah's dorm room and knocked on the door. Sylvia opened the door to show her and Hannah looking slightly sullen and welcomed them in. Samuel and David sat down unceremoniously on two neon-colored faux fur bean bags. Samuel cleared his throat and began speaking.

“So, I know it must seem weird to all meet here and talk about Catherine, but we have to remember that we aren't doing this to judge. We're doing it out of love.” Hannah and Sylvia nodded silently. “After Bible study yesterday, Catherine and I went to Dairy Queen, and she told me something very concerning. She told me that she was talking to a guy at the bible study who thought he was gay.” Hannah let out a small moan of disapproval. “Now,” Samuel began, eyeing Hannah warily, “we don't know his story and we all know it's not like any of us have never sinned. BUT, when I spoke to Catherine about this interaction, you know what she said she told him?” There was silence in the room. No one guessed. “She told him that that was totally fine! That it wasn't her 'place' to tell him what not to do, and that Jesus just says to loooove everyone, so that's all that matters. Does that seem right to you all?”

David couldn't take it any more. “No! Absolutely not. God said to love people, but there's a reason there is HEAVEN and HELL. I think we should love others, but that doesn't mean we can just be cool with everyone's sins and let the entire world just be a free-for-all. I don't know about you guys, but I don't want to be BFF's with a mass murderer.”

Hannah and Sylvia, a little put off by David's passionate words and face that nearly matched the pink bean bag he sat on, both just nodded their agreement.

“Okay then,” Samuel sighed in relief. “Now, we just have to figure out what to do about it.”

A productive half hour later, Samuel and David were getting ready to leave. Before they got the chance, Sylvia asked Samuel if she could speak to him alone. They stepped out into the hallway.

“What’s up?” Samuel asked her.

Sylvia’s brows were knitted together, and she stared down at the floor. “I guess I’m just feeling conflicted...” she began.

“About what?” Samuel pried. “Something I said?”

Sylvia nodded. “I mean... the Bible did say that being gay was wrong, right? That should be enough. But it does also say to love everyone and not to judge. And, I guess I feel guilty for questioning the word of God.” She paused, then continued, “My cousin... Jeremy, came out as gay a few years ago at Christmas. Everyone in my family had a long and tearful discussion about how being gay was not a choice and that Jesus’s primary message had been to love each other no matter what, and everyone eventually came around with acceptance. I never told anyone, but I always felt a little skeptical.”

Samuel smiled, and put his hand on Sylvia’s shoulder. “Look, I think with any person who is sinning, it’s important to separate the person and who they are with the sin they are committing.”

Sylvia repeated out of habit, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”

“Yes, exactly!” Samuel exclaimed. “You can love someone completely, just like Jesus would, without condoning or letting the sin go. It’s just like if someone was an alcoholic or something.”

Sylvia nodded. Samuel continued, “Plus, think of it this way. Now you can evangelize to him! He needs you, Sylvia. You just have to make sure you’re representing God well.”

Sylvia thanked him, and they went back inside the bedroom, allowing Samuel and David to leave and head to the basketball court.

Chapter Seven

Catherine had nearly given up searching for Hannah and Sylvia. Before she quit, though, she decided to check their room one more time. She walked over and knocked on the door. A small voice rang out and asked, “Who is it?” and at that, Catherine barged in. She couldn’t believe it. Hannah and Sylvia were just sitting there, not a care in the world. “Hey, guys,” she said, pointedly and with an attitude. Hannah and Sylvia looked at each other.

“Hey, what’s up?” Sylvia replied.

Sick of the casualty, Catherine blew up. “What are you guys doing? I texted you both and then I looked all over the school for you. I just needed a little help with my math homework, but I couldn’t find you guys anywhere! I had to do a wild goose chase to try and find you, only to find out that you guys were just hanging out without me.”

“I’m so sorry, Catherine. We meant to text you back, we were just talking without you because...” Hannah trailed off. Catherine gave her a quizzical look, and Hannah looked at Sylvia. When Hannah didn’t resume speaking, Sylvia picked up with, “Because it’s almost your birthday! Hello! How are we going to surprise you if you’re here while we plan everything?”

Catherine looked at the floor, silent. Hannah and Sylvia held their breath. Then Catherine looked up at them with an abashed smile. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I probably blew that way out of proportion.” Hannah and Sylvia smiled, looking relieved.

“Get over here,” Sylvia called to Catherine, and the three hugged on the bed. Catherine joined the girls and they studied until dinner.

Later that night, Catherine was in her bedroom with Amelia, her roommate, enduring the awkward silence of two people who barely know each other being stuck in a dorm together. Catherine kept her eyes glued to the Bible she was reading. Suddenly, though, she got a text and ripped her eyes away from Proverbs.

Hey Catherine ;), the text from Samuel read. Can I come over?

Catherine glanced up at Amelia and saw her poring over a science textbook. She texted back, *Idk. My roommate is here for once.*

She soon received the reply, *David isn't here. Want to come to my dorm?*

Catherine texted that she would, gathered a few things, and headed over. She knocked on Samuel's door and was greeted with a big hug.

"So what are you up to?" Catherine asked, putting her bag on Samuel's small dresser.

"Oh, nothing much," Samuel replied. "I was just playing a game online. What about you?"

Catherine beamed with pride. "I actually started going through Proverbs today! I think it's going to be my favorite book of the Bible."

"Oh really? That's awesome," Samuel replied. He smiled and leaned close to Catherine. "I'm proud of you for reading the Bible. I think that's the best way to know what God wants for us. You know?"

Catherine nodded slowly, leaning in to Samuel, as well. She smiled softly, and her eyes drifted down his face to look at his lips. Samuel licked his lips and Catherine bit hers. All of a sudden, Samuel moved in and their lips crashed together like tempestuous waves on a rocky shore.

Samuel grabbed Catherine's hips and she bent her body to melt into his. Catherine put her hands on his shoulders and pulled him close to her. Then, Samuel backed Catherine up against the bed and pushed her lightly. She fell onto the bed and Samuel got on top of her. Catherine laughed a little and Samuel kissed her on the nose. Then he began tugging her shirt up.

"Um, Samuel?" Catherine giggled again, nervously this time. Samuel pulled her shirt the rest of the way off, leaving Catherine in just her bra. She opened her mouth and Samuel kissed her, deeply. He reached under the pillow she laid on and pulled a condom out.

As Catherine felt Samuel's hand digging around under her head, she opened her eyes. When she saw the condom in his hands, she leaned back away from him.

"Samuel, what are you doing?" Catherine asked, in a small voice. Samuel leaned in to kiss Catherine, but she pulled away more, and crossed her arms over her chest. "Samuel?" Catherine asked again.

"It's okay," he said, reaching out to put his hand on Catherine's face, but she got off the bed and stood away from him.

Samuel furrowed his brow. "What's wrong? I thought you just needed more time. I thought we were going to do this together."

"I... I didn't..." Catherine's mind was still reeling. She didn't know what to say. She just felt scared. She took a shaky breath. "I want to go back to my room," was all she said. Samuel tossed her shirt to her in silence. Catherine slipped her shirt over her head, grabbed her bag, and walked out the door.

As she made her way back to her dorm, Catherine's mind raced. Should she have refused him? Catherine couldn't understand why Samuel would try to have sex after Catherine was so unsure if she even wanted to the last time they'd talked about it. Maybe she had been too nice

about it. She wondered if what she had worn or something she had said made him think that she wanted it. Catherine was so unsure about she even felt about sex, and this only made things more complicated.

The next morning, she told Hannah and Sylvia what had happened in a hushed voice at the breakfast table. They quietly covered their mouths with their hands.

“What did you do?” Hannah asked Catherine.

Catherine sighed. “I didn’t know what to do. I just left and went back to my dorm.”

“So you two didn’t do it?” Sylvia pressed.

Catherine shook her head, then chewed on a fingernail. “Do you think I should have?” In response, Hannah blushed and looked at the floor.

Sylvia, on the other hand, spoke up. “I don’t know,” she said at first. Then, thinking about it, she continued, “I mean, you wouldn’t want him to break up with you because you won’t do it. Men have certain... needs.”

Catherine’s face flushed. Why didn’t she think about that before? She wondered if it was too late and Samuel would already be looking for another girl.

“Then again,” Sylvia continued, “It is a sin. It’s weird that Samuel wouldn’t know that. Maybe he interprets the verse differently. Whatever verse it is.” Suddenly, Sylvia sat straight up. “What were you wearing last night? And what were you guys doing right before that happened? Were you being flirty and stuff?”

Catherine’s stomach sank. Perhaps it was her fault that she made Samuel feel like she wanted it. She tucked her hair behind her ear, looked down, and just muttered, “I don’t remember.”

“Oh,” Sylvia shrugged off the conversation and dipped a french toast stick into syrup.

“Well, that could have been it.”

Chapter Eight

Tuesday morning, Samuel woke up earlier than usual. He told himself it was out of excitement, but truthfully, it could have just as easily been nerves. He laid in bed, staring at the early blue morning light hit his ceiling. Finally, he sat up and reached for his phone, and texted the group chat he shared with David, Hannah, and Sylvia. “Can’t sleep”, he sent, followed by, “Anyone else?” Within two minutes, everyone else replied that they were awake, as well.

Samuel wanted to kick himself. Why was he feeling so strange about tonight’s bible study? It needed to be said, and to be honest, he was the best person to say it. Surely people would appreciate his message, especially considering how controversial being gay is right now. People need to hear the truth. He glanced over as he thought this, and saw a ray of warming light hitting the Bible he left on his bedside table. It was a sign. Samuel’s mission was approved by God, and since that was the case, it was sure to be successful. Samuel got up and got ready for the day, with a renewed bounce in his step.

Chapter Nine

Later that day, Avery watched Isaac get ready for bible study. It almost warmed his heart, seeing Isaac so excited. Isaac babbled on as he did his hair.

“You know, I feel like it’s the first time in recent months, that I’m actually excited to go to a religious event. For the longest time, I felt, like, almost cut off, or not accepted in those spaces, even though I really do want a relationship with God, you know?”

“I guess I can’t relate,” Avery commented, flipping through a graphic novel.

“Of course you can’t,” Isaac said, then continued, “But now, after talking to Catherine, I *finally* feel like I’ll be accepted, or at least not ostracized.”

“Or burned at the stake,” Avery chimed in.

Isaac gave him a side eye. “Yeah. Or that. Thanks.” He went on, “Look, I know you don’t care about religious stuff, but I’m just... happy to feel like me and my relationship with God is the thing that really matters,” Isaac tried to explain. “Not whether I like guys or not.”

Avery nodded and gave Isaac a thin but understanding smile. As a Asian American, he often felt as if people saw him as just someone who was different at best, or some sort of social representative. He often wished people could just see him as his personality or actions, as they did for other people.

“I’m sure you’ll say no to this,” Isaac began, snatching Avery from his contemplations, “but I would like to formally invite you to come with me.”

As much as Avery appreciated Isaac’s constant invitations, he was not eager to attend Bible study. “Ah, I would if I could, but I have to... walk my... fish.” Isaac smiled at him through the mirror.

“Suit yourself.”

Chapter Ten

Catherine finished up her homework for the night and got ready to go to Bible study. When she was, she met Hannah and Sylvia in their dorm and they discussed the latest Literature paper as they walked to the meeting room, where Samuel and David had been getting everything ready.

Twenty minutes later, she saw Isaac walk through the doors and into the crowded room full of students chattering excitedly. He looked around for familiar faces, and Catherine waved hello. He waved back across the sea of people. Unfortunately, there were no seats near Catherine, so he was forced to sit between strangers near the front of the room.

Samuel walked up to the front of the room, a solemn but determined look on his face. Catherine realized she didn't actually know what the topic for today was, and turned to David to ask.

"Do you know what he's going to talk about?" she whispered, apparently too quiet for David to hear, because he kept looking forward and did not reply. Catherine shrugged it off and Samuel began to speak.

"Tonight, I have a message that is going to be difficult for me to say. And it might be difficult for some of you to hear. But I've felt God's calling and encouragement for me to bring this topic up, and who am I to ignore our heavenly father?" Catherine's confusion grew. What was he talking about? She looked at Hannah and Sylvia, but they were simply looking forward with straight faces, just like David.

Samuel took a pause and then continued, "Sometimes, in our culture, we all get so caught up in all the progressivism and social movements that we forget what holds the ultimate truth." He held up his Bible. "It's this. This is straight from God's mouth, and it has laws and rules that

we, as Christians, are called to live by, no matter what it is cool to be these days. That includes... homosexuality.”

A hush came over the entire room. The blood completely drained from Catherine’s face. No one in the previously chatty crowd breathed a word. Hannah, Sylvia and David continued to stare straight forward. Samuel looked out at the crowd, while specifically avoiding eye contact with any one.

Samuel continued talking and reading some of the Bible, but Catherine was no longer listening. She couldn’t believe him. Samuel was her boyfriend! She had told him something that she never would have imagined he would have shared with anyone else, much less have an entire bible study devoted to it! Did he tell David? That would have explained why he was ignoring her. Hannah and Sylvia wouldn’t look at her either, did they know? Were all of them angry with her? Hannah and Sylvia hadn’t been acting abnormally. She thought of Isaac and turned slightly to try and find him in the crowd.

“I realize,” he continued, “that many people hold the opinion that there are other sins, such as divorce, that does not receive the same attention from the church, even though it is forbidden in the Bible. Now, I can’t exactly speak about divorce with authority, seeing as how I’m only seventeen.” Samuel paused, and Catherine could tell he’d thought he might receive some laughs for that line. She was slightly satisfied to see that when he looked out into the crowd, he was only met with solemn eyes, and a fog of tension. He went on, looking slightly disappointed, but recovered quickly. “I will say, though, that sin is always wrong. Every time you sin it is wrong, and every sin is the same in the eyes of God. So the fact that some people wake up in the morning and choose to live life in a sinful way, day after day?” Samuel shook his head

in the way of a deeply disappointed father. “I imagine that’s probably the worst thing you can do, from God’s perspective.”

Catherine was twisting her neck around, trying to find the spot where Isaac had taken a seat. Eventually, she located him, and tried to telepathically explain how sorry she was for this whole ordeal. He kept facing forward, though, just like David, Hannah, and Sylvia. Catherine thought about going over to him, but before she knew it, Isaac was up from his seat and headed for the door. He was crouching and kept his eyes glued to the floor.

“*Isaac,*” Catherine whispered, trying to get his attention, but he was gone. So, Catherine followed Isaac out of the room, but was held up by trying to squeeze past her friends, her, trying to shoot daggers with her eyes, and them, trying to avoid eye contact. By the time she got out, Isaac was nowhere to be found.

Catherine paced around for a few minutes trying to figure out what to do. It didn’t take her long to decide that she needed to find Isaac as soon as possible. She definitely needed to apologize and explain, and tell him she had no idea that Samuel would ever do anything like this, and that she had nothing to do with it. She felt so guilty that she was itching to relieve her conscience. On top of that, though, she also wanted to make sure that he was okay. She didn’t talk to him for very long and wasn’t sure if he had many friends, and if he did, how many knew that he was gay. She didn’t want him to have no one to go to.

The only problem with all of this was that she had no idea where he went. She decided the only thing she really could do at the moment was check all of the common student spaces to see if he was at any of those. The closest one was the library, quiet, but full of studiers. The floorboards creaked obnoxiously, causing annoyed students to look up from their schoolwork, as

Catherine tried to tip toe swiftly around to peek in all the nooks and crannies Isaac might have found himself nestled in, but she had no luck.

Disappointed but not dissuaded from her goal, Catherine moved on to the student union, where there was a smaller crowd but much more chatter. She did a quick survey of the location, but, again, to no avail. She walked back and forth across the span of the building, checking over and over again, at first in case she had missed something, but then to try and come up with what she should do next.

Chapter Eleven

Avery was only half way through his graphic novel when Isaac whipped the door open, slammed it closed, and laid down wordlessly on his bed. Avery thought it best to proceed with caution.

“Hey, how was it?” Greeted with silence, Avery looked closer at Isaac in confusion.

“Hello?” Isaac, looking exasperated, sat up.

“She... told.” Isaac began, getting the most painful part out in the open. Avery did not follow.

“What do you mean? Who told what? Are you-” Isaac put up his hand to stop him, and took a deep breath.

“The girl that I talked to last week, about faith, I told her about... I told her about me being gay.” Although it was only the beginning of the story, Avery began to realize the gravity of the situation, and his eyes widened with comprehension. Isaac got more passionate as he went on. “I specifically asked her not to tell anyone, and she promised! I thought I could trust her.” He paused, disappointed. “She acted like she understood and cared. But I guess not.”

Avery, trying to get a sense of the damage, asked, “Well, who did she tell, exactly?”

Isaac took a deep breath. “I don’t know for sure, but I have a sneaking suspicion that she at least told her asshole boyfriend, considering he,” Isaac paused, seemingly struggling to form the words, “he made the topic of today’s bible study ‘why being gay is the worst sin.’” Avery’s mouth dropped. Isaac went on.

“I tried to just sit through it, but eventually I couldn’t take it anymore and I just left. But I’m worried that that will make people realize that I’m gay.” As he said it, panic set in again and Isaac started hyperventilating. This made Avery upset, but he simply sat stoically, not knowing

what to say or do. He prided himself in his rationality, however, so he searched his mind, looking for ideas, until suddenly one came to him.

“Isaac.” Isaac looked up, surprised at the sudden demandingness in Avery’s voice. “You know what we’re going to do?”

Isaac shook his head weakly. “What?”

Avery looked him square in the eyes and smiled widely. “We’re going to get that motherfucker back.”

Isaac looked at Avery, a frown still deeply settled on his face. “What do you mean?”

“What Samuel did was so wrong, but no one else is ever going to do anything about it, so we’re going to take it into our own hands.” Avery had a determined fire in his eyes. “Just because Samuel is popular and a great public speaker doesn’t mean he should be able to get away with anything he wants. We’re going to teach him a lesson.”

Isaac couldn’t help but smile despite himself. He breathed in almost a whisper, “What should we do?”

Avery smirked and simply said, “We should go to a pet store.”

Chapter Twelve

Catherine eventually tired of pacing and went back to her dorm room to think. By this point, while she was still very concerned about Isaac, her mind also wandered to her own friends. She was still taken aback and hurt that Samuel would take something she told him and turn it in to an opportunity to preach at someone he didn't even know. Aside from Samuel, though, there was also Hannah and Sylvia, who she was forced to assume knew the entire time and didn't tell her. Why didn't anyone tell her? I mean, if they had told her and they could have talked about it, Catherine probably would have been upset and tried to talk them out of preaching about being gay, but it feels so much worse for them to sneak around behind her back and then drop the bomb on her like this. Still, as she laid on her bed staring at the ceiling, she realized it must feel even worse for Isaac, and tried to think of how she could find him and make up for what she could.

After sitting in her room and letting her mind race and go in circles for half an hour or so, Catherine decided that while she may not be able to do anything about Isaac at the moment, she did know where she could find Samuel. Renewed with the rage she still felt coursing through her veins, she jumped out of bed and walked to Samuel's dorm.

Catherine found herself walking down the hallway to Samuel's room, suddenly aware she didn't know what she was going to say. Her heart began to race as she reached his door. She shakily put her fist up to knock, but as soon as she did, the door quickly swung open.

Isaac and Avery stared at Catherine in shock. Catherine slowly lowered her fist, her eyes wide. There was a brief moment of silence while each of the three took in what was happening,

and Catherine noticed a small pet store box in Avery's hands. Catherine was the first to break the quiet with the most overwhelming thing she felt at the moment- confusion.

Her eyes flicked to make sure she was at the right room, then turned back to Isaac and Avery. "What are you... doing here?"

The question jerked Avery back into the reality of why he was there. "Why are you here?" he shot back. "Did you come to tell your shitty boyfriend how great of a job he did, being a complete asshole and humiliating Isaac?"

Catherine was stung by Avery's words. "No!" she said quickly, then continued, ashamed. "I had no idea he was going to do that, I'm so angry with him." She then turned to Isaac and said, "I've been trying to find you since you left. I wanted to apologize, I really didn't know he was going to do that, but I feel like it's all my fault. I'm so, so sorry."

