

The Face You

See

by Grace and Sara Dvorachek

“Never judge a book by its cover” is an ironic thing to say, especially when those who say it often do just that.

We’d all like to think that we’re unbiased and unprejudiced. But, the truth is, we all make conclusions based on what we see. We look at someone’s face and think we know their heart. A face can tell a lot about someone, but it doesn’t always tell the whole story.

So that’s what this is... the story behind the faces.

This isn’t about only one face, but it did start with just one. Her name is Willow Grant, and she was thirteen years old that autumn.

She was riding in the car with her brother, the day it all began. She’d known for a while that things were going to change that day... but she had no idea just how big those changes would be.

“Are you crazy?” Willow reached over and switched off the radio, looking incredulously at her brother. “That shot was all luck!”

“Not a chance.” He glanced away from the windshield to shoot her a grin. “I’m telling you, Will, he’s gonna get them to the playoffs one of these days.”

Willow’s brown eyes sparkled as she shook her head. “The playoffs? Now *that’s* just wishful thinking.”

“Fine, but just wait until spring and you’ll see.” He flipped on the car’s blinker and slowed to turn into a driveway. “Well, here it is... Royal Oak Private Girls School.”

Willow fell silent, looking out the window as they approached a long, low school building. All traces of laughter had suddenly vanished from her face.

Pulling up to the curb, her brother turned to look at her, and his sandy eyebrows raised slightly. "You okay, Willow?"

"Yeah..." she replied, not looking at him. "Yeah, I'm okay."

His voice softened. "I know you wish Mom and Dad were here."

Willow pressed her lips together. *Did* she wish they were there?

In a way, she did. She wanted to hear their voices and feel their presence assuring her that everything would be okay. She wanted them to walk her to the front of the school and give her a hug.

But, in another sense, the last thing Willow wanted was for her parents to be there. Not now, at least. Not after all that had changed.

"You're gonna do great, Will." The humor slipped back into her brother's tone. "Once those kids see your dribbling skills, they'll be falling at your feet."

She grimaced. "C'mon, Micah, you know I'm better at shooting. Besides, I'm not joining the team."

"Aw, it won't be that bad." Micah rolled his eyes. "Believe me, the fans at our college games are way more brutal."

"I guess."

He paused for a long moment, then began again in a gentler voice. "Hey, it's all gonna be fine, okay? We'll be fine."

She blinked back a sudden rush of tears that pricked her eyes. "You don't know that."

"I—"

"Do you *have* to go back to college?" Willow turned, looking at him pleadingly.

“Will, you know I’ve got to. I’ve already missed too many classes.” Micah gave her a reassuring smile. “Besides, I know you’ll do great.”

She looked over her shoulder at the school again. “No, I won’t. I’m just a weird homeschooler to them.”

“Well, I won’t argue with that,” he said jovially, then sobered. “Seriously, you’re a great person, Will. You’ll make friends... you’ll see.”

She avoided his gaze, not replying.

“Oh, come on, Will.” Micah shook his head. “You’ve gotta have some courage, okay?”

At last, Willow sighed. “Okay.”

He grinned. “That’s my sis.”

She grabbed her backpack from the floor of the car, then put a hand on the door handle. “I guess you probably have to get going, huh?”

“Yeah,” he glanced at his watch. “I still have to grab my bags at the house and say goodbye to Mom and Dad.”

Willow opened the door and stepped out, giving him a brave smile. “Bye, Micah.”

“See you later, Will.” He gave a wave. “I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thanks.” She shut the door and stood planted on the sidewalk as Micah drove away.

Okay... Willow turned to face the school building and sucked in a deep breath. Here we go.

The cool metal of her locker handle felt good on Willow's sweaty hands. Two minutes inside the building, and she already felt lost. She slid her backpack off her shoulder and set it on the ground to unzip it.

"Hey, you're new, right?"

Willow turned around to face the two girls who had addressed her. "Me? Oh, uh... yeah."

The tall, slender girl flashed a smile. "Taylor Reed, team captain for the Royals."

"I'm Willow. Willow Grant."

"Nice name." Taylor nodded, though a spark of scorn was in her eyes. "I used to have a gerbil named Willow."

The other girl let out a little giggle, her brown bob bouncing irritatingly. She stopped when Willow glanced at her.

"So, are you gonna try out for the basketball team?" Taylor continued.

Willow shrugged, remembering what Micah had said. "I don't know... maybe."

"You should totally try out." Taylor flipped her blonde ponytail over her shoulder. "It might be a good experience for someone like you."

"Taylor made like half the points last year," the other girl spoke up. "She's *really* good."

"It wasn't even half, Kaylene," Taylor interjected, turning to her friend. "And you made some good shots, too."

Kaylene frowned "Not enough to win the playoffs."

"Oh, Coach is just too hard on you," Taylor replied, rolling her eyes.

"Um, my brother plays basketball," Willow ventured. She faltered as the girls turned their attention back to her. "He's... he's on a college team."

"Cool." Taylor's blue eyes suddenly froze on Willow's cheek. "Hey... what happened to your face?"

Willow's hand flew to her left cheek, her fingers gently resting on a raised scar. "It's nothing."

"It looks like a plastic surgery fail," Kaylene spoke up, hiding another giggle behind her hand.

"*Kaylene!*" Taylor said admonishingly, though her mouth formed a visible smirk. She turned back to Willow. "Sorry, she can be kind of rude sometimes."

Willow felt her face grow warm.

"Anyways, where did you transfer from?" Taylor asked. "They don't usually let people start going here after the school year starts."

"I— I'm homeschooled," Willow managed to respond.

"*Homeschooled?*" Taylor's eyebrows raised, and she looked amused. "Wow, I bet that was an interesting experience."

The reddish tint on Willow's face deepened, this time in annoyance. "It's not that different from what you guys do."

"So why'd you switch?" Taylor persisted. "I mean, it's been like two months since school started."

Willow stiffened. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"Oh, come on, don't get so uptight about it," Kaylene chimed in.

"Look, can you please just leave me alone?" Willow's voice came out tight and shrill. "I said I don't want to talk about it."

"Hey, we were just asking." Taylor frowned defensively. "You don't need to be so secretive. We don't like people like that around here."

"C'mon, Taylor." Kaylene tugged on her friend's arm, her eyes resting on Willow with distaste. "We have to get to class."

"Fine." Taylor spun on her heel. "See you later, Willow."

Willow let out a shaky breath as she watched the girls march down the hall.
Jesus... please help me.

Taylor's words echoed in her mind. *"We don't like people like that around here."*

The warning bell rang overhead, and Willow squared her shoulders. So what if they thought she was weird? She'd prove them wrong—all of them. They'd see that she didn't have to be who they thought she was.

She could be just like them.

Willow let the front door close behind her and dropped her backpack with a sigh of relief. The sound of paws padding across the floor drew her head up. Her Australian Shepherd puppy, Atlas, trotted up to her, tail wagging at full speed, and pressed a wet nose into Willow's hand.

"Hey, Will!" Her dad came from a kitchen, a bowl of chips and salsa in his hand. "How was school?"

"It was fine." She bent to rub Atlas' head. "How was work?"

"Oh, you know how it goes." He chuckled, rubbing his beard. "One of my clients decided he wanted his book translated into German instead of Mandarin. I mean, how can *anyone* think those languages are even remotely similar?"

Willow smiled but found that it was a bit forced, and focused instead on untying her shoes.

"Well, I just came down for a snack, so I'd better head back upstairs to finish work." Mr. Grant turned towards the steps. "Make sure to stop in to see Mom... she's been asking about you all day."

She nodded, kicking her shoes off. "Okay, but only for a minute. I've got to take Atlas for a walk and pass out my dog-walking fliers."

He smiled wearily. "Hopefully soon you'll be able to take Mom with you, too."

"Yeah, hopefully..." Willow said quietly, picking up her backpack from the floor.

"Willow, honey? That you?" A voice called from upstairs. A moment later, a plump, dark-skinned woman appeared at the top of the stairway. "How was school?"

"Hey, Birdie." Willow gave another forced smile. "It was fine."

"Well, you sure don't look fine." Birdie descended the stairs, eyeing Willow critically. "That smile wouldn't fool a blind man."

Willow opened her mouth to respond, but Birdie had already turned her sharp, brown eyes to Mr. Grant. "Jared, what is that?"

"What?" Mr. Grant's eyebrows raised, then he glanced down at the bowl in his hands. "Oh, it's just a snack, Birdie."

"Uh-uh, not when I'm 'bout ready to start supper!" The older woman grabbed the bowl from him. "You'll be eatin' healthy, so long as I'm here."

"But Birdie—" Willow's dad began to protest.

"Don't you argue with me! I been rebukin' you since you was in diapers, Jared Grant!" Birdie shook her head, but her eyes twinkled at Willow as she turned to go into the kitchen.

"How's Charlotte doing?" Willow's dad trailed behind Birdie, his voice fading.

"I just finished checkin' her over an' she's doin' fine. We'll have her in that wheelchair soon enough."

Unable to listen anymore, Willow turned and went quickly up the stairs. She approached a closed bedroom door and paused to knock lightly on the door.

"Come in," a weak voice called.

Willow pushed the door open. Soft sunlight greeted her eyes, and she followed its rays to the bed, where a woman lay.

The head of beautiful black hair lifted, and the woman's lips stretched into a smile. "Willow."

"Hey, Mom." Willow crossed the room to sit on the side of the bed. "How are you feeling today?"

"Oh, about the same. How was school?"

She shrugged, avoiding her mom's gentle gaze. "Fine, I guess. I met a couple of girls."

Mrs. Grant grinned. "Well, you'll have to introduce us sometime."

"Yeah." Willow nodded.

Inside, she was vehemently shaking her head. Introduce Taylor and Kaylene to her mom? What would she even say to them? *"This is my mom. My mom, the cripple. My mom, the wheelchair lady."*

Willow grimaced as she imagined the girls' reactions. Taylor, pasting on a fake smile, only to start cracking jokes the moment she walked away. Kaylene, hiding giggles behind her hand, but unable to hide her disdainful glances.

"Will, I know this is hard," her mom began quietly. "But we've got to keep trusting God. And it'll get better... I'll get a wheelchair, and then we can go places like we used to."

Willow shook her head. "It won't be anything like it used to be."

Mrs. Grant gave a weary sigh. "Willow—"

"Sorry, Mom..." Willow stood up. "I— I have to go."

She walked quickly out of the room, tears pricking her eyes. No matter what, she couldn't let Taylor and Kaylene find out. They already thought she was weird... what would they think of her then?

Willow stared down the long, cracked driveway at the small house. Only half-visible due to the overgrown trees and shrubs in the front yard, its white paint was peeling, and the porch floor was sagging considerably.

I could just go home, she thought, glancing down at the stack of fliers in her hand. I've probably done enough for today.

Atlas tugged at the end of the leash and gave a small bark, her nose pointing towards the driveway.

"Alright, girl." Willow tucked the fliers under her arm. "Last one."

She started down the driveway, careful to avoid the weeds growing in the cracked cement. Gingerly climbing the porch steps, she sidestepped a gaping hole in the floorboards and rang the doorbell

A low growl emitted from Atlas' throat, and she tugged at the leash again.

"It's fine, girl." Willow gave her puppy a friendly pat. "They're probably just not home."

She was about to leave when the porch window flew up, and an old man's head appeared. "What do you want?"

"Just passing out fliers, sir," Willow replied, trying not to stare past him into the house. A strong smell was coming from the open window, and she couldn't help but notice the piles of trash and boxes everywhere.

"What kind of fliers?" The man asked gruffly, straightening the orange hunter's cap he wore.

Willow glanced in the window again and continued hastily. "Well, they're for my dog-walking business, but you probably don't have a dog, so—"

"I used to," the man interrupted, his wrinkled face etched with irritation.

Atlas, who had been watching the man warily, suddenly let out a sharp bark and lunged forward. Willow gripped the leash, struggling to hold her dog back.

"Hey, watch it!" The man jerked back, accidentally banging his head against the edge of the window. "Get that thing out of here!"

Surprised at his sudden outburst, Willow began to back away. "I— I'm going. Sorry to disturb you, sir!"

With a loud grunt, the man disappeared inside his house, slamming the window after him.

Clutching her lunchbox, Willow glanced around the noisy cafeteria, hoping to find someone to sit next to. It was already her second week here, but she still didn't know anyone besides Taylor and Kaylene.

I guess I could sit with them, Willow thought. Maybe I can meet some other girls that way.

She looked around for the two girls, but they were nowhere to be found. It was odd... they usually seemed to be at the center of everything.

From across the room, Willow heard a slight sound. She paused, listening closely. It was definitely Taylor's laugh, but it sounded different... almost cruel.

Willow headed across the room, where a stack of unused cafeteria tables blocked off a small space. As she got closer she heard more and more laughing. At last, she rounded the tables and took in the scene.

Taylor and Kaylene, along with several of their friends, were standing around a girl Willow had never seen before. The girl's face was tilted downwards, and her arms were clasped tightly around herself.

"Hey, loser!" Taylor's voice rose above the others in a mean, ugly tone. "I bet *this* will fix your outfit!"

Taylor waved a bottle of ketchup in the air before squirting it onto the girl's shirt.

Willow's mouth fell open, anger boiling up in her at Taylor's cruel actions. Surely the other girls would put a stop to this.

