

Finally Free

by
Dave Walley

To Kaela and Elyse

Two special ladies who I've
been blessed to have in my life
as both co-workers and friends.

I looked out the living room window, the same window I'd looked through almost exactly two years earlier to watch a moving van park in the driveway of the house next to the house across the street. Today I had just seen another moving van pull out of that same driveway, beginning its thousand-plus mile journey to the Milford family's new home in Nebraska. Soon the Milfords themselves - John and Kathy, and their two sons Kyle and Jacob - would follow in their car. They had been loading the trunk with a few special possessions they wanted to keep with them, and luggage for the overnight stop they would make on the way, at the same time the movers had been finishing their work on the van. Now the Milfords were undoubtedly taking one last look around the house before departing.

I knew what would happen next. The Milfords, and probably Jennalee Morgan, would emerge from the house. (Jennalee lived across the street from my family and next door to the Milfords, but since she was Kyle Milford's devoted girlfriend she was almost certainly in their house with them now, spending as much time as possible with Kyle before his departure.) Jennalee and Kyle would say their good-byes (though it wasn't really good-bye, since their relationship was going to continue despite the many new miles between them), and then the Milfords would drive away.

And then Jennalee would come across the street to be comforted by her longtime best friend, Michael Davis.

Me.

For the past two years, whenever Jennalee had talked to me about things that in any way related to her boyfriend, it had been a bit awkward for me. Well, more than a bit. It's a difficult thing to handle when the one you are deeply in love with thinks of you only as a friend, and has no idea how you really feel.

As I thought about this situation between us yet again, it took me back - also yet again - to yet another day when a moving van had appeared on the block where I lived. It was the day seven years earlier when the Morgans had first arrived to move into the house across the street.

Since I was only ten years old at the time, I didn't have any interest in the opposite sex. Even though I knew most people eventually fell in love and got married, I was pretty sure it would never happen to me.

It was Jennalee who changed all that.

I didn't fall in love with her right away, of course; but, like virtually everyone else who has ever met Jennalee Morgan, I was instantly fascinated by her.

Now, at this point you need to know a little about me. When I was young, I was the kind of kid who was frequently described as 'precocious.' At age three I could read at first grade level and do simple arithmetic. I was not only exceptionally smart, though, but also somehow naturally mature. My grandmother used to say that I was born middle-aged. Which was obviously an exaggeration, but what was true was that I almost never acted impulsively, as most little boys tend to do.

My primary reason for behaving as well as I normally did was simply that I loved my parents very much and wanted them to be proud of me. Of course, I'm not saying I NEVER acted up. I'm as human as anyone else, after all. However, I was able to notice at an unusually young age that when other kids didn't control themselves and just did whatever they felt like doing at a given moment, they often got into trouble. Also, that when they continued to repeatedly ask a parent for something even after they had been told 'no,' it would only antagonize the parent and cause more trouble. Thus, I could see that misbehaving was counterproductive in multiple ways.

So I figured out early on that if I consistently behaved myself, and then selectively asked my parents for only those things or privileges which I had decided, after some thought, that I REALLY wanted, they would usually be pretty receptive. Of course, unlike most little boys, I had both the intelligence level to comprehend these concepts, and the emotional control to carry them out. In a way I suppose I was manipulating my parents at those moments; but most of the time I just wanted to please them by being the kind of person they were teaching me to be. They always encouraged me to love God and other people, to be responsible and respectful and nice, and to learn as much as I could about the

world around me. Doing those things always made sense to me, regardless of whether or not I happened to want something for myself.

The only problem was that I went too far in that direction. I was so busy taking everything seriously and soaking in as much knowledge as I could that I never really learned how to totally relax and just have fun.

Until Jennalee Morgan came along.

I had never met anyone else quite like her. She wasn't the prettiest girl I had ever seen (though she was certainly quite pretty), but she had a magnetism about her that made people instantly like her, and a radiant smile that locked in that 'instant like' permanently. But that was only the beginning. She also had an engaging, outgoing personality that made you enjoy being with her, and took her likability to even higher levels.

She also loved to have fun. She was a classic example of a free spirit. She loved life and drank in every moment of it joyfully.

The problem was that she, like me, took her own lifestyle to extremes. She was pretty intelligent in her own right, and she took her responsibilities at home and at school seriously as a matter of general principle. However, in specific cases she often had trouble focusing on things she didn't like, and would sometimes give in to the temptation to put things off, or not give them her best effort. Her scholastic performance in particular tended to be rather erratic.

So in some important ways we were opposites. Potentially, this could have meant that we weren't going to get along at all.

Instead, however, it turned out that each of us was just what the other needed.

I hadn't paid attention to the moving van coming down the street that day, beyond noting that it was something unusual. I also knew, of course, that the house across the street had been vacant for a while, and that the moving van meant we were finally getting new neighbors; but I didn't think at all about who they might be until late the next afternoon, when my parents took me over to meet Claire Morgan and her daughter Jennalee.

I was first introduced to Mrs. Morgan, and then to Jennalee, who happened to be the same age as me, just two months older. She held out her hand, and as I shook it she smiled widely and said, "Nice to meet you, Michael!" Unlike many people at moments like that, she sounded like she really meant it. I was so dazzled by her smile that I almost forgot to respond in kind; and when I did, I really meant it too.

She immediately invited me to come and see her room, which she had finished setting up not long before. The previous evening my parents had come over to assist Mrs. Morgan (who was a single mother) with moving some of their furniture into the exact places she'd decided on, and with setting up the beds. This was the beginning of a close and permanent friendship between our families. I'd had a Boy Scout meeting, so I didn't come along. The Morgans had spent this next day getting boxes unpacked and their contents organized and placed, including for Jennalee's room.

After she had shown me around the room, we sat on her bed and started talking. It turned out that we were both the only child in our respective families, but for completely different reasons (my mother had had serious problems during her nine months carrying me, and had been strongly advised by the doctors to never get pregnant again; her father had been killed in a traffic accident when she was just a baby, and her mother hadn't remarried). She asked me what kind of things I liked to do, so I told her about some of my interests, which were pretty much all academic in nature (for example, I had my own microscope and enjoyed collecting water and soil samples from different places to see what I could find in them).

Then Jennalee started telling me about herself. She had a beautiful voice and punctuated her speech with interesting facial expressions and gestures, so she was fun to listen to both for what she said and how she said it. She told me in some detail about a few of her favorite things, which were much more normal for a ten year old than mine. Then she described how she struggled sometimes with her schoolwork. So I started to tell her how learning was fun for me.

"I like you Michael," she interrupted, the words sending an unexpected wave of pleasure through me, "but you're so SERIOUS! Hmm." She paused briefly to think. "Hey, I know how to loosen you up. Do you like to dance?"

"Not really," I chuckled in response. "No offense, but there doesn't seem to be much point to it."

"That's what you think, huh?" she replied with a sly smile. "Well, you may be smart, but you don't know everything." She ran over to her combination radio and CD player and turned it on. She switched the station several times until she hit one that was playing a fast song with a strong beat.

"Avril Lavigne! Perfect!" she exclaimed. Then she turned to me. "Get up!" she ordered.

I felt totally foolish, but at that moment I discovered for the first time that it was very difficult for me to say 'No' to this amazingly compelling person.

"I don't know what to do," I admitted as I got to my feet, speaking considerably louder than normal because of the blaring music.

"You don't have to KNOW!" she laughed. "Just do what you FEEL!" With that, she launched herself into a dance that was wild and yet had rhythm and a certain level of organization to it. I still felt foolish, but I started trying to dance too.

At first I was uncomfortable and indecisive, and wasn't keeping up with the music. I looked over at Jennalee, expecting her to start laughing at me; but she didn't.

"Just let go!" she said joyfully. "Have FUN with it!"

Somehow her confidence in me increased my own bravery about the matter, and I stopped trying to think my way through it and just let myself react. Before I knew it my movements were matching up with the song's beat, and I was fascinated to discover that I actually could 'let go' and be led purely by my instincts and emotion.

And to my shock and amazement, it was FUN!

After the song ended, Jennalee turned the radio off and ran over to me.

"That was GREAT!" she exclaimed. "I knew you could do it! I'm so proud of you!" Suddenly she threw her arms around me and gave me a hug. Before I could even think about hugging back, though, she quickly released me and retreated a step, looking embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she said sheepishly. "I don't know you well enough yet to know if you like to be hugged like that. My Mom tells me I'm too friendly sometimes to people I barely know."

"No, it's fine," I quickly replied. "I didn't mind at all." It was a bit hard to concentrate at that moment, because 1) I was slightly short of breath from the dancing; 2) I was stunned by the fact that Jennalee had hugged me; and 3) I felt excitement over her use of the word 'yet.'

Her full smile returned. "I really like you Michael!" she said happily. "I think we're gonna be good friends!"

"I'd like that," I responded, my voice a bit unsteady because of how she was continuing to provide new reasons for me to feel unaccustomed levels of emotion. I'd never before met anyone who overwhelmed me like this.

Suddenly her face went serious. "Michael," she muttered, not addressing me but obviously just considering the name. "Hmm. That's such a grown-up sounding name for a kid. Does anyone ever call you anything else?"

"No," I replied. "I've always been Michael to everyone."

She smiled again. "How 'bout if I call you 'Mikey?'" she asked. "Would you mind?"

"Well," I responded after a moment, "I don't really like it as much." Then I decided I didn't want to disappoint her by shooting down her idea, so I smiled and added, "But if it's just between you and me, it's OK."

