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The Prayer Closet Warriors

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By

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The Prayer Closet Warriors

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
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ABSTRACT:

Maddie's grandmother Jean Steele spends her last evening alive telling Maddie not to ever grow up and to always love. Grandma Jean informs Maddie that anyone in the Steele family can travel to heaven. Before she passes away, she gives Maddie a silver locket and tells Maddie that heaven is waiting for her. Grandma Jean dies before Maddie has the chance to ask what she meant.

Three years later Maddie is in the seventh grade. She has become unusually angry ever since school started in the fall. One afternoon she has a short and unpleasant encounter with Dillon, the new kid in school. That evening she dreams of a bird covered in tar. She also dreams she is standing in a rainbow and sees a boy who says to her "Prayer Closet."

The next day Maddie eventually gives in to the urge to go into her hall closet to pray. Once she is there she prays and asks God to help her with her anger. When she opens the closet door to leave, she finds that she is standing in a field in heaven.

She meets a scruffy looking boy named Sam, the boy from her dream. Sam informs Maddie that she has been called by God to save her school from the Anti-Nagah, the light eater. Maddie explores heaven with Sam and collects the precious twinkle dust that is used to get rid of the slime the Anti-Nagah produces.

She goes to the Spirit Realm, the land between heaven and earth where the Anti-Nagah is. The Spirit Realm is a

place exactly like earth except that the supernatural is seen and touched. This place and earth parallel each other. What happens in one place has an effect on the other place.

In the Spirit Realm Maddie is tricked by her classmate Dillon into giving away all of her twinkle dust, causing her to fail in her mission. Maddie retreats back to earth. Through the encouragement of her dog Golden she returns to heaven.

Back in heaven, now with her dog Golden, Maddie undergoes three tests so that she can advance to the second level of heaven. This is where she can get more twinkle dust. The three tests teach her to not give in to fear, to receive help from others, and to forgive. Before heading to the Spirit Realm, she enlists the help of her friends Quinton, Leah, her brother Jackson, and Jackson's friend Nick. They all travel to the Spirit Realm.

They use Maddie's twinkle dust to work their way through the school, getting rid of the slime. Once they come to the cafeteria, all of them become angry because of the effects of the slime. Maddie finds Dillon standing in a ball of slime. She realizes that twinkle dust isn't enough. She tells Dillon she's sorry for how she treated him, that she forgives him for releasing the Anti-Nagah, and that she'd like to be his friend.

The love of Maddie softens Dillon's anger, causing the Anti-Nagah to lose its power. They discover that Dillon is Maddie and Jackson's cousin. In the end, Dillon becomes friends with all of them.

This juvenile novel is written for third through sixth graders. During those years, children are continuing to develop their character. It is a pivotal time when they are often given choices to grow in love and friendship or instead in self-centeredness. I wrote this novel with the themes of love and friendship to encourage children to choose those traits even if it requires them to let go of their fear, self-reliance, and unforgiveness.

"And you will have faith too when you are in a great worship service, a conference or experiencing a heavenly encounter in your prayer closet."

Joyce Meyer

Prologue

"Always look to the good book," Grandma Jean Steele often said, at least until she died three years ago. Grandma Jean, or Huma, as Maddie liked to call her, was Maddie's favorite family member. When Maddie was learning to talk, she pronounced grandma like Huma. The nickname stuck like pizza dough without enough flour.

The two of them had a special bond. Grandma Jean was the only adult in the family who called Maddie by her

nickname. All the other adults called her by her full name Madeline. "Madeline sounds too grown up," grandma would say to Maddie.

During their last conversation Grandma Jean warned, "Don't ever grow up, Maddie. I'm a lot older than you would think, but I never grew up." Grandma Jean rested in her bed. Maddie sat on a nearby stool. Maddie didn't understand what her grandma was talking about. Maddie's parents always told her to act like a grown up until she was one. Maddie made a puzzled look. Grandma Jean began to explain herself.

"The good book tells us if we want to enter heaven, we have to be like little children. All my life I have held onto that little girl inside of me. She still likes to catch fireflies and eat desert before dinner." Maddie held her grandmother's hand and tried to pay attention. Thoughts of carrot cake and hot fudge sundaes captured her imagination.

"Did you know that I have a brother?" Grandma Jean said.

Maddie shook her head no. She'd never heard about this before.

"His name is Alfred. When we were both a little older than you, he gave into his fears. He became angry, and he only thought about his own needs. He let go of that little child in himself. I haven't seen him since I was your mother's age."

"Promise me you won't ever forget to stay a child, Maddie," Grandma Jean said.

"I won't. I promise, Huma," Maddie said.

Grandma Jean let go of Maddie's hand. She reached into her bedside dresser drawer. Out came a silver heart-shaped locket on a long chain. The wrinkled hand shook as she handed her treasure to her granddaughter.

"The key to having a child's heart is to always love. You can't love if you're afraid. And you can't love if you're angry. And you can't love if you're always thinking about only little you."

Grandma Jean smiled at Maddie. Maddie felt like her grandmother's mind was off somewhere else. Maddie nodded even though she knew she didn't completely understand about everything. What did her grandmother really mean about staying young? She often had a hard time understanding Grandma Jean. Maddie's grandmother frequently said things that sounded odd to Maddie.

Not only did Grandma Jean talk funny, but she also acted funny, too. Sometimes when she visited her grandmother, Maddie wouldn't be able to find her anywhere. Once she peeked into Grandma Jean's bedroom and didn't see her. Maddie was walking out of the room when she heard a noise. She turned around and saw her grandmother walking out of the closet. Grandma Jean had said she was in her "prayer closet" praying for Maddie. Maddie was sure she had just looked in the closet and found it empty.

Maddie held the locket in her hand. It was warm.

"Heaven is waiting for you, Maddie," Grandma Jean said. "Use the locket. It will help you to remember what I told you."

Grandma Jean occasionally talked about heaven like it was a neighbor's house down the street. It was like she was leaving Maddie a key to the front door.

"I don't understand," Maddie said.

"You're my granddaughter and you're a Steele. Our family has been given a gift. Anyone in the Steele bloodline can use a 'prayer closet' to travel to heaven. That is, if they choose to. The locket is to help you make right choices along the way."

Maddie was about to ask her if anybody else in the family knew about this gift. Maddie's mother popped her

head into the room. "Madeline, dear, let Grandmother Jean get her rest," Maddie's mother said.

Maddie kissed her grandmother on the cheek. "Maybe we can finish our conversation in the morning," Maddie said, then started to leave.

"Remember, Maddie, heaven is waiting for you," Grandma Jean said.

Maddie closed the door behind her. That night Maddie tried and tried to get the locket open. But it remained stuck. She planned on asking Grandma Jean how to open it the next day. She never got the chance. A few days later the family had the funeral for Grandma Jean. Maddie didn't know if she'd ever figure out how to get the locket open.

She also never got to ask her grandma the million other questions forming in her mind about the "prayer closet" and heaven. Maddie wondered, *How does the "prayer closet" work? What is heaven like? And most of all, why would heaven be waiting for me?*

*

Three years later Maddie stepped out of a "prayer closet" and into heaven. The colors of the sky moved in slow motion. They looked like an ocean with each wave a different color. Red and yellow waves of color splashed in

to a green pool. A dark blue star was surrounded by smaller neon green stars.

A faint humming sound came from the trees and the grass. She looked at her new surroundings. Maddie spun around in a circle then jumped up and down in excitement. Another member of the Steele family had just begun her journey.

1

Three years passed by quickly after the funeral. Maddie had long forgotten all about the locket and what Grandma Jean had said about heaven. The night before Maddie entered heaven, she played with her friends, Leah and Quinton. Leah and Maddie were best friends, but Maddie often got annoyed at Leah's know-it-all attitude. But Quinton was nothing like his sister Leah in that sense. He was practically a genius, and he never let on to it.

Maddie loved how he wasn't all brains. He was athletic, too. Quinton never came in second place on his track team at the public school that he and Leah went to. Maddie often wished she could go to their school instead of *Willow Creek Christian Academy* all by herself. Even her brother Jackson wasn't forced to go to the stuffy academy. Maddie and Jackson's parents were home schooling him for at least one more year.

Maddie waved goodbye to Leah and Quinton. Her two friends rode their bikes home a couple of streets away. When Maddie heard a rustling noise come from the bushes, she walked past them quickly as she walked down the street to her house.

She noticed that Nick was still playing with her little brother Jackson across the street. She watched as Jackson reached for Mr. Clouse's slender Siamese cat. It was almost too dark outside for Maddie to see them across the street. Luckily, a city street light at the end of Mr. Clouse's driveway shed light on her neighbor's front yard.

Jackson worked himself half-way up one of many oak trees in the yard. He sat on a thick, leafy branch. It would be at least another month before the trees started losing their leaves. Nick held the water hose tightly in his hands as water came gushing out. He aimed the green

hose at the cat. As the cold water touched her, the cat screeched and jumped to a higher branch.

Maddie laughed. "Don't you know cats hate being wet?" she commented, shouting out into their direction. Maddie twirled her mouse brown shoulder length hair between her fingers. "You'll just scare her."

The water sprayed the branches and Jackson a little in the face. He wiped the water off. Jackson put his hands on a branch to climb up to where the cat now sat. He began to stand when his feet slipped. "Ahhh," he yelled as he fell to the ground.

"Jackson!" Maddie screamed.

2

Maddie ran across the street forgetting to make sure no cars were coming. Her little brother often annoyed her, but he was her brother after all. "Jackson, are you okay?" she shouted. Maddie darted around Mr. Clouse's car. Thank goodness Jackson had landed on his back. He curled up in a ball with his arms and fists against his chest and lay on his side. His red Snoopy fireman helmet was still strapped to his head.

Maddie reached Jackson and sat down at his side. Nick crouched down next to her. Jackson groaned. Maddie felt the tears begin to well up in her eyes.

"Hey, buddy," Nick said, then lightly poked Jackson above the hip.

"Man down," Jackson yelled. He turned to face them and began squirting them with his small water gun that he often pretended was a fireman's hose.

Maddie couldn't believe he had a smile on his face and was laughing at her. "Why you little," Maddie began to say then punched him on the arm a little harder than she meant to. She got up and brushed the dirt off her shorts. "And here I was running over to save you."

"Oh, my back," Jackson complained.

"Oh, no. I'm not going to believe you any more," Maddie said. She snatched the water gun from Jackson and threw it into the bushes. "Serves you right for scaring me. I'm going home," she said and headed towards their house.

"No, really. I was fooling with you, but my back hurts, honestly," Jackson said.

"Well, I'll bet it does after falling from a tree," Nick said, still sitting next to Jackson.

The cat jumped down onto the ground and brushed up against Jackson. "Meoooow," she purred uncaringly. The cat casually walked away as if Jackson's fall wasn't caused by her in any way.

Maddie walked quickly across the street, back to the house. She saw somebody jump out from the bushes. *Oh, no,* she thought. *It's that new kid at school, Dillon.*

Dillon shoved his hands in his pockets. "Your brother's not too smart, huh?" Dillon said.