But then she saw... they were laughing—*laughing*—as the girl tried to wipe away the globs of ketchup.

Before she knew what she was doing, Willow had marched up to Taylor and grabbed the ketchup bottle from her hands. "Stop it! Stop it, all of you!"

Taylor's surprised face soon turned into a look of disdain. "Stay out of this, Willow!"

"Just leave her alone, okay?" Willow snapped.

Taylor took a step back, her eyes narrowing. "Fine, if that's what you want. We'll leave *both* of you alone." With a flip of her ponytail, she turned to leave.

"What's going on here?" A teacher asked, rounding the corner and heading towards them.

In a twinkle, Taylor's face had morphed into a smile. "Nothing, Mrs. Trubinski," she said sweetly. "Kaylene and I were just trying to find a place to sit."

Willow opened her mouth to protest, but a glare from Taylor silenced her.

"Well, go look out there," the teacher pointed back to the rest of the cafeteria. "You know you're not allowed to sit back here."

"Yes, Mrs. Trubinski," Taylor replied. She gave Willow one more disdainful look before marching off, the other girls right behind her.

Willow watched them go, a sick feeling in her stomach.

"And what are you doing here?" Mrs. Trubinski turned to Willow sternly.

"Oh, I..." Willow glanced around for the other girl, but it seemed that she had slipped away in the commotion. "I was just leaving."

She sighed inwardly as she turned away. *I guess I should go check on her.*

“Hello?” Willow called softly, stepping into the bathroom. “Is anyone in here?”

There was a moment of silence, and then a muffled voice answered from inside a stall. “Yes.”

Willow stepped closer to the stall door. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Another pause came before Willow heard the lock click, and the door swung open.

Willow’s gaze was first drawn to the girl’s ketchup-stained shirt, but they slowly rose to her face. She was surprised to see how pale and pasty the girl’s skin looked. On top of that, her features seemed just slightly crooked and uneven.

“Oh—” Willow began, taken aback. “Um... here, let me get you some paper towel.”

She moved over to the dispenser on the wall and pulled a few squares of paper towel from it. Trying not to look too hard at the girl’s face again, she extended the paper towel.

“Thanks.” The girl wiped at her shirt. “I guess it’s a good thing I wore pink today.”

Willow cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Are... are you new here?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “Well, I mean, my dad isn’t—he grew up here. But we just moved back because he got a job offer. He’s a lawyer.”

Silence came over them as the girl bent over her shirt again. Willow took the opportunity to study the girl more closely. She was small and slight, and her long,

auburn hair was pulled into two tight braids. Her face seemed to be naturally pale, and something about her features looked slightly uneven. But her eyes, a soft hazel, shone with a light all their own.

“I was born like this, you know.” The girl’s voice broke into Willow’s thoughts.

“What?” Willow asked, a bit startled.

“My face.” Her gentle gaze met Willow’s eyes. “The doctors said it’s some kind of rare disorder. I guess it tightens some of the muscles on my face and relaxes some of the others.”

“Oh.”

The girl sighed, moving to the sink to wet a piece of paper towel. “I’m just trying to trust God in all this, you know?” She paused. “Do you believe in Jesus?”

“Well, yeah...” Willow was confused by the sudden change of subject. “A lot of people at this school do. I mean, Taylor’s dad is an assistant pastor.”

“Well, I can’t see Taylor’s heart, but...” The girl glanced meaningfully at the remaining ketchup stains on her shirt. “Having a pastor for a dad doesn’t exactly make you a Christian.”

“I– I guess,” Willow replied, still quite puzzled by the girl’s behavior.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re a Christian, though,” the girl continued. “I mean, I wasn’t sure, but when you helped me out in the cafeteria...” She paused. “I guess with some people, you can kind of just tell, you know?”

The shrill sound of the bell pierced through the bathroom, and both girls jumped.

Willow took the opportunity to move towards the door. “I– I should get to class now.”

“Okay.” The girl turned to toss the paper towel into the trash. “Hey... what’s your name?”

Willow hesitated. “Willow Grant.”

"I'm Jaquelyn Brennan." The girl smiled broadly. "It's nice to meet you, Willow."

"Yeah." Willow back out of the bathroom into the hallway and let out a breath. *Well, she's... interesting. I've never met anyone quite like her before.*

It was at that moment that she recalled Taylor's disdainful look and biting words. *"Fine, if that's what you want. We'll leave both of you alone."*

And now... Willow frowned. *I kind of wish I hadn't met her.*

Willow sat in her bedroom on the window seat, the curtains pulled up around her. She adjusted the earbuds in her ears, tipping her head back and closing her eyes. At least, here, she could relax.

A knock sounded on her bedroom door, and she took her earbuds out, pushing aside the curtains. "Come in."

The door opened, and Birdie's plump figure moved through the doorway. "Hey, honey, how was school?"

Willow shrugged. "Fine, I guess."

"You makin' any friends over there? 'Cause I know you ain't the most sociable."

"It's okay, Birdie," Willow replied hastily. "I'm doing fine."

Birdie arched an eyebrow. "Don't make me drag it outta o' you, now. I got enough to do around here, what with nursin', cookin', and cleanin'. I don't got time to argue with you."

Willow's gaze dropped to the floor. "I- I'm just tired of being different, you know?"

"Young lady, what you talkin' 'bout?" Birdie put her hands on her hips. "Jes' cuz you ain't like all those other girls don't mean that they're any better'n you are."

Sure, we all got things we tryin' to work through an' get rid of. But don't you be changin' your beautiful self jes' to fit in, you got it? 'Sides we supposed to be different... we gotta be shinin' Jesus to this here world, okay?'

"Okay, but I just..." She sighed. "Well, sometimes I wish I was a little less like me and a little more like *them*."

"Mhm." Birdie eyed her unsatisfactorily. "Well, your daddy be wantin' to talk to you, so you better not keep him waiting."

Willow stood up. "Okay, I'm coming."

"Hey, Will!" Mr. Grant turned from his computer at her knock. "How was school?"

"Fine." Willow came through the open doorway and seated herself across the desk from him.

"Look, I was just thinking about that man you told me about... the one who lives on Osburg Road."

Willow wrinkled her nose. "The guy with the disgusting house?"

"Yes, his name is Ralph Greenwich. He used to be a warden at the Royal Oak Reserve back when I was younger..." Mr. Grant smiled thoughtfully. "He was a nice man."

"Nice?" Willow repeated skeptically. "He didn't seem like that to me."

"Well, he's kind of been a hermit these past several years," he explained. "You know, I was thinking that this would be a really good project for you."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, I thought maybe you could over a few times a week to help clean up his house.”

“What?” Willow jumped to her feet. “Dad, you’ve got to be kidding me!”

“No, I’m serious. Mr. Ralph used to be a prominent citizen in this town, and I’m sure you could learn a lot from him.” Mr. Grant paused. “I think you could be a really good witness to him too.”

“But—”

“Will, I’m not going to force this on you, but I really think you should do it. And I’m sure you’ll find that he’s not as bad as you think.”

Willow was silent for a moment, then sighed. “Okay, fine. I guess I’ll give it a try.

“Good, I’ll give him a call, then.” Mr. Grant stood to his feet and pulled out his cell phone.

As Willow turned to leave the room, she remembered the mess she had seen through the window of Mr. Ralph’s house.

He’s not as bad as I think, huh? She thought. Well, I guess I’m going to find out.

“Basketball Tryouts Today,” the sign on the bulletin board read.

Willow stared over the heads of the other kids, indecision crowding her mind. *I told Micah I wasn’t going to join, but...*

“Hey, Taylor!” A girl turned from the sign-up sheet. “Are you gonna try out?”

“Are you kidding me?” Kaylene replied as she and Taylor approached the bulletin board. “I bet Coach will let her pass without even watching her try out.”

“Too bad we lost some girls last year,” Taylor said, signing her name to the sheet. “I bet we won’t even have a chance at the championship.”

Kayelene shrugged, taking the pen from Taylor and signing her own name. “Well, maybe with you we will.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Taylor laughed. “Come on, let’s get to class.”

Willow watched them leave. *Maybe I could join the team.*

The other kids ahead of her moved on, and she stepped closer to the bulletin board. Before she could second-guess herself, she reached for the pen and scrawled her name on the signup sheet.

“Hey, are you trying out for basketball?” A voice asked from behind her.

Willow turned around to see Jaquelyn smiling brightly at her. “Yeah, but we’ll see if I make the team.”

“I’m trying out, too.” She shrugged. “I’ve never played before, but it’s just for fun, anyway.”

“Yeah.” Willow glanced over her shoulder. “Hey, I should get going now.”

“Okay,” Jaquelyn replied. “I’ll see you at tryouts!”

“See ya.” Willow headed down the hall, but there was a sinking feeling inside of her.

Why was it that she was already starting to regret her decision?

Willow wiped the sweat off her brow, readying herself for the free throw. She dribbled and shot smoothly, the ball making a satisfying *swish* as it dropped through the hoop. One of the other girls grabbed for the ball to take a turn, but a whistle from the sidelines stopped her.

“Okay, bring it in, *novatas!*” A stout, burly man in a dark blue polo shirt waved his clipboard impatiently.

Willow jogged over with the other girls to form a circle around the man. She glanced around the group. Jaquelyn was standing next to her, and she recognized a few of the other girls. Oddly, Taylor and Kaylene seemed nowhere to be found.

The man gave a loud sigh. “I don’t know what to do with this team. You are sloppy and undisciplined.”

A door shut behind them, and they all turned as Taylor and Kaylene sauntered in.

“Hey, Coach, sorry we’re late,” Taylor said, sending a smirk in Willow’s direction.

The man grunted. “You two don’t need to try out. I already know you are the best players on the team.”

“So, do you think we’ll be good enough for the championship this fall?” Kaylene ventured

“Ah, the championship.” A faraway look came into Coach Ramos’ eyes. “Ten years, I have been coaching this team, and we have never won. I had hoped this would be the year, but...” He sighed. “Now, I am not so sure.”

A silence settled across the group, and Willow realized just how big of a deal this championship was for the school.

All at once, Coach Ramos’ head snapped up. “Grant, where are you?”

Willow gave a start as all eyes suddenly turned to her. “Yes, sir?”

“I’m not a sir, I am your coach,” he said briskly. “Grant, you looked good out there. Where did you learn to play?”

“My— my brother taught me.” Willow dared to sneak a glance at Taylor, and she noticed a disgusted glint in the girl’s eye.

“He taught you well,” the coach said approvingly. “I’ll put you in as a starter.”

Willow's heart leaped. "So I made the team?"

"*Si*, if you can even call it a team." He glanced around the group. "I'll take Robinson, Gibley, Hatch, McWheeler, and Duran. The rest of you can go back to basketball preschool."

The group erupted into disappointed groans and mutters, but Coach Ramos held up his hands. "I do not want to hear any complaints. Now all of you, go pick up the basketballs and bring them back here."

The girls scattered across the court to collect the basketballs. Willow turned to join them, but she noticed that Jaquelyn was approaching the coach.

"Um, Coach Ramos?" Jaquelyn gave a timid smile.

"*Si*?" He turned, raising a dark eyebrow.

"Do you think..." Jaquelyn paused, taking a breath. "Well, do you think I could still be on the team? I'm a fast learner, and—"

"Ha!" He cut her off with a laugh. "Brennan, you were the worst of them all! I have not seen such terrible playing in years!"

Jaquelyn's smile faded and she glanced down at the ground. "Oh."

"I am sorry, but we don't need bad players to slow us down." He tucked his clipboard under his arm and turned away.

"Wait!" Before Willow knew what she was doing. "I— I'll help her practice, Coach. You have to let her join!"

"What?" He stopped in his tracks, turning his piercing glare to Willow. "Grant, I don't—"

"If you don't let her on the team, I— I'll quit!" Willow heard a voice saying the words, but she barely realized it was her own.

Coach Ramos sighed, shaking his head. "Fine, whatever, she can be on the team." He spun on his heel. "But she is not playing in any games!"

All Willow could do was stand there, shocked at what she had just done.

“Thanks, Willow.” Jaquelyn smiled hopefully. “Are you really going to help me practice?”

She swallowed. “Yeah, I guess.”

A sharp laugh came from behind them, and they turned.

“Kaylene, it’s not funny,” Taylor reprimanded her friend, though her own face was full of approval. She faced Jaquelyn, her countenance melting into something like spite. “Congratulations on joining the team.”

“Thank you,” Jaquelyn replied quietly.

“I’m glad you two are getting to be such good friends.” Taylor flashed a grin and walked away.

Willow stared after her, that sinking feeling in her stomach coming back even stronger. *Friends? With Jaquelyn?*

She hoped not.

Knocking loudly on the wooden door, Willow pulled her coat more tightly around herself. She was already drenched to the skin, and the porch roof was barely doing much to keep the rain out.

At her side, Atlas paced back and forth, her eyes watching Willow intently. Willow placed a hand on the dog’s shoulder, only to find that the long fur was as soaked as she was.

Several locks clicked from inside the house, then the door swung open. “Yeah?” A hardened face thrust itself out.

“Um... are you Mr. Ralph?” Willow asked, taking a step backward.

“Don’t call me that!” The old man snapped. His voice lowered. “The name’s Greenwich.”

Willow nodded hastily. “Right... Mr. Greenwich. I’m Willow.”