"Yay!" she exclaimed. "My new friend Mikey! I like that a lot!"

Though I didn't normally approve of that particular variation of my name, it sounded good when Jennalee said it, and it was cool that this amazing person not only had become my friend, but already had her own private nickname for me.

Which made me think that I should have one for her.

"So what do people call YOU?" I asked.

"Mostly Jenna or Jen," she answered. "Sometimes Jennalee too, 'cause you have to admit it's a beautiful name."

"Definitely!" I agreed, as I thought the matter over: the obvious alternate names were already in use, so I needed to be more creative. "What's your middle name?" I asked.

"Joy!" she replied, her smile widening further. "Pretty appropriate, huh?"

I laughed. "Perfectly!" I agreed again. "That means your initials are JJ. Could that be my special nickname for you?"

She giggled. "I LIKE that! Very cool idea! Thanks!"

"You're welcome!" I chuckled in return. "Thank YOU for teaching me how to dance!"

"It was fun for both of us, wasn't it?" she responded. Then she paused for a moment. "You know, since you like learning so much, you should learn more about how to not be so serious and just have fun. From now on, I'm going to be your 'fun teacher.' Does that sound good?"

"My parents have suggested sometimes that they'd like to see me act like a kid more often," I admitted, "but I didn't understand what they really meant until today. So taking 'fun lessons' from you sounds very good; and maybe when school starts I can pay you back by helping you with your homework. Serious learning can be fun too, you know. That's something I can teach YOU."

"That's kinda hard to imagine," she replied with a chuckle, "but I think I believe you. It'll be interesting to see you try, at least!"

And that's how it all began. At age ten, even with my advanced intellect, I didn't fully understand what had happened. Looking back on it now, though, there's no question that on that very first day, Jennalee Morgan had begun taking possession of my heart. It wasn't anything remotely resembling love yet, of course, but for the first time I was enjoying associating with a girl, and I didn't care what anyone else thought about it. I knew she was special, and I was very happy to be able to call her my friend.

Naturally, both her mother and my parents were delighted with how Jennalee and I had hit it off, and the promises we had made to help each other. To them it seemed as if God must have intended for she and I to meet and become friends. That idea certainly made sense to me.

The remaining weeks of the summer were Jennalee's stage to teach me the art of having fun like a normal kid, and she set about it with missionary zeal. She began with softball, and by the time school started I was on my way to being a decent player. I had a glove that I'd only previously used once in a while when my Dad insisted on playing catch with me, but now both he and Jennalee gave me instruction in the sport, and she and I were soon playing together in the pick up games that often broke out at the park two blocks away. She also recruited kids from the neighborhood to join us in playing other outdoor games. These included such classics as four squares, tag and hide-and-seek.

Though she was a pretty good natural athlete and seemed quite tomboyish during outdoor activities, Jennalee could also be a total 'girlie girl,' and was just as comfortable in that role when she was teaching me other fun things. These ranged from video games to board games to actually 'playing house,' where we pretended to be married and the parents of two of her dolls. While I fervently hoped that none of the other boys at school would ever find out about that, it was fun - especially since I was very mature for my age anyway, and could look at it as an interesting exercise in creative thinking about possible future scenarios.

In retrospect, it's evident that those 'playing house' sessions contributed significantly to the eventual emergence of my genuine love for Jennalee Morgan, because the idea of pretending that she and I were married adults wasn't at all unpleasant, as I would have expected it to be. It actually generated a positive feeling, one that would begin to take on a life of its own as time went on.

Meanwhile in the adult world, Jennalee's mother and my parents soon discovered that their religious beliefs were pretty much the same, and so the Morgans joined the Church we belonged to, giving Jennalee and me even more opportunities to interact.

That fall I set out to fulfill my part of our agreement, and began having regular homework sessions with Jennalee. It turned out that we were in the same fifth grade class, and thus had the same assignments, which greatly facilitated my ability to work with her.

Math had been her weakest subject to that point, and it was the easiest one in which to tailor our assignments so she would find the problems interesting, instead of intimidating and tedious. I would create scenarios from things she liked in order to frame the problems in a way that would stimulate her interest. Soon she had embraced the technique, and began creating some of her own scenarios.

I figured out ways to help Jennalee focus on her other subjects as well, and to feel positive about getting things right. I also taught her how to organize her time better, so she could get her studying in

and still have sufficient opportunities to do the things she really liked, or to just be spontaneous. She was surprised to discover that serious learning actually could be fun (though, of course, she still much preferred the kind of fun she was teaching me). It turned out that I was something of a natural teacher, a talent I hadn't even known I possessed. I'm sure my enthusiasm for teaching this particular student contributed to our success too, of course.

One of the main reasons for my ever-growing enthusiasm about all the aspects of Jennalee's friendship was that whenever we had the chance - and between school, play, studying, Church and the time our families spent doing things together, there were many opportunities - we would take the time to just talk to each other, about whatever we wanted to. These conversations quickly got both more frequent and deeper, and within a few months we were both feeling free to bring our deepest thoughts and fears and concerns to each other, as well as sharing all our joys and triumphs. We had come to truly care about each other as people, and were both very thankful that we had found each other. We had become best friends in the fullest sense.

The increasing closeness of our friendship didn't mean that I found Jennalee any less fascinating, however. In fact, just the opposite: the better I got to know her, the more fascinating she became to me. I gradually realized that out of all the subjects I was currently studying and ever had studied, one had emerged above all the others as the central focus of my intellect: Jennalee Morgan. I had become a devout student of everything about her. I drank in her every word and action, striving to learn exactly how she thought, what motivated her, what made her react negatively, anything and everything that could help me understand her better.

To someone on the outside this might have seemed a bit obsessive, but my motivations were pure. For one thing, knowing as much as I could about her would allow me to do a better job helping her with her studies. Even more important, though, were the friendship considerations.

Jennalee had become a very devoted friend who was always there for me. She truly cared about me, just as I did about her, and that was something I never stopped appreciating even for a moment. Also, her 'fun lessons' had added a whole new dimension to my life. Because of her I had learned that taking time to relax and have fun not only didn't detract from the more important matters, but actually enhanced them, because a balanced life was a happier life. Thanks to Jennalee I had become a textbook example of this concept.

As if all that weren't enough, she had also vastly improved my interaction with the world around me. Due to being so different, I had never been popular at all either at school or in the neighborhood, and had even gotten picked on sometimes. That began to change after Jennalee arrived, because many of the other kids soon wanted to be her friends, and since I was clearly someone she liked very much, this considerably improved my standing in their eyes. Between that and how Jennalee was helping me learn to have fun like a normal kid, I began to fit in better with my peers than I ever had before. I had come out of my serious, studious shell and learned how to relate better to other people. I wasn't just the 'freaky smart kid' anymore.

For all of these reasons I treasured my friendship with Jennalee Morgan above anything else in the world, and totally adored her as a person. I owed her so much, and in every way she was endlessly fascinating to me. I wanted to do anything I could to at least partially pay her back for all that her friendship was giving me. So I embraced my desire to know everything I could about her, because doing so would obviously help me to be a better friend to her. By applying my high intelligence so completely to this, I came to understand her better than anyone else.

Not to brag, but a person had to be very intelligent to achieve that kind of understanding, because Jennalee Morgan was an extremely complex person. Just as she was both tomboy and 'girlie girl,' and could switch effortlessly between the two, there were many other aspects of her personality that were multifaceted and a challenge to predict and comprehend. She had a strong tendency to 'live in the moment,' embracing whatever would make her happiest at any given time. This could sometimes make her seem detached and self-centered, because she would fail to be as sensitive to the feelings of those around her as she could be. Yet she really did care about other people, and wanted others to be as happy as she usually was. She could also be very thoughtful when circumstances called for it, and was deeply compassionate toward anyone she encountered who had an obvious need that she could help with. She

was particularly glad to help me with any problem I had. She was very perceptive when she tried to be, and eventually she came to understand me just about as well as I did her.

Anyway, all of that only scratches the surface of her complexity. It was a challenge even for me to try to keep up with all of it and to comprehend it, to find patterns in her thinking that would give me greater insight into her mind. I made many mistakes early on, but by the time we had known each other for two years I seemed to be getting most of it right, and throughout the process our friendship grew stronger and stronger. We even had a special secret: our nicknames for each other, which we always kept private, and which somehow seemed to add to the bond we had developed. (The rest of the time, when we were with other people or when I was talking about her to someone else, I always called her 'Jennalee,' never Jenna or Jen. As she herself had observed, it was a beautiful name, and I thought she deserved to be referred to by a name that was almost as special as she was.)

Being so charismatic and generally fun to be with, Jennalee of course had no trouble making other friends, both in the neighborhood and at school. Despite her popularity, though, none of her other friends ever became the kind of really close friend to her that I was. She would talk about 'girl stuff' with her female friends (even then I understood there were some things a girl just didn't tell a boy), and she also always had a good and open relationship with her mother. In the majority of situations, however, I was the one she preferred to talk to about most things. I didn't know exactly why she never grew as close to any of her other friends as she did to me, but my best guess was that since, in her own ways, she was as far from normal as I was, perhaps that tended to prevent people from feeling that they could really relate to her. Some might also have found her charisma and outgoing personality intimidating. She was never at all afraid to be different too, and that can make it harder for a person to bond with someone else. As a fellow 'different' person, this was something I could understand well, because while I'd made other friends, Jennalee was the first and only truly close friend I'd ever had.