Isaac lowered his head, and Avery stepped in between the two. "It doesn't matter whether or not you knew about what he was going to do," Avery retorted. "It matters that Isaac trusted you, and told you about something very important to him," he was stepping closer and closer to Catherine, who was on the verge of tears. "Why would you do that?" Avery continued, "Especially at this school, where everyone is such a religious fanatic-" Catherine was forced to back up so far that she hit the wall behind her, and Avery stumbled forward, dropping the box he was holding. The three watched as a cockroach crawled out and ran free down the hallway.

This sight shocked Catherine back to the reality of the immediate situation. "Wait, what was that? What do you have in that box? And why are you in Samuel's room?" Avery and Isaac, not wanting to answer any of those questions, exchanged glances with each other.

"We should go," Isaac said. Avery nodded and grabbed the box off the floor. The two ran down the hallway to the stairwell.

All of a sudden, Catherine heard a noise coming from the opposite side of the hallway and turned to see Samuel and David walking towards her.

“Catherine?” Samuel exclaimed, as he quickly walked towards her. “What are you doing here? Why did you leave in the middle of me speaking? Where did you go?” Before long, he was in front of her, as Catherine felt the wall against her back. Samuel continued, “You know that part of the reason I was talking about homosexuality was because of you, right?”

Although he may not have intended them to, each question rose in intensity and volume. Catherine fought back tears and hesitated for a moment before running down the hallway and down the stairs. She got outside and kept running until she got to her own dorm and reached her bedroom.

The next morning, Catherine made her way to the cafeteria, her head in a foggy cloud. She was wearing the sweatpants she had on the previous night, though she had not gotten much sleep. She tossed and turned for hours, replaying everything in her mind over and over again. She thought about what she did wrong, what she felt justified in doing, and all the questions still unanswered. Hannah’s loud laugh suddenly cut into Catherine’s consciousness and she winced. She looked up to see that Hannah was reacting to something David had said. In fact, David, Samuel, Hannah, and Sylvia were all sitting together. They all seemed totally fine, a complete opposite to Catherine’s emotional reality. She didn’t know how she felt about them at the moment, but the anger hadn’t evaporated overnight. All she knew was that she couldn’t sit by them.

She peered around the cafeteria and saw Avery and Isaac deep in conversation, at a table by themselves. Catherine took a deep breath and walked over. She wanted to try to apologize

again, figure out what they were doing in Samuel's room last night, and maybe even mend the relationship and become friends.

Isaac saw her walking over and whispered something to Avery, who turned around and glared at her. Catherine's face grew warm. This might not be as easy as she'd hoped. She tentatively sat down. "Look, I just want to say again that I'm sorry--"

"Sorry for what?" Avery shot back.

Catherine wasn't expecting that. "For... for, I don't know, telling Samuel, and that he apparently reacted differently than I thought he would, that you had to hear him say all that stuff."

Avery looked at Isaac. Isaac studied his hands. Catherine took this as a positive sign and pressed on, though changing the topic. "So, what were you guys doing in Samuel's room last night? Did you TP it?" she asked with a tentative attempt at a joke.

"Why don't you ask your boyfriend?" Avery asked her coolly.

Catherine looked down. "I haven't talked to him."

"Then what are you doing here, exactly?"

With a sigh, Catherine admitted, "I... I just didn't want any hard feelings. But I guess that isn't an option, is it?"

"Nope!" Avery said, and, finishing his meal, got his things, and left, with Isaac following behind him.

"Wait!" Catherine called after him, "Please."

Avery spun around. "Look, I don't know what you want from us. You can't stand for the public shaming of his sexuality and then want to hang out after. You're going to have to decide

what you think and stand up for it. And I suggest starting with the Bible. Do you think Isaac is going to burn in hell forever for something he can't even control? Really?"

When Catherine didn't reply, Avery nodded and left. Isaac followed him. Catherine, however, had a large task in front of her. Unfortunately, the bell rang and everyone had to go to class. She spent the next few hours trying to take notes and pay attention, but found herself staring out the window more often than not. She was so lost in thought that when her math teacher asked her to work out a problem on the board, something she usually volunteered for, she didn't even know what problem they were on.

Catherine felt as though she was having to choose sides. On one hand, she was still upset that all of her friends agreed to publicly humiliate Isaac and keep it all from her until it was too late. Catherine still didn't think being gay was wrong, despite what they said. On the other hand, though, Isaac and his friend Avery didn't exactly seem like they were going to get over it anytime soon. But maybe they were right to act that way. Her thoughts bounced back and forth all day. Even during lunch, rather than eating with Samuel or Hannah and Sylvia, she ate at a table in the library, lonely but undisturbed.

After classes had finished for the day, Catherine went back to her room. Before long, though, she heard a knock. She slowly opened the door and was somewhat surprised to find Hannah standing there.

"Hey!" she greeted, only to be met with silence. "Um, can I come in?"

"Oh, right, yeah."

Hannah entered slowly, took a deep breath, and said, "Look, I just want you to know that none of us are mad at you."

Confused, Catherine merely let out an, "Okay..."

“Samuel even said if you just come back everything will be forgiven and forgotten.”

When met with more silence, Hannah handed Catherine a piece of paper. “Also, here you go. I made you this.” Catherine glanced at it and saw a list of Bible verses. “Samuel told us that you maybe didn’t really know what to think about the whole homosexual thing, so these are some places in the Bible where it talks about it.”

“...Oh. Um, thanks.”

Obviously feeling like she had accomplished her philanthropic mission, Hannah beamed. “You’re welcome! If you ever have any questions or just want to talk, you know I’m here for you.” Hannah let a thoughtful moment pass before she smiled and said, “C’mon, let’s go study in the library. Sylvia’s there already, and you know that history test next week is going to be just awful.” So, Catherine got her things together and followed a chattering Hannah there. Sure enough, Sylvia was alone at a large table she’d called dibs on, and Hannah and Catherine joined her. Once they were all sitting together and “studying” by laughing at the funny pictures in the textbook, everything felt like it was the same it had always been- no secrets, no hard feelings, just friends being together. Catherine felt at home then, and felt she’d made the right choice. After a few hours, Samuel and David joined them, and, unspoken as it was, everything was forgiven and forgotten.

Chapter Thirteen

Even though things were more or less all made up with Samuel and Catherine's friends, the next morning, Catherine felt exhausted and emotionally burnt out. She had undergone a complete spiritual transformation, and this is where it got her? She was completely frustrated by the turn of events. Despite her emotions, though, she knew what she had to do.

Catherine opened her Bible to the book of Job. As she began reading the amazing story of all the hardships Job experienced, she began to feel bad that she even felt frustrated or complained at all. Job had literally everything that could go wrong happen to him in his path with God, and he never once felt down or questioned God. He simply persevered.

Job's story was so moving to Catherine that she spent all day engrossed in it, just barely breaking away long enough to eat or finish a school assignment. It completely opened her heart. She knew what God was telling her, through Job. Catherine realized that God wanted her to persevere--that it might not always be easy to do the right thing, but that's what she (like all Christians) are called to do.

Once that was decided, Catherine brainstormed how she would enact her vision. She decided she couldn't--and wouldn't--stop speaking at the Bible study, no matter what. She also realized, though, that there was even more she could do. There are plenty of younger girls at the school. They might benefit from having someone a few years older than them in their lives.

When Catherine brought the idea of the small mentoring group to Hannah and Sylvia, she was disappointed by their reactions. They both told her it was a great idea and she should totally do it, but also that they were, unfortunately, too busy to help her. Deciding, nonetheless, to take the project on herself, she sought out people who could help. Catherine recruited the third and

fourth grade teachers to determine which students might most benefit from just participating in some small group activities and discussions every other week or so. The teachers were thrilled, and each gave their recommendations of who they thought should be included, as well as many ideas for projects and a promise that Catherine could use any of their supplies any time she needed any. Catherine left on Cloud Nine.

When the time for the first meeting came around, however, she felt very different. She had everything set up and ready in the classroom she was using, but she paced around, worrying there was something she forgot, or if the whole thing was a bad idea. What if the girls didn't like her? What if they were so shy that no one spoke? Catherine knew that the teachers recommended the girls because they seemed to have trouble making friends or getting along with others, what if they all started fighting or something? Catherine wouldn't know how to handle that.

She also worried about the activity she had prepared--making friendship bracelets. It was something Catherine loved to do when she was younger, but what if she had guessed incorrectly about what these kids liked to do? Before Catherine psyched herself out enough to quit before she even began, some of the girls started to arrive.

Once they all arrived, there were 12 young girls in total. Most of them were a bit shy at first, but were also enthused that the mysterious "girls group" their teachers told them they were selected for just included hanging out with an older girl and making bracelets.

"Does anyone else need help with their bracelets?" Catherine asked the group. Seeing, however, that they were all working independently, Catherine relaxed, and even smiled to herself. This was happening! She let the girls work in silence for a few more minutes as she cut some more string and began her own bracelet. Then, she spoke up and said, "So, I think I have a fun idea!" A few of the girls looked up in interest, and she continued, "how about if each of us

thinks of a question we can ask the whole group, and then each of us answer. That way we can get to know each other a little bit!” she was met with wide eyes, and continued, “I’ll go first. What is everyone’s... favorite bible story? Mine is Esther.” she turned to her left and asked, “Casey, what about you?”

After what felt like the shortest two hours of her life, each girl had a fashionable new bracelet and everyone found out about each others’ siblings, favorite movies, favorite colors, favorite aquatic animals, and whether or not they liked pepperoni pizza, to name a few. Catherine correctly guessed that working on something would make them able to relax and talk more freely with the other girls. When the girls left, they were excitedly chattering amongst themselves, and the difference between their composure when they arrived and when they left warmed Catherine’s heart.

As she got the extra material together, one of the fourth grade teachers, Mrs. Lockland, arrived. “Hi Catherine!” she greeted, “How did everything go?”

Catherine beamed. “It went really well! I was nervous at first, but the girls really opened up a lot. Thank you for letting me use your string!”

“Oh, of course, sweetheart! You getting those kids to open up and get involved is more than worth it to me. If you ever need anything else, just let me know and I’ll make it happen.”

When Catherine met up with Hannah and Sylvia later, she regaled everything that had happened.

“That’s really awesome, Catherine! I’m surprised everything went so well on the first run,” Hannah said.

Sylvia said, “And the bracelet you made is so cute! Can you show me how to make one?” Catherine laughed and agreed, and later that day, Sylvia even offered, “So, if you ever need help at one of those girl groups, I could see if I could make time to come.”

Catherine was walking down the hallway with her hands full, foolishly not paying too much attention to where she was going. One of her shoelaces accidentally got caught on a door, and she fell over on the ground, sending all of the craft supplies in her hands flying. She immediately turned red from embarrassment, and tried to gather her things as quickly as possible. While she did that, though, one of the vice principals noticed and came over to help.

“This is a lot of stuff,” he said, handing her some pink glitter glue. “What’s it for, if I may ask?”

Catherine blushed again. “Oh, it’s just for some girls I mentor,” she answered. “We’re going to make cards for a nursing home and tell them about Jesus.”

The vice principal raised his eyebrows. “Wow, that’s very kind of you. Is that for a class?”

“No, I just wanted to do some outreach. Both to the girls and the nursing home.” Catherine picked up the last bag of sequins from the floor. “Thank you for your help!”

“Oh, it’s no problem. It’s Katelyn, right?”

“Close! My name is Catherine.”

“Catherine. Got it. Keep up the great work, Catherine!”

Chapter Fourteen

At first, no one really noticed. Maybe that was their downfall. Sure, boys might have noticed a roach scuttle across the bathroom floor, or wind up dead under their mini fridge, but they were tough. They weren't afraid of bugs. And, after all, what else can be expected in a dormitory full of boys? None of them kept the place spotless, but so what? A roach here or there is no big deal.

That's how the infestation got to the degree it did.

By the time the school's administration started noticing more and more roaches around, it was too late. The dean had an expert check the building out- causing a few curious glances with the large PEST CONTROL van parked outside. The muscular pest expert told the balding principal that a total fumigation was needed and that it could take up to two weeks. He noticed that the principal's hair looked even thinner than it did that morning and thought to himself that he would probably be bald soon.

The school board called an emergency meeting to decide how to handle the situation. The building had to be fumigated, obviously, but what to do with the students? Tents were suggested, but the idea was immediately shut down. Mattresses in the gymnasium was a popular option, but there was the issue of showering. There wouldn't be nearly enough showers for all the boys, and the only thing worse than a bunch of boys stuffed like sardines into a gym was a bunch of boys who weren't showering stuffed like sardines into a gym. No, the only thing left to do was to make room for them in the girls' dorm.

It was decided that the girls would double up and have four roommates per room, and the boys would stay in the remaining rooms. Staff would take extra care to patrol the hallways to ensure there would be no inappropriate relations between different genders.

Chapter Fifteen

The day after the announcement, Catherine met with her girls' crafting and community group. She knew the girls would likely be worried and fearful about all the changes (even Catherine was a bit nervous, herself), so it would be an important opportunity to check in. Luckily, she had an easy craft prepared--they would each be making some slime. If all went well, they would be able to discuss things and hopefully Catherine could help them feel better about moving and what would happen to them.

When each person of the group arrived, it was obvious that the big soon-to-be change was on everyone's minds. They smiled and greeted each other, but it felt muted compared to the loud, giggly group that they had grown to be. Every girl took her usual spot as they solemnly mixed colors, sequins, and sparkles together to create their messy projects.

As they settled into their places, Catherine asked everyone about the "highs" (best part) and "lows" (worst part) of their week. Shelby, the girl who began, said that her high was getting a good grade on a high test, and her low was that she would have to change rooms because the boys had bugs in their building. There was a moment of silence as everyone agreed.

Catherine decided to take control of the situation. "Okay, let's talk about it. A lot of you are feeling the same way, aren't you?" A few girls looked down, and a few others nodded. "Is there anything in particular you all are worried about? Any questions I might be able to answer?"

A girl named Lucy raised her hand. "Yeah, Lucy," Catherine called on her, "what's up?"

"Are we going to have to share our rooms with boys?" she asked, her voice timid.

"No!" Catherine exclaimed, "Of course not. You will still only be with girls, you'll just have four girls per room instead of two, like there is now." Lucy looked down and nodded her

head, satisfied. Catherine looked around the room. “See, things won’t be as bad as you think. Does anyone else have questions?”

A girl named Rachel who had a propensity to get in fights raised a chubby hand. “Uhm, Miss, are we still going to have our club?”

Catherine had to admit she was stumped about that one. She hoped they would be able to continue, but she hadn’t actually spoken to a teacher to confirm that. She hesitated, wanting to ease Rachel’s mind, but not wanting to make false promises. “You know what, Rachel? I have to admit that I’m not sure about that one.”

Even as Catherine took a breath to keep explaining, Rachel had already gotten red in the face and demanded to know, “WHY?”

“It’s going to be okay, I promise,” Catherine soothed. “Here’s what I can tell you--I’ll do my best to be able to still have our group, but just in case it doesn’t work out, we’ll just start again when things go back to normal. Okay?” Rachel gave a pout and folded her arms. Catherine continued, “But don’t forget, it’s you all that make this group what it is. If you stick together and check up on each other, then we’ll all be just fine. Plus, who knows? Maybe some of you will even end up as roommates! Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Most of the girls cracked a smile at that, and some even excitedly looked to the friends they’d made to giggle at the idea of living together. Among them, however, was a small girl with a very serious facial expression. Catherine noticed, and asked, “What’s wrong, Jasmine? Do you still have a question we haven’t talked about?”

Jasmine looked up at Catherine with wide eyes, and timidly asked, “Are we still going to have our old roommate?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but I think you will keep your current roommate and just add two more.” Catherine smiled. “So don’t worry, you’ll still have the familiar face of whoever your roommate is now.”

“Oh,” was the only reply Jasmine gave, until suddenly, tears were streaming down her face.

“Jasmine, what’s wrong?” Catherine asked, as the other girls began crowding around her to offer side hugs and murmurs of encouragement.

After a long sniff, Jasmine replied, “My roommate always takes my stuff. And when I say no, she pushes me.” Sympathetic moans echoed from the group. Catherine squatted down in front of Jasmine.

“Jasmine, have you told any grown-ups about this? Any teachers or anything?” Catherine asked softly. Jasmine replied with shaking her head. “Okay, well I’ll see what I can do.”

Casey brushed Jasmine’s hair behind her ears. “We’re here for you, Jasmine!” she proclaimed.

“Yeah and let me know if you ever want me to push them back,” Rachel told her, with a troublemakers’ smirk.

After Catherine did her best to convince Rachel not to push anyone, the group lightened up by going back to their slime, and cracking jokes to make Jasmine smile. Everyone left with a smile on her face. Catherine gathered up the leftover materials and took them to Mrs. Lockland.

“Thanks, Catherine! How’d it go today?”

“It went okay,” Catherine said, “But... do you know Jasmine?”

Mrs. Lockland’s brows furrowed. “Of course, she’s the sweetest.”

“Well, she said something today, and I thought I should tell someone.” Mrs. Lockland was looking increasingly worried, and Catherine took a deep breath. “I think her roommate is bullying her. She said something about getting her things stolen, and getting pushed.”

Mrs. Lockland looked relieved. “Oh, yes, her tutor also mentioned something about that. Don’t worry about it dear, the adults will take care of everything.”

Chapter Sixteen

The boys were given a two day notice to pack what they thought they would need, and the girls were moved together. Class was canceled on the day the boys moved into the girls dorm. They all gathered in the cafeteria talking and joking despite the strangeness. No one was seriously worried, but the grandness of it all gave it an apocalyptic feeling.

There was an expected amount of chaos as the boys all got their room assignments and warnings about etiquette, then even more as they all settled into their new rooms. Despite the efforts of the adults, both the girls and the boys weaved in and out of all the rooms. Threats were made to the boys not to mess up the rooms somehow. A few teachers whispered between themselves that it was plausible that there could be roach eggs in any of the boys' belongings. After one look at the principal's damp, red face, however, they thought it best not to bring it up.

Chapter Seventeen

Samuel whistled as he and David tried to find where their new room would be. They just finished helping Catherine's friends move their stuff (Catherine was among the lucky girls who didn't have to leave her room, and instead got two new roommates-Hannah and Sylvia). While many people were fuming about their living situation, Catherine, Hannah, and Sylvia were overall pretty happy, treating it more like a sleepover than an apocalypse situation. Samuel couldn't complain, himself. He and David were going to be even closer to Catherine and her friends, AND he would be getting two new roommates who would surely be his future best friends? It sounded like a dream to him.

That dream quickly turned into a nightmare, however.

When Samuel and David found and opened the door to their new room, they were greeted by Isaac hanging up a picture of his family and Avery sitting on his bed, reading.

Oblivious, Samuel began with, "Hey guys! I'm Samuel, and this is David," before Isaac looked up and Samuel realized the gravity of the situation. "Oh," he said.

"Uh, hey," David attempted, trying to salvage the situation. "I don't think I've met either of you. I'm David." This was met with a heavy silence. Avery glared daggers and Isaac meekly greeted David.

After recovering from his initial shock, Samuel decided the best path was to befriend the two. "So, you're Isaac, and what's your name?" he asked with a smile.

"I'm Avery."

"Well it's nice to meet you both. I hope we can be friends, especially since we're stuck in such close quarters, for who knows how long."

Avery spoke up. "I think it's supposed to be about three weeks," he said, then muttered under his breath, "but it can't come fast enough."

"Well, who knows, maybe they'll have trouble with it and we'll be rooming together for the rest of the year!" Samuel joked. He was greeted with a chuckle from David, a weak smile from Isaac, and a cold expression from Avery.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it through these next three weeks," Samuel lamented to his group of friends, not long after they all unpacked and settled into their respective rooms.

"Well, who knows, it could be the rest of the year!" David chimed in, with a troublemaking grin. Samuel groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"What's wrong?" Catherine asked. Samuel and David exchanged glances.

