

Finally Free 2:
Finally Engaged

by
Dave Walley

To Andrea

A special friend and co-worker
who I am thankful to have in my life,
and who was the first person to
request a sequel to 'Finally Free'

Prologue - The Present and the Past

I looked out the living room window, the same window I'd looked through exactly one year earlier, when I had watched Jennalee Morgan say goodbye to her boyfriend (whose family was moving away that day), and then come across the street to talk to me, her longtime best friend. Of course, it had turned out that she was actually saying goodbye to her EX-boyfriend, who she had broken up with the night before so she could become my girlfriend instead. Thinking about that day still gave me such a warm and pleasant feeling that sometimes tears came to my eyes. It's pretty special, after all, when by far your greatest dream, which you thought had become completely impossible, suddenly comes true before your eyes.

At that time Jennalee and I had known each other for seven years, ever since she and her mother moved into the house across the street from my family when we were both ten years old. The day we met was a major turning point in both of our lives.

In some ways we were about as different as two kids could be: I, Michael Kevin Davis, was far above average in intelligence, average in looks, a bookworm who had little social interaction with his peers, and whose idea of fun was learning as much as possible and doing science experiments; and Jennalee Joy Morgan was pretty and very charismatic with an outgoing personality and engaging manner, all of which combined to make her almost irresistibly likeable, and who was a free spirit who loved to have traditional fun and didn't like anything that kept her from having it.

In spite of our differences, however, we had immediately liked each other. We became friends on that very first day, and were soon making each other's lives better. Jennalee taught me the value of just relaxing and having fun sometimes, that a balanced life was a happier life. Through that I also learned how to relate to my peers much better, so that soon I was no longer just the 'freaky smart kid' I had always been. I helped Jennalee to discover that learning could be turned into another source of fun when it was approached properly (resulting in a significant improvement in her grades), and also that it was good to stop and think things through sometimes instead of just acting impulsively, as she usually tended to do.

Most important, though, was the fact that we each became the closest and most devoted friend the other had ever had. We came to know and understand each other extremely well, and were always there for each other. We became best friends in the fullest sense.

The most significant difference that developed between us as time went on was that I slowly fell totally in love with Jennalee, while she continued to consider me to be only a friend. Even during most of the two years when Jennalee was Kyle Milford's girlfriend, I had continued hoping that somehow, someday she would be able to feel that way about me instead. It was just at the point when I had become convinced that this wasn't ever going to happen that Jennalee had come over for the talk that changed both of our lives once more.

Since then another year had passed, and today I was again looking out my living room window, waiting for Jennalee Morgan to emerge from her house and come across the street for an important conversation. This time, however, there would be no pleasant surprises for me. I knew exactly what needed to happen, what I needed to do, and doing it would be difficult and challenging. Specifically, it would involve one of the most unpleasant things possible for me: telling the love of my life something that she very much did not want to hear.

As I waited for Jennalee, my mind again started flashing back to the events that had occurred a year ago today, and all that had happened after that. I yielded my thoughts to those memories to fill the time...

Chapter 1

On a beautiful morning in the middle of the summer between our junior and senior years of high school, Jennalee Morgan had surprised me by telling me she had finally figured out that I was in love with her, and then stunned me by revealing she had also come to realize that she loved me too. Her beautiful voice saying, 'I love you, Mikey!' was by far the sweetest sound I had ever heard. ('Mikey' was Jennalee's special nickname for me, and 'JJ' was mine for her; we only used these names in private, when no one else was around.)

After we had hugged and cried, and then kissed for a while and talked for a while, we'd had lunch together and then spent a very pleasant afternoon at the beach (we lived in a city that was located on one of the Great Lakes). There we had swum, played, frolicked, talked and kissed. By the end of it all we had begun to forge a new bond between us that was even stronger than the one we had built through seven years of close friendship. We both knew beyond any doubt that we were going to be together forever.

On our way home from the beach I got the idea that Jennalee and her mother should come over to my family's house for dinner, at which time we would formally announce to her mom and my parents that their children were now boyfriend-girlfriend. (Jennalee's father had died in a traffic accident when she was still a baby, and her mother hadn't remarried.) Jennalee thought this was a great idea, so while I drove she left messages for both of our mothers with her cell phone to let them know about our plans, and asking them to inform us if there was a problem.

We arrived back on our block with sufficient time to do what we needed to: shower and change, and then prepare dinner for our parents before they got home. We did the cooking at my house, but Jennalee brought over some raw materials from her own kitchen. She often cooked for herself and her mother on weekdays, as one of her regular chores. So even though cooking wasn't one of her favorite activities, because it was one of her official responsibilities she had taken it seriously enough to eventually get good at it. Since I, in contrast, had minimal kitchen experience, Jennalee took charge of our dinner project, and I acted as her assistant. We had as much fun working on the meal together as we'd had with anything we had done at the beach (except maybe for the kissing), and I learned quite a bit of basic cooking information by watching Jennalee in action and asking her questions.

By the time my parents got home (they had carpooled that day) we had dinner almost ready, and Mrs. Morgan arrived a short time later. Jennalee and I carefully made sure we were seated next to each other on one of the long sides of our kitchen table, as close together as possible without compromising our eating logistics.

After dessert it was time for the big announcement. Jennalee had insisted that I would be the bearer of the tidings, so I politely asked for everyone's attention, then began.

"Jennalee and I have some great news for you," I said with a big smile. "We're delighted to inform you that as of today, she and I are officially a couple!"

My parents glanced at each other briefly, then looked back at me with uncertain expressions on their faces. Jennalee's mother just looked stunned. No one spoke for a few seconds. Then Mrs. Morgan broke the silence.

"I don't believe it," she declared.

Jennalee and I immediately looked at each other with mischievous smiles, and I could see we had both gotten the same idea at the same moment. We leaned toward each other, I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, and we engaged in a passionate kiss.

We let the kiss go on until Jennalee's mother exclaimed, "All right, already! I believe it!"

My parents both started chuckling, and so did Jennalee and I as we separated and I withdrew my arm. A moment later Mrs. Morgan's serious expression cracked, and she joined in too.

"I'm sorry for the reaction," she said after the chuckling had subsided. "It's just that...well, I know you

too have been close for a long time as friends, but I never imagined...and isn't this rather sudden, Jen? You just broke up with Kyle last night!"

Jennalee responded by smiling more broadly at her mother and raising her eyebrows. Suddenly Mrs. Morgan's expression changed from confusion to surprise.

"Oh!" she exclaimed!

Jennalee nodded. "That's right, Mom," she said. "I broke up with Kyle because I finally figured out that it was really Michael I was in love with, not him. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you that part of the story last night, but I wanted Michael to hear it first, and I didn't want to tell HIM until Kyle was gone. I've finally started to understand what being in love really means, and I know now that I could never share the rest of my life with anyone but Michael."

She looked at me and gave me a very affectionate smile, and I smiled back the same way. I wanted to kiss her again, but it didn't seem to be the right moment for that; so I settled for putting my arm back around her and giving her an affectionate squeeze, this time leaving my arm there when I was done. As I did this I glanced at my parents, and saw that they were both wearing little smiles of amazement. They were surprised at what they were hearing, but also clearly happy about it.

Something clicked in my mind.

"You guys knew, didn't you?" I demanded. "You knew I've been in love with Jennalee for as long as I've been capable of being in love with anyone, even though I never talked about it and tried my best to hide it, especially for the past two years!"

"Of course we did, Michael," my father replied. "You're our only child, the human center of both of our lives since we first found out you were on the way. When our families have been together we could see how you looked at Jenna, how you responded to her. For years now it's been apparent to us that for you there was more than just friendship going on. It was also pretty obvious over time that she thought of you ONLY as a friend, so we were hoping that as you both got older you would outgrow those feelings for her." He looked at Jennalee and continued, "But assuming that what you've discovered about your own feelings is true, Jenna-"

"Oh, it is, sir!" Jennalee interrupted emphatically. "I've spent the last two weeks hardly thinking about anything else besides trying to understand my feelings, really thinking deeply about all of it for the first time, about Michael and about love in general; and the more I thought, the more sure I became that Michael is the one I belong with."

"She explained all of it to me in great detail this morning," I added. "She reasoned it all out just the way I've always tried to teach her to, and as well as even I could have." I looked at her and gave her a second little squeeze. "I've never been so proud of her." We spontaneously engaged in another kiss, this time a quick one. Then I looked back at my parents. "There's no question about it. We're totally in love, now and forever."

I suddenly realized that this was a great moment for the 'I love you' game. As I quickly turned my head to look at her and say it, I saw that she had simultaneously turned her head toward me, and for the first time all day we said "I love you!" in perfect unison. We both burst out laughing, and a moment later we leaned our heads together as our laughing continued.

"I think I missed something there," my mother said after a few seconds.

I looked at my parents and Mrs. Morgan, who all had expressions of confused amusement on their faces. I forced my laughter under control so I could explain.

"It's a game we invented at the beach today," I explained, withdrawing my arm from Jennalee's shoulder again as we both straightened back up. "We each try to say 'I love you' before the other. We hadn't said it perfectly together like that before, though, so naturally it was funny to us."

"Fair enough," Mrs. Morgan responded with a little chuckle. Then she became more serious. "Anyway, I just want to say that even though this is a bit of a shock, I have no problem at all with the idea of you two being together. Michael, you're obviously a very nice, very intelligent young man with a very bright future, and just as obviously you've always cared about Jen very much. It probably should have occurred to me somewhere along the line that there might be more than friendship to your feelings, but right now that doesn't matter. The point is that I know you love Jenna deeply, and that you'll always see that she's well taken care of. It would be very hard for me to have a problem with that!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Morgan," I replied. "That means a lot to me; and I can assure you right now," I

continued, turning my head to look at Jennalee with a loving smile, "that I intend to devote the rest of my life to making your daughter the happiest person on the face of the earth."

Mother and daughter both gave little sighs at the same time, then looked at each other and chuckled. A moment later Jennalee looked back at me and gave me a loving smile of her own.

"You'll have to settle for a tie at most," she stated, "because I'm going to be doing the same thing for you."

"A tie works for me!" I replied. Once again we got the same idea at the same time and indulged in a brief but affectionate kiss.

"All right," my father said when the kiss had ended. He looked at Jennalee and her mother. "I think I can speak for both of us when I say that the two of you have been more like family than friends to us for a long time. Even though you can be a bit eccentric at times, Jen - which I'm sure you would admit to! - you're a sweet girl who has been a wonderful friend to Michael since the day you two met. So for whatever it's worth, I completely approve of this development too."

"Agreed!" added my mother.

"Thanks, Mr. Davis, Mrs. Davis," said Jennalee.

"Agreed!" I added, drawing a big smile from Jennalee.

"Now then," my father continued, "all that having been said, I feel compelled to raise a couple of points here. Perhaps you have comments too, Claire?"

"You go ahead," replied Mrs. Morgan. "I'll put in anything you didn't cover afterwards."

"OK, well I'll try to do this as painlessly as possible."

Suddenly I heard Jennalee softly mutter, "Uh-oh." I had still been focused more on her than the adults, and only when she said that did it dawn on me where my father was going. I took a quick breath and braced myself.

"I just want to remind both of you," my father went on, "of the promises you each made before the Lord at Church-"

I knew this discussion would be very embarrassing to Jennalee (and not exactly pleasant for me either), so I needed to extinguish the fire as quickly as possible.

"Look, Dad, Mom, Mrs. Morgan," I interrupted, "Jennalee and I talked about a lot of things this afternoon at the beach, and this was one of them. Knowing that we're going to be together forever doesn't change anything. We agree that we're still going to wait until we're married." I wanted to add, *And then we're going to do it a LOT!* to get back at my dad a little for bringing up the subject at this time; but I knew that even though the comment would make Jennalee giggle, it would also increase her embarrassment even more. Plus, it would be rather disrespectful. So I held that in and just said, "Can we PLEASE move on?"

"Yes, I think so," replied my father, looking at my mother as he spoke (obviously wanting to make sure they were on the same page). "We've always been able to trust you, and I see no reason not to about this matter, since you're so adamant about it. Does that satisfy you ladies?"

My mom and Mrs. Morgan both nodded briefly. It seemed that they, too, were glad to dispose of that particular subject quickly. Jennalee gave a little sigh of relief.

"Now the other thing," my father continued, "will hopefully be less difficult to address. I'm just a bit concerned about how quickly you've both decided that you're going to spend the rest of your lives together." He suddenly held up his hand as I opened my mouth to interrupt again. "Just hear me out on this one, OK?"

I glanced at Jennalee, and she didn't seem more than mildly annoyed, so I didn't feel a need to intervene on her behalf this time. I looked back at my dad and nodded, and he continued.

"Now, I know you both feel sure about your future together right now, and I really hope you're right about it; but you're only seventeen now, and I don't think either of you fully understands how relatively young that really is. I certainly didn't at that age. You're both still changing and will continue to change as you enter adulthood, and I think it would be unwise of you to rush ahead with this relationship too quickly. Take your time, keep being kids for a while longer. You can still enjoy being together just as much, but on the off chance that you start to grow apart before you're fully into adulthood, I hope you won't get too locked into a commitment to each other right now. That's my advice, anyway, and I hope you'll both take it."

"I agree completely with that," my mother affirmed. "Let your relationship grow naturally, and if you really are supposed to be together forever, that will happen."

"I agree too," added Mrs. Morgan, "but I want to take it a step further. Maybe it's just because I know very well how impulsive you can be, Jen. You've definitely gotten better about that than you used to be, but I'm betting that right now you're already looking forward to being officially engaged."

That subject hadn't come up in our long conversation at the beach, so I was expecting Jennalee to deny that her mother's statement was true. However, she hesitated and looked embarrassed again, and I knew then that Mrs. Morgan had been right.

"Well," Jennalee began in obvious reluctance, "I haven't said anything to Michael about that. But I guess that thought has crossed my mind today. Once or twice."

"You always say how well Michael knows you," her mother replied gently, "but I think I understand how your mind works pretty well too. Trust me, you shouldn't be thinking about getting engaged yet, not for a long time. As Mr. Davis said, just keep being kids for now, and enjoy it while you can. In fact, both of you could make me very happy right now if you'd promise not to get engaged at least until after you graduate next year. Give it that much time at a minimum, OK?"

"I think that's an excellent idea," agreed my mom, and my dad nodded to indicate he also concurred.

Jennalee and I looked at each other. The proposition seemed reasonable to me, but I could see immediately that she wasn't so amenable to it. I gave two quick little nods, signaling that I didn't mind making the promise. She let out a deep breath, nodded back, then turned to her mother.

"All right," she sighed. "I don't think it's really necessary, but I promise; and so does Michael."

"What she said," I affirmed.

My father chuckled. "You two sound a bit like a married couple already," he said with a big smile. My mother immediately poked him in the upper arm.

"Thank you," Mrs. Morgan said to Jennalee and me, ignoring my parents. "I assure you, Jen, you'll see someday that I was right about this."

"Anything else you guys wanted to tell us?" asked Jennalee, suddenly smiling sweetly as she shifted her eyes between all three of the adults. Clearly she wanted to end this whole double family discussion session as quickly as possible and vacate the premises. I couldn't have agreed more.

The adults looked at each other for a couple of seconds, each of them shaking their heads.

"No, I guess that's it for now," said my father. "Except to congratulate you two again. I really am happy for you."

"Me too," said my mother and Mrs. Morgan at the same time.

"Then I guess Jennalee and I can start cleaning up," I said, rising from my chair.

"No, no," Mrs. Morgan countered. "You kids worked hard to cook and serve this meal. The grown-ups can handle the cleanup chores. Right?" she concluded, looking at my parents.

"Absolutely," agreed my mother. "I'm sure the two of you would like to have some more one-on-one time together, so go right ahead. We've got this."

"Thanks!" said Jennalee gratefully, standing up and grabbing my hand as she spoke. She pulled me toward the back hallway, snatching her little purse from the counter as she went. "See you later, Mom!"

"Yeah, thanks from me too," I added as I disappeared into the hall. Within seconds we were out the back door, and finally free from any further embarrassment.

Chapter 2

As soon as we were outside Jennalee released my hand. Then she turned, took my face in both of her hands, and kissed me very passionately for several long seconds.

"Not that I'm complaining," I said with a big smile when she had ended the kiss and taken a step back, "but what was that for?"

"That was for being my hero in there!" she stated emphatically. "Thank you SO much for jumping in so fast and ending that sex discussion, Mikey! I thought I was gonna DIE when your dad started talking about that!"

"Yeah, I knew you wouldn't like that," I replied. "Don't be too hard on him, though, or our moms. They're only trying to look out for us." Then I chuckled. "Besides, we were basically all over each other after we broke the news. I can't really blame them for panicking a bit."

Jennalee gave a little sigh. "I guess you're right; and you know I love your dad. He's often been like a substitute father to me ever since we moved here. I just wish that subject could have been brought up some other time. Not that it wouldn't have been embarrassing whenever it happened."

"Yeah, it was probably best to get it out of the way now, when you think about it," I responded.

Suddenly Jennalee's eyes widened, and she grabbed my hand again.

"C'mon, let's get out of here!" she hissed as she pulled me toward the driveway.

"What's the rush?" I asked as we hurried down the drive toward the street.

"Just in case they think of something else to talk to us about!" she answered. "This is the best day of my life so far, and I don't want anything else messing it up!" Suddenly she stopped, dropped my hand and went to open her purse. "We should turn our phones off!" she stated.

"Come on, JJ" I chuckled. "That's an overreaction, don't you think?" She paused to look at me. "OK, here's what we do," I continued. "You go ahead and turn yours off. I'll leave mine on, so if they do call they'll have to call me; and if they do, I'll think of a way out of it."

Jennalee kissed me on the cheek, then quickly pulled her phone out and turned it off. As she replaced it in her purse, she smiled at me and said, "I was right this morning, Mikey. You WILL always have my back!"

"Every day forever!" I agreed as she grabbed my hand again. "By the way, where are we going?"

"I was headed for my house, if that's all right with you."

"Sounds good!"

A couple of minutes later we had settled ourselves in on the love seat in her living room, with Jennalee's head nestled into my shoulder and my arm affectionately around her.

"I think I'm over the sex discussion thing now," she said, sounding relaxed and contented, "but I wish we hadn't had to make that promise."

"About waiting until we're married?"

She giggled loudly. "No, silly! About not getting engaged until we graduate!" Then she became serious again. "We should be able to decide that completely for ourselves! Don't you think so?"

"Well," I replied, "as much as I'm looking forward to seeing my ring on your finger someday, I don't see a need to take that step while we're still in high school. We're on the verge of adulthood, but we're still kids too. We know we're going to get married someday. We can take our time getting there, can't we?"

"It doesn't matter," she responded in a resigned tone. "We promised, so we're stuck with waiting."

"Then let's follow their advice, and concentrate on enjoying being young."

"Now that I think about it, there's a lot to be said for that, isn't there?" she said, sounding happier.

"That's the attitude!" I agreed. She snuggled into me, and we were silent for a minute or so.

"Mikey," Jennalee suddenly said in an uncertain tone, turning her body so she could look at me. "You know what your dad said about us possibly growing apart? You don't think that could really happen, do

you?"

"It's not going to happen to me, I can tell you that!" I assured her. "I've spent seven years slowly building my life more and more around you, and the idea of being with you forever. I couldn't MAKE myself grow apart from you. You know that's true, too, because when I thought you had made a serious commitment to Kyle, I tried starting that process. You saw this morning how completely I failed. Whatever changing and growing is still left for me is only going to make me grow even closer to you. I'm as sure of that as I am that Jesus died for my sins."

Jennalee smiled broadly. "Thank you!" she said with some obvious relief. "I'm that sure too. It took a lot of thought for me to figure it all out, but once I did...well, it was like finally seeing the answer to a tricky riddle, you know? It suddenly seems so obvious that you can't believe you didn't get it a lot sooner. As soon as I started consciously thinking of you as a boy I could be in love with, and then right after that began understanding that I actually HAD been falling in love with you for a long time without realizing it, everything that had been so confusing to me immediately started making perfect sense. I finally saw that you were the answer to all my questions, the fulfillment of all my relationship dreams, and I know now that what I have with you could never possibly happen with anyone else. I wouldn't even want it to. It's you or nobody, and always will be. I love you forever, Mikey!"

Suddenly tears filled my eyes.

"I'm never going to get tired of hearing you say that, you know," I said emotionally. "I waited so long and wanted so much for you to love me as more than a friend, and now you do. You actually love me! I..." At that point, words failed me.

"Oh, Mikey!" Jennalee said lovingly as tears appeared in her own eyes. She gently touched my cheek. "I've always wanted you to be happy, just as much as I wanted it for me. I'm so glad it turned out that your greatest possible happiness was something I could give you myself! Nothing else could make ME happier than that."

She kissed me tenderly, then snuggled herself back into my arms. I held her gratefully for a while as random thoughts about the two of us bounced around in my mind.

"Hmm," I eventually muttered.

"What?" Jennalee asked.

"I was just thinking about how unusual we are as a couple."

"How do you mean?"

"Just by the way our relationship developed. Most couples meet, they go on a date, if that goes well they go on more dates, if those go well at some point they become exclusive, and if the relationship continues to grow, eventually the guy proposes. There's a BUILD to it, you know? But with us, we developed our relationship as friends for a long time first. In fact, as a practical matter, our afternoon at the beach today was really our first date, and before we even did that we were not only already exclusive, we already knew we were going to get married! When I do propose, there's not going to be much drama to it, is there?"

"Wow," Jennalee replied sarcastically as she turned again to look at me, "you certainly know how to suck the romance out of a moment, don't you?"

"That wasn't my intent," I chuckled. "But it does underscore why we don't need to rush anything. Don't worry, though, I'll find plenty of ways to be romantic. I promise!"

"Another promise!" groaned Jennalee, still in sarcastic mode. Then she smiled. "Actually, though, I think I can live with that one. Shall we seal it with a kiss?"

We sealed it with many kisses, followed by some more cuddling and small talk (which didn't really seem small at all because of who I was having it with), and then one last kiss to say goodbye for the day after her mother returned home.

As I walked back across the street, I thought again about the whole proposal concept as it applied to my relationship with Jennalee. I resolved right then that when it eventually did happen, my proposal would not be anticlimactic. I would find a way to make the moment special.

By the time I went to bed, I had the beginnings of an idea.

Chapter 3

During the previous two years, when Jennalee had been Kyle Milford's girlfriend, she and I had naturally spent considerably less time together than in the five years of our friendship prior to that. So for the rest of that summer, after becoming a couple, we devoted ourselves to making up for lost time. When we weren't doing our respective jobs (I did professional tutoring year round, something I'd gotten into a couple of years earlier primarily because working with Jennalee on her schoolwork had revealed that I was a good natural teacher; and Jennalee worked in one of the department stores at the local mall), we spent every possible moment together. I temporarily put all my academic pursuits aside (normally I almost always had some kind of research going on), and concentrated completely on enjoying being Jennalee Morgan's boyfriend, and on beginning to fulfill my two promises: to make her the happiest person in the world, and to find ways to be romantic.