I'll never forget the end of one conversation that occurred during the summer two years after we met, when we were both twelve. I had just helped Jennalee figure out something that had been bugging her, and how to deal with it.

"I'm SO glad you're my friend, Mikey!" she had suddenly exclaimed. "You GET me! No one else really does, not even my Mom, not like you do. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you to talk to about stuff." She paused for a moment. "Do you ever feel weird about how we're best friends, when most girls have girl best friends and boys have boy best friends? I mean, I like my girl friends too, and you've made more friends since my 'fun lessons' turned out so good, but there's something special with you and me."

"No, it doesn't bother me at all!" I replied immediately. "I feel very lucky to know someone as special as you so well, and to know that you consider me your best friend."

She smiled and shook her head. "You're the special one, Mikey," she said. "You're so sweet and caring, and such a great teacher, and so SMART! You'll probably cure cancer or something someday. I'll never be able to do anything important like that."

"But look at how much you changed my life!" I countered. "I'm so much happier now than I used to be, I like my life so much more, and I'm still doing just as well in school too. That's all because of you!"

"Whatever," she said dismissively. "The point is that I'm just really glad we're friends. We always will be, right?"

"I'm not going anywhere," I assured her. She smiled, and then hugged me.

Even though I was only twelve, and barely beginning to understand love despite being smart and mature for my age, I think it may have been on that day that I began to be in love with Jennalee Morgan, in the simple sense of wanting to be with her forever.

Over the next three years, Jennalee blossomed physically. By fifteen she had gone much of the way from pretty girl to beautiful young woman. Though she still didn't form any other close friendships, she continued to be popular. She was also starting to draw attention from other boys, but she never showed any real interest in any of them, and still hung out with me as much as ever. During this same time I was continuing in my ongoing quest to know and understand her better. Though Jennalee always remained the same basic person deep down, as she continued to grow and mature her personality

naturally evolved. So I had to make sure my own understanding of her kept evolving too. I gradually got even better at reading her moods and state of mind, so I could anticipate the best way to interact with her at any given time. Eventually she began commenting once in a while that I seemed to know her better than she knew herself. In some limited respects that might have actually been true.

Jennalee was also continuing to grow academically during this time. There had been a considerable improvement in her grades after I started working with her, even in our first semester together, and our study sessions had continued in the years that followed. Eventually I started working to help Jennalee go from learning how to learn, to learning how to THINK. Even though, all things being equal, she still preferred to be impulsive and live in the moment, I began to convince her that there were many times when it would benefit her to slow down and really analyze things in a more mature way, and I helped her learn how to do that.

This went against her natural grain, of course, and I didn't expect it to be something she did all the time. I didn't want to change her - she was wonderful the way she was, after all - but being able to logically analyze things is an important skill for anyone, and I wanted her to have it.

She turned out to be as good a student for me in that area as in any other, and her grades continued to get even better. It all culminated in her final report card for eighth grade, on which she got straight A's for the first time. I was prouder of her for that than I had ever been over any academic achievement of my own.

At the same time that Jennalee was rapidly going from girl to woman, I was progressing much more slowly from boy to man. I had never been that much to look at in the first place: I was basically average looking, neither homely nor handsome. In my early teens my growth lagged behind most of the other boys I knew, and I had always been a bit small for my age as it was. For about two years Jennalee was actually taller than I was. I only caught up to her height during our freshman year in high school, when I finally had a growth spurt. It wasn't until then that my voice finally started changing noticeably.

I should have realized that there might be implications in all of this regarding my relationship with Jennalee, but I was content to revel in our ongoing friendship and, in my mind, our unfolding love story. I grew more and more genuinely in love with her as we went through those three years, and it seemed inevitable to me that our close friendship would at some point officially become boyfriend-girlfriend. It wasn't something we ever talked about, but we had known each other so well for so long that there didn't seem to be a need to.

Looking back on it now, I think I never raised the subject myself because deep down I was afraid of what might happen. It wasn't something I ever consciously thought about, but I feel fairly sure that I would have taken some steps toward moving our relationship to the next level if that hadn't been the case. It was safer to go on assuming. It FELT like we were moving toward romance, and that was good enough for me.

On that morning when the moving van had come down the street bringing the Milfords' possessions, and I had walked over to the window to look, the plans for the day called for my Mom to take Jennalee and I down to the beach (living only a few miles from one of the Great Lakes did have its perks). I commented to Mom that we would soon have to go meet our new neighbors. A few minutes later Jennalee came across the street, and shortly after that we left for the beach.

When we got home late in the afternoon, the moving van was gone, and I caught my first glimpse of one of our new neighbors: a man taking something out of a car in the driveway and carrying it into the house. Mom and I decided that since Dad wasn't home yet, we would wait until after dinner to introduce ourselves. Jennalee went home, and I went into our house to take a shower before dinner.

When I was done and dressed again, I wandered back to the front window to try to get another look at our new neighbors. What I saw was Jennalee standing in their driveway, talking to a boy who appeared to be about our age. He was around six feet tall, with a muscular, athletic build. His face was just about as far above my level as his body was. This was a classic all-American boy, the kind you automatically pictured as being the star quarterback on the football team.

His conversation with Jennalee seemed to be going well. She was all smiles and bubbling with excitement as they talked, and he was also clearly enjoying himself. They were hitting it off a little TOO well from my point of view, and I became increasingly uncomfortable as I continued to watch them.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time, they appeared to say goodbye, and the new boy walked to his front porch and up the stairs. Just before he went into the house he looked back and gave a smile and wave to Jennalee. She waved back, and then he was gone.

Jennalee stood there staring at the door for a few more seconds, then suddenly turned to look at my house. Seeing me in the window, she smiled, and then hurried across the street. I met her at the front door.

"Did you see him, Mikey?" she exclaimed excitedly as soon as the door was open. "Isn't he gorgeous?" Before I could respond, she laughed. "I'm sorry," she said as she continued to chuckle. "Obviously you wouldn't think another boy was gorgeous, but you know what I mean. His name is Kyle Milford. He's fifteen like us, and he plays football, he's a linebacker. And he seems really nice! He told me I was very pretty, and he laughed when I said something silly, but not AT me, you know? I think he really likes me!"

"EVERYBODY likes YOU, JJ," I replied, trying to not appear as uncomfortable with the whole situation as I felt.

"C'mon, you know what I'm talking about!" she said with a combination of amusement and bit of annoyance. "And he lives right next door! I think I might have found the boy who's gonna be my first boyfriend!"

The words cut into me like a dagger, and I tried as hard as I could to keep the pain from my face. I didn't want to spoil this moment for her.

Her eyes suddenly narrowed a bit. "You ARE happy for me, aren't you, Mikey?" she asked.

"Of course!" I answered, perhaps a bit too quickly and loudly, but in her excited mood she didn't seem to notice. I forced myself to smile wider and more convincingly. "Whatever makes you happy makes me happy, you know that. I hope it all works out for the best." That last sentence had been deliberately ambiguous, but again Jennalee was oblivious to any subtleties.

At that moment her mother came to my rescue: she stuck her head out their front door and called, "Jenna! Dinner!"

"Oh, I gotta go!" she said quickly. "I just wanted to tell you the good news first, like usual. It's so cool to have my best friend right across the street for a moment like this!" She started backing away, said, "See you soon!" then turned and dashed toward home.

I retreated into the house, closed the door, and then turned around and leaned my back against it. Then my legs went out from under me as my emotional control finally broke, and I slumped to the floor, my back sliding down the closed door.

It was a natural reaction for someone who had just seen their world come crashing down.

Because there was no way around it: during all this time when I had thought that Jennalee's feelings were developing in the same direction as mine, the truth had been that she had never once thought of me as anything but a friend. The closest of friends, to be sure, but there had clearly never been a single moment in the five years since we had met when she had thought of me as a prospective boyfriend. If there had, she wouldn't have felt completely free to run over and tell me how happy she was to have found a boy who she DID feel that way about.

Everything had fallen apart in a single moment. One of the central assumptions of my life and of my expectations for the future had just been definitively proven 100% wrong. Suddenly everything was different. Everything I had believed about Jennalee and I had to be completely rethought and reevaluated.

So what did I do now? Did I try to change her mind about me, try to make her see that I could be more than just a friend? The emotional devastation was making it hard to think rationally, but rational thought was what I needed most at that moment. I closed my eyes and gave my head a quick, hard shake, hoping that it would work like a slap to my face and help clear my head and focus my thoughts.

So, then, what if I did what I instinctively wanted to do and began working to paint myself as another possible love interest for her? The problem there was that by doing so, I would be thrusting her into the middle of a 'love triangle.' How would that make her feel? I didn't have to be at 100% mental capacity to know that she would react negatively to that. It was just the kind of ongoing drama that she hated. Knowing her as well as I did, I knew that since she had decided this new boy had serious

possibilities as a boyfriend, she would want that scenario to be able to play out without unpleasant complications. Trying to insert myself into it would cause her unnecessary problems, and maybe even lead her to have bad feelings toward me, all because of an extremely selfish motivation on my part.

So I couldn't do that. Jennalee's happiness mattered to me far more than my own, so I could only step in if her relationship with this new guy started going in an unhealthy direction, and she NEEDED a better alternative.

These logical progressions of thought were calming my emotions now, helping me to think more easily, and my next thought was that the odds had to be small that two fifteen year olds who became boyfriend-girlfriend would end up with a serious long-term relationship. If I was patient, there was a very good chance that sooner or later - more likely sooner - the situation would play out to where she didn't want him anymore, and then I could make my own move at a much more favorable time. Besides which, they had only just met! Maybe they would never become boyfriend-girlfriend at all.

