

CHAPTER 1

SO GREAT A COURAGE

*The promised land, near the city of Judea
66 B.C. The twenty and sixth year of the Nephite/Lamanite war*

My feet pounded the ground as I ran; my heart thumped against my ribs. I did not know where my strength came from, for I had been running with my army of brothers for two days. I tightened my grip on the hilt of the double-edged sword and held up my shield, which was emblazoned with the noble crest of my heritage, as I charged toward battle.

No more would we run and hide.

No more would we look over our shoulders and wonder when they would attack.

I did not fear death.

God would deliver me.

God would deliver us.



*Salt Lake City, Utah
A.D. 2010*

“What did I do?” Uncertainty vibrated in Colin Staker’s voice as he followed close on my heels, acting like he cared. I, Sydney Morgan, a girl who should have known better than to let what a guy said get under her skin, was not stopping for an argument. Not now. Not when his words had cut so deep. I’d already stayed too late after school looking for him. I didn’t have time to argue. I had to go home.

“Was it something I said?” He grabbed my arm, preventing my escape.

“Take your hand off me,” I said quietly. The frosty October air made the words come out in visible puffs. I looked up at his tall frame and into his usually sincere green eyes. He stared at me with the pretense of caring.

“You walk me home from school every day,” I said. “You were late today, so I went searching for you.” The more I thought about the situation, the angrier I became. “You know that I watch Gracie right after school every Wednesday.” The scene of him laughing with his football buddies flashed in my mind’s eye. “You were with your doofus football friends.” A small crowd had gathered around us by this time. As I glanced sideways at the students surrounding us, I desperately wished I could click my heels and be transported somewhere else, anywhere other than the school lawn, where the entire student body of Suncrest High now watched my emotions bleed out onto the grass.

I determined that if Colin didn’t let go, I was going to give him a snap punch to the stomach. You might not think that a sixteen-year-old girl who is only five foot five would be much of a threat to a football player. But Colin knew better. He knew I had a black belt in karate—and that I could flatten him faster than he could flinch. I glared at him as if I could melt him into a puddle.

“You heard?” His face paled. “Look, Syd, the guys and I were just kidding around. Come on, you know how guys are.”

I stared at his flustered face. I’d always thought he was cute in a scruffy sort of way. And I’d always felt comfortable with Colin. After all, we’d been friends since the second grade. How could I have been so wrong all these years? I guess that’s what I got for letting my emotions rule my mind.

“Colin, let go of me,” I said in a low, monotone voice.

“If I do, you have to promise to stay put until we can work this out.” His forehead was wrinkled, his mouth curled in that *come-on-let’s-be-friends* smile that would ordinarily make me stop and rethink. But this time was different.

I pretended to relent and relaxed my stance just a bit.

He lifted a hand to pat my cheek and then reached up to tousle my short hair, which he said made me look like a boy. My anger

bubbled over at the condescending gesture. I dropped my books, grabbed his wrist with my right hand, and jabbed his elbow with my left hand. Off balance, he flipped to the ground. Keeping hold of his arm, I twisted it just a little—not enough to hurt, but enough to make my point—and glared down at him.

“Don’t follow me, don’t call me, and don’t try to pretend you didn’t say what you said.” I glowered at him for a moment, making sure he understood. The small crowd around us had grown very large. I heard someone say that Principal Jefferson was coming our way. Quickly, I let Colin go, snatched up my books, and ran.



As I walked into Mom’s karate studio, I glanced around the front foyer looking for Gracie. No sign of her.

“I intend to develop myself . . .” The small class of yellow-belt hopefuls repeated their creed from the front dojo. I peered through the observation window. Mirrors banked the walls of the large exercise room.

Mom stood at the head of the class. She was decked out in her red *gi* and seventh-degree black belt. She taught on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and I taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I loved to watch my mother at work. I was proud of her. For a woman of fifty-two, she was strong yet beautiful, with short black hair and sparkling brown eyes that reflected her Shoshone heritage. She noticed me, smiled, and pointed in the direction of the office.

I understood. That was where I’d find Gracie.

As soon as I walked through the office doorway, Gracie glanced up, looking at me in the mirrored wall. “Syd, I s’ayed on the chair like Mummy said, didn’ I?” Her halting speech could not hide the excitement and pride in her voice.