The city that Jennalee and I lived in wasn't big. For example, it had three high schools: two public and one Catholic. It had a daily newspaper, but the editions were generally pretty thin and concentrated largely on local and regional issues. Our mall was fairly small and had only two major department stores. However, there was a considerably larger city located not far down the lake: it took less than fifteen minutes to go from our outskirts to theirs. This bigger neighboring city had four public high schools, plus three private high schools: one Catholic, one Protestant and one secular. Their daily newspaper was much more like a big city paper. Their mall was considerably bigger and had four department stores. Overall, as would be expected, their city generally had a much larger selection of stores, restaurants, and other urban amenities and attractions than ours did.

In our own more humble burg, we almost always referred to our larger neighbor as the 'Big Town.' During the long period when I could only dream of being Jennalee Morgan's boyfriend, I had imagined at one time or another taking her to just about every place worth going to and doing every activity worth doing, both in our own city and in the Big Town, as well as the surrounding areas.

Now that reality had replaced fantasy, and my love for Jennalee had been set free from its prison, I immediately started indulging every dream about being her boyfriend that I had ever had. During the rest of that summer I took her to all the places I'd ever wanted to take her to, in both of the two cities and beyond, and did all the activities with her that I'd ever imagined us doing as a couple, plus a few more that hadn't happened to occur to me before.

Even the activities we had done together sometimes while we were just friends (miniature golf, for example, or just staying home and playing a game or watching a movie) felt very different (and better!) when we did them as boyfriend-girlfriend. In fact, because each of us knew absolutely that we were and always would be the number one person in each other's lives, even the most mundane moments we now shared seemed special. There was a sort of uninhibited, comprehensive sense of closeness between us whenever we were together that gave us a high default level of excitement and happiness, and greatly enhanced our enjoyment of whatever we were doing at any given time.

One of the days I enjoyed most during the rest of that summer was when we went to the big amusement park that was located about halfway between the Big Town and another even larger city about sixty miles farther down the lake. Our two families had taken a day trip there together at some point during five of the last six summers, leaving early in the morning and returning late in the evening. This year, however, Jennalee and I made the excursion to the park by ourselves.

As with everything else, sharing all the rides and other attractions with Jennalee as boyfriend-girlfriend was significantly more enjoyable than the experience had ever been during the earlier trips to the park with our parents. The high point of the day came when I fulfilled a silly but special (to me) dream about being Jennalee's boyfriend that I'd had for a long time: kissing her while we were stopped at the top of the Ferris wheel. I'm sure that wanting to do that sounds corny (and it probably is), but even though

I'm not normal in many respects, some of my romantic ideas are. In any case, when we got up there Jennalee could tell without a word being said that it was an important moment for me, so she went all out to make our kiss as affectionate and romantic as possible. It was an amazing experience having that little fantasy come true.

Another thing that happened during this period was that Jennalee finally persuaded me to become active on Twitter. I'd started an account when she did several years earlier, but until that summer I'd used it almost exclusively just to follow Jennalee and read her Tweets. She often Tweeted Bible verses and little nuggets of Christian-based wisdom she had either picked up somewhere or thought of herself, in addition to general updates on her life and activities.

Jennalee had quickly accumulated quite a few followers, of course. I might have done more with my own account, except that hardly anyone besides Jennalee ever saw my Tweets. So I didn't see much point in doing them.

Now that I was her boyfriend, however, Jennalee made it her mission to get me followers. She encouraged me to share my wit and wisdom (as well as Bible verses, of course), and retweeted everything I did to her own followers. She also repeatedly Tweeted requests for her followers to follow my account as well. This caused many new people to start following me, which suddenly made Twitter a worthwhile activity, especially for faith sharing.

Both during and between all the fun activities Jennalee and I did over the remainder of that summer, we also had conversations about anything and everything a young couple would ever want to talk about. In addition, I often surprised her with a little present, or by taking her to places we'd once visited as friends that had made a special impression on us. I told her over and over in many different ways how awesome she was, how much it meant to me that she loved me now, and how much I loved her.

Jennalee immensely enjoyed every moment of all we did and everything that happened, and reciprocated by giving me her own unexpected presents and moments. For example, one day she invited me into her bedroom, where she played the Avril Lavigne song we had danced to on the day we met. Trying to recreate our dances from that memorable day, and then falling into each other's arms in near-hysterical laughter, was one of the most fun things we did all that summer.

We also continued doing the 'I love you' game from time to time, although it gradually occurred less frequently. It still usually cracked both of us up when we did it, though, and I was pretty sure we wouldn't be abandoning it any time soon.

There's an old saying that anticipation is better than reality. This turned out to be completely false in regard to me becoming Jennalee Morgan's boyfriend: the reality was even better than I'd ever imagined it would be; and as the days and weeks of the rest of that summer went by, the thrill showed no sign at all of even beginning to wear off. Every day was like a new dream come true for me, every moment was as magical as that first day as a couple had been, every kiss felt as wonderful as the first one we'd shared. I thanked both Jennalee and God for all of it from the bottom of my heart, over and over, day after day.

Finally summer ended, and school began again. In one sense the time had seemed to pass quickly; yet in another, not being Jennalee's boyfriend felt by then like a distant memory. We belonged together so absolutely that any other reality seemed not just impossible, but unimaginable. Any slight lingering doubts either of us might have had about being together forever were long gone by the time we walked into Jefferson High School on our first day as seniors.

The school year actually started out with some unpleasantness: though Jennalee was always going to be popular wherever she was, her former boyfriend Kyle Milford (who was tall and handsome and had been an all-conference linebacker the previous year) had also been quite popular at Jefferson, particularly among the jock/cheerleader faction. As a result, there was resentment from some people toward Jennalee for having broken up with Kyle just before he left town. That resentment also extended to me, for having taken over as Jennalee's boyfriend.

The first few weeks of school were therefore uncomfortable for us at times, both in person and on Twitter (making us thankful that neither of us had ever extended our social media presence beyond that one outlet). Jennalee actually shut down her account for a few days at one point just to avoid the unkind Tweets that were regularly coming her way. Of course, that did nothing to stop the rude remarks and shunning we were both experiencing sometimes at school.

Because Jennalee was so naturally likeable and generally tried to be nice to others, she had little experience dealing with people who actively disliked her and acted accordingly. Even though there were a limited number of adversaries involved, and most of her fellow students still liked her as much as ever, the situation was a difficult thing for her to experience. There were two basic reasons for this: first, because she truly wanted to get along as well as she could with everyone around her; and second, because she liked keeping her life as simple and happy as possible, and this kind of drama brought only complications and negativity.

I, on the other hand, had been picked on and hassled on numerous occasions over the years, especially before becoming Jennalee's best friend (my peers began to hold me in considerably higher regard after that, which significantly reduced the amount of bullying I encountered, although it still happened once in a while even then). I had developed a thick skin about it over time, and could now endure almost any amount of verbal abuse or back-stabbing behavior directed at me without getting upset. Seeing it happen to my beloved Jennalee, however, was another matter entirely: it angered me very much and made me want to strike back.

Jennalee didn't like seeing it happen to me either, but she could tell when I assured her that it didn't bother me for my own part that I was telling the truth. Plus, she was the primary target anyway.

So our individual reactions to what was going on were different; and once again, as had happened frequently during the seven years of our close friendship before we became a couple, our differences allowed each of us to help the other in the ways we needed it.

Because of my experience dealing with bullying, plus the fact that I knew Jennalee better as a person than anyone else in the world, I was able to provide a sympathetic and understanding ear for her, and to assist her in dealing with her feelings. This helped her to stay positive about the situation, which in turn allowed her to help ME by taking the lead in doing what we both knew the Lord wanted: to not only love our new enemies, but to try to turn them back into friends. Only by seeing Jennalee's love and faith and forgiveness and patience in action was I able to control and conquer my anger toward those who were trying to hurt her, and instead yield to God and follow her example.

Leaning on each other and helping each other the way we did during that time took the growth and maturing of our relationship to another new level. So the end result was that those who essentially sought to punish us for becoming a couple only succeeded in driving us even closer together, and strengthening the bond between us even more.

Day after day Jennalee kept a smile on her face no matter what, and kept being nice to everyone, including those who were trying to bring us down. I did my part too, and soon we could feel the resentment toward us beginning to pass. It was apparent that our enemies were starting to accept Jennalee's genuine regret over hurting Kyle. Plus, they couldn't help noticing how much in love the two of us were: it was obvious to anyone who saw us interacting that we truly belonged together. There was also the factor of Jennalee's natural likeability, which was hard for just about anyone to resist for very long, particularly when she was going out of her way to return love for hate. Inevitably, she eventually won almost everyone over again, and things gradually returned to normal.

Then school, like everything else Jennalee and I were now sharing as boyfriend-girlfriend, became even better than it had ever been before.

Chapter 4

During the last week of September I decided it was time for me and Jennalee to discuss a particular aspect of our futures. When she came over one evening after dinner for one of our homework sessions, I was ready to bring up the subject. I was seated at my computer desk when she entered my room carrying her book bag.

"Hey, Mikey!" she said cheerfully as she walked over to me. She gave me an affectionate kiss, then sat down on my bed and made herself at home. "What are we going to study first today?"

"Actually," I replied, rotating my chair so I could face her, "I wanted to talk about something else before we get to that."

"Sure!" she agreed with a big smile. "I'm always willing to put off studying, you know that!"

"Yes, I know!" I chuckled, then got serious again. "Don't worry, though: we WILL get to it soon. We've got to get you back to straight A's this year, to make your academic record almost as attractive as you are."

Jennalee giggled. "Aw, that's so sweet!" she said. "I love it when you say things like that!"

"That's why I say them!" I assured her. "Well, that and the fact that they're true. Anyway, speaking of academics, we'll obviously be going to college next year. Since we're going to go together, we need to start thinking about where, and narrowing down the options. That means we both need to figure out what we want to major in."

"You still haven't decided between biology and being a doctor, huh?" Jennalee said. "I wish I could tease you about that, but since I still have no idea at all what I want to study in college, I'd better not!"

"It's a tough decision for me," I affirmed. "As you know, there have been times over the last several years when I've really wanted to do each of them. Biology is kind of my first love academically, learning about how living organisms function. These days I'm most interested in the cellular level, all the amazingly complex operations that constantly go on in every living cell, from bacteria to our own human cells. I'd love to be someone who does cutting edge research and discovers completely new things. However, I also feel that I have the intelligence and temperament to be a really good doctor, and doing that would be using my gifts to directly help people. I like that idea a lot too. I would take many of the same undergraduate courses either way, but I'll want to do a double major plus at least one minor, and one or more of those would almost certainly be different depending on what field I decide to go into. That could definitely be a factor in figuring out ideal colleges for me. However, with some diligent research I can come up with a relatively short list of schools for each of my two possibilities that would be suitable."

"Wow, all those majors and minors sound like a lot of studying!" Jennalee exclaimed. Then she assumed an expression of uncertainty and added, "I hope you'll have a little time left for ME once in a while."

"Don't worry!" I assured her. "You always come first! The truth is I've already been studying a lot of things at college level on my own for a couple of years now, as well as taking as many advanced courses as I can at school. I'm pretty sure I'll be able to skip the lower level classes completely no matter which route I take, once they see how much I've already learned; and with my reading speed and high retention I've always been able to study very fast, as you well know. I won't ever take on any academic load that will keep me from having sufficient time to spend with you, both recreationally and to keep helping you with your own studies!"

"I knew that," Jennalee replied with a big smile, "but thanks for saying it anyway. You're the best boyfriend ever, you know that?"

"If I am," I answered with an equally big smile, "it's only because I have the best girlfriend ever to inspire me."

"Awww," said Jennalee, her nose twitching adorably as she said it, which made me pause for a second and give a little sigh.

"OK," I continued after a moment. "So even though I haven't made a final decision, I can find good options for either alternative. The problem is that I'm not just looking for schools for myself. In order for me to find colleges that would be an excellent fit for both of us, regardless of which way I go, I need to know what YOU want to study. Or would you rather look for colleges for yourself after you decide on a major, and have me work from your list?"

"Nah!" she answered immediately. "I trust you completely on that. Not only do you know a lot more about education and college than I do, but I know you love me so much that you'll turn the whole country upside down to find the very best schools for me!"

"Exactly what I had in mind!" I grinned. "So that brings us back to possible majors for you. Have you decided what field you might want to go into yet? I've asked you about this more than once before, and you've never given me an answer. We're getting close to the point now where a decision needs to be made."

"Oh, gosh, Mikey," Jennalee said in a slightly whiny tone. "I don't know. You know me, I don't like to think too far ahead. I avoid it at any reasonable cost, in fact! But I guess you're right, I do need to figure that out soon. I mean, declaring a major right away isn't required, of course, but not figuring it out beforehand only puts off the decision, and I don't want that hanging over me."

"True, that's good thinking," I agreed. "So isn't there anything specific you can see yourself doing with the rest of your life? Something that a degree would help prepare you for? What would you say your greatest passion is?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I just don't know, Mikey."

Suddenly I asked, "What's the Fall Play going to be?"

"Oh!" she replied quickly. "We're doing the female version of 'The Odd Couple!' It's perfect because we have a small drama club that's mostly girls. Auditions are next week-" She abruptly stopped, stared at me for a couple of seconds, then smiled slyly. "Ahh, I see what you did there!" she continued. "Very sneaky! You're trying to tell me that you think theater is my passion."

"Well, theater is something you've definitely been enthusiastic about for years," I replied. "You've always played a small role in the school plays, as well as helping out with sets and costumes and make-up."

"Yeah, it's fun to be involved in putting on a play without having the pressure of being one of the leads," she responded.

"That's kind of how you live your whole life," I pointed out. "Being reasonably serious about the important things like homework and chores, and then having as much fun as possible while avoiding pressure the rest of the time. Like softball, for example. You love to play in pick-up games, but you've never wanted to be in a league."

"Exactly!" Jennalee confirmed. "I always love how you get me so well, Mikey! In a league, all the other players are depending on you, week after week after week. In a pick-up game, when it's over it's just over. That's so much better to me."

"You're the happiest person I've ever known," I said, "so it's hard for me to criticize your philosophy. But..."

"I hate that word," Jennalee put in with a little frown. "Nothing good ever follows it."

I laughed. "It all depends," I replied. "The thing is, we're not kids anymore. Not little kids, at least. We need to start thinking like adults now when it comes to looking ahead. That's why I think you need to change your attitude about avoiding pressure. First of all, dealing with more pressure successfully is part of becoming an adult. Beyond that, though, sometimes the pressure is really worth it, because the reward is so much greater. Particularly when it involves something you really LIKE to do. So I think it's time for you to move up from the small parts and the crews and get into the spotlight, to really embrace acting as your career choice. You know it's what you love, and it's clearly what you're most talented at."

"You really think I'm that talented?" she asked, seeming genuinely interested but doubtful.

"JJ, how many times over the years have we been watching a movie together, and you've made comments about how one of the actors didn't do something right?"

"Not THAT many," she replied defensively.

"Maybe more than you recall offhand. The most recent one was just a couple of weeks ago, remember?"

"Well, yeah, but ANYONE could see that he shouldn't have reacted so quickly to what his daughter

said. It came out of nowhere, it was a total shock. A real person would have been stunned for a second, but he just responded right away. It wasn't natural at all."

"I didn't notice it until you pointed it out," I countered, "and obviously the actors and director didn't notice it either. You may not have a huge amount of formal acting experience, but you have amazing instincts for it, and you've learned a tremendous amount both by doing and watching, in the school plays and from TV and movies. You have a gift, JJ! You get acting like...well, like we get each other! Like I get biology! And it's not just the mental thing. You have such a wonderfully expressive face, and such a beautiful voice. Every time you talk, or even just react, it's a like a little performance. You're the most naturally entertaining person I've ever known. So you have all the tools any actor could possibly ever want! You're even a really good singer, and you took dancing lessons for five years, so you're totally prepared to be a lead in musicals too."

"You really think I should be a starring actor, huh?" she asked, still obviously uncertain.

"JJ, have you ever really looked at yourself in a mirror? In addition to the whole talent thing, you're also very pretty, and extremely charismatic. You light up every room you walk into, and people instinctively like you. If there was ever a person who belonged in the middle of a stage as the star of a play, it's you!"

Suddenly Jennalee's face relaxed and she gave me a little smile.

"You really do believe in me," she said. "I don't even have to ask you to confirm that, because you wouldn't be pushing me to do something that you didn't think I could handle. You think it would make me happy, don't you?"

"I do!" I agreed emphatically. "I've been thinking about this a lot recently, about what you have talent for and what career choice would make you the happiest. No matter how I analyzed it, everything always pointed most strongly to acting, in roles where you're one of the leads in the production. Yes, it's a level of pressure you don't usually face voluntarily; but I'm sure that when you walk out for your first curtain call after your first performance in a starring role, and the audience goes nuts applauding and cheering because you were so awesome, it will be one of the best feelings you've ever had."

She suddenly closed her eyes for a few seconds, apparently deep in thought.

Then she sighed, opened her eyes again and looked me.

"All right," she said, looking happy. "Next week I audition for one of the leads. One of the Odd Couple. And I'll major in acting, of course."

"Great!" I replied, genuinely excited. "And that's exactly what you'll be, as long as you work hard at it." I paused. "By the way, what were you thinking about when you had your eyes closed? The audience clapping and cheering?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I was praying - and I'm going to keep praying about it all the way up to the auditions: for the resolve to do this, and the poise to do it well." Then she winked at me. "And to make sure I'm paying attention, just in case God wants to warn me not to do it at all."

I chuckled. "It's always a good idea to be listening for what God might be trying to tell us," I said, "but I'm not worried about that one. God gave you all those gifts, after all! Plus, I think it's a sign that the first play you're doing this for has two main leads. You'll be sharing the starring duties with someone else, so that will be a little less pressure on you. This is all going to work out, you'll see."

"I haven't gotten the role yet," she reminded me. "I might not get it at all."

"Yes you will," I replied confidently. "If you go in there prepared and believing in yourself, no one else will have a chance."

"I'm only going to be able to do this because I can't NOT believe in someone you believe in so much," she replied. "Even if it's me. If you think I can do it, then I have to think so too."

"That's us, isn't it?" I observed. "Always helping each other be better. We did it so many times as friends, and we're still doing it now."

"And we always will!" she concluded.

"Amen!" I added.

"And now," Jennalee continued, "since that matter has been decided, I suppose you want to move on to studying." Suddenly she came off of my bed, plopped herself onto my lap, wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a big kiss.

"Studying would be a good idea," I said after the kiss ended. I put my arms around her and held her

lovingly. "However, that was a pretty serious discussion we just had, and I'm sensing you'd like to take a little break for something more enjoyable before we hit the books."

"Like I said, Mikey," she replied with a big smile, "you always get me."

"As it happens," I responded, smiling back, "I approve of your idea completely."

"I knew you would," she said, "because I get you too!"

"OK then, that's settled," I confirmed. "So just to wrap up what we were talking about: I'm going to start making two lists of colleges that work for each of my choices AND have a top notch drama department. Then after I make my decision, you can eventually make the final choice about where we go. Sound like a good plan?"

She responded by kissing me again, which I took for a 'yes.'

Then all the plans for both college and studying were forgotten for a while.

Chapter 5

Over the following days I helped Jennalee practice for her audition. She decided to go for the part of Olive, the easygoing slob, because that character was closer to her own personality than the fastidious, uptight Florence. She also thought that Olive would be more fun to play in any case. She worked very hard on her audition scene, trying to get everything just right. When the day came, she nailed the audition just as I'd predicted she would, and got the part of Olive.

The next day I started helping Jennalee prepare for the eventual performances of the play. I was quite useful in assisting her with the memorization of her lines. Improving the quality of her acting, however, was an area where my contributions were of much less value.

At first Jennalee would ask me fairly often about her delivery of specific lines or speeches, and sometimes about whether she was being consistent and believable in her portrayal of Olive from scene to scene. I could tell her how funny or moving something seemed to me, but I was out of my league when it came to objectively evaluating how good anything was that she was doing. Finally, on the third day of helping her, I responded to one of her inquiries with a question of my own.

"I'm writing a paper for my Advanced Science class about chloroplasts," I said. "Do you think it would be more interesting to emphasize how they contain chlorophyll and the enzymes needed for photosynthesis, or how they synthesize adenosine triphosphate from adenosine diphosphate and inorganic phosphate?"

She stared at me as if I had just sprouted antlers.

"How would I know about something like THAT?" she asked incredulously.

"You wouldn't, obviously," I chuckled, "and that's pretty much how I feel when you ask me these detailed questions about how you should play Olive. Science is my specialty. You're the acting genius here. You should follow your own instincts, and the knowledge and understanding you've accumulated about acting from both the small parts you've played and all the TV shows and movies you've watched. You've been teaching yourself acting all along. That's why you've been able to point out little mistakes in the performances of others sometimes. You know how to evaluate your own acting already, far better than I ever could. I'll still be glad to give you my opinions whenever you want them, and the advice you can get from Mrs. Fletcher at school will obviously be more valuable than anything I could tell you, but you should trust your own feelings above anything else. Don't be afraid to believe in yourself!"

She sighed and shook her head. "This is a different kind of thinking than I've ever done before," she observed. "I always like to get the best advice I can about things, both to reduce the pressure on me and to avoid making mistakes; but if what you say is true - and I trust you so completely that I almost have to believe it - the best advice I can get about doing this part is my own! That goes against all the instincts I've developed for seventeen years! It's taking some getting used to!"

"That's OK," I assured her. "Like dealing with pressure, trusting yourself more is part of becoming an adult, and this is one area where you should be able to get comfortable with that fairly easily, because you know you do have a big talent."

"All right," she nodded. "Trust myself first. Got it." She paused, then continued. "So for now, let's just concentrate on memorizing. I won't ask you any more questions. I'll work out the performance details on my own for a while. Maybe consult Mrs. Fletcher sometimes, but mostly trust my own feelings. Then when it's all in my head and I really know what I'm doing, you can start telling me if anything seems wrong or unnatural. How does that sound?"

"That's my girl!" I replied approvingly with a big smile. "That plan will work, as long as you keep believing in yourself."

"Thanks!" she said, smiling back. "So let's get back to it, then!"

From that time on, Jennalee immersed herself in the play and in her role to a level well beyond any

commitment I'd ever seen her make before. She gave every spare moment she could, at school and at home, to studying her script and figuring out exactly how she wanted to play every scene and say every line. This was time consuming, and she soon asked for a leave from her job at the store so she could devote herself even more fully to the rehearsals and to polishing her portrayal of Olive. Eventually I felt compelled to practically force her to take some time to just have fun. This was an amazing role reversal for us, of course, since it had always been her job to make sure MY life stayed balanced.

Despite the pressure she was putting herself under, though, she was clearly enjoying the whole process, and didn't seem nervous about the idea that the success of the play depended primarily on herself and only one other person. She was learning to believe in herself more than she ever had before, and watching it happen was one of the most exciting experiences I'd ever had.

It only took Jennalee a little over a week of intense work to get her lines memorized to her satisfaction. We then began doing full scenes together, with me reading the other parts so she could react to the lines. At this point she began fully acting the role more like she eventually would during the performances, demonstrating everything she'd been working on by herself. Even though I had believed in her talent completely, I was still slightly surprised by just how much depth she was developing in her portrayal of Olive, how hilarious she was making her funny lines (sometimes I would laugh out loud, even though I knew the line was coming, because her delivery was that good), how much genuine, fully believable emotion she was bringing to the more serious moments.