My mind continued to work better as my emotional level got closer to normal - until another thought hit me that sent me right back into shock again: what if Jennalee was RIGHT? What if she had never seen me as a potential boyfriend because I really WASN'T right for her, and she was able to see it while my own desires were blinding me to the truth? What if being her best friend was my only destiny with Jennalee Morgan?

I couldn't deny that it was possible. Just comparing the two of us physically showed that we were a total mismatch in that regard. We got along extremely well, and because of what we'd done for each other we had some things in common, but at our cores we were two very different people. What if the way we complemented each other and helped each other with our weaknesses only worked in the context of friendship, and would turn disastrous if placed within the more complex dynamics of a romantic relationship?

There were far too many unknowns in that equation to allow anything to be solved right away. Everything that had happened between Jennalee and I so far had seemed like it was meant to be, like God had brought us together for a reason. If our friendship was destined to grow into something more, I had to believe that somehow it would. I still wanted it to very much, but it would be a truly terrible thing if I tried to force Jennalee to see me in a way that she wasn't able to, to feel things for me that she simply wasn't capable of feeling, because it had turned out that I wasn't the right boy for her after all. I would have to be patient, and watch carefully everything that developed, and pray a lot, and have faith that I would be able to figure out what to do and when to do it, so that things would eventually work out for the best for both of us, whatever 'the best' turned out to be.

I took a deep breath, let out a loud sigh, and stood up. My life had just gotten much more complicated, and I still totally hated the idea of Jennalee being anyone else's girlfriend, but I also felt cautiously optimistic about the long term.

Then I made myself focus on the most important factor: the one thing I wanted most of all was for Jennalee to be as happy as possible, whatever that happened to mean for me and my place in her life. I vowed that I would continue to make that my number one priority as things played out, and never let my selfish desires interfere with it. Then I said a silent prayer for God to help both me and Jennalee find His will.

Less than a week later, Jennalee and Kyle were officially a couple. She was spending a lot of time with him, which meant less time for me, but she didn't neglect me. In the ensuing months we still saw each other a lot between school, Church and the things our families did together, and she also made time when she could for us to just hang out the way we always had. Our study sessions became less frequent, and whether coincidental or not, her grades began to drop a bit from where they had been. Overall, though, our friendship remained strong. In spite of her having a new boyfriend, there was no question that I still mattered to her too, and this didn't diminish as time went on, as the seasons passed, as we each turned sixteen. At that point Jennalee was finally allowed to single date, and her relationship with Kyle seemed to take on new dimensions. She always made time for me, though, throughout it all. I was still her 'go-to' friend when she needed someone to talk to who could really understand her, and she was always still there for me too if I needed her.

Even though things weren't the way I wanted them to be, I couldn't really resent any of what was

happening, because I had never seen Jennalee so happy - and that, of course, was really saying something. As much as I still wanted to be in Kyle's place, I couldn't bring myself to dislike someone who clearly cared about Jennalee very much, and was bringing her a large amount of joy.

I was contributing too, as her best friend, and I was very glad that I was able to be a part of her happy life; but I hadn't been able to change how I felt about her. I still loved her with all my heart, even when another year had gone by, and we had all turned seventeen, and I was still as far as ever from where I wanted to be. I continued to do my best to focus on Jennalee's happiness instead of my own pain. This usually worked well enough to get by, but it became more and more difficult as time went on. I was still very thankful to be Jennalee's best friend, but I couldn't stop myself from wanting to be more than that. Though Kyle and Jennalee only seemed to grow closer as time went on, we were all still very young, and I wasn't able to let go of the thought I'd had the day they'd met: that the odds were strongly against the two of them staying together for the long-term. As long as there was any real chance of Jennalee someday being available again, I had no choice but to wait and hope.

Jennalee was absolutely worth waiting for, of course, but I was increasingly feeling trapped and helpless. I couldn't let go of my hope, but in spite of it I found myself starting to think about other possibilities. The thought of being free from the inner conflicts and in control of my life and future had an appeal to it that even my feelings for Jennalee could eventually no longer push completely away; but I also continued to cling as tightly as ever to my hopes regarding Jennalee. The battle within me raged on, with no sign of resolution in sight.

Despite my increasing struggles, Jennalee never gave any indication that she might suspect what my true feelings for her were. In fact, on two occasions when she was sixteen she had set me up with one of her girl friends so the four of us could double date. I went along with it for her sake, and apparently hid my discomfort well enough that she didn't see it, though on the second occasion I once noticed Kyle looking at me a bit strangely.

I had to give him credit, though: he never once said anything to me about any suspicions he might have had. I could only guess that Jennalee had told him clearly that I was someone she wanted in her life, but also that I was no threat to him, that I was ONLY a friend. If so, he was apparently smart enough to accept that and not risk antagonizing her over it.

When this past school year ended, I finally began to notice a significant change between Jennalee and me: she and Kyle were taking advantage of summer vacation and their driver's licenses to do more things than ever together, and I was increasingly being left out of her schedule. She wasn't coming to me to talk as much anymore, in person or on the phone, and we hardly ever just hung out. I tried to tell myself it was only the circumstances of that summer; but I couldn't forget that we would be seniors in the fall, and a year later it would be time for college. Obviously, things couldn't go on forever the way they were now between the three of us. At some point decisions had to be made, and perhaps Jennalee was already starting to make one, whether she herself realized it or not.

I began trying to prepare myself for the worst as much as I could.

Then came the day when I got the news that Kyle's father's employer was transferring him again, as they had two years before. This time the family would be moving to Nebraska, over a thousand miles away. The company needed him there in just two weeks time, so they were putting their house up for sale, and moving into a rental unit in Nebraska while they house-hunted there. In two short weeks, Kyle Milford would be gone.

Under the right circumstances I might have seen this news as the opportunity I'd been waiting for. However, there were two factors that made this news very bad instead of good.

The first was that Jennalee and Kyle had decided not only to continue their relationship during their senior years despite the distance, but also that after graduation they would attend college together. The second was that I had received all this news from my mother, who had gotten it from Mrs. Morgan. Jennalee hadn't deemed it necessary to tell me personally. Over the next two weeks she didn't visit or call me at all, and I was afraid to contact her myself. She only communicated with me once during that time, five days in, via a rather cryptic text message that read, "Sorry for being out of touch. We'll talk soon. JJ" No other messages followed. I didn't even see her at Church on the two intervening Sundays.

And so the Milfords' moving day had now arrived, and I stood at the living room window,

watching and waiting, and carefully going over in my mind everything that had already happened, and what I knew needed to happen next.

It was undeniable that for seven years my life had been pretty much centered on Jennalee Morgan. She was always the focus of my present, and my biggest hope for the future. Even when I had started, against my will, to think about other possibilities for the rest of my life beyond marrying Jennalee, I had still always believed deep down that in the end everything would work out the way I really wanted it to.

Now I couldn't take that view anymore, because the hope I'd been clinging to so tightly had virtually disappeared. Jennalee, even at seventeen, was still someone who preferred the moment-to-moment approach to life. If Jennalee Morgan was making plans so far into the future, it could only mean that she was very sure about herself and Kyle. In fact, as I saw it, such a serious commitment to each other was only one step away from engagement. Under those circumstances there was no point in my continuing to wait and hope for the chance to be more to her. In fact, I couldn't see how my role in her life could even remain the same. It would be bound to change even if I wasn't in love with her too.

After all, it was one thing for a girl to have a boyfriend and a male best friend simultaneously when they were all sophomores and juniors in high school, and there were no serious commitments to the boyfriend yet. Once that relationship has gone to a higher level, however, the presence of the male best friend starts to get awkward for everyone. In fact, at that point it's only proper that the girl's best male friend should be her boyfriend, not someone else.

And when it turned out that the best friend was actually in love with the girl too, the awkwardness and need for change obviously increased exponentially.

I wondered how deeply Jennalee herself had thought about the implications of her decision. Once she learned of my true feelings for her, of course, she would have no choice but to alter her thinking. Even then, I didn't know if she would be able to just write me off. For seven years I had been the one she had leaned on most, and she would need support with Kyle leaving. Plus, she would still care about me as a person too. She would never intentionally hurt me, of that I was still sure.

Nevertheless, with Jennalee and Kyle having taken their relationship to a much higher level, it was obvious that one way or another I would eventually become the odd man out. Whether the end result was a greatly reduced role for me in her life or no role at all, it would mean a radical and permanent change in my own life.

So Jennalee and I needed to come to a new understanding concerning our friendship, and where it would go from here. She obviously also had to finally learn what my true feelings for her were, because that made the necessary changes even more urgent. It all needed to happen today, too, before she had a chance to start depending on me more again to compensate for Kyle's physical absence.

Of course, I didn't know if leaning on me more was her plan or not. Perhaps she had already seen as clearly as I had that things needed to change, even without knowing that I was in love with her. Regardless of exactly where she would be coming from, though, she also needed to know where I stood, and what I was and wasn't willing to do from this point on.

First, there were the givens that came with this new situation. For one, I would always love Jennalee Morgan as a person, and would always be there for her if she really needed me. Because of all she had done for me and meant to me, that would never change. However, there was another given that was just as important: for me to stay IN love with her now would be very self-destructive. Two other givens directly proceeded from that one: 1) the only permanent way for me to not be in love with Jennalee was to be in love with someone else; and 2) the only way for me to fall out of love with her so that I COULD fall in love with someone else was to have much less Jennalee in my life from now on.