"Catherine..." Samuel began, as casually as he could, "Do you remember that kid Isaac?"

"And his friend Avery," Daniel chimed in. Catherine's heart leapt.

"Yes, what about them?" she replied.

Samuel sighed. "They're our new roommates."

Hannah spoke up. "Well, I think you could use this as an opportunity to reach them. I mean, I don't really know anything about Avery, of course, but I know the two of them are always together. So clearly, Avery doesn't think being gay is an issue--"

"Or he's gay too!" Daniel chimed in. Hannah scoffed but said nothing.

Samuel had a thoughtful expression. "You know what? I wonder if there are other people feeling the same way."

"Gay?" Daniel asked, with a smirk.

“No, feeling like they won’t get along with their roommates. I bet there are. And things have been so crazy lately, I’m sure everyone is in need of something to cheer them up.”

“What are you thinking?” Sylvia wondered.

Samuel smiled at all of them with a twinkle in his eye. “I’m thinking about a good, old fashioned party.”

When Samuel brought the idea up to the school’s administration, and while they agreed an event would be beneficial to the overall student morale (and hopefully, in return, their behavior), they would not sponsor a giant party. After some negotiation, though, they agreed to hold a dance that included teacher chaperones. That suited Samuel just fine, so the planning began.

The dance was to be held in the gymnasium the next Friday night. Because of the chaos of moving and the short time to plan, it was decided the dance would be slumber party themed, so students could simply wear their (“modest, ladies” as the posters pointedly instructed) pajamas. There would also be refreshments served, such as hot chocolate and popcorn.

As preparations developed, the teachers got more enthusiastic about the idea. The school counselor spoke with the principal about how much this dance could help relieve students’ stress and encourage them to make friends and get along with each other in an otherwise tense and disheartening situation. This had a trickle down effect, until every student was expected to go, and some offered extra credit for it.

So, that is how, while Catherine, Hannah, and Sylvia, like many of the girls, were doing intricate hairstyles and makeup (despite the fact that they’d soon be donning their pajamas),

Avery and Isaac were showering and trying to decide which of their sweatpants resembled pajamas the most.

Chapter Eighteen

When Catherine and her friends arrived fashionably late to the dance, most students were there already. Hannah noticed Avery and Samuel sitting alone together, away from where most people were either dancing or standing around talking. She stifled a giggle. Sylvia and Catherine noticed, though, and asked what it was. She pointed out the lonesome pair.

“Look,” she said, “Samuel started this whole thing for them and they go so far as to show up, but not talk to anyone.”

Sylvia snorted. “To be fair, I think Samuel just wanted to have fun and meet people. I don’t think it was for them.”

“Still,” Hannah argued. Catherine just stood and watched them. Avery had his head buried in a book, and Isaac was looking around miserably. The pair of them just looked so... pathetic. Her heart immediately hardened towards them. She couldn’t believe she let Avery talk down to her like he was so high and mighty and she was stupid or careless. Where did that get either of them? She was her with her friends and her boyfriend, about to have a fun night, and he was there sitting basically alone, in all of his righteous glory.

Samuel greeted them with a wide smile, beaming like the dance was thrown in his honor.

“Good evening, Catherine,” he said, as he bent slightly and held out his hand. “May I have the honor of this dance?”

“This dance, as in... the cha cha slide?” Catherine laughed. “But of course!” Catherine and Samuel joined the dance floor, as Hannah and Sylvia went and found Daniel and some of their other friends by the hot chocolate table.

Within the next hour, everyone at the school had shown up at the dance, even the latecomers. The dancing went on. Two teachers roamed the room with the diligence of vultures,

but the rest merely stood around and gossiped, only there out of obligation. Occasionally, the middle aged economics teacher who was doubling as a DJ accidentally let a few Youtube ads play, but other than that, his school dance playlist went off without a hitch. Everyone got comfortable dancing, even the shy students who merely swayed and nodded along on the outskirts of the crowd. Catherine noticed Isaac looked on, wistfully.

Chapter Nineteen

“Hey, Avery, I know you didn’t want to be here, but are you sure you don’t want to dance just for a bit? Everyone else seems to be having a lot of fun.”

Avery snorted. “Well, first of all, I’m not like everyone else. And second of all, I am having fun. This book is really good. It would be perfect if they just turned down the music, too.”

Isaac had finally had it. “Are you serious? Look at everyone here. There isn’t anyone else just sitting alone like us. People are smiling, and laughing, and dancing. They’re... happy. How can you keep this up? Do you just like being miserable all the time?”

Avery snapped his book shut and looked at Isaac, with fury shining in his eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” Isaac gulped nervously. “You know these people aren’t your friends, right? They think that because you’re gay, you deserve to burn in hell for eternity. Why would you want to hang out with or be like them at all?”

“Well, it would sure beat hanging out with you! All you ever do is sulk around and read. Maybe, for once, I’d like to do something that’s actually fun.”

“With who? I’ve been trying to be friends with you because I know you don’t have anyone else, you know,” Avery retorted. “None of them like you.”

“You’re just assuming that because no one likes YOU!” Isaac shouted.

Avery was quiet for a moment, then he got up and stormed out. Isaac fled after him.

Chapter Twenty

A few people noticed the abrupt movement, including Hannah. She poked Catherine and Sylvia on the shoulder and then pointed. “Trouble in paradise,” she said loudly, over the music. Sylvia laughed, but Catherine instinctively rolled her eyes and said, “Stop it,” before remembering that she could care less about him. It served Avery right, she thought. That was what he got for being standoffish and rude to everyone around him.

Despite this, she had an impulse to go “grab a hot chocolate” at the edge of the gym to get a closer look. She motioned that she would be right back and walked over, her cheeks warm with the joy of spending an pleasurable evening with her best friends in the world. When she got to the refreshments area, the overly-friendly English teacher beamed at her while he stirred a packet of Swiss Miss into steaming water. “Hey, Catherine! How are you enjoying the dance?” He offered her the small white styrofoam cup.

“Good, thanks,” Catherine replied absentmindedly. She took a small sip and glanced in the direction Avery and Isaac had run. All she saw was the door to the outside slam closed.

Chapter Twenty One

Isaac chased Avery, desperate to make things right. “Wait, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it,” he yelled after him. “Avery, please come back.”

Avery spun around on his heels. “Why should I? I guess since NO ONE LIKES ME, that would include you, wouldn’t it?”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Isaac panted.

Avery paused. “Look, we’re both loners. We’re just forced to go to this shitty school and we have to just stick together to get through it.”

It was Isaac’s turn to recoil. “I’m sorry, we’re *both* loners? I don’t know where you got that from, but I don’t want to sink to your pathetic level. I do have other friends, you know. You’re the loner.”

“Oh, you have other friends? That’s cool.” Avery shot back, seething. “So, remind me, were they the ones who publicly shamed you or the ones who dropped off the face of the Earth after that?” He asked, “Just so we’re clear.”

Isaac breathed heavily, staring at Avery with disbelief mixed with fury. Avery nodded. “That’s what I thought.” The next thing he knew, a hard, bony fist made contact with his face. He stumbled back in shock and touched his cheek. He pulled his hand away and saw blood. When he realized what had happened, he looked up at a pale, shaking Isaac. Without hesitation, Avery whispered, “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

Isaac frantically tried to back up and talk his way out of the situation, but Avery laughed ruefully and said, “Oh, it’s too late for that.” Avery grabbed his shirt and punched Isaac square in the face. Isaac keeled over, clutching his nose and glasses. “What? If you can’t handle it, don’t dish it out!” Avery mocked.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?!” Isaac yelled. Before either of them knew it, they were being ripped away from each other. As they looked around, they realized two teachers had pulled them apart and were telling them to calm down, while the rest of the school looked on.

Chapter Twenty Two

Avery saw many curious students milling around outside the school building, trying to see what was happening. A few teachers stood outside as well, shooting worried looks his way and trying to herd the loose students back into the gym. Then he spotted Catherine, standing next to Samuel, as she turned around to head back inside. Avery scowled and spit on the ground. He wondered to himself if it was him who called the teachers over. Thanks to Samuel, he would probably get either suspension or detention. Either way, it wouldn't be good. What was that guy's problem, anyway? Besides being a self-righteous religious fanatic. He kept sticking his nose where it didn't belong. Avery thought he taught him enough of a lesson about that, but maybe he needed more.

This is what Avery was thinking about as he and Isaac were led into the Principal's office. He barely even noticed Isaac's hyperventilating until they sat down.

The Principal ran his hands through his thinning hair. "So, all of the lovely teachers at this fine institution went to all this effort to make this nice dance just to boost student morale, and this is what you do? Get into fist fights?" He sighed and sat down behind his desk. Then, he leaned forward, and looked probingly at each boy.

"What's going on here?" he asked them both.

Isaac was the first to reply. "I'm very sorry, sir, it won't happen again." He gulped and glanced at Avery, who was wearing a slight scowl and glancing at the floor. "We were just having a disagreement, and things escalated from there. I started it, but I didn't mean to. Er, well, I did, but I regret it, I swear."

The principal turned his attention to Avery. "And you, Avery?" He asked, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Avery shrugged. The principal waited for a long pause before asking, “Is that all?” When he got no reply, the principal removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. After a deep sigh, he put his glasses back on and peered at the boys.

Isaac looked like a nervous wreck. He was pale and kept uncomfortably rubbing his hands together while he avoided eye contact with Avery. Avery, meanwhile, continued examining the old, gray-black carpet on the floor, looking more sad than angry. The principal softened his voice.

“Look, you two are roommates, correct?”

Isaac answered, “Yes, sir!” and Avery looked up and nodded.

“Alright. There isn’t going to be any more trouble, now is there?” The boys both shook their heads no. “Very well,” the principal conceded. “Why don’t you both go up to your room and call it a night.” They did as they were asked, and walked out sullenly.

Avery and Isaac didn’t speak to each other for the rest of the night. As they went back to their rooms and got ready for bed in silence, Avery felt an overwhelming sense of calm. Although the events of the night didn’t go how he expected, he never had to dance. Plus, he and Isaac had reached an agreement, Avery figured. It was true that people didn’t much like Avery, but it was also true that Isaac had no friends except him. They decided that, and they expressed their anger about it. Now they could move on, together, and focus on the real enemy--Samuel, and all the boys like him at the school.

Chapter Twenty Three

On the Monday after the dance, the principal called some of his most trusted advisors into his office. The principal considered the two vice principals (and a teacher who'd been at the school longer than any of them) his cabinet, of sorts. He trusted them to guide him in matters in which he was uncertain. Today, it was the boys who got into a fist fight at the dance. He told them what had happened, and asked for their advice.

“I’m just not quite sure what to do. On one hand, they haven’t been trouble makers before, and they did seem legitimately sorry and regretful. Plus, they are roommates, and friends. It seemed like just a little scuffle. On the other hand, however, I can not just sit around and tolerate students breaking out into fights. Who knows what would become of the school if I did? Not to mention, Matthew 5:39 encourages all of us to turn the other cheek when we have been wronged. That is an important pillar of the Christian faith, and something that I want to impress upon all of the students here. Especially these two, if they’ve strayed so far as to punch each other when they disagree.”

The cabinet nodded along with the principal solemnly. After he finished, the woman vice principal, Nicki, asked, “Have their parents been notified?”

The principal replied, “Not yet, would you mind doing that for me today?” Nicki smiled, nodded, and wrote it on her hand.

“So, does anyone have any ideas?” the principal asked again. After a thoughtful moment, the older teacher spoke up.

“I might have an idea,” the small woman began, peering wide-eyed, over her glasses.

“Of course, Cindy, I’d love to hear it.”

“Well, I’ve been reading a book about the development of adolescents, and something it emphasizes a lot is the effect of the people that they are surrounded with. They’re at such a tender age, the difference between going to college and being successful or getting caught smoking pot in the bathroom can be found simply in what their friends are doing.”

Nicki was interested in this idea. “So, what do you think we should do, split the two of them up? Find them different roommates?”

“No, no,” Cindy shook her head. “If we do that, they’ll just want to hang out together even more. I suggest finding a good student with outstanding morals and have them spend some time together. If we find someone who is kind and has a great personal connection with the Lord, I don’t see why he or she wouldn’t be able to improve the character of these boys.”

The principal nodded thoughtfully, but the other vice principal, a no-nonsense man named James, scoffed. “Well, as sweet as that sounds, Cindy, no one can convince me that there is any solution better than good, hard work. I say we should have these boys spend two or three Saturdays cleaning up the school grounds. That way, they surely won’t be tempted to get into a fight again, and other students will see that breaking rules don’t go unpunished.” He relaxed back into his chair and crossed his arms, as if waiting for someone to challenge him.

The principal thought for a moment and then spoke. “Okay, how about this,” he began, “We can combine both of these. We’ll give Avery and Isaac, say, two weekends. On Saturday, they’ll pull weeds, sweep, clean windows, whatever. Then, on Sunday, we have them spend some time doing some sort of activity with a student we think would have a good influence on them. What do you all think about that?”

James and Cindy agreed with the compromise, but Nicki raised an important question. “I think that sounds good, but how should we choose which student will help them?”

“That’s... a good question,” the principal conceded. “Obviously, it should be someone their age, someone they could relate to.”

Cindy spoke up and added, “They should be a good student, as well as friendly and outgoing.”

“And, of course, on a solid path with God,” Nicki added.

The principal put his hands in the air. “Well?” he asked the group. “Do you all have any suggestions?”

It was James who answered. “I might know someone.”

Chapter Twenty Four

On the next Saturday after the fight, Avery and Isaac both showed up to the janitors' closet they were told to report to, but they could not have had more different attitudes. They each received a broom and went on their merry way.

"This sucks," Avery grumbled.

"Whatever."

Avery gave Isaac a sideways glance. "What, you don't even care?"

Isaac gave him a sigh. "Honestly, not really." Avery snorted.

"Well, I care. I have a paper due Monday and I really needed this weekend to work on it. Now I'll barely have any time. We have to do this all day today, and then whatever community service they've come up with for tomorrow."

Isaac nodded along, his expression vacant. Avery tried a different topic. With his voice low, he asked, "So what did your parents say when they found out?"

"Well, it's just me and my dad," Isaac swallowed hard, "but he was really mad."

"Is he going to do anything?"

Isaac shrugged. "I don't know. But I'm really worried." He looked thoughtful for a moment, and Avery didn't interrupt. Soon, Isaac continued, "Sending me here was sort of my dad's last ditch effort to whip me into shape, or something. So I'm not really sure what he would do if he felt like it wasn't working."

Avery didn't want to pry into something that was obviously a very sensitive subject for Isaac, but he couldn't help being a little curious. "Did you... get in trouble for something?"

Avery postured.

Isaac laughed. “Of course not. Look at me. I was the perfect student, with extracurriculars, and friends, and…” he looked down. “No, I just… My father is a pastor, you know. Everyone in the church looked at him to be this perfect, spiritual guy and family man, and… well, having a gay son doesn’t really line up with that.”

“Your dad didn’t support you?” Avery asked.

Isaac wiped the window and stared outside. He sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know. We never really sat down and had a good conversation about it. He only ever mentioned the church, and his role within the church, and how important it was for him to be a good example.” Then, Isaac turned to Avery with a wry smile. “But, he shipped me off to a religious school, clearly with some hope of it *fixing* me, so I wouldn’t say he’d be the type to bake me a rainbow cake or anything.”

Avery nodded, solemnly. “I’m sorry, Isaac,” he said.

Isaac shrugged. “It is what it is,” he deadpanned. Then changing the subject, he turned to Avery. “What about your parents? Were they mad? Do they know you’re an atheist?”

“Yeah, they were pretty upset at me,” Avery told him. “But it was worse at first. When I explained that you were my friend and that we just got into a disagreement, they softened up. I guess they were afraid that it would be more serious, like I was getting bullied or had made some real enemies or something.”

As for the second part of the question, Avery stood washing his window in silence for a while. Isaac didn’t push. Eventually, Avery said, “My parents don’t know about me being an atheist. I mean, they wouldn’t like it. They would probably just try to convince me to be religious again for the rest of my life. So I don’t really see the point in telling them.” Isaac nodded understandingly.

From there, the boys' conversation moved on to lighter matters. They were laughing and joking like old friends by the time their detention was over for the day.

Chapter Twenty Five

The next day was Sunday. The principal had not yet told Avery and Isaac what they would be doing, but told them to meet him in his office after the morning church service.

Avery hated church with a special passion that day. Attending church services were required, so usually he would simply show up and check out mentally. Once, he tried to bring *The God Delusion* to read during the service, something that the principal decidedly did not find funny. Sometimes Avery just slept through the service. Every week, though, he just spent the whole two hours just biding his time until he was free again. But not this week.

Avery and Isaac arrived at the principal's office before he did. The door was locked, so they waited outside until he came around the corner, whistling. Avery thought he looked rough and wondered if he was in church with everyone else, or if he'd just woken up. He narrowed his eyes when he realized he couldn't remember the last time he even saw the principal in church.

The principal walked up and grinned. "So, boys, how was yesterday?" he asked. They muttered that it was fine and the principal nodded. "Good, good! Well, I think you'll both have a lot more fun today. Especially you, Avery. Follow me!" The principal began leading them down the hallway.

"Do either of you know a girl named Catherine Mellark?" the principal asked, but went on, ignoring the wide eyed confusion Isaac and Avery both had plastered on their faces. "She's a great girl. Anyway, she has this group of girls she sort of babysits and they all do crafts and talk about their feelings. So today you two are going to be joining her! Doesn't that sound like fun?"

Avery and Isaac were too stunned to reply. Avery was unable to squash a spark of admiration for Catherine after finding that out, though. He didn't know that she spent her time volunteering to hang out with younger kids.

The principal stopped at an open door of a classroom. “Welp, here we are! Have fun, you two!” With that, he turned on his heel and headed back down the hallway. Avery and Isaac stood frozen.

Chapter Twenty Six

Catherine was inside the classroom, cutting up fabric. When she heard footsteps and the principal's booming voice, her heart sped up. She had been told that her girls' group could continue, which she was ecstatic about, but also that she would be having some guests. Two boys, in fact, that had recently gotten in trouble for fighting. It didn't take much mental gymnastics to figure out who that might be.

She was so apprehensive about having Avery and Isaac join that she contemplated if it was even worth it at all. The young girls she mentored meant so much to her, and she knew that they had finally found a safe place that they could be themselves. The last time she talked to Isaac and Avery, they made it very clear that they were not on good terms. What if, for some reason, they decided to take it out on her and her small group? Her mind raced, imagining them doing everything from being totally despondent in the corner to actively trying to shame or belittle the girls. But, despite her worrying, the time had come. When she heard the principal leave, she took a deep breath and stepped to the doorway.

"Hi," Catherine said, meekly. "Um, come on in." The boys awkwardly shuffled in. The three of them spent a few moments looking at everything but each other, then Avery and Catherine tried to speak at the same time.

"So--"

"It's--"

Avery's cheeks warmed as he blushed. "Sorry, go ahead."

"Oh, okay," Catherine said, all in one breath, "I- I just wanted to say I know you guys probably don't really want to be spending your Sunday doing this, but this group means a lot to me--to all of us--and... so... you know..."

Avery looked confused. “What?”

“Just please don’t take anything out on the girls, okay? I know you don’t like me, but this is a really important thing for them, so please don’t do anything.”

“What do you think we’re going to do, bully them or something?” Avery asked. “I was going to tell you that I think it’s really cool that you do this.”

It was Catherine’s turn to blush. “Oh. Thanks.” She gave him a small smile. A small olive branch was extended and accepted.

“So, was this all your idea?” Isaac piped up. “To start this?”

“Yeah! I just felt called to act on my faith and help others,” Avery rolled his eyes slightly, “and I found that there was an opportunity here, with these second and third graders.” Then Catherine remembered how soon they would be arriving. “That reminds me! So today we’re going to be making dog toys to donate to an animal shelter. I have these fleece pieces, but I need some help cutting up the rest.” She pointed to a pile of fleece and some scissors. “Would one of you mind cutting those into one inch strips?”