Maddie stuck out her tongue at the boy with black hair and bleach clean sneakers. She wondered if he ever got them dirty playing because he didn't have any friends. She walked on by him.

He caught up and started walking alongside Maddie. "I said your brother's not too smart, huh?"

Maddie stopped and pointed her finger at him. "Oh, leave me alone. Why don't you go home and make fun of somebody else?"

Dillon turned away with his hands still shoved in his pockets. As he walked away, Maddie thought she heard him mutter something. It sounded like, "I'm glad it's ruining their stinkin' school."

Maddie walked up the driveway to her house. She wondered why she got so easily angry at Jackson, at Dillon,

at anything and everything it seemed. Her mom and dad attributed her self-centeredness to being a young pre-teen. *There's got to be more to it than that. Quinton and Leah don't seem to be as hateful as I am,* she thought. She opened the screen door to the house and walked inside.

Later that night she hit the switch on the wall behind her head. She had rigged the switch to turn on her nightlight of white Christmas lights. They looped around the top of her canopy bed. "I can't believe dad took away my television privileges for the night because I talked back to him after he yelled at me for punching Jackson." Maddie climbed out of bed. "How rude," she said to herself about her dad's treatment of her and not the other way around.

She glanced at her family picture taken last Christmas. It was inside her purple plastic frame on her dresser. Maddie turned off her bedroom lights. The soft white lights of her nightlight always calmed her down. Other than the nightlight, the only other light in her bedroom came from under the door. Her parents always left the hall light on in case there were any late night trips to the bathroom. At least that's what they said. Maddie knew that it was really because Jackson was still afraid of

the dark. Maddie was too a little, but she sure wouldn't admit it to Jackson or anybody else.

Maddie stared at the white wooden dresser and desk. They sat against the light blue wall across from her. She had begged her dad to paint her once brown furniture white. She wanted it to look like white clouds floating in the sky against her blue walls. *I wish I could float away on the clouds. Then I wouldn't have to deal with annoying parents or a pest of a brother,* she thought.

She closed her eyes and listened to hear if there were any sounds coming from Nick and Jackson's two-boy slumber party downstairs. The only noise she heard was the air conditioner rattling. A couple more days and the air conditioner would shut off for a while. Soon afterwards the heater would kick on. She didn't look forward to when she'd have to exchange her shorts and t-shirt for pants and a light jacket when she went outside.

She wondered how long it had been since she wasn't annoyed all the time. She pulled the sheet up until it almost covered her head. She planned on falling asleep with her nightlight on. She was recalling the fun of summer that ended only six weeks ago. "I don't think I was so angry then," she said aloud to herself. Slowly she began to drift into sleep.

Late in to the night Maddie squeezed her worn Care Bear that had a button for a right eye while she slept. Images of black tar being poured on to a blue and green bird invaded her dreams. Maddie felt helpless as the bird became unable to flap its mired down wings to escape. The more it tried to shake off the tar, the worse the tar stuck. Maddie couldn't see herself in the dream, but she heard her voice say, "Somebody help the poor bird."

Then the scene changed. The bird was gone. Maddie could see herself standing inside of what looked like a rainbow. She looked around and felt an urge to touch it. At first she cautiously only used her finger to tap on the blue light. She felt a wave of peace flood her. No longer afraid, she began moving her hands up and down the wall of energetic light. Warmth poured over her from above.

She looked upwards, expecting to see the sun. Instead, she saw a boy who looked about her age sitting on a ledge a good ten feet away. His dark blond hair was messy, and it looked like he had on dusty overalls. He grinned wide, reached out his right hand down towards her and matter-of-factly said, "Prayer Closet."

3

"Breakfast, Madeline," her mother shouted from the kitchen.

Maddie sat up in bed momentarily unaware of where she was. "What a strange dream," she said as she stretched. The aroma of bacon and eggs caused her to hurry out of bed. She slid her feet into her purple bunny slippers and quickly headed to the kitchen downstairs. Saturday morning breakfasts were Jackson and Maddie's favorites. Their mom

cooked everyone's most wanted breakfast foods. Jackson and Nick usually played with action figures at the table while waiting for breakfast.

"Did you have a nice sleep, dear?" Maddie's father asked without looking up from the sports section of his newspaper. Maddie pulled out the wooden kitchen chair then sat down in between Jackson and her father. Jackson made fighting noises. He held onto his two action figures causing them to punch each other.

"Man down," yelled Jackson. He tossed onto the floor the action figure that lost the fight. Their yellow Labrador "Golden" began chewing on the toy.

"Jackson, put your toys in the living room. Then I'll give you your food," Maddie and Jackson's mother said. She grabbed silverware out of the drawer. Jackson crawled under the table and then got the action figure out of Golden's mouth. He stuck out his tongue at Maddie as he walked past her towards the living room. She stuck hers out at him.

It was just in time for their mother to turn and face Maddie with a plate of food. "Madeline, don't stick your tongue out at your brother," their mother said. She placed a yellow plastic plate with food on it on the table.

"He did it first!" Maddie said crossing her arms.

Nick laughed quietly as he sat across the table from Maddie. He stuck his tongue out at her, too.

Maddie and Jackson's mother began to cook Maddie's favorite eggs, sunny-side up. She had on the black and white checkered apron she always wore while cooking. Her amber brown hair that was a couple of shades darker than Maddie's was gathered into a loose French braid.

Jackson returned to the kitchen, waddling and flapping his arms like a penguin. His fireman pajamas matched his red hair and freckles. He sat down and began arranging his breakfast masterpiece before he proceeded to eat it. Jackson always made a smiley face out of bacon pieces, using the scrambled eggs for hair. "Smiling breakfasts taste the best," he said. Nick followed along Jackson's idea by making a crooked nose out of his bacon. Then he used scrambled eggs for hair coming out of the nostrils.

Except for Jackson and Nick's making fire truck siren sounds, there wasn't any other conversation all through their Saturday breakfast. While she finished her orange juice, Maddie thought about her dreams. *I wish Huma was still around. She was the best at figuring out dreams,* Maddie thought. Maddie put her plate in the sink then headed out of the kitchen.

"Maddie, please straighten up that mess in your bedroom before you do anything else," her father said in between bites of bacon.

"Fine," she grumbled as she headed upstairs. Maddie changed into her jean shorts and a red shirt. It was Quinton's favorite color. She day dreamed about Quinton. "I wonder if he'll notice my shirt," Maddie said as she put her hair in a pony-tail. She fussed with it for a minute, unable to get out all of the bumps. "Uggh!" she said as she pulled the pony-tail holder out. "Oh, forget it." Fifteen minutes later her room looked decent. *I hope my parents don't look under my bed or in my closet,* she thought.

The house was quiet when Maddie casually walked down the stairs. Her dad was out golfing, his usual Saturday activity. Most likely, her mom had walked Jackson and Nick to the small field. They often spent all day playing catch.

The words "prayer closet" from her dream danced around her mind. "I am not going in to the closet," Maddie thought as she stood at the bottom of the stairs with her hands on her hips. "I know that the term 'prayer closet' is just an expression that Huma used when she was going to

find a private place to pray," she said trying to reassure herself.

She walked in to the living room and sat on the tan micro fiber couch. Golden was sleeping on his pillow in the corner. Her mother's crossword puzzle lay upside down on the table. Maddie picked it up along with the pencil that rested next to her mother's square pink eraser. Her mother often changed her mind after she filled out an answer. Long ago the eraser on the end of the number two lead pencil had been used up.

Maddie read the crossword puzzle. A five letter word for a flower that is like a daisy. Maddie squeezed the pencil tightly as she began to write in the appropriate box. Snap! The pencil broke in two. "Why is it always me who breaks things? Nothing is going right today," she murmured. She walked over to the small dark red dresser that matched the table. She opened the drawer and pulled out another pencil, throwing the pieces of the broken one in the trash bin next to the dresser.

The words prayer closet came to her mind again. "Oh, alright!" she shouted, and then carelessly dropped the pencil and crossword puzzle on the table. She marched in to the hallway and opened up the hall closet. The winter coats, mittens and scarves that occupied the closet during

fall and winter were still in a plastic box in the attic. Maddie sat down on the floor. She closed the door so that no one would notice her and her foolish activity. Even though she couldn't see anything she closed her eyes.

She wondered if Huma felt a little foolish whenever she prayed in her bedroom closet. Maddie fumbled at her first words. "God, um, hi." She paused and took a deep breath, relaxing. Then she began again. "I know it's been a while since I spoke to you. I guess that's my fault, not yours. I'm just so angry all the time. Right now I don't even want to think about praying." Maddie mused about how the only time she prayed lately was during Quinton and Leah's and her church youth group meetings.

"And Jackson's always getting on my nerves." Now the words seemed to come easily. "I guess I should also pray about school. I'm afraid to do anything to make Teresa and the others laugh at me. Oh, yeah, God, please help me with my anger," she said holding herself. She rocked back and forth for a minute drinking in the peace that she experienced. It felt familiar, too, like when she touched the rainbow in her dream.

When the peace began to subside, she got up and opened the door to leave. She squinted when she stepped out of the closet. The light became blinding. Her bare feet

touched what felt like silky grass. It wasn't at all the hard wood floor of her hallway that she had expected. She giggled as the grass tickled her feet. The sky looked the brightest blue she'd ever seen, too. She rubbed her eyes. "Wow," she said, leaving her mouth gaping wide open.

She observed the grassy field that surrounded her and her closet. Before she thought to do anything but stare, a familiar looking boy with dusty overalls came walking towards her. He had a bounce in his step. He waved his right hand as he approached. "Welcome to heaven, Maddie. My name is Sam."

4

Maddie wondered if this was what her grandma saw when she visited heaven. Maddie stood and stared at the boy named Sam, then at the place all around him. After a few seconds Maddie began to stammer. "Um," she said as she looked straight at him. Now he was only a few feet away. "Oh, sorry. Hi. I mean how did I get in to heaven?" The air smelled sweet like honey. Maddie wanted to stick out

her tongue like she did when it snowed and see if she could taste the air.

"Why, you've entered the prayer closet your grandma told you about," Sam responded with a big, toothy grin.

Maddie turned around to make sure that her hall closet was still there. It appeared to be just the same as it would if she was staring at it from the hallway in her house. The only difference was that the house around it was missing.

Sam continued. "Right now you are in the field of bloom-me-nots." He walked over to a flower that was growing right next to Maddie's hall closet. The flower had a furry, medium-length green stem and green triangular shaped petals that were closed. Sam crouched down next to the flower and smiled. Gently he cupped the petals that formed the shape of a ball when closed. "That's a fine flower," he quietly said, then stood up. He took a step back, near to where Maddie was standing.

Maddie watched closely, unsure of what was supposed to happen. The green color of the flower petals began to change color. First the green slowly turned to light green. Then more quickly the color changed to a pale yellow, then to a bright yellow. As the tips of the yellow petals turned crimson red the flower opened up. Maddie

walked over to the flower and peered inside. The petals looked like they formed a bowl that held a gold gooey looking substance. Maddie inhaled the scent. "It smells like honey!"

"Bloom-me-nots have the best tasting honey you'll ever try," Sam said. He rubbed his belly, as if he had just tasted it.