After only a couple of days of this, however, Jennalee told me that as grateful as she was for my help, what she really needed at that point was to spend as much time as possible outside of the formal rehearsals working with Angelica Sims, the girl who was playing Florence, the other lead.

"It means less time with you for a while," she said apologetically, "and I'll miss that; but if I'm going to do the best job I can, this is the way to do it."

"No, it's fine, JJ, I do want that very much," I replied. "It's not like I won't see you at all, and it's only for a few weeks. You have my full support, as always."

"Thanks, Mikey!" she smiled. She gave me a kiss, then left to go to work with Angelica. From then on I didn't help her anymore with the play.

The rehearsals at school were closed to outsiders, and as time went on Jennalee was increasingly evasive about what went on there (which was strange, because she usually loved telling me about whatever was going on in her life). So a week before the first performance I went privately to Mrs. Fletcher, the teacher who was directing the play, to ask her how Jennalee was doing.

"Oh, she's amazing!" Mrs. Fletcher immediately replied with obvious enthusiasm. "I've been trying since she was a freshman to talk her into going for a lead, because I could see while she was playing the small parts that she had considerable talent, and of course she has a lot of charisma too, probably the best stage presence of any student I've ever had; but I had no idea just HOW good she could be! It took a while, she was nervous at the first read-through, but she gained confidence pretty quickly. Then, when we got to on-stage rehearsals, something started happening that I've never seen before in all the plays I've directed."

"What was that?" I asked, naturally very interested.

"Well, during the first on-stage run-through, at one point Jen very shyly suggested to Angelica Sims, the girl who is playing Florence, that she should be saying one of her lines differently, that it wasn't as good as it could be the way she was doing it. She demonstrated how she thought it should be done, and then Angelica tried it that way, and Jenna was right! The line was suddenly much funnier. It was a way of saying the line that had never even occurred to ME. Angelica, who takes her acting seriously and really wants to do a good job, thanked Jenna, and told her to please let her know if she noticed anything else that she could do better.

"That started it. A few minutes later another girl asked Jen about one of her own lines, and Jen again gave a suggestion that improved that girl's delivery of it. It snowballed from there. After a couple of more rehearsals, Jen had become the unofficial acting coach for the whole production. Sometimes it was in response to a request, other times she would just jump in when she thought someone could do something better, but either way the other cast members would listen. They had seen that she knew what she was talking about, and understood that they would look better in the play if they took her advice.

"I probably would have instinctively resented all of it, since I'm supposed to be the director, except

that I could see the play getting better and better because of what Jen was doing. Plus, I did contribute something to her growth, because one day we had an in-depth discussion about the Olive character. Jen wanted to understand her better, so we talked about how Olive might have gotten to be the way she was, beyond just what the play reveals, and what her general attitudes about life might be. She really understands that acting is about getting the audience emotionally involved with the story, and especially with the characters, and that an actor achieves that by being as interesting and entertaining as possible while still being fully believable at all times. Again, I've never had a high school student who thought so deeply about the process of acting, and understood it so well.

"Right after that was when she persuaded Angelica to start doing private one-on-one work with her in addition to the rehearsals, and soon they had developed a genuine chemistry. Their characters started to seem more and more real and believable, both individually and in terms of their love-hate friendship. I've never seen anything like it at the high school level, maybe even college. I mean, don't misunderstand, I'm not saying Jennalee's ready for Broadway yet, but she's further on the way to it now than any other student I've ever directed."

"Wow!" I exclaimed in amazement. Now I knew why Jennalee didn't want to talk about the rehearsals: she felt it would sound like bragging to tell me what she was doing, and she was too humble a person to want to do that. "Thanks for sharing that with me, Mrs. Fletcher! You have no idea how good that makes me feel."

"By the way," she continued, "did you, by any chance, have something to do with Jenna deciding to play a lead? I know how close the two of you are. Did you encourage her?"

"I certainly did," I confirmed. I related the basic points of the discussion I'd had with Jennalee about her college major, and about embracing her love of and talent for acting.

"I can't thank you enough, Michael," Mrs. Fletcher replied. "This is almost certainly going to be the best production I've ever directed, and that's largely due to Jennalee; and apparently that wouldn't have happened without you."

"My pleasure," I responded. "Literally!"

"I just hope we get decent sized audiences," Mrs. Fletcher continued. "With all the hard work that Jen and Angie are doing to make this show so good, it would be a shame if we got our usual mediocre attendance level. There have been notices in the papers here and in the Big Town, but we always do that and it doesn't seem to help much. Our best hope for breaking the normal pattern is that someone from our paper is going to be here to see the show on opening night so he can write a review for the Saturday morning edition. If we can put on a really good show that night and get a really good review, maybe that would boost attendance for the rest of the weekend."

"I really hope it works out that way!" I agreed. I paused, then added, "You know, based on what you told me about what Jennalee is doing, I think it would be nice if she got an additional credit on the program, like 'Assistant Director' or something, to more fully describe her contributions to the show. That would look good to the college admissions people too."

"You're right, I'll do that!" Mrs. Fletcher replied. "Plus, I'll also write a letter of recommendation for her, of course."

"I'm sure it will be a very glowing one!" I said with a smile. "Thanks for your time, and for everything, Mrs. Fletcher."

"You're welcome!" she replied. "I'm sure you'll be here for the first performance, so see you then!"

Chapter 6

Opening night for 'The Odd Couple' was the next Friday, with the curtain going up at 7:00. There were two more performances scheduled for Saturday - a matinee at 2:00 and an evening show at 7:00 - then another 2:00 show on Sunday to conclude the run.

On Monday of that week, Angelica Sims and her boyfriend, Dewayne Freeman (who was also in the show), began joining Jennalee and me for lunch at school. Jennalee and Angelica had discovered through their work together on the play that they had a lot in common beyond just a love for theater and acting. A genuine friendship had begun to form between them, so they wanted to share time together beyond play practice. Jennalee had made many casual friends over the years, but few of them had ever become close friends, and none had ever grown nearly as close to her as I was. I hoped that Angelica would turn out to be a close friend to her for the long term.

On Friday Jennalee naturally left early to go to the school theater for the pre-performance preparations, taking her mom's car. Mrs. Morgan rode with us later. We stopped at a flower shop on the way so Mrs. Morgan and I could each pick up a small bouquet to give to Jennalee after the show.

Before she left, Jennalee had requested that I meet her in the hall outside of the backstage area before I took my seat. When we arrived I immediately went there, leaving the bouquet with my mom.

I knocked on the door that led backstage, and after a minute or so Jennalee came out. She was already in full costume and make-up, and looked amazing except for one thing: an obvious case of pre-show butterflies. Now that it had come down to the Big Night, she was understandably nervous.

"You still think I can do this, right, Mikey?" she asked softly.

"Wrong!" I replied. "I KNOW you can. You're going to blow everyone away, and I can't wait to see it!"

She smiled, though it was still a nervous smile.

"Thanks, Mikey," she said, her voice a bit stronger. "Knowing you believe in me so much, I really think I CAN do that. I just hope I stop feeling so jittery once the show actually starts."

"I've read that many performers experience that kind of thing," I responded. "First of all, nervousness beforehand is natural, because it's a sign that you care about doing well. However, you know this play inside and out now, and know exactly what you want to do out there. Someone in that situation usually gets into a relative comfort zone once they start doing what they've been practicing. I feel very confident that since you're such a natural performer, it will happen that way with you. Just get that first line out, and it will all be downhill from there."

"Thanks, Mikey!" she replied with a smile, visibly less nervous already. "I should have known that you would do research to prepare for giving me a pep talk! Having a really smart boyfriend is a gift from God that never stops giving!"

I chuckled. "Glad to be of service," I said with a little nod of my head. "I better let you get back in there now. Break a leg!"

"Thanks again!" she said. "And don't worry: I intend to make you proud of me tonight."

"I've never doubted I would be," I replied. "How about we say a quick prayer just for some insurance?" We joined hands, and I prayed for God to help Jennalee use the talent He had given her with calmness and confidence. Then we gave each other a quick little hug, being careful to preserve her make-up.

"I love you!" I suddenly said, loudly and quickly.

"Hey, that's not fair!" she giggled. "You knew I wouldn't be thinking about the game now!"

"It made you laugh," I replied with a smile. "That was all I wanted."

"Thanks, I did need that!" she agreed. "Love you too!" Then she turned and disappeared through the backstage door. I rejoined my parents and Mrs. Morgan, and we were ushered to our seats.

Glancing through the program as I waited for the show to start, I saw that Mrs. Fletcher had been true

to her word: underneath her own credit as director was 'Assistant Director: Jennalee Morgan.' I hoped everyone would notice it.

By curtain time the school theater was only about half filled. This wasn't surprising, of course: as Mrs. Fletcher had pointed out the week before, the plays at our school seldom drew big audiences. In a way it was probably just as well, at least for opening night, because a packed house might have made it harder for Jennalee to get past her nerves and settle into the play. I said another prayer for her, this one silent, as the lights went down and the curtain began to rise.

When Jennalee made her first entrance a few minutes into the show (immediately lighting up the stage with her presence, of course), she still looked slightly nervous. She had to say a long line as she entered - the answer to a trivia question - and when she finished I saw a hint of relief in her face that she had gotten the line out correctly. One of the other girls then asked her a non-trivia question, to which her answer would be her first funny line of the play. I could see Jennalee quickly focusing herself while the question was being asked, and then she delivered her line with just the right pacing and inflection and facial expression to make it as funny as possible. She got a good laugh, and that one very positive response was enough to wash away her remaining nervousness. From that point on she looked completely comfortable and was fully in character, and her confidence quickly grew stronger and stronger as she fed off of the reactions of the audience. By the end of the first scene it was overwhelmingly obvious that acting in starring roles was truly what Jennalee Morgan had been born to do, and I could tell that she knew it too.

Throughout the play her performance was hilarious and emotionally moving in all the right places. She was totally believable as Olive, and richly entertaining. Angelica did an excellent job in her role too, and the chemistry between them that Mrs. Fletcher had spoken about was amazing to watch. The supporting actors also did very well. The whole production was at a considerably higher level than any of the previous plays I'd seen at school, the ones in which Jennalee had taken only a small role. Still, the best thing about this one, unquestionably, was Jennalee's outstanding performance.

When the show was over, I turned out to be wrong about Jennalee's curtain call: she didn't just get the loudest applause and cheers, she got a standing ovation. As she stood up there with tears of joy in her eyes waving to the audience, I wanted to scream out, *THAT'S MY GIRLFRIEND!!*

I knew it would take Jennalee a while to get out of make-up and costume, so I passed some time hanging out in the lobby with our parents after the show, along with numerous other people who I assumed were parents of other cast and crew members. After a few minutes I noticed a man who was leaning against a wall and writing in a notebook. I strongly suspected that he was the writer from the local paper who was going to do the review, and it occurred to me that I could provide him with some interesting information. So I went over and introduced myself, and he confirmed his identity. I told him that I was Jennalee Morgan's boyfriend, and asked him if he had noticed her additional credit in the program as 'Assistant Director.' I then explained to him briefly what Jennalee had done for the show beyond her own role. He seemed impressed, and thanked me for letting him know about it. Out of curiosity I asked him what he'd thought of the show.

"Since you've been so helpful," he replied, "I'll give you a hint: I think you and your girlfriend are going to enjoy the review very much."

I thanked him, then let him return to his notes.

Soon after this I made my way to the backstage door where I had given Jennalee the pep talk: I wanted to be the first one to talk to her when she came out.

She emerged a few minutes later with Angelica and Dewayne, followed by several other cast members. As soon as Jennalee saw me she ran the three or four steps over to me, threw her arms around my neck and hugged me hard. I hugged her back and said, "I told you you'd be awesome, and everyone here tonight agreed! A standing ovation for your first starring performance! Doesn't get much better than that!"

"No it doesn't!" she agreed as she released her hug and backed up a step so she could look at me. "Thank you again so much for believing in me and talking me into this! You were right, this IS one of the best feelings I've ever had!"

I handed her the bouquet I was holding.

"Maybe that's a bit corny," I said, "but I'm so proud of you right now, and so proud to be your boyfriend, that it's appropriate to give you something traditional to express it. Congratulations!"

"Thanks!" she replied. "I'm going to keep this forever!"

At that point Angelica said, "We're gonna go find our parents. See you tomorrow, Jen! Great job!"

"See you, Angie! You were great too!" Jennalee replied as Angelica and Dewayne walked away. We shared another big hug, then turned and started heading for the lobby ourselves.

Jennalee's mom and my parents met us about halfway there, and I yielded Jennalee to them so she could receive their praise and congratulations, as well as her mom's bouquet. Then we all finished the walk to the lobby together.

When we got there, we found that there were still some audience members hanging around. I barely had time to start wondering why before several of them came up to Jennalee, wanting to tell her how good they thought her performance was. The rest of the people then noticed Jennalee's presence, and before I knew it a line had formed. Some of the people were students, but others were adults. I watched proudly as one person after another gave Jennalee high compliments, and a few actually asked her to autograph their programs. She looked surprised but delighted, and I couldn't have been more delighted for her. Nothing in the world could make me as happy as seeing Jennalee happy, and I had never seen her any happier than this. It confirmed to me once again that acting was what Jennalee Morgan had been born for.

Finally our two families made our way to the parking lot. Jennalee insisted that I ride with her and her mom, and naturally I approved of that idea completely. We cuddled up together in the back seat as the drive home began.

"What a night, huh?" I commented a minute or so into the ride. "You'll remember this one forever!"

"I sure will!" she agreed. "I've definitely found my calling, thanks to you. Now we just have to figure out what YOURS is."

That topic was becoming increasingly uncomfortable for me to just think about, and I certainly didn't want to talk about it at that moment. So I quickly changed the subject.

"Hey," I said, "I noticed in the program that you were also listed as 'Assistant Director.' What's that about?"

"Oh," she said, turning to look at me. "Well...I guess I helped Mrs. Fletcher out a little with the other actors. It was really nice of her to put that in there."

"You don't need to be so modest," I replied. "Especially with me. As it happens, I talked to Mrs. Fletcher last week because I was curious about the rehearsals. She told me exactly what was happening and how much you were contributing. There's nothing wrong with getting credit for that. You deserved it. By the way, I hope you don't mind, but I may have mentioned something about it to the guy from the paper. I think you and the show are going to get a really nice review tomorrow."

"You shouldn't have done that," Jennalee said. She paused, then continued. "Although in your place I probably would have done it too, so I guess I can't be mad at you. Anyway, the thing about what I did is, I was kinda embarrassed about it, especially at first. We're all just students, after all, and I didn't really feel like it was my place to tell the others what to do. Once it started happening, though, everyone said I was making the show better, so they didn't mind, and so I didn't mind so much; and eventually, helping the others whenever I could started feeling natural to me, just like working on my own acting. Am I making any sense to you?"

"Actually, yes," I responded, "and I'm really glad you're that humble. If and when you become famous, that attitude will serve you well."

"I don't think I have to worry about that for a while," she replied with a smile.

"Well, you signed your first autographs tonight," I pointed out. "So obviously you already have fans!" She giggled. "That WAS pretty cool, I have to admit. But don't worry, I'll stay humble. If for no other reason than because you'll have my back, like always. You won't ever let me get a big head."

"I don't think I'll ever need to help you with that, but I'll be here just in case!"

"Thanks!" she said, then suddenly added, "I love you! Ha, got you that time!"

"I graciously concede defeat," I chuckled. "After all, this is your night to shine." We exchanged a brief kiss, then she turned and snuggled back into me as the ride home continued.

The review in the morning paper was, indeed, glowing. The writer said it was the best high school production he had ever seen, and that Jennalee was an exceptional young actress with all the tools to be a star someday. He also noted her other contributions to the show, and closed by speculating that someday he might be bragging to his grandchildren that he had seen Jennalee Morgan's first starring performance. There

was also a very nice picture of Jennalee and Angelica in character, which I assumed was something Mrs. Fletcher had arranged for and released to the paper.

Jennalee came over that morning for a study session (it was an unusual time for us to have one, but we had to work around her unusual schedule for the weekend). However, we ended up spending more time discussing the review and the show than we did studying. Jennalee was a bit embarrassed by the review, but also very pleased by it. I expressed hope that the article and picture would result in larger audiences for the remaining three shows.

I skipped the Saturday matinee to catch up on some additional studying of my own, then went to the evening show to see Jennalee again, stopping to pick up a couple of extra copies of the paper on the way. She and the rest of the cast and crew had stayed at school between shows, with some of their parents providing a meal for them. I arrived early enough to be able to talk to Jennalee prior to the evening show.

She told me that the afternoon performance had gone very well again, that she had gotten her second standing ovation, and that the audience had been considerably bigger than the one the previous evening: the theater had been at least three quarters full. This was unusual, as normally the Saturday matinee was the lightest attended performance of a weekend run at our school.

"I'm sure the review had something to do with that," I said. "Perhaps word-of-mouth was also part of it."

"Whatever caused it, I'm just glad so many people showed up!" she replied happily. "The more people who see it, the more all the hard work we did was worth it, you know?"

"Very true!" I agreed. "Should be interesting to see tonight's attendance. By the way, you don't seem nervous tonight like you were last night."

"Just a little," she replied with a wink, "but I know I can do this now, so it doesn't scare me anymore. I really LIKE being out there!"

"As I said when we had our discussion," I reminded her, "center stage is where you belong."

"I guess you were right!" she acknowledged. "Thanks again!"

By show time the theater looked full. Sitting in the midst of the big crowd, I could feel a difference from the night before, a higher level of group energy: this audience was much more excited about being here, was clearly expecting to be entertained by something considerably better than a normal high school play.

Jennalee didn't disappoint them. She was completely calm, focused and in character from beginning to end, and she delivered a performance that was actually even better than what she had done the night before.

Seeing how packed the house was, during the intermission I went to the ticket window and inquired about the attendance. I found out that fifteen minutes before curtain time the show had sold out completely. It was the first time that had ever happened in the history of the school. I also found out that many of the tickets for the final performance the next afternoon had also been claimed already. I was glad our parents had bought tickets for the Sunday show for themselves and me the night before.

Jennalee got another standing ovation at the end, and because of the size of the audience it was considerably louder and more impressive than the one I'd been part of the night before.

The Sunday performance also sold out, and Jennalee and her castmates again put on an outstanding show. This time the standing ovation started at the beginning of the curtain calls; Jennalee simply got the loudest and longest applause.

After the show I made my way to the backstage door to wait for Jennalee again. When she emerged, Mrs. Fletcher was with her. After Jennalee and I had hugged and I had congratulated her on another great performance and a great run, Mrs. Fletcher spoke to her.

"So, you're definitely going to do it, right?" she asked. "And help coach the other actors again, too?"

"Sure, if you can arrange everything," Jennalee replied. "And if I win the audition, of course."

"I'm not worried about that," Mrs. Fletcher stated, then continued, "I've wanted to put on 'Hello, Dolly!' for years, it's been a dream of mine, but the level of participation needed for a show like 'Dolly' has always been hard to get here. Plus, I've never had someone who seemed good enough to really bring the Dolly character to life. With you being willing to be a lead I have that matter covered, so I just need to fill out the rest of the cast and chorus. Not coincidentally, I think I also have an excellent means of persuasion to make that happen this time: after what you did in this show, I think the chance to be up on stage with you

will be very appealing. Our Drama Club is small, but the choir participation here is pretty large, and singers who can act are just as good for a musical as actors who can sing. I'm optimistic enough about the prospects that I'm not afraid to make a commitment, since I basically have to make one to whatever musical we're going to do right about now anyway. So we're going for 'Hello, Dolly!' next spring!"

"I'll certainly do my part to help make your dream come true!" Jennalee assured her. "Well, thanks again for everything, Mrs. Fletcher. I had so much fun doing this, and I can't wait to start it all over again with the next play!"

"Thank YOU, Jen!" Mrs. Fletcher responded. "I can't wait either! Take care!"

"You too!" said Jennalee as Mrs. Fletcher began to walk away.

As we rode home (Jennalee had insisted on the same arrangement as Friday), I asked her how she felt.

"I feel so many things," she replied, "but I think most of all I feel like I'm really finally growing up. I applied myself to something completely by choice, put myself under pressure, and really worked hard at it, and I could handle all of it. I don't think I could have done that even last year." She smiled at me. "Thank you so much for seeing that I COULD do it, and how happy it would make me. There's no way I would have done it if it hadn't been for you."

"I'm not so sure about that," I replied. "If you think back to that day, you'll realize that it wasn't exactly hard for me to talk you into it. I think deep down you knew you wanted to pursue acting as your career. I gave you a little nudge to get you going, but even if I hadn't said anything, I think it's very possible you would have realized on your own that you wanted to go for a lead this time."

"I'll always give you most of the credit no matter what you say!" she insisted. "But in any case, I'm feeling more and more like an adult now. Which means I'll totally be ready when you propose to me!"

"We've still got a while before that can happen," I noted, "but it's good that you're feeling more ready. Just don't grow up so much that you start losing that free-spirited part of you that I adore."

"Oh, don't worry!" she assured me. "Just because I CAN be more grown up now doesn't mean I want to do it all the time. In fact, I definitely DON'T want to! As much fun as the play was, I'm definitely ready for a break from all that extra pressure. I'm still the same person, I can just be more mature now when I want or need to be."

"I'm glad of that too," I said with a big smile, "and that you know where your life is going now. You're on your way, Jennalee Morgan!"

She gave me an even bigger smile, then a brief kiss; then she snuggled into me, and I put my arm around her.

You know where you're going, I thought. That just leaves me.

Chapter 7

Jennalee's experience with the play had several after effects. One was that she was suddenly even more popular at school than before. She had always turned heads and gotten a lot of little greetings whenever we had walked down the halls together, but now many of those who had seen her in the play were stopping her to give her compliments and engage her in brief conversations.

In the period during and after the run of the play, Jennalee also saw a significant increase in the number of her Twitter followers, and the many nice Tweets she started getting were another source of delight for her. She replied to every one of them, knowing it would make the senders happy.

The responses to Jennalee's performances weren't limited to school and Twitter. She returned to her part time after-school-and-weekend job at the mall after the play was over, and during her first week back she experienced three separate incidents where people came up to her to compliment her and talk to her about the play. Each time she told me about one of these incidents I felt a little frustrated that I hadn't been there to witness and enjoy it.

Fortunately, I didn't have to wait long to see such an encounter for myself.

It happened on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, a week after the last performance, while Jennalee and I were out doing some relatively early Christmas shopping. At one point we stopped at a particular store so she could take advantage of a sale price on a gift set of her mom's favorite fragrance.

When we went to check out and Jennalee set the gift set on the counter, the middle-aged woman at the register smiled and said, "Hi, welcome to-" Suddenly her eyes widened a little as she looked at Jennalee. "Hey!" she exclaimed. "I know you! You're Jennalee Morgan, right? The girl from Jefferson High who was in 'The Odd Couple!' My husband and I saw it last weekend after we read the review. I loved it! You're such a good actress, and so beautiful! I bet you're going to be doing TV and movies someday!"