“Willow, eh?” He swung the door open wider. “Well, come in.”

She started forward, then stopped. “Um, about my dog...”

“Dog?” Mr. Ralph caught sight of Atlas, and a flash of something crossed his face. “Why’d you bring that with you?”

“I was taking her for a walk,” Willow explained. “Could she... could she maybe come inside? She’s very well-behaved.”

“No, no, you can’t bring her in here.” He shook his head vehemently.

“Please?” Willow persisted. “She’ll be so cold out here!”

He sighed, holding the door open. “Fine, but keep her away from my stuff!”

“Yes, sir.” Willow stepped into the house, Atlas following close behind.

Immediately, Willow felt as though she had stepped into a woodsman’s cabin. Pictures, trophies, and stuffed animals hung on the walls, coated in years of dust. A case of rifles sat in one corner, while a tangle of fishing rods, lines, and tackle boxes sat in another. The walls and furniture were all camouflage colors—drab greens and browns.

Willow frowned, pulling off her coat and laying it across the back of a wooden chair. *Smells like he forgot to stuff one of the animals.*

All of the available surfaces were covered in either dust or trash. A radio on the countertop was blasting some news station, while the sound of a TV came from another part of the house.

Mr. Ralph waved a careless hand at the room. “Well, this is it.”

Willow caught sight of an especially life-like deer head on the wall and instantly felt its beady eyes watching her. “You, uh... you have a lot of stuffed animals.”

His eyes snapped, detecting the disgust in her voice. "I collect them." He strode across the kitchen and switched off the radio. "You can shut the dog up in the bathroom down the hall."

Willow led Atlas down the dim hallway and into the bathroom, shutting the door quickly so she wouldn't have to see the mess inside. Then she returned to the kitchen where Mr. Ralph was rummaging through the fridge.

She cleared her throat. "Um... where should I start?"

"Eh?" He looked up. "Oh. Give me a minute and I'll show you around."

He pawed through the fridge for a few more seconds before closing the door, an open can of spam in his hand.

Willow's stomach churned, and she arched an eyebrow. "You really like to eat that stuff?"

"Yeah, I do." His sharp eyes landed on her for a moment before he headed into the hallway. "Now come on."

The house was small, but each room was every bit as dirty as the kitchen. And each room was also cluttered with the same kind of fishing and hunting gear.

By the time they emerged from the last bedroom upstairs, Willow was in despair. *It'll take weeks to clean all this!*

Just as they were about to head down the stairs, Willow noticed a door she hadn't seen before. "Oh, Mr. Ralph, I think you forgot a room."

The old man's eyes traveled to where her finger pointed, and he stiffened. "You don't need to go in there."

"Are you sure?" Willow asked. "Because I might as well—"

"Just stay out of there." Mr. Ralph's voice was as sharp as his glare. "Do you understand me?"

She lowered her gaze. "Yes, sir."

“Good.” He turned, heading down the stairs. “Now, come on. You should get started.”

Willow set down the full trash bag, stretching her aching back. She’d only been working for a half-hour, but it seemed like forever. Thankfully, Mr. Ralph had gone into another room to watch some TV show. His presence was probably the only thing that would have made the job worse.

He’s such a slob, Willow thought, glancing around at the dirty dishes in the sink and on the counter. And all of his hunting stuff gives me the creeps.

She glanced through the doorway into the living room. Mr. Ralph seemed pretty engrossed in his TV show... she was sure he wouldn’t mind if she checked on Atlas for a minute.

Willow headed into the hallway, where she could hear her dog whimpering to get out. She reached for the doorknob and opened the door just a crack.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Ralph’s voice came from behind her.

She jumped, letting go of the doorknob. Before either of them could react, a furry mass dashed past Willow into the hallway. She whirled around just in time to see Atlas bounding up the stairs and out of sight.

“No!” Both Willow and Mr. Ralph leaped forward at the same time.

Willow reached the top of the stairs first, and right away she spotted the dog on her hind legs, scratching frantically at a door.

But it wasn’t just any door... it was *the* door.

“Atlas, no!” Willow grabbed her dog’s leash, giving it a strong tug. But Atlas only pulled back harder.

“What is going on here?” Mr. Ralph’s voice was full of stormy anger.

Both Willow and Atlas simultaneously stopped short and turned to face the glowering old man.

“Sorry, Mr. Ralph,” Willow mumbled. “I didn’t think she’d get loose.”

“I told you, it’s Mr. Greenwich.” His voice had lowered in volume, but his glare didn’t waver. “Now you’ve done enough for one day.” He turned to go back down the stairs. “Just take the dog and leave.”

The front door closed hard behind Willow, but she didn’t care. She dropped her backpack to the floor, then knelt to unhook her dog’s leash.

“Oh, hey, Will.” Mr. Grant said, stepping out of the living room. “How’d it go at Mr. Ralph’s house?”

“Terrible.” Willow tossed the leash onto the floor and stood. “I’m not going back.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That bad, huh?”

“He’s just so weird, Dad. He’s obsessed with hunting, his house is full of junk, and he likes to eat spam!” She wrinkled her nose. “It’s so disgusting. Plus, he’s got this one room that he won’t let anyone touch. I bet he keeps more junk in there, too!”

“I see.” Mr. Grant paused. “So you think that’s enough reason for you not to go back?”

“Dad, I told you, he’s so dirty and grumpy and— and weird! His house was like a stuffed animal zoo!”

He gave a chuckle. "And you used to collect dog figurines. He's not any weirder than you are, Willow."

She shook her head. "But this is different. He literally collects dead animals."

"Different isn't always a bad thing." Mr. Grant put a hand on her shoulder, looking her in the eyes. "You can't just dislike someone because they're not like you. Not everyone has the same hobbies and interests as you do."

She shrugged. "Yeah, but—"

"Willow." His voice became even more serious. "We aren't just called to love 'normal' people. Sometimes, it's the weird ones that need our friendship the most."

"Yeah..." Willow paused. "I guess you're right."

"I can't make you back," Mr. Grant said. "But I hope you'll at least think about it."

She heaved a sigh, picking up her backpack. "No, it's fine... I'll go."

Brushing past her dad, Willow climbed the stairs, Atlas trailing behind her. She entered her bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind her. Pressing her back against the door, Willow stared up at the ceiling for a moment. *It won't be that bad... he mostly keeps to himself, anyways.*

She shook herself, and strode across the room to her window, grabbing her earbuds off of the desk on her way. She sat down on the cushioned window seat and plugged the earbuds into her phone.

"C'mere, girl," Willow called to Atlas. She patted a space on the seat next to her, and the dog jumped up. "It's only for a few weeks, right? I can handle that."

Atlas lay down at Willow's feet, looking up at her with loyal eyes. Willow pushed play on the music on her phone and pulled the curtain shut. Resting her head against the wood of the window, she closed her eyes, letting the music erase the bad memories of the day and replace them with thoughts of other, better days.

Dribbling the basketball a few times, Willow shot it, a satisfying *swish* meeting her ears as it dropped through the net.

“Wow, I don’t think I’ll ever be as good as you,” Jaquelyn said, catching the ball as it came down.

“Well, it takes practice.” Willow paused, glancing down the long driveway that led to Jaquelyn’s brick, country home. “Who’s that?”

The other girl followed her gaze to a gray car that was coming down the driveway. Her face immediately lit up. “Oh, that’s my dad!”

They waited until the car had parked in front of the two-car garage before approaching it. The driver’s side door opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered man in a suit stepped out. “Jackie!”

“Hey, Daddy!” Jaquelyn wrapped her arms around him, beaming up at him. She turned, still embracing him with one arm. “This is my friend, Willow. She’s teaching me to play basketball.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Willow.” Mr. Brennan’s face stretched into a smile.

“You too,” Willow replied politely.

“Can you practice with us for a while, Dad?” Jaquelyn asked.

“Jackie, you know I’m not very good...” He began.

“That’s okay, you don’t have to be good,” Jaquelyn replied. A sparkle of mischief came into her eye. “Besides, I need someone to make *me* look good.”

“Oh, so *that’s* why you want me to play?” Mr. Brennan raised an eyebrow, his eyes glinting with the same playfulness. “Well, I think it’s time I put you in your place.”

He picked up the basketball from where Jaquelyn had dropped it and began dribbling toward the hoop, commentating the whole way. “The star player makes his way in for another shot!”

“Dad!” Jaquelyn called, laughing as she ran to get in front of him. “That’s not fair... I wasn’t ready!”

Mr. Brennan grinned, clumsily dribbling around his daughter. He looked quite a sight, playing basketball in a full suit. “He gets past the defense, turns, and shoots!” He flung the ball towards the hoop, but it bounced off the backboard and dropped to the ground without going through the net.

“See? I knew you wouldn’t make it,” Jaquelyn said teasingly.

“Well, I bet I will next time!” Mr. Brennan ran to retrieve the ball for another try.

Willow watched them absentmindedly from the driveway, her mind still replaying Jaquelyn’s words from before...“*My friend,*” she’d said.

I didn’t mean for this to happen, Willow thought. She pressed her lips together firmly. *We can’t be friends— we don’t even have anything in common. I’m just... helping her out.*

Holding her books in one arm, Willow shut her locker with her free hand and turned to go down the hallway. She stopped short as Jaquelyn stepped in front of her.

“Hey, Willow!” Jaquelyn wore her usual, friendly smile.

“Hi.” Willow glanced down the hall. Taylor and Kaylene were chatting loudly with a group of girls only a few lockers down.

“Are we going to my house after school?” Jaquelyn asked.

“Uh... I don’t know. Maybe.” Willow turned quickly before Taylor or the others could see her, and started walking in the opposite direction.

“Well, I was thinking that you could stay for supper,” the other girl continued, trotting to keep up with Willow. “We could maybe watch a movie, too.”

Willow’s pace slowed. “Sorry... I– I can’t tonight. I have to go home right after we practice.”

“Then how about tomorrow? Or next Monday?”

Glancing back, Willow saw that Taylor and Kaylene had left the other girls and were now headed toward them. “Look,” she said, too hurried to even try to sound polite. “I have other things to do then, okay?”

Jaquelyn’s smile faded. “O–okay.” She was silent for a moment, then turned slowly away. “See you later, I guess.”

Willow felt a twinge of guilt, but Taylor’s voice stopped her from saying anything more to Jaquelyn.

“Hi, Willow!” Taylor breezed past Willow down the hallway, giving her a smile laced with sarcasm. “I *love* the outfit... you could start your own trends!”

“Thanks,” Willow said quietly. She backed up against a locker to let Taylor and her friends pass, Kaylene’s giggle echoing in her ears as they walked away.

As soon as Willow had collected herself, she glanced around to find Jaquelyn.

But there was no sign of her anywhere.

Willow’s mind was a whirl as she walked up her home’s front steps that evening. She hadn’t seen Jaquelyn at all the rest of the day, and her phone wasn’t picking up, either.

Did she really take that much offense to what I said? She thought, stepping through the front door.

“Oh, Willow, honey.” Birdie appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. “I gotta run to the store, an’ your Momma’s sittin’ in the living room. Can you jes’ look in on her real quick?”

“Mom’s in the living room?” Willow asked, looking confused.

“She sure is,” Birdie said with a pleased smile. “Your daddy carried her down here for a change o’ scenery.”

Willow headed into the living room, her curiosity now aroused.

“Hey, Will,” Mrs. Grant greeted her from the couch, her lifeless legs propped up. She still looked a bit pale, but she wore a smile on her face.

“Hi, Mom... you doing okay?” Willow asked.

“Yes, much better. It’s so nice to be able to be down here again,” her mom answered cheerfully. “Soon, I’ll be able to go outside, too.”

Willow nodded, seating herself in an armchair.

“How’s your friend doing?”

“Friend?” Willow repeated. “You mean Jaquelyn?”

“Yes, Jaquelyn,” Mrs. Grant replied. “When are you going to bring her over so I can meet her?”

“Oh.” She paused. “I– I don’t know... we should probably just keep going to her house to practice. They have a bigger driveway, anyway.”

“Well, you *can* take a break from basketball, you know. Why don’t you have her over for dinner sometime? Now that I’m well enough to be downstairs, we can all eat together at the table.”

“I just... I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Willow said abruptly.

“Why not?” Her mom asked, looking surprised.

“Because...” She hesitated. “I just don’t, that’s all.”

A heavy silence spread across the room for a moment.

“Willow.” Mrs. Grant’s voice was gentle but deliberate. “Is this because of my accident?”

“No... well, not exactly.”

Mrs. Grant raised an eyebrow sternly.

Willow sighed. “It’s— it’s just that all of the girls at school think I’m weird. Well, except for Jaquelyn, but *she’s* weird, so that doesn’t count. And, well, if it got out that... that...”

“That your mom’s a cripple,” Mrs. Grant finished quietly. “They’d think you’re even more weird.”

She looked down at the floor.

“Willow, sweetheart, you’re not weird, okay? You’re just the way God created you, and so am I. I’m the same person with or without working legs... you know that.”

“Yeah, but— but *they* don’t.”

“Well, then, you know what, Will?” Mrs. Grant smiled. “I’d say they’re missing out on an awful lot of friendships.” She paused. “So, what do you say? Are you going to invite your friend?”

Willow frowned. “She’s not really my friend, Mom.”

“But she could be.”