Maddie suddenly realized that was where the yummy scent that she had smelled must have come from. She dipped her finger in the petal bowl, scooped up some honey, and tasted it. "Wow. You're absolutely right. That's great. But, you know, Sam, I still don't know what I'm doing here."

Sam just stood stock still and smiled at her. That smile seemed so familiar, like somewhere she had seen it before. "Why good golly, you're the boy from my dream last night!" Maddie exclaimed in wonder and disbelief. "Am I dead then?" she asked, tensing up, and wrapping her arms around herself. All of a sudden she felt quite cold and clammy. "You said this was heaven. Don't only dead people go to heaven? My grandma never got the chance to explain about heaven to me."

"Nope. You're not dead. You're alive and ticking just fine. And, yes. This is heaven, or what I like to

call my backyard." When Sam said the word heaven his arms extended outward as if introducing heaven to her.

"Is my Grandma Jean here? Oh, wouldn't I just love to see her?" Maddie said.

"Living people like you are allowed in on this and some other levels. Your grandma is on one where the living can't travel to."

Maddie frowned, disappointed. She took her attention off of her new acquaintance and began examining her surroundings. "Wow, so this is heaven, huh?" Her disappointment was replaced by curiosity and excitement. "There's the gate with the huge white oyster pearls grown-ups are always talking about." The gate ranged far off in the distance, but she could see it clearly. The pearls looked twice the size of a basketball.

Maddie walked around the back side of the brown closet. Oddly, it looked a little like an outhouse in the middle of a national park. A dense forest to the south and west looped around the back of the closet. She couldn't see through the trees. Everywhere else was covered by grass and the bloom-me-not flowers. "Sam, is this the place my grandma used to visit? I still can't understand how I got here. And . . ."

Sam smiled. "There's not much time, so I'll explain while we're on the way to the Colored Mud Caves." He held out his hand. "Come on. I'll show you all around heaven, at least the parts I'm able to."

Maddie looked down at his hand and noticed neon specks of blue on it. She frowned and just stood there, not sure she wanted it to get on her.

Sam saw her frown then followed her eyes to where she was staring. "Oh, sorry," he said as he wiped his hand on his overalls. "Whoever said 'Cleanliness is next to godliness' had it all backwards."

She had so many questions. She wondered who this kid really was. Did he live here, or had he somehow stumbled into heaven like her? If so, did he stay to help anyone else who came? Who else in her family had been to heaven and why? She figured the only way she'd find anything out was through Sam. She reluctantly took his hand, and they headed off through the flower field towards the forest. Maddie wished she was holding Quinton's hand instead.

Sam let his other hand hang down by his side. He held his palm wide open. His hand lightly touched many of the flowers. They in turn responded with the same pattern of changing colors as the other flower had. Maddie turned around to get one last glimpse of her hall closet, her only

tie to the real world. She saw that the bloom-me-not flower she had eaten honey out of was still open and transformed.

"A minute ago you said that we don't have much time. I always figured there wasn't such a measurement as time in heaven," Maddie said. She let her hand touch the flowers to her right like she saw Sam do as they passed by them.

"You're right. There isn't regulated time in heaven. It's like a summer day that never ends. But while you're here, time on earth continues, so we must move along quickly."

They eventually started on a stone path into the forest. It was lightly littered with what looked like soft white rose petals. The trees had leaves that were shades of green brighter than any green Maddie had ever seen.

After passing each new flower or tree that Maddie had never seen before, she made "oohs" and "ahhs." She noticed that the air seemed to taste cleaner than the air on earth. She took deeper breaths. She kept stopping to have Sam tell her the names of flowers.

"Some of these trees look like they are growing upside down," Maddie said.

What Maddie had always seen as the top of a tree, the part with all of the leaves, was touching the ground like a

bush. The trunk of the tree came up out of the middle. The roots reached up higher and higher. It looked like brown fireworks shooting up into the sky, frozen in place. Some of the roots looped around themselves making circles. Maddie tilted her head far back and noticed that the highest roots had little white blossoms on the ends.

Maddie saw a few blossoms on the ground by her feet. She picked one up off the ground and deeply inhaled the peppermint scent. When she lifted her head up, Sam burst out laughing. Maddie's face instantly burned red with embarrassment, even though she didn't know what she was embarrassed about yet. *How rude!* she thought, beginning to get angry.

Sam picked up another blossom and inhaled it. When he took the flower away from his face, his nose was covered in a dark orange coating. "We can call ourselves the orange nosed twins," Sam said, then laughed. He blew the blossom in his hand away.

Maddie laughed once she saw that Sam wasn't making fun of her. She then quickly rubbed her nose to try and clean off the unwanted orange tint. She didn't want to meet anyone else in heaven while having an orange nose. The sound of running water was heard somewhere off in the distance.

Maddie put one of the blossoms behind her ear. She continued walking the stone path with Sam to her left.

"So, how did I get here?" Maddie asked again.

"Well, let's see," Sam said. "You stepped out of the prayer closet, walked through the field of bloom-me-nots, then headed into the forest."

Maddie couldn't tell if he was teasing her or being serious. She changed her question from how she got here to why she was here.

"You're here to bring heaven to earth," Sam replied in a matter-of-fact way, as if he had said something as normal as mosquito bites are hard not to itch. "Just like your grandma."

"Me?" Maddie asked, pointing to herself. "Why me? I live in a simple home, with a simple mom and dad, and with a simply annoying little brother. I'm nobody special."

Sam grinned real wide as they continued their walk. "You responded to God's call on your family. He has an important assignment for you, and you are his child. You are very very special to him."

"If you say so," Maddie said. "So why isn't my grandma on this level?"

"There are many levels of heaven. This is the first level, where living humans come, so that they can be

energized and learn God's ways. The more time you spend here, the more you will be transformed into who God created you to be, a Heavenling. Whenever you go back to earth you will still be the transformed you."

"You mean I'll get to come here again?" Maddie asked.

"Sure you can. Your grandma came here all the time. We were good friends, you know." They walked under a vine covered gateway opening and were out of the forest. Above them was a huge waterfall with many smaller waterfalls that all led into a river below. Some of the waterfalls appeared to have different colors of water coming out of the caves.

"This is the Land of Seven Waterfalls. Ahead of us is the Colored Mud Caves I mentioned."

Sam led her down a small hill and into a cave opening. Instead of it being dark like Maddie had imagined, it was well lit by glowing walls. There were countless drawings on the walls of the cave. The pictures reminded Maddie of the Native American cave drawings she had seen in her history book.

"Do you like to paint?" Sam asked as he dipped his finger into a stalagmite with a shallow hole in the center. He then proceeded to paint a red smiley face on the wall next to a painting of a yellow sun.

Maddie saw some blue paint in a nearby stalagmite and made a star on the other side of the sun. "The only color of mud on earth is brown," Maddie said. She noticed she had blue specks on her hands like Sam did when he first met her. She wiped her hands on her shorts. There was purple mud, green mud, and even rainbow colored mud.

Sam saw Maddie looking closely at a glowing liquid. "That's Twinkle Dust. On the first level of heaven, it is only found in this cave," Sam said. "The Twinkle Dust mixes with water then comes out in a glowing waterfall," Sam said as he passed by the Twinkle Dust. He dipped his entire hand into a stalagmite a couple feet away from Maddie. When he pulled his hand out, the Twinkle Dust caused his hand to glow like fireflies.

"Wow," Maddie said as she walked over to the light giving Dust.

"The Twinkle Dust is what gives light inside the caves. It's what we've come for." Sam picked up a red and blue striped canteen lying up against the wall. He filled it with the Twinkle Dust that had already mixed with water. Maddie took the offered canteen and used its strap to wear it like a purse.

"Come on," Sam said, then headed around a bend in the cave. Maddie ran to catch up to him. Maddie stopped when

she saw Sam peering into the rainbow colored waterfall. The water exited the cave and dove into the river below. "You wanted to know why you are here. Take a look and see."

Maddie gazed into the water. After a couple of seconds an image appeared in the water. The same green and blue bird from her dream came into view. This time it was lifeless like stone. Black tar was dripping on its head. The image started to pull back like it was zooming out for a larger shot of the area.

Maddie gasped as she saw that the bird was a small statue at the front of her school. She then realized that the bird was her school mascot. It was a blue and green broad-billed hummingbird. There was a small trail of black tar leading away from the bird and into the school. "What's that black stuff? And why haven't I ever seen it before?"

"That's black tar. It's the trail of the Anti-Nagah, the light eater. You've never seen it because right now you are looking into the Spirit Realm. If you were to go to your school on earth, the tar would still be there, but you couldn't see it or touch it. The Spirit Realm shows what earthlings can't see. It reflects the things done on earth. It works both ways. What's done in the Spirit

Realm can also reflect on earth. Your family can also travel there."

"Everything that's good gives off light like the Twinkle Dust," Sam continued. "You give off light on earth, but you can only see the light in the Spirit Realm. Whenever you show kindness instead of selfishness, you give off light. When your grandma gave you her locket, the act of kindness gave off a lot of light. You see, the evil Anti-Nagah is eating all the light in your school. It feeds off of other people's selfishness, fear, and anger. Maddie, it is up to you to save your school from the Anti-Nagah."

5

Maddie put her hands up in protest. "Oh, no. Not me! That sounds way too creepy. It's not fair that I should have to do it. It's not my fault there's that gunk on my school." Her temper began to rise. She turned and started to walk back toward the entrance of the cave.

"Maddie, it won't stop there. The Anti-Nagah will keep spreading until it's stopped." Sam followed her.

"No, not to Quinton and Leah's house! They live across the street. Why me? I didn't ask for this job."

"Well, actually, you did," Sam said.

Maddie stopped a few feet from the entrance to the cave, turned and faced Sam. She was beginning to wonder why she trusted him at all. She folded her arms as Sam continued.

"When you were in your closet I heard your prayers. You asked God to help you with your fear, anger, and self-centeredness. Well, I know this isn't what you expected, but this is God answering your prayers."

"I don't understand," Maddie said with her arms still crossed. "How does this relate to what I prayed about? And by the way, I don't appreciate you listening in to my prayers whoever you are."

Maddie expected Sam to react meanly, but he looked at her with kindness. "I know this is hard for you. You see, your anger is a direct result of the Anti-Nagah eating all the light. The less love and joy in your school, the less light. The less light, the more black tar. Those things you asked God to help you with are largely caused by the Anti-Nagah."

Maddie's anger softened when she recalled the peace and love she felt in her dream when she touched the rainbow. "I'm sorry. I'm just as rotten as that tar."

Sam hugged her.

Maddie took a deep breathe and relaxed. "I don't want to do it. And I'm honestly still annoyed that I'm supposed to, but I'll try to help. I'm sure my Huma would want me to."

Sam walked out of the cave and back towards the forest. "Come on, then. No time for a turtle's pace now."

Maddie clutched her canteen and followed Sam back onto the stone path and through the forest. When they reached the bloom-me-not flower field, Maddie's closet was in the same place. They walked over to it.

"Just use the Twinkle Dust mixed with water to combat the Anti-Nagah."