"Thank you very much!" Jennalee replied, looking slightly embarrassed but very happy. "I'm so glad you liked it. We worked really hard to make it a good play, so it's always nice to get compliments."

"Well, I'm very glad to meet you!" the clerk said. She held out her hand. "I'm Annette!" she continued, in her excitement apparently forgetting that she was wearing a large name tag.

"Nice to meet you too," Jennalee responded as she shook the woman's hand. "Thanks for coming to the play. I hope you'll come back to see our musical next spring."

"Well, if you're in it, I definitely will!" the woman declared. As she spoke she absently put the gift set into a bag. "I'll look forward to that!" She handed the bag to Jennalee, then said, "Thank you for shopping here! I hope I'll see you here again soon."

"Thank you, that's very nice of you," Jennalee replied with a little chuckle. She handed the bag back to the clerk. "But I should probably pay for this."

The woman stared at Jennalee for a moment, looked down at the bag, and then blushed brightly.

"Oh, my goodness!" she said with an embarrassed giggle. "You're honest too, that's really nice! I'm sorry for being so distracted." She took the gift set back out of the bag, scanned it, and then quickly re-bagged it and returned the bag to Jennalee, who had been pulling out the money to pay for it at the same time.

With the transaction officially completed at last, the clerk again thanked Jennalee, who gave her a dazzling smile as we walked toward the door.

"Well, you certainly made HER day!" I observed as we made our way to her mom's car. "The word 'starstruck' comes to mind."

"Yeah, she was more enthusiastic than the ones at the mall," Jennalee replied with a chuckle.

"Regardless, it's still a little embarrassing for me when that happens, but I'm glad I can make some people so happy so easily. It's a good feeling!"

"It's part of being famous, obviously," I observed, "so I guess it's good for you to get some experience

dealing with fans at this level, so if you do hit it big someday you'll be more ready."

"If it does happen, I'm going to try to make as many of my fans as I can as happy as possible," she responded with a big smile.

"Exactly what I would expect from you," I replied, putting my arm around her and giving her a squeeze.

The most significant after effect of the play, however, was Jennalee's newfound friendship with Angelica Sims. As I'd hoped, their friendship continued to grow after the play was over, and it wasn't long before Angelica had become Jennalee's closest female friend ever. I was delighted to see it happen.

Thanksgiving was a joyous occasion, because we were both more thankful than we had ever been in our lives. We had both been raised to always be thankful to God for all our blessings, but this particular year we were obviously even more thankful than usual because of how He had guided us into becoming a couple. It was something we were both extremely grateful for every day, of course, but on the annual official Day of Thanks the feeling was enhanced even more. Plus, we were also very thankful for Jennalee having discovered that acting was her destiny. We truly praised God with all our hearts and minds for all He had done and was continuing to do for us.

The final performance of 'The Odd Couple' had been recorded by the school, in part for release on DVD. The week after Thanksgiving, Jefferson High started selling the DVDs, and within three days it had outsold any previous video release of a school production. By the end of the first week it had more than tripled the sales of the next highest seller in school history. It was obviously being bought both by people who had seen the play and those who had missed it. This generated a small new wave of people who recognized Jennalee at work or elsewhere, and came up to her to talk about the play and her performance.

"I believe you're really starting to become a local celebrity!" I commented to her after observing her latest such encounter when I came to pick her up at the mall one Saturday afternoon at the end of her shift.

"I think 'celebrity' is still an exaggeration," she replied with a chuckle. "But I'd have to agree that I'm not exactly anonymous anymore either."

"I'm really interested to see what happens next spring with 'Dolly,'" I said. "You'll not only be the star, you'll have a chance to really showcase ALL of your talent. 'Celebrity' might not be too grandiose a term anymore after that, at least on the local level."

"We'll see," she said with a big smile. "I'm not really concerned about that, I'm just looking forward to doing the play."

Being Jennalee Morgan's boyfriend was still a dream come true for me every day, and it was obvious that she still felt the same way about me. We were both very happy and thankful to be together, and in most ways our lives were going extremely well.

There was one matter, however, that had begun to cast an unpleasant shadow over us - and time was running out to deal with it.

Chapter 8

December brought cold weather and the Christmas season - which were stark reminders to me that Jennalee and I needed to begin sending out our college applications very soon. We had both been working on our essays on and off since shortly after our late September conversation about Jennalee's major. I, of course, had also put in a significant amount of time researching potential colleges. I had compiled two lists of ten (with several schools making both lists) that would work well with each of my two possible career choices, each of which also had a very strong drama department.

Obviously, only one thing was preventing us from going any further.

As autumn had gone on, the decision I faced over my eventual career had gradually loomed larger and larger. I had dealt with the mounting pressure pretty well during October and most of November, all the way through Thanksgiving. However, when the glow from that wonderful celebration had begun to fade after a few days, I found myself getting rapidly frustrated, because I still couldn't make any intellectual headway into solving the puzzle I faced. I had been praying about it multiple times a day for over two months, but still hadn't found my answer.

With the arrival of December, the pressure to decide became brutal: time was growing short, and the decision didn't affect only me. My parents and Jennalee's mother were also turning up the heat on me by then, and rightfully so.

A week into the month when Jennalee came over for one of our evening study sessions, she walked into my room looking very serious, almost angry. She closed the door, pulled me off of my desk chair and sat me down with her on my bed, continuing to hold my hand.

"Mikey, we need to talk," she said, in a tone that was both sympathetic and firm.

"About what?" I asked, though I was sure I knew.

"About your decision, of course," she responded. "I know this is tearing you apart, and watching that happen is tearing ME apart! Ever since the play ended you've slowly been acting more and more distracted, and for the last few days you've practically been grumpy. That's so unlike you, and even more unlike what I want you to be. I can't be happy when I'm seeing that you're not, you know that."

"Do YOU have a solution to my dilemma, JJ?" I asked, feeling weak and helpless.

"Maybe," she replied, smiling ever so slightly. "I've been thinking about it a lot this week, more than I've thought about anything since last summer when I was figuring out that I was in love with you."

"So, which option do you think I should go with?"

"That's just it, Mikey!" she exclaimed, her smile vanishing. "I know you, better than anyone. The best thing about us is how we get each other so well, and the more I've thought about this with that in mind, the more frustrated I've gotten; and what I finally realized is that you're not going to be completely happy as either a doctor OR a biologist. Either way, you're giving up something you really want. That's why you can't decide."

"Wow," I said softly, quickly thinking over what she had said. "I never thought of it that way. I've been thinking so much and so hard about figuring out which career I wanted more that I never stopped to think about WHY I was having so much trouble deciding."

"I know," she said, her little smile returning. "You taught me so well to always keep my mind open to new possibilities, but sometimes you don't follow that advice yourself. You get your mind locked onto something and block everything else out. Like when you decided that what was going on with me and Kyle last summer meant that I was starting to not want you in my life anymore."

"You do know me well!" I agreed. "That's exactly how my mind functions sometimes." I paused. "So, what do I do, JJ? How do I choose?"

"Are you listening to me even now, Mikey?" she replied, her smile gone again. "What did I just say? NEW POSSIBILITIES! I think the whole problem here is that BOTH of those choices are wrong! You can't

find the right answer because, as things stand now, there's no right answer to find! The only way to fix that is to take everything off the table and start fresh. Expand your thinking, Mikey! Isn't there another career option that can give you at least most of what you want all in one?"

As Jennalee had been speaking, my mind had kicked into high gear, because what she was saying made perfect sense. She was absolutely right: I was in a no-win situation, a dead end, and the only solution was to start my whole analytical process over from scratch. So I mentally pushed aside the two options that had dominated my thinking about my ultimate career for so long, and let my mind start working on the matter anew, with no restraints.

Suddenly I let out a loud gasp of astonishment as my eyes went wide. It had taken me only a few seconds to see something that now seemed so obvious I couldn't believe it had never occurred to me before. I released Jennalee's hand and grabbed her shoulders.

"That's it, JJ, that's IT! That's the answer!" A shiver of relief went through me, and I felt my face break into an expression of pure joy as the ever-growing burden I'd been carrying for months fell from my shoulders. I suddenly felt as if I could fly.

"What, Mikey, WHAT?" Jennalee demanded, her own expression now one of amazed joy.

"It was right in front of me all along, but without you I might never have seen it!" I exclaimed. "I think I locked out every other option because I already had what I thought were two very good ones, and any more possibilities would only have complicated things even more; but I was wrong, and you made me see it! I know now, I know exactly what I'm going to do with my life!" I threw my arms around Jennalee and held her tightly. "Thank you, JJ!" I said emotionally, "Thank you so much, for loving me so much and knowing me so well that you could give sight to my blind intellectual eyes!"

"For goodness sake, Mikey!" she chuckled in exasperation. "TELL ME, ALREADY!"

I released my hug and took both of her hands in mine.

"Medical research!" I declared. "I'm going to be a doctor who works on developing new medicines and treatments for diseases and conditions. A doctor AND a biologist! And lots of other things too!" My mind was still working at high speed, and I could feel excitement flowing through me as I began considering all the implications of my newly determined career on my educational choices. "OK, let's see," I continued, speaking both faster and louder than usual. "Maybe a double major in biology and biochemistry, with a minor in microbiology, or maybe in pharmacology. No, both! I can handle that! Plus some physics and both general and organic chemistry, of course, and ...oh, wow, there are so many possibilities, it'll take time to work it all out-"

My train of vocalized thought was abruptly derailed as Jennalee suddenly tore her hands free, threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. I instinctively wrapped my own arms around her, and then kissing her back took over my attention from everything else. Within seconds I could feel myself quickly calming down.

Eventually the kiss ended.

"Thanks, I really needed that!" I told Jennalee with a big smile as I released her and leaned back.

"What an adrenaline rush that was! I didn't realize just how much anxiety and frustration had built up inside of me over this until I found the answer and it all got released!" I sighed deeply. "I feel so much better now! Because of you, the most important unanswered question about my life has been resolved in a manner that I can completely embrace with absolutely no regrets. Thank you so, so, SO much, JJ!"

"You're very welcome!" she responded, looking as relieved and happy as I now felt. "I'm just so glad I could help! I owed you one anyway for getting me to finally take acting seriously, and this was the perfect way to return that favor. Just another example of us being us, right?"

"Exactly!" I said. I touched her face gently. "Oh JJ, it's so amazing. Every time I think I've reached the maximum possible love one person could ever have for another, you find a way to make me love you even more. You better not ever go anywhere, because I don't think I could even make myself get out of bed in the morning if you weren't in my life anymore."

"I know what you mean," she replied. "I keep loving you even more too, and I can't even think about what life would be like without you. The idea is just too horrible." As if to force even a hint of that unpleasant thought away, she abruptly changed the subject. "So, medical research, huh? Inventing new medicines and stuff. You'll get to be involved with biology and other science things, and help people too."

You're right, that IS perfect!"

"It is, indeed!" I agreed. "It's exciting to think about all the possibilities, all the different diseases out there, and all the people who get them whose lives I might help improve or even save someday."

Suddenly Jennalee sat up straight and laughed in amazement.

"What?" I asked in amused confusion.

"Mikey, I just remembered something!" she exclaimed, grabbing my hand. "I remember one time we were talking, when we were kids, and I said you were so smart you'd probably cure cancer someday. Maybe I was actually right!"

"Well, it's really not a matter of 'curing cancer,'" I responded. "There are many kinds of cancer, and each one has its own challenges when it comes to treating it. It's certainly possible, though, that I could someday help find a cure, or at least a new or much better treatment, for at least one kind of cancer. I'd love to be able to do that!"

"I bet you will, Mikey!" Jennalee said with a big smile. "I believe in you!"

"And just like with me believing in your acting ability, your belief in me makes me believe it too!" I replied. "Thanks again, JJ!"

"You're welcome!" she said happily.

"All right, then," I continued, "let's get our studying done, and then as soon as you're gone I'm going to go back to the colleges I've been researching. Now that I know almost exactly what I need, I can narrow down the choices easily. I'll have a list of five before I go to bed, and tomorrow we can start putting together our CommonApp applications for those schools. Work for you?"

"Sounds great!" Jennalee said enthusiastically. "I'll be really glad to have it all taken care of!"

We shared another affectionate kiss, and then started in on our homework.

A week later we had filled out a Common Application form (which is a standardized online college application used by most top level schools in the country) for each of the five colleges I'd picked out; had lined up all the recommendations, transcripts and other secondary things we needed; and had filed our applications. So that chore was behind us at last. We could begin looking ahead to the eventual responses, and Jennalee could rank the five schools according to her own preference at her leisure.

By this time we were also becoming fully engulfed in the Christmas season. We finished our shopping, enjoyed the decorations and music, and shared the special Church activities, including a joyful and moving candlelight service on Christmas Eve that our families attended together. It all culminated in our first Christmas Day as a couple, which was naturally very special for us.

One of my presents to Jennalee was a laminated and framed copy of the review from the paper.

"You're always going to look back on that experience as one of the turning points in your life," I explained after she had opened it and given me a giggling "Thank you!" "I thought you should have a permanent memento of it to put on your wall."

"That's very sweet of you to think of that!" she replied, and gave me a quick hug and kiss.

A week later we got together for New Year's Eve. Since it was very likely that Jennalee would be starring in 'Hello, Dolly!' the following spring, we found a copy of the 1969 movie version and watched it as we waited for midnight to arrive. Jennalee had heard a lot about 'Hello, Dolly!' but had never actually seen it performed. As we watched the movie she kept saying how much she loved the character, and became more and more excited about the chance to play Dolly herself.

At the stroke of midnight we rang in the new year, which promised to bring many exciting and interesting events: our eighteenth birthdays, the Spring Play, prom, graduation, the beginning of our college days. I suggested that we get the year off to a good start with a couple of kisses.

"Only a couple?" Jennalee asked in mock disappointment. "I'm afraid I might lose count."

"Don't worry, I'll keep track," I assured her, just before our lips met.

A minute or so later I breathlessly added, "Or not..."

Chapter 9

With all the pleasant distractions of the holiday season behind us, Jennalee and I both took advantage of the relatively uncluttered month of January to put in some extra time on our academic interests. I was proud of her for the dedication she was showing in applying herself to her school classes. Even though schoolwork still wasn't something she embraced nearly at the level of acting, it was clear that the lesson she had learned through her 'Odd Couple' experience about how hard work results in a very positive feeling of accomplishment had spilled over into her approach to regular studying. Her growth as a person was definitely continuing in the new year.

Jennalee also reported that she was doing independent research into acting in general, and 'Hello, Dolly!' in particular. For the latter, she watched several different performances of the play on YouTube to learn the role better and get ideas for her own portrayal of Dolly.

For myself, now that I knew what I was going to become someday I plunged into finding as much material as I could (mostly online, but some off as well) about all the aspects of a career in medical research, and about the disciplines I would be studying in college. I wanted to know as much as possible about every facet of my chosen career path before I ever walked into my first college classroom.

Of course, there was more to January than just studying and research: Jennalee and I found ample time to hang out and have fun during the month as well. Like Jennalee's maturity, our closeness as a couple also continued to grow as time went on. Being together never got old for either of us.

One very notable event that occurred in January was Jennalee's birthday, which that year fell on the last Sunday of the month. Her mother hosted a party for her during the afternoon, which included our family as well as a few relatives of theirs that lived in the area. Then she and I went out to dinner with Angelica and Dewayne for our own celebration of Jennalee turning eighteen.

While we were waiting for our food, Jennalee opened her presents from the three of us (mine was an additional present, as I had already given her two others at the family party). Dewayne gave her a suncatcher that featured flowers and a hummingbird, her favorite animal. Angelica had gotten her a purse, the small kind that Jennalee liked but a bit fancier than the one she usually used. I gave her a picture frame that had a movie-making theme, with the space for a 4x6 print surrounded by images of things like an old-time movie camera, a clapboard and a director's chair, as well as actors playing scenes. Inserted in the frame was a glossy print I'd obtained through Mrs. Fletcher of the picture of Jennalee and Angelica, in costume and make-up for 'The Odd Couple,' that had appeared with the newspaper review.

"You can replace it with one from 'Hello, Dolly' in a few months," I suggested. "Sorry I couldn't find a frame that had a stage theme, but at least it's about some kind of acting."

"Hey, she'll be doing movies someday too, so it's appropriate," Angelica commented.

"Well, regardless of that," Jennalee responded, "it's very cool and I love it! Thanks, Michael! You're awesome, as always." She turned to Angelica and Dewayne. "Thanks again to you guys, too," she continued. "I love all my presents. I'm so blessed to have such wonderful friends."

They both assured her she was very welcome, as did I.

Later, immediately after we had ordered dessert, Jennalee and Angelica excused themselves to go to the ladies' room, leaving me and Dewayne alone at our table.

"Michael, can I ask you something?" Dewayne said as soon the girls were gone, looking very thoughtful.

Though the four of us often hung out together at school and other places, Dewayne and I hadn't hit it off the way Jennalee and Angelica had, or anything close to it. I liked Dewayne, but we just didn't have a whole lot in common. So up to that point we had never had a really serious conversation. Apparently Dewayne wanted to have one now, knowing from experience that our girlfriends always took their time on their restroom breaks.

"How did a nerd like me end up with arguably the most comprehensively awesome girl on the planet?" I guessed.

Dewayne chuckled. "Apparently you've already been asked that question."

"A few times, yeah," I chuckled in return.

"I did wonder about that for a while," he admitted, "but Jen told the story to Angie, and she told it to me, about how the two of you were best friends for seven years and really knew each other well and liked each other a lot before you became a couple. So that's not what I was going to say. By the way, I never wondered that out of envy or anything, just curiosity. I'm crazy about Angie. She's such an amazing person, so beautiful and talented and smart and cool. I love being with her, and I hope she'll marry me someday. As much as I like and admire Jen, I've never wanted to take your place or anything."

"Fair enough, and thanks," I said. "So what IS on your mind?"

"Well," he said, suddenly looking a little uncomfortable, "I just can't help noticing what a great relationship you and Jen seem to have. You're always so supportive of each other and nice to each other, and you never argue. So first of all, I can't help wondering, are you always like that, even in private?"

"Pretty much, yes," I answered. "I mean, we disagree on little things sometimes, like what movie to watch or what to do when we have some free time, but even then we always resolve the matter quickly. Occasionally we have different opinions about things that happen in the world, but we never let that get in the way of our relationship. On the really important matters we're almost always on the same page. Why?"

"Well, it's good that you guys get along so well, but it's hard to understand," Dewayne replied. "It doesn't seem normal. I mean, people are different, and you and Jen in a lot of ways are VERY different. According to what everyone has told me, and even more from my own experience with Angie, friction happens between even the most loving people, especially when they're together a lot, which you and Jen obviously are. Making a relationship work is supposed to be all about give and take in those situations, finding compromises that both can live with. I mean, Angie and I usually get along pretty well and enjoy being together, but sometimes we get into it, and I don't always even know exactly why. Something that we disagree on gets blown up more than you would think it should, and we won't even want to talk to each other. Or one of us will just be in a bad mood, and it takes both of us down for a while. Things like that. I wish she and I could get along well more consistently, like you and Jen do. What's your secret, or are you two just the exception that proves the rule?"

"OK, since you already know our basic story," I responded, "I'll fill in some details to help you understand better. From the day Jennalee and I met there was just something special between us, even though we were very different in some ways. We've always loved being together, and having such a close friendship for so long before becoming a couple is obviously a rare situation. Then, when we DID become a couple, we were both extremely thankful: me, because I had waited so long for us to get to that point; and her, because it took her so long to figure out that she was actually in love with me. It might not have happened at all, and that made both of us really appreciate what we suddenly had. It felt so wonderful that we didn't want that feeling to ever end.

"It's been about six months now, and we both still feel that way. In fact, just last week Jennalee said something that I really liked. She said she loves how we're in love with being in love. I knew immediately exactly what she meant. It's like an addiction for us. Making each other happy is always so much better than doing something for ourselves, because then we're each making both of us happy at the same time. It feels so good we don't want anything to ever get in the way of that feeling. That actually pre-empts most arguments completely, because an argument is usually a clash of individual priorities. Since Jennalee and I have both made each other our permanent number one priority, we both always want to work out any disagreement as quickly as possible, so our closeness and happiness don't get disrupted. That's always so much more important to us than anything else.

"As far as us being opposites in many ways, that actually benefits our relationship because our strengths and weaknesses match up so well against each other. We help each other be better in the ways each of us need it most. I'm so much better a person than I ever would have been without her, and she'd tell you the same about me. We have sort of an ideal symbiotic relationship."

"Symbi-" Dewayne started to say, looking and sounding like he was going to ask what it meant. Then he suddenly smiled. "Oh, yeah, I remember about that. It's like that fish that cleans sharks, right?"

"The remora, correct," I affirmed. "It cleans parasites off of the shark, and also gets leftover food from anything the shark eats. So the remora gets fed, and the shark stays cleaner and healthier. There are many such relationships in nature, like the plover bird and the crocodile, or bees and flowers. We humans actually have a symbiotic relationship with the bacteria that live in our digestive tracts."

"All right, I get the point," Dewayne interrupted. "Jen was right, you really ARE a walking search engine, aren't you?"

"I guess so, to some extent," I chuckled. "I'll take that as a compliment, by the way; and I'm sorry, I didn't mean to go into a lecture there. The point is, Jennalee and I have that kind of relationship in terms of our differences; but an even bigger component for us is how well we know each other. Over time Jennalee and I have learned what makes each other happy or angry or sad, how to build each other up, how to not annoy each other, when to say something and when to hold it in. Eventually we even learned how to interpret each other's moods, body language and words, so that sometimes it's almost like we can read each other's minds.

"We've also always been each other's refuge when things were going bad. For example, whenever I was getting picked on or feeling lonely, because I was different from the other kids, she could always cheer me up and make me feel better. I would do the same for her when something was getting her down. So a central part of our relationship became being the one person in each other's lives who was always there and always cared. Beyond our parents, I mean, and that's obviously not the same thing. Besides, sometimes we'd have to cheer each other up when we had disagreements with our parents.

"So we built a relationship as friends that was very deep and enduring. Even during the two years when Jennalee was with Kyle, we still remained each other's 'go-to' friend. Having that attitude and knowledge of each other develop over a period of years has allowed us to enjoy all of the good things about taking our relationship to the boyfriend-girlfriend level with very few of the many ongoing adjustments most couples have to make. Which goes back to my earlier point about why we avoid most disagreements, because that's obviously another reason for that."

"I guess that makes sense," Dewayne said, "though I think it also supports my idea that your relationship isn't really normal."

"Well, she and I aren't exactly normal as individuals either, when you come right down to it," I replied with a smile. "However, there's also the fact that even though we're very different in some ways, we also have a lot in common. Our tastes in things like movies and music are very similar, for example. The most important thing, though, is that we're both committed Christians. Faith in Jesus Christ and the whole view of life and the world that come with that are a uniting force for any two people who share it, but especially for a couple. Plus, to top it off, we both believe with all our hearts that God meant for us to find each other and be together. That literally puts everything into a completely different perspective."