Willow stood to her feet. “I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

“For what?” Mrs. Grant asked, meeting Willow’s gaze. “Having people over, or being friends with Jaquelyn?”

She stared into her mom’s eyes, then finally turned away, her voice firm.

“Both.”

Walking quickly down the sidewalk, Willow pulled her phone out. She pushed a few buttons, then waited as the phone's dialing music played from the speakers.

After a few moments, Micah's smiling face appeared on the screen. "Good timing, Will... I just finished with my classes. How's school going?"

She sighed, glancing away for a moment. "Not very good. I tried making friends like you said—I even joined the basketball team. But now I'm stuck with this weird girl who *thinks* she's my friend."

"What do you mean?" Micah raised his eyebrows. "Is she your friend or not?"

"I— I don't think so." Willow paused at a street corner and glanced both ways before crossing. "At least, I didn't mean for us to be. See, I offered to teach her basketball, so she thinks we're best buddies. And now I have to do extra practices with her!"

"Well... is she nice?"

"I mean... I guess so." Willow dodged a puddle on the sidewalk. "She's just so weird, Micah. All the other girls think so, too. And now that they've seen me with *her*, they barely speak to me!"

Micah paused. "So, let me get this straight. This whole time, you've been trying to find friends, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Well, did it ever cross your mind that this girl might need a friend more than you do?"

Willow opened her mouth to respond, and then shut it, falling silent.

“Friendship is a two-way thing, Will.” Micah’s eyes focused steadily on her. “And, sometimes, you have to learn to look past someone’s quirks to see who they are on the inside. Sure, it takes work. But it’s worth it.”

“Look, Micah, I should go.” Willow avoided his gaze, glancing down the street. “I’m almost to Mr. Ralph’s house.”

“Who?”

She sighed. “I’ll have to tell you about *that* later.”

“Okay, well, bye, Will.” He grinned at her. “Think about what I said, alright?”

“Bye, Micah.” Willow ended the call and stuffed her phone in her pocket. Turning down Mr. Ralph’s driveway, she heaved a sigh as she headed towards the house. *Back to work.*

Walking back into the living room, Willow brushed the dust off of her hands and bent to open the flaps of yet another cardboard box. She nearly groaned out loud as she saw that the box was full of more hunting gear. *Why does he even need all of this stuff? I don’t even think he goes hunting anymore.*

She glanced through the doorway at Mr. Ralph, who was washing dishes in the kitchen. *Well, I can at least ask him.*

Straining her muscles, Willow picked up the box and headed into the kitchen. She set the box on the counter with a loud *bang*. “Hey, Mr. Ralph?”

“It’s Mr. Greenwich,” he said, not turning around.

She sighed. “Mr. Greenwich, then. Should I just throw all of this away?”

“Eh?” He looked up from the sink, and his eyebrows lowered. “No, don’t throw that away! Those are special!”

Willow shrugged. "I'm just saying, you have a lot of stuff. I mean, it can't all be special."

His glare moved from the box to her. "You don't know anything, do you?"

"What?" Willow took a step backward, frowning.

"Never mind." Mr. Ralph shook his head, turning back to the sink. "Just forget it."

But Willow stood rooted to the spot, his words echoing in her mind. "You don't know anything, do you?"

The front door of the brick house opened, and Willow stepped back.

"Oh." Jaquelyn froze in the doorway. "Hi."

"Hey," Willow replied, suddenly forgetting everything she was going to say.

Jaquelyn stepped onto the porch, shutting the door behind her. "How'd you get here?"

"My— my dad dropped me off." Willow hesitated, then took a deep breath. "Look, Jaquelyn, I'm really sorry for what happened the other day."

The corners of Jaquelyn's mouth lifted. "It's okay. I shouldn't have pestered you." She paused for a long moment. "I— I don't blame you for not wanting to be my friend. I know I'm not like those other girls. Besides... no one really wants to be friends with the sick girl."

Willow was a little surprised. It was true, she didn't exactly want to be friends with Jaquelyn. But the way Jaquelyn put it almost made Willow sound... mean.

"Jaquelyn," Willow began. "That's not why—"

The other girl gave her a distinct look. "Isn't it, though?"

Willow noticed that Jaquelyn's lower lip was trembling. "How— how bad is it? The disorder, I mean."

"I don't really know." Jaquelyn glanced down. "I mean, mostly it just affects the muscles on my face, but I'm scared that it's going to get worse."

"Don't the doctors know?"

She shook her head. "Only a few people have ever had it before. It— it's just hard not knowing what's going to come next."

"Yeah..." Willow paused. "Hey, I— I haven't really told anyone else at school about this but... I think maybe I can tell you."

Jaquelyn looked a little confused, but she waited expectantly.

Taking in another deep breath, Willow began slowly. "A few months ago, my mom got in a really bad car accident, and—" She paused, her voice coming out in a whisper. "And I was in the front seat."

"Willow..." Jaquelyn placed a comforting hand on Willow's shoulder. "I— I'm sorry... I had no idea."

Willow blinked back the tears that rushed to her eyes at the friendly touch. "That's not even the worst of it. Something happened to her spine—I guess she damaged it or something—and now the doctors said that she'll never be able to walk again." She paused. "Look... don't tell anyone at school about this, okay?"

Jaquelyn gave Willow a knowing look. "They're going to find out sometime."

"I know, but—" She hesitated. "They already call me a weird homeschooler. I— I just don't want to be known as the wheelchair lady's daughter, too."

"But she's not just a lady in a wheelchair... she's still your mom."

Willow shook her head. "Tell that to Taylor and Kaylene. They won't know the difference."

“Well, maybe it’s time someone showed them,” Jaquelyn said firmly.

Jaquelyn sighed. “When you first stood up to Taylor for me, I saw Jesus in your actions.” She paused. “The real you showed up in the cafeteria that day, Willow. And— and I think you need to let her out a little more often.”

Willow fell silent for a long moment, not knowing what to say.

All at once, the front door opened behind Jaquelyn, and Mr. Brennan poked his head out. “Everything alright out here, girls? I don’t hear any basketballs bouncing.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Jaquelyn said with a small smile. “We’re fine now. We were just about to go practice.”

“Actually...” Willow turned to Jaquelyn’s dad. “Mr. Brennan, do you think you could take us back to my house?” She glanced sideways at Jaquelyn. “I— I want Jaquelyn to meet my family.”

Jaquelyn looked up, her smile growing wider.

“I actually do need to run a few errands, anyway,” Mr. Brennan said, nodding. “Just let me go get my keys quick.”

Turning, he disappeared inside the house, leaving the two girls alone on the porch.

“Hey, Willow?” Jaquelyn smiled again, her eyes shining gratefully. “Thanks for coming back.”

“You’re welcome.” Willow grinned. “After all, what are friends for?”

“Dad, we’re home!” Willow called as she stepped inside the front door of the house.

“Hey, Will!” Her dad appeared at the top of the stairs.

Willow grinned. “Dad, this is Jaquelyn and her dad.”

Mr. Grant came down the stairs and shook Mr. Brennan’s hand, smiling. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” Mr. Brennan said. “I’m going to go run some errands... you’re sure it’s okay if Jaquelyn hangs out here for a while?”

“Of course,” Mr. Grant replied. “It’s not a problem.”

“Great.” Mr. Brennan gave Jaquelyn a quick hug. “I’ll see you later, Jackie.”

“Bye, Dad,” Jaquelyn said, hugging him back.

“I’m going to bring your mother down for supper,” Mr. Grant told Willow. “Why don’t you girls go say hi to Birdie?”

“Okay.” Willow turned to Jaquelyn with a grin. “C’mon.”

Jaquelyn followed Willow through the dining room into the kitchen, where Birdie was standing with her hands on her hips, looking admonishingly at Atlas.

“Now, don’t you be stealin’ my scraps, y’hear?” Birdie frowned down at the puppy, who was looking a bit guilty.

Seeing Willow, Atlas perked up, and she trotted over, her tail wagging.

“Oh, come on, Birdie.” Willow bent to give her dog a pat. “How can you resist those eyes?”

“I can resist jes’ fine, thank you very much.” Birdie surveyed Jaquelyn up and down. “An’ who is this, now?”

“I’m Jaquelyn,” Jaquelyn said, smiling politely. She hesitated, then extended her hand.

Birdie wiped her hands on her apron and, ignoring Jaquelyn’s hand, hugged her instead. “Well, Jaquelyn, you jes’ make yourself at home, okay?”

Jaquelyn's smile widened. "Okay." She knelt next to Atlas, stroking the dog's fur.

"Isn't she sweet?" Willow asked.

Jaquelyn nodded. "I love dogs, but my dad hasn't let me get one yet." She shrugged. "I guess he's not much of an animal person."

Willow grinned, remembering Mr. Brennan dribbling a basketball in his suit and tie. "He doesn't seem like much of a sports person, either."

"He isn't," Jaquelyn said, giggling a little. "He's more into books and politics."

"Make way, make way!" Mr. Grant's voice called from the dining room.

"Gracious!" Birdie looked up from the stove, peering through the doorway. "Willow, go help your daddy. He'll kill himself tryin' to do that on his own."

Willow and Jaquelyn headed into the dining room, where Mr. Grant stood with his wife in his arms. "Willow, can you pull that chair out for me? My arms are about to give way."

Mrs. Grant gave him a nudge with her elbow. "Oh, stop it... I'm not that heavy."

Willow grinned and pulled back the armchair that they'd moved into the dining room. "Better be careful, Dad. She's fragile."

Her mom snorted. "Oh, so now I'm fragile *and* heavy?"

"No, dear, you're as light as a feather." Mr. Grant gave an exaggerated groan as he eased his wife onto the chair.

Willow glanced at Jaquelyn, but her friend was observing the conversation with a wide grin on her face.

"Jared, you outta be more careful," Birdie remarked, coming out of the kitchen with a pan of casserole in her hand. "You ain't so young anymore."

"Young enough to let you boss me around," Mr. Grant said teasingly.

Birdie frowned at him, but her eyes were smiling. “Well, let’s sit down, now, ‘fore this food gets cold.”

“Oh, Mom.” Willow motioned for Jaquelyn to step forward. “This is my friend, Jaquelyn.”

Mrs. Grant turned and, seeing Jaquelyn, smiled. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Jaquelyn.”

Jaquelyn smiled back. “You, too, Mrs. Grant.”

As Willow sat down at the table with her family, she caught her mom’s approving glance and felt a sense of peace wash over her. *Thank You, God*, she prayed silently.

Maybe—just maybe—everything would be okay after all.

“Mr. Ralph?” Willow called, stepping out of the bedroom. “Where do I put—” She stopped short, glancing down the stairs. “Mr. Ralph?”

There was no response, and all Willow could hear was the sound of the TV coming from the living room.

She turned to go back into the bedroom, but the mysterious, closed door at the end of the hall caught her eye. *Hmm...* Willow studied it for a moment. Ever since her first day, she’d been dying to know what was on the other side of that door. *Maybe it won’t hurt to take a peek...*

Before she could rethink her decision, she had crossed the hallway and was slowly turning the knob. The door gave a slight creak as it swung open, and Willow stepped inside. As her eyes took in the sight beyond the door, she breathed in sharply.

She was standing in the perfectly-preserved bedroom of a teenage boy.

A glass case stood against one wall, holding two rifles and several fishing rods. A bookshelf held all sorts of books on nature, biology, and wildlife, while several trophies sat on the desk and dresser. There were even a few original bird sketches sitting on the desk next to a pair of binoculars. And everywhere—on the wall above the bed, on the dresser, and on the desk—were pictures of a young man with light blonde hair and dark eyes. In every picture, he was somewhere outdoors... swimming in a lake, hiking in the woods, hunting, and even mountain climbing. His bright, confident smile seemed to radiate even through the photos.

Willow walked further into the bedroom, looking around her in awe. Aside from the layers of dust coating the surfaces, it was almost as though someone was still living there.

All at once, a set of soft footsteps came behind her, and she whirled around.

Mr. Ralph stood framed in the doorway, his eyes fixed on the room behind her. But his face held no trace of anger—only an immense wave of sadness.

Willow stood frozen in the middle of the room, unable to say anything.

At last, Mr. Ralph spoke in a low, husky voice. “He was my son.”

All of the pain and sorrow in the world seemed to hang on those four words. Somehow, Willow knew that whatever secrets this room held brought only grief to him.

She swallowed, daring to speak. “What... what happened?”

He gave a weary sigh. “I’m not even sure when it all started... I guess it was sometime after my wife died. We had two sons—Drew and Wilbur.” He smiled fondly. “Drew was so much like me. We would spend hours in the woods together... we even had our own special spot at the Royal Oak Reserve. He was the best shot, the best bird-watcher, and he could sketch just about anything.”

“And Wilbur?” Willow asked softly.

“Wilbur.” Mr. Ralph’s face darkened. “Wilbur wasn’t anything like us. He liked books and reading and debating. He hated hunting, and he hated being outdoors

most of all. He and Drew were best friends, but... well, I guess he and I didn't get along very well."

"So..." Willow paused. "So what happened?"

Mr. Ralph sighed. "Well, Drew was nineteen when it happened, and Wilbur was eighteen. Drew was getting ready to go off to college... he was going to be a wildlife biologist." He looked past Willow for a moment at the bird sketches on the desk. "The week before he was supposed to leave, Drew and I decided to take one last hunting trip together. To my surprise, Wilbur asked to come with us. I knew he hated hunting—he hadn't gone since he was a little boy. But he wanted to spend time with Drew, so I agreed to let him come."