Avery jumped on it. Isaac asked how they would make the dog toys, and Catherine spent a few minutes showing them both the way to braid and tie off the pieces of fleece. Avery finished cutting, and as soon as he and Isaac got the hang of it, the girls began to arrive.

Catherine was dividing up the materials and placing them on the empty desks when she heard a girl cry, “AVERY!” and looked up quickly. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Jasmine, the smallest and most shy girl of the group, had run up and hugged Avery with all her might.

“Hey Jasmine, long time no see! How is long division treating you?”

“It’s okay,” she relented. “I still don’t really like it though.”

Avery laughed. “Well, that’s alright. As long as you know how to do it, that’s enough for me.”

Jasmine chattered with him excitedly for a few more minutes and then took her seat. A few of the other girls had a very similar reaction to Avery when they saw him. Catherine put two and two together to realize that he was a tutor for the school. She couldn’t help but admire Avery’s ability to win over so many kids and get them to open up around him. She realized in spite of herself that she might have judged him too harshly. Clearly there was a side of him she didn’t know about. Still, though, that didn’t excuse the way he treated her. She decided she would give him a chance to start over, but only as acquaintances. Classmates, but not friends.

When all of the girls arrived, Catherine introduced Avery and Isaac as her helpers, but Avery clearly needed no introduction. She then demonstrated the process of braiding the dog toys and showcased what a finished product would look like. The braid was a bit difficult for some of the girls, but Isaac and Avery didn’t hesitate in making rounds to those struggling to walk them through the steps again.

The group time was only scheduled to go for about an hour, but everyone was having too much fun to notice the time. The girls got the hang of the braid, and Catherine told them they could keep going until there was no more fleece. After a bit, Isaac and Avery even sat down and started making some on their own, too. It was only when (a little after two hours past the start time) Mrs. Lockland showed up, that they realized how late it was.

“Hey girls!” she laughed, seeing everyone so engrossed in the braiding, surrounded by fleece and dog toys. Then, upon noticing Isaac and Avery, “Oh, and guys!”

“Hi, Mrs. Lockland!” Catherine replied. “I’m so sorry, I guess time sort of got away from us.”

“Oh, that’s no problem, sweetie! I’m assuming this means everything went well?” Mrs. Lockland eyed the boys suspiciously. The girls started wrapping up what they were doing, and Isaac began collecting the leftover materials.

“It went great! I’m sure the animal shelter will be excited to get so many toys.” When Catherine realized Isaac had gathered all of the fleece, she thanked him and handed them to Mrs. Lockland. Avery gave Mrs. Lockland the completed toys to be donated. She smiled and thanked all of them. The girls filed out, chattering amongst themselves excitedly. Catherine noticed and was glad that they all seemed to be doing well. Even Jasmine was smiling, a sight Catherine loved to see.

When everyone was gone, Catherine, Avery, and Isaac simultaneously took a deep breath. Catherine smiled.

“I can totally see why you do this, Catherine. That was a lot of fun,” Isaac said. Avery nodded emphatically.

“Yeah, it was great having you guys there,” she said, then added with a mischievous grin and a nose tilted in the air, “you know, as my assistants.”

“Your assistants?” Avery scoffed. “Please, you never would have gotten along without us.”

It was Catherine’s turn to scoff. “Um, the whole month I’ve been doing everything on my own begs to differ.”

“Of course!” Isaac interjected. He was eager to try to smooth the relationship between the both of them. “Hey, Catherine, have you eaten yet? Avery and I came here right after church, and I’m starving.”

“Oh, me too!”

“Would you want to get food with us?” Isaac offered.

Catherine’s cheeks warmed. She felt like she could hear Samuel and Hannah’s voices in her head, criticizing Avery and Isaac, making fun of them. But Jesus commanded that she should love everyone, right? Besides, no one was expecting her for a while. She told everyone that she was going to be planning her next craft idea afterwards.

“Sure!” she replied, with a casual tone that hid the internal debate she just had with herself.

The three of them headed to the cafeteria. Catherine and Avery headed to the burger station, while Isaac opted for pasta. When they sat down, Isaac eyed their meals suspiciously.

“You, too, Catherine?”

“What?”

“I keep telling Avery that the burgers here are cooked all wrong and are an insult to burgers in general, but he gets them every time anyway.”

Avery smiled and rolled his eyes. “He’s not joking when he says every time.”

Catherine took a bite. They tasted normal to her. “I think they’re okay,” she said.

“See?” Avery cried triumphantly. “Catherine knows what’s up.” He held out his hand for a high five. Catherine smiled and high fived him.

“Sure, they’re *okay*. They’re *edible*.” Isaac conceded, “But why is that your standard? You should advocate for food that makes your taste buds sing!”

Avery scoffed. “Is that what that ziti does for you?”

“Well, no, they’re not as good as when I make it--”

“When you make baked ziti?” Catherine interrupted. “Are you guys running a restaurant out of your dorm room?”

Avery chuckled. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“No, I mean when I’m not here,” Isaac said. “You know, like at home. I really like cooking.”

There was a silent moment. “I didn’t know that,” Avery admitted.

Isaac shrugged. “You never asked.”

“Well, I think that’s really cool!” Catherine interjected. “What’s your favorite thing to cook?”

Completely straight faced, Isaac replied, “Burgers,” and the three of them cracked up.

Catherine, before she could stop herself, said, “You guys are actually really cool and funny!” Her eyes immediately widened and her hand flew up to cover her mouth.

“What, did you think because I’m gay, I can’t be funny?” Isaac retorted.

“No! I just- I mean, you were just kind of mean to me before, and I’m not saying that what happened wasn’t my fault or anything, because I take full responsibility for telling... you know, Samuel, when I shouldn’t have, but...” she paused for a moment. “I... I did apologize, and I meant it. I still do. I’m really sorry. I just thought you guys hated me, that’s all.” She looked up, her eyes searching.

“I forgive you,” Isaac said softly. Catherine and Avery’s eyes fell on him. “I forgave you when you apologized.”

Catherine’s eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. “Thank you,” she whispered. Then they turned to look at Avery.

He noticed and gave a wry smile. “What, so I’m the asshole now?” Then he quickly added, “Don’t answer that.” He took a moment to gather his thoughts. “I’m sorry, Catherine. I should have been more empathetic and understanding. I kind of struggle with that sometimes.”

He took a deep breath. “It’s just that Isaac trusted you with something really important and even though you know that this is a religious school and that other people wouldn’t agree with your moral decision, you unknowingly made him into a spectacle and someone had to fight back.”

“Avery!” Isaac exclaimed.

“But, I know, I know. I’m sorry. Again. About that. And I forgive you for telling Samuel about Isaac, and I’m sorry for being so rude.” Avery sighed, then repeated, “I’m sorry.”

Catherine had mixed feelings. She appreciated Avery’s apology, but at the same time, she couldn’t bring herself to just forget all the rudeness he had shown her. She was called to forgive, yes, but just because she forgave him didn’t mean they were best friends or anything. She gave him a small smile and put her hand out, offering a handshake. “Truce?”

He returned with a wide grin and shook her hand excitedly. “Truce!”

Everyone returned to their food, satisfied.

After a few minutes, Isaac piped up. “So, Catherine, what are you going to make for next week’s meeting?”

“Yes, as your humble assistants, we’d love to be as informed as possible, to better serve you, of course,” Avery said dramatically, while Catherine rolled her eyes, “...m’lady.”

“I’m actually not sure yet,” she admitted. “I was going to use this time to try to plan something but I’m sort of stuck right now. You guys wouldn’t happen to have any ideas, would you?”

The boys thought for a moment. Then Avery suggested, “Well, we could use Isaac’s skills to our advantage and maybe cook something, like cookies or cupcakes.”

“I’ll have you know that cooking and baking are two separate art forms, and they should not be confused. Baking is simply a matter of adding oil and eggs to a box of powder.” Isaac looked into the distance. “Cooking is what requires real skill.”

Avery and Catherine tried to contain their laughter. Isaac noticed and broke into a smile himself. “Of course, if you were so inclined, I would be more than happy to assist.” He began chattering on, suggesting everything from macarons to truffles.

Catherine didn’t have the heart to interrupt, so she just nodded along, smiling at Isaac’s enthusiasm. When he finally got around to asking Catherine what she thought, she winced and admitted, “Actually, I’m not sure we’d be able to do any of that.” Isaac looked crestfallen, and Catherine quickly tried to explain. “It’s just that really, all we’re able to use is that classroom and whatever supplies Mrs. Lockland will let me borrow, so I don’t want to demand anything extravagant or complicated, you know?” Isaac nodded. Avery looked in the distance, trying to think of alternative crafts or projects.

“It sounds like fun, though!” Catherine added, still trying to smooth over the situation. “I’m reading this book right now that’s set in Paris and there’s a woman who runs a macaroon shop. I’ve never even had one before but I still find myself craving them.”

Simultaneously, Isaac demanded, “You’ve never had a macaroon?” and Avery asked, “You like to read, too?”

Catherine blushed and chuckled. “Um, no, I’ve never had one. And yes, I do like to read. I mean, I’m not to the point where I would bring a book to a school dance, but I do enjoy it.”

Isaac wanted to bring the macaroons up again, but he knew he’d be fighting a losing battle. Anyway, he enjoyed watching Catherine put Avery in his place.

Avery was quick. “Well, maybe you need better books then.”

“Maybe,” Catherine laughed, “or maybe you just need to learn how to dance.”

“Woooooow.” Avery said, shaking his head, but unable to contain a smile. “But for real, what kind of books do you like?”

Catherine thought for a moment, then told him, “Mostly just contemporary stuff. But my guilty pleasure is murder mysteries.”

“Oh really?” Avery asked, “Have you read *And Then There Were None*? It’s by-”

“Agatha Christie, I know.” Catherine interrupted, “That book is like murder mystery 101, of course I’ve read it.” Then, thinking she might have been too harsh, she added, “What did you think of the ending? I think it’s incredible.”

Avery shrugged. “I kind of saw it coming.” Catherine changed her mind about being too harsh.

Then, Isaac had an idea. “Hey, maybe since we couldn’t incorporate my hobby, we could incorporate yours!”

“What do you mean?” Catherine asked.

“Maybe we could do something with reading. We could get some paper and stickers and markers and stuff and just make a bunch of bookmarks! It’s a bit simple, but it could be fun!”

Avery scratched his head. “I don’t know, do you guys actually use bookmarks? I usually just remember the number of the page I was on. That is, if I’m not reading a book all in one sitting.”

Catherine rolled her eyes. “Well, I guess you’re just a reading god then, and we all marvel at your skill and ability and bow before your throne. Happy?” Then she turned back to a slightly wide-eyed Isaac. “I think it’s a great idea. We could write inspirational things and bible verses on them, and they could pass them out to other girls and build more relationships. Perfect.”

“I- yeah. Thanks!” Isaac sputtered.

“No, thank *you*, Isaac.” Catherine replied, as Samuel sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

Catherine looked up and saw David standing behind him. She didn’t know how she didn’t even hear them walk up. She wondered how long they’d been listening.

“Hey, guys!” he said, overly enthusiastically, and with a sneer. He turned to look at Catherine. “Whatcha thanking him for?”

She cleared her throat. “Oh, um we were just talking about what we, er, I, I mean we, are going to do next week for the girls group.”

“Oh!” Samuel said, then turned to Isaac and Avery and asked, “So, what, you identify as girls now?”

Catherine kicked Samuel’s shin under the table and hissed at him to stop it. “They’ve just been helping me lead it. As part of their... detention.”

“Oh yeah, I remember now,” Samuel mused, “you guys got in that fight at the dance, right?”

“Yep!” Avery pitched in, loudly. “We were just sitting there, talking about music, and Isaac here,” Avery narrowed his eyes at Samuel, “You remember Isaac, right? Well, anyway, he says that the Cha Cha Slide is better than the Cupid Shuffle.” Catherine had to stifle a giggle.

“Now, I don’t know about you guys,” Avery continued, “But I just couldn’t accept that kind of slander. So I told him that we needed to take this outside, right then and there.”

Avery cracked his knuckles. “Naturally, the principal just didn’t understand. Oh, well. At least we could agree that they’re both better than the Chicken Song.” He looked threateningly at

Samuel and David. “You two agree, don’t you? Because I’m afraid if you don’t, we’re going to have some problems.”

Catherine and Isaac were grinning like fools, and David just looked confused, but Samuel scoffed. “Whatever. Catherine, let’s go. Hannah and Sylvia were looking for you.” Catherine tried to put on a straight face.

“Bye, guys, I’ll see you next week,” she mumbled.

Samuel, David and her began walking away, and Avery called after them, “The Cupid Shuffle rules!”

Chapter Twenty Seven

The next Friday, Catherine, Hannah, and Sylvia were all painting their nails and watching TV in their dorm room. Catherine mentioned her plans for the girls crafting group on Sunday, and Hannah gasped.

“That reminds me!” she said, “Samuel told us you have to let those weird guys help you, Avery and Isaac.”

Sylvia’s eyes widened. “Yeah, what is that like?”

Catherine smiled. “You know, they’re actually pretty nice! They were helping me come up with craft ideas and stuff, and they were good with the girls. You know, Avery is a tutor, for math, I think, so he knew a lot of them already.”

“So, they aren’t weird or rude to you?” Sylvia asked.

“Umm, not really,” Catherine replied.

Hannah scoffed. “That’s just how they get you. They’re all nice and fun, then before you know it, you’re worshipping the devil. It’s called a slippery slope, we learned about it in English class, remember?”

Catherine bit her lip. “Well, who says it can’t happen in the opposite direction?” she asked. “Maybe I could be a good influence on them.”

Hannah laughed ruefully. “Come on, Catherine. We both know that’s not what would happen.”

“Yeah, haven’t you seen that chair thing?” Sylvia asked. When Catherine said no, Sylvia had Hannah stand on top of a chair, while Sylvia remained standing on the floor. “So, this is what it’s like when one person is a believer and one person isn’t. Hannah, can you try to lift me up?”

Hannah grabbed Sylvia's hand and tried pulling her up. When Sylvia didn't budge, she tried grabbing more of Sylvia's arm.

"Ow, okay, that's enough," Sylvia interrupted. Then she turned to Catherine. "That's how difficult it is for a Christian to raise up a nonbeliever. But now watch." With that, Sylvia yanked Hannah's hand down, and with one swift motion, Hannah nearly fell to the floor. Hannah complained and sat back down on her bed, and Sylvia kept talking. "THAT is what it's like when a nonbeliever tries to pull a Christian down. It's that much easier."

Hannah, still rubbing her wrist, agreed. "Yeah, and you admitted yourself not that long ago that you were struggling with your faith, right? So you're probably especially vulnerable."

Catherine nodded and verbally agreed with them, and the subject of the conversation changed. Somewhere deep inside, though, Catherine resented being patronized, especially when she was just trying to do a good thing. Besides, they didn't know Avery and Isaac like she did.

When Sunday rolled around again, Catherine felt the complete opposite of how she felt the same time the previous week. Catherine was no longer skeptical of the boys. As much as she tried to focus on what the pastor was saying, her mind couldn't help but wander to Avery, Isaac, and the craft group. Everything last week had gone even better than she could have imagined, and she couldn't wait to just relax and enjoy this week. She trusted the boys to be kind and helpful.

She recognized, however, that the fact that she kept thinking about that, rather than the sermon, was just a sign that Hannah and Sylvia were right. At the moment, they were being a distraction from her personal relationship with God. Catherine tried to snap out of it and vowed to have a conversation about faith with both of them after the club meeting.

Avery and Isaac hastily retreated to their bedroom before meeting Catherine in the classroom. This gave Catherine time to write some bible verses on the board, like “You are fearfully and wonderfully made, Psalm 139:14” and “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,’ Jeremiah 29:11.” As she finished writing, Catherine heard the excited chatter of Avery and Isaac as they made their way down the hallway and towards her door. She couldn’t have stopped herself from smiling, even if she wanted to.

The boys came into the room, smiling widely. Isaac was carrying a large box. Catherine greeted them and, unable to contain her curiosity, gave Isaac a puzzled look and asked him what was in the box. Avery beamed and opened it to reveal three dozen colorful macaroons. Catherine was shocked, but still a little confused.

“Wow, those look amazing!” she said, “But, what, how did you get them? I didn’t know of any place that sells macaroons around here.”

“Av-” Isaac began, but was cut off by Avery.

“Isaac made them for us!” he exclaimed. “He just couldn’t stand the fact that neither of us had eaten one before, and then figured while he was at it, he might as well make some for everyone.”

Isaac gave Avery a confused look, which Avery brushed over with a, “He’s just being modest. Go on, try one!”

Catherine smiled and pulled a pink macaroon from the box. Avery grabbed a green one, and Isaac set the box down and chose a blue one. “Cheers?” Catherine suggested, and the three of them touched their macaroons together and then took a bite.

The macaroon was exactly as Catherine always imagined it would be. It had a crunch on the outside, then led to a creamy center. It was sweet without being overwhelming, and had just the right amount of strawberry flavor.

“Well?” Avery asked, a hopeful smile on his face.

“I love it!” Catherine exclaimed. Avery beamed. “Are you sure we have to share these with everyone else?”

Avery and Isaac laughed, but then it was too late. As Catherine suggested that, two of the girls showed up, and, upon seeing a large box of sugary treats, needed one immediately.

So, for the better part of the first fifteen minutes of the meeting, the colorful macaroons were passed around on paper towels and met with excited little smiles. If Isaac and Avery hadn’t won over any of the girls last time, they sure had this week. Naturally, they were now associated with desserts.

After the food mess was cleaned up, Catherine brought out all of the craft supplies, and the girls dove in, with a sugar-induced frenzy. Some girls put only stickers on their bookmarks, one or two tried their hand at drawing things on them, but most copied down one of the bible verses and decorated the rest how they saw fit. When they realized the girls didn’t need much help with this craft, Isaac and Avery sat down to make their own creations. Isaac wrote Psalm 139:14, while Avery created a geometric design. Since a lot of the beginning of the class was taken up by the macaroons, it was over before they knew it.

Catherine spoke up a few minutes before the end of class. “Okay girls, so today’s activity was making bookmarks, but just like God’s love, you shouldn’t keep them all to yourself. Giving your bookmarks away to other people is a great way to talk to them about Jesus and how much he loves them and wants a relationship with them, just like you.” As the girls chattered away

about who they would give their bookmarks to, Isaac and Avery helped clean up the supplies that were scattered everywhere.

“Are you guys going to bring these next week, too?” one of the bolder girls, Grace, asked, biting into her fourth macaroon, that she nabbed from the box.

“Uh...” Avery wasn’t sure how to answer, but Catherine cut him off.

“Actually, we aren’t having group time next week. I’m sorry. The older kids at the school are going to a conference, so we’ve got to go to that.”

Grace accepted this with an, “Oh, okay,” and ran off. Avery turned to Catherine.

“I am NOT looking forward to the whole sex conference thing. I think it will be either really boring or get really weird,” Avery lamented.

Catherine blushed, but looked thoughtful. “I don’t know, I think it might be good. At least they’re trying to educate us and stuff, instead of just brushing it under the table.” She realized that all she really knew of sex was what Samuel and her mom had told her about it. Then, she added, “Plus, I think it’s called a purity conference.”

Avery scoffed. “If by educating, you mean just telling us to keep it in our pants in 500 different ways, sure.” Catherine gave him a concerned look. He changed tactics. “Besides, all of the guys will probably be immature the whole time anyway. Giggling and whatnot.”

Catherine smiled and rolled her eyes, but disagreed. “I don’t know, I think you might be surprised.”

“Surprised about what?” Isaac asked, as he waved goodbye to the last girl to leave.

“Oh, we were just talking about the stupid sex conference we have to go to next weekend.” Avery told him.

“Well, I don’t remember us agreeing that it will be stupid,” Catherine said pointedly.
“And it’s a purity conference.”

Isaac raised his eyebrows. “Well it sure won’t be fun for me.”

“And why is that?” Catherine demanded. Then she remembered and her hand flew in front of her mouth. “I mean... I’m sorry. I forgot.”