Dewayne gave a little smile and nodded. "That makes even more sense," he agreed. "You and Jen have a lot going for you, and I hope now that I understand better how the two of you do it, that I can put at least some of those things into practice myself with Angie. We're both Christians too, but I don't think we've ever really thought about how much that means for us as a couple. Plus, since we've only been going together since last fall, because she moved here over the summer and we didn't even meet until school started, we haven't had nearly the time to get to know each other that you and Jen have had."

"I hope it works out for you," I said, "although I would caution you to not get too committed yet to the idea of marrying Angelica. Last summer when Jennalee and I became a couple my parents told us we should take things slow, let our relationship continue to develop before locking ourselves into being together forever. They were wrong in our case because of our unique circumstances, but as a general concept it's very good advice for people our age. In some ways Jennalee and I really are like an exception that proves the rule, and you shouldn't expect yourself and Angie to be able to duplicate everything we have any time soon. It's a process that takes a lot of commitment and time, but you can certainly make that commitment and start putting in the time without any further delay, if that's what you want to do. By doing that you'll not only build a better relationship, but also eventually find out just how long-term compatible you and Angelica really are, whether marriage is really going to be the right thing for you.

"With that in mind, and if you're really serious about this, you should start working as hard as you can to develop all the aspects of your relationship with her. Make a deliberate decision to always put her

first, above yourself and your own interests; and really try to get to know her as deeply as possible. That takes time, obviously, but you should always be moving that process forward as much as you can. Don't just wait for it to happen on its own. You need to know not just what she likes and doesn't like, but what she responds to, both positively and negatively, so you eventually learn how to constantly build her up and avoid as much as possible doing anything to annoy her or bring her down. Whenever she talks to you, listen carefully to everything she says, and process it so you learn more and more about her. Always tell her what you're thinking too, so she can learn as much as possible about you for the same reason. Another important thing is to tell her regularly how much she means to you, how blessed you feel to be with her. If you two are really meant to be together, these things will all bear fruit and make your relationship grow. It takes a lot of time and effort, but as you see from Jennalee and me, it's very worth it!"

"Thanks, Michael," Dewayne replied. "That's all very good advice, and things I hadn't thought about very much yet. I guess maybe I've been thinking that as a guy I'm supposed to be tough and not get into all that emotional and sensitive stuff. Like when we have an argument, I would feel like I was being weak if I didn't stand my ground, you know?"

"Well, despite what some might think or say," I commented, "it doesn't make you less of a man to be sensitive to a woman's feelings, or to sacrifice some of your own desires to please her and grow the relationship. A guy can be sensitive without letting himself get pushed around, too. Strong and sensitive CAN go together and work well. Jennalee and I prove that, because we both have pretty strong personalities. It's a dynamic that a couple works out over time, with both learning how to be sensitive to the other."

"That's another good point I hadn't thought of before," Dewayne nodded. "I really do want to start putting all this stuff into practice. What you and Jen have going is a great basic model for Angie and I to follow, even if we can't follow all of it because our circumstances are different. I'm really glad I talked to you about this, Michael."

"Glad to be able to help!" I assured him. "Remember, though, I'm only six months into having my first girlfriend, so I don't pretend to have all the answers by any means. I just know what works so well for me and Jennalee, and I don't see any reason why those basic principles couldn't be applied by you or anyone else to their own relationship, with positive results. So take what I've said for whatever you think it's worth, and feel free to ask follow-up questions any time, if you want to."

"Thanks again!" Dewayne responded, then paused for a moment. "Still, though," he continued, "I just can't help but think that sooner or later you and Jen are going to get into a major disagreement about SOMETHING. I still believe that no relationship is perfect."

"Well, those are separate questions, of course," I replied. "I would never claim that Jennalee and I have a perfect relationship, by any means. It's just that the good things we have together are SO good that when we do have a disagreement, it seems inconsequential by comparison. The thing is, though, we're still in high school now. Our lives are relatively simple, and we still have enough space to live our own lives and follow our own interests in addition to all the things we do as a couple. Later on, when we're married and living together and have bills to pay, and especially when we have kids, there'll be a lot more opportunities for us to disagree about things, and more general stress potential as well. That's when-

As I was speaking, Dewayne's eyes suddenly shifted to my left, and he sat up a little straighter.

"Here come the girls," he whispered urgently, interrupting me.

"Hi, boys!" Angelica said cheerfully as she reached her seat. Then she looked into Dewayne's face for a moment, and her forehead crinkled a bit. "Were you talking about us?" she asked.

I jumped in before Dewayne could respond.

"Well, of course we were!" I exclaimed with an expression of mild astonishment. "Dewayne and I are blessed enough to have two of the most wonderful ladies in the world as our girlfriends! Why WOULDN'T we talk about you?"

Angelica chuckled. "Aw, that's so sweet!" she said, smiling at me. "Thank you!" Then she turned back to Dewayne, and her smile vanished. "Why don't YOU say nice things like that?" she asked as she sat down.

Dewayne gave me a quick glance, then took Angelica's hand.

"I agree with Michael," he said in a sincere tone, following my lead as I'd hoped he would, "and if I haven't said enough how much I love you and how lucky I feel to be your boyfriend, I'm sorry. I'll do better

from now on."

As he spoke, Angelica's eyes widened a bit in surprise. When he had finished she looked at me, then back at Dewayne. Finally she turned to Jennalee and smiled.

"You know, I think we need to leave these two alone more often!" she commented. Then she faced Dewayne again. "Thank you, I appreciate you saying that; and I love you too."

I looked at Jennalee, and she was smiling at me. It was a smile that said, *I'm so proud of you!* as clearly as if she had spoken the words. She was perceptive enough to understand that Dewayne and I had had a significant conversation while she and Angelica had been gone, and that the exchange the two of them had just had was the first fruits of it.

Moments later the server arrived with our desserts. While we were all eating, Dewayne continued to treat Angelica with a new level of affectionate attention, and she responded in kind. For a while they seemed to forget that Jennalee and I were also at the table, and neither of us minded that development at all.

Later, on the drive home (after we had dropped off Angelica and Dewayne), Jennalee asked about what had happened between Dewayne and me, and I related the primary points of our conversation. By the time I had finished we had arrived at my house.

"That was really nice of you," she said, reprising her proud smile from the restaurant, just before she opened the car door. As we came together behind the car to begin our walk across the street, she continued, "Of course, you're the best teacher I've ever known, and you always try to be helpful, so it doesn't surprise me at all that you did that; but thanks, because you could see that it made a difference between them right away. All through dessert and afterwards Dewayne was acting more loving and attentive toward Angelica than I've ever seen him do before, and Angie was responding to it like it was a dream come true. She looked so happy, and I'm really happy for her!"

"Wow, I wasn't thinking when I was talking to Dewayne that part of the result would be to make YOU happy, but I'm glad it worked out that way!"

"Well, Mom says that being nice is like throwing a stone into a pond," Jennalee replied. "You never know how far the ripples are going to go."

"Very true!" I agreed. "In any case, I guess you can consider that an extra, unintended birthday present. So happy birthday again!"

"Thanks!" she chuckled. "It was a really good one! Especially since I'm eighteen now, and in the year ahead I'll be graduating high school, and starting college..." She paused long enough to wrap her arm around my waist and snuggle herself into me as we walked. "...and getting ENGAGED!" she concluded significantly.

"Yeah, I suppose that could happen," I conceded with a smile as we arrived on her porch. We said and kissed our goodnights, and then she went inside, smiling at me as she closed the door.

As I walked back across the street, thoughts of my eventual proposal to Jennalee were on my mind. There was a lot there to think about.

Chapter 10

A few days later Dewayne and I, for the first time, hung out together without our girlfriends. Our conversation at the restaurant turned out to be the beginning of a genuine friendship between us, as well as a new era of growth in Dewayne's relationship with Angelica. Before long I considered Dewayne to be the closest male friend I'd ever had.

On the Wednesday following Jennalee's birthday, Mrs. Fletcher came up to Jennalee and me at school as we were on our way to the cafeteria for lunch.

"Hi Jen, Michael!" she said happily. We stopped so she could talk to us. "Just wanted to update you on what's going on with the musical, Jen. Miss O'Neill and I have talked to each of the choirs together this week, telling the members that we're doing 'Hello, Dolly!' to follow up on the success of our Fall Play. I assured them that with you and Angie on board again it would be another quality show, particularly since you were also going to serve as an additional acting coach for the production, and we just needed to get enough volunteers, especially boys, to play parts and share the stage with you. Long story short, between the two choirs there was enough interest expressed that we should definitely be able to fill out the cast and chorus without any problem. So my gamble paid off! I can't wait to see you play Dolly, Jen!"

"I'm glad it seems to be working out," Jennalee replied, "but I insist that there be auditions for Dolly Levi just like for the rest of the parts. I want to earn my part like everyone else."

"I admire your sense of fair play," said Mrs. Fletcher. "I was, of course, planning to include Dolly in the auditions, just to follow proper procedure. I don't see how anyone could possibly beat you out, though. The only other girl I know of in this school who is even remotely close to you in acting ability is Angelica, and as I'm sure you already know, she wants to play Irene. I'll be fair, though, even though I'm dying to see what you would do with that role!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Fletcher," Jennalee responded. "I hope you're right, 'cause I know playing Dolly would be a lot of fun!"

"Thank YOU, Jen," Mrs. Fletcher replied. "I'll be posting the audition notice by the end of the week. Oh, by the way, because of how well attended our shows were last fall, I've convinced the powers that be to add a second weekend of performances this time. We're also going to try to get the paper in the Big Town to send someone to see it opening night and write a review, in addition to the reviewer from our own paper. The review of 'The Odd Couple' from our paper last fall will hopefully convince them that our production of 'Hello, Dolly!' will be an event worth covering. If we can get any decent amount of traffic from the Big Town for this we should be able to get good audiences for all of the performances. So, all in all, everything's really coming together." Then she took a deep breath and gave a little fist pump. "This is so great! Doing 'Hello, Dolly!' is a dream come true for me, and Miss O'Neill is excited about being vocal director for it too. This show is going to be awesome, I can feel it! Take care, Jen, Michael!"

Jennalee and I simultaneously bid her farewell as she began to move away.

"For a second there I thought she was going to break into a happy dance," Jennalee chuckled as we resumed our walk to the cafeteria.

I laughed. "I can almost picture it," I said. "ALMOST! I don't really want to go there."

Jennalee laughed fairly loudly in response to that, causing a few heads to turn as we joined the lunch line.

On Friday the audition notice was posted, as well as calls for volunteers to help with costumes, make-up, building sets, and being stagehands for the show. By the following Friday, Mrs. Fletcher had reported that the various crews had been adequately staffed, and that there were enough singers willing to be non-speaking chorus members and dancers where needed. So all that remained was the main casting.

That second Friday also happened to be the first Valentine's Day for me and Jennalee as a couple, and we celebrated by going to a very nice restaurant in the Big Town for a fancy meal. Before we left we sat down on the love seat in her living room and exchanged our presents and cards.

Jennalee gave me a custom wall clock she'd had made that had a picture on the face of the two of us

kissing, with the caption:

'Michael and Jennalee:
No such thing as
too much time together!'

"Very cool!" I laughed after I had unwrapped it. "I love it! I'm going to put it up on my wall as soon as I get back home later. Thanks! I remember now on Christmas morning when your mom was taking pictures, how you wanted to make sure she got one of us kissing. You were so casual about it I never guessed you had an ulterior motive."

"Well, I wanted to have that picture anyway," she responded, "but yes, I was thinking ahead to today and this present too. I'm glad you like it!"

Then Jennalee opened my present: a silver bracelet formed with alternating hearts and crosses, which I thought was an ideal gift for a Christian guy to give his girlfriend on Valentine's Day.

"Oh, it's beautiful! Thank you so much!" she exclaimed, and started putting it on. I immediately helped her with the clasp. When it was securely around her right wrist she continued to look at it, and then declared, "I'm going to wear it all the time! Thanks again!"

"You're welcome! Glad you like my gift too," I replied. "The first one, I mean."

"What do you mean, 'first one?'" she asked. Then she noticed that there was a folded sheet of paper inside the box that had contained the bracelet, and she picked it up. "What's this?" she continued as she unfolded the paper.

"It's a poem I wrote for you," I said softly, with a shy smile. "Please keep in mind that I'm an emerging scientist, not a poet. It may not be great verse, but it's from the heart."

She began reading the poem silently to herself:

'Forever and Ever
by Michael Davis
for Jennalee Morgan

They say that all good things must come to an end,
but I know for sure that's not true.
Though this life will pass, we have souls that will last,
and live with God always like new.

Because we're together I have a great life,
but this life is only the start.
In Heaven we'll share all that God gives us there,
and eternally you'll own my heart.

Forever and ever you'll have all my love,
and I know I'll have your love too.
We won't ever end, for I know that I'll spend
forever and ever with you.'

When she finished reading there were tears in her eyes, and she looked at me with a smile that expressed large amounts of both love and astonishment.

"You really wrote this?" she asked emotionally. "It's GOOD! I mean, maybe it's not Elizabeth Barrett Browning level, but I'm CRYING I'm so moved! I had no idea you could do something like this!"

"Well, I promised you last summer that I would find ways to be romantic," I reminded her. "I figured if I could write even a halfway decent poem, that would qualify."

"It certainly does," Jennalee agreed, "and this one's much better than just halfway decent! You've found a lot of ways to be romantic since you promised, but this has to be your best one yet! Thank you so much, Mikey! You just never stop amazing me!" She set the paper down, put her arms around my neck and

gave me a long, tender and affectionate kiss. When it ended she leaned back again and looked at me.

"You know what's really cool?" she pointed out. "How we both had the same basic idea with our presents, that no amount of time together can ever be too much for us."

"Good observation!" I agreed. "I'm so glad to know that you feel that way too."

"Of course I do!" she replied with a little chuckle, taking my hand in both of hers. "Thanks for everything you do that makes it impossible for me NOT to feel that way! Thanks again for the poem and the bracelet too."

"Thank YOU for the clock, and for everything," I responded. "Most of all, just for loving me." I gently touched her cheek. "Forever and ever, right?"

She gave me her biggest, most beautiful smile.

"Forever and ever!" she confirmed.

And I could tell we both knew it was true.

Chapter 11

Auditions for the speaking parts in 'Hello, Dolly!' were on the following Monday. Jennalee, of course, had been working hard all the previous week on polishing her audition scene, even though there was little question she was going to get the role. Angelica and Dewayne (who was trying out for Horace, the most prominent male role in the play) got together with us a couple of times so the three of them could practice and help each other (which turned out to be mostly Jennalee coaching the other two). The three of them all wanted me to be there too, so I could give my general impression of their performances. I didn't think my opinion of their acting was worth much, but they were interested in it anyway. Jennalee, of course, always valued my judgment, and Angelica and Dewayne had shown a significantly higher general regard for me as a person ever since Jennalee's birthday and my conversation with Dewayne. In any case, I thought they were all doing very well and would have no trouble getting the parts they wanted.

On audition day we all went to the school theater together after our last classes (I tagged along just for the chance to spend some extra time with Jennalee, of course). Angelica, Dewayne and Jennalee each had an audition form that they had prepared in advance. There were about twenty people in all gathered in the waiting area, the majority of them girls, when Mrs. Fletcher came out to let her assistant at the registration table know that she was ready to begin. She paused for a moment, glancing at the turnout, then turned and went back into the theater with what appeared to be a look of slight disappointment on her face.

My three companions were each called in later on in the proceedings, and we were all still in the waiting area discussing their auditions and the show in general when the last person who was auditioning came back out.

"I want to go talk to Mrs. Fletcher," Jennalee said. So we all went into the theater.

Mrs. Fletcher was seated at a little table just on the opposite side of the orchestra pit from the stage. She was making notes, and didn't notice us approaching until we had nearly reached the table.

"Oh, hi kids!" she said, looking up and pausing in her writing. "Sorry, can't give official results now, you'll have to wait until they're posted." She smiled. "But off the record, none of you three needs to lose sleep worrying."

"That's not why I came in, but thanks!" replied Jennalee. "So, how did it go overall? There didn't seem to be a whole lot of boys here to try out."

"Yes, I noticed that when I went out right before we started," Mrs. Fletcher replied. "I've got the main parts covered, but it looks like I'll have to double up on a couple of secondary male roles to complete the cast. I saw Stanley the waiter and the judge played by the same person in a school production once, so I guess we can do that. Unless I can find at least one more boy in the next few days with enough talent and willingness to play a part; and be in the chorus too, of course. Our balance is tilted toward the girls at this point, so any extra boys would be good to have."

Jennalee suddenly turned to me. "Michael, why don't YOU do it?" she said excitedly. "All the times you've helped me practice you did a good job reading parts. With some help from me I bet you could be a good enough actor for a small role! And maybe you're not a natural singer like me, but you can carry a tune, and that's all you need for the chorus."

"Jennalee," I replied, smiling with embarrassment, "that's flattering, but you know I have no experience at all with this kind of thing; and all I know about acting is what I've picked up from you."

"Well, the judge is a non-singing, non-dancing part," Mrs. Fletcher pointed out. "If you could act well enough, that's all you'd need to play him. The chorus dance parts will all be pretty simple, and obviously you don't need to have a great voice, because you'd be singing with the whole group."

"Best of all," Jennalee added slyly, "you'd be working with me on something I love! Don't you think that would be fun?"

There were probably a dozen valid reasons for me to say 'no' to being in the play, but the one reason

Jennalee had just given me to say 'yes' easily trumped all of them: it would be a LOT of fun to share this experience with her, that was something I couldn't deny.

"Well, I suppose I have to audition first, right?" I asked softly.

Jennalee stared at me for a moment, then lit up with joy.

"You're gonna do it!" she declared, and threw her arms around my neck in a tight hug. "Thank you, Michael, thank you!"

"I WILL need to have him read, at least, Jen," Mrs. Fletcher put in. "Just so I can see that he has some basic ability to act." She looked at me. "The judge is elderly, so you have to act that way. He only has two short speeches, but they are important ones; especially the second, where he has to be very emotional. Plus, you'll need to be physically reacting to everything that happens during the rest of the scene if you get the part. Think you can handle all that?"

"Only one way to find out for sure, I guess," I answered. "I'm confused, though: there was no judge character in the movie."

"The courtroom scene with the judge wasn't used in the movie," Jennalee replied. "I didn't realize at the time we were watching it how different it is from the play in some places. I found that out when I watched those YouTube videos of 'Dolly' performances last month."

"Ah, I see," I responded.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Fletcher had picked up a script from her table and flipped quickly through the pages until she found the place she was looking for.

"OK, here's the courtroom scene," she told me, handing me the script. "The judge's lines are at the beginning and end."

"Since I'm not familiar with the scene or character, can you give me a few minutes to look at what I'm going to say? These guys had over a week to prepare, after all."

"Sure, by all means," she replied. "Take your time, I can wait."

I sat down in the nearest theater seat and focused on the judge's first speech, which opened the scene. I read through it once quickly to get the words into my head, then two more times, going a bit slower and concentrating on exactly how I wanted to say it. Then I flipped ahead, and repeated the process with the second speech at the end of the scene. For that one I also considered how I could work up the emotion I needed - and the obvious answer to that question came to me almost immediately. Finally I closed my eyes, and tried to get myself to think and feel like an elderly judge.

I stood up and handed the script back to Mrs. Fletcher, noticing at the same time that my companions had taken seats in the front row on the other side of the teacher's table while I'd been preparing.

"Ready!" I said, with as much confidence as I could muster. Mrs. Fletcher looked at me curiously for a moment.

"You sure?" she asked in a doubtful tone. "That couldn't have been more than two minutes."

"Well, I'm as ready as I'm going to be today," I amended. "Do you want me on stage, or can we do it here?"

"Here is fine," replied Mrs. Fletcher, looking down at the script and then back at me. "Uh...don't you want this?" she asked, holding the script out.

"No, Ma'am," I answered, shaking my head slightly. "I've got the part memorized."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jennalee give Angelica a little poke with a big smile on her face, the clear message being, *How about my boyfriend, huh?*

"Well, I knew you were smart," Mrs. Fletcher said, looking somewhat astonished, "but...well, then, let's do this!"

I tried to speak just a bit hoarsely, to make my voice sound older, and used a fairly slow, deliberate cadence, which I also thought would suggest an older person. I performed the first speech, where the judge calls the court to order and begins the case. Then I looked at Mrs. Fletcher.

"Go ahead with the other one, whenever you're ready, Michael," she said.

I closed my eyes for a moment and silently invoked the emotional stimulus I'd thought of during my brief preparation. With tears in my eyes, I then delivered the second short speech, where the judge dismisses most of the charges after having been moved by the romantic declarations from the various defendants before him.

I looked again at Mrs. Fletcher. She was smiling.

"You'll need some work on the delivery of your lines, Michael," she said, "especially with projecting your voice better; but for someone doing their first ever audition that was quite good. The emotion on the second part was actually VERY good, you pretty much have that aspect down already. So, all in all, I'm satisfied that you can handle the role. Congratulations, Michael!"

Jennalee leaped to her feet, ran over and threw her arms around me again.

"I'm so proud of you!" she exclaimed. "You HAVE learned something from me about acting!" She released me and turned to Mrs. Fletcher. "And don't worry: I'll have him doing those speeches like a pro by the time we open."

"I believe you will, Jen!" she replied with a chuckle. "So, we have our cast! Thanks again, and see all of you at rehearsals!"

We said our goodbyes to the teacher and headed out of the theater.

"Mrs. Fletcher was right, Michael," Jennalee said as we walked. "Your emotion on the second speech was wonderful. I was surprised you pulled that off so well. How did you do it?"

"Actually, that was the easiest part," I answered, looking at her with a loving smile. "All I had to do was think back to that moment last summer when we both had tears in our eyes as you told me you loved me for the first time."

"Awww, really?" Jennalee replied emotionally. "That's so cool! We help each other sometimes even when we're not trying!" She stopped walking so she could give me another big hug. "This is going to be so much fun, you'll see!"

Chapter 12

Jennalee was right, of course: doing the play with her was a LOT of fun, and a fascinating experience in many respects.

First of all, stage acting was a new challenge for me, in multiple ways different from anything I had ever done before.

With Jennalee's help I learned how to use my diaphragm to project my voice, so the whole audience would be able to clearly hear me when I did my little speeches. It took some practice, of course, but eventually I got pretty good at it. She also worked with me on saying my lines in a completely natural way, and in learning how to feel like the character I was playing, another part of being natural and believable in a role.

As a chorus member in some of the other scenes I also had to learn simple dance moves, another completely new skill for me. I not only had to do the moves correctly, but coordinate myself with the other chorus members so we would perform as a unit. Plus, I sometimes had to sing at the same time. Speaking of which, there were also the singing sessions with Miss O'Neill, where all of us in the chorus learned and practiced the songs we'd be performing in the show. There was also the 'blocking,' figuring out exactly where everyone needed to be at any given time during each scene so all the logistics would work out.

For someone like me, who didn't have a lot of basic talent for any of these things, it was a challenge despite my intelligence level. Being able to see the progress I was making in learning all these aspects of stage acting was a very positive feeling.