I gazed at my ten-year-old sister, whom I loved more than life. Her long, honey-blond hair framed her pale face, which was sprinkled with brown freckles. How could Colin have told his friends that my Gracie was a *retard*? The way he’d said it was maddening. Just *retard*, like she was a castoff. Gracie was far from being a castoff. Colin, on the other hand, fit the bill perfectly. I mentally grouped him with the

person I considered the ultimate castoff in my life—my father, Logan Morgan, who had walked out of our lives ten years earlier.

“You did exactly as you were told!” I said enthusiastically as I patted Gracie’s back. “Guess what I found on my way home from school?” I set my books on the desk. Gracie’s eyes grew wide. She shrugged, knowing full well what I’d say next.

“A tickle bug!” I yelled and chased her around the small office cluttered with sparring gear. She squealed gleefully.

“Wait!” Gracie froze, staring up at me. A smile curved her lips. “I see a ’ickle bug.” Then Gracie chased me. This was our ritual, our *hi-how-was-your-day* routine.

Finally collapsing in the chairs across from the desk, I looked at the mirrored wall and gazed at our reflections. Gracie had inherited our father’s Caucasian traits: sandy blonde hair, pale skin, and blue eyes. I had inherited Mom’s half-Shoshone traits: black hair, honey-colored skin, and brown eyes.

By just looking at Gracie, you wouldn’t suspect at first that she was mentally challenged. Her handicap was only evident in her speech and thought patterns. A childlike innocence radiated from her smiling face, which could brighten a room. And by just looking at me, you wouldn’t suspect that I had an IQ of 140. This was only evident in my straight A’s. I didn’t have Gracie’s glow. For reasons that even I didn’t understand, a darkness followed me. We were two very different sisters, but that was okay. We were family—just Mom, Gracie, and me.

“Let’s make dinner,” I said. I knew Gracie loved to help. Her special ed teacher had encouraged us to include her in almost everything we did. At times this was trying, but mostly it was fun.

She immediately headed for the stairs that led to our apartment. I quickly retrieved my books, waved good-bye to Mom as I passed the observation window, and followed Gracie.

Poached salmon was on the menu, along with steamed rice and romaine lettuce topped with bacon bits, chopped boiled eggs, golden raisins, and slivered almonds. I loved to cook. Mom had taught me to enjoy cooking, and I had never looked at it as a chore.

Gracie was in charge of the salad, and she set about her task with gusto. As I reached above the kitchen island to snag a pan from the pot rail, I noticed a light blinking on the phone’s message machine.

I pushed *PLAY*.

“You have three messages. Tuesday, October 15.” I smiled. Today was Wednesday, not Tuesday. And it was the sixteenth, not the fifteenth. But the month was right at least. Our machine had a severe case of dementia.

“Message one.

“Syd—” It was Colin’s voice. I pressed the *DELETE* button.

“Message two.

“This is Principal Jefferson. Mrs. Morgan, please call me as soon as possible. We need to talk about Sydney.”

Again, I pressed *DELETE*. I’d talk with the principal in the morning. No need to drag Mom into this.

“Message three.”

At this point the machine decided that enough was enough. “Garble, garble . . . hospital . . . preregister . . . Call 555- . . .”

We really needed a new answering machine. I didn’t catch the rest of the number. But I wasn’t worried about it. From what I had heard, it sounded like a wrong number.

Gracie spilled the almonds on the floor and began to cry.

“It’s okay. Just pick them up,” I told her. I smiled as I placed the pan on the stovetop. We had learned not to make a big fuss when Gracie became upset. Gracie wiped her eyes and began carefully picking up the slivered almonds one by one. At this rate I’d have the rice and salmon ready before the almonds were recovered and rinsed off.

As I watched my sister dutifully rescuing the almonds, I wondered if perhaps the hospital had called about Gracie. But Mom hadn’t mentioned anything, and we always talked about Gracie’s treatments. Mom always said that our family was a team and that we would work out family problems together. But maybe something had happened I didn’t know about.

Gracie had finished picking up the almonds and was now retrieving eggs from the fridge. She dropped one on the floor and began crying again. I quit wondering about the call and knelt to help her clean up the floor.