"Wait. Aren't you going with me?"

Sam looked at the ground and moved his foot around sheepishly. "No. I can't help you any more than I already have."

"What! I have to do this all by myself?"

"I didn't say that. I just said I can't help you in the Spirit Realm. I, too, have an assignment from God. That is, I'm to help you while you are here in heaven. I

can give you one more thing to help. Remember this. Always ask and listen."

"How do I get there? To my school in the Spirit Realm, I mean."

"Ask and listen."

Maddie took a deep breath. "Fine," she said trying to hide her annoyance at his answer. "Here I go. Wish me luck."

"May God's wisdom and presence be with you always." Sam smiled. He talked like a grown up even though he acted like a kid.

His goofy grin softened Maddie's anger. She walked over to her closet, opened the door and got inside. *Here I go again*, she thought as she gripped her canteen tightly. She closed the closet door wondering if she'd ever see Sam or heaven again. "Ok. I know that I need to ask and listen. God please help me save my school."

Maddie tried not to squirm at all so she could hear if God said anything. She stood in her dark closet and counted to twenty. "Nothing. Oh, well. Maybe Sam'll have another suggestion. She opened the door and shielded her eyes, expecting the brightness of heaven to blind her again. To her surprise, instead of stepping out on the

silky grass of heaven, she stepped out onto the hard mulch
of her school's flowerbed.

6

The sweet honey aroma of heaven became replaced by what smelled like month old garbage. She recognized her school. It looked more like a reflection in a lake than the real thing. Maddie stepped out of the flower bed. She headed up the left outdoor sidewalk and into the front door of her school. Once inside she saw black tar spattered on the ceiling, dripping onto the floor. Many lockers and a few classroom doors had tar on them.

She held the canteen out in front of her and unscrewed the lid. Light came out of the container. She dipped her finger into the water mixed with Twinkle Dust.

"Incredible," she said as she examined her glowing finger. She went over to a locker a couple feet down the row. It was definitely her locker. Her heart pounded.

Maddie cringed as her finger headed towards the tar. "Here goes." She shut her eyes until her finger touched metal. When she opened them again the tar was replaced by a little patch of glowing light. "Wahoo!" She continued down the line of lockers, replacing the darkness with the light of the Twinkle Dust.

Maddie noticed that the minute hand on the wall clock in the hallway went from five after to fifty-five after since she'd arrived. She glanced around. It looked like it would take quite a while to get to all the tar. As much as she was repulsed by the tar, she also had the urge to touch it without any of the Twinkle Dust on her finger. She quickly tapped on the tar. A little piece of goop stayed on her finger.

The odor was sickening. Self-centered thoughts from the tar attacked her mind. She wiped the tar onto the wall, then stood there for a minute and began to complain to herself. "Oh, that darn Sam," she shouted into the

empty hallway. "He probably could have done this all himself. I bet he was just too lazy." The more she thought about him not being there instead of her, the angrier she became.

Just then a boy walked out of one of the nearby classrooms. He had black hair and didn't notice Maddie. He walked in the direction opposite of her. She was surprised to see anyone else and then remembered Sam's comment about help. She decided to introduce herself to the boy who looked vaguely familiar. "Hey, you. Down here," Maddie said as she waved to flag him down.

The boy sharply turned around. He frowned.

Maddie recognized him. *What is Dillon doing here?* she wondered. She bit her lip and ran up to him. "Um. Did Sam send you here, too, so that you could help me get rid of the Anti-Nagah?"

A smile slowly crept onto his face. "Uh, yeah. Good old Sam." He looked around the hallway.

He was a good three inches or so shorter than Quinton and not nearly as cute, Maddie thought. "Okay. Where's your Twinkle Dust?" She didn't want help from Dillon, but she was desperate. The smell was making her nauseous.

Dillon just shrugged his shoulders. His black eyes bore into hers. She unconsciously took a step back.

"Well, I guess we could share mine. It'll make the job go twice as fast with two people touching the black tar with the Twinkle Dust." She looked around. "Now I wonder what we can use as a container for the Twinkle Dust, so you can have some."

Dillon placed his arm around Maddie's shoulder and began walking her towards the front door of the school. "Actually Sam sent me here to relieve you."

"Finally," Maddie said smiling. "I didn't know how much more of this smell I could take."

"Right. So I'll take your canteen and you can head back. Sam said he wants to see you right away." Dillon opened the front door to the school and they walked outside.

Maddie wasn't sure what to do. She wanted help, and here it was, but something just didn't feel right.

"You'd better hurry. You don't want to keep Sam waiting."

"Alright," Maddie said as she reluctantly handed over her canteen.

Dillon smiled, snatched it, and headed back into the school without saying another word.

"Well, I guess that wasn't too bad after all." Maddie walked back over towards the closet that sat on the

sidewalk touching the flowerbed. As she came closer to the closet she passed the small statue of the school mascot. It had the repulsive tar on it like she had seen in her dream. "Yuck. I hope Dillon knows that there's a little tar outside, too. I better make sure." Maddie turned around and headed back. "I guess he's not such a bad kid after all."

She opened the front door and peered inside. There was no Dillon in sight. She walked towards the cafeteria to see if Dillon might have started there. It didn't look like he'd touched any of the tar in the hallway. Maddie accidentally stepped in a little puddle of tar that dripped from the ceiling. "Double yuck."

She heard some commotion in the classroom on the right a few doors down. "That must be Dillon." Maddie walked over and began to enter the partially opened door to her science classroom.

"I'll show them," Dillon said quietly.

Maddie began to gasp then quickly covered her hand over her mouth as she watched Dillon pour all of the Twinkle Dust down the sink.

He shook the canteen. His back was towards Maddie. "They think they're so great," he said talking to himself. "All these hypocritical Christians at this school. 'Love

one another' is the stinking school motto. A lot of love they showed me when I got here. I don't need their love or anyone's." He snickered.

Maddie quickly and quietly backed out of her spot and rushed back outside. She had to get some air. What was happening? She ran to her hall closet and leaned against it for a minute. "Oh, I told Sam I didn't want to do this. It wasn't my fault Dillon tricked me." She kicked a small gray stone nearby. Maddie headed towards the closet. The fresh memory of Dillon laughing evilly as he poured her Twinkle Dust down the drain stuck in her mind.

7

Maddie raced into the "prayer closet" and closed the door. "I want to go home!" she shouted. The garbage smell from the tar was still present. Maddie realized it was now coming from her. "Yuck," she said as she opened the door. *I'm never going back there again,* she thought. She stepped out of her hall closet and back into her comfortable, warm, familiar hallway.

"Sam'll just have to find somebody else to take care of that mean newbie Dillon. I wish he'd just go back to wherever he came from and take that tar with him." She plopped down on her bed and told Golden the entire story. It didn't make her feel less guilty for giving up. Then Maddie decided she needed to put the whole incident out of her mind.

Maddie pulled her favorite book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, out of her dresser drawer. She got halfway down the second page before the words "prayer closet" pounded on her brain. She attempted to ignore it by humming loudly, but that didn't work for more than a couple of seconds. Next, she tried turning her radio on full blast, but she quickly got a headache.

Golden barked at her, but the barks were drowned out by the noise. Maddie stuck her tongue out at her dog. Golden pawed his wet pink nose and yowled pathetically.

Maddie turned off the sound of the blaring music and sat back down on her bed. Golden lay down across the room and looked up at Maddie. "Don't give me that look," Maddie said while crossing her arms. Golden's tale wagging on the ground made a sweeping sound. The words "prayer closet" pounded on Maddie's brain and heart. She felt like she

would cry if she didn't give in to going back in the dreaded closet.

Golden walked over to Maddie's white dresser that had a knob missing on the bottom drawer. He barked at the dresser twice then looked at Maddie. She just stared at her dog. Golden barked again.

"What is it boy?" Maddie said. She got up and looked at the dresser. Neither Golden's squeaky dog bone nor any other toys were underneath it. Golden barked again and scratched at the wall near the backside of the dresser.

Maybe something's stuck, Maddie thought. She pulled the dresser out from the wall a couple inches. A clanking sound was made. Maddie couldn't see what it was because Golden was hovering over the object. Suddenly Golden snatched the object up in his mouth and then quickly trotted out the door.

"Hey, that's the locket Grandma Jean gave me!" Maddie said. "Come back here, you dog." Maddie chased after Golden through the upstairs hallway, then down the stairs. Golden stopped at the downstairs hall closet. He dropped the locket in front of the closed door and pawed at the door.

Maddie picked up the cold, silver locket. Part of it looked like it had dried dirt stuck on it. "But Golden, I don't want to go back in the prayer closet." Golden's tail wagged at a fast pace.

She turned the locket backwards and forwards. Maddie remembered Grandma Jean lying on the bed the last time Maddie saw her. "Heaven is waiting for you," was the last statement Grandma Jean made. Golden barked again.

"Alright, I'll go back to heaven if you go with me this time." Golden wagged his entire body instead of just his tail. Maddie put the locket around her neck. The red shirt made the silver locket all the more noticeable. A few minutes later Maddie and Golden stepped on the lush grass of heaven. Golden ran around, stopping to sniff at every new smell.

Sam sat on the ground facing the closet a couple feet away. "Hey, good boy. How are you?" Sam said to Golden. Sam patted him on the head.

Maddie looked around so that she didn't have to see any possible looks of disappointment on Sam's face.

"Glad you're back," Sam said to Maddie as he continued to pet Golden.

"Yes, I'm back to save the school," Maddie said in a prideful tone. She didn't want to admit that she failed the first time.

Golden ran to get a branch Sam threw. "Maddie, are you willing to try again?" Sam asked. "The Anti-Nagah is growing stronger each minute through Dillon. It was his anger and cursing the school that brought the Anti-Nagah." He looked up at her.

"Dillon's the one to blame? I should've known. He tricked me," Maddie said, trying to defend herself. She knew she sounded whiny. "If you were there, you would have told me not to give him all my Twinkle Dust." Maddie waited for him to respond. She kept her head low and didn't look at Sam. He didn't say anything.

"Oh, alright," Maddie said. "I'll get some more Twinkle Dust. And this time I won't be giving any to Dillon." Golden carried the stick in his mouth and walked over to Maddie. She rubbed Golden's favorite spot, behind his right ear.

"We used up all the Twinkle Dust in the Colored Dust Caves. You'll have to go to the next level of heaven," Sam said.

"Awesome. What kind of things are on that level?" Maddie asked. She looked around. "How do we get there?"

"Well, you won't be able to go yet," Sam said.

"What! You just told me the Anti-Nagah is growing. When can I go?" Maddie asked.

"First, you'll have to pass a test."

"Great. I'm terrible at tests, especially math. Is it at least multiple choice?" Maddie said.

Sam stood up. "No, it's not that kind of a test. To get to the next level of heaven, you have to grow in heavenly qualities. This first level of heaven is for beginners like you. It's a great place to start. It took faith for you to get here in the first place. But you'll have to pass a test to continue."

"So I need to defeat the Anti-Nagah. But before I can do that I have to get more Twinkle Dust. And before I can do that I have to pass a test," Maddie said.