Much more fun for me, however, was watching Jennalee at work. She took full advantage of her charisma, her engaging personality, and the reputation she had established with 'The Odd Couple' to become virtually a second director of the play, at least for the performing aspects of it. She not only helped anyone who needed and wanted it with any component of their performance, she took it upon herself to make the entire production a happy experience. She was always one of the first to arrive for the rehearsals, and would greet everyone else with a hug and brief conversation. She was constantly upbeat, single-handedly creating a positive atmosphere for everyone. Even when she offered criticism once in a while, it was always in a constructive and encouraging way. She saved her really enthusiastic praise for when it was genuinely earned, which made everyone instinctively work even harder to try to earn it.

It was amazing to be able to look around a stage full of people practicing a play, and not see a single person who wasn't obviously delighted to be there.

The most fun and fascinating part of all, however, was watching Jennalee's own performance evolve. She progressively took herself deeper and deeper into the character of Dolly Levi, working on her voice and mannerisms and cadences until she seemed almost as if she really was a middle-aged widow when she was in character. She polished the delivery of her funny lines until she was getting the maximum out of every one - yet at the same time was so natural that she seemed to be making up the lines as she spoke.

As I watched her from the stage or the wings when she was in character, I sometimes got the eerie feeling that she wasn't just playing Dolly, but that somehow she had actually BECOME Dolly. The quality of her work inspired everyone else in the cast to work even harder raising their own games as high as possible; but no one seemed to mind at all working so hard.

My personal schedule became very tricky for a while, as I had to set things up so I could both continue doing my tutoring and attend enough rehearsals to satisfy Mrs. Fletcher. It was a hectic time, but sharing 'Hello, Dolly!' with Jennalee was worth all of the hassle and much more.

Between Jennalee's efforts with the stage performers, and Mrs. Fletcher working tirelessly supervising all the various aspects of the production in an effort to make her dream come true as fully as possible, the show came together wonderfully over the course of the rehearsal period. Even though I was a novice performer, I had seen enough movies and plays in my life to realize that we had something special

going with this production of 'Hello, Dolly!' I had a strong feeling that the show in general, and Jennalee in particular, were going to be received extremely well by our audiences.

This feeling increased even more at the dress rehearsal, when we all finally got to see Jennalee play Dolly in full costume and make-up. Her dresses had some padding to make her look heavier (she always kept herself in good physical condition), and the make-up made her look older. With these visual factors added to her carefully devised and practiced portrayal of Dolly, the illusion she was able to create of being forty or so instead of eighteen was stunningly effective.

Opening night was amazing. The house was nearly full, and from the moment Jennalee began her first speech as Dolly early in the first scene she had that big audience in the palm of her hand, and never let them go. Every word, facial expression and movement in her performance was fully believable yet richly entertaining. She got laughs on several lines that weren't even especially funny in and of themselves, just because her delivery of them was so amusing. The combination of the quality of her performance and her natural charisma and likeability completely captivated the audience.

The rest of the cast also performed well. Angelica and Dewayne were particularly excellent, which was not surprising considering that they and Jennalee had done additional practicing together beyond the regular rehearsals. She had worked even more with me, and if I do say so myself I did a pretty respectable job as the judge, despite the predictable first-show-ever nerves.

The audience came to their feet and cheered and applauded loudly at the end of the finale. The main cast then did their curtain calls, with the applause surging for each lead. Finally, Jennalee came to center stage. The applause and cheers immediately became thunderous, and stayed that way for at least a full minute: the audience simply did not want to let her go. Eventually the whole cast joined hands, and we all took one final bow before the curtain came down.

Then Jennalee and I quickly found each other, and shared a tight and emotional hug. I would have held her a lot longer, but the other performers were gathering around to give Jennalee their own hugs and congratulations, and I had to share her with them.

I had never been involved in a team effort anywhere near this magnitude before, and the feeling of having successfully delivered a great show after all the hard work we'd all put in together was amazing - and doubly so because the person who had led all of us to be able to be so good was the love of my life. I was so thankful that Jennalee had persuaded me to participate in the show. I knew this opening night was an experience neither of us would ever forget.

The first performance was reviewed in our paper again the following morning, and the reviewer raved even more about this show than he had over the previous one. He praised every aspect of it, but naturally saved his greatest praise for Jennalee. He wrote that her performance was professional quality, and that Jennalee was almost certainly a future star in our midst. He ended the review by advising everyone who was reading it to go and see this show, because if they didn't they would regret it someday, when Jennalee Morgan had become famous.

Just as importantly, at least from an attendance perspective, the paper from the Big Town did indeed send their own writer to cover opening night, and her review was also enthusiastic and full of praise, for the whole show and especially for Jennalee. Like her counterpart from our paper, the writer also predicted that someday Jennalee would achieve a significant level of professional success and fame as an actor.

The result was that all three remaining shows for the weekend sold out, and by Monday over half of the tickets for the following weekend had also been bought, either in person or online.

On Sunday evening (there was only a matinee performance that day, of course) our local paper contacted Jennalee and asked if she would do an interview for an article to be published later in the week. A feature reporter stopped in after school on Monday and talked to her for almost an hour. A photographer also took a few pictures of her so they would have a shot of her out of costume and make-up to include with the article (Mrs. Fletcher had previously given the paper some stills taken at the dress rehearsal, one of which had appeared with the review on Saturday).

The article ran on Wednesday, and it was well done, giving a flattering but accurate portrayal of Jennalee Morgan as a performer, student and person. The management of the paper from the Big Town must also have been quite impressed by Jennalee and her performance as described by their own reviewer, because they picked up the article from our paper and used it in their own Thursday edition.

During this time Jennalee was seeing another spike in the number of her Twitter followers, and a considerable number of people were sending multiple Tweets to her because they couldn't squeeze everything they wanted to say into 140 characters. So she and I decided that we should set up an official Jennalee Morgan Fan Page on Facebook, so her fans could more easily post messages to her of any length. I also started a normal Facebook of my own at the same time. Jennalee's page quickly accumulated a large number of 'likes,' of course. She enjoyed all of the messages posted by her fans, and replied to all of them.

With the performances of the play, the reviews, the newspaper article and social media all drawing attention to her, Jennalee was now definitely emerging as a local celebrity.

All four of the 'Hello, Dolly!' performances on the second weekend sold out completely, and the demand for tickets was such that another weekend of performances probably would have sold out as well. The show was a smashing success in every way.

Mrs. Fletcher was naturally ecstatic. Her 'Hello, Dolly!' dream had come true at last, and in a manner beyond anything she had ever imagined. She thanked Jennalee profusely after the final performance for all she had done to make the play so good, and Jennalee thanked her back for the chance to play Dolly, and for the latitude she had been given to take a leadership role in the production.

As had been the case with all of the performances, there were a bunch of people waiting to talk to Jennalee in the lobby afterwards. So it wasn't until the ride home (in the back seat of her mother's car again, of course) that Jennalee and I finally had a chance to really reflect on the whole experience of the show.

"Now that it's all over," I began, before we had even left the school parking lot, "I just want to tell you how impressed I am with you over everything you did with the play. You've truly moved beyond being the girl who just wants to have fun all the time. In many ways you were the most mature of all the students involved with the show. You were a leader who made everything and everyone around you better, as well as working extremely hard to perfect your own performance. I'm even prouder than before to be your boyfriend."

"Thanks!" Jennalee replied. "The thing is, though, I WAS having fun, with all of it. I haven't really changed much that way. I've just grown up enough that my definition of fun has expanded. I can have fun WHILE working hard and being mature now, not just with the more relaxing or entertaining kind of fun things. Especially when I'm doing something I really love, of course, and theater and acting are what I love to do most now. It's what I always want to do, because then I can be productive in an adult way and still have a lot of fun too. It's the perfect career for me!"

"Good point!" I agreed. "It makes me very happy to know that you'll be doing something that makes you so happy."

"You deserve to be happy," she responded, "because none of this would have happened for me without you. I know you don't believe that, but I still do. I'm more thankful than ever that I figured out that you were the one I really loved and needed to be with forever."

"Well, regardless of what might have happened with you and acting, I still think I got the better part of the deal when it comes to you and me. The thrill of knowing that you love me still hasn't begun to wear off, even after all this time. By the way, thanks again for talking me into being in the show. It was an amazing experience in so many ways, most of all because I got to share it with you and see firsthand what you can mean to a production and the people involved with it."

"You're very welcome, and thanks again for being in it! It was great to share it with you, too. Plus, you got better with every performance, and that was wonderful to see!"

"Wow, I'm honored!" I replied with a big smile. "Of course, I had a great acting teacher, so I can't take all the credit."

"I guess that's true," Jennalee responded, giggling a little, "but you do have talent as well. That's good to know, too, because if that medical research thing doesn't work out, you'll have something to fall back on!"

I laughed heartily. "I hope it doesn't come to that!" I finally said. "But if my worst case scenario is sharing a career with Jennalee Morgan, I'm pretty much guaranteed to have a VERY good life!"

"As long as we're together, we both are!" she observed. We shared one long, affectionate kiss, and then she snuggled herself into my arms for the rest of the ride home.

Chapter 13

During March we had celebrated my eighteenth birthday, and by the end of the month I had received acceptances from all five colleges we had applied to. Jennalee had gotten responses from three. Her other two replies came in early April.

There had been no question that all the schools would accept me, of course. My academic record included, among other things: straight A's since first grade; the maximum number of advanced courses I could take; three wins and several other high finishes in regional science fairs; my nearly three years of tutoring, with nearly every student I'd worked with achieving a significant improvement in their grades; the weekly volunteer work our two families had been doing together for years at the local food bank; and my very high SAT score. Plus, there was my extremely ambitious plan for a double major plus minors on my way to becoming a top level medical researcher. With all that going for me I could have gotten accepted at virtually any college I wanted to go to, with at least a partial scholarship.

So it was just a question of which schools would accept Jennalee. Mrs. Fletcher had written a wonderful letter for her, and we had also sent each college a packet containing the newspaper review and a copy of the DVD of 'The Odd Couple.' With those things added to the excellent grades I had helped her achieve and her own additional extracurriculars, it seemed likely that at least some of the five schools would be glad to have Jennalee Morgan in their drama department.

Over the winter Jennalee had ranked the five colleges in order of her personal preference. There was actually a tie for first place on her list, because both of the two had a drama department head who had been a successful Broadway actress for at least ten years before going into teaching. To our mild surprise, the first of those two schools she heard from actually rejected Jennalee's application. The other was the last response she got, almost a week into April. To our relief, delight and great thankfulness to God, that college accepted her.

The school we would be attending was the second closest of the five to our home city, only about a three hour drive away, meaning we would easily be able to come home for a few weekend visits during the school year. So it seemed to be a good fit for us all around. We immediately arranged for a campus visit together, which we scheduled for the first Thursday after the show closed.

The visit was very enjoyable for both of us. During the course of the day I got a chance to meet with the heads of both the Biology and Biochemistry departments, and both seemed amazed by the extent of my knowledge of their respective disciplines. They assured me that I should, indeed, be able to bypass the lower level courses, which would obviously expedite my ambitious educational plans.

Jennalee hit it off very well with the drama head, who had already seen the 'Odd Couple' DVD. Jennalee tended to make quite an impression on just about everyone she met, of course, but this woman seemed even more impressed by her as both an actor and a person than most. Jennalee treated her to an impromptu performance of one of her speeches and a verse of one of the songs from 'Hello, Dolly!' These were received with sufficient enthusiasm that the teacher made Jennalee promise to send her a copy of the 'Hello, Dolly!' DVD as soon it came out.

By the end of the visit it was evident to both of us that we had definitely chosen the right college. We were both excited, and already looking forward to the start of classes in the fall.

Jennalee's new status as a local celebrity naturally continued after the show ended. The exposure she'd gotten through the article that had appeared in both newspapers was even more significant than the large attendance at all the performances in causing her to be recognized in public. Almost everywhere she went there would be at least one person she didn't know who would come up to her to talk about the play, and sometimes ask for an autograph. Usually it was more than one. The release of the DVD of 'Hello, Dolly!' two weeks after the show closed helped keep this trend going a while longer. Not surprisingly, the DVD

sales this time far exceeded even those of 'The Odd Couple,' since there was demand for it not only from those who had seen the show and wanted to relive the experience, but from the many people who had been unable to get tickets, and could thus see a performance only via the DVD.

Gradually Jennalee began being noticed less and less, fame being the fickle thing that it is. Still, through the end of the school year a week never went by without at least one fan encounter, and she continued to enjoy them whenever they would happen.

Aside from the recognition and attention Jennalee was receiving, however, our lives had returned to normal after the play ended, especially in terms of our daily schedules. Graduation was less than two months away at that point, and soon Jennalee began regularly giving me both subtle and not-so-subtle reminders of what she wanted to have happen right after that.

For example, there was a night when Jennalee and I were watching TV together. I hardly ever watched TV on my own, by the way, simply because I almost always had other things I wanted to do that were more important and interesting for me. Though I did always enjoy sharing a good movie with Jennalee, most television shows held no interest for me at all; but clips of real people having real experiences were often fascinating, so I did like watching one of the viral video shows with Jennalee when we had relaxing time available.

On one particular night in early May, the show we were watching had a clip of a public proposal that went horribly wrong. We both cringed at the awkwardness of the moment, and then Jennalee said, "I hope you're not planning a public proposal to ME! I think a proposal should be a private moment between two people who love each other, don't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," I replied, intentionally sounding a bit uncertain. "Darn it, I guess I have to scrap that skywriting idea."

Jennalee giggled. "You're so silly sometimes!" she said. "I know you know me too well to ever even think about something like that. Plus, you couldn't afford it."

"Even if I COULD afford it, you're right: I wouldn't embarrass you like that."

"I can hardly wait for it to happen, however you decide to do it."

"Ooh, look at that!" I suddenly exclaimed, shifting our focus back to the TV: I wanted to get us off of the proposal subject before she dragged us any further in.

Late the following Saturday afternoon I picked her up after her shift at the store. I suggested we take a stroll down the mall to relax and window shop before we went home.

As we slowly walked and browsed, someone recognized Jennalee and stopped to say hello to her. This caused several other people to notice her too, and they also joined in the conversation. As always when she met fans, Jennalee was glad to take the time to talk to them.

After a few minutes her admirers went on their way, and our stroll continued. At one point, while we were deep in conversation, Jennalee noticed that we were passing close by one of the display cases of the jewelry store that was located in one of the corner spots at the center of the mall. She stopped in mid-sentence, and her face lit up.

"Look, Michael!" she exclaimed. "Engagement rings! We're going to need one soon, we should look at some of them!"

"Uh, sure, why not?" I replied noncommittally.

"All right, here's a quiz for you," Jennalee continued, apparently not noticing my somewhat guarded tone. "Knowing me as well as you do, what kind of engagement ring do you think I'd want?"

"Hmm," I muttered as I thought for a moment. "Well, you're the kind of person who likes to keep things uncomplicated, including in how you dress: stylish but simple clothes, nice but basic hairstyle, even small earrings, never the big hoops. So based on that, I would say you would want a simple kind of ring: a good stone in a nice but simple setting, nothing high and fancy, and without a bunch of smaller diamonds around it. Am I right?"

"Like I always say," she replied with a big smile, "I love how we get each other! That's exactly right!" She turned back to the display case and looked for a few seconds. "Something like that kind right there!" she continued, pointing to a group of identical rings that were simple but beautiful.

A moment later a clerk came up to the other side of the counter.

"Anything I can help you folks with today?" he asked.

"Can I try on one of those rings, please?" Jennalee asked sweetly, pointing again to the same group. "I don't know which size I need, I don't usually wear rings."

The clerk pulled out the tray containing the rings, and Jennalee tried one on. The first one was slightly loose. The second one she tried fit perfectly.

"That's a seven," the clerk informed us.

"It looks good on me, doesn't it?" she asked rhetorically as she slowly moved her fingers. "Ooh, and the simple stone has such a nice sparkle." She held her hand closer to my face for a couple of seconds so I could see what she was observing; then she abruptly pulled her hand away, quickly removed the ring and handed it back to the clerk. "Sorry," she said to me, "if you want to see a ring like that on my hand any longer than that, you'll have to propose to me with one!" She turned back to the clerk and flashed her biggest smile. "Thank you very much, sir!" she said. "Have a nice day!"

"Thank you, my pleasure, you too!" the clerk replied, looking slightly dazzled but happy, as we walked away.

"Now, that's what I call 'fun AND informative!'" Jennalee said happily. "I'm glad I noticed those rings, it'll make things easier for you, right?"

"I suppose it will," I replied. "Hey, why don't we stop at the frozen yogurt place for a quick treat before we head home?"

"Sure," she replied, looking at me a bit strangely. Then she apparently decided to let whatever might be bothering her go as we continued our leisurely walk down the mall.

Jennalee's occasional hints about expecting a proposal in the near future continued through most of May, whenever an opportunity presented itself to her. It was hard to tell how much she was noticing that my responses were somewhat lukewarm.

On the third weekend in May we attended the Senior Prom together. To absolutely no one's surprise, Jennalee was elected Prom Queen. To my utter astonishment, however, I was voted King. I had no illusions whatsoever about the result of the voting being due to any sudden rise in my own popularity. I knew very well that I had gotten the honor only because everyone who voted for Jennalee knew that it would make her even happier to have me at her side when she was crowned. Which, of course, it did, and that was the best part, even though it was also a pretty cool experience in and of itself.

Finally, graduation night arrived. I was valedictorian, but I kept my speech short, not wanting to bore anyone. I did take the opportunity to talk briefly about how academics are important, but that a balanced life makes knowledge even better, and credited Jennalee with teaching me that lesson. From there I thanked everyone from the principal to my parents, and then gave special thanks to Jennalee, and to God for being the ultimate source of all the good in anyone's life.

When it was all over and we were out of our caps and gowns, we were congratulated again by our parents. Then they carpoled home so Jennalee and I could go out for a late snack to celebrate.

When we got home later I walked her to her door. I could sense her excitement as we went, not just in her face but in her whole manner.

When we reached her front door I gave her a long, passionate kiss.

"Congratulations, grad!" I said with a big smile. "I'm so proud of you. One more enjoyable summer, and then our lives really start getting interesting. It's so exciting."

"Congrats, Valedictorian!" she replied. "Not that anyone ever doubted THAT would happen! I'm proud of you too."

"Thanks!"

We continued to smile at each other for a few seconds. Then my smile faded, and I sighed.

"Oh, JJ, I'm so sorry," I said, softly and sadly. "I was hoping you were just excited about graduating, but I can read you too well. I can tell it's more than that. You're waiting for me to propose, aren't you?"

"Well...yeah!" she responded in surprise. "You mean...you're not going to?" The sudden disappointment in her face was painful to see.

"I was afraid to talk to you about it," I said. "I didn't want to hurt you. You haven't dropped any hints this last week or so, and I was hoping that meant...OK, I guess I really did know you still wanted it to happen tonight, I just didn't want to face it."

"What are you saying, Mikey?" she demanded, now looking like she was starting to panic. "Are you

having second thoughts about marrying me?"

"NO!" I stated emphatically, almost yelling it. I immediately put my arms around her and held her tightly. "No, no, no! You're still my whole world and always will be, of course! I'm still very much looking forward to marrying you - someday. It's just that...well, I'm not sure anymore that I'm ready to be engaged this soon."

"Wow," Jennalee murmured. She gently pushed herself out of my hug so she could look at me. "I wasn't expecting this." She was silent for a few seconds, and then sighed. "But I should have," she went on, speaking louder. "Those times when I gave you the hints about expecting a proposal soon, I could see you didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about the whole thing; but I couldn't let myself consider that maybe there was a problem. I was looking forward to being engaged to you too much." Then her expression hardened. "But you should have talked to me about this weeks ago, Mikey. You should have known how I'd feel."

"You're right, you're absolutely right," I agreed, hanging my head. "I'm so sorry." Then I looked at her again and gently put one hand on each of her shoulders. "Look, JJ, you trust me, right? I don't even need you to answer that, I know you do, absolutely, just like I trust you. It's late now, and I need to figure out how to fully explain to you how I feel, because for once it looks like you DON'T get me." I took her back into my arms and held her tightly again, and didn't continue speaking until I felt her arms securely hugging me back. "But you have to know one thing: I love you, Jennalee Morgan, with all my heart and soul, forever and ever. I want to BE with you forever and ever. Your happiness matters more to me than my own, always has and always will. So believe me that one way or another, this is going to work out for the best. OK?" I released my hug, stepped back and slid my hands down her arms into a double hand hold. "OK?" I repeated, softer and more gently.

"OK," she replied. "I really DON'T get you right now, but I do trust you. We'll talk more tomorrow, right?"

"Definitely!" I stated. "We'll get everything straightened out." I put my arms around her again. "I love you forever, JJ. No matter what happens, that will never, ever change."

"I love you too, Mikey," Jennalee replied.

I loosened my hug just enough so we could kiss, and tried to make it as emotional a kiss as I could. It went on for a while, and when we finally broke it off and I leaned back to see her face, she was smiling. There was still uncertainty in that smile, but I could clearly see her deep and abiding love for me there too.

"That's better," I said, smiling back. "Goodnight, my precious lady. I love you."

"Love you too," she replied. "Goodnight." She went inside and closed the door, and after a moment I walked home.

Chapter 14

The next day, which was Saturday, Jennalee came over to our house on her own while I was still eating my breakfast. I had slept in a bit, and my parents had gone out for some weekend shopping.

After I let Jennalee into the house I quickly finished my oatmeal and cleaned up, then sat down with her at the kitchen table.

"Can you tell me now what's going on with you?" she asked softly.

"I don't think I can explain all of it," I answered, "not in a way that would satisfy you, because I don't completely understand everything myself yet. This past school year has been so interesting for me. I've watched you grow so much as a person, get so much more mature while still staying the Jennalee I love with all my heart. I've changed too, though, in different ways. I've always been so serious and mature, but at the same time that you were growing and maturing, I was discovering more of the kid in me.

"I think maybe it was because of being a senior this year, on the verge of legal adulthood for most things. I think I've been looking back on my life, and the person I've been. Doing the play, which was a kind of experience I've never had before, helped clarify this stuff in my mind. I've seen in recent months that even though you've helped me so much to have a balanced life, I've still been trying too hard for too long to be too much like a grown-up; and I feel now like I'm not sure I'm ready to go all the way there yet. Because let's face it: when you get engaged, you're an adult. There's no turning back.

"Most of all, though, is the simple fact that we both want each other to be happy. I want you to be happy by being engaged; but at the same time, you won't be as happy about it as you should be if you see that I'm not as happy about it as you want ME to be.

"So, I have a proposition for you: let's take some time to just have some summer fun together while I keep really thinking this through. Put the whole engagement matter on temporary hiatus for a specific time."

"How long?" Jennalee asked.

"How about until our first anniversary as a couple? That's less than two months. Give me that much time to work things out for myself. Could you do that without hating me too much?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Come on, Mikey, you know I'll never hate you. I guess no couple ever agrees on every important thing ALL the time. We ARE human after all." She took a deep breath and let it out. "All right, fair enough," she said, smiling a little wider. "I promise I won't say anything about proposals and engagement again until our anniversary. I think I still get you, though, in spite of this, and I've got a feeling I know what you'll decide - and that's the last thing I'm saying about it!"

"Thank you!" I exclaimed.

"You're welcome, Mikey. Really, I mean it."