So I needed to make her understand that while I would certainly still provide emotional support for her to help her with her temporary separation from Kyle if she wanted it, there had to be limits. Our friendship could no longer be everything it had been up to now, because that would be counterproductive for both of us: I needed to fall out of love with her, and she needed to start thinking of Kyle as her best male friend, not me. What had to happen was really just taking what Jennalee had already been doing these past two months to a greater level, with both of us pulling back instead of just

her. She would probably want to maintain some level of friendship with me, but she also cared about me as a person just as I cared about her, and she would want what was best for me. She would want me to have the chance to fall in love with someone who could return that love.

On the other hand, I knew her well enough to know that this separation from Kyle would be difficult for her, and that she would want any support she could get to help her deal with it, at least support that she was comfortable with. How comfortable would she still be with me? How would she want to balance her needs with mine? The answers to those questions would come today.

It was hard to imagine that Jennalee and Kyle hadn't talked about my future as her friend in the wake of their new commitment, and perhaps that was at least part of why she had been out of communication with me. Maybe she had been using these past two weeks to prepare herself to tell me that things had changed. If so, when I finally told her how I really felt about her, it would actually reinforce her resolve, and make things less difficult for both of us.

Though I hated to think it, I actually hoped Jennalee would NOT be comfortable with me anymore once she knew the whole truth. I hoped the inevitable change between us would happen quickly rather than slowly, so I could move on with my own life. As much as I cared about her, I had to think about myself too. It had been wonderful being Jennalee's best friend, but the conditions of our friendship had permanently changed. The fact that I was in love with her had become an irresolvable issue, because love and friendship could no longer coexist. That feeling of being trapped that I'd started experiencing during the past year was no longer just a feeling. It was now an accurate assessment of the situation I was in. My love for Jennalee Morgan had become a prison, in which I was locked away from a relationship with anyone else. I needed to have that option, needed to have a chance to find my own happiness the way Jennalee had. I needed to remove the chains and unlock the doors. It was finally time for me to be free.

There was still no sign of the Milfords or Jennalee as I finished going through all these thoughts. I knew it couldn't be much longer before something happened, so I continued to look across the street and wait. I was tempted in that moment to blame God for letting me get into a position like this. I pushed the thought away. I was honest enough to accept that all the blame for this was mine. It was my fault, because I had dared to believe that Jennalee Morgan could actually love someone like me. I was getting what I deserved for thinking with my heart instead of my brain.

I promised myself I would never make such a mistake again. Then I said a quick prayer for God to help Jennalee and I work things out in the best way for both of us.

A short time later the Milfords came out of the house. Jennalee wasn't with them, though, as I had guessed she would be; but then she suddenly emerged from her own house, and quickly walked over to Kyle. Maybe they had said their serious goodbyes the night before, and wanted to keep it quick and less painful today. Whatever the case, they talked for a minute or so, until Mr. Milford called for Kyle to get into the car. Kyle touched Jennalee's cheek for a moment, and she responded by giving him a quick little hug around the waist. Then he immediately got into the car, and it backed out of the driveway and rolled down the street.

Jennalee watched it for a few seconds, then turned her head and looked toward my house. Seeing me in the window, she started walking over. It was an eerie flashback to that day two years earlier when she had done the same thing after meeting Kyle for the first time.

As I watched her cross the street, I marveled yet again at her beauty and charisma. She had grown into an amazing young woman, inside and out. If she hadn't had a steady boyfriend these past two years, she probably would have needed a secretary to keep track of all the boys who would have been after her. In fact, if that boyfriend wasn't so intimidatingly big and strong (he was now 6' 2" and over 200 pounds, all of it still solid muscle), some of them would have undoubtedly pursued her anyway.

And me? Other than my above average intelligence, I was still as ordinary as ever in just about every other way. In some ways LESS than ordinary. For example, over two years after finally catching up to Jennalee in height, I was now just barely taller than her 5' 5".

Suddenly something occurred to me: if I were meeting Jennalee today for the first time, would I consider her a potential girlfriend? I chuckled and shook my head. Jennalee Morgan was so far out of my league that by any objective evaluation the idea of her being in love with me was comically

ridiculous. How could I have kidded myself for so long that such a thing was actually possible? It was inexcusable foolishness.

While she was on the walkway leading to our porch I tried to get a read on her mood, as I always did when we were about to talk. I really focused on it, since because of the circumstances I wanted to know what she was thinking more than I ever had before; but unfortunately, Jennalee wasn't giving much away at that moment. Her mouth was closed and a bit tight, as if there were some kind of resolve in her mind. That would be consistent with readying herself to deliver difficult news - except that the corners of her mouth were ever so slightly raised in the faint traces of a smile. Exactly what all that meant I wasn't sure, but at least it seemed to indicate that she wasn't overcome with sadness over Kyle's departure. I hadn't expected her to be, since they would be in constant touch and the separation was only temporary, but the nightmare scenario here was that Jennalee would immediately fall into my arms crying. That would have meant postponement of any serious discussion about our futures, of course, and made it that much harder to initiate the changes between us that had to happen. I was relieved, though not at all surprised, that things apparently were not going to play out that way.

I opened the door while Jennalee was walking up the steps, and invited her in. The weather was nice enough that we could have talked out on the porch, but this was likely to be a difficult and emotional conversation, and if so, I didn't want that to happen in front of the neighborhood. My parents were both at work, so inside the house we would have full privacy.

Jennalee smiled at me but said nothing as she walked past me and into the house. I closed the door and then followed her into the living room.

Being in the same room with her only emphasized why things had to change: her very presence was having a strong effect on me. I felt a PULL toward her, wanted to touch her, even if it was just holding her hand. The knowledge that I had decided to begin letting go of Jennalee was only intensifying my physical attraction to her, because my mind was instinctively focusing on not wanting to push her away.

It was clearer than ever that there was no way for me to stop loving her while still being around her regularly.

We sat down on the couch together. I wanted to quickly start the conversation on my own terms, telling her right away what my true feelings were, so she would have all the facts in front of her before the subject of my helping her through Kyle's absence could come up at all.

But before I could say a word, Jennalee looked me straight in the eye and said:

"You're in love with me, right?"

Though phrased as a question, it was definitely intended as a statement. She had little if any doubt about it, she just wanted confirmation.

I was so stunned by this abrupt departure from my imagined script that I couldn't respond right away. Finally I forced a little smile, and with a slight nod I softly said, "Busted."

"I knew it," she replied, giving me a little smile in return. "You have been for a long time, haven't you?"

"I think the first seeds were planted the day we met," I responded. "I don't know exactly when it became official, but it was long before Kyle moved here."

"That's what I thought," she nodded. "Why didn't you ever tell me, Mikey?"

"Well," I began, as I tried to quickly reorganize my thoughts about our conversation, now that it had turned out that Jennalee already knew about my true feelings, "before Kyle came along I didn't think I had to. We were so close, I just assumed we would formally become a couple at some point. But then when you met Kyle, you were so HAPPY! Seeing him with you was always difficult, and I always wished it was me instead, but telling you how I really felt couldn't have done anything but damage your happiness. I couldn't do that. I just kept believing that if something more was still supposed to happen between us, it would someday."

"Wow," replied Jennalee in amazement. "You really DO love me." She shook her head. "How could I have never even noticed before?"

"What finally tipped you off?" I asked. I was genuinely curious. Since Jennalee already knew how I really felt about her, maybe she would be better able to understand what had to happen with us

now, and this conversation wouldn't be as difficult as I had feared it might be. I wanted to find out as much as I could about her current state of mind before going any further.

"I'm glad you asked!" she replied. "You're gonna be so proud of me. You've been trying all these years to help me be less impulsive and think things through, and that's what I did. It all started when Kyle told me they had to move, and then suggested that we stay in close touch for the next year and then go to college together. I agreed without even thinking about it. It's always been that way with Kyle. He's the kind of boy every girl dreams about meeting and dating, and becoming his girlfriend was like suddenly living in a fairy tale. It was a dream come true. It's been that way for two years. And faced with having him move away, agreeing to do a long distance relationship and then going to college together was the only way to keep the dream from ending. It was easy to say 'yes.'"

She paused for a moment. "But almost immediately after I agreed to go to college with him, something started feeling wrong about it. At first I tried to ignore the bad feeling, but it wouldn't go away. It only got worse. So I started doing what you taught me, about analyzing things. I figured that if I was feeling this way so strongly, it had to be over something important. So I started thinking about the important things in my life. Of course, it didn't take me long to get to you - and that's where I started finding answers.

"See, this whole college thing was obviously a big commitment to make to someone. It's a HUGE step, and a person shouldn't do that if there's anything else in the way. When I started really thinking about you, and all the things you've done for me, and how you treat me, how you LOOK at me even...well, I had never even consciously considered the possibility that either of us could feel anything more than friendship for each other, but once I had opened my mind to consider that you might have feelings for me beyond that, it was easy to see. I mean, you had never dated anyone yourself, never even ASKED anyone as far as I know. I'd thought about that once in a while, but it never occurred to me that the reason for that might be ME. The whole thing is incredibly obvious now that I've really thought about it."

As Jennalee had been telling me all this, my mind had been working; and the more she had said, the more apparent it was that we were actually on the same page to a greater extent than I could have hoped for. She had already seen that she couldn't make a serious commitment to Kyle while knowing that someone else so close to her was also in love with her. It was giving her a bad feeling that wouldn't go away until that conflict had been resolved - and obviously there was only one way to resolve it. We could get this whole thing over with right now, allowing both of us to move on with lives. It was sad, but we both knew it was the only right thing to do.