"Well, it's actually three tests." Sam's thumbs moved up and down behind his overall bib straps. The toothy grin Maddie first saw when she met Sam reappeared on his face. "Come on. I'll explain when we get there."

Sam, Maddie and Golden headed off towards The Land of Seven Waterfalls. They walked through the bloom-me-not field, and through the forest with the white flowers and orange pollen. They passed by the Colored Mud Caves and walked down a steep hill. At the bottom was the river

where all of the waterfalls commingled into. Yellow, green, and blue colored water flowed out of three different caves. Maddie watched it dive into the river below.

"Geronimo!" Sam yelled.

Maddie turned and saw him do a cannonball into the river.

"Jump in, Maddie. The water's great," Sam yelled.

Maddie dipped her foot in to get a feel for the water. It was cold. Not the kind of cold like forgetting your scarf on a windy December day. It was the kind of cold Maddie enjoyed, like popsicles during a hot August afternoon. "Geronimo!" Maddie jumped in. She swam over towards Sam. Golden paced back and forth on land.

"You can do it, Golden. Come on in," Maddie shouted. Golden barked and leapt into the river. Pretty soon all three of them were treading water. Maddie found it much easier to tread water in heaven than she did on earth. Golden licked at the water all around him.

"Do you remember the pearly gates you saw?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, they were beautiful. My mom would love one of them. She wears her pearl necklace on special occasions."

"Your first task is to get one of the pearls. Each pearl you saw that made up the gate was added by someone like you. The gate is over one thousand feet high and one

thousand feet long in both directions. Once you get a pearl, you can add it to the gate."

"Wow. That doesn't sound like a hard test. It's kinda neat," Maddie said.

"Just swim down towards the bottom of the river. When you see a cave, you're in the right place. Remember that the longer you are in heaven the more you take on the Heavenling mindset. We don't have the same rules here that you have on earth. There's no falling down and getting a scraped knee. There aren't even any mosquito bites here. That means there's no drowning or running out of breath when you are underwater."

"That's fantastic. It'll be like I'm a mermaid," Maddie said.

Light reflected off of Maddie's locket. "Don't worry," Sam said. "The locket that Grandma Jean gave you won't rust in the water."

Maddie looked at the locket as she continued treading water. The dirt she had seen before was gone. It looked shiny and new.

"Golden and I will be waiting for you and your new pearl at the pearly gates." Sam dove under water then swam towards land. "Come on, Golden."

Maddie continued treading water while she watched Sam and Golden. They got out and headed toward the forest. She dove down and decided to see how far away the bottom was. The deeper down she went, the darker it got. She could barely make out the bottom, but she kept swimming towards it.

A blue neon fish with a tail shaped like an ice cream scooper swam by her. It left a short trail of a blue cloud behind. Maddie followed the fish into a large cave. There, countless neon fish of all different colors were swimming around.

Towards the back was the prized pearl. It was sitting inside a giant oyster. The outside top and bottom oyster shells were light gray and spread out like a fan. The pearl looked like it was resting on a green tongue inside the oyster. Fish darted off clearing a path for Maddie as she swam towards the oyster. The closer she got the more she realized how enormous the pearl was. It didn't look twice the size of a basketball. It looked twice the size of her.

As Maddie reached the pearl she realized the cave was getting darker. At first she thought all the neon fish that helped light up the cave had left. She turned around to face the cave entrance. The darkness wasn't caused by

the fish leaving at all. It was caused by the giant oyster closing its shells, locking Maddie inside.

8

She swam as fast as she could to get out, but it was too late. *I'm trapped.* Fear grabbed at Maddie's lungs, causing them to burn. *Oh, no. I'm out of air, too! I don't want to die,* Maddie thought. She thrashed her arms in a panic. The cream colored pearl cast a dim light. She frantically swam around inside of her oyster cage, pounding on each section of the wall. Her lungs burned more and more until she felt like they were on fire.

The words Grandma Jean told her echoed in her mind. Maddie remembered what she'd learned about staying a child forever. She couldn't give in to fear like Grandma Jean's brother Alfred had. Maddie held the locket in her hand and rubbed it with her thumb.

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God. I'm a Heavenling. I'm a Heavenling. She prayed and repeated her phrase over and over. As she did her blazing lungs began to cool down.

The light from the pearl slowly grew brighter. Maddie swam over to it and touched the soft treasure. It reminded her of the soft silky grass in heaven that tickled her feet. *Wait a minute. I think I've figured a way out!* She began tickling the oyster. She tickled the top of the shell and felt the oyster shake like an earthquake. Her tickling hands worked faster. She roamed from top to bottom, back to front, tickling as she went.

Slowly the shells began to part. She continued tickling the oyster until the opening was wide enough for her to slip out with the pearl. The moment she stopped tickling the oyster to get the pearl, the shells began to close again. *I've got to hurry, or else I'll be tickling this oyster for eternity.* Maddie got behind the pearl and pushed it with all of her might. It rolled down the tongue of the oyster and dropped out into the cave. Maddie

hurried and leaped out just before the oyster shells locked together again.

Hurray! I did it. Maddie swam down to the pearl sitting on the bottom of the cave. *Now how am I going to get this pearl out of the water? It's got to be ten feet tall, and I'm definitely not strong enough to push it.* As she thought about her next problem, tons of the neon fish swam towards her. Their spoon tails swayed back and forth, faster than Maddie had ever seen Golden wag his tail. They circled around the pearl and backed their tails under it. Maddie watched amazed as they carried the pearl out of the cave.

She swam as fast as she could, but couldn't keep up with her favorite new fish. Maddie began breathing again after she reached the surface. That definitely beat her best previous record for how long she could hold her breath under water. Maddie stared at the fish as they pushed the pearl up the steps and onto land.

"Thanks a lot," she shouted as she waved to the fish. They dove into the water and swam back to their cave. Maddie got out of the water and began rolling the pearl up the hill with all her strength. The top of the pearl barely cleared the vine covered frame that marked the entrance to the forest. As she neared the exit of the

forest she realized how pushing the pearl was still difficult but getting easier. "I am becoming a Heavenling," she said aloud to herself.

Golden came running in to the forest and jumped up on Maddie. "Hey, boy. Looky what I've got. I bet you wish it was a giant bone instead of a giant pearl." Golden walked next to Maddie. She exited the forest and continued rolling the pearl in Sam's direction. He was waving with one hand and pointing to a hole in the gate with his other.

"That's your spot. You've earned it. Go ahead and roll that pearl right on in," Sam said.

Maddie felt like she had just won first place in a difficult race. The pearl fit perfectly, like a pillow in a pillowcase. *What a treasure I'm holding*, Maddie thought.

9

For the second test Maddie learned she'd have to go back in the Spirit Realm. Her prayer closet would take her to a place where the Anti-Nagah had eaten all of the light.

"Well, at least Golden will be with me for this test," Maddie said. She could see her prayer closet a little ways off.

"I'll be watching from heaven," Sam said. As they neared the closet, Sam pulled something out of his pocket. He handed Maddie a simple white candle.

"How do I pass this test?" Maddie asked. She took the candle and examined it.

"Do you remember your first visit to heaven?" Sam asked Maddie. "When I sent you to the Spirit Realm that time, I told you to ask and listen. That's what you'll need to learn to do to get to the next level of heaven. Just ask and listen. That's all the help I can give you."

Maddie took a deep breath and turned the candle forward and backward. "Alright. Come on Golden. I'm going to the creepy place where the Anti-Nagah ate all the light and you're going with me." Golden followed Maddie into the prayer closet.

"Hopefully I'll pass this test and be back here real soon." Maddie closed the door. "Okay God. Take me to the Spirit Realm." A moment later there wasn't anymore of heaven's light coming in through cracks in the closet. Maddie patted Golden's back, glad to have his company. Maddie opened the door. Complete darkness surrounded them. Maddie held the candle out in front of her, unable to see it. "Oh no. There's no light at all and we don't have any matches!"

10

Maddie closed the door and prayed for God to take her back to heaven. Nothing happened. She prayed again. "God, Sam forgot to give us matches. Please, oh please, take me back to heaven. This isn't fair!" Maddie opened the door and cautiously stepped out of the closet. Golden barked. There was a slight echo.

"I can't believe that, Sam. It wasn't my responsibility to bring matches. He should have known I'd need them. Ughh!" Maddie stomped her feet in protest.

"I don't even know where we are." Maddie crouched down to touch the ground. She felt dirt and hard, crunchy grass. Maddie heard the sound of an animal scurrying in their direction. It raced passed them. "Woof!" Golden barked and shot off into the dark after the unknown creature.

"Golden, no! Don't leave me here alone." Maddie put her hands out in front of herself and tried to walk towards the direction of Golden's barking. She tripped and fell, hitting her knees and the palms of her hands on the ground.

Maddie sat on the cold ground with her knees to her chest. She rocked back and forth. "I don't want to be here," she said. "Golden, you dumb dog. Get back here," Maddie shouted. "It's all your fault anyway. If I hadn't fallen for your pathetic look in my bedroom, I wouldn't be here."

Golden's bark was becoming more and more faint. A single tear dropped from Maddie's left eye. Soon her entire face was littered with wet sadness. "Sam, I thought you were my friend. Why would you do this to me?" The last image she had of Sam played in her mind. He had stood

across from her and had waved goodbye frantically. Always with that big grin on his face. *How could he smile knowing what he was sending me into?* Maddie wiped her tears from her eyes.

Maddie didn't want to do anything but think about how angry she was at Sam. She thought about last time Sam had sent her into the Spirit Realm. He hadn't even cautioned her about Dillon. *What other terrible things could there be here that he didn't warn me of?* She remembered Sam's advice both times had been to ask and listen.

"Well, last time I asked for help, and look where it got me. Stuck here, because Dillon was no help." *Ask and listen* echoed in her mind again. "Alright, so I didn't listen last time. I just asked." Maddie took a deep breath and rubbed her locket. "Grandma Jean said don't give in to anger, so here I am God, not giving in to anger."

Maddie waited a couple of seconds and nothing happened. She could feel the anger start to rise. "No, no no. I can't give in to anger. I'm asking and listening now, God. What do I do?"

Maddie realized the candle had rolled out of her hands when she fell. She reached around and felt it. She held it in her hands as if her life depended on it. She closed

her eyes. It made her feel less powerless. Almost as if not being able to see was her choice, instead of the other way around. *I'll just sit here until God answers me*, she thought.

Instead of thinking about how much she didn't want to be there, Maddie tried to think happy thoughts. She thought of Quinton waving goodbye to her before he rode away on his bike yesterday. She thought about the time she and Leah washed all of Jackson's white underwear with a red sweater. Her little brother had to wear pink underwear for months.

After only a couple of seconds it was brighter. She opened her eyes and saw that her candle was lit. "Yeah!" she shouted. She couldn't see more than three feet in front of her. She looked down and spied the big jagged rock that had tripped her.

She stood up and began slowly walking around. "Golden, where are you? If you don't get back here right now, I'm sending you to the pound." The same scurrying noise she had heard earlier got closer and closer. For a second Maddie saw a squirrel run past her. It was shortly followed by Golden. Maddie ran after her dog. "Stop chasing squirrels you silly dog!" This time Maddie was

able to see a large rock in front of her. She barely had time to jump over it as she ran.