“Read abou’ Helaman’s swipling warriors.” Gracie was forever dropping her t’s. She snuggled down in bed, ready for her story before falling asleep. I pulled out the worn Book of Mormon. The pages were tattered and torn, a true sign of love. The story of Helaman’s stripling warriors was Gracie’s favorite.

Sitting on the bed beside Gracie, I paraphrased the story in words she’d understand. “Do you remember how the people of Ammon promised God they would never fight again?”

“Yeah . . .” Gracie anxiously waited for her favorite part.

“Well, when the Nephites were attacked, the people of Ammon wanted to break their promise and help fight. But what did Helaman say?”

“Keep da promise.” Gracie’s eyes began to droop.

“Did they?”

“Uh-huh.” She yawned.

“The Ammonites’ sons hadn’t made the promise, though. Two thousand of them wanted to help fight for freedom.” I quickly checked to see if Gracie were still awake.

Her bright blue eyes blinked opened. I briefly thought of the pile of homework waiting for me. It was getting late, but Gracie needed my attention right now.

Clearing my throat, I continued. “Helaman led his two thousand young warriors into battle. Although they had never fought, they were not afraid. Their mothers had taught them to have faith in God.”

“Like Mummy, huh?” Gracie waited for me to answer.

“Yes.” I tucked the covers around her. “No more talking.”

She nodded.

“Close your eyes,” I chided gently. She clamped her eyes shut.

“Helaman and his army fought bravely and helped drive away the enemy. After the battle, Helaman found his sons had been hurt, but not one had been killed. It was a miracle.” I quickly glanced at my little sister. At last she had fallen asleep.

Laying the book on Gracie’s nightstand, I looked at the picture on her wall—Helaman riding on his white stallion, surrounded by the boys he called his sons. Gracie had said their mothers were like ours. And I knew that she was right. Mom had taught us to believe in God. And I did believe in Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. I had a

testimony. But sometimes the Book of Mormon stories felt like just that—stories—about people who lived a very long time ago and lived in a very different world. It just didn't feel like they applied to me sometimes. To think about young men with faith so strong they weren't killed . . . it was hard to understand faith like that. And I couldn't help but think that out of all two thousand of those guys, there had to have been one who was rebellious . . . or one who was forgotten. I gave a sigh. Sitting there staring at the picture was not getting my homework done.

I turned out the light and gently closed the door to Gracie's bedroom. Glancing at the hallway clock, I saw it was now nine o'clock. Mom would be coming up soon. As usual, when Gracie and I had finished dinner, I had wrapped Mom's dinner in plastic wrap and put it in the fridge for her.

Even though Mom would be tired, she'd still ask why I had been late coming home from school. I didn't want to tell her I had fought with Colin. And I certainly didn't want to tell her what he'd said about Gracie. Mom didn't need another man to be disappointed in. My father had been disappointment enough.

The funny thing was, Mom never really talked about my father. It used to make me angry that she never got riled up about his leaving. Instead of being bitter, she had focused her energy on establishing a thriving karate studio. I knew she thought that one day I'd become her partner. But while I loved karate, I had other ideas.

More than anything, I had always wanted to become a police officer, a detective really. I wanted to help people. The only problem I could foresee was my height . . . and maybe the tiny issue of my quick temper. I hoped that the department would overlook my height and temper in favor of my skills as a black belt.

I heard Mom's steps on the stairs. Hurrying to the kitchen, I pulled her plate from the fridge, loosened the plastic wrap, and placed it in the microwave. I hoped that if I was extra helpful, maybe she'd forget I was late. As I pushed the START button, Mom walked into the room.

"Hi, sweetie." She plopped down on a chair. "How was your day?"

"Great, fine. How was yours?" I grabbed a water bottle, snapped off the top, and handed it to her.

"I've had better." She took the bottle. "You were late."

"Yeah, well . . ." I had never been able to hide anything from my mother, but I could distract her. "You won't believe it, but Gracie's asleep."

"Really? You have the magic touch." She took a drink of water and rubbed her temples. "Is that my dinner heating up?"

"Salmon, your favorite."

"You're too good to me." Mom leaned her elbows on the table and studied my face. Then she said, "You've fixed dinner and Gracie's even asleep. But despite all your good deeds, I still want to know why you were late coming home from school."

"Time just got away from me." I hoped she wouldn't press for more. The microwave beeped. I pulled out her dinner and set it in front of her. As I watched her examine her food, then look up at me with a smile, I realized she was a little pale and looked tired. And she wasn't eating. I hoped she wasn't upset.