Isaac just grimaced in reply. “That’s okay. It’s just... at best, anything they say will be completely irrelevant, and at worst, they’ll tell me all about how I’m going to hell.”

Catherine, trying to save face, said, “Not necessarily! Stuff about, like, modesty or purity could be relevant.”

“I think the modesty talk is just for the girls...” Isaac said.

Avery had been looking more and more agitated, and he finally jumped in. “But that’s just the type of thing that’s an issue! Telling girls they have to cover up because it will lead men to sin? And talking about how damaging and terrible sex is, that is, until you’re married, and then all of a sudden you better put out all the time because it’s your Godly duty?” Avery ran his hands through his hair. “I mean, has anyone ever sat down and thought about how this is supposed to make sense?”

Catherine, trying not to be offended, offered her opinion. “Well, the school and the conference are just trying to help us be better Christians by talking to us about what’s in the Bible. It’s not like they wrote it or anything.”

“Still, they’re perpetuating it.” Avery argued. “I don’t think it’s good for anyone.”

Catherine looked taken aback. “Of course it’s good for people! God put things in the Bible for a reason, he put things in there that keep us safe and happy, and protected.”

“Yeah, right,” Avery retorted. “Men wrote the Bible to stay in power over everyone else.” There was a moment of silence. Isaac looked increasingly uncomfortable, and Catherine was deep in troubling thoughts.

“Avery...” she began, “Do you... believe in God?” Catherine finally asked.

Avery let out a deep sigh. “No,” he answered, frankly.

“Like, at all?” Catherine pressed. “You just don’t think he’s real?”

“No.” he said, again, more firm this time. Catherine glanced at Isaac, who was staring at his feet, then looked out the window. “Look, I know I’m probably the only... atheist that you know. But I don’t want to fight. Isaac believes in God, and we just agree to disagree. He doesn’t try and convert me, and I don’t try to get him to worship the devil with me every night. We just respect each other.”

Catherine looked at Avery with panic written all over her face, but relaxed when she heard Isaac chuckle and saw Avery grinning. “And hey, if you want to talk about religion, that’s cool, but if you’d rather just avoid the subject when we talk, that’s fine, too.”

“Hannah and Sylvia told me you were going to be a bad influence on me.” Catherine admitted, “They said I shouldn’t even be friends with you, but I tried to convince them I could be a good influence.”

“I think you’re a good influence on Avery,” Isaac smirked, “someone needs to put him in his place.”

Avery gave Isaac a surprised look, and Isaac shrugged. Then Avery turned to Catherine. “Plus, you could always just tell them you’ve converted me. If they ask, I’ll tell them all about how much you changed my life for the better.”

Catherine blushed and laughed. Avery went on. “Oh, yes, Hannah. Before I met Catherine, I was truly in a dark place. My heart was cold and locked away from God. Luckily, my saving grace, my angel from above, Catherine came in and opened my eyes and my heart to everything that I had previously shunned. Without her, I would be on the path to hell, with drug addiction, sex, and alcohol, not to mention homelessness, along the way. But now? Now I’m a changed man. I’m going to be a pastor and share the Good News to all!”

Isaac snorted. “Yeah, that’s super convincing.”

Catherine, meanwhile, spoke up and said, “Okay, not all of my friends act like that.”

“I never said anything about your friends.” Avery stated. “You brought that one up yourself.”

Catherine rolled her eyes and laughed. “Okay, good point. Hey listen, I have to go run the rest of these supplies to Mrs. Lockland and then work on some homework, but Isaac, could you text me the recipe for the macaroons? Thanks again for making them, they were delicious.”

“Uh, sure,” Isaac said uncertainly. “I’m not sure if I still have it, though.”

“Oh, I think I have the recipe saved!” Avery pitched in. “Here, I can send it to both of you. Uh, what’s your number, Catherine?”

Catherine blushed and recited her number for Avery. He sent a message with the recipe. Once Catherine confirmed she received it, she told them both goodbye and headed out.

Chapter Twenty Eight

When Catherine returned to her room, Hannah and Sylvia were there already, working on the essay together. Catherine closed the door behind her absentmindedly, and Hannah and Sylvia spun around to look at her expectantly.

“Well?” Hannah asked.

Catherine looked confused. “Well, what?”

Hannah scoffed and rolled her eyes, but Sylvia supplied an explanation. “You just seemed really bent on trying to talk to Avery and Isaac and making them into real Christians. So how did it go?”

“Um...” Catherine began, not knowing what to say. She was totally blindsided by this question. If she was being honest with herself, she was still trying to figure out how it went and how she felt herself.

Hannah interjected Catherine’s thoughts. “You didn’t even talk to them, did you?”

Slightly offended by Hannah’s assumption, Catherine corrected her. “No, no, I did talk to them. I just- I mean, I... Nobody can just change someone’s mind on something like that in just one conversation. We talked about what we believed and stuff and set up a foundation of respect for each other, and-”

“Oh no, they’ve got her,” Hannah quipped, which made Sylvia giggle.

“That’s not true!” Catherine retorted. “I’m working on it, okay? I have to start somewhere.”

The next day, Catherine and her friends met Samuel and David for lunch, Catherine was forced to regale the conversation again when Samuel asked about Avery and Isaac. Then David spoke up.

“Oh, that reminds me, I saw Avery and Isaac right after church yesterday. Avery was carrying a box and talking all about how he worked really hard to make something and was hoping you would like it. What was that about?”

Everyone turned to look at Catherine, and Samuel raised his eyebrows. Catherine turned a deep shade of red. She didn't understand what David meant. Avery didn't make anything for the crafts, he didn't even come up with the idea. Was it something he hadn't mentioned yet? The only thing they brought was... the macaroons. But Catherine thought that Isaac made those. Then again, they did act a little bit weird about it. Maybe Avery did make them. Why wouldn't he just admit that?

“Um, hello?” Samuel asked. “I'm very interested to know what exactly this guy was making just for you.”

Hannah snorted. “Probably poisonous apples.”

“Oh! Sorry,” Catherine was flustered. “I was trying to remember, it was just some stuff for the crafts we made.” Samuel still seemed wary.

Sylvia piped up and asked, “What did you make this week?”

Grateful for the change of subject, Catherine answered, “Oh, we made some bookmarks... with bible verses. I just asked them to help cut the paper into strips ahead of time. Since we had so much.” She cleared her throat.

“Well, at least you don't have to deal with them intruding in your life anymore.” Samuel commented, as he turned to ask David something.

“Yeah...” Catherine halfheartedly agreed. “I guess not.”

Later that week, Catherine had a mountain of math homework to complete, but didn't want to do it alone. She reached out to Samuel, but he was busy with David. Hannah and Sylvia were also hung up working on a group project with some students for a different class. Catherine flopped down on her bed, exasperated.

Her mind wandered to Avery and Isaac. Would it be weird if she asked them to study together? She hesitated for a few minutes, and then typed out, *Do you guys want to come do homework with me in my dorm?* Then she quickly hit send before she could change her mind.

After a few minutes, she finally got a reply. Avery texted back, *Isaac is busy, but I'm down!* Catherine's heart began to race. She told him to feel free to come over whenever, and frantically began cleaning everything in sight. She also brushed through her hair and slightly touched up her makeup.

Just as Catherine was pulling out her textbook and notes, there was a knock at the door. She shoved everything aside and answered it to find Avery standing on the other side, looking sheepish.

“Hi!” Catherine greeted him.

“Hey, how's it going?”

“Pretty good, just got a lot to do.” She stepped back and opened the door for Avery to come in. Catherine grabbed her things from the desk. “Here, you can use my desk if you want.”

“Okay, thanks,” he replied, and Catherine had a seat on her bed. Avery got out some of his homework, and asked, “So what are you working on?”

Catherine looked down at her notes to remember. “I’ve got a bunch of math homework. What about you?”

“I actually just have some required reading to catch up on. But hey, if you need any help with your homework, I’m actually a math tutor.”

“Oh really?” Catherine asked. “Okay, thanks!”

Avery smirked. “You don’t have to sound so surprised. My people skills aren’t THAT bad.”

Catherine blushed, and Avery followed up with, “Just my social skills.” Catherine giggled, which made Avery smile. There was a comfortable silence. Then, however, Catherine looked down at the first problem on her homework and realized she had no idea what to do.

“Actually, I could use some help, if you don’t mind,” Catherine blushed.

Avery practically jumped up. “Of course!” He exclaimed. “Your class is learning how to factor, right?”

“Yeah, I guess I’m not really sure how to get started.”

Avery sat next to her on the bed. “No worries! Which problem do you want to look at first?”

As Avery asked that, Catherine’s phone buzzed and, on instinct, she picked it up to read the text. “Oh, my god.”

Avery frowned slightly. “So do you not want to do your homework after all, then?”

“No, no, I’m sorry, I’m about to, but you’ve got to listen to this,” Catherine explained.

“What is it, Sylvia and Hannah accidentally wore the same thing and now they’re mortal enemies? Samuel got a haircut? Omg!!”

Catherine glared at Avery. “Is that really what you think of me?” Avery bit his tongue. “I’ll have you know that what the text ACTUALLY says is that apparently, Mr. Smith and a student... did it.”

Avery was incredulous. “Mr. Smith had sex with a student?” Catherine nodded. “That is so fucked up!”

“Woah,” Catherine said. “You don’t have to cuss about it.” She looked down at her phone again. “Sylvia says it’s no wonder, because his wife won’t have sex with him.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Avery asked her. “This is a teacher and a student we’re talking about. There’s a huge power gap, and a student can’t even consent.”

“What do you mean?” Catherine asked, quietly.

“Well, I don’t know all the laws for teenagers having sex with each other, but a full-blown adult having sex with a minor would be considered rape since the minor can’t consent.”

Catherine took this all in. She’d never thought about it before. Avery went on, “Plus, it’s never a woman’s job to have sex with anyone. Whether she’s married or not.”

“Really?” Catherine asked. “Wait, but that’s just a part of marriage. It’s necessary to maintain the bond or something.”

“I mean, I’ve never been married,” Avery told her. “But... do you like the idea of having to have sex, whether you feel like it or not, just to keep your husband around?”

Catherine’s thoughts drifted to Samuel. “I don’t know,” she admitted, “but being a Christian isn’t about being comfortable and doing what you want all the time. It’s about being uncomfortable and making sacrifices to live in a better way.” She opened her mouth slightly,

wondering if she should tell Avery about what had happened. Catherine wasn't sure he would understand.

Avery wiggled an eyebrow. "Except for the fact that God isn't real." Catherine rolled her eyes and scoffed. "Just kidding," Avery amended. "Well, I'm not kidding, he isn't real, but I am just teasing you. I know your faith is important to you." There was a moment of silence, with disbelief from Catherine. "So which problem did you want to start on?" Avery asked, about the math homework.

"Wait, so that's it?" Catherine asked.

Avery furrowed a brow. "What do you mean? You wanted to work on the Math homework, right?"

"No, I mean you're not..." Catherine trailed off, not sure how to explain. She blushed, embarrassed. "When we first met, you were saying all this stuff about, being, like, just sheep or something and how stupid religion was..."

It was Avery's turn to be embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I guess it's just stressful feeling like I'm the only one who believes what I believe. No one agrees with me, and it gets isolating, you know?"

Catherine considered this. She gave Avery a small smile. "I know. It's hard to... feel like you're surrounded by people with different beliefs than you."

"Exactly!" Avery exclaimed.

"...But I've felt like that before too, and I didn't lash out at anyone and insult an entire school and religion." Avery looked down. Catherine continued, "Anyway, I'm just saying, you don't have to be rude about it."

Avery was tempted to attack Catherine for acting so high and mighty, but instead, he bit his tongue. “You’re right,” he admitted, showing his palms. “I thought you might have agreed with me at the time, but I shouldn’t have assumed and I shouldn’t have been rude.”

“Thank you,” Catherine smiled.

“Except for Samuel,” Avery smirked. “I would still be rude to him.”

Catherine let out a chuckle in spite of herself. Then she grabbed a pillow and smacked Avery with it. Avery laughed and grabbed the pillow from her. Catherine squealed and got another pillow, but Avery reached out and took it before she hit him with it.

“Hey, I am here to be nice,” Avery laughed, holding the two pillows. “Do you want help with your homework or not?”

Catherine, blushing, nodded yes. She sat back down, and Avery promptly hit her with the two pillows he held. Catherine gasped, and Avery calmly placed the pillows behind the two of them.

“Alright, *now* we can get started.”

As the two worked through some of the problems, Catherine could appreciate how good of a tutor Avery was. She had to admit that it surprised her somewhat. She supposed they had both assumed things about each other that turned out not to be true.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Bright and early at 8:00am on Friday morning, all of the older students loaded large busses to take them to the conference. Girls and boys were split up into two different busses, so that no funny business would take place. In fact, all of the students were instructed to sit next to their original roommate, so Hannah and Sylvia sat together, while Catherine sat a row in front of them with the girl she never took much time to get to know.

“It’s so annoying that they make us leave so early, isn’t it?” Catherine commented, trying to start a conversation. “It would have been more fun to just leave last night and sleep in this morning.” Catherine’s roommate, Amelia, just stared. Catherine tried again. “Or do you like getting up early?”

Completely straight faced, Amelia answered, “I wake up at 4:30 every morning to skip and feed the ants.”

“Skip?”

“Yeah, you know, like some people run, but skipping is actually better for you.”

“Oh.” Catherine hesitated, then asked, “So do you have like... pet ants or something? Like an ant farm?”

Amelia snorted. “Don’t you think I would have noticed by now if I did? No, I feed the ants outside. Their ecosystem is very fragile, you know. I have to make sure they get enough nutrients.” With that, Amelia pointedly reached into her backpack and put her nose into a National Geographic with a giant ant gracing the cover. Catherine shuttered.

She peeked behind her to see if Hannah or Sylvia had overheard, but they were deep in conversation about an actor from some new movie. Catherine twiddled her thumbs for a bit. As the busses peeled out of the school parking lot, she thought to herself that it would be a long day.

Catherine watched the trees speed by, thankful that she had the window seat, and wished she'd brought a book. She thought of Avery. He was probably as happy as ever, with a book and an entire day of free time to read it. She wondered what he was reading. Then, she remembered that she had his number, from when he texted her the macaroon recipe! She should have known that it was actually him who made them when he was the one who had the recipe, not Isaac.

She pulled her phone out, opened the conversation, and her thumbs danced over the screen as she tried to decide what to say. Should she confront him about the macaroons? Maybe text him something mysterious, like, "I know your secret"? No, that would be weird. Besides, if he didn't want her to know he made them, he didn't want her to know. Catherine considered asking him about what he was reading, but she didn't want to seem like she was too interested. Just something casual and off the cuff.

So I just tried bonding with the roommate who's never around- turns out she has a weird thing for ants? This is going to be a long bus ride. Avery read the text on his phone and couldn't help but chuckle. He replied, *That's nothing! Mine won't shut up about how the cafeteria burgers are a disgrace to burgers everywhere. SOS!*

Catherine was pleasantly surprised that he texted back so quickly. She thought for a moment, then texted, *At least you probably have a book to keep you busy. All I brought was gum, and it isn't exactly very entertaining.*

Actually, you're wrong. I didn't bring a book this time. Avery responded. *I brought two. You can borrow one, if you want, whenever we stop for a restroom break.*

Touched by Avery's thoughtfulness, Catherine smiled. She didn't want to be a burden, though, so she texted, *Thank you, but you don't have to! I know how much your books mean to you. I couldn't just take one!*

Don't be silly, was Avery's reply. *I trust you to take good care of it. I can't just leave you with only Ant Girl as your company, now can I?*

Catherine replied, asking about both books. Avery was more than happy to comply, and the two hit it off. After exhausting their book conversation, they turned to movie adaptations (they both agreed that the poor adaptations ruled out the good ones), and then movies themselves. Catherine said her favorite movies were rom-coms, to which Avery replied he only watched documentaries and had never seen a romantic comedy in his life. Catherine didn't believe him.

After an hour and a half, the busses stopped at a rest station and the adults told the students they had twenty minutes, and then they had better be back on the bus. Avery hadn't gotten very far in his book.

When Catherine got off the bus, she looked around, but didn't see Avery anywhere. Not wanting to seem desperate, she decided to go to the bathroom. The line to the girls' bathroom spilled out the door. Catherine sighed, resigned herself to knowing it would take a while, and joined the back of the line.

"Isn't that INSANE?" the girl in front of Catherine in the line exclaimed.

"I mean, I don't know, I can see it." her friend countered. "He was always way nicer to the girl students, but then would give them lower grades. That makes a lot of sense actually."

The first girl was thoughtful for a moment. "Now that you mention it, I think he did that when I had him, too. But he never asked me for sexual favors!"

"Maybe you weren't doing bad enough in his class," her friend suggested, "Or he just didn't like you."

They both laughed. Catherine interjected, "Are you guys talking about Mr. Smith?"

The second girl nudged the first girl's arm. "See, it isn't insane, even she knows who we're talking about!" To Catherine she explained, "Yes, we are. I heard that he got caught for having sex with a student, and that's the whole reason we even have to go to this conference."

Catherine was incredulous. "Oh, I know. It's crazy, right?"

"Yup. And apparently," her voice lowered conspiratorially, "this wasn't the first time, either."

Catherine was shocked, then tried to remember her experiences. She thought back to memories she had of him. He was always very friendly, and what was it he had said to her at the dance? He had told her she looked amazing. She had felt a little uncomfortable, but brushed it off. Now, she wondered if he was imagining what she looked like without the pajamas on. She shuttered.

After being lost in thought, Catherine found that the bathroom line went much quicker, and suddenly looked around and found herself at the front of it. She took care of her business, then stepped outside into the bright mid-day light. She looked around and saw Hannah and Sylvia sitting on a concrete picnic table. She walked over.

"You guys will never believe what I just heard."

Sylvia's eyes lit up. "What is it?"

Catherine lowered her voice. "You know how they caught Mr. Smith with a student? Apparently it's happened multiple times."

"I heard that, too," Hannah agreed.

"I heard that he also slept with the Principal to keep the situation quiet," Sylvia interjected.

Hannah gasped. "He did not!"

“That’s just what I heard,” Sylvia shrugged.

“Oh.” Catherine said. “Well, still, I just thought it was crazy.”

Hannah, only half paying attention now, muttered, “Well, that’s what happens when a man’s wife won’t sleep with him and he’s surrounded by other girls all day.” Before Hannah’s words could sink in, Catherine’s phone buzzed. It was Avery.

Do you still want the book? I’m near the vending machines. “I gotta go,” Catherine told her friends. “I’ll see you back on the bus.” She headed to the covered area with the vending machines and road maps, wishing she brought change for candy or a soda. Then, she spotted Avery and Isaac. Avery hadn’t seen her yet, but was laughing at something Isaac had said. Catherine’s heart fluttered a little and she noticed for the first time how much she liked Avery’s laugh. Then she shook her head. What was she thinking? He was just a guy friend with some common interests that she was trying to evangelize to. Nothing more.

She took a deep breath and walked up to the boys. “Hi guys!” she said, with a smile. Avery turned to look at her and Catherine thought she saw a sparkle in his eye, but she promptly convinced herself she was imagining it. Isaac smiled at her and gave a small wave.

“Catherine!” Avery exclaimed, with a wide smile. “Guess what we just saw!”

Catherine couldn’t help but smile, too. Avery’s enthusiasm was infectious. “What?” she asked. But as soon as he opened his mouth to tell her, the teachers suddenly began telling everyone that it was time to get back on the bus. Catherine realized that she hadn’t even seen Samuel during the break.

“I guess we have to go,” Isaac said.

The three of them began walking towards the busses. Avery hurriedly dug around in his backpack. “I’ll just text you in a minute. Here’s the book!” Avery held out a mystery novel, and

Catherine took it. “It’s a murder mystery,” Avery explained. “Talking about them made me want to read one. I hope you haven’t read it yet.”

“Thank you!” Catherine said, “I haven’t.” As she said this, they neared the busses, waved goodbye, and went their separate ways. What they didn’t see, however, was Samuel walking behind them, watching everything that was going on.