His eyes took on a misty, faraway look. "It was a beautiful morning, that day. We didn't even mind that there weren't any game birds to shoot... we were just enjoying ourselves. Even Wilbur wanted to try his hand with a rifle." He stopped short, his face becoming sad again. "But then..."

"Then?" Willow pressed.

He shook his head. "I don't know exactly how it even happened. We saw a flock of birds, and both boys got excited. Wilbur said something about wanting to get the first shot and raised his rifle just as Drew was running up to get a better look at the birds. There was a terrible bang, then I heard a yell." He paused, his eyes haunting. "The next thing I knew, I was looking at Drew—my own son—bleeding on the ground."

Willow gave a small gasp, tears pricking her own eyes.

Mr. Ralph took a deep breath, but his voice was still trembling. "I called an ambulance, but by the time they found us out there in the woods, there was nothing they could do. The police and the newspapers just wrote it off as a hunting accident. Only Wilbur and I knew the truth."

"So..." Willow swallowed. "So what did you do?"

“Do?” Mr. Ralph shrugged helplessly. “What else could we do but go home? Wilbur locked himself in his room...neither of us spoke a word to each other for days. It wasn’t until after the funeral that I couldn’t stay silent anymore. I hadn’t wanted Wilbur to come with us in the first place. He’d never even liked hunting, so why would he want to go?” His jaw clenched. “If it hadn’t been for his inexperience, Drew would still be alive.”

His voice lowered, his face suddenly looking haggard. “The next day, Wilbur was gone. I found a piece of paper on his bed in his handwriting.” He shook his head sadly. “There were only two words... ‘I’m sorry.’”

Willow was silent for a long moment before she tried to speak. “Mr. Ralph, I—”

“It’s alright,” his voice was gruff, but understanding shone in his eyes. “Now you know.”

“Did... did you ever try to find Wilbur?”

“What was the use?” Mr. Ralph shook his head sadly. “We didn’t get along—we didn’t even have anything in common. The only thing that ever really held us together was Drew.”

“So this room...” Willow glanced around. “All this stuff is just like Drew left it?”

Mr. Ralph nodded. “I got rid of Wilbur’s things, but I couldn’t bear to touch this room. It’s all I have left. Drew kept a journal, but I never found where he hid it.”

They both stood there in silence for a long time, each deep in their own thoughts.

Finally, Mr. Ralph shook himself. “Well, it’s getting late. You should probably get home.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I should.” Willow headed for the hallway but stopped in the doorway. She turned to see Mr. Ralph staring after her, his eyes full of quiet sadness. Standing there in the middle of the bedroom, he suddenly looked very alone.

“The real you showed up in the cafeteria that day, Willow,” Jaquelyn’s words echoed in Willow’s mind. *“And— and I think you need to let her out a little more often.”*

Before Willow knew what she was doing, she had walked quickly over to Mr. Ralph and wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. He didn’t move, but when she pulled away, there were tears in his eyes.

“Good night, Mr. Ralph,” Willow said.

Then she turned and walked out of the room.

“Bring it in, bring it in!” Coach Ramos called.

Willow threw the ball to the referee and jogged over to the bench. She grabbed a water bottle from under her seat, drinking deeply.

“Alright, from now on, we’re going to press them,” Coach Ramos said, glancing around at the girls. “If you get the ball, pass it to Grant.”

“But Coach,” Taylor spoke up, her lips tugging downwards into a frown. “I thought I was supposed to take the ball!”

“Change of plans,” he replied. “Grant can hit threes, and we’re gonna need a lot of them tonight.”

“That’s not fair!” Kaylene interjected. “Taylor—”

“Lo siento, but I do not care what’s fair!” Coach Ramos shot back. “Now, we only have a few more games before the championship, and this is the hardest team we’ll have to face until then. I need everyone to work together, do you understand?”

A murmur went around the group as the girls nodded.

“Bueno, now grab some water and get back out there.” The coach turned away.

“Um, Coach?” Willow glanced over at Jaquelyn, who was sitting on the far end of the bench.

“Si, what?” He turned back to face her.

“I— I think you should put Jaquelyn in.” Willow hastened to continue before he could interrupt. “I’ve been working with her, and she’s getting better! You should see her when we practice at home—she’s a natural!”

He sighed. “Grant, I already told you, she’s not going to play in any games.” He glanced around, then lowered his voice. “I have heard she has a disorder, and I don’t want her getting hurt out there. She can wear the uniform, for all I care, but I won’t let her play.”

She bit her lip, knowing that protest would do no good. “Yes, sir.”

Willow turned away, and caught sight of Jaquelyn sitting on the bench, her gaze following Coach Ramos as he walked towards the scorers table.

She knew then that Jaquelyn had heard every word.

“Willow!” Jaquelyn held out her hand for a high-five. “You did an awesome job!”

“Thanks.” Willow gave a tired grin. “I didn’t think we would win.”

Just then, Jaquelyn’s eyes focused on something over Willow’s shoulder. “Uh-oh... isn’t that the Birdie?”

Willow turned to see the woman marching towards Coach Ramos, and she grimaced. “Yep, that’s Birdie.”

“Excuse me, young man, I would like a word with you!” Birdie’s voice carried across the hallway.

“What?” Coach Ramos turned. “Oh, *si*, you are Mrs... uh, Mrs...”

Birdie snorted. “I done introduced myself before, but I guess you can’t trouble yo’self to remember. My name is Birdie Brooks, an’ I jes’ wanna know what kind o’ team you’re tryin’ to run here?”

“Poor Birdie,” Jaquelyn whispered, a half grin on her face. “She should know better than to pick a fight with Coach Ramos.”

“I don’t know...” Willow grinned back. “I think she can hold her own pretty well.”

Coach Ramos’ face was already turning red. “*¿Disculpe?* Are you complaining about my coaching?”

“Now, I want you to tell me why you’re keepin’ perfectly good players on yo’ bench,” Birdie continued, ignoring the question.

“I’ve seen that girl play before, an’ she’s real good.”

“Brennan?” Coach Ramos sputtered. “She could not even pass the ball when she joined this team! She is no *buena*.”

“Well, she can pass it now, an’ she can dribble, too,” Birdie shot back. “Now, are you gonna let that talent go to waste?”

“*¡Es mi equipo!*” He snapped, the shade of his face deepening. “I am the coach, and I do not need *una mujer vieja* to tell me how to do *mi trabajo!*”

Birdie’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you use that tone o’ voice with me! You need to learn how to treat yo’ elders, young man!”

“And you need to learn how to play *baloncesto!*” Coach Ramos yelled.

“Oh, I learned it, alright,” Birdie replied. “I played six years in school, an’ I prob’ly know more than you do!” With that, she turned on her heels and marched off.

“*¡Ay!*” He threw his hands into the air, storming off in the other direction. “*¡Las mujeres son imposibles!*”

Willow shook her head, grinning. “Good ol’ Birdie.” She turned. “Is your dad here, Jaquelyn?”

“Yeah, I think he’s talking with your dad.” Jaquelyn nodded down the hallway. She sighed. “He doesn’t really have to come... I never play anyway.”

“Coach just doesn’t get it,” Willow said. “If he could see the progress you’ve made...”

Jaquelyn shrugged. “He’s seen how I’ve been in practice lately... he just doesn’t want me to play because—” She stopped short, looking down at the floor. “Well, you know why.”

Willow opened her mouth to say something, but, at that moment, the phone in her pocket began to ring. She pulled it out and glanced at the screen. “Oh, it’s Micah.” She swiped on the green answer button, and her brother’s face popped up on the screen. “Hi, Micah!”

“Hey, Will!” He waved.

“There’s someone here I want you to meet...” Willow motioned Jaquelyn to move into the camera angle. “This is my friend, Jaquelyn.”

“Hi, Jaquelyn!” Micah’s grin widened. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Jaquelyn replied, smiling back. “Willow talks a lot about you.”

“Oh does she, now?” He narrowed his eyes in fake suspicion. “All good things I hope.”

“Well... mostly.” Jaquelyn’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “She *has* told me a few stories.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t *not* tell her about the time you crashed your bike into a tree,” Willow said, grinning sideways at her friend.

“Hey, you were supposed to keep that a secret!” Micah shook his head. “Sisters will turn on you in a heartbeat these days.”

“To be fair, I never actually said I wouldn’t tell anyone,” Willow interjected.

“Well, since we’re telling stories, here,” Micah began playfully. “Jaquelyn, did you ever hear about the time Willow thought someone was breaking into our house?”

“Whoa, okay, I think it’s time to hang up now,” Willow said.

Micah shrugged. “Alright, alright, I won’t tell it.” He lowered his voice, addressing Jaquelyn. “She almost hit our dad over the head with a hairbrush.”

Jaquelyn laughed. “A hairbrush?”

“Yeah, well, I was only nine, okay?” Willow glanced over at her dad, who seemed to be just saying goodbye to Mr. Brennan. “Oh, Micah, it looks like we’re about to leave.”

“That’s fine, I can call you back later,” Micah said. “But how did your game go?”

“Well, it was rough, but we won,” Willow replied with a smile.

“That’s my sister.” Micah grinned. “You’ll be in the WNBA before you know it.”

She grimaced. “No thanks, I think I’ll stick to middle school basketball.”

“Alright, I’d better let you go now, Will.” He waved. “Talk to you soon!”

“Okay, bye, Micah!” Willow hung up and slid her phone back into her pocket.

“Jackie, you coming?” Mr. Brennan called from further down the hallway.

“Be right there!” Jaquelyn turned to Willow. “I guess your mom didn’t come today, huh?”

“Oh...” Willow glanced around and saw Taylor standing nearby. “No, she didn’t.”

“Well, I gotta go.” Jaquelyn turned. “I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“See ya.” Willow watched her walk away, then glanced over at Taylor. To her relief, the girl was talking with Kaylene, and it appeared that she was paying no attention to Willow.

“Hey, Will, great job tonight!” Mr. Grant walked up, giving her a hug. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.” Willow looked over her shoulder at Taylor. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

Willow knocked gently on the bedroom door, then stepped inside. “Hey, Mom.”

Mrs. Grant’s face lit up into a smile. “Hi, honey, how was the game?”

“It was good,” Willow replied, seating herself on the side of the bed. “We won.”

“Well, hey, good job!” She gave Willow a high five. “One of these days, I’ll be able to actually come watch you play.” She sighed. “I can’t wait to get that wheelchair.”

“Yeah...” Willow glanced out the window at the dimming sky, an idea forming in her mind. “Hey, Mom... do you think you’d be strong enough to sit outside?”

“I don’t know.” Mrs. Grant shrugged. “We haven’t tried that yet.

“Hey, honey.” Mr. Grant entered the room and bent to give his wife a kiss. “Did Will tell you about her game tonight?”

“She was just starting to,” Willow’s mom responded.

“Dad, do you think you can carry Mom to the back porch?” Willow asked suddenly.

Mr. Grant frowned. “Well, sure, but—”

“I want her to see the sunset.” She ran to the window and looked out. “Hurry, Dad... the sun’s already going down!”

“Okay, okay, I’m hurrying.” He pulled back the blankets and sheets and lifted his wife in his arms.

Mrs. Grant chuckled. “Now just don’t drop me this time.”

“Drop you?” Mr. Grant asked, moving out the door and down the stairs. “When have I ever dropped you?”

“Well, you *almost* dropped me last night.”

“I caught you in time.”

Willow grinned as she followed them down the stairs and through the kitchen, moving ahead of them to hold the back door open. “Maybe I should carry her instead, Dad.”

“Hey, whose side are you on?” He joked, turning sideways to go through the doorway.

“Careful!” Mrs. Grant squealed as he stumbled on the doorstep.

“Ouch.” He winced at her scream. “Keep hollering like that, and I just might drop you.”

She laughed. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Mr. Grant set her down on a patio chair and planted a kiss on her cheek. “You’re right, I wouldn’t.”

With a contented sigh, Willow sat down on the chair next to her mom, and her dad settled on a seat nearby. For a moment, the three of them sat in silence, gazing up at the sunset. The sky was lit up with colors, from fiery orange to soft blue, and the trees and housetops stood out as dark silhouettes against the vibrant backdrop.

All at once, Willow felt a gentle hand rest on top of hers, and she turned. Tears glittered in her mom’s eyes, but there was a smile on her face. “Thank you, Willow.”

Willow grinned and turned back to look at the sunset again, resting her head on her mom’s shoulder. Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply, feeling more at peace than she had in a long time.

“Great job, Jaquelyn!” Willow called, retrieving the basketball. “You’re doing so well!”

Jaquelyn wiped a stream of sweat from her face. “Not as good as you.

“No, but you’ve come a long way just this year.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Willow.”

Willow rolled the ball around in her hands a few times, feeling the rubber in her palms.

“Hey, do you wanna take a break?” Jaquelyn asked suddenly. “We still have a few boxes from the move, and my dad’s been bugging me to unpack them.”

“Sure!” Willow said. She set the basketball down and followed Jaquelyn toward the large, brick house.

“I think all that’s left is Dad’s old papers and things,” Jaquelyn said, holding the door open for Willow. “But, who knows?” She grinned. “Maybe we’ll find a treasure map.”