Wanting to make her laugh, I said, "Hey, we really need a new answering machine. You should hear the remains of the message some hospital left."

"Syd . . ." She pushed her plate aside. "We need to talk." There was a strange tone in her voice. Why wouldn't she just let it go? I was late; it didn't happen often.

"About the hospital, I . . ."

"It's Gracie, isn't it?" Little prickles skittered up my arms. I sat down on the chair beside her.

"No, no. Gracie is fine." Mom nervously combed her fingers through her short hair. "In fact, her teacher said she's been doing much better."

Now I was confused. "Well, if it's not Gracie . . ."

The doorbell rang. We hardly ever used the front door; we always entered our apartment through the studio. The only other person who used the front door was Colin. I groaned inwardly.

"That's the bishop." Mom immediately stood.

"The bishop? Bishop Staker? Why's he here?" Bishop Staker was Colin's father. Had Colin used his father to get to me? Now I really was concerned. Not only about the hospital business but about Mom

learning of the argument Colin and I had after school. It would hurt her to hear what he'd said about Gracie.

"I called the bishop this afternoon." Mom bit her bottom lip a moment, then said, "He's here to give me a blessing." She took hold of both my shoulders, staring me square in the eyes. "Syd, I don't have time to do this right, and I'm sorry, but I went to the doctor today. He said I have cancer."

CHAPTER 2

A TERRIBLE BATTLE

Fire soared through the sky on flaming arrows, landing at my feet. I would show no fear. My warrior brothers looked to me for guidance. Ignoring danger and riding a wave of fearlessness I had never known before, I charged ahead, yelling with all my might, praying silently that the Almighty would be with us. Strangely, in this frenzied moment, the face of my younger brother flashed before me. His brow had been furrowed with worry as I left for battle. Would I ever see him again? Would I ever be able to tell him how much I loved him?

And then we were amongst them.

Amongst the enemy.

Black shining eyes stared out from red-painted faces. The foul, bitter aura of hate swam around us. Their muscles, drenched with sweat, flexed to battle-ready. An eerie quiet held both armies captive for an instant, and then we collided with blood-curdling yells, the clang of metal meeting metal, and the desperate gasp of lives being taken.

Boy against man.

Man against boy.

Numb to pain, I moved instinctively, dodging a blade and swinging my sword at my attackers. Smoke stole the air. Breathing became an effort.

Time ceased to be.

Reason ceased to be.

And then the battle grew worse.



The next morning, Bishop Staker and Colin picked Gracie and me up. The bishop's wife had offered to look after Gracie for a few days while Mom was in the hospital. I felt my resolve to be angry with Colin melt a little as I watched the kind way he helped Gracie into the car. I could tell he really was sorry for calling her a retard; he'd apologized over and over and promised to get my homework from the classes I'd miss. I began to feel a little remorseful about having pulled the karate on him. A little. After dropping Colin off at the school and Gracie at the bishop's home, Bishop Staker drove me to the hospital. By now I was late.

I pushed through the hospital doors. Mom would be in the operating room. I walked as fast as possible without running down the corridor, which was lined with windows on both sides. At the end of the hall I saw the elevator doors about to close. I sprinted forward and slipped inside. A janitor, broom in hand, stood beside a large plastic garbage can on wheels. There was a peaceful aura about him. Intrigued by the light that seemed to emanate from his kind eyes, I blinked, suddenly feeling calmer, and punched the button for Mom's floor. The elevator started to move.

The janitor looked right at me. The serene light was still in his gaze, and his smile was warm and friendly. The longer he stared at me the more I wondered whether he thought he knew me. For a millisecond, I thought I knew him. Then reason took charge. I had no clue who this man was. But I smiled back. He was attractive, with short, curly blond hair and a muscular build. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties.

The elevator gave a lunge and stopped.

We were stuck!

Panic washed over me, replacing the calm I had felt. This couldn't be happening. Mom needed me. I punched all the buttons.

The janitor shook his head, calmly picked up the elevator phone, and called someone. When he hung up, he turned to me. His eyes were empathetic. "Should take them a few minutes to fix."

"Great," I sighed.

"So, who are you visiting?" He looked like he really wanted to know.