Chapter Thirty

When Samuel took his seat next to David, he told David that he watched as Avery and Catherine were walking to the busses together, looking all buddy-buddy, and that he handed her a book. “Should I be worried?” Samuel asked David. “Because I’m beginning to feel worried.”

David shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, they could just be friends.”

“But what kind of friends are they?” Samuel pondered. “I mean, at least one of them isn’t following God’s rules. And the only reason they were hanging out is because they both got in trouble for getting into a fight.”

The more David thought about it, the more he agreed. “Yeah, and that’s over now, isn’t it? They only had to do it for two weeks.”

“Yes. It’s supposed to be.”

Chapter Thirty One

Meanwhile, on the other bus, Catherine was chewing her nails. She realized that she may have given Avery the wrong idea. I mean, she had a boyfriend. And Avery wasn't exactly the kind of Godly man that she should really marry or anything, even if she did like him like that. But she didn't. She decided it might be best to keep her distance some. Then she received a text.

So I never told you what I saw during the break, Avery said. Catherine's curiosity won out. She decided it would be fine just to see what he saw, she just wouldn't text him all day after that.

What was it? She replied.

Avery broke into a smile just texting the words. *I saw your roommate feeding the ants outside! She bought a bag of chips and put a chip near every anthill she could find, while cooing at them like they were babies.* Catherine had to stifle a laugh. She didn't want Amelia to ask what was so funny. In searching for a way to reply, Catherine remembered what she had heard in the bathroom during the break.

That's hilarious, she began, *I'll definitely never look at her the same way again.* Then she ventured, *Do you want to hear something I heard over break?* When she received a text in seconds saying that of course he did, she continued. *Apparently this is old news to everyone but me, but I heard that Mr. Smith was apparently notorious for giving out grades in exchange for ~favours~.*

Catherine didn't hear anything from Avery in several minutes. *Wow,* he finally replied, *That's really terrible.* Catherine agreed. She knew that she'd no longer feel comfortable in class with Mr. Smith. Suddenly, for the first time in her life, she wondered if the skirts she wore every day were appealing to him. She shuddered at the thought, but then pushed it out of her mind.

After all, the school administration wouldn't make them the uniform if they weren't appropriate.

It was a Christian school!

Chapter Thirty Two

The thoughts running through Avery's head at the same time were much more angry than afraid. He told Isaac what Catherine had told him, and soon, both of them felt like their blood was boiling. Both of them recognized the hypocrisy of it all. Isaac wondered why he was so shunned for being gay--something that didn't hurt anyone (in fact, it didn't even really affect anyone), while one of the teachers of a Christian school got away just fine with having sex with students. I mean, the man was supposed to be a Christian mentor! Eventually, though, Isaac just stopped thinking about it. Nothing else about this school and their treatment of anything was fair. That's just the way it was.

Avery, on the other hand, simmered for hours. Catherine never texted him back (he could only assume because the book he lent her was so good), and he just thought about all of the things that the school got away with and covered up. Especially considering Avery would rather be anywhere else in the world, but instead, he was going to be stuck listening to a bunch of know-it-all adults, just because a teacher had a problem. Pathetic.

Chapter Thirty Three

The large busses pulled into the hotel parking lot, and everyone was abuzz with excitement. The teachers stood up in front of the busses to remind students about the rules at the hotel. No girls would be allowed in boys rooms, and no boys would be allowed in girls rooms, under any circumstances. At ten o'clock, they all needed to be in their rooms, and tape would be put across each door at 10:05 to ensure the rules were followed. Then, they told all the students to calmly exit the bus one by one, and find their luggage outside.

Everyone rushed out, and Catherine felt like she was reunited with Hannah and Sylvia, as they all tried to figure out what the plans for dinner might be. Sylvia guessed that they would order pizza for everyone, while Hannah was betting they would walk across the parking lot to eat at the Cracker Barrel. Catherine hoped for pizza, but she was also looking around, not for Avery or anything, just to see if Samuel was off the bus.

As the three girls looked for their bags, Catherine was greeted with a scare when Samuel came up behind her and pinched her sides. She cried out, then, upon realizing who it was, simply smacked his arm. "One of these days, I'm going to hear you sneak up on me," she laughed.

Samuel shrugged. "You say that every time, but I'm still waiting." A teacher held up Catherine's suitcase to ask whose it was, and Catherine claimed it.

"Go put your stuff in your room and be in the lobby in twenty minutes, okay?" the teacher told Catherine, and everyone around her. Catherine nodded, Samuel left to find his own luggage, and the girls traipsed into the hotel and to their room.

A short twenty minutes later, all the students convened in the lobby, much to the dismay of the hotel clerk. A harried Principal Johnson stood on a chair.

“Attention, attention everyone.” Students milled around and quieted down a little, but some remained turned around and whispers and giggles still echoed through the lobby. “HEY!” Principal Johnson yelled. The whispers and giggles stopped. “That’s better,” he said, as he searched for his eyeglasses before realizing they were atop his head.

He flourished a few papers and addressed the students. “Okay, so a reminder of the rules. Number one, don’t go into each others’ rooms. Number two, be respectful of all the people leading the sessions. They’ve all been where you all are, so you can learn a lot from them. Number three, remember that you all are representatives. Not only do you represent our school, but you also represent Christians and God wherever you go. So keep that in mind when you’re making decisions this weekend. Okay?” He was met with silence.

“Okay. So, now we’re going to hand out schedules. If you’re a girl, go to Mrs. Harley back there and get a pink schedule, and if you’re a boy, get the blue schedule. Put it somewhere safe, we don’t have enough to give you an extra every day. When you’ve done that, go outside. We’re going to walk to Cracker Barrel.”

Later that night, as they were unpacking all of their things, the girls discussed what all the weekend had in store for them.

“I feel like its going to be so awkward to talk about sex and stuff with the boys right there. I mean, that’s just so embarrassing,” Sylvia lamented.

Amelia looked up from her magazine. “Well, we won’t be. Didn’t you look at the schedule?”

Hannah and Sylvia gave each other a look that made it clear how they felt about Amelia. “What about the schedule?” Catherine asked.

“All of our sessions and workshops are different from the boys’. Some of them are the same, but at different times. So we won’t be with them at all.”

Sylvia sighed a breath of relief.

“That’s probably for the best, so we can talk about issues that really affect us,” Hannah mused. “Personally, I could never talk about sex in front of a guy. It makes me feel gross just thinking about it.”

Catherine thought to herself that it meant she wouldn’t see Avery and Isaac, or Samuel or David hardly all weekend. She figured Samuel was looking forward to attacking another part of life with the word of God. She wondered if there was any part of Avery that was curious or excited, or if he was just miserable.

Later that night, as the girls had unpacked and gossiped, they were told it was after ten and they needed to quiet down. Blue tape was added to their door, and the teachers each took hour-long shifts roaming the hallways.

The next morning, the bleary-eyed students worked on their breakfast in the lobby. Samuel and Catherine sat together.

“You know, I’m actually really excited that we have the opportunity to attend this conference,” he mentioned.

Catherine’s eyes widened. “So am I!” she exclaimed. “I was afraid I was the only one.”

“Of course you aren’t!” Samuel replied. “I think that we can both learn a lot from all of the sessions we’re going to attend, and we can have a lot of important conversations.” He looked into the distance. “You know, as the man in this relationship, I’m called by God to be the

spiritual leader for both of us, and I want to make sure I'm leading us well. Let's pray for our intentions this weekend."

Catherine softly agreed and they both bowed their heads. "God, first of all, I just want to thank you for bringing Catherine into my life. She is the sweetest girl I know. I realize that I will never be able to love her as much as you do, but I will try every day." Samuel took a deep breath and continued, "I always want to do the best and most Godly thing for both of us, so please give me wisdom as I gain more knowledge on how to best do that, and help Catherine to also be intentional this weekend so that we can both be better and get closer to you, God. Amen."

Samuel and Catherine raised their heads, and realized it was time to load up on the busses and go, so they parted ways. Catherine caught up with Hannah and Sylvia. Sylvia mentioned that she watched Samuel pray with her, and Hannah gushed. "That is SO cute! You're so lucky that you have a boyfriend who is so committed to God, some of these boys seem like they're just messing around all the time." Catherine agreed.

On the bus ride over to the state college where the conference was taking place, Catherine received a text from Avery. *I hope the girls' schedule looks like more fun than the boys' schedule*, he wrote. *But if not, LMK and we could all ditch.*

Actually, I'm looking forward to the sessions, Catherine replied. *You're joking about ditching, right?*

There was a few minutes before Avery replied and texted back, *I guess you'll never know...*

Catherine rolled her eyes at the screen. Avery was funny, she would admit that, but Sylvia was right. He was just playing around. Samuel was the real deal.

When the busses arrived at the college, the students were more or less let loose to find the rooms they needed to be at. College students wearing bright smiles and matching purple T-shirts wandered the campus, helpfully pointing students in the direction they needed to go.

Catherine and her friends had some difficulty finding the first class, and ended up a little late, but the curly-haired woman with bright red lipstick ushered them in.

“Hello Ladies! Go ahead, find a seat. I know it can be difficult to find these classrooms.” She checked her watch. “We’re going to give people a few more minutes to find us.” Sure enough, some other girls trickled in. Then, the woman addressed the class. “Hello and welcome! I’m so very happy you all are here today.”

“So, I’m going to ask you guys a couple questions. Raise your hand if these apply to you, okay?” She pulled out a note card. “Okay. How many of you grew up watching Disney princess movies?” Every girl raised her hand. “How many of you like romance movies or rom-coms?” All the hands stayed up. “And do any of you like reading romance books? A little Nicholas Sparks? John Green?” Some hands went down. “Okay, alright, now here’s an easy one. How many of you want a boyfriend and husband who treats you like a princess?” Everyone raised their hands. “That’s what I thought,” she said, and winked.

From there, she went on to tell the students how, really, romance was to girls what porn is for boys. Girls’ deepest desires are just to be loved, and they had all grown up with this being in the form of fancy dinner dates, and think that love is being completely accepted and that your future husband will constantly fawn over you. Modern popular culture, the woman told them, tries to convince impressionable young girls that sex is a part of all that romance! And it can be, but not until you’re married. Don’t let a movie convince you that sex is a part of dating and you

need it to get romance. And beware of boys who may try to give you the romance you want to get the sex that they want. Catherine learned a lot from that class that no one had ever talked to her about before. She realized that she did sometimes idealize romance.

From there, she attended the homosexuality class, which reminded her a lot of the things her friends had told her after she said she didn't think it was a big deal. She still wasn't completely convinced, but the session leader told them that being gay was a choice, and even if people sometimes felt that way, they would be expected to either stay single or marry the opposite gender so they were still obeying God. The session leader also talked about the option of conversion therapy, something Catherine didn't know anything about. It was described as being something that people used to force gay people into associating being gay with bad things.

The next session, titled, "Why Wait?" was all about, you guessed it! The reasons why everyone, Christians especially included, should wait for sex. The session leader told them that while sex is something people can have as many times as they want, virginity is something that goes away.

He told the girls that their virginity was the greatest gift that they can give a man, so why would they give it to just anyone? The session leader said that sex before marriage is often compared to test-driving a car before you buy it, but in reality, doing things with guys was more like crashing a car, because once it was gone, you would never be able to get it back. Wouldn't it be in their best interests to wait and only give it away once a man has vowed, in front of God, to stay with you forever? Most guys would just leave after a girl gave him what he wanted. All of that could be avoided if you just wait until marriage.

Catherine made a mental note of all of the points the session leader brought up. She figured she would mention them to Avery later, seeing as he seemed to disagree with the

prospect of waiting for marriage. Suddenly, she wondered if he simply didn't believe in waiting because he just didn't want to wait so long to have sex.

There was a lunch break next, which Catherine attended with Hannah and Sylva. They found the cafeteria totally packed, and, while they gave a valiant effort to search for Samuel and David, could not see them anywhere and instead sat at a long table with some students from a different school. Catherine mostly just listened, and admittedly peered around to see if Avery or Isaac were there.

After lunch was an afternoon-long session about modesty. Catherine figured she already knew pretty much everything they were going to say, since dressing modestly was something that was taught to her and other girls since they were in fourth or fifth grade.

They all found the classroom and had a seat, and then Mr. Smith walked in with Mrs. Huxley. They explained that they figured the conversation about modesty might be more helpful if both genders were represented. They began talking about the importance of modest clothing.

“From a guy's perspective, I can tell you that when you wear something immodest or inappropriate, it sends a very clear signal to the guys you're around. Your clothes say a lot about you, and when they're too short, or low cut, or tight, it's like you're telling guys, Hey! Hey look at me! Look at my legs!” Mr. Smith explained.

Catherine began to feel guilty and uncomfortable. Maybe if she felt weird around Mr. Smith, it was her own fault for wearing something that made him look at her that way. She certainly didn't want him--or any boy, for that matter, to think she was just trying to get attention.

Mr. Smith went on to say that when guys (especially teenage guys) looked at girls, they couldn't help but think about what they looked like under their clothes. He looked out and told

them that every guy they knew probably imagined them naked at one point or another. Some of the girls looked at each other and shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“But guys can’t help it! That’s how they’re wired, they’re visual creatures. However, that’s all the more reason that each of you should be mindful of what you wear,” Mr. Smith explained. “The less they see, the less they have to go off of. The more they see, the more their imagination will lead them into sin. You pretty ladies don’t want to lead your brothers in Christ into sin, do you?” The girls shook solemn heads no.

After Mr. Smith spoke, Mrs. Huxley took over and discussed with the girls all of the other ways modesty could be incorporated. This extended beyond just clothes, and included things like wearing natural makeup (if any at all), speaking in a soft voice, not being too overly flirty, and not cursing or talking about unlady-like things. Catherine took all of this very seriously. No one had ever talked to her about non-clothing ways to be modest.

After the modesty session, the students all ate dinner at the college cafeteria, and then boarded the busses to head back to the hotel. Catherine was still ruminating on everything she had been told that day, and considering how she could apply it to her life. She wondered how the boys’ sessions had been, and the kind of things they learned about.

When everyone got back to the hotel, most students just went up to their rooms to fall asleep or watch TV, though some stayed in the lobby to play cards or socialize. At first, Catherine and her roommates just went to their room and did face masks. Caroline texted Samuel some and was happy to hear that he felt like he was learning a lot. After a little while, though, the girls decided they wanted some tea from the machines in the lobby, but didn’t feel like going down to get it.

“I mean, I could go, if you want,” Catherine offered. “I don’t mind.”

Hannah raised an eyebrow. “But how would you carry them all?”

“I’ll go,” Amelia asserted from the other side of the room.

“Are you sure?” Catherine asked.

Amelia stood up and nodded. “Yeah, I have something I need to do anyway.” So, it was decided. The two girls endured an awkward elevator ride together, until they reached the first floor of the hotel. “Um, I’ll be right back,” Amelia said, and hurried off. Catherine sighed and looked around.

Across the lobby, she saw Avery and Isaac sitting together in the corner, deep in discussion. Catherine walked over. “Hey guys! What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing,” Isaac said, “We’re just avoiding your boyfriend.”

Catherine blushed. “W-why?”

Avery laughed at Catherine’s reaction. “It’s no big deal,” he told her. “We’ve just found that we both prefer our space.”

“Oh, okay,” Catherine said. Then, trying to save an awkward moment, continued, “So, what did you guys think of today?”

The boys just stared back at her. “That’s a joke, right?” Avery asked.

Catherine chuckled nervously. “So I guess that means it was as bad as you expected it to be?”

“Pretty much,” Avery agreed.

“Worse,” Isaac countered.

Catherine bit her lip. “Um, Isaac?” she began. She paused to try and find the words, and finally sat down at the table. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure...” Isaac relented, feeling unsure.

“One of the sessions I went to... It was called All About Homosexuality...” Avery had to resist rolling his eyes, while Isaac unconsciously tensed up. “I guess I was just wondering, is it true that being gay is a choice?”

Isaac replied, “Don’t you think that if it was a choice, I would have just chosen to be straight? Why would I *want* to be actively condemned for the rest of my life, for--he lowered his voice slightly--shits and giggles?”

Avery could tell that Isaac was feeling flustered, so he stepped in. “Yeah, Catherine, he can’t choose to be gay any more than we chose to be stright. You can’t just all of a sudden be into girls, right?”

Isaac turned back to Catherine. “The short answer is no, I didn’t choose to be gay. No one chooses their sexuality. Which is why it’s so upsetting that the church and our school and--” Isaac stopped himself before he said any names, but Catherine understood.

“And all of my friends?” she supplied.

Still looking slightly uncomfortable, but relieved Catherine had the self-awareness to admit it, Isaac continued. “...yeah. That’s why its so upsetting that everyone condemns me--and all gay people--so hard for it, because we can’t help it. It’s just part of who we are.”

Catherine nodded. She understood Isaac’s perspective, but she also understood everyone else’s. Mostly, though, she thought to herself that she could never be gay. The very idea was totally weird.

Avery noticed Catherine’s thoughtful look. “So, are you on the This-Whole-Thing-Sucks train yet?” he asked her.

“No, actually,” Catherine raised her nose in the air slightly. “There were a lot of other sessions that I found very useful.”

Avery raised his eyebrows. “Oh really?” he asked, “Like what?”

“Okay,” Catherine began, as she took the bait, “Well, for one, Mr. Smith and Mrs. Huxley taught one on modesty, and-”

Avery nearly spit a mouthful of the black coffee he’d been sipping. He recovered and interrupted Catherine, saying, “Wait wait wait wait wait. *Mr. Smith?* Taught a session to teenage girls about *modesty?*”

Catherine’s cheeks warmed. “Yeah, it was kind of uncomfortable, but-”

“The same Mr. Smith that got caught having sex with a student?”

“Um, well, technically it’s just a rumor, but yeah, there’s only one Mr. Smith that teaches at our school...”

Avery gaped at Catherine. “So he has sex, with a minor who can’t consent, who is also a student that he has power over, and the school decides that the best thing to do is have him tell girls how they should avoid being too provocative?”

“Well, guys are visual creatures,” Catherine tried to explain, “So even though it was bad that he, you know, did that with a student, that doesn’t mean that what he was saying wasn’t true. I don’t want to give guys the wrong idea about me, or cause them to sin because of me, and-”

“Catherine,” Avery interrupted, “That’s not your responsibility. It’s the guys’. If they have a problem with what you’re wearing, that’s on them.”

Catherine gave him a sideways look. “I appreciate you saying that, but still. I want to protect myself, and represent God well.” To that, Avery put his hands up.

While the subject was on her mind, however, Catherine realized that there was a question that she had that was heavy in her chest. She unconsciously opened and closed her mouth, trying to find the words.

Avery noticed. “What is it?” he asked.

Catherine turned red and was silent for a few more moments. Finally, she admitted her question. “Um... Is it true that every guy imagines every girl naked?” Catherine asked timidly.

Isaac snorted. “No.” Catherine laughed.

“Actually, that’s my answer, too.” Avery agreed. Catherine gave him a surprised look. “I mean, boys can control what they think about. It’s not like anytime I see any girl, I can’t help but picture what she looks like without clothes on. I’d have to choose to think that, it doesn’t just happen.”

Catherine considered this, then asked him, “Well, what if a girl is wearing skimpy clothes? And flirting with you?”

Avery thought for a moment. “I mean, I might be more inclined to imagine things if a girl was doing that, but if I didn’t want to, then I wouldn’t.” Catherine looked into the distance, considering this. “Everyone can control their thoughts, Catherine. If they can’t they have a bigger issue.” Catherine cracked a smile.

“Are you really telling me the truth?” she asked. “You’re not just trying to sound all sweet and noble, are you?”

“Why would I be trying to sound sweet?” Avery asked, and Catherine blushed. “No, I’m telling the truth. If you think I’m sweet and noble, though, that’s up to you.”

Catherine tucked her hair behind her ear. “So, um, what all did you guys talk about in your sessions?”

“How would we know?” Avery countered. “We skipped them all.”