But I couldn't let her go on any further, to continue bearing this burden. Because of all she had done for me and how much I still cared about her, I would make it less difficult for her by pulling the trigger myself.

"All right," I interrupted. "It's obvious where this is going, and I agree with you." The words were hard for me to say, but I knew it had to be this way, so I forced myself to continue. "There isn't room in your life for two men who are in love with you. So I'm willing to bow out of your life gracefully, with nothing but best wishes for you...and..."

My words trailed off when I saw shock and confusion come over Jennalee's face.

"What?" she said softly, "Why would you..." Then her eyes went wide, her jaw dropped and she drew in a sharp breath. "OHHH!!!" she exclaimed loudly. "No, no, NO, Mikey! That's not what I meant at ALL!" She suddenly took my hand in both of hers and squeezed it. "I know I haven't been spending much time with you lately, but that's not because you don't still matter to me as much as ever!" Then she released my hand and wrapped her arms around my neck in an affectionate hug. "I NEED you, Mikey!" she declared emotionally. "I'll ALWAYS need you! I don't know how I could even LIVE without you!"

As soon as I'd seen Jennalee's shocked expression, I had become as confused as she looked. Obviously we hadn't been on the same page after all. We hadn't even been in the same BOOK. Then that explosive 'OHHH!!!' had momentarily startled me. As Jennalee continued speaking, however, my mind instantly kicked into high gear, because somehow I had been misreading this entire situation ever since the end of school, and I was desperate to figure out where I had gone so horribly wrong.

But my desire for rational answers was immediately redirected by the overwhelming wave of

relief that was washing over me. Relief, because I suddenly realized that deep down I had never really wanted the slightest part of any future that wasn't built completely around Jennalee Morgan. I saw now that the only reason I had been able to think about pushing her away at all was because I had convinced myself that she soon wouldn't want me anymore. Now that I knew that the truth was the exact opposite, my real feelings could no longer be suppressed. It was clear now that despite all my thought about the alternate options for me that involved little or no Jennalee, nothing in my heart had changed in any way: Jennalee still meant far more to me than everything else in the world combined, and I would always need her as much as she needed me. If I had ever actually landed in one of those other scenarios, it would have been a disaster. I would have been miserable. I was also now experiencing great thankfulness, because I had learned the truth about myself in time, as well as learning that Jennalee still needed me after all, needed me so much that she was sure she wanted me to be her best friend for the rest of her life.

Suddenly I didn't care anymore exactly HOW I had gotten things so wrong, because my cup of relief and thankfulness was truly running over, washing everything else away. All that mattered was that Jennalee still loved me and wanted me, and always would, and even though it could only be as a friend, that was enough. In fact, it was much more than enough. So I would go to whatever college she and Kyle picked, and when they were married I would live next door. I would stay single and unattached, so I could always be there for Jennalee, anytime, day or night, for anything she needed. It would be a profoundly unconventional life - some would undoubtedly say it was pathetic - but since it was the only life option I had that Jennalee was at the center of, it was the only life I wanted.

All of this ran through my head rapidly, at the same time that I was automatically wrapping my own arms around Jennalee and then holding her gratefully for a few seconds, until my thoughts finished their quick course and finally spawned words.

"I'm sorry I said that!" I declared emotionally. "Under the circumstances I thought it would be the best thing for both of us, but I'm so glad I was wrong, because I don't really know how I could live without you either! You matter to me more than anything else in the world, JJ, and I'll always be here for you! ALWAYS!"

"Thank you, Mikey!" Jennalee replied, softly but with equal emotion. "I know you will."

"And I don't know how I'll do it," I continued, "but with God all things are possible, and I promise I'll find a way to fall OUT of love with you, and just be the friend you need me to be."

Suddenly Jennalee laughed, a strange little laugh that sounded even stranger because it was partially muffled by our embrace. Then she released her hug, so I let go too. She leaned back and looked at me, then shook her head a little and sighed.

"Oh, Mikey!" she said, "I came over here to do something good, and it's getting all messed up!" She grabbed my shoulders. "Now listen, Mikey. You'd do just about anything for me, right?"

"Of course!" I agreed.

"Well, what I need you to do for me right now is: for once in your life, STOP THINKING! Just let me finish what I was saying, and don't interrupt again, OK?"

"OK," I answered weakly. I was completely lost now anyway, and had no faith at all in my own thinking processes anymore when it came to this whole situation, so it was easy to agree to Jennalee's demand. In fact, for the first time ever I was so intellectually deflated by how badly I had botched something that I seemed to have gone into some kind of temporary mental collapse. My mind had somehow lost its normal analytical ability beyond the simplest level. I could barely think at all.

"All right, where was I?" Jennalee asked herself. "Oh yeah, I finally figured out that you were in love with me. I knew that somehow that was part of what was wrong, but it definitely wasn't all of it. So then I used more of what you taught me, this time about not confining my thinking so that I'm free to consider new possibilities. Because if I had missed something for so long that now seems so obvious, what MORE hadn't I seen? So then I started thinking more about my feelings for Kyle, because it was making a bigger commitment to him that had started the bad feelings in the first place."

She took a deep breath. "Like I said before, becoming Kyle's girlfriend was like living in a fairy tale. Prince Charming riding in on a white horse and sweeping the Princess off her feet is something that girls dream of having happen to them, and that's what Kyle coming into my life felt like; and when I was

fifteen and naive and content to live in the moment, that was enough for me. It stayed enough for a long time, too, because I was deliriously happy. Being with Kyle felt like what I'd always thought love was supposed to feel like, and I didn't want anything to change that.

"Of course, I was always aware that he and I didn't have the same kind of connection that you and I do. Kyle never really learned to understand me any better than anyone else besides you ever has. So once I started really thinking about it over the last two weeks, I saw that it wasn't just being Kyle's girlfriend that had made me so happy during all that time. It was having BOTH of you in my life. Between the two of you I had everything I had ever wanted. If you hadn't been there too, the fairy tale feeling wouldn't have lasted so long, I'm sure of that now; but I never saw it before this because I was too busy just enjoying being so happy.

"But in spite of that, I still managed to grow up a lot during these past two years, and all the things you've tried to teach me about more mature and careful thinking were finally starting to take hold. In fact, over the last couple of months I had already been thinking that my relationship with Kyle needed to start growing more, because we weren't just kids anymore. We were attracted to each other, and it felt good to be together, but I wanted my relationship with him to start becoming more like my friendship with you, something that had more substance to it. I thought it was MY fault that it hadn't happened yet, because of how impulsive and in-the-moment I usually am. So I started spending more time with Kyle, especially after school was over, trying to build our relationship. I never talked with you about that, because I felt like it was something Kyle and I needed to work out by ourselves, without any help. I told myself that over time it would work, and I really believed it. I never considered any possibility other than being with him. I still felt that way when Kyle told me the news about having to move, so I had no hesitation about agreeing to go to college with him.

"But then the bad feelings started, and after I figured out that you were in love with me, I began thinking about the whole thing with Kyle in a much deeper way too. I finally put aside all my assumptions, and my desire to cling to my fairy tale feeling, and really considered everything as objectively as I could. By doing that I was finally able to start figuring out the truth about everything, not just about your feelings and my feelings, but about love itself. I've been thinking a LOT these past two weeks, because I had to make sure I was finally getting everything right. So I see now that feeling so much like I was in a fairy tale should have been a sign to me all along that something was wrong, because fairy tales aren't REAL. What I had with Kyle felt good, because it was what I'd always thought I'd wanted; but it wasn't something that a whole life together could be built on. There was never any real depth to our relationship, even when I was really trying for it, and it's so obvious now that there was never going to be, no matter how long we were together. It wasn't anybody's fault, it just wasn't meant to happen. That was a hard thing to deal with at first, and it took me several days to completely understand that I was right about it; but it was so obviously true that in the end I had no choice but to accept it. I can see now that I was never really in love with Kyle Milford at all. It was just a very pleasant teenage crush, and it wasn't fair to either of us to let that go on any longer. That's why I broke up with him last night."

I had been trying to follow along with my impaired mind as best I could while Jennalee explained what she had been thinking, but I wasn't doing very well, and the news of her breakup with Kyle was something I hadn't even seen coming at all until her last few sentences. Then I felt even more stunned, and desperately tried to make my mind work better, to fight back against the sense of unreality that seemed to have surrounded me like a tangible thing. Was this really happening? Jennalee's fairy tale romance with Kyle Milford was actually history? It was hard to believe it even with Jennalee herself telling me.

Then I remembered something, and in spite of my promise not to interrupt I couldn't keep it to myself, because it was strong evidence that all of this was, indeed, real.

"You didn't kiss him!" I exclaimed.

"What?" Jennalee asked.

"Kyle! When you were saying goodbye to him before you came over here! YOU DIDN'T KISS HIM! The most natural thing in the world would have been to kiss your boyfriend goodbye, and the fact that you didn't went right past me. I should have known immediately that something had happened.

Man, I'm not getting ANYTHING right anymore."

Jennalee chuckled. "Hey, you're still better at this stuff than me, although I finally seem to be catching up now." Then she turned serious again. "And yes, I was just thanking Kyle again for everything, because he's really a sweet guy and I hated having to hurt him like that; and I also wanted to see if he was all right, and wish him happiness."