"Woof! Woof!" Maddie caught up to Golden. Golden's front paws were on a tree trunk. "Bad boy. Don't run away from me like that," Maddie said. She swatted her usually faithful sidekick on the head. Golden continued scratching at the tree. The bark of the tree was gray and chipping badly. "It must be dead like the grass." Maddie touched it and a piece of bark came off in her hand.

She held the candle up as high as she could reach. The squirrel was sitting on a nearby branch. It was the thinnest squirrel Maddie had ever seen. The grass, tree, and any food the squirrel would have eaten were dead, killed because it had no light.

The squirrel climbed around the tree to a branch on the other side. Maddie noticed a carving in the tree. *T.J. loves M.N. and there's a heart around it. Why does that seem so familiar?* The squirrel jumped off that tree and onto the branch of a nearby tree. The branch was so thin and frail Maddie was surprised the weight of the squirrel didn't cause it to break.

Golden barked and ran over to the next tree. The squirrel attempted to make a break for it on the ground. Maddie chased Golden, who chased the squirrel up a dirt

path. She ran faster to try and keep up and didn't see the deep puddle ahead. "Splash!" Maddie slipped. Her right foot went up in the air. She landed sitting in the puddle.

Her candle rolled along the ground and stopped at the foot of a wooden sign. Maddie sat in the puddle and pounded her fists into it causing the mud mixed with black tar to splash her in the face. "Ugh. This is gross. I just wanna go home and take a warm shower and forget this day ever happened."

The brown dry grass where the candle fell suddenly caught on fire. Maddie gasped as she read the sign the light of the fire now made readable. *Willow Creek. That's my school.* The words Christian Academy that always followed the name of the school were covered by black tar. Maddie now realized why the initial carvings on the tree seemed so familiar. She had watched her classmate Teresa Hamilton carve them before the beginning of last summer.

The grass began to burn from the candle, and then the fire jumped to the nearby bushes. Maddie scrambled out of the puddle and crab walked back from the fire. She froze in her spot, her back up against a dead tree. She didn't know what was worse. Whether it was the tar she could now see that almost completely covered the building, or the fire that was destroying her school.

The flames climbed up the sign, causing it to catch on fire. Maddie knew that the school would soon catch on fire as well. *Am I too late? God help me. I don't know what to do. I thought I was supposed to save the school.* This time Maddie listened eagerly as the raging fire began to devour the bottom of the school. Golden ran up to Maddie and barked at the flames. "I don't know what to do boy." Maddie hugged Golden and cried into the comforting fur. She didn't want to watch her school become a mountain of ashes.

Golden began licking Maddie's hand. Maddie looked up at her dog. "What is it, boy?" Golden faced the school and continued barking. Maddie's jaw dropped as she watched what the fire was doing. The fire wasn't burning the school. It looked like it was eating away at the black tar.

Maddie stared as the fire rose higher and higher. The bottom half of the building that had been covered by tar now looked clean. It looked like a new coat of paint had just been painted. Golden kept on barking as the fire licked up the last remains of the tar leaving the school intact.

Rays of sunlight began to shine. Dark clouds that had been covering the entire area scattered. Each spot of

brown grass that the sun touched quickly turned to a bright green. Soon the entire area looked normal again, even happier. It was the way Maddie was used to seeing it on earth.

"I've never been so happy to be at school before," Maddie said. She got up and noticed that the tar was gone from her shorts. A cracking sound came from above her. Maddie looked up and saw the thin squirrel. It was opening an acorn that it had plucked off the oak tree. Golden jumped up and began pawing at the tree again. The squirrel carried the acorn in its mouth and darted off. It jumped from limb to limb until it was far out of sight. Golden growled and sat down.

Maddie smiled. "Thank you God for the fire."

She heard a voice inside her head. "Where there is Light, darkness cannot dwell." The voice sounded deep like her dad's but stronger. It sounded light, like her mom's but sweeter. Her heart warmed like when her Grandma Jean used to kiss her on the forehead.

"Come on, Golden. I can't wait to tell Sam about this." Maddie ran down the same dirt path, except this time she could see where she was going. Golden followed along, close behind her.

11

When she opened the prayer closet door, Sam was waiting for her. "Well, how'd it go?" he asked.

"Sam, it was amazing. The candle took a while to light, then it caught the school on fire, and I thought the building was going to burn to the ground. Instead, the fire ate the tar from the Anti-Nagah. You forgot to give me matches by the way," Maddie said with her hands on her hips.

"Oh, did I?" Sam said. He smiled.

"One thing I want to know is how the candle lit up without any matches," Maddie said.

"You were in the dark until you resisted your anger. Once you did that you were able to ask and listen to hear God. Your love that was free from anger caused a fire to light up the candle," Sam said. "Come on. We're headed to Cloud Pond for test three."

"Wait, I thought the fire burned up all the Anti-Nagah's tar. Aren't I done?" Maddie asked.

"That was a demonstration of what could happen in the future in the Spirit Realm. God wanted you to see it to help you when you go back."

"Darn it," Maddie said. "I thought I didn't have to go through any more tests. Oh well. At least now I'll still get to see what the second level of heaven looks like. Let's get me to test number three."

They raced across the field laughing from the ticklish grass. Finally Golden stopped at the top of a hill. "Hold up, Golden. I'm not as fast as you are." Maddie hunched over, placing her hands on her knees while breathing heavily. She was ten feet away from reaching the top of the hill.

Up above them were enormous clouds in the sky. The shapes looked very defined. Maddie and Sam finished walking up the hill. "Wow Sam, from the bottom of the hill I didn't even notice these clouds. They seem almost close enough to touch! There's a dragon shaped cloud. Oh, oh, and there's one in the shape of a princess's crown! It's very lovely." Maddie looked out over the hill and saw another hill that went up even higher across the similar looking grassy field below.

"Come on," Sam said. "That hill over there is high enough to touch the clouds!"

"Woof! Woof!" Golden shot off down the hill, chasing Maddie and Sam. They went up and down, hill after hill, getting closer to the clouds each time. To Maddie's surprise, she didn't get more out of breath, but less.

"There's a cloud shaped water hydrant like firefighters use. Jackson would love that one," Maddie said. They reached the top of the highest hill right as a speedy cloud shaped race car was driving by. Maddie held out her arms and stuck out her tongue as the cloud temporarily surrounded them. "It tastes like cotton candy!" Golden licked the cloud and barked in approval.

After the cloud car passed by, Maddie looked to see what differently shaped cloud would arise. "Hey, Sam, how do the clouds get to be their shape?"

"We're almost to Cloud Pond. You dip your hands in and pull out a small amount of floating gooey dough to make it whatever shape you want. Then you blow on it like when you blow out candles on your birthday cake. It floats off into the air and gets bigger and bigger as it gets higher. Come on. I'll show you."

She and Golden followed Sam to the small pond. After making fun-shaped clouds Sam sat on a nearby bench. "So, Maddie, are you ready for your third test?" Sam stared straight at her as he asked his direct question.

"Yeah, I'm ready." Maddie stood crouched down near the water and began twirling her finger in it. Golden began licking the doughy water in the pond. Choo! The water made him sneeze. A small dog bone shaped cloud formed and began floating in the air. Eventually, it became the size of Golden himself. Golden barked and jumped up in the air, trying to bite at the cloud.

Sam stood up from the bench. "All you need to do to pass this test is to forgive Dillon," Sam said.

12

“What? He’s a weirdo,” Maddie said. “He acted snotty from day one. If I’d tried to make friends with him, he definitely would have been mean to me. Just look at how he tricked me in the Spirit Realm. He is without a doubt not someone who deserves forgiveness. I mean look at all this stuff I have to do because of him.”

Maddie turned and looked at Sam. He just stood there smiling. "Oh, don't be nice to me. It just makes me feel worse," Maddie said annoyed.

"Maddie, let's look at Dillon's life." He sat down at the edge of the pool. Sam closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath.

Maddie sat down next to Sam. Both of their bare feet touched the cool water. Maddie closed her eyes like Sam, unsure of what she was supposed to do. After a couple seconds she got impatient and peeked one eye open. The water in the pool looked like it was swirling. Maddie opened her other eye and touched the water again. It was quickly moving counter clockwise.

Suddenly an image appeared in the center of the pool. It was Dillon. He faced Maddie as he brushed his teeth. Dillon looked right at her. He acted like he was looking into a mirror. Dillon smoothed his hand over his short military school hair cut.

"Wow, this is like having a spy camera in someone's home," Maddie said, then looked at Sam. He still had his eyes closed. Maddie turned back to the image in the pool.

Dillon had finished brushing his teeth. He smiled. "Finally, I'll get to be a normal kid," he mused. The image altered to Dillon walking into the kitchen.

"Alright, a family breakfast," Dillon said. He opened the fridge to get out milk. First, he poured the whole milk into two bowls. One was for his father and the other one was for himself. After he put the whole milk back, he got out the fat free milk. He poured some into a bowl for his mother. His dad walked into the kitchen, grabbed his cell phone off the table, and headed to the garage door.

"Dad, I thought we could all eat breakfast together."

An older looking version of Dillon patted his son on the head and rushed out the door. "Bye, son. Have a nice new first day at school. I won't be home until late." Dillon poured his dad's milk into his own bowl and grabbed the cereal out of the pantry.

A thin brunette wearing a violet business jacket and matching skirt whisked into the kitchen. "No time for breakfast, honey. I have a meeting in thirty minutes. And you don't want to be late for your first day of school." She pulled a fifty dollar bill out of her briefcase.

"Here's some lunch money. You'll probably need to use some of it to order yourself some pizza for dinner, too."

"But, mom, school doesn't start for an hour. I thought you were dropping me off," Dillon reminded her.

"Ms. Redman said she'd be happy to take you. I really must run." She gave Dillon a quick kiss on the cheek.

"But, mom, she smells like old people."

"Be nice, Dillon. Ms. Redman has been lonely since her husband passed away," Dillon's mom said. "Taking you to school will give her a couple of minutes to have a conversation with someone. I really must run." Dillon's mother left him standing there with the fifty dollar bill in his hand and lipstick on his cheek.

"What about me having a parent to talk to!" he shouted. Dillon poured the skim milk down the drain. "So much for family breakfasts. I thought it'd be different once I was home from military school. I see my parents now just as much as I did when I didn't live with them." Dillon sat at the kitchen table and ate his cold cereal, one lonely spoonful at a time.

The image changed to Dillon riding in the car with an elderly lady. "Ms. Redman, you can drop me off a block away from the school. I really don't mind walking."

"Oh, nonsense dear," said the woman with short gray hair. She had a pair of prescription glasses on her head. Another pair that looked exactly like the other glasses was on a necklace she wore. Her car smelled like Munster

cheese and cough drops. "I am happy to have your company, young man."