Isaac laughed at Catherine's concerned face and informed her, "He's just joking." Then he went on to list some of the sessions they attended. "Let's see... We had the gay one too, and we had one about porn and objectifying women..."

"That's right!" Avery added, "And then one about being the spiritual leader in a relationship." Catherine suddenly remembered what Samuel had mentioned earlier that day. "And then we talked about why it's so important to save sex for marriage." Avery rolled his eyes.

"Oh, I think I had that one, too!" Catherine said. "I actually found that one to be really interesting." She saw Avery's skepticism, and continued, "I mean, they didn't just say, 'because God told you not to,' they talked about how you can only lose your virginity once, and it's meant to be a gift for your future husband. Plus that way you know that whoever you date is serious about you and not just trying to sleep with you."

In a rare moment of pure emotion, Avery looked at Catherine with wide eyes, and said, "I'm sorry."

Isaac gave Avery a weird look, and Catherine chuckled nervously. "Um, for what?"

Avery somewhat snapped out of it, cleared his throat, and continued, "I'm just sorry that it seems like so much of what you get told is how to adjust yourself for men. Men never get told that anything they do is wrong or bad, or how to act for the sake of women. I just feel bad that you have to experience that."

"Experience what?" Hannah asked, out of nowhere. Catherine, Isaac, and Avery all whipped around to see Hannah and Sylvia standing near their table.

"Talking to you two?" Sylvia guessed with a smirk.

"Sylvia!" Catherine cried. "They're my friends, too. Don't be rude."

There was a stare down between Avery and Sylvia, both of them glaring intensely at each other, until Sylvia said, “Well, anyway, you guys were taking a long time, so we came to see what was up. I guess you got distracted. Where’s Amelia?”

“Probably feeding ants,” Isaac quipped. Catherine and Avery laughed. Hannah and Sylvia didn’t.

“Whatever. I’m getting a hot chocolate and going back up to our room. But it’s almost ten, just in case you were getting any ideas.” Hannah eyed Avery and Catherine suspiciously. Hannah and Sylvia retreated to the hot drinks station, and Catherine murmured an apology to the boys and joined Hannah and Sylvia.

When the girls all got back to their room, Amelia traipsing in eventually, they all got ready for bed. Once in bed, though, they continued to stay up on their phones. Catherine texted Avery, *Hey, I’m sorry again for how Sylvia treated you. I think she has trouble with people who disagree with her. She thinks that you two are going to get me into devil worshipping or something.* Catherine had to wait a few nerve-wracking minutes before she received the reply, *It’s okay.*

“Catherine, Samuel said he’s coming over to talk to you,” Sylvia broke the silence.

Catherine was startled. “What? Why?”

“He’s just had enough of the lies and the sneaking around. I kind of think we all have. I mean, come on, Catherine, it’s like you spend more time with those *heathens* than you do your boyfriend and friends. What’s wrong with you?”

“Wait, what?” Catherine rubbed her face. “How would he even know about me talking to Avery and Isaac?”

Hannah and Sylvia looked at each other. “Well…” Hannah started.

“Look, he deserved to know.” Sylvia finished for her.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. “That’s probably him now,” Sylvia said. Amelia buried her nose in her National Geographic. Catherine was still reeling.

Hannah opened the door to reveal a strangely polished-looking Samuel. Hannah and he murmured for a few moments, then Samuel looked over her shoulder.

“Catherine, can we talk?” Catherine’s cheeks burned. She nodded silently and, avoiding eye contact with the other girls, walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

“So, have you talked to Avery and Isaac lately?” Samuel asked first, with forced casualty.

“Yeah,” Catherine admitted, “I talked to them some earlier.”

Samuel asked, a hint of a smile on his lips, “And how are they taking all of the stuff they’re teaching us?”

“Oh, well, we were having some good discussions about it.”

Samuel nodded approvingly. “Did you talk to Isaac about homosexuality?”

Catherine’s cheeks warmed. “Um, yeah, we talked about it some.”

“Well, that’s good!” Samuel said. There was a moment of tension. Catherine opened her mouth to ask what was going on, but before she could, Samuel began.

“Catherine,” Samuel started, with a deep breath, “I think that, within our relationship, I’ve had about as much as I can take.”

Catherine felt panic rising in her stomach. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” Samuel asked, exasperated. “Catherine, all I’ve ever tried to do is prepare myself for being a husband and a spiritual leader. I need someone who matches me in that.”

Catherine looked at her feet. Samuel continued. “Over these last few weeks, I’ve grown fed up with you. You keep hanging around Avery and Isaac, more than you hang around me. And they’re not real Christians, Catherine. They’re not. What does that say about you? About us?”

Samuel didn’t give Catherine a chance to reply. “I’m sorry, Catherine. But I need to find someone who is more devoted to God and to a future family. I don’t know what you’re looking for, but clearly that isn’t it.”

Catherine still said nothing, so Samuel simply pulled her in, kissed her on the lips, and said goodbye. Catherine walked in the room, still in a daze, and laid down in bed. No one knew what to say, so they avoided acknowledging what had happened and didn’t say anything. Catherine cried herself to sleep. The girls pretended not to hear.

Chapter Thirty Four

The next morning, Catherine woke up with puffy eyes and felt weak. She just wanted to hide under her covers and never come out again. But she knew she had no choice, the teachers would come knocking on her door if she didn't show. She pretended to be asleep until the other girls had gotten ready and gone downstairs to get breakfast. Then, she finally mustered up the strength to rouse herself, throw on some sweatpants, all while she took deep breaths to avoid breaking down.

When she got downstairs, she heard Samuel's laugh and her stomach flip flopped. She peeked towards that direction and tears started flowing again. Catherine saw David, Samuel, Hannah, and Sylvia all sitting together and talking. Sylvia had her hand on Samuel's arm. They all looked so happy. So content. Without her.

Catherine sobbed for a moment and then violently wiped her tears away. She held her head unnaturally high and walked near the group. Despite her intentions, she darted her eyes over enough to see them all take notice of her. Samuel's smile melted and Sylvia yanked her hand away. Catherine's throat burned and her eyes stung. She kept walking, and grabbed a dry, sad muffin.

"Catherine!" she turned her head to the direction her name had come from. She saw Avery waving.

Catherine, grateful, walked over to their table and instinctively faked a smile.

"Hi Catherine!" Isaac said. "How's it going?"

"Um," Catherine chuckled faintly, but her smile dropped.

“Catherine?” Isaac asked. “Is everything okay?” With that simple but kind question, more sympathy than she’d been shown by any of her other friends, the tears started flowing. Avery stood up and led her to the chair he’d vacated. She sat down and covered her face with her hands. “What happened?” Isaac asked again.

Catherine took long, deep breaths to calm herself and uttered, for the first time, she realized as she said it, “Samuel... broke up with me. He said he was... focusing on growing his relationship with God and preparing for a family, and I wasn’t keeping up.” She sobbed.

“You’re better than him,” Avery blurted. He began to pace near the table. “I can’t believe the NERVE of him. First he wants to rub in everyone’s faces just how much higher and mightier he is than them, police others for differing beliefs and their supposed *sins*, and then he breaks up with you? One of the most amazing girls I’ve ever met, because you’re not Godly enough? Who does he think he is?”

When he was done, he realized that Catherine was crying again. He knelt down next to her and put his arm across her shoulders. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry, Catherine.” She turned to him and put her head in his neck. He wrapped his arms around her tightly, and, softer, in her ear, said, “I’m sorry.”

Isaac sat and watched, silently. After a few good minutes of crying, Catherine’s sobs became more regular and evolved into deep, ragged breaths. Eventually, she calmed down enough to loosen her grip on Avery. He did the same. Another moment passed, and Catherine wiped her cheeks harshly.

“I would offer to put more roaches in his room, but Isaac and I live with him now, so that would come back to bite us.”

Catherine’s jaw dropped. “Wait, what?” she asked, “You put roaches in his room?”

“It was right after he gave his whole little sermon about being gay,” Avery muttered, clearly still bitter.

“Hold on a minute,” she said very seriously. “You two... put roaches in Samuel’s room... last fall?”

Avery and Isaac nodded.

“And a few months later, all of the boys had to vacate their building... because of a pest infestation?”

Everyone’s eyes widened. Catherine covered her mouth. Avery ran his hands through his hair. The silence was deafening. Then, Isaac cracked a smile. Catherine saw Isaac’s smile and let out a small, nervous giggle. Avery smiled at Catherine’s laugh, and before any of them knew it, they were laughing so hard a few tears came out. When they all finally settled down, the boys’ faces rested in a content grin, but Catherine’s fell into a deep frown.

Avery noticed. “Still thinking about Samuel?” he asked her, softly.

“You know what the worst part is?” Catherine exclaimed, in a rushed fury. “I don’t even know if he really broke up with me because he felt the way he said, or if I just stopped looking like I was the perfect Christian girlfriend. You know?” She didn’t stop long enough for any of them to reply. “I mean, he would talk about God and stuff in front of everyone all the time, and pray before meals in the cafeteria, but he was suspiciously less consistent when people weren’t watching.”

After thinking for a moment, Catherine continued, “I mean, after I sort of was coming back into my faith, I started having a quiet time every day and reading the Bible. I don’t know if Samuel ever did that! I should have broken up with HIM for not being Christian enough!” Catherine crossed her arms across her chest, breathing heavily. Avery raised his eyebrows.

Feeling slightly lighter, Catherine forced herself to choke down her muffin and some orange juice. She still wasn't happy, but she felt like she could get through the day. Once she started attending the talks, going through the motions comforted her somewhat. She focused completely on the lesson and almost forgot about Samuel and everyone else, swallowing down the waves of emotion when they came. She clung tight to the book that Avery had let her borrow and read it with a fervor whenever there was a break in sessions, and during lunch.

When the sessions were over for the day, everyone returned to the hotel, and Catherine caught up to Avery and Isaac. The principal ordered pizza for everyone, and they all gathered in an empty conference room to get their two greasy slices on white paper plates. Catherine, Avery, and Isaac swapped stories about the people who had talked to them that day.

Eventually, students either trailed back to their rooms, or into the hotel lobby to fill up on the free hot drinks. Isaac decided to go up to the room to get a shower before Samuel or David came upstairs.

When Isaac left, Avery and Catherine watched him walk away, and saw Hannah and Sylvia hunched over a phone, giggling at something together. Catherine's eyes pricked with tears, and she quickly looked away. She noticed Avery's silence, but one glance at his troubled expression told her he probably just didn't know what to say.

"I just don't want to have to go to my room to be alone with them again tonight," Catherine lamented, in an almost whisper. "They're just as bad as Samuel. They didn't say anything last night after he..." Catherine took a shaky breath, "broke up with me." She still had a difficult time coming to terms with it. She sighed and leaned her head back against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. "I just don't want to be alone with them all night."

"Don't be, then. Sneak out of your room so you aren't stuck with them."

Catherine, taken aback, almost laughed. “What?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fun!” Avery said, gaining momentum. “I’ll sneak out too. We can just hang out together!” Catherine still looked unconvinced, so Avery added, “I mean, unless you’d rather snuggle up with Ant Girl...”

Catherine stared at him. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Avery smiled. “Of course.”

Catherine couldn’t help but feel her lips curl upward in response. “But, how would I even do that? I mean, Hannah and Sylvia would definitely notice, and I don’t think they’d be super cool and understanding.”

“Maybe... Hmm.” Avery considered this. “Okay, maybe you wait a bit until they’re getting ready for bed and stuff, then get into the shower pretty late. Then by the time you get out of the shower, they’ll be asleep and won’t see you go or tell anyone that you’re gone.

Catherine began to grin. “You really think that will work?”

“I don’t see why not,” Avery replied. “I’ll do the same thing. Then we can meet in the lobby. How does that sound?”

“Good!” Catherine beamed. Then her face darkened. “But...what about Isaac?” she asked.

“What about him?” Avery questioned.

Catherine blushed. “I mean, I didn’t know if you were going to invite him, too, or hide sneaking out from him.”

Avery considered this. “Well, I could invite him, if you want,” he offered. “But I know he mentioned not getting much sleep last night. He might want to catch up on getting some shut-eye.”

Catherine nodded, relieved. “Yeah, I mean, if he’s tired, I wouldn’t want to keep him up.”

“Of course not,” Avery agreed. “Neither would I.”

They were both quiet for a moment, until Catherine mentioned, “Oh, you might want to take the stairs, to avoid the teachers in the hallways.”

Avery nodded in agreement. “Smart thinking,” he told her, and winked.

A few hours later, everything was going to plan. Catherine waited for the other girls to take their showers and get ready for bed. Then, she took a long, steamy shower. Just the act of feeling the warm water surrounding her and washing her body and hair made her feel significantly better than she had a mere twelve hours prior.

When she finished, she combed her hair, donned her pajamas, and took a deep breath. She turned the bathroom lights off, so they wouldn't be a disturbance, and cracked the door open. She let out a breath when she barely saw, in the darkness, all of her roommates fast asleep, lying still in their beds. Catherine crept out the door, closed it carefully behind her, and tiptoed down the hallway to the stairwell.

As she made her way downstairs, smiling to herself at her daring, Catherine saw Avery, holding none other than a book.

“There you are!” Avery exclaimed. “I was afraid you had stood me up.”

Catherine took mock offense. “How dare you, sir? I would never stand anyone up on a date.” When she realized what she had said, her stomach dropped. “I mean...” Catherine racked her mind for something to salvage her embarrassment.

“Well, I hope you'll excuse me for the faux pas,” Avery said, with a slight bow. “Would a cup of Peppermint Dreams tea suffice to make things right?”

Catherine blushed and shot Avery a small, grateful smile. “But of course,” she replied.

Avery held out his arm. Catherine laughed and took it, and Avery escorted her to the corner of the library near the fireplace. He pulled a pack of cards out from his pocket.

“I grabbed these bad boys, too,” he mentioned, “If you want to play cards.” Catherine agreed, and that is what they did, for a while.

The tension between them dissolved as they threw themselves into the games, and the weight that was on Catherine’s shoulders since the breakup seemed to lighten, as well. At times, Catherine found herself forgetting about Samuel, and David, and Hannah and Sylvia. It was just her and Avery, playing cards, laughing and joking. She wished she could stay in this moment forever.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Catherine’s phone chimed, letting her know she’d received a text. Her heart stopped, and the color drained from Avery’s face. Catherine looked to see what it was, and her face went from scared to sad.

Avery was confused. “What is it?” he asked, “Is Samuel bothering you?”

“No, no,” Catherine murmured, “It’s not that.” She put on a smile. “It’s just... it turned midnight, and my mom texted me, because...” She continued smiling, despite tears welling in her eyes. “It’s my birthday.”

“Oh, really?” Avery said. “Happy Birthday!”

“Thanks,” Catherine chuckled, half heartedly. She was still much more somber than she’d been a mere few moments ago. There was a long silence, and Avery kept his eyes on the deck of cards, shuffling slowly, until Catherine broke it. “Well, when I imagined what my 16th birthday would look like, I never guessed it would be spent at a sex conference, single, and without any of my friends,” she tried to laugh. Then her eyes opened wide. “I mean, not that you’re not my friend, or anything, it’s just... you know.”

Catherine studied her hands in her lap, then looked up. Avery looked thoughtful.

“What is it?” she asked.

Avery turned to her, and Catherine noticed a sparkle in his eye. “Okay, wait right here,” he told her.

“For what?” Catherine asked, with a nervous chuckle, but Avery didn’t answer. He just winked.

“You’ll see,” he replied. Catherine watched him jog to the hotel clerk, exchange a few words, and then the hotel clerk handed him a few random items. After that, Avery disappeared from her line of sight. When he came back to the table Catherine was sitting at, he was grinning like a fool and had his hands behind his back.

“Okay, now close your eyes for just a minute,” he instructed. Catherine humored him, covering her eyes with only a slight shake of her head from disbelief.

Catherine heard Avery make some scuffling noises, and a sigh of satisfaction. “Now you can open,” he commanded. When Catherine saw what Avery had done, her eyes immediately began to well up with tears. So did the hotel clerk’s.

On the table in front of her was a Honey Bun with a single candle protruding from it, as well as a mysterious package wrapped in the previous day’s newspaper. Catherine lifted it.

“What is this?” she laughed.

“Woah, slow down, at least blow out the candle first,” Avery said. “That’s a fire hazard.” Then, he quietly sang the version of Happy Birthday he’d learned as a kid and liked much more than the original. “Happy Birthday to you, you live in a zoo, you look like a monkey, and you smell like one too,” He glanced up at Catherine with a smile. Catherine was laughing softly as a few loose tears ran down her face.

Catherine blew out the candle, and she and Avery both beamed at each other. Avery did his best to tear the treat into two, and gave Catherine half. He held his half in the air until Catherine did the same, and they touched them together and said “Cheers!”

“Okay, I have to know,” Catherine said, as she licked the sticky sugar off her fingers, “What is this?” Catherine picked up the package wrapped in a newspaper. “I know you didn’t just go to the store. Is this more vending machine snacks?” she laughed.

Avery smiled and shrugged. “I guess you’ll have to open it and find out.”

With Avery’s suggestion, Catherine tore at the paper and pulled it off to reveal the book Avery had been holding earlier that night. “Avery,” Catherine said, surprised. “You don’t have to give me your book. I appreciate the thought, but I don’t want to-”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you would say,” Avery interrupted. “You’re too nice, you know. But that’s why I did this.” Avery gently took the book from Catherine, and opened the front cover. Doing this showed a note that Avery had written in permanent marker. It read, *To Catherine. Happy Birthday. Your Friend, Avery.* “See?” Avery said. “It’s yours.” He pushed the book back across the table.

Catherine stood up quickly and wrapped her arms around Avery’s neck. After the initial shock wore off, Avery stood up, so that their heights were more even. Then he hugged Catherine back, holding her just as tightly as she held him.

In a few moments, they both relaxed their grip on each other. Their arms lowered slightly, but neither of them stepped away. Catherine’s hands fell from Avery’s shoulders to his forearms. Her heart was beating a million times a minute. Catherine slowly tilted her face up towards Avery, at the same time he tilted his down. Their noses touched. Catherine giggled softly. Avery gulped hard.

Then they both leant their faces in just enough to touch. Their eyes closed and their lips touched. Once they both recovered from the initial jitters, they smiled and were able to relax. They gently came together again, slowly, becoming more comfortable as they continued kissing.

Eventually, they pulled apart for good. Avery was flushed and a large smile formed on his face. Catherine giggled and burrowed her head in Avery's neck. They sat back down and Catherine curled up next to him. Avery put his arm around her and everything felt alright. Then, Avery showed off some magic tricks and the two flirted for a while longer.

Catherine yawned widely.

"You getting tired?" Avery smirked.

"Never," Catherine protested, but Avery was able to see the fatigue in her eyes.

When Avery said, "Come on, we should probably head back," Catherine didn't argue. Avery gathered their things and handed the book to Catherine, who beamed at him, sleepy as she was.

The two rode the elevator upstairs and walked to Catherine's room. Before she slipped inside, she turned around to face Avery.

"Thank you," she smiled. "This has been the best birthday ever."

Avery chuckled. "And it's only been a few hours!"

"I know!" Catherine agreed.

There was a moment of silence, until Catherine quickly leaned in, gave him a peck on the lips, and whispered, "goodnight," into his ear. Then she opened her door just wide enough so that she could sneak in.

Neither of them slept much that night.

Chapter Thirty Five

_____ Catherine was woken up by a heavy rapping on her door. She sat up quickly, and looked around. The other girls had woken up, too, and they all looked at each other in bleary-eyed surprise. There was a second round of rapping. Catherine dragged herself out of bed and went over to the door. When she looked through the peephole, she saw an angry looking female teacher. Still sleepy and confused, Catherine opened the door.

“You four girls need to get out of bed and come downstairs RIGHT NOW.” Then she turned and walked away quickly.

Catherine turned and looked over her shoulder, afraid that she had accidentally overslept. But the clock read 6:00, hours before they were told to meet in the lobby to head back to the school.

The other girls looked confused, too. It was clear that none of them knew what was going on. Nonetheless, they all fumbled around the room, finding their shoes and trying to smooth out their hair.