“Yeah, right,” Willow replied teasingly as they headed for Mr. Brennan’s office. “It’s probably just a bunch of boring files.”

Jaquelyn opened the door to the office. “Well, here they are.” She waved a hand at a small stack of boxes next to the mahogany desk.

“Right, well we’d better get started.” Willow grabbed a box off the stack. “I only have a few minutes before my dad picks me up.”

Jaquelyn took another box, and they both began to sort the papers inside. Willow’s prediction proved to be correct—the files *did* seem to be rather boring. They’d only been sorting for a few minutes before she was wishing that her dad would hurry up and arrive.

Finally, Willow finished a stack and stood up. “Jaquelyn, where do you want these old receipts?”

“Oh, just over in the trash is fine.” Jaquelyn motioned to the overflowing garbage can in the corner of the room. “We should probably empty it soon, though. My dad’s been dumping all of his old stuff in there.”

“Okay, I can take it out while I’m up.” Willow put the receipts on top of the pile, then pushed it all down

As she was reaching for the drawstrings of the trash bag, something on the floor caught her eye. Frowning, Willow bent to pick up what appeared to be a little, leatherbound book with a metal clasp.

“Jaquelyn, what’s this?” Willow asked, holding the book out for Jaquelyn to see. “I found it next to the garbage can.”

Jaquelyn shrugged. “I don’t know... I don’t think Dad ever kept a journal. Maybe he picked it up somewhere by mistake.”

“Only one way to find out.” Willow undid the clasp and opened the book to the first page. The words that met her eyes nearly caused her heart to stop beating.

Property of Drew Greenwich, 267 Osburg Road, Royal Oak.

For a moment, Willow stood frozen in shock. *Drew? This is Drew’s journal?*

“What does it say?” Jaquelyn asked, breaking the silence.

“It— it belongs to someone named Drew,” she finally managed. “Has your dad ever mentioned him?”

“No... I don’t think he knows anyone with that name,” Jaquelyn replied.

“And you’ve never seen this journal before?”

Jaquelyn shook her head. “It’s probably just something Dad wanted to throw out. He dumped a lot of stuff in there.”

“Jaquelyn,” Willow began, then hesitated. “Can– can I take this home?” It’s important.”

“I mean, I guess. Dad was just going to throw it out, anyways.” Jaquelyn frowned. “But why?”

“I think...” Willow took a deep breath. “I think I know who this belongs to.”

“So how was practice today?” Mr. Grant asked as they pulled out of the Brennans’ driveway.

“It was pretty good,” Willow replied distractedly. “Jaquelyn’s getting better every day.”

“Well, that’s good.” He paused. “You excited for the big game next week?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?” He chuckled. “That’s not very enthusiastic.”

She glanced down at her backpack, where she knew the journal was resting. *How did Mr. Brennan get it? And why would he throw it away?*

They rode in quiet for a long time, Willow’s thoughts rolling around in her head. She had so many questions, but answers were scarce. And reading the journal might only bring more questions instead of answers.

All at once, her dad’s phone rang, breaking the silence. Holding onto the steering wheel with one hand, he answered it and held it to his ear. “Hello? Oh, hey! Yes, she’s right here.” He flicked on the blinker to turn onto their street and glanced over at Willow. “Will, Mr. Brennan said to tell you that you left a sweatshirt at their house.”

“Hmm?” Willow looked away from the window. “Oh, that’s fine... I can just get it next time I’m there.”

“She said she can just get it next time,” Mr. Grant said into the phone. “Alright, thanks for calling. Yep, I’ll talk to you later.” He switched the phone to his other ear, slowing the car as he turned into the driveway of their home. “Bye, Wilbur.”

Willow whipped her head around, her heart suddenly beating very fast. “Did you just say Wilbur?”

“Yes...” Mr. Grant set the phone down and put the car in park. “I was talking to Mr. Brennan.”

“I know, but— but why did you call him Wilbur?”

“Because that’s his first name.” He shook his head. “C’mon, Will, we’d better see what Birdie’s making for supper.”

Willow grabbed her backpack and opened the car door. “I— I can’t eat right now.”

“What? Why?” Mr. Grant stepped out of the car, looking at her strangely.

“Sorry, I just... I need to do something.” She shut the car door, heading for the house at a brisk pace. “It’s important.”

Willow shut her bedroom door and crossed the room quickly, unzipping her backpack as she went. Atlas followed her, her tail wagging.

“Hey, girl.” Willow gave her a distracted pat.

Tossing aside her backpack, Willow pulled out the journal and settled herself onto the window seat. Atlas hopped up after her, then Willow pulled the curtains shut.

Opening the journal eagerly, she flipped past the cover page to the first entry.

January 1st

A new year, a new journal. I can't believe my gap year is halfway over... soon I'll be starting college. I'll miss Dad and Wilbur, of course, but I'm excited to finally start school. And I think it will be good for the two of them to be without me for a while. Maybe they'll be able to work out their differences better if I'm gone.

Forgetting everything else, Willow read on and on into Drew's life. Each page shared Drew's adventures in the outdoors... hiking, swimming, hunting, and fishing. Several of the pages even included sketches of birds and wildlife. More than ever, Willow felt as though she knew Drew. He wasn't just some guy in a picture or somebody's dead son. He was a real person who'd had a real life.

Finally, Willow finished the last entry. It was so full of hope for the future, and excitement at the prospect of everything in front of him. Everything that had been taken away from him in an instant.

Absorbed in her thoughts, she absentmindedly flipped through the blank pages in the back of the journal. All at once, she stopped. On the very last page was another sketch. But this sketch wasn't of an animal... it was a map. A map of the Royal Oak Reserve.

"We would spend hours in the woods together." Mr. Ralph's words came back to her. *"We even had our own special spot at the Royal Oak Reserve."*

Willow sucked in a breath. *I'll bet this map leads to their spot.*

She closed the journal and latched the clasp again. Pulling the curtains aside and standing up, she put the journal back in her backpack for safekeeping.

Everything was so confusing... Jaquelyn's dad was Wilbur? But why had he changed his name? Why had he come back to Royal Oak? Why hadn't he reconnected with his father? And why did no one else seem to know about Drew?

I know. The thought suddenly struck Willow. *I know about Drew. And I know where both Wilbur and Mr. Ralph are.*

Then another thought came to her, as surely and suddenly as a slap across the face. *I'm the only one who can reconnect them.* She took a deep breath. *But only if I dare.*

Willow glanced around the classroom, frowning. They were just about to start, and Jaquelyn hadn't shown up yet. *Where could she be?*

"Alright, class, settle down." The teacher up front clapped her hands for silence.

Willow looked over her shoulder again, just in time to see Jaquelyn slip in the door. Her long, auburn hair covered most of her face, but Willow saw that her eyes were red as though she'd been crying.

Frowning, the teacher looked up as Jaquelyn slid into her seat. "Jaquelyn, do you have an excuse for being late?"

"No, ma'am," Jaquelyn replied softly. Her lower lip was trembling. "Can... can I go to the bathroom?"

The teacher's face softened. "Yes, you may. Are you okay?"

Jaquelyn didn't respond... she only stood and hurried from the room.

Willow's hand shot up, and she was speaking before the teacher could even call on her. "Can I go to the bathroom, too?"

The woman nodded, giving Willow a knowing look. "But be back soon."

Willow tried to keep calm as she stood and headed for the door, but she had a sick feeling in her stomach.

What was the matter with Jaquelyn?

Willow stepped into the bathroom and spotted Jaquelyn. She was sitting with her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her, and her head down. She made no sound, but her shoulders shook as though she were crying.

Slowly, Willow approached her friend and slid to the ground next to her, putting an arm around her. After a few moments, Jaquelyn's shoulders stopped shaking, and they sat in silence.

"I had a doctor's appointment yesterday," Jaquelyn finally began in a very soft, very low voice. "They said that they found this new procedure that might cure my disorder. There's a visiting surgeon at the hospital that agreed to do it before he goes back home."

Willow frowned. "But isn't that good?"

"Well, at first, it sounded that way." Jaquelyn paused, then her voice came out softer than ever. "It has a fifty-percent survival rate."

Willow felt as though all of the breath had been sucked out of her. "Wh—what?"

"My dad wanted me to stay home today, but I told him I was okay. I— I guess I thought I was." Jaquelyn shook her head. "I *want* to do it. I *have* to do it. But..." Her voice quivered. "I'm scared."

Willow's mind was a whirl of thoughts and emotions, and she couldn't even find the words to respond.

"Willow." Jaquelyn turned to look at her. "You— you don't have to do this. I can't ask you to stick by me when I don't even know if I'll be here next week."

Willow shook her head, barely able to get the words out as tears rushed to her eyes. "You don't have to ask me, Jaquelyn. I— I'm your friend, and I'm not leaving you."

Jaquelyn gave a watery, tearful smile. "I know that's the real Willow talking." She wrapped her arms around Willow in a hug. "Don't ever stop letting Him shine through, okay?"

Nodding, Willow hugged her friend tightly as a tear trickled down her cheek. "Okay." She took a deep, trembling breath. "Okay."

"Another nine!" Willow groaned as she picked up her playing piece and moved it across the board. "That's jail again for me."

Jaquelyn giggled. "Wow, you must be a professional criminal by now!"

"Hey, I'm innocent, I swear!" Willow held up her hands, grinning.

After a moment, Jaquelyn sobered, and her gaze focused on the wall.

"Jaquelyn, are you okay?" Willow touched her gently on the arm.

The girl stirred, then turned back to Willow. "Sorry, I just got to thinking again."

"Well, you shouldn't be thinking," Willow said with mock sternness. "It's dangerous."

Jaquelyn's grin returned. "Yeah, I might end up in jail with you." She stood, grabbing the empty bowl on the floor next to the board. "Hey, do you want any more popcorn?"

"Sure... I won't say no to that."

"Hey, girls!" Mr. Brennan poked his head in the doorway of the living room, and his eyes landed on the board game. "Are you playing Monopoly without me?"

"Sorry, Dad," Jaquelyn replied with a teasing look. "I needed some better competition." She headed past him out the door, carrying the popcorn bowl.

"I'll have you know I've beaten you several times!" Mr. Brennan called after her. He shook his head with a grin, then turned back to Willow. Stepping further into

the room, he lowered his voice so Jaquelyn couldn't hear. "Thanks for coming over, Willow. I— I think it's been good for her to keep her mind off everything."

Willow shrugged. "Well, we were going to practice basketball anyway."

"I know, but this is beyond basketball practice." He nodded at the board game on the floor. "You're a good friend."

She smiled. "And you're a good dad."

He glanced away for a long moment, his face becoming downcast. "I don't know... I'm beginning to think we should have never come back here. I— I guess I thought it would be good for us."

"And hasn't it been good?" Willow asked. She thought of Mr. Ralph. "At least, it *could* be good for you, if you let it."

"Nah." He shook his head, his gaze traveling to the window. "I grew up here, but my heart left this place a long time ago. There are things that I said"—he faltered, pain seizing his features—"And— and did, that I can never take back."

"But you came back anyway."

"Yeah, I did." He sighed. "I thought I could handle it, but I guess I was wrong." He swallowed, a husky sorrow welling up in his voice. "There are too many things that I can't face."

Willow was silent, her mind racing for something to say. "I mean, you have to have at least *some* family still left here, right?"

Mr. Brennan shrugged, but the sorrow in his eyes deepened. "I don't even know anymore. And, to be honest, I'm not sure if I want to know." He paused. "I— I'm not sure if *he'd* want to know, either."

"He?" Willow asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"My dad."

"I think..." She took a deep breath. "I think he does, Mr. Brennan."

“He doesn’t.” He shook his head. “Why would he? If he did, he would have found me a long time ago.”

“Well, maybe he’s scared, too. Maybe he does want to find you, but he just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He sighed. “Or maybe not.”

“Scuse me, popcorn coming through!” Jaquelyn brushed past her dad into the room.

“Alright, I’ll let you girls get back to your game.” Mr. Brennan turned to go, but paused, looking at Willow. “Thanks again.”

“The back bedroom still needs more work,” Mr. Ralph said, motioning down the hallway. “But I think you’ve done pretty much everything else.”

He turned to head back to the living, and Willow’s mind raced to think of something to say. *I’ve got to tell him... it’s now or never.*

“Um... Mr. Ralph? There’s— there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Yeah, and what’s that?” He paused, looking at her curiously.

“I... I don’t know how to say this.” Willow swallowed. “But I think I know where your son is.”

Mr. Ralph’s face blanched. “Wilbur?”

She nodded. “He moved back to town this fall.”

“Then...” His voice was hoarse. “Then he’s here?”

“Yes. He— has a daughter. She goes to school with me.”

“A daughter...” he repeated slowly. “What is she like?”

Willow felt a tightness in her chest. “Her name is Jaquelyn. She’s sweet and quiet... she loves animals. She’s good at basketball.” She blinked back tears. “And she’s a really, really good friend.”

Mr. Ralph’s face was still as he stared off into the distance.

“Mr. Ralph...” Willow began. “Don’t— don’t you want to see him again?”

A wistful look crossed his face, but, in another moment, it had vanished. “No... no.” He shook his head vehemently. “I can’t do that.”

“But he’s your son. You’re going to miss out on the rest of his life—and Jaquelyn’s life. And for what?”