Dillon looked out the window to avoid Ms. Redman seeing him frown. *At least things will be different with these kids*, he thought. *This is a Christian school. They have to be nice to me.*

Maddie was surprised that she was able to hear Dillon's thoughts. It was like he talked out loud, except that his lips didn't move. Golden pawed in the direction of Dillon. "He can't see you, Golden," Maddie said to her dog.

The image changed. Maddie recognized her school instantly. The walls were painted off white. Green lockers matched the trashcans. The principle walked with Dillon down the hallway until they came to Mr. Marshall's eighth grade classroom.

"Oh, no," Maddie said. "That's the kiss of death. No one wants the principal to introduce them to their new classmates. That's like putting a big target right on your forehead."

Maddie watched as the kids chuckled at Dillon's haircut. They pointed at his expensive book bag and uniform that he wore way too properly. All the other kids had their top button loose, but Dillon's jacket was

buttoned all the way up. His new black dress shoes glowed polished and shiny. All the other kids had on worn shoes.

Maddie continued watching Dillon's first day at school. She could tell how discouraged he became. His shoulders slumped down more and more throughout the day. The smile that she had seen early on was gone. It was replaced at the end of the day by a frown and a black eye. The neat shirt was now torn and no longer tucked in.

"Oh, there's me!" Maddie shouted. "Cool. I'm on camera, too." Maddie watched Dillon get back into Ms. Redman's car. She watched as all of her seventh grade girlfriends laughed at Dillon. Maddie felt heat creep into her cheeks. She watched herself laugh along with the insults her friends delivered. The water began to swirl again and the image disappeared.

Maddie stood up and faced away from Sam. She put her hands on her hips. "Well, it's not like I said anything mean about him. Besides, what has he done to show he deserves to be forgiven?"

"So, in your opinion forgiveness is something that needs to be earned?" Sam offered.

"Yeah, I guess. I mean it's not like he's even apologizing. He poured my Twinkle Dust down the drain! He's so not sorry. Why would I forgive him?"

Sam bent down and touched the water in the Cloud Pond again. After the water twirled, the image that appeared wasn't of Dillon again. It was of Maddie.

13

The first scene was of Maddie explaining her original visit in heaven and the Spirit Realm to Golden. This time, though, Maddie watched the previous events happen through Golden's eyes. Maddie bit her lip while she watched her past self stick out her tongue at Golden. Her faithful Labrador hadn't run away. Instead, he had gone humbly to Maddie to give Maddie comfort. Golden even journeyed with her to heaven.

The next scene was of Maddie and Golden in the Spirit Realm. Maddie listened as her past self called Golden dumb and blamed everything on him. She'd forgotten that she threatened to put Golden in the pound if her dog didn't come back. Maddie cringed as she saw her past self hit Golden through Golden's eyes. Her poor dog had only chased squirrels. He'd never gotten into trouble for it before. Not once did Maddie ever hear herself apologize to Golden. Not once.

The image dissolved. "I wasn't serious about putting him in the pound," Maddie said in self-defense. "I would never do that. I love him. He's the best dog I could ever have." Maddie wrapped her arms around Golden and cried into his fur. "I'm so sorry, boy. I didn't mean to be a big ninny. Please forgive me."

Golden barked and licked Maddie on the mouth. This time Maddie didn't cringe. "I won't swat you again. I promise."

"Maddie, Golden was kind to you, and look how you treated him. Just imagine how Dillon feels the way the kids at your school treated him," Sam said.

"But I didn't do any of those mean things to him," Maddie said.

"Did you stick up for him when your friends teased him? How about ever talking to him in the hallway? I'm sure he would have appreciated it."

"I guess." Maddie looked into Golden's eyes. "But I'm not as rotten as those bullies at school are," Maddie said. She remembered how she stuck her tongue out at him when she saw him outside of her house.

"Everybody added to Dillon's anger. If there had been one kind word, or even a smile, for Dillon that day, he wouldn't have been so angry."

Maddie thought about how Grandma Jean never saw her brother Alfred after Alfred stopped loving. Maddie didn't want to be self-centered and lose her loved ones. Golden barked at Maddie. "Alright, boy. I get it. I forgive Dillon for hating the school and releasing the Anti-Nagah. Heck, I probably wouldn't have done any better if I'd been in his shoes."

Sam bent down and pointed to the water. "Maddie, take a look."

"I don't think I can handle any more of these images in Cloud Pond. They're too much."

"Trust me. You'll love this one."

Maddie glanced into the water and saw her reflection. "I'm glowing like the Twinkle Dust!" She held her hands out in front of herself. "Alright!"

"Maddie, you're ready to go to the next level of heaven. Let's get you your Twinkle Dust."

Maddie and Sam held hands as they jumped into Cloud Pond. Golden jumped in after them. To Maddie's surprise, her feet didn't hit the bottom of the shallow pond. Instead, it was like she had jumped from a treehouse onto the ground. She landed on grass and wasn't even wet.

"That was awesome. Is that how you get to the second level of heaven?" Maddie said. She looked around and she was standing near the bottom of a hill. Next to the hill was the largest volcano she'd ever seen. She could hear what sounded like canon blasts explode above.

Color burst in the air, like the rainbow of a fireworks display. Out of the hole in the center of the volcano more bursts of color rose higher and higher. There was a red explosion, then pink, then another full rainbow, with another one coming out of the top, blasting in the air.

The ground level opening to the volcano was as wide and tall as a school bus. Music came from inside. Maddie approached the entrance and stopped to peek in. Golden

came barreling down the hill full speed and smacked right into Maddie.

They tumbled into a room the size of a football stadium. Golden licked Maddie on the cheeks. Maddie stopped herself from swatting Golden and patted him instead. Maddie looked around and saw a group of people for the first time in heaven. Her jaw dropped as she stared at one person after another. Every one of them glowed all over as if they were covered in Twinkle Dust, but much brighter than Maddie.

Each person danced, sang, or played a musical instrument. Maddie recognized the base guitar that a young man was playing. The woman next to him had an instrument Maddie had never seen before. It looked like a combination of a flute and washboard with guitar strings. The woman blew into the flute and played the flute notes with her right hand. Her left hand plucked the strings of the washboard that hung down from the flute.

Everyone seemed to be playing or singing his or her own tune, but it all flowed together in perfect harmony. The music sounded like what she had always imagined angels singing would sound like. She sat there for a couple seconds drinking in the delicious harmony.

Maddie watched a tan skinned woman twirl. She was wearing a deep purple sash with gold trim and a matching gold headpiece. Maddie recognized the pirouettes from her ballet classes. The tan skinned woman didn't seem to notice anyone around her as she moved gracefully.

Maddie reached her hand up to touch a blue wave of light. It was coming from a white bearded man near her. As he lifted both hands up in the air saying, "Holy, holy, holy," peace coursed through Maddie. Her gaze followed the blue wave of light as it wafted up in the air. The light was joined by many other blue lights before it reached the top. "Whoosh!" The blue shot out through the hole in the roof and exploded in the air above.

Sam played on a drum half his height. The drum looked like a short but fat wooden wine glass. It was black with white tribal carvings on it.

"What kind of drum is that?" Maddie asked.

"Why this is an African Djembay drum. It's my favorite instrument." Sam played it for Maddie and Golden. With the last hard bang of the drum, yellow light raced out through Sam. It shot through Maddie then up into the sky. Maddie felt a deep sense of care when the yellow light touched her. She realized at the same moment Sam's concern about her.

Sam smiled. He took off his Djembay and held it out to Maddie. "Do you want to try it?"

"Sure" Maddie said. She strapped the drum on and began to tap on it lightly. "I sound off key or something. How come my beat isn't in tune with everyone else's?"

"You've only been a Heavenling a little while. You'll get the rhythm."

Maddie listened carefully. She tapped a little harder trying to match the beat of a nearby drummer. "Everyone here is glowing like the Twinkle Dust."

"Remember, the longer you're in heaven, the more you will have the traits of a Heavenling. Traits like love, fearlessness, forgiveness, and selflessness. And the more tests you pass, the brighter you'll glow. It starts like a fire in your heart. It burns so strongly that it can't be contained inside. So it seeps out of the pours like sweat. Only it's not so stinky."

"It's not stinky at all. It's beautiful."

"All the people you see dancing and glowing have passed many tests. They are able to travel to the highest levels of heaven that a living person can reach. Each test they passed strengthened their glow. All of these people here have been visiting heaven for a long time. Many of

them started when they were your age like your Grandma Jean."

"Wow, she visited heaven when she was my age? I could stay here dancing forever," Maddie said.

"You may now come here to the second level of heaven since you've passed your tests. It's a great way to get refreshed when you're sad or worn out."

"I don't see any Twinkle Dust. Where is it?" Maddie took off her drum and laid it against the wall then followed Sam outside. They watched an explosion of orange burst in the air.

"Keep a close eye on it," Sam said.

Maddie watched as pieces of the explosion began to drop to the ground like a falling star. "There's one," she shouted. Maddie ran to the orange star shaped object. It glowed, but wasn't hot like Maddie expected it to be. It felt like stone and was as small as a ping pong ball. Orange specks of dust came off it.

"The Twinkle Dust comes in the form of small stars. They easily disintegrate, leaving the glowing dust everywhere to give light. The water from the Colored Mud Caves mixed with the Twinkle Dust.

Maddie and Sam ran around, gathering stars of all different colors. Sam got a sack from inside the volcano

to put them in. While Maddie waited for Sam, she threw one of the stars towards Golden. Golden jumped in the air and caught it with his teeth. They glowed like they were spray painted with glow-in-the dark paint.

"Here's the best part," Sam said. Follow me. They climbed up a large hill. Maddie saw a river at the bottom. They jumped into the river and drifted along. Golden paddled and held onto the bag of stars with his glowing teeth.

Maddie heard a huge rush of what sounded like rapids.

"This river joins into the Land of Seven Waterfalls. It's actually the only one that can take you from the second level of heaven to the first, so it's got the highest waterfall," Sam said.

"Waterfall. . . . Are we going to go down a waterfall? That'll be like riding on a slide at a water park but way better."

"Geronimo," Maddie and Sam yelled together as they went over the waterfall. They plunged into the river below, the same one where Maddie retrieved her pearl.

Golden paddled over to the steps and climbed up onto the ground. Then Sam and Maddie lugged the big bag of stars onto the land. They carried it with them back to the prayer closet.

As they neared the closet, Sam said, "Maddie, it's time for you to complete your purpose of bringing heaven to earth. Now that you have begun growing into a Heavenling, you must take what you've learned and use it from here on. But you will have to do the rest without me."

"It's going to take me forever to clean up all the tar by myself. Do you have a gigantic canteen or something for me to mix the Twinkle Dust in," Maddie asked. "And can I take Golden with me to the Spirit Realm again?"

"Sure, you can take whoever you want," Sam said.

"What! Whoever I want? I want Quinton and Leah. Can they help me fight the Anti-Nagah?"

"Ultimately it will be up to you to defeat the monster, but they can help," Sam said. "As long as they are with you, they will be able to travel to heaven and the Spirit Realm."

Sam paused. "Maddie, it's time to let go of who you are, too, so you can become the person God created you to be."

Maddie's heart began to warm and tingle. "I'm ready." Maddie said confidently as she puffed her chest out. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "I think," she added sheepishly. "Well, I'm willing to try again at least."