"My mother." The words slipped out before I could stop them.

“What brings her here?” he asked as he leaned his broom against the wall.

“Breast cancer.” Why had I said that?

“Well, it may take some time for her to recover, but it’s a good thing she has you, Sydney. You’ll help her pull through.”

I froze. Then I slowly asked, “How did you know my name?”

The janitor pointed to the gold ID bracelet on my wrist, the one Mom had given me.

I relaxed a little but then wondered why he was so sure that my mother would be all right. “How do you know Mom will recover?”

“I just do.”

He looked at my confused expression and smiled.

“Let’s just say that I have an in with the man upstairs.” He shook my hand. “My name’s Steve Smith.”

“Nice to meet you, I guess.” The last two words slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them. I hoped I hadn’t hurt his feelings.

We heard a clank from above. Someone was trying to get us out.

“Will your father be coming to visit as well?” Steve Smith stared at me with those kind, penetrating eyes that seemed to see into my soul.

“Nope.” Without thinking, I continued. “He left us ten years ago. We haven’t heard from or seen him since.” What was the matter with me, telling a stranger such personal details?

“Oh.” He clicked his tongue. “So . . . now you’ve taken on the role of bitter teenager?”

“You don’t know what it was like.” How dare this man judge me? “My father was a drunk, and when he learned my little sister was mentally challenged, he left.” I really didn’t know for sure whether my father had left us because of Gracie, but odds were good that I was right. The man had left and never looked back. He didn’t care about me, my sister, or my mother. There was no excuse for what he’d done, and I wasn’t going to defend him—certainly not to a stranger.

“I’m sorry.” Steve reached up to rub his jaw and then asked, “Why do you suppose he did that?”

“I’ve asked myself that question thousands of times. The only answer I can come up with is that he’s . . . he’s a coward.” I’d thought my father was a coward since the day he left, but I had never actually

said so out loud. Taking a deep breath, I let the air out slowly. I looked at the man next to me. Why in the world had I told this stranger my innermost thoughts? Was he playing some mind game? “Do you talk to everyone like this?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“Frisk them verbally about who they’re going to see and find out all their family secrets.” I was interested to hear his reply.

The elevator gave a lunge and began to move.

“Nope.” He grabbed his broom. “Just the ones who need me.”

“Well, thanks, but I don’t need help.” The elevator doors opened. I rushed out, anxious to see my mother and to end the conversation.

“Sydney,” he called after me. I stopped, but I couldn’t bring myself to look at the man whose eyes seemed to see everything.

“There are things you need to learn about your father. When you’re ready to talk, come see me. I’m in housekeeping. Just ask for Steve.”

What in the . . . this guy was weird. He had gone to the great beyond and back. Who did he think he was? I turned around to ask him.

But he was gone.

Vanished.

Garbage can and all.



When they wheeled Mom into her room after surgery, she was pretty much out of it. A short, pudgy nurse—who reminded me of one of the good fairies in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty*, the one who liked the color blue—gave me a nod while she and another nurse moved Mom from the gurney to the bed. With Mom settled, the good-fairy nurse came over to talk. “You must be her daughter?”

“Yes.”

“She’ll sleep another couple of hours.” She patted my shoulder. “Doctor Foster will see you soon.” With those words, she left. I gazed at my sleeping mother. Tape and the tailings of a bulky gauze bandage peeked from beneath the thin fabric of Mom’s hospital gown. I brushed aside the sinking feeling in my chest and pulled my chair to her bedside.

Taking Mom's hand in mine, I studied her long, thin fingers. She had the prettiest hands. I had not inherited them. My fingers were short and stubby, like the rest of me.

An hour later the doctor walked in. He was a brick of a man; his white coat hung at crisp right angles over his blocky shoulders. Worry showed on his face, the grave *I-don't-know-what-to-do* type of worry that could reduce a patient's will to tapioca pudding. His look changed to a professional mask when his eyes met mine.

"You're Sydney?" He shook my hand.

Mom stirred but kept sleeping.

"The operation went well. She should sleep the rest of the day." He gazed down at Mom, and I sensed that he wasn't telling me everything. "Will you be here in the morning?" he asked.

I nodded. I wasn't leaving until Mom told me to. "Is she going to be all right?"