“Look, he chose to leave. If he wanted to find me, I’ve been here all along.” Mr. Ralph looked away. “He and I... we just don’t understand each other.”

“You could at least try,” Willow replied. “Listen, he’s not Drew, Mr. Ralph, and he’s never going to be. But that doesn’t matter. He’s Wilbur Greenwich—he’s *your son*.”

“I’m sorry.” Mr. Ralph shook his head sadly. “I know you’re trying to help, but I don’t think you understand.”

“No, I do understand,” she said firmly. “I think you’re scared. You’re scared because Wilbur isn’t like you, and he’s not like Drew, either. It takes work to talk to him—work *you* never put in. And now that he’s come back, you don’t want to face him. You *can’t* face him.”

Mr. Ralph flinched, but he didn’t say anything.

“God gave you Wilbur just like he gave you Drew,” Willow continued. “And if He can love you and me, then surely He can help you love your son. It’s hard... believe me, I know. But it’s worth it.”

The old man stood there for a moment in silence, and then his eyes took on the steely gaze he’d always worn. “I think we should get to work, now.”

“But Mr. Ralph—”

“And it’s Mr. Greenwich.”

Willow hesitated, then sighed. “Yes, sir.”

Willow shut the front door and dropped her backpack to the ground, letting out a huge breath. Tears flooded to her eyes once more as she took in the familiarity of home, but she swallowed them back.

“Will!” Her dad’s voice called. “In here!”

She shook herself and moved towards the living room. As she got closer, she heard other voices talking and laughing. She stepped inside the room and froze.

Birdie and Mr. Grant were standing on either side of her mom, their faces stretched into wide grins. Mrs. Grant was sitting in the middle of the room, her eyes sparkling with a light that Willow hadn’t seen in a long time. But Willow wasn’t staring at Birdie, or her dad, or even her mom.

She was looking at the wheelchair.

“Ain’t it fine, Willow?” Birdie asked proudly.

“It’s an answer to prayer!” Mr. Grant said.

Mrs. Grant smiled at Willow, her hands resting on the wheels on either side of her. “Now I can come to your games, Will. And we can go on our walks again.”

Willow swallowed. She tried to say something—anything—in response, but all she could think of was Taylor. Taylor’s face when she saw the wheelchair. Taylor’s smirk as she spread the news to the rest of the school. Taylor’s approving look as she pretended to scold Kaylene for laughing.

She'd just begun to fit in on the basketball team... what would happen now? What would they all say when they found out her mom was crippled? What would they think of her then?

"Will?" Her mom asked gently, her smile fading slightly. "What do you think?"

Shaking her head, Willow turned and fled from the room. As she ran up the stairs, tears threatened to blur her vision once more. *I just wanted to be like them... is that so much to ask?*

She already knew the answer. She could never be like Taylor or Kaylene or the other girls... she could only be herself.

"Don't ever stop letting Him shine through, okay?" Jaquelyn's words echoed through her mind.

The real Willow, Jaquelyn had referred to her as. Not Willow, the weird homeschooler, not Willow, the wheelchair lady's daughter... Willow, the child of God. The person she was deep down—the one she'd been trying to hide for so long.

That was who she really was.

"Willow?" The familiar voice asked.

Willow gripped the phone. "Jaquelyn? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Did... did the surgery go well?" Willow ventured to ask.

"The doctors said it did." Jaquelyn paused. "I have to warn you, though... I look a little different now."

"What do you mean, different? Is that good or bad?"

“Depends on how you look at it,” she said with an air of mystery. “I guess you’ll have to wait until the big game to see.”

“The game?” Willow repeated. “You’re coming to the championship game?”

“Yeah, but I might be late,” Jaquelyn replied. “I have a doctor’s appointment right before.”

From somewhere in the background, Willow heard Mr. Brennan’s muffled voice.

“Oh, I should probably go now,” Jaquelyn said into the phone. “I’m still supposed to be resting for a while.”

“Okay, bye, Jaquelyn,” Willow said. She hesitated. “I— I’m really glad you’re okay.”

“Goodbye, Willow. And... thanks.”

Willow knocked on the door—probably harder than she needed to knock—and waited. A cold gust of autumn wind cut through her sweatshirt, and she shivered. After a few moments, she knocked again, even harder than the first time.

The door swung open, and Mr. Ralph peered out. “Yeah?” His face lengthened in surprise as he saw Willow. “What are you doing here? I said I don’t need you today.”

“I know, but I thought I should come anyway.”

His eyebrows raised. “And why is that?”

“There’s a basketball game tomorrow night at Royal Oak Private Girls School,” Willow said. “It’s for a championship—our biggest game of the year.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “Jaquelyn’s on the team.”

“Jaquelyn?” He frowned. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to come.”

Mr. Ralph’s eyebrows lowered. “Listen—”

"I know what you think already, Mr. Ralph, but I still think you should come."

He rubbed his jaw wearily. "I'm guessing Wilbur will be there."

"He doesn't have to know *you're* there."

"Yeah, but what if he sees me?"

Willow pressed her lips together. "Just... just come. Please? I think it might help."

He paused for a long moment, then sighed. "You know, I've noticed something different about you. It— it's written all over your face... almost like it's a part of who you are."

She smiled slightly. "That's God."

"I know." Mr. Ralph looked thoughtful. "I've heard it all so many times... how Jesus died for my sins. But I've never actually *seen* it. Not until now."

"He can give you the courage you need," Willow said softly.

Mr. Ralph hesitated. "Okay. Okay, I'll come. But that's it. I— I'm not ready to talk to him yet."

Willow took a deep breath, looking him straight in the eye. "I think you've been ready for a long time, Mr. Ralph."

"Will! Willow!"

Hearing the familiar voice, Willow whirled around. "Micah?"

Her older brother came striding across the basketball court, a huge grin on his face. She ran to him, wrapping him in a hug. "Micah, what are you doing here?"

“Oh, just coming to scout out a certain player for my college team,” he said teasingly. “Seriously, though. You’ve been talking about this game for weeks... you can’t expect me to *not* come.”

She smiled, giving him another hug. “I’m really glad you’re here, Micah.”

“Me too,” he replied. He glanced around. “Where are Mom and Dad?”

“Over there.” Willow motioned towards the wall next to the bleachers, where her dad had parked her mom’s wheelchair.

“Well, that’s where I’ll be, then.” Micah turned to go, then paused. “Hey, isn’t your friend going to play tonight?”

“Jaquelyn?” Willow swallowed, unable to shake the worry in the pit of her stomach. “I hope so. She isn’t here yet.”

“She’d better hurry.” Micah glanced at the clock. “You guys are pretty much done warming up.”

“I’m sure she’ll be here soon,” Willow said, though she didn’t fully believe herself.

Micah headed for the bleachers, and Willow turned to join her teammates on the bench. She scanned the crowd, wondering if Mr. Ralph had kept his promise. At first, she didn’t see him, but then she spotted his orange hunter’s cap near the top of the bleachers. She breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t look happy to be there, but at least he was there.

“Okay, *novatas!*” Coach Ramos called, waving to Willow and her teammates. “Bring it in!”

Jesus, please help us, Willow prayed. Then she took a deep breath and trotted towards the bench.

The game was about to begin.

Willow jogged down the court as Taylor took the ball. She cut to the corner, trying to get open, but a defender was there waiting for her. Taylor slowed as she crossed the half-court line, looking for an open pass. A girl from the other team came up on her, and Kaylene ran up to help her out. Frowning in frustration at the other team's tight defense, Taylor finally threw the ball toward Kaylene.

Right at that moment, the point guard from the other team—their fastest player—came out of nowhere, taking possession of the ball. Too late, Kaylene saw what was happening, and lunged for it. However, the other girl was already dribbling down the court toward the other hoop. Taylor took off after her, but the girl reached the hoop first and made an easy layup.

Willow gritted her teeth as she glanced up at the clock. *Ten seconds... that's not enough time to make a shot on this team.*

"Timeout!" Coach Ramos called, motioning for the girls to come in.

Willow and her teammates headed for the bench, gathering around their coach.

"Coach, these guys are tough!" Kaylene panted.

"Yeah," another girl chimed in, wiping sweat from her face. "They're killing us out there!"

"Look, we are only a few points behind," Coach Ramos said. "And we can still make a shot before the end of the half."

Taylor snorted. "How? We have ten seconds! They won't let us get *near* the hoop in that amount of time!"

"That is enough, Reed!" The coach snapped. "I don't need any negativity from you! Now," he continued, looking around seriously. "I want Reed to bring the ball down. Grant, you're going to take the shot."

"*Willow?*" Kaylene asked doubtfully.

“Did I stutter?” Coach Ramos retorted.

Willow swallowed, her mouth feeling even drier than before. “B—but Coach—”

“Do not talk back to me, Grant,” he interrupted. “You are the only one on the team who can hit a three, and we are going to need those points later in the game. Do you understand?” His glare moved around the group.

“Yes, sir,” they all chorused.

“Good.” His eyes rose to the clock. “Royals on three.”

Willow put her hand in the middle with the other girls. “One, two, three, Royals!”

As she headed back to her place on the court, Willow felt the butterflies in her stomach flutter up. She swallowed again, readying herself for the ball. The referee passed the ball to one of her teammates, who threw it in to Taylor. The girls from the other team moved in, knowing they would have to make a shot soon.

Moving quickly, Taylor dribbled around one of the girls to make it across the half-court line. Willow took a deep breath, glanced at the clock, and took off. She cut across the court to a spot just outside the three-point line, grabbing the ball as it came to her. She barely had time to feel it in her hands before she turned, checked her form, and shot.

The buzzer went off just when the ball left her hands, and Willow held her breath as it fell towards the hoop. *Please, God. We need these points.*

The ball landed, bouncing off the rim and dropping to the ground with a disappointing *smack*. Willow saw Taylor’s shoulders slump and Kaylene’s face mold into a frown as they both turned to head for the bench, and she felt her heart sink.

Things were not looking good.

As soon as Willow and her teammates returned from the locker room, she began looking around for Jaquelyn. Once again, her search proved in vain, and her frown grew. *Where could she be?*

Just then, the door on the other side of the court swung open, and a girl wearing a Royals uniform strode onto the court. Her wavy, auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail, a few strands left out to frame her pretty face.

The other girls stopped short, and Kaylene frowned. "Who's *that?*"

The girl turned and, catching sight of Willow, her face stretched into a smile. As the sparkling, hazel eyes met Willow's, she realized there was something very familiar about the joy that shone from her face.

It was Jaquelyn.

Before Willow had time to do anything else, her teammates gathered around Jaquelyn, flooding her with questions.

"Hey, what's your name?"

"Why are you wearing Jaquelyn's uniform?"

"Where do you get your hair done?"

"Are you good at basketball?"

Willow frowned. *Don't they know it's Jaquelyn?*

They didn't, of course. They'd never paid much attention to her before, except to make fun of her.

It was funny how they were all acting. After all, Jaquelyn was the same person she'd always been... it was only her face that had changed. Perhaps it was because her face was all anyone had ever seen before.

Except Willow.

She froze as she realized... she was the only one who had recognized Jaquelyn. How would anyone else know that it was Jaquelyn in that uniform instead of a new girl?

At that moment, Jaquelyn's gaze locked with Willow's again. Slowly, subtly, Jaquelyn raised a finger to her lips and winked.

A slow grin spread across Willow's face as she understood her friend's meaning.

Coach Ramos came up next to Willow, his eyebrows crinkled. "What is going on here?"

"Nothing, sir," Willow replied. "But, uh... I think you should know. That's Jaquelyn."

"*That* is Brennan?"

"Yeah." Willow paused. "But Coach? Can— can we just keep this a secret for a little bit?"

"You mean about Brennan?" He hesitated, looking from Willow to Jaquelyn confusedly. "*Si*, I don't care what you do." He raised his voice, calling to the other girls. "Alright, *novatas*, let's huddle up!"

Willow tried to get to Jaquelyn, but all of the other girls wanted to stand next to her, and Willow ended up on the other side of the group. She caught Jaquelyn's eye again, and her friend gave her another reassuring smile.

As Coach Ramos began to talk, Willow glanced around just in time to see Mr. Brennan slip into the stands. Her eyes darted to Mr. Ralph, but it appeared that he hadn't seen his son yet.

The nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach returned. Jaquelyn was okay, but her dad and grandpa weren't. Would this night solve the problem, or would it make things worse?

Only time would tell.

Willow ran down the court, waiting for Taylor to come in with the ball. They were still down by eight, and it was almost the end of the third quarter. *It's going to take all we've got to pull ahead*, she thought grimly.

Taylor crossed the half-court line, looking for an open pass. Willow glanced across the court at another teammate, and they both cut at the same time. Keeping her eyes on Taylor as she ran, Willow opened her hands for the pass. All at once, she slammed into another player, who hadn't been paying attention. Willow instinctively threw out her hands as she fell to the ground, and she felt a sharp pain in her wrist when she hit the floor.

The referee's whistle went off as the other players gathered around her, whispering nervously.

Coach Ramos jogged over to her. "Alright, guys, let's give her some space." He knelt next to Willow. "Grant, are you gonna be okay?"

"I— I think so." Willow slowly sat up, examining her left hand. "But my wrist hurts a lot."

"Well, let's get you back to the bench so I can look it over." The coach helped her up, and they headed for the sidelines. "Hatch, you're in for Grant!"

Coach Ramos' eyes followed the other girl as she jogged onto the court. "There goes the championship," he muttered.

Willow sat down, then glanced down to the end of the bench. "Um, Coach?"

"Si?" He turned back to her. "Let's have a look at that wrist."

"Wait, Coach." Willow hesitated a moment. "I think you should put Jaquelyn in."

"Brennan?" Coach Ramos frowned, his eyebrows lowering. "You already know what I think of her playing."

"Yes, but she's been practicing a lot, and she really is good!"

“I’ve already given you my answer, Grant,” the coach replied. “I can’t risk any more setbacks... especially after this injury.”

Willow bit her lip, casting another look at Jaquelyn. “Look, Coach... I know she doesn’t look like much, but I promise you that she’ll give it her best. All she needs is someone to give her a chance.”

He scanned the court for a minute before turning back to her. “Alright, I will put her in.” He sighed. “I don’t think we have much of a chance to win, anyway.”

Willow’s face slid into a smile as Coach Ramos turned sharply away to speak to Jaquelyn. Though Willow couldn’t hear what they said, she saw Jaquelyn’s eyes flash with surprise, then with happiness. Standing to her feet, she headed for the scorers table, casting Willow a grateful look as she passed by.

The ball went out of bounds just then, and Jaquelyn waited for the buzzer before jogging onto the court. “Olivia,” she called to the girl she was replacing.

Taylor’s face spread into a grin as she went to high-five the new girl. “Let’s see what you’ve got,” she said encouragingly.

Watching from the sidelines, Willow couldn’t help but shake her head. Taylor could sure change her tune fast. How could she not see the pattern in the way she treated people?

The referee’s whistle blew again, and the game started up. At first, Jaquelyn looked a little lost on the court, but then she seemed to remember Willow’s coaching. She ran down the sideline, then cut underneath the basket. Taylor passed the ball to Kaylene, who quickly threw it to Jaquelyn. Turning, Jaquelyn shot from the corner, and the ball went in with a satisfying swish.

Willow jumped to her feet, cheering. She glanced into the stands to find Mr. Brennan’s proud smile, then looked further until she saw Mr. Ralph. His eyes were fixed on Jaquelyn, but Willow couldn’t quite interpret the odd expression on his face.

Another shout from the crowd turned Willow's attention back to the court, and she realized that Jaquelyn had stolen the ball, and was coming in for a wide-open layup. As the ball went neatly into the hoop, Willow cheered again, her grin nearly splitting her face in two.

Maybe, just maybe, they would be okay after all.

All of the players were crowding around Jaquelyn, congratulating her in a hundred different ways.

"You were so good!"

"Yeah, your shots were amazing!"

"You totally won us the game!"

Jaquelyn blushed underneath the praise, hardly able to say a word.

"Great job," Taylor said, coming up beside Jaquelyn. "But, hey, what was your name again?"

Jaquelyn froze, looking panicked as she glanced across the girls' heads at Willow. "Uh..."

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention, please," a voice boomed from the middle of the court. A man in a suit was holding a microphone and a large, shiny trophy. "I would like to present the winners of tonight's championship game... the Royals!"

The crowd burst into applause as the girls jogged down the court to stand beside the man. Willow kept an ice pack against her injured hand, which was feeling better already.

"You take the trophy," Kaylene said to Jaquelyn. "You won the game, after all."

Jaquelyn smiled. “Thanks.”

“It is my great honor to present you this trophy on behalf of the organizers of this game,” the man in the suit said. He tucked the microphone underneath his arm, handing the trophy to Jaquelyn with both hands.

Jaquelyn looked thoughtful as she took the trophy. Leaning in towards the man for a moment, she whispered something to him that Willow couldn’t quite hear.

The man’s eyebrows arched upwards, but he nodded. “Well, okay, if you want to.” He put the microphone back to his mouth. “And, now, this young lady has informed me that she would like to say something.”

Jaquelyn handed the trophy to Coach Ramos, then took the microphone from the man. She faced the crowd, suddenly looking very nervous. “I— I just wanted to thank you for the opportunity to attend this school. I’ve learned a lot of things about people during my short time here... some things that I wish I hadn’t learned. A lot of you probably don’t know who I am, but... I think I should first tell you who I’m not.

“I am not the face you see when you look at me. I’m not the clothes I wear or the hobbies I enjoy. I’m not just the way I walk, or the words that come from my mouth. Those things are a reflection of me, but they are not the real me. The real me is what’s inside—the unique person God has made me to be.”

Willow scanned the crowd and found Mr. Ralph. His eyes were fixed on Jaquelyn as she spoke, but Willow couldn’t interpret the look on his face.

“I might not look just like you, or act the same way,” Jaquelyn continued. But that’s exactly the way God planned it. He designed each one of us to be different in our own way—to have different strengths and weaknesses. And that’s not being weird or out of style... that’s being the beautiful, amazing person that, by the grace of God, you have become.”

Jaquelyn paused for a long moment, and the man in the suit stepped forward to take the microphone. She hesitated before raising it again to her mouth, now turning to look directly at Taylor. “Oh, and by the way... I’m Jaquelyn.”

Silence hung over the basketball court like a thick blanket as Jaquelyn handed the microphone back to the man. No one seemed to know what to say or what to do.

At last, from the bottom bleacher where he sat, Mr. Brennan raised his hands and began to clap, the sound making a sharp report in the silent room. Several other people joined him until the entire crowd was clapping and cheering. A wide smile spread across Jaquelyn's face, and she looked happier than she ever had before.

Willow pushed her way past the other players, giving Jaquelyn a tight hug. "You did so great!"

"Thank you!" Jaquelyn replied, hugging Willow back.

Just then, Taylor approached them, Kaylene trailing not too far behind. "Hey, um, Jaquelyn..." Taylor began. Willow was surprised to see that Taylor's face appeared to be full of sincere apology. "I just wanted to say that I'm... well, you know. Sorry."

Kaylene opened her mouth, shut it, then opened it again. "Yeah... me, too."

Jaquelyn smiled graciously at them. "I forgive you. And... I— I hope we can be friends now."

Taylor returned the smile, then turned. "Oh, and, Willow... I owe you an apology, too." She hesitated. "I don't like to admit it, but you're just about the best basketball player I know."

Kaylene nodded vigorously. "Your three-pointers are *amazing!*" She turned to Jaquelyn. "Willow must have taught you how to shoot, too."

"Willow!" Several voices called out from behind them.

Willow turned to find Micah waving to her, Birdie and her parents not far behind.

Micah reached her first and gave her a high five. "Will, you were awesome! I think I need you to teach my college buddies a few things."

Willow grinned. "Thanks, Micah."

"You done showed them, Willow!" Birdie said. "'Specially that coach o' yours."

Her dad put his arm around her shoulders. "We're all very proud of you, honey."

She beamed, looking over at her mom. "I– I'm proud of you guys, too."

At that moment, an idea sprang into her mind. She hesitated, then tapped Taylor on the shoulder to get her attention. "Hey, guys, I– I want you to meet someone."

Taylor and Kaylene turned, and stopped short as they saw Mrs. Grant's wheelchair.

Willow grabbed her mom's hand, standing straight and tall. "Taylor, Kaylene... this is my mom."

For a moment, neither girl said anything. Finally, Taylor stepped forward and extended a hand. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Grant."

"It's nice to meet you, too," Willow's mom said, shaking Taylor's hand. Her smile was directed at Taylor and Kaylene, but her other hand gave Willow's a tight squeeze that was full of joy and motherly pride.

As the two girls continued to talk to her family, Willow took the opportunity to scan the crowd again. She frowned as she realized that she didn't see Mr. Ralph's orange baseball cap anywhere. Where was he?

Now looking all around for the old man, Willow realized that he seemed to have disappeared. She recalled the look on his face during Jaquelyn's speech and froze. Suddenly, she knew where he had gone.

And she knew what she had to do.

Turning, Willow headed for Jaquelyn, who was talking to some of their other teammates. Mr. Brennan stood nearby, deep in a conversation with Coach Ramos.

The other girls were leaving just as Willow walked up, and she touched Jaquelyn on the shoulder.

“Oh, hey!” Jaquelyn said, giving her a bright smile. “The girls were just telling me that we’re all going to a restaurant in a little while.”

“Cool,” Willow said. She hesitated. “Um, Jaquelyn... do you think your dad can drive us somewhere really quick first?”

“Yeah, I’m sure he would.” Jaquelyn looked at her curiously. “Is something wrong?”

“Right now... yes,” Willow replied. She glanced over at Mr. Brennan. “But hopefully for not much longer”

“So where are we headed again?” Mr. Brennan asked from the driver's seat of the van.

“It’s... kind of a surprise,” Willow said. She glanced down at the page she had torn from Drew’s journal. “Take a right up here.”

“Okay...” He looked in the rearview mirror. “Jackie, do *you* know where we’re going?”

Jaquelyn shrugged. “You probably know more than I do, Dad. You grew up here.”

His face tightened. “That... was a very long time ago.”

“Turn right again into this driveway,” Willow instructed.

He flipped his blinker on, slowing to make the turn. The car bumped over the gravel road until, finally, they came to a stop in front of an old, wooden sign that read, “Royal Oak Reserve.”

Mr. Brennan's eyes fastened on the sign, and he sat very still for a long moment. “Why— why are we here?” He asked, his voice hoarse.

“You’ll see. Just... come on.” Willow opened her door, looking back at him pleadingly. “Please?”

He sighed, turning the car off. “Okay. But hurry up... we need to be at the restaurant soon.”

“Are you sure you’re going the right way?” Mr. Brennan asked, pushing aside a branch in his way. “This doesn’t even look like a trail.”

“It’s not,” Willow replied. She turned away to consult the map again.

“What?” He shook his head. “I sure hope you know where you’re going.”

“Did you ever come to these woods when you lived here, Dad?” Jaquelyn asked.

“Uh... yeah.” Willow couldn’t see his face, but she heard the pain in his voice.

“Yeah, I did.”

Willow looked at the map, then scanned the trees in front of them. *There should be an opening through here somewhere.*

Then she spotted a small space between a tree and a shrub just a few feet away. She hesitated, then walked through it, Mr. Brennan and Jaquelyn following several paces behind her.

They were on the edge of a small clearing, surrounded by a dense wall of trees and brush. At one time, it appeared the grass underfoot had been lush and green, but it had browned and was now covered in a layer of fallen leaves. The sun, which hung low in the sky, cast a few of its dying rays through the canopy of bare tree branches. To one side, a little brook gurgled merrily over a few smooth stones.

But what captivated Willow's attention was the stone bench in the middle of the clearing. Though moss and dirt now marred much of its surface, she could still make out the words carved on its side... "To My Son, Drew."

She heard Mr. Brennan's sharp gasp behind her and turned to see that his eyes were fixed on the bench. His face had paled, and he looked as though someone had just stabbed him with a knife.

"Dad?" Jaquelyn's soft voice broke the silence as she slid her hand into his. "Daddy, what is this?"

He stirred but didn't take his eyes off the bench. "This... this is for my brother."

"Your brother?" She looked up at him, her face confused.

"Yes." Mr. Brennan sucked in a deep breath, blinking back the tears that were in his eyes. "I— I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, Jackie. This was one of them."

Jaquelyn paused. "So... so this is why you left?"

He nodded. "That was an even bigger mistake... I realize that now."

Mr. Brennan slowly moved forward to stand before the bench, bowing his trembling head. "I'm so sorry," he said after a moment, his voice racked with sorrow and guilt. Willow couldn't tell if he was speaking to Drew or Mr. Ralph... or both. "I would give anything for the chance to say that to your face."

Silence settled over the clearing, and the only sound was that of Mr. Brennan's heavy, grief-filled breathing. Then, both slowly and all at once, a slight rustling noise came from the edge of the clearing where the brook disappeared into the forest.

Willow breathed in sharply as Mr. Ralph emerged from behind a tree, his eyes fixed on the figure standing before the bench. Hearing both the rustle and Willow's gasp, Mr. Brennan turned. He froze, his whole body stiffening as he saw his father.

Finally, Mr. Ralph spoke, his eyes and voice full of more love than Willow had ever seen or heard. "Son."

Mr. Brennan let out a choking gasp, his shoulders dropping. “Dad.”

At that word, the tension between them dissolved entirely, and both men rushed forward. They met in the middle of the clearing, embracing each other tightly.

Willow glanced over at Jaquelyn, who had remained, motionless, where she was. Moving towards her, Willow put her arm around her friend’s shoulder. Jaquelyn turned, her eyes brimming with tears of joy, and a smile lighting up her face.

Not a syllable passed between them, but none were necessary. There were no words that could describe the overwhelming happiness and peace that filled Willow’s heart.

She now knew that, no matter where the road led, or what it might hold, God had surrounded her with the most amazing group of people she could have asked for. Sure, they might not all be exactly the same. But they were God’s creations... in His sight, they were special and rare.

When she looked at Jaquelyn, she no longer saw a face that had once been marred by a disorder. When she thought of her own mother, it wasn’t a wheelchair she saw. When she looked at Mr. Ralph, she didn’t think of his dirty house or his strange hobbies. In their own, unique way, she saw the light of Jesus in each of them.

And she knew that whatever people thought of her—however strange they might think she was—she wanted them to think the same of her. When they looked at her face, she didn’t want them to see Willow Grant.

She wanted them to see Jesus.