When the four of them trailed into the lobby, where the principal, a few teachers stood. Catherine also spotted Avery, Samuel, Isaac, and David all gathered nearby. Catherine and Avery made eye contact. Catherine gave him a questioning look, but he just shrugged, his eyes wide.

“Finally!” Principal Johnson exclaimed, upon seeing the girls. He muttered something to the teachers, and ushered the students into a conference room. Once they got inside, Principal Johnson sighed deeply. The students looked around at each other, scared and confused.

“When we all got here,” the Principal began, smoothing his hair back, “I explained to everyone that we are representatives not only of the school, but of the body of Christ.” He paused suspensefully, and the students eyed each other, trying to figure out what was going on.

“So, I expected the most upstanding behavior from all of you,” he continued.

“Unfortunately, I have been disappointed.” The principal began pacing. “After all my years of working with teenagers, I have realized I need to be vigilant in security measures. You all are too smart.”

Catherine’s heart started to beat faster. Security measures?

“Clearly, however, you all did not realize that we had an extra precaution this week. After 10:00, the time everyone was supposed to be in their rooms, the teachers that I enlisted to help me went to every room and placed tape over each door.”

Avery and Catherine looked at each other. They both realized what this meant.

“Now, when we checked the tape this morning, the tape on the two doors of your rooms was no longer intact.” The principal peered at each student individually, until they shirked from his gaze. “So, first, I’ll give you all the opportunity to come forward and explain yourself.”

There was a moment of shocked silence. Then, all of the students turned to look at each other. Hannah and Sylvia glanced at each other, then gave Catherine a death glare. Isaac first turned to Samuel and David, suspecting them, but saw that they were peering at Avery, so Isaac then searched Avery’s face for any clue he knew what was going on. Avery, meanwhile, looked at Catherine, who looked back at him with fear in her eyes.

Suddenly, Amelia raised her hand. All eyes flew to her. Principal Johnson raised his eyebrows. “Yes, Amelia?”

“It was me,” Amelia confessed. She was met with silence. “I like to feed the ants. This morning, I woke up and couldn’t wait. So I snuck out to go see them.” She lowered her head. Then, she raised it again, quickly. “Do I get my one phone call before I go to jail or once I get there?”

Principal Johnson sighed. “Sneaking out isn’t illegal, Amelia.” She nodded, solemnly. The principal continued, “However, your admission doesn’t explain the tape on the boys room.” He looked at each boy pointedly.

Isaac took one glance at Avery and sighed.

“I was the other one.” Everyone turned to look at Isaac in surprise. Isaac blushed. “Umm, I... I couldn’t sleep last night, so I went to... work out.”

Sylvia snorted and covered her mouth. She and Hannah stifled giggles. Principal Johnson scratched his head. Catherine looked at Avery. Avery gave her an apologetic look. Then he stepped forward.

“No, that’s not true,” Avery said. “It was Catherine and I who left our rooms last night. They’re just taking the blame for us.”

“Okay,” Principal Johnson said, exasperated. “That makes a lot more sense. Avery, Catherine, you two come with me--”

“But wait, we only played card games in the lobby, I swear!” Avery said. “We didn’t do anything!”

“--the rest of you, go back to your rooms and get ready for the day.” The principal continued. “Avery, we’ll talk about this in a moment.”

Principal Johnson let the doors close behind the last student to leave. Then, he turned to a solemn-looking Avery and Catherine. He sighed.

“Alright. Well, as much as I hoped that Catherine here would be able to help you get back on the right path, Avery, I see now that I was wrong.” Avery looked at Catherine. Catherine looked at her feet. The Principal continued, “So, since apparently it wasn’t enough for you two to do arts and crafts together, I’ll make your punishment for this more severe. You are both going to

stay behind today and read the Bible on your own. And, next week when we're back in school, you'll both have in-school suspension. You're going to have to do all of your classwork alone, under supervision. Maybe all of that time to think will make you both reflect on the path your lives are going down and what you want your futures to be."

With that, Principal Johnson sent Avery and Catherine up to their rooms to retrieve their Bibles. They were both silent for the elevator ride. Avery was dying to say something, but the words didn't come, and the longer he waited, the more difficult it was to think of the right thing. When they returned, two tables were set up ten feet from each other. Between them sat a weary, older teacher with a battered book.

"Now, I don't know what you two did, but I've been given strict instructions to keep you apart, quiet, and your noses in the Bible." The teacher eyed Avery and Catherine and then turned back to the old book.

Catherine and Avery glanced at each other. Catherine gulped. They both took a seat and began reading.

Chapter Thirty Six

After Samuel left with the other students and realized he wouldn't be getting into trouble, he relaxed significantly. In fact, the relief quickly turned into a wry satisfaction. He called out to David, Hannah and Sylvia.

“Hey guys, it looks like I made the right decision about Catherine, huh?” he jeered. David chuckled. “I mean, it's kind of sad, I guess, that apparently I was the one good influence in her life, but...” he shrugged. “It's not worth it if she wasn't going to try.”

There was silence between the group. Issac looked at his shoes. Amelia inspected her fingernails. Then Hannah added, “I wonder what they were doing.”

Sylvia got a glimmer in her eyes. “Do you think they were hooking up?” Hannah elbowed Sylvia in response, which only led Sylvia to defend herself. “I mean, come on,” she explained, “Playing cards? Do you guys really believe that?”

“Plus, they would talk all the time without Samuel there,” David added. “That's pretty suspicious.”

Isaac's cheeks flushed, but as much as he wanted to defend Avery and Catherine, he himself didn't know what they had really been doing. It seemed unlikely to him that they would have had sex, but in all honesty, he had no idea.

“I guess I really dodged a bullet, there, huh?” Samuel mused.

“Yeah, for sure,” David agreed. “Honestly, I never really liked her.”

Hannah was thoughtful. “I don't know, it seems kind of weird to me. I felt like she was pretty devout. This doesn't seem like her.”

“Oh, come on,” Sylvia snorted. “I mean, she definitely went through the motions of being religious, but there were definitely signs. I mean, this all started because she said that being gay

was okay-” She immediately stopped in her tracks, remembering Isaac’s presence. “I mean, the Bible is pretty clear on its stance on all of that.”

Amelia snorted. Everyone turned to look at her, surprised. “Just like its pretty clear on its stance on slavery and mixing fabrics.” When she noticed the dumbfounded stares, she shrugged and added, “Guess which one is allowed and which one isn’t.”

“Well anyway, I think we can all agree that its wrong to have sex before marriage,” Sylvia recovered. “So I can’t believe that Catherine stooped that low so fast.”

Hannah thought for a moment and added, “Maybe she was trying to get Avery to like her.”

“Well that’s stupid,” David snorted. “I mean, that would work for a night, maybe, but... it’s not exactly going to make him fall in love with her.”

Samuel considered this. “But she would know that, wouldn’t she? I mean that's the type of thing they’ve been telling you girls about this week, right?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” Hannah pondered aloud.

Sylvia smirked. “Maybe it was just to get back at Samuel.”

Hannah’s eyes widened, and everyone turned to see Samuel’s reaction. He just coolly quipped, “I don’t know how damning herself to hell for all of eternity is getting back at me,” and everyone burst into giggles.

Chapter Thirty Seven

The rest of the day went on much like the last for everyone but Avery and Catherine. While Catherine occasionally looked over and noticed Avery looking bored and miserable, she didn't mind reading the Bible so much. She started in Psalms, highlighting verses that she felt she related to. Then she skipped ahead a few pages, glanced around, and skimmed Song of Solomon. Then, feeling embarrassed, she backtracked to Job. She had moved on to Ruth when Hannah burst into the room.

Used to the silence of the room all day, Catherine, Avery, and the teacher watching them all jumped. Hannah looked embarrassed.

"Oh, sorry," she said, her eyes shifting. "I was just... looking for Catherine..."

Catherine and Avery looked at each other, and then at the teacher. The teacher looked at his watch. "Alright," he mumbled. "You all get out of here."

With that, Avery and Catherine both quickly gathered their things and followed Hannah out. Hannah turned and looked at Catherine, bashfully expectant. Catherine cleared her throat. "Um, Avery, I'll catch up with you later."

Getting the hint, Avery nodded. "Right," he said, and headed away, admittedly looking unhappy about it.

Catherine and Hannah watched him go and then looked back at each other. Hannah's cheeks were a little pink. "So... are you doing okay?" she asked.

Catherine took a deep breath. "Well, I guess so," she answered. "I mean, I'm not happy that Samuel broke up with me, but Avery has really been here for me." Catherine gave Hannah a small but pointed glance. Hannah's cheeks flushed darker.

“I’m sorry that Sylvia and I... we just weren’t sure what to say--I mean, we’re friends with both of you, you know, and--”

“It’s okay,” Catherine interrupted her, and put on a wry smile. “I get it. It’s fine.”

Hannah breathed a sigh of relief. She let a moment pass before continued, “Well, you probably won’t be happy to hear this, but I feel like you should know.”

Catherine swallowed hard.

“Obviously, Samuel and David and Sylvia know, you know, that you and Avery were... together last night,” Hannah quickly studied Catherine’s face to gauge her reaction, then went on, “and, well, they were wondering if you might have, you know, *done stuff* together...” Catherine groaned and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “So, anyway, they were sort of talking to some other students and stuff. So I just wanted to let you know that it’s gotten around a little bit.”

Hannah looked down, then back up at Catherine. “But I just want to say, no matter what you did, Jesus still loves you. If you come to him, he’ll forgive your sins and you’ll be wiped clean.” Getting no response, Hannah kept going. “I feel like right now could be a dangerous time for you, because if we stop hanging out and you only have Avery and Isaac, who knows what kind of path you’ll go down?” Hannah, emboldened by what she had said so far, puffed her chest out. “You need a Christian influence in your life, Catherine.”

“Isaac is a Christian,” Catherine snapped back, immediately.

Hannah blushed. “Well, you know what I mean. Like, a real Christian.” Catherine raised her eyebrows, and Hannah backtracked, “I mean, just a Christian who upholds the traditional moral values, like how they were intended. In the Bible.”

Catherine scoffed. “Okay. Well, thank you for letting me know.” With that, she turned on her heel and walked off. She went straight upstairs and knocked on the door to Avery’s room.

Isaac answered the door.

Catherine gave him a small smile. “Hi Isaac, is Avery here?”

“What, I’m not good enough?” Isaac retorted, with a straight face.

Catherine chuckled nervously. “No, I mean, it’s not that, I just--”

“I’m kidding, it’s fine,” Isaac replied, and opened the door wider. “He’s in here.”

Catherine walked in to see Avery sitting on his bed, a book open in his lap. Her face flushed and she looked at her feet.

“Hey Catherine,” Avery said. “What’s up?”

“Um, well,” Catherine began. “Hannah just basically told me that Samuel, David, and Sylvia have been talking about us all day.”

“Oh, right, that we had wild sex all night and that I’m dragging you to hell with me?”

Catherine gawked at Avery. He chuckled, and softened. “Isaac already told me about it. Thanks for giving me a heads up, though.” Isaac nodded and sat on the desk in the corner.

“Oh, right,” Catherine blushed. “Well, you’re welcome. I figured you should know, too.” She sighed.

“So, how does it feel to be a sexual deviant like me?” Isaac deadpanned, making Catherine laugh a little.

“Not great,” she admitted. She thought for a moment, though, then said, “Although, I guess by now, we’ve been through quite a bit together. Some stupid rumors can’t be much worse, right?”

Avery smiled. “That’s true. I mean, Isaac and I got in a fist fight.”

“Samuel all but outed me publicly,” Isaac added.

Catherine nodded. “And I got broken up with,” she concluded, grimly.

“All in all, I’d say this has been the best school year of my life, wouldn’t you guys agree?” Avery quipped, with an eyebrow slightly raised. Isaac and Catherine had no choice but to chuckle.

Catherine sat down at the foot of the bed, near Avery. “So, Isaac, were you there when the rumor about us got started? Do you know how exactly it happened? Was it Samuel? Or Sylvia?”

Isaac opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment, the three heard loud laughing, and in a flash, the hotel room door was open and Samuel, David, Sylvia, and Hannah poured in. Samuel smirked at the sight of Catherine being there already.

“Hey guys, look,” he said, “Catherine is in bed with Avery... again.”

Catherine stood up, indignant. Avery slowly rose to his feet, as well.

“What exactly is your problem, Samuel?” Catherine demanded. She could feel her entire body warming with anger, as she got uncharacteristically loud and demanding. “Please, tell me. What, *specifically*, did I do to you?”

Samuel backed away slightly, and chuckled nervously. “Look, Catherine, if you want to talk, we can take this somewhere private.”

Catherine gave a dry laugh. “Oh, so now we should talk in private? After you talked to the entire school about me without even knowing what happened?”

Samuel gave Isaac a withering look. Then he turned back to Catherine. “Look, Catherine, it’s just that you seem to keep proving that you’re falling from your walk with God. Honestly, I’ve been worried about that for you for a while now.” Catherine scoffed. Samuel continued,

“But I broke up with you because I no longer saw you as the type of Godly woman that I could see being my wife. And as soon as I did that, you only got worse. You went out and snuck around at night, doing who knows what, with an atheist!”

“Okay, for the RECORD,” Catherine raised her voice, “All Avery and I did was play cards, AND eat candy from the vending machines, BECAUSE, by the way, in case you FORGOT, it’s my BIRTHDAY.” Samuel’s jaw dropped slightly, but it was just enough for Catherine to notice and confirm her suspicions that he had forgotten. She took a few steps closer to Samuel. “Yeah. And, just another thing, Avery would never pressure me to have sex. He thinks that it should be whenever two people want it, not when a guy begs his girlfriend and tells her that it’s fine because they’re going to get married someday, like someone else here.”

Sylvia gasped, and Hannah covered her mouth. David and Avery looked at Samuel in genuine surprise, David with a slight smile and Avery with clenched fists. Samuel glanced around at the others. Catherine, a mere foot away, did not waver her eyes from his.

After a moment of his mouth agape, Samuel recovered. “Look, no one is perfect, Catherine. All of us are sinners, and we all need God. But that’s why being a Christian is important. At least I’m on that path, unlike them,” he pointed wildly at Avery and Isaac.

“Okay, everyone seems to keep forgetting that I’M a Christian, too!!” Catherine sputtered. “You all aren’t above me!”

Samuel crossed his arms. “You could have fooled me,” he retorted.

“Oh, really?” Catherine said. “So, like, when I was genuinely struggling in my faith and then decided to spend more time in the Bible? That was me being a bad Christian? Or was it when I actually tried to form relationships with people different from me, instead of just preaching and throwing Bibles at them?” Catherine laughed. “Or was it the worst part of all,

when I started a group especially to minister to young girls to make sure that they had someone?" She scoffed. "Yeah, I'm the worst."

Sylvia stepped in front of Samuel. "What, so are you saying that all of us are terrible Christians because we don't do all those things?" she demanded.

"NO!" Catherine shouted. "I'm saying you need to step off everyone's asses. It's not up to you to determine who is a 'real' Christian and who isn't. None of you are better than anyone. And that isn't up for debate."

Catherine stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Adrenaline still pulsed through her body, so she took the stairs to her floor and went to her room. When she got inside, Amelia was there, her attention on a handheld game console. They both looked startled to see each other. Before either of them could say anything, there was a knock at the door.

Catherine opened it to reveal Avery and Isaac. She invited them in.

"Are you okay, Catherine?" Avery asked. "That was... intense."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Catherine said. "Was I too much?"

Isaac shook his head. "No, you were right."

"Yeah, I was just afraid you were really upset," Avery agreed.

Catherine looked sideways at him. "I mean, I am upset. Or at least I was. But it needed to be said. They have all antagonized others for way too long. They just think they have all the answers."

Amelia snorted. "Yeah, and everyone knows that it's really me with all the answers," she asserted. Isaac smiled, but Avery and Catherine looked at each other confused. "Seriously," she continued. "Ask me any question."

"Umm, 2+2?" Avery asked.

“Easy. four.” Amelia said. “I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.” Isaac and Catherine laughed, while Avery’s face soured.

Before long, the four of them were interrupted by Hannah and Sylvia coming into the room. “It’s almost 10,” Hannah said quickly, as an explanation.

Avery and Isaac took the hint. Isaac headed out, and Avery leaned into Catherine for a hug, which took her by surprise. She managed to recover enough to touch his arm in return, but the awkwardness was palpable.

“See you tomorrow,” he muttered, and followed Isaac out. The girls got ready for bed in silence.

Chapter Thirty Eight

The next morning, everyone woke up feeling exhausted. It had been a long few days of attending the conference, not to mention all of the emotionally charged drama between them all. Avery, in particular, was having a hard time keeping his eyes open as he threw all of his belongings together in his suitcase.

He had been up late, thinking about Catherine. He sometimes struggled to understand others, but Avery really had a difficult time figuring out what was happening between him and Catherine. He liked her, but had never dated anyone before, so he didn't quite know how to proceed, or if she even liked him.

When he saw her in the hotel lobby as students were gathering to leave, she waved at him. He waved back and took this into consideration. Once he boarded the bus and took a seat, however, he was fast asleep. He didn't even miss the books he had given her.

A few bleary bathroom breaks later, all the students arrived back at the school. The principal made commands in the background, ordering students to grab their luggage and head to their rooms, but there was no need. All every student wanted to do was get to their rooms, with the exception of only a few who wanted dinner first.

Avery, for one, brought his suitcase to his room and went straight to bed. As he drifted off, he heard the faint sounds of Isaac unpacking, and Samuel and David quietly talking to each other.

The next day was Sunday. Since Avery fell asleep so early the night before, he was up with plenty of time to get ready. He chose his outfit carefully, knowing that he would see Catherine. They hadn't had any time together to talk since the night that they flirted all night, and

kissed. Avery hoped that would change today. He chose navy blue slacks with a light blue dress shirt, remembering that blue was Catherine's favorite color.

Avery and Isaac arrived at church on the earlier side. Avery tried following along in the book he'd brought, but he couldn't help glancing at the door every thirty seconds. Catherine arrived right before the service began. Avery smiled brightly and waved her over. She quietly thanked Avery and took a seat next to him.

The entire church service, Avery was thinking about exactly how close Catherine's body was to his, and what he was going to say to her after the service. When the pastor wished everyone a good week, Avery's stomach dropped. It was time. He cleared his throat and tried to sound casual. "Hey, Catherine, do you want to go outside and talk for a second?"

Catherine replied with a bright, "Sure!" so Avery told Isaac they would meet him at the cafeteria for lunch in just a few minutes. "I can't believe the school year is almost over," Catherine said, when they got outside. "There's only a few weeks left."

"Yeah," Avery agreed. "Me neither. Although..." he mentioned, with a sly glance at her. "I think this might be the first time I'm actually hoping the summer will fly by, and I can come back in the fall."

He studied Catherine, who was looking out in the distance. She sighed. "Avery, I have to tell you something." Avery's heart raced. Catherine continued, "I called my mom last night, after everything that's happened. I just sort of spilled my guts and was crying to her about it all, and..." She took a deep breath, "My mom and I talked it out and decided that I would try a different school next year. Somewhere else, where I can get a fresh start." Catherine said this with the resolution of someone who was still trying to convince themselves.

Avery was crushed. All this time, he had been dreaming about what next year could look like for the two of them. Swapping books, studying at the library together, talking into the night... and now all of those possibilities were evaporating before his eyes. Then, he realized it was now or never. Catherine was looking at him expectantly.

“Well, I’ll miss you,” he said, quietly.

Catherine nodded. “I’ll miss you, too. But we can keep in touch, right?”

“Right, of course!” Avery agreed. “Um... yeah. Definitely.” Avery’s heart was beating a million times a minute. He desperately still wanted to ask Catherine out, but for what? To go on one date and then be separated forever? Avery wasn’t sure it was worth it. “Tell you what, are you hungry?” he asked her.

Catherine smiled. “I’m starving.”

Avery put his arm around her shoulders. “Come on. I’m sure Isaac is waiting for us.”