"If I have anything to say about it, she will be." He smiled, and a forced cheeriness claimed his face. "I'll tell you more when your mother is fully awake. If you notice a change in her condition, page the nurse, and she'll call me." He patted my shoulder. "Don't worry." With those final words, he turned and left.

I knew from watching TV that whenever a doctor said, "Don't worry," that was the time to pray real hard. I should have demanded he tell me everything then, but I didn't . . . couldn't. I wanted to chase him down the hall and beg him for more information. Fear blocked my way. And I couldn't bring myself to leave Mom's side. I pulled my seat so close to the bed that the metal of the bedrail clinked against the wooden armrest on my chair. If Mom so much as flinched during the night, I'd know it. With a prayer on my lips, I settled in.



The night was long and miserable. Every few hours Mom would wake up just long enough for the nurse to give her a pain pill, and then she would fall back to sleep. I slept fitfully, shifting endlessly in the hard, wooden chair. There was a recliner in the room; I could have slept on it, but I would have been too far away from Mom. I stayed in the chair, holding her hand and resting my head beside her on the bed.

Doctor Foster woke both of us as he entered the room to do his morning rounds. "Are you two awake?" He gave Mom a tender smile, and in that moment I knew he was a man who cared a lot about his patients. I rubbed my sleep-deprived eyes and quickly looked at Mom.

She was awake. "How did it go?" Mom asked with a scratchy voice I barely recognized.

"Not like we had hoped." Doctor Foster's face turned serious.

Mom put her hand up to stop him from talking. "Syd . . ." She cleared her throat and continued. "Would you call the Stakers and check on Gracie?"

I reached for the phone.

"Not here." Mom tried to sit up, but she sank back into her pillows. "Use the pay phone in the hall."

I knew what she was doing. "You're not getting rid of me, Mom."

"Please, sweetie."

Doctor Foster took my side. "You need her," he said. I knew I liked him.

I grabbed Mom's hand again. Together we could get through this.

Doctor Foster began. "As you probably suspected, we had to do a mastectomy instead of a lumpectomy. We discovered in surgery that, unfortunately, the mass had spread. I want to start chemotherapy as soon as you're strong enough."

Mom squeezed my hand and looked at me. Then she turned to the doctor. "If chemo doesn't work, then what?"

"We're not at that point yet." Doctor Foster took Mom's hand from me, feeling her pulse. "We have to be positive here. An important part of recovery has to do with your outlook. Helen, you're a fighter."

Mom smiled at me and then looked at the doctor. "You bet I am. But I want to be realistic here."

"I understand." Doctor Foster let go of her hand, unwrapped the stethoscope from around his neck, and said, "Let's give chemo a chance to work. If we don't see the results we want, then we'll talk about what to do next. Let me take a listen to your heart." He gently slid the small disk beneath her gown beside the massive bandage covering her chest.

"Well, you're heart's beating; that's always a good sign." The doctor winked and flipped the stethoscope around his neck. "I want

you to rest now. I'll check on you tonight." He gave Mom's hand a squeeze, tucked her chart under his arm, and left as suddenly as he'd appeared.

"Well, that's that," Mom said. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she quickly wiped them away. I couldn't believe this was happening to my mother . . . to us.

"Syd, get my purse from the closet." She nodded toward a door. I hustled over and located the small shoulder-strap purse she'd had since I was in the sixth grade. I handed it to her.

Raising herself up a little, she opened the flap and dug through the contents, catching her breath every so often. I'd never seen my mother so weak.

"Here, let me." Taking the purse from her, I asked, "What are you looking for?"

"A letter." She inhaled deeply, clutching her side. She whispered, "Might be in the side pocket."

I dug through the side pouch, pulling out a small bottle of lotion, a checkbook, a roll of antacids. Finally, I found it.

The paper was old and yellowed. The return address was within the city. Strange. Why would someone mail a letter instead of calling or just stopping by?

"Who is it from?" I asked, handing the letter to her.

She studied the envelope and quietly said, "Your father."

The word drained the air from the room, and for a moment I couldn't breathe. Finally catching my breath, I said, "My father . . . but I thought he never contacted you."

"It's an old letter." Mom closed her eyes, a pained expression on her face.

"Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes and placed the letter in my hand. "Yes. Sweetie, I need you to do something for me."

"Anything."

She bit her chapped lips, then said, "Find your father. I need to see him."