My mind seemed to be gaining greater functionality now, but I still couldn't comprehend any additional implications of what Jennalee was saying, couldn't even form a guess yet. So I went back to listening.

"Anyway," she continued, "after I'd figured out and accepted the truth about me and Kyle, I kept thinking more about what love really is and isn't, and trying to understand it all better. Then I remembered something that happened when I was little, before we moved here. I was talking to my grandparents, and I asked them if it had been love at first sight when they met. They laughed and said it was exactly the opposite, that they weren't attracted to each other at all at first; but when they started to get to know each other, and realized that they had a lot in common and enjoyed each other's company, suddenly they began to find each other attractive. They've been married for over 40 years now, and they're still in love.

"That was what got me to start finally understanding what being in love really means. I saw that truly being in love is something that happens more slowly than in the fairy tale scenario. It has to be worked at. It can start with physical attraction, but it can also start when a boy and a girl just care about each other as people."

She moved slightly closer to me, and looked meaningfully into my eyes as she continued.

"I see now that being in love means liking some of the same things, and helping each other like different things. It means being there for each other, in bad times and good times. It means taking the time to really get to know each other, so they each always know what the other needs. It means always totally believing in each other, no matter what. It means helping each other be better people." She smiled. "I think you can see now where I'm going with this. I understand now that being in love means all the things we've been to each other for all these years, everything we've been building between us since the day we met; and thanks to my grandparents, I also understand now how physical attraction can grow from that. Once I started thinking about it that way, and then thought again about how you were already in love with me, I realized something else that I had somehow never noticed before: you're actually CUTE, Mikey!"

As she was saying all this, a sense of wonder was building in me, because my mind was recovering enough that I finally did see where she appeared to be going, except it seemed too good to be true. When she had told me earlier that she had come here to 'do something good,' in my impaired state I hadn't grasped that she had meant 'do something good FOR YOU.' Then when she told me I was cute, literally one of the last things I would have ever expected her to say to me, I wanted to say something back, but I was so stunned that my mouth wouldn't work.

"And once I started thinking about you that way," she continued, "I realized that feelings for you beyond friendship were there inside me already, and had been growing for a long time. That was the real reason I got that bad feeling when I made a commitment to Kyle: not just because I wasn't really in love with him, but because deep down I was actually in love with someone else. I feel so silly that I never understood that before, especially while I was actually trying to make my relationship with Kyle more like OUR relationship! I should have seen a long time ago that I already HAD the relationship I really wanted, and never needed Kyle or anyone else at all."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying, JJ?" I finally blurted out through the emotion that was taking over every cell in my body, and filling my eyes with tears.

"Uh-huh," she replied with a little nod, her face breaking into a bigger smile. A moment later there were tears in her eyes too. "And I'm so sorry you had to wait so long to hear this."

Then, in a voice cracking with emotion, she said, "I love you, Mikey!"

"I love you too, JJ!" I managed to get out before the emotion overwhelmed me. Then I threw my arms around her, and she locked hers around my neck tightly, and we both cried.

I had hugged Jennalee on many occasions over the years; but now, for the first time, I was

holding her tight as my girlfriend, my soon-to-be fiancée, my one-day-to-be wife, my partner for all time. It was really happening. Jennalee Morgan loved me! Her voice saying, 'I love you, Mikey!' echoed in my head again and again. To finally hear those words, to experience a moment that I had desired so much for so long, had dreamed of so many times, and which, until just minutes before, I had been convinced wasn't even possible anymore, was filling me with so much joy that I felt like I was in danger of exploding from it.

She loves me! She loves me! She actually loves me! The thought ran through my head over and over. Then, for just a moment, I instinctively wanted to add, *I can't believe it!* But I instantly realized that this thought was wrong: I DID believe it, because Jennalee had laid out her thinking and deductions in such a compellingly logical way that it was impossible for me NOT to agree with her conclusions. She really did love me, and while I continued to marvel at it, I believed it completely.

This sudden burst of rational thinking began to bring my emotions back to a manageable level as I continued to hug Jennalee. I could have held her forever the way I felt then, but after what seemed like a relatively short time she loosened her grip, so I immediately did the same. She leaned back, wiping tears from her eyes as she did so, and gave me a smile of embarrassment.

"You forgive me for not figuring all this out sooner?" she asked.

"Oh, JJ, there's nothing to forgive!" I assured her, as I wiped tears from my own eyes. "I should have told you how I really felt well before Kyle even moved here. It's my fault this took so long to happen."

"We both made mistakes," she replied comfortingly. "I guess God was watching over us, to make sure we got it right in the end."

"I'd say so!" I agreed. Then I paused for a moment to think. "You know, maybe God even meant for the mistakes to happen, because I'm always going to appreciate you even more now than if everything had gone smoothly."

"That's true for me too!" she stated. Then, giving a brief look upward, she continued, "In any case, thanks, Lord!"

"Amen!" I said.

As we continued to smile at each other, Jennalee's expression began to take on a look of wonderment.

"What's the matter?" I finally asked.

"Nothing!" she replied. "It's just so strange, 'cause after all these years it's like I'm seeing you today for the first time. I guess somehow I was so wrapped up in having such a wonderful best friend that I never really saw you as a BOY! Not one that I could fall in love with, anyway." She chuckled. "You really are cute, you know! I was amazed when I started thinking of you that way, because I immediately felt very attracted to you, and the idea of feeling like that had never even consciously occurred to me before."

I shook my head in astonishment. "I'm glad you didn't just come right out and tell me that you loved me and thought I was cute, because I don't think I could have processed that!"

"I know," she replied, "that's why I wanted to tell you everything slowly. I knew how you always want your intellect to lead your emotions. I was afraid if I just said, 'Guess what, I broke up with Kyle and I love YOU!' that you would have fainted, and then when you woke up you wouldn't have been able to believe it. I wanted you to see that I wasn't just acting impulsively like usual, but that I'd really thought it through and was totally sure. I'd had days to work all this out, and then more days after that to make ABSOLUTELY sure my conclusions were right. You needed to have a reasonable chance to catch up with me. I mean, you were shocked enough when I told you that I knew you were in love with me. You should have seen your face!"

"I had no idea you had any clue about that," I admitted. "I wanted to start the conversation by telling you myself. Finding out so abruptly that you already knew was definitely a shock."

"I had to do it that way, though," she said, "because I needed to find out right away if what I thought about you was true. Because if it wasn't, obviously I couldn't say any of the other things at all; but I was about 99.9% sure, so I wasn't worried."

My mind was working much better now, and I saw the answer to another matter.

"It was because you were thinking everything over, things that concerned me, that you didn't talk to me during that time, right?"

"Right," she nodded. "I knew you might come to some kind of wrong conclusion about that, but I couldn't talk to you again until I completely understood my own feelings for you. Even then, I wanted to wait until Kyle was gone to tell you everything, because it was bad enough that I had to hurt him so much. I didn't want to make it even worse for him by having to see us together before he left. I didn't tell him I was breaking up with him to be with you, of course, just the part about rethinking my relationship with him. I had to make sure he left without finding out about me and you, just to be safe. He's really a gentle person outside of football, but he's so big, and...well, I couldn't take the chance that he might blame you for losing me and take it out on you. I don't want anything bad happening to my boyfriend!"

"I appreciate that very much!" I stated with genuine sincerity, inwardly shuddering at the thought of an angry Kyle Milford coming after me, but at the same time exulting over hearing Jennalee refer to me as her boyfriend. Then I added, "Actually, it's just one more example of how you analyzed everything correctly in this whole matter. Which is in stark contrast to MY recent record. This is one case where I would have been a lot better off following your normal kind of lead and just trusting my heart. My confidence in my own thinking abilities has taken a major blow today. It's the only slight negative for me in all of this."

Jennalee smiled widely, and in a seductive kind of tone that she had never used with me before said, "I know a way to get your mind off of that - and I've really been looking forward to it!" Then she gently took my face in her hands and moved it closer to her, at the same time bringing her own face closer to mine.

She wanted to kiss me!

Instantly a wave of panic hit me, because she was an experienced kisser, and I had never done it before. What if I kissed her so badly that it shattered this whole wonderful mood?

It may sound silly, but when we were fourteen I had actually done some research into kissing, just because I wanted to be ready to kiss Jennalee (I was assuming then that the time for it wasn't too far off). I didn't want to embarrass both of us with my ineptitude when it happened.

So I knew basically what I was supposed to do, but I also knew well that to become good at just about anything requires DOING as well as knowing.

As I closed my eyes and our lips came together, however, the panic ceased. This was me and Jennalee, after all, and just about everything between us had always come pretty naturally. I suddenly felt a strong sense that I just needed to relax and let it happen, so I did.

It was incredible. Sensations washed over me that were beyond anything I could have ever begun to imagine. Our arms wrapped around each other again, further deepening the intimacy of the moment, until it was as if not only our bodies but our very souls were in contact with each other. Time seemed to lose all meaning as the moment continued on.

Finally, as if to prove how united we were in the kiss, we both started leaning back to break lip contact at the exact same instant.

Jennalee stared at me, open mouthed and wide-eyed, and her expression was a mirror of how I felt (and I'm sure I looked that way too). The kiss had seemed unbelievably wonderful to me, but not trusting my judgment anymore on this day, and wanting to hedge my bets just in case, I said, "That was my first kiss, so if I didn't do very well, I promise I'll get better very soon."