"And you might be right," I added. "Maybe eight weeks or so of acting like kids and having fun times together will be enough to get this conflict out of my system and make me fully ready to be a grown-up. It's certainly possible."

"No comment," Jennalee replied with a big smile.

"All right, then!" I said as I started to stand up, "No work for either of us today, so what do you say we get started on having a fun summer?"

"Now you're speaking my language!" she chuckled. "Wanna go to the beach?"

"The water's probably still a bit cool for swimming," I noted, "but we could ride our bikes down there, hang out for a while and then do the lakeside bike trail. Good fun and good exercise all in one!"

"Sounds great! Let's go!"

So began our eight weeks of summer fun before the Day of Determination. True to her word as always, Jennalee never said a single thing about getting engaged during the entire time, not even the most subtle allusion to it. Still, I knew she was anxious for the Big Day to come, and that she fully expected to end that day with a ring on her finger.

We had lots of every reasonable kind of fun during those eight weeks. Sometimes Angelica and Dewayne joined us for an activity. Because Dewayne and I had become good friends, and because Angelica and I had also been getting along much better since Jennalee's birthday, there was now a strong sense of unity between the four of us when we were together. We had developed a genuine group friendship, which made the time we shared even more fun than before.

As always, though, I cherished most the time that Jennalee and I spent one-on-one; and as we had done during the last part of the previous summer, we spent as much of our free time together as we could. I enjoyed every minute of it.

The days and weeks of fun went by, and eventually came the day before our anniversary. I suggested we go to the beach again.

Since it was now the heart of summer, the water was excellent for swimming, and we enjoyed an afternoon much like the one we'd shared on the day we became a couple. We even returned to the little park overlooking the beach, where we again spent the last part of the afternoon relaxing and kissing and cuddling and talking.

"It's great to be young and in love, isn't it?" I commented at one point as we were snuggled up together on our towels.

"On a day like this, it's great just to be alive," Jennalee replied.

"Most of all," I added, "it's great to be US!"

She didn't respond immediately, and I shifted my position so I could see her face. I could tell that she wanted to say something, but was forcing herself to hold it in. I imagined it was something like, *I hope it'll be even greater to be us TOMORROW*. Among the many things I loved so much about Jennalee Morgan was that she always kept her promises, and she was certainly keeping one with difficulty at that moment.

"I would never want to be anyone else, or be WITH anyone else," she finally said. I resumed my previous position and held her a little tighter than before.

"I almost wish this could just go on forever," I sighed.

Again she didn't respond, and I wondered how she had taken that last statement of mine. I didn't ask or try to clarify it. Instead, in a slightly louder and quicker voice, I said, "I love you!"

"I love you too, Mikey," she said, with a distinct lack of meaningful emotion.

"Prove it!" I challenged.

She turned herself around and we both sat up. I gently pulled her close, wrapped my arms around her and gave her an affectionate kiss. She kissed back enthusiastically, and for a while the shadow of the following day was lifted from us.

Our conversation on the ride home and our goodbyes for the day were much more restrained than usual. We both knew that an important moment was upon us, and that there was a lot each of us couldn't say yet; and by that point it seemed that neither of us could think of much else.

The night came and then the next day, the day of our anniversary. I had tutoring appointments in the morning and afternoon, and Jennalee had to work the day shift at the store.

Then the tutoring was done, and Jennalee had arrived home. She called to let me know that after she'd grabbed a snack, showered and gotten dressed, she would be over.

So now here I was, looking out the same window I'd looked through a year ago, waiting again for Jennalee Morgan to come across the street to talk to me.

I had thought through my plans for this conversation repeatedly, and I knew what I needed to do, but I still couldn't help going over all of it one more time as the last minutes passed before the arrival of the love of my life.

We had chosen my house as the meeting place because again my parents weren't home. As it was late afternoon on Friday, this time they were away because they had gone out for dinner and a movie. Jennalee and I were also going to go out after our talk to celebrate our first anniversary as a couple, so when she came over she would be dressed nicely. I myself was wearing shirt and tie, dress slacks and the newer of my two sport coats.

Finally, the door to her house opened, and Jennalee emerged. I focused myself as I watched her cross the street. She was dressed VERY nicely, in her usual stylish-but-simple manner, and looked stunning, somehow even more radiant than usual.

A year earlier I'd been unable to get a clear read on Jennalee's mood as she came up the walkway toward my house, a very unusual occurrence for either of us in dealing with the other. This time, however, there was no difficulty at all in seeing what was going on in her mind: she was trying to stay positive, but there was also unmistakable trepidation and anxiety present in her beautiful features. I could see that she wanted to believe things were going to work out the way she wanted, but knew there was a good chance it wasn't going to happen.

I hated seeing her looking and feeling that way, especially since I knew that her worst fears were about to be confirmed.

She took a deep breath as she came up the stairs, and let it out as she hit the porch.

I quickly walked over to the front door. As I looked through the window in the door at Jennalee, our eyes met, and she smiled at me, a smile that held both hope and fear.

I took a deep breath of my own.

"Show time," I whispered to myself, and opened the door.

Chapter 15

"Hi!" I said in a friendly but somewhat reserved manner as Jennalee entered the house.

"Hey," she replied, still smiling in that mixed emotion way.

We went into the living room and sat down together on the couch, just as we had done for our talk a year before; and just like the year before, Jennalee spoke before I could say anything.

"All right, Mikey," she began, "before you start whatever you're going to tell me, I want to say a few things."

"Fine," I replied, still smiling. "Go right ahead."

"Eight weeks ago, I was pretty sure that you would be proposing to me today, that you would sort out your issues and come to the conclusion that you were ready to be engaged. I've enjoyed this time a lot because I wasn't worried about it.

"But the past couple of days I've suddenly been less sure, and especially after what you said at the park yesterday, because of the way we can read each other so well. Last night I was thinking back to how you reacted to my proposal hints last spring, and how you're acting now, and I started getting a feeling that maybe I was wrong about where you are on this. I hope I'm wrong now about THAT, but I want to have a chance to make my case in FAVOR of us getting engaged before you announce how you feel. Just in case that might help your decision, or even change it if it's a close one for you."

"Fair enough," I responded. "I'm willing to listen."

She paused at that, and I thought I knew why: if I had definitely been intending to propose today, at that point I would have told her that she didn't need to make such an argument to me. Since I HADN'T said that, it meant, at the very least, that I was still unsure. As she continued to react facially for a few more seconds, I became certain that she was, indeed, thinking those very thoughts.

I was proud of her for quickly reaching such a logical conclusion, especially since it was a conclusion she definitely didn't want to draw. I had taught her well.

"OK," she said, breaking the brief silence. There was a subtle but unmistakable change in her demeanor at this point: I could tell she'd perceived that the slim hope she'd been clinging to had turned out to be in vain, and yet she still couldn't quite abandon it completely.

She took a slow breath and went on.

"Now, this is pretty obvious stuff, but important. First of all, you do still agree that we're going to be spending the rest of our lives together, right?"

"Of course!" I agreed emphatically. "Just try to get rid of me!"

She smiled slightly, then continued.

"Good. I knew that, but I'm glad to hear you say it again. Second, we're adults now, legally and in terms of where our lives are. We start college in another month. We'll both be working toward our specific careers, not just getting a general education. We're not kids anymore. It's not going to change anything important from this point on, for college or otherwise, if we're engaged. Like you said eight weeks ago, it's a permanent step into adulthood - but so what? We ARE adults!"

She paused again, and leaned toward me,

"But most of all, Mikey, for me, being engaged is about our commitment to each other. I want to make that commitment so much! I WANT to have that ring on my finger that tells the whole world that I'm yours and you're mine, forever! I want that because I love you SO MUCH! Isn't that enough? Isn't that more important than anything else?"

She stopped speaking, clearly fighting back tears. This was all so painful for me to listen to and see, but I knew I had to be strong: I not only had to make my own counterargument, I had to convince her to go along with me.

"Was there anything more you wanted to say?" I asked, in as gentle a tone as I could. She looked at

me for a moment, then shook her head.

"But you're going to tell me you're not ready, aren't you?" she asked very softly.

"You've got to try to understand, JJ," I began. "I've thought all this through very carefully. A year ago we both observed that in this relationship you're the impulsive and fun one, and I'm the 'big picture' guy. It's my job to see all the larger implications of what we do at any given time. So that's what I've done. I really WANTED to come to the conclusion you wanted me to find, but it didn't happen. I know it's just not the right thing for us right now. Please try to listen to what I have to say with an open mind, knowing that it's coming from someone who loves you more than his own life.

"For one thing, you just said that being engaged isn't going to change anything important for college. I disagree. Few people enter college engaged. It would set us apart from most of the other students, and I think a lot of them would find it intimidating to interact with an engaged couple. It would make us seem much more mature than they are, and harder to relate to.

"But more important than that is what being engaged would do to our own attitudes as college students. Yes, we're officially adults either way, but so are all the other students; but they are also still kids in a way. We're still going to school, still completing the journey to find out exactly who we really are in all the details. So much of the college experience beyond the academics is geared to a youthful attitude. If we make that commitment to each other now, step fully into adulthood before we ever step on campus, it takes away from that. It makes the college experience much more serious for us.

"When I did the show with you, it turned out to be a revelation to me about feeling like a kid. I'm sure it's a different kind of atmosphere when it's a professional show, where everyone is trying to make a living with a play. Everyone associated with our play was there because it was something they WANTED to do, because it was FUN! The reward was the experience and doing a good job, not a paycheck. All of that is the epitome of a youthful attitude. It was exhilarating to be a part of that!

"So it all comes back to taking that irretrievable step. I realize now that young adult is a phase all its own between kid and full-fledged adult. It combines some of both. That's how college should be experienced: taking the training for your chosen field seriously, but still enjoying the school atmosphere with a youthful attitude. Getting engaged, making the most serious commitment two people can make to each other short of marriage itself, would inevitably compromise that youthfulness. It would change our college experience, whether you can see that right now or not."

Now it was my turn to lean in a little closer.

"JJ," I continued. "I've loved this whole year we've spent together as a couple, being young and in love. I loved being in the play with you. I loved everything we did together. I loved the way every moment of it FELT! And these past eight weeks, fully enjoying summer and each other, haven't they been awesome? Young and in love is so great! I'm just not ready to give that up yet!

"A year ago our parents told us to not rush ahead too fast with our relationship, to enjoy being young while we still can. They were right. We're a year older, we're heading for college soon, but we're still young, and we can keep fully enjoying it for a while longer. I want to do that. I don't want us to look back in a few years and see that we finished growing up too soon, and start regretting what we did.

"We can always decide, at any point, that we're ready to be engaged and go ahead with it; but once that ring is on your finger, the door between childhood and adulthood closes and locks, and we can never go back. Are YOU really sure you're ready for that? The beauty of waiting is that you don't have to answer that question now. You don't even have to think about it."

I leaned back again, indicating that I was finished, and waited for Jennalee to respond.

"I understand what you mean, Mikey," she said softly after a few seconds. "But yes, I AM ready. I want to be engaged to you more than anything else in the world, and I'm ready to pay any price in lost youthfulness or future regrets that it might cost me. I've thought about it a lot too. I'm not sure you're right about engagement necessarily forcing us to be COMPLETELY grown up, but no matter what it means, I'm ready for it."

She stopped, closed her eyes for a second and gave a little sigh, then continued.

"But it's not fair for me to try to impose that on you when YOU'RE not ready. I want it to be a completely joyful experience for both of us when it happens. For your sake, and OUR sake, I'm willing to wait until it can be that way. We'll do it your way, and I won't ever complain or bug you about it. I'll try my

best to keep feeling young, so we can both keep fully enjoying our lives together."

She paused, then took a deep breath and let it out. At the same time, I was managing to keep my smile small, even though I was rejoicing on the inside: I was succeeding in my mission.

"Um..." she continued tentatively. "Can I ask...do you have any idea how long you think you might want to wait?"

"Well," I replied. "Logically we would get married after you graduate. So maybe get engaged a year before that?"

"THREE YEARS?!" Jennalee exclaimed in dismay.

"Maybe two, maybe two," I added quickly. "I don't want to set deadlines, though. Let's just take things as they happen. We'll know when the time is right."

She bowed her head, took another deep breath and let it out.

"I love you forever, Michael Davis, and nothing will ever change that," she muttered, "but this is SO not what I was hoping for." She looked up at me and smiled just a little. "It's so ironic: I was always the impulsive, immature one, and you were like a kid-going-on-35; but now we seem to have reversed our roles. I'm ready to be an adult, and YOU want to stay a kid."

"We have the rest of our lives to be grown-ups," I replied, taking her hand. "Staying kids a little longer won't be so bad. I'm pretty sure that before long, you'll find you actually like it." I stood, and pulled her to her feet. "Two or three years from now, when we ARE finally engaged, you'll look back and realize that I was right." Still holding her hand, I gave her a brief but affectionate kiss. "Thank you SO much for being so understanding. I'm not the least bit surprised about it, because that's you, but thanks. It means a lot to me. It means EVERYTHING to me."

"It's OK," she replied, still smiling a little. It was clear that she still very much wanted to be proposed to today, but that her love for me was stronger than even her desire to be engaged. I knew that when she had said she was willing to wait for my sake, she had really meant it. I had known beforehand, beyond all doubt, that she would feel that way.

"So then, you think you can force down a little food?" I continued. "I made a reservation for us at a nice restaurant in the Big Town. We've got an anniversary to celebrate, after all! Engaged or not, that's a pretty special occasion." I was still forcing my smile to stay in control, even though I was celebrating in my head: I had pulled it off! I had convinced Jennalee that waiting to be engaged, waiting two or even three years, was the best thing for us, and she had accepted it gracefully. Not happily, of course, but I hadn't expected that. I hadn't even wanted it.

"Sure," she replied, smiling a little more. "I'm still very glad and thankful that we're a couple. I wouldn't ever trade you for anything." It was clear that she was reconciled to what we had decided, and was ready to get back to being happy together. That was exactly where I wanted her to be at that moment.

We continued to hold hands as we walked across the living room toward the front door. Suddenly I stopped, released her hand and turned to face her.

"Oh," I said, "you know, there was one more thing I meant to bring up, because it's another good reason for us to wait."

"C'mon, Mikey!" Jennalee replied in obvious annoyance, not even meeting my eyes. "You got your way. You don't need to pile on like this."

"Hey, you know I wouldn't do that!" I replied. "I'm only bringing it up because it's something for you to look forward to. It's about your engagement ring."

She looked at me, obviously interested in spite of herself.

"See, the thing is, I've made some decent money the last few years doing tutoring, but I'm still a kid just out of high school. If we wait two or three years, I'll be able to save enough to get you a better ring than I could possibly afford now."

Fighting as hard as I could to keep my face, voice and movements completely under control for just a few more seconds, I very casually reached into the left front pocket of my sport coat, pulled out a small box, flipped open its hinged lid, and held it out so Jennalee could see the contents: a ring with a single diamond in a simple but beautiful setting.

"Maybe something like this one," I said.

I had managed to say the words in a completely calm, totally matter-of-fact tone, exactly the way I

had wanted to, exactly as I had practiced. As if the ring had no real significance at all, as if pulling it out at that moment had been the most natural thing in the world.

Jennalee initially reacted to the sight of the ring only with slightly amused curiosity, which was exactly what I'd intended, exactly what I'd been working so hard toward. Her reaction at that moment was the final confirmation that she was now completely off guard, absolutely convinced that no proposal would be coming for a long time. Through a year of planning and months of execution I had successfully maneuvered her into the perfect psychological position for the surprise of a lifetime.

"Hey, that's just like the one I tried on at the jewelry store!" she said with a slight smile of almost reluctant interest. "That's EXACTLY the kind of ring I...wa..." Her voice trailed off as the analytical part of her mind that I had helped her develop suddenly kicked into gear. Her face froze for a couple of seconds in that little grin, her mouth hanging open. Then her expression quickly morphed into one of confusion as she continued to stare at the ring. I was pretty sure I could read in her marvelously expressive face the exact words she was thinking: *Wait a minute - WHY DOES HE HAVE THAT??*

Suddenly she tilted her head up for a second to look at my face, then back down to look at the ring, then back up to look at me again. By this time my control had broken completely, and my smile was so wide I was almost chuckling.

Jennalee exhaled loudly as her face changed again, this time to an expression of intensely astonished happiness. She took a deep breath, then let out a long, loud scream of such pure, unadulterated joy that it instantly brought tears to my eyes.

The scream was immediately followed by a series of loud breaths, about a second apart, as if she were trying to laugh but was too overwhelmed with shock to do it correctly.

I was suddenly afraid that she might be starting to hyperventilate; so, still holding the open ring box in my left hand, I quickly took her left hand in my right, went down on one knee, and launched into the speech I had been writing and rehearsing for weeks. As soon I started to speak, Jennalee's breathing began to return to normal, obviously because she was focusing on my words.

"JJ," I began, struggling to control my own emotion so I could speak clearly, "one year ago today I learned that one of the most wonderful things that can ever happen to a person is when they want something very badly, become convinced that it isn't going to happen - and then suddenly and seemingly miraculously, it happens after all. You gave me a moment like that when you told me you loved me and became my girlfriend, just when I had pretty much abandoned all hope. Since we both knew from that very first day as a couple that we were going to get married someday, and that as a result a conventional proposal would be somewhat anticlimactic, I decided before that day was over that the best way to make my eventual proposal to you really special was to use the occasion to give you the kind of magical moment you had given me."

Tears were streaming down Jennalee's cheeks as I spoke, and she was visibly trembling with excitement and happiness.

"Based on your reaction to all this," I continued, my smile widening a bit, "I think it's safe for me to conclude that I've accomplished what I set out to do. If it isn't obvious already, the truth is that I don't really feel the way I told you I did before at all. I actually agree with you completely: I'm as ready to be an adult and as anxious to make this commitment as you are; and right now I can't wait one more minute to see this ring on your finger!"

My emotional control was beginning to slip, but somehow I managed to maintain a steady voice just long enough to say the words I'd been dreaming of saying for years:

"Jennalee Joy Morgan, will you marry me?"

"YES!" she sobbed loudly, "YES, YES, YES!"

With tears now running down my own face, I released Jennalee's hand just long enough to pull the ring from the ring box and slip the box back into my pocket. Then I took her hand again, and gently slid the ring onto her finger.

She stood there for a few seconds just looking at the ring on her hand and crying in pure joy, obviously savoring a sight that she had been longing for, a sight that only two minutes earlier she had fully believed she wouldn't get to see for a long time.

Then she looked back at me, grabbed my arms and tried to pull me to my feet. She was so emotionally overwhelmed she couldn't exert nearly enough force to do this, but she didn't need to. I quickly

rose under my own power, and Jennalee moved her body gently up against mine and slowly put her arms around my neck. I'm sure she wanted to throw herself onto me, but again, in her state of shocked happiness she just didn't have the strength. I wrapped my own arms around her and held her tightly.

"Thank you, Mikey!" she whimpered, "Thank you, thank you, tha-" Then her emotion took over completely, and a moment later we were both sobbing together. As we cried and hugged, Jennalee began finding her strength again, and her embrace got tighter and tighter.

My crying stopped before Jennalee's, but even after she was in control again too, she kept holding me tightly for another minute or two, undoubtedly just continuing to enjoy the knowledge that her dream had really come true, that I now officially belonged to her, and she to me.

Finally she released her hug, so I did too. She eased back just far enough so she could look into my face and place her hands on the outsides of my shoulders. She was still in a state of astonished joy, but had regained enough control to be able to talk coherently.

"Part of me wants to be mad at you for fooling me like that," she said emotionally. "But I can't! I'm too happy! I'm engaged! I'M ENGAGED! WE'RE ENGAGED!!" Suddenly she threw her arms around my neck again and actually started jumping up and down with excitement and happiness. I hugged her back and we jumped up and down together. "WE'RE ENGAAAAAAAAGED!!!" she shrieked as we bounced. Then she stopped jumping and just held me tightly again for a minute or so, obviously giving herself a chance to regain control of her excitement. Finally she released me and backed up a step so we could talk face to face again. When she spoke, there was still considerable emotion in her words.

"I'm just...so happy!" she proclaimed, chuckling slightly. "I didn't know it was POSSIBLE for a person to be this happy!"

"I knew you'd feel that way, that was the whole purpose of the exercise," I responded with a big smile. "It took a lot of planning and effort, but it was all so worth it to see you so happy right now."

"You didn't really mean any of that, huh?" she asked rhetorically. "You had me completely fooled. I was totally sure I was going to be waiting a long time to be wearing this." She held out her left hand so we could both look at the ring again.

"Well, the part about how much I enjoyed the last year together was true, obviously," I replied, "but the rest was just to set up the surprise. I needed to present a case that I knew wouldn't change your mind, but that sounded credible enough that you could believe I believed it myself; and then I had to act it well enough to convince you. That was the part I was very unsure about, even after graduation night and the next day."

Her eyes went a little wider.

"That was all acting too?" she asked in amazement. She shook her head. "Yeah, I guess it would have had to be!"

"All part of the plan," I assured her, "and somehow I managed to pull it all off."

Her mind was working much better now, and she suddenly put her hand to her mouth and gasped loudly.

"And that wasn't an accident when we just HAPPENED to be passing by that jewelry counter, was it?" She laughed and shook her head again. "Oh my goodness, we were actually shopping for my engagement ring that day, and I didn't even know it!"

"I had to find out exactly what kind you wanted, and your ring size," I replied, "and I had to do it in a way that would still allow me to seem reluctant to propose later. Thanks for being so cooperative, by the way. I had a back-up plan in case you didn't take the bait, though I was kind of iffy about it, but I thought there was a high likelihood you would jump at the chance to give me another reminder that you were expecting a proposal soon. Obviously I was right. You did everything I was hoping you'd do."

"And those times when I mentioned getting engaged and you didn't react with any enthusiasm, and yesterday at the beach when you said you wished we could go on forever like that, all those little things?"

"Uh-huh. And suggesting the day after graduation that I would very possibly come around by our anniversary, so you'd be able to fully enjoy this long fun period, and only in the last couple of days bringing the doubts back in so you'd start remembering all the other stuff again. That was part of the plan too. You're a very perceptive person, plus you know me extremely well and can read me very accurately. I knew that if I suddenly started acting reluctant to get engaged on our graduation day, or even just a short time before that, you would almost certainly see through it and know that something was up. So I carefully planted those little

seeds in your mind whenever I could, confident that when the finale was drawing near you would remember them, and those memories would make my story considerably more believable. Apparently that part of my strategy worked too."

"It was brilliant! All of it!" Jennalee declared. "And the best surprise EVER! I mean, I would have been very happy about you proposing to me even if I'd seen it coming a mile away, but to have it come completely out of nowhere like that just when I was sure it wouldn't happen for a long time...well, I can't even describe how incredible I feel right now! I guess this must be something like how you felt a year ago, and finally understanding just how good I made you feel then makes me feel even better now!" She paused for a moment. "Wow, I'm actually trembling again, I'm so happy! In fact, I want to bounce around again!"

"Hey, why not?" I asked. I took her by her forearms and started jumping up and down, and she immediately grabbed my forearms too and began jumping with me. "WE'RE ENGAAAAAGED!" I cried out, and then Jennalee joined in with me as I yelled it again while we continued to bounce around like little kids.