Maddie and Golden got into the prayer closet in order to travel back to their home. This time Maddie decided she wouldn't leave the Spirit Realm without using the Twinkle Dust to completely defeat the Anti-Nagah. She still wasn't sure, though, about how to defeat Dillon.

14

This time she didn't doubt that when she opened the closet door, she'd be someplace else. Maddie had never been so excited to be in her house again. "You stay here, Golden," Maddie said. She wrapped her arms around her dog. "Thanks, boy." She quickly slid into her flip flops near the front door and darted outside, closing her dog inside the house.

Maddie passed her family's familiar mailbox at the end of the driveway. It had a covering on it with a picture of yellow Labrador Retrievers like Golden. She ran down the street towards Quinton and Leah's house. As she approached their front yard she stopped. She felt a chill as the wind whipped by her.

She observed the *Willow Creek Christian Academy* across the four lane street and shivered. She shivered more from the image of the darkness that she had just seen that covered her school in the Spirit Realm than the wind. *Odd how normal it looks now*, she thought.

Maddie heard the bounce of the trampoline in the backyard. It was shortly followed along with a couple of laughs and a squeal that must have come from Leah. The sounds brought Maddie's mind back to the present. She quickly walked up the grassy lawn that wasn't beginning to turn brown like hers.

She then remembered the numerous times Mrs. Cronin wagged her finger at Maddie through the kitchen window. She didn't want Quinton and Leah's mother commenting again about the need for "the children" to take the sidewalk. Their mother didn't want the patches of delicate flowerbeds to be trampled on accidentally.

I hate it when she calls us children, Maddie thought. *Leah and I are twelve, and Quinton is thirteen.* She jumped onto the driveway. Her paced quickened as she hurried to the stone walkway on the left of the two-story brick house that led to the backyard.

"Wahoo," Leah shouted as she jumped up and down on the trampoline.

"Hey, Maddie. Wanna jump on the trampoline?" Quinton asked. He then did a front flip on the trampoline.

"Come on, guys. There's no time. You've got to help me," Maddie said, waving at them to get them off the trampoline.

Leah jumped down and slid into her favorite black flip flops that matched Maddie's. She hurried over to her best friend. "What's wrong? Isn't everything alright?"

Quinton sat on the edge of the trampoline that was in the center of the backyard. He dangled his legs over the side. He raked his hand through his short black hair.

"No, no, no," Maddie exclaimed shaking her head. "We've got to hurry. The darkness will take over soon."

Quinton hopped down and picked up his white socks and the sneakers he wore for track team. He walked over to the picnic table bench near the screen door to the house and sat down to put on his socks. "Maddie, there's plenty of

time left before it starts getting really dark earlier in the day. It's only September. And, besides, it's almost lunch time yet. We've got the entire day before the sun quits."

"Oh, that's not what I mean. Never mind, just come on. I can explain later." Maddie didn't wait for them to answer. Instead, she turned and headed back towards the backyard gate.

"I'll tell mom we're going over to Maddie's and catch up with you two down the street," Quinton said as he finished lacing up his second shoe.

Leah followed Maddie down along the sidewalk and the driveway to the street. They began to jog towards Maddie's house. "Hold on," Leah said after a couple of seconds. "I can't run in these flip flops." She bent over and took them off then ran past Maddie. "Race you to your house," Leah shouted. Maddie took off her flip flops, too.

They turned left at the stop sign then a quick right four houses later on to Kings Drive. All of the houses on the street had similar Colonial designs, and were mostly made out of red brick.

Quinton caught up to them a few houses before they reached Maddie's at the end of the cul-de-sac. "Here's your jacket, Leah," he said as they all slowed to a brisk

walk. "I know you'd complain of freezing if you lived on the sun."

Oh, how sweet, Maddie thought and smiled at Quinton. She began to imagine Quinton offering her his jacket on a cold moonlit night.

"So what are we doing?" Quinton asked.

"What?" Maddie responded. She wondered if Quinton had caught her staring at him and began to blush. "Oh, right," she said walking up the driveway to her house with a lawn that wasn't half as manicured as Mrs. Cronin's. "We've got to go get into that closet."

Leah stopped and put her hands on her hips. "The closet? Are you trying to trick us into helping you with your family's fall house cleaning? I'm not sweeping a smelly closet that could be full of cobwebs."

"Which one?" Quinton interrupted ignoring his sister. He continued to follow Maddie into the house through the open garage door. Leah hurried along after them.

"Um, well, last time I used the hall closet downstairs. Let's try that one again," Maddie said. She stopped when she saw her mother wearing reading glasses, sitting on the living room couch. The crossword puzzle was in her hands. "Rats. Can't use that closet," she

whispered to herself more than to Quinton or Leah. "Hey, mom. We're gonna hang out upstairs."

"Sure honey," Maddie's mom responded looking up. "Hi Quinton. Hi, Leah," she said then returned to her puzzle. Golden had returned to her favorite spot, sleeping on her pillow on the living room floor. Maddie figured Golden had enough excitement for one day.

The trio headed up the flight of tan carpeted stairs. "We can't use my closet," Maddie said after she reached the top. "I'm afraid to open the door. It's full of junk. It'd probably all fall out on us. We'll have to try Jackson's closet." Quinton and Leah followed Maddie to the end of the hallway.

Jackson's bedroom door on the right side of the hallway was open. Maddie could see that Jackson and Nick had their super soakers filled up with colored water.

"What are you guys doing with that?" Quinton asked.

"Mom won't let me have paintball guns. Nick and I figured we'd have to use what we could find in the house," Jackson said. "Mom said I could have one for my tenth birthday. Four years. That's like four lifetimes away."

"Yeah, my ma won't let me have one yet neither," Nick added pushing back up his glasses that slid down as he talked.

Maddie walked over to Jackson's closet and opened the door. "I'm glad you are as neat and tidy as Quinton and Leah's mom," Maddie said. The closet had one brown box on the top shelf and three brown ones stacked inside. Maddie began to lift the top box of the three on the floor out of his closet and placed it on Jackson's carpeted bedroom floor.

"What are you doing that for?" Jackson asked pointing his water gun full of red water at Maddie. He pretended that he'd shoot her.

"We need to borrow your closet," Quinton said as he pulled out the second box.

"Don't ask me why. I have no idea." Leah said as she got out the last box that was lying on the floor.

Maddie looked into the closet that was now empty. After being satisfied with the large amount of space in the closet, she turned back and looked at the four confused faces. They were standing in Jackson's bedroom with wall-to-wall firemen and fire truck posters.

Maddie figured she couldn't wait any longer to tell them. "Okay, I know you aren't going to believe me, but this morning I met someone named Sam." Maddie didn't want Quinton to get the wrong idea so she hurried along. "The thing is" She hesitated and looked at her feet,

then hurriedly blurted out, "I had a dream and was told to get in the closet, and I ended up in heaven. Oh, yeah, and my Grandma Jean told me that heaven was waiting for me and that she went there too. So Sam showed me my school that's across the street from your house, and the light in the school was being eaten up by darkness. If we don't stop the Anti-Nagah, your house is next!" She looked up at them.

"Cool. Let's go," Nick said.

Maddie let out a deep breath she didn't know she was holding. At least one person believed her.

"Well, I'll give it a chance," Quinton said.

"Great," Maddie replied. "Jackson and Nick, you guys should stay here. It could be dangerous. But let me borrow all the squirt guns you've got. I can use them for the Twinkle Dust.

"No way," Jackson and Nick shouted in unison.

"If you're gonna have an adventure, and you're using my closet and my water guns, Nick and I are comin'," Jackson said. He grasped his medium-sized water gun tightly to his chest.

"Alright, but only if we can all fit in the closet," Maddie said. She got in first, followed by Quinton. He had to lower his head a bit so he didn't bump the shelf.

Nick and Jackson pushed in. "Come on," Maddie said to Leah.

"You guys remind me of when I was Jackson's age. I tried to cram all of my Barbies in the elevator of my Barbie mansion," Leah said. "Not to be an ant at your picnic, but you guys look crazy."

Maddie bit her lower lip. She could feel her anger rising again.

Leah sighed. "Oh, alright," she said, and then got in.

"I think you have to close the door," Maddie said to Leah.

Leah proceeded to shut the brown door, which filled the cramped space with darkness. Maddie could smell Quinton's cologne. She inhaled a deep breath of the musky scent then coughed accidentally.

"Quinton, you put on way too much of daddy's aftershave," Leah said and giggled. "So what now?"

Maddie said, "I guess it's been long enough and we're squished. Your Barbies were lucky they didn't need to breathe. Go ahead and open the door."

The door swung open and Leah laughed. "Well, I never thought heaven would look like Jackson's bedroom." Everyone other than Maddie laughed, too.

"Shoot," Maddie said. The prayer closet usually works. What went wrong this time?"

Quinton asked, "Did you call it a prayer closet? Then why don't we pray."

"Oh, yeah," Maddie said. "After I close the door in the closet, I pray." Maddie was too embarrassed to tell them how long before this morning it had been since she last prayed alone. She was also too embarrassed to tell them that her prayer was asking God to help her with her anger among other things.

"Well, here goes round two," Leah said as she shut the door. "Who's going to do the honors?"

Quinton cleared his throat. "God, please take us to heaven."

Leah giggled. "That was formal. It's creepy in here. Can we stop playing this game now and go back to jumping on the trampoline?"

Maddie could feel her face burn red like Jackson had just shot her with his water gun full of red water. *At least Quinton can't see how embarrassed I am in the dark,* she thought.

Leah opened the door. Before she could take a step out, the light blinded them all. Leah squinted her eyes as she tried to let them adjust to the brightness. "I guess I

owe you an apology. You weren't playing a game with us after all," Leah said.

One by one they stepped out of the closet and into heaven.

15

"Everybody, this is Sam. He's the one I told you about who showed me around heaven." Quinton, Jackson, and Nick didn't seem to notice Sam. They got out of the closet, and began walking around looking dumbfounded.

Leah went right up to Sam. "Hi, Sam. My name's Leah. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance." She held out her hand.

Sam shook it and flashed her his toothy grin. The boys finally noticed Sam. They all introduced themselves. Afterwards Sam showed the group the bag of Twinkle Dust stars.

"Ooh, Sam. Guess what I brought," Maddie said. "Water guns for each of us. We can fill the guns, drop in a Twinkle Dust star, and we'll finish off that tar in no time. We can use the water in the school water fountains and sinks."

"Great idea," Sam said.

"But wait," said Jackson. "We just got to heaven. Heaven! Can't we explore just a little while?"

"You can explore all you want *after* we defeat the Anti-Nagah," Maddie said. "I can even show you around myself."

"I don't know about this," Leah said. "Black tar and an Anti-Nagah. Sounds creepy to me."

"Don't be such a baby," Nick said. "I'm half your age, and I'm ready for the adventure."

"All I'm saying is maybe we should think about this a little more before we go trying to save the school. The Anti-Nagah is probably way stronger than we are," Leah said.

"Leah, it's time to be who you are," Maddie said, trying to give Leah the encouraging words