"No!" she quickly replied, with a little shake of her head. "That was AMAZING!" She paused to take a couple of quick breaths, and I realized then that I was slightly winded too. "I mean, I kissed Kyle many times, but it never felt like that. Not ANYTHING like that!" Then her face broke into a smile that was particularly beautiful even for her. "In a way I guess that was my first kiss too, because it was the first time I ever kissed the one I really, truly love with all my heart forever."

I'd thought it wasn't possible for me to feel any happier than I already did, but hearing those words from the only girl I ever had and ever would and ever COULD love made me realize that I had been wrong yet one more time. I smiled broadly.

"Thank you so much, for everything!" I told her passionately. "You've made all my dreams come true in one morning. I love you so much, JJ!"

"I love you too, Mikey!" she replied, still smiling her most wonderful smile ever. Then suddenly she turned thoughtful. "Hmm. Mikey," she said, not addressing me but just considering the name, as she had done with 'Michael' seven years earlier. "That's really a kid's name. I'm glad I gave it to you the day we met, but somehow it doesn't seem so appropriate anymore for someone who's almost an adult now." She smiled again, then added, "And so much a man!"

Yet again I'd been wrong about not being able to get any happier. Jennalee kept miraculously finding ways to increase my joy even more.

"Well," I replied, feeling myself glowing with happiness, "it's ultimately up to you what you're going to call me, I guess; but my preference would be not to change. I'm very content to always be your 'Mikey.'"

"I was hoping you'd say that!" she replied happily. "And I assume I'll always be your 'JJ' too."

"Absolutely!" I agreed.

We took another long moment to just look at each other, reveling in the wonderful new reality we were now living in.

"You know, I haven't gotten much right today," I said eventually, "but let me try one more idea: I'm thinking we should make sure that that first kiss wasn't just a fluke."

"OOOH! I am SO up for that!" Jennalee replied enthusiastically, and we immediately fell back into each other's arms.

Sometime later the kissing session finally ended, and we continued just sitting there on the couch holding each other gently, once again simply enjoying the togetherness of our new reality. There didn't seem to be a need for words for us to both understand how we both felt.

Eventually Jennalee broke the silence.

"What are you thinking right now?" she asked.

"Actually," I answered, "I was remembering the many times I've imagined something like today happening, and how wonderful I thought it would feel." I chuckled and shook my head. "For someone as smart as I am, it turns out that my imagination isn't very good at all. The reality is so much better than I ever dreamed it would be." I held her a little tighter. "Thanks again so much, JJ."

"You're welcome!" she replied.

"So what were YOU thinking?" I asked.

"Something kinda similar, in a way," she responded. "I was remembering how good I always thought it felt to be with Kyle, and comparing that to now. The truth is that being with you like this doesn't just feel good. It feels RIGHT. It feels just SO right! That's a much higher level of good. I had no idea what I was missing. So thank you, too, Mikey!"

"You're welcome too!" I replied.

We were silent again for a minute or so. Then Jennalee again spoke first.

"So, now what do we do?" she asked.

"Well," I answered, "I guess now we spend as much time together as we can for the rest of the summer, then enjoy our senior year more than we ever thought possible, and then it'll be us that go to college together. I know I've always said I wanted to go Ivy League, but we'll get your grades back up at top level this next year, and find a school that suits both of us."

"All that sounds great, Mikey," Jennalee replied. She gently pulled herself out of my arms so she could smile at me. "But I meant, 'What do we do for the rest of the day?' It's not even noon yet, we've still got lots of time together today."

I laughed and nodded. "In the moment, as usual!" I observed. "That's one of the many things I love so much about you, and one of the many reasons we're so right for each other. I NEED someone to keep me from focusing so much on the big picture that I forget to enjoy each day and each moment just for itself. Fortunately, you're one of the world's foremost authorities on that subject, so I couldn't be in better hands."

She giggled. "And obviously I DESPERATELY need someone to keep me from forgetting the big picture completely sometimes," she said, "and there's no one better at that than you! I'm glad I can know now that you'll always have my back."

"It'll be my pleasure, believe me!" I replied. "Anyway, since you're the expert, what do YOU

think we should do?"

"No way!" she said firmly. "I want YOU to decide. I'm still your fun teacher, and this is a pop quiz!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" I chuckled, and she giggled again in response. "So, the rest of today, huh?" I paused to think. "Well, first we should head to the kitchen and grab some lunch. I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry."

"Me too," she agreed. "You're doing fine so far!"

I thought about post-lunch possibilities for a few seconds, then smiled.

"After lunch," I said, watching Jennalee carefully to see her reaction, "how about the beach?"

It only took her a second to get it.

"OH! That's PERFECT!" she exclaimed excitedly. "We haven't gone there with just us since your mom took us the day Kyle got here! It'll be like picking up right where we left off. Except now we BOTH know we're in love!" She gave me a short but enthusiastic hug, which I returned, then let go so she could look at me again. "Excellent job! An A+ for the day for my prize student!"

"Thanks!" I chuckled. "I'm honored!" Then I turned more serious. "But the truth is that today, you're the prize student. If you hadn't learned from me so well, and figured everything out about us the way you did, none of this would be happening at all. So you get an A+ not just for today, but for the rest of your life. Or more accurately, the rest of OUR lives."

"I knew you'd be proud of me!" she replied. Then she added, "But if you hadn't been such a dedicated and patient teacher, it wouldn't have happened either. So give yourself credit too, 'cause we both did it together."

"OK, shared credit works for me," I replied. "It's quite appropriate, actually, since we'll be sharing just about everything for the rest of our lives."

"So true!" Jennalee agreed. "Very romantic observations too, by the way. I had no idea you had that in you before today. Being your girlfriend just keeps getting better!"

"Thanks!" I replied, again smiling broadly with the glow of happiness. "You keep making being your boyfriend even better for me, too!"

"Sharing everything again!" she observed with a smile. Then after a moment, she suddenly exclaimed, "OK, enough of this! I've been doing nothing but serious thinking for the past two weeks, which has to equal my normal quota for at least a year! I need some FUN!"

I stood up, took her hand, and gently pulled her to her feet.

"We'll get on that right away!" I declared. "Starting with a delicious but reasonably healthy noontime meal!" I started leading her toward the kitchen. "This way, my lady!"

We went to the kitchen and shared a quick lunch, then separated to get our swimming gear. By the time Jennalee had returned from across the street, I had also gathered a few bottles of water, a big bag of baked potato chips and some grapes to take along.

My parents had carpooled to work and left my mother's car at home. Because of my long record of good behavior, I was free to use it as long as I let one of them know. I sent a text to Mom's phone, and then drove Jennalee to the beach.

We swam around together for a while, enjoying both the fun and exercise elements. As we did, I started saying 'I love you' to Jennalee at random times, just because it felt so good to actually be able to say that to her after having to keep it inside me for so long. At first she answered, 'I love you too' each time, but soon she started trying to beat me to the punch and say it first. It became a game between us, and of all the games I had ever played with Jennalee, this one immediately became my favorite. It was a game I could never get tired of, because I knew that the thrill of telling Jennalee I loved her would never wear off.

Eventually we came back to shore and joined a volleyball game that was underway on the beach. Jennalee and I continued playing the 'I love you' game between points (we were having so much fun with it that we couldn't help ourselves), and this almost certainly would have gotten on the nerves of the other players if they hadn't been busy being dazzled by Jennalee. As it was, when we decided to leave the game after half an hour or so, several of them practically begged us (meaning her) to stay longer. We were ready to move on, though, so we went back into the lake and passed some more time just frolicking

in the shallow water. (I know 'frolicking' is kind of a corny word, but there's really no other accurate way to describe what we did.)

Throughout all of this activity I could feel Jennalee and I regaining the fullness of the bond that we'd had before Kyle Milford had come along. Though we'd still been close during the past two years, the distraction of Kyle's presence and the reduction of time together that had come with it had caused the strength of our bond to fade a bit. By the time we had finished our second session in the lake, however, I could see in Jennalee's eyes and smile that we'd gotten all of it back and then some. By that point it almost felt to me as if Kyle Milford had just been a bad dream, someone who had never really existed at all; as if the internal struggle and pain of the past two years had never even happened; as if Jennalee and I had been boyfriend-girlfriend all along.

After we'd dried off we made the short climb to the little park that overlooked the beach, spread our towels out under the trees, and relaxed with our refreshments. Then we just sat side by side on the towels, and talked. And talked some more. Then we kissed. And kissed some more. And then we snuggled up together on the towels, just enjoying the view and each other, and occasionally sharing a thought or two about the wonderful future together that now stretched out before us.

There was no question about it in either of our minds: we were going to be together forever.

Life is truly amazing. There are so many unexpected twists and turns that sometimes even when someone as intelligent as I am thinks he has something all figured out, the truth turns out to be totally different. Just a few hours earlier I had regarded my love for Jennalee Morgan as a prison, and was determined to release myself from it. Now I had willingly marched back into my cell, put the chains back on, and happily accepted a life sentence with no possibility of parole.

The thing was, though, I had been completely wrong in my analogy. My love for Jennalee was never the problem at all. It was only the constraints on that love - not being able to be all that I wanted to be to her, and not being able to tell her how I really felt because she had seemed so happy with the way things were - that had made me feel locked up and helpless.

Today those shackles had crumbled to dust, the walls of the prison had fallen down, and I hadn't just walked away, I had flown into the sky on wings of joy. I was soaring high above the clouds.

I now belonged to Jennalee Morgan more completely and permanently than ever.

Yet I had never felt so free.