Finally we fell into each other's arms laughing, and held each other tightly for a minute or two. Then we separated so we could see each other's faces again. I could see at that point that while she was still excited and very happy, the initial shock from the surprise was finally wearing off, leaving her a little calmer and more in control of herself than she'd been previously.

"You know what," I observed, "that wasn't very grown up of us, was it?"

"Well, we can't expect to be totally grown up right away, even though we ARE engaged," Jennalee replied.

"Certainly not," I agreed. "You were right about that, of course: the truth is that childhood and adulthood really aren't as black and white as I argued before when I was making my fake case not to get engaged. We can always keep a little of the innocent, fun-loving kid alive inside of us. In fact, that's actually a good thing, as long as we don't compromise any of our adult responsibilities."

"I'm glad you think that!" Jennalee declared. "I actually had no intention of ever completely abandoning that part of me; but at this point, I do feel MOSTLY like a grown-up. I'm ready for being an adult now."

"Me, too," I agreed. "Especially after having taken these past eight weeks to largely concentrate on just having fun. That was also an important part of my plan in and of itself, by the way. One of the three reasons I chose today to propose."

"What were they?" Jennalee asked.

"OK, first of all, you were expecting me to propose on graduation night, so there was no way I could surprise you then; so I had to set it up for a later time. Then there was the fact that this date was already our anniversary of becoming a couple, so I thought it would be appropriate to have it become a double anniversary for us. Plus, the eight weeks between the two was a nice period for us to have one more long chance to have fun like kids before we got engaged and entered college and had to really start thinking like adults most of the time. Sort of a last farewell to our childhoods, you could say. I'm glad it worked out that we could have that."

"Aw, you're right, Mikey," Jennalee replied. "It was perfect, I'm glad we had that too. Your whole plan was perfect. It gave me a moment I'll remember forever. I'll never forget how I felt when I suddenly realized what you having that ring really meant."

"I'll never forget how you looked at that moment!" I chuckled. "And that scream of joy! My all time favorite sound forever. I'm just so glad I was somehow able to be a good enough actor to fool you. I wasn't at all sure I could, given what an acting genius you are. If you hadn't taught me as much as you could about acting to help me play the judge better, I probably wouldn't have been able to do it."

"You were really good, Mikey," Jennalee acknowledged with a big smile. "You obviously learned a lot from me, and I'm very proud of you for that. Thinking about it now, though, I'm pretty sure I would have figured out something was wrong if I'd been at all suspicious. For example, if I'd been in your place, I would have had a more apologetic attitude from the beginning of our talk today. I think I would have noticed that, and probably other things, if it wasn't for the simple fact that you're the most honest person I've ever known. It's just never occurred to me, for as long as I've known you, that you might ever do something to deceive me."

Suddenly her smile faded, and then her face assumed an expression of shock.

"But now you HAVE!" she continued in amazement. "You LIED to me! Oh, Mikey, this changes EVERYTHING!" She began to breathe a little faster as she looked at me, and fear and pain joined the shock in her beautiful face. "I mean...a relationship is based on trust, and now...how can I ever trust you again?"

Her emotions were so real and compelling that I reacted instinctively with my own shock, and then panic. *No, NO, THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING!* I thought rapidly. I wanted to scream. I was no more than a second away from falling to my knees and begging for her forgiveness when my intellect suddenly intruded on my internal emotional reaction, and I quickly realized that within the contexts of our relationship and the conversation we'd been having, what Jennalee had just said made no sense whatsoever.

With a force of will I pulled back my emotions, put as good a smile on my face as I could muster, and said, "You don't really think that!"

Her only immediate reaction was an increase in the pain and fear in her face, accompanied by a slight lean backwards to emphasize her fear.

Then a moment later, her face dissolved into a huge smile, and she giggled loudly.

"Of course not, silly!" she chuckled. "But I had you for a second there, I could tell! You gotta admit, THAT was good acting!"

I let out a deep breath that I hadn't even noticed I'd taken. "It was indeed!" I agreed, my smile now more genuine. "You put my performance today to shame with that one. I guess I had it coming, though; and just for the record, even though I know you agree it was for a good cause this time, I promise I'll never lie to you again. So are we even now?"

She responded by wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me, a kiss that continued for some time. When it finally ended, she tucked her head into my shoulder and kept hugging me.

"I love you, Michael Davis," she said emotionally. "I love you so much, even more than I did just an hour ago. You know, I MUST be an adult now, because there's no way a kid could ever love someone as totally and deeply as I love you at this moment."

"I feel the same way," I replied with just as much emotion. "God gave me a really good mind, and hopefully I'll use it to accomplish some very good things in my life; but you ARE my life. I'd be nothing at all if God hadn't brought us together, my angel. My precious one." I released my hug, put my hands on her shoulders and looked into her radiant, smiling face. "My FIANCÉE!" I concluded triumphantly.

"MY fiancé!" she replied, taking my face in her hands. "Oh, that feels so wonderful to say, doesn't it?" Suddenly she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door. "We've got to tell people!" she exclaimed. "Starting with my mom!"

Chapter 16

Jennalee and I quickly crossed the street and entered her house. She told her mom the good news, showed her the ring, and then we each hugged her.

"A year ago, I told you not to be in a hurry to get engaged," Mrs. Morgan said to Jennalee. "I think you'll agree now that you weren't ready yet. Since then you've grown a lot as a person, and I'm extremely proud of you for that, as I've told you before. You and Michael have also proven beyond any doubt that your love for each other is real and permanent. I'm very glad you two waited, because now you clearly ARE ready. I'm so happy for both of you! Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Morgan," I replied. "That means a lot to me."

She smiled at me for a moment.

"You know, there was another house I was looking at when we were going to move eight years ago. I seriously considered it before finally deciding to move here. That turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made - not because of the house, but because you were living across the street. You're the best thing that's ever happened to Jennalee, Michael. You've been making her and her life better ever since the day you two met, and I can't ever thank you enough for all you've done and continue to do for her."

"Wow," I said softly, genuinely moved. "That's so nice of you to say. It's all been my pleasure, believe me, and if anything she's done more for me than I have for her, so I really can't take too much credit."

Mrs. Morgan looked at me for a second. "I think you're a bit too humble sometimes, Michael," she said, "but all things considered I guess that's not a bad flaw to have. Anyway, I would say, 'Welcome to the family,' but you and your parents have been like family to us for a long time already, so that's not really necessary."

"I agree," I replied. "Hey, would it be all right if I call you 'Mom' from now on?"

"Of course it is!" Mrs. Morgan answered happily. "I'd be honored."

"Thanks again, Mom," I said as I put my arms around her and gave her another big hug. "Especially for moving here!"

After Jennalee had also hugged her mother again, we finally left for the restaurant, to celebrate both our anniversary and our engagement. Before we left town we made a brief side trip to Angelica's house, after Jennalee had called her to make sure she was home. As it turned out, Dewayne was there too, which saved her another call later.

When we arrived, Jennalee and Angelica immediately shared a big, excited hug, while Dewayne and I first shook hands as he congratulated me, and then with shrugs and smiles engaged in a hug of our own. Jennalee and I switched hugging partners, and then finally she showed Angelica and Dewayne her ring. A group conversation followed, with Jennalee and Angelica soon doing most of the talking, just because they were the most excited.

As always, I was delighted to see how close Jennalee and Angelica had become. Even though they would be attending different colleges, I had no doubt that they would maintain their friendship for many years to come, if not for the rest of their lives.

Time soon forced us to cut the conversation short so Jennalee and I wouldn't be late for our dinner reservations. After goodbyes and more hugs all around, we at last departed for the Big Town. During the drive Jennalee was busy on her phone, calling as many relatives and friends as time permitted to tell them about our engagement. She was still almost bubbling with happiness and excitement, and I was delighted to continue to see it.

Finally we arrived at the restaurant, and were escorted to our booth. (I had specifically requested a booth rather than a table, so Jennalee and I could sit close together on the same side, instead of in separate chairs; and I had further specified that I wanted one of the booths in a particular section of the dining area.) As we were looking over our menus, our server arrived.

"Hi, I'm Jodie!" she said cheerfully. "I'll be your-" She stopped suddenly as Jennalee lowered her menu. "Hey!" she exclaimed excitedly, "You're Jennalee Morgan! I saw you in 'Hello, Dolly!' I'm gonna be a senior at Lincoln High here this year, and I'm an actress too! In fact I found you on Twitter and Facebook after I saw you, and I posted on your Facebook a few times. Jodie Hemphill, remember?"

"Oh, of course I remember!" Jennalee replied, looking, as she always did at these moments, a little embarrassed but very delighted. "Your posts were VERY nice! I got a bunch of wonderful posts and Tweets during and after the run, but yours were some of the very nicest. You really are a good fan, and I appreciate it, just like I said when I replied to you."

"Oh, thank you!" Jodie exclaimed, blushing a little. "You know, playing Dolly is one of my dreams, I've been trying to talk our drama teacher into doing it at our school next spring. So when I saw in our paper that your school was doing it, I kinda wanted to see it, but I hadn't made plans yet before I saw the review when you opened. Then I knew I really HAD to see it. So I went that night, and you were SO GOOD! I liked it so much I got a bunch of us from Drama Club to come with me to see it again the next week. I even got one of the DVDs when they came out. If I ever do get to be Dolly myself, I'm gonna try to play her just like you did!"

"Thank you very much!" Jennalee responded. "But you shouldn't try to just copy what I did. You need to bring some of your own personality to a role like that, and emphasize your own particular abilities. If you just copy someone else, whoever it is, you won't seem natural."

"Wow, that's good advice, thank you so much! Wait'll I tell the other kids in Drama Club this fall that I got acting advice from Jennalee Morgan! Oh, I'm sorry, I should do my job! What can I get you tonight?"

We placed our orders, then Jodie took our menus and backed away, looking at Jennalee for an extra second before turning to go relay our orders to the kitchen.

Jennalee immediately turned to me.

"Michael Davis," she stated accusingly, "there is NO WAY we just happened to end up at this restaurant with that waitress!"

I laughed. "Hey, we've run into fans of yours many times. It could have happened randomly!" Then I chuckled contritely. "But you're right, of course. After she made those very nice posts I checked out her Facebook, where I learned she worked at this restaurant. It really is a very good restaurant, by the way, so it was worth the drive here just for the food; but I thought meeting one of your biggest fans would be another nice touch to add to this very special day. It WAS luck that she happened to be working tonight, though, and that she's a server at a good restaurant like this at all, for that matter. Or maybe not. Maybe God planned it that way."

"You are truly amazing, Michael," Jennalee chuckled, shaking her head. "I'm so blessed. There can't be a more wonderful, thoughtful, devoted boyfriend - excuse me, FIANCÉ! - in the whole world than you are to me. Thank you so much for everything!" She looked upward. "And thank you too, Lord!"

I looked upward myself and said, "That goes for me too!" Then I looked back at Jennalee. "And as I've said before, if I AM everything you say, it's only because I have the love of the most wonderful lady in the world to inspire me. Thank YOU for everything!"

We continued to smile lovingly at each other for a few more seconds. Then I put my arm around her and we snuggled up together, with Jennalee setting her left hand on the edge of the table so she could look at her engagement ring while we waited for our orders.

The food was delicious, definitely worth the drive. Throughout the meal Jennalee was positively glowing with happiness. She repeatedly gave me her most loving smile as we talked and ate, and I don't think more than two minutes ever went by where she didn't pause for a few seconds to look down at her left hand: apparently she was so delighted to be engaged to me that she had practically fallen in love with the ring too. Knowing I'd made Jennalee so happy made ME happier than anything else ever could.

When Jodie returned with our check after dessert, she also had a blank notebook with her.

"Um..." she said to Jennalee very shyly, holding out the notebook and a pen, "Could I please have your autograph? I think the reviewer in the paper was right about you becoming a star someday. I hope you'll remember that I was one of your first fans."

"Of course I'll sign that for you!" Jennalee replied. "I'm flattered that you would want me to! I won't forget you, either."

She took the notebook and pen, and I watched as she wrote,

'To Jodie,
If you really believe in yourself and work hard,
anything is possible.
Follow your dreams to the end,
just like I'm going to!
Love,
Jennalee Morgan
PS I really hope you get to be Dolly!

"Thank you so much!" Jodie said happily after she got the notebook back and read what Jennalee had written. "I don't know why you came here tonight, but I'll always be glad you did!"

"Actually," Jennalee responded, holding out her left hand, "Michael and I are celebrating our engagement."

"Really?" Jodie exclaimed in amazement. "Wow, congratulations! And that ring is really nice!" She looked at me. "You're a lucky guy, you know!"

"I do feel VERY lucky!" I stated. "In another way, though, I consider myself blessed, not lucky. I believe God meant for Jennalee and me to be together, and He should get the credit for it, not pure chance."

"Aw, that's nice," Jodie replied. "Well, anyway, you take good care of her, now!" She looked back at my fiancée. "And thanks again, Jennalee! You totally made my night. Heck, you made my whole SUMMER!"

As we walked back to the car a few minutes later, Jennalee said, "It really was cool to meet Jodie, even though having someone gush over me like that is a little embarrassing. It was worth it, though. Thanks for going to the trouble to set that up."

"You'd better start getting used to that kind of reaction," I replied. "I've been completely right about you and acting so far, and I don't see any way that someone who's as talented and charismatic and all-around awesome as you are isn't going to end up famous."

"Wait a minute," Jennalee responded, "you're supposed to make sure I DON'T get a big head about this stuff, not inflate my ego more!"

"That's true," I acknowledged. "However, I also promised you today that I'd never lie to you again; and the truth is, you ARE awesome, in just about every way possible!"

"All right," Jennalee shrugged, "but if I turn into a prima donna someday, it's on you!"

"Well, your sweetness and humility are part of your awesomeness," I replied. "So I'll just make sure you keep on being you, because as long as you're doing that, you'll always be nice."

"You're probably right," Jennalee said with a big smile as we reached my mom's car, "That should work!" She looked at the car, then said, "Hey, that reminds me, we haven't told your parents yet! Let's get going!"

I drove Jennalee to my house. My parents were back by then, so we went in and told them the news, and Jennalee showed them her ring. There were hugs all around, and blessings from my parents, who agreed with Mrs. Morgan's earlier statement that we were ready now for being engaged. When Jennalee and I thanked them, she called them 'Mom' and 'Dad,' which clearly delighted them.

"Forgive me for saying this," my father added, "but I hope you'll give engagement some time now too, and not be in a rush to get married, since you're just starting college."

"We'll take that under advisement," I assured him. After another round of hugs Jennalee and I left the house, and I walked her across the street to her door.

As we arrived on her front porch we suddenly looked at each other, and in perfect unison we loudly said, "I love you!"

We both burst into laughter, and then leaned together and put our arms gently around each other as we laughed.

When the laughter had begun to subside, we separated so we could look at each other.

"Wow," Jennalee said, still chuckling a little, "it took us a whole year to say it together like that

again. Of course we hardly ever do that game anymore."

"You know what?" I replied. "As much fun as it's been sometimes, I'm thinking maybe we should retire the 'I Love You Game' now, as another symbol of our crossing over into the adult world. It would be rather fitting that the last time we ever played it, we got it exactly right."

Jennalee nodded. "I think that's a good idea too. We may have technically become adults when we each turned eighteen, but as you've pointed out, getting engaged is a full and permanent step into real adulthood. Some things should change because of that, so I'm ready to let go of the 'I Love You Game.' On the other hand, as we both agreed, we don't have to give up ALL the kid in us. So partly in the interests of that, I'm gonna keep calling you 'Mikey' in private!"

"Well, I should hope so!" I chuckled. "I would never want you to stop calling me that, no matter how grown up we feel or how old we get. I hope you're prepared to be called 'JJ' forever too!"

"Absolutely!" she agreed. "Some things need to change sometimes, but other things should never change, including our nicknames." Then she brought up her left hand so we could both see it. "Or this," she continued, suddenly speaking in a more thoughtful and emotional tone. "This ring being on my finger will never change either." She looked at me and smiled. "Thanks again so much for putting it there, and for the great surprise that came with it. I'm still so excited and happy about being engaged to you that I feel like I could bounce around again like we did right after you proposed! I'll probably feel that way every time I look at my ring for a long time to come. Maybe even always. It was such a great idea to propose like that, so much better than if you had just done it normally. I could never thank you enough, Mikey!"

"You're very welcome!" I replied. "By the way, give yourself some credit too. It was only because I was completely sure that your love for me was much stronger than even your desire to be engaged that I was willing to pretend that I didn't want to propose to you yet. Even for the sake of a great surprise I would never have done that if I'd thought there was the slightest possibility of it damaging our relationship. So your deep and unassailable love for me made what happened today possible as much as anything I did. Thanks again so much for loving me like that!"

"You're welcome too!" she beamed. "Oh, and what you just said reminds me: I was thinking earlier that one of the best things about all of this was finding out that we hadn't really had our first major disagreement after all. I feel so good about that, and it makes me want us to never, EVER have any kind of real argument again. I suppose that's not realistic though, huh?"

"Hey, with God all things are possible," I replied. "I mean, we'll probably disagree on something important once in a while, especially after we're married; but if we stay focused on God all our lives and constantly seek His guidance and blessing, we might just be able to keep those situations from turning into genuine arguments."

"And if we keep totally believing in each other, and in US, of course," Jennalee added. Then she smiled widely. "But there's no question about that, is there?"

"None at all!" I confirmed, smiling back. "We'll ALWAYS have that."

"Or, as a great guy I know once put it," she continued, as her smile grew even wider and more loving, "'Forever and ever!'"

"Forever and ever!" I nodded in agreement, as my own smile widened more too. "You know what else?" I added. "After an entire year of being a couple, the thrill of knowing that you love me STILL hasn't even begun to wear off. I'm starting to think that that's another thing that will last forever."

"I still feel that way too," she agreed, "and I can't see any reason why that feeling should ever stop for either of us, as long as we don't want it to."

"Then we'll just have to keep not wanting it to!" I declared.

"Deal!" she confirmed.

We stood there for a few seconds, continuing to smile at each other in silence, both of us simply enjoying the wonderfulness of the moment, of the day, and of just being together.

Then Jennalee's face turned serious.

"Hey," she said, "I just realized that we haven't talked yet about WHEN we're going to get married." She smiled again. "You've been the man with the plan in all of this, Mikey. Do you have any ideas about our wedding?"

"I wasn't going to bring that up tonight," I answered. "I figured this day would be full enough already

without discussing that topic too. Since you asked, though, I'm sure you won't be surprised to learn that I HAVE given the matter some thought."

"Ooh, cool!" she replied happily. Then her serious expression returned. "You said today that logically we would wait until I graduate from college. Please tell me that wasn't something you actually DID mean!"

"No, of course not!" I said emphatically. "That was just to provide lots of time for the pretended delay of our engagement."

"So when DO you think we should get married?"

"Well, my thought is that this date has been special to us for the past two years. So I say, why not make it special three years in a row?"

Jennalee's face lit up, and she jumped into my arms.

"That's PERFECT, Mikey!" she exclaimed excitedly as we hugged. "Not too soon, so there's plenty of time for planning, but not too far away! And in the summer between school years! I love it!"

"I had a feeling you would!" I replied as we ended the embrace. "It even falls on a Saturday next year, so it's the ideal day of the week for a wedding."

"It's a perfect idea, and the perfect end to a perfect day!" Jennalee said happily. "Thank you again. I love you so much, Michael Davis, my wonderful fiancé!"

"I love you too," I said. I took her gently back into my arms, and we shared a long, passionate goodnight kiss. Then we separated, and Jennalee opened the door and stepped into her house.

"See you tomorrow!" she said as she began closing the door, her happiest, most radiant smile lighting up her beautiful face.

"I can't wait!" I replied with a big smile of my own.

After the door closed I paused for a couple of seconds, listening carefully.

Suddenly I heard a loud squeal of pure joy, and the sound of rapid impacts on the floor of the front hallway: as I'd guessed she might, Jennalee had taken another look at her ring and spontaneously broken into a happy dance.

I chuckled with delight, then did a quick little happy dance of my own on my way off of the porch as I began my short walk home.

It had been a truly amazing day, and an awesome official start to the rest of our lives together.

Epilogue - The Present and the Future

I walked across the street whistling, feeling like I wasn't even touching the ground. All the wonderful images of that day kept passing through my head, pictures of Jennalee being amazed and excited and happy. I was buoyant, elated. I had pulled off everything exactly as I had planned, and given Jennalee a moment and a day she would never forget. I thanked God over and over that everything had worked out so well.

I went to my room and got ready for bed. It wasn't my normal bedtime yet, but I didn't feel like doing anything else that day. So I just relaxed on my bed, the thoughts of my fiancée's happiness still flowing through my head.

Then another thought occurred to me. It was from the previous winter, when Jennalee had pointed out that sometimes I got my mind locked onto something and blocked everything else out. I wondered why that thought had come to me at that moment.

Then I realized something.

I saw that for several months, my mind had been locked into planning and carrying out my mission to give Jennalee the most wonderful surprise of her life, to make my proposal a moment she would remember joyfully forever. I had been focused on making Jennalee happy, had pictured her reaction to the carrying out of my plan over and over as I labored on the details of it.

Then today, after everything had worked out - if anything, even better than I had hoped for - I had been drinking in Jennalee's happiness and enjoying it tremendously.

The problem with all of that was that in the whole proposal scenario - planning, carrying out and results - I had been thinking almost exclusively of Jennalee and her happiness.

And now, as I reclined on my bed contemplating all of it, I saw that I hadn't yet given myself a chance to be happy purely over what I had gotten out of all of this myself.

That was when it fully hit me.

"I'm engaged," I whispered. Then I said it louder: "I'm engaged!" Then louder still: "I'm engaged to Jennalee! I'm engaged! We're engaged!"

I suddenly leaped off the bed and began jumping up and down, just as Jennalee and I had done together after my proposal.

"WE'RE ENGAGED!" I yelled. "WE'RE ENGAGED! WE'RE ENGAGED! WE'RE ENGAAAAAAGED!!!"

After years of waiting and hoping, after two years where hope virtually vanished, after the rebirth of hope and another year of waiting and planning, my dream had come true at last: Jennalee Morgan had agreed to become my wife.

I was finally engaged to my dream girl!

I collapsed back on my bed, breathing hard more from excitement than exertion, completely engulfed in pure joy, tears in my eyes. Even though I'd known for a full year that Jennalee and I were going to be getting engaged, the knowledge that it had actually happened was now overwhelming me. For a long while I continued lying there, simply enjoying the incredible feeling I was experiencing. I was in no hurry at all for the moment to end. It just didn't seem possible for life to get any better.

Then I sat up, because I'd suddenly realized that life still **COULD** get even better, that there was still one more dream left to be fulfilled.

I didn't regret the outburst I'd just had at all; but I saw now that in the world where that last dream could come true, jumping around and screaming like a little kid had no place.

I had become an adult, and I needed to start fully thinking and acting like one.

Because I wanted to be ready for the moment when that final dream would come true: the moment when I would be watching Jennalee Morgan coming toward me down the aisle of our Church, wearing her wedding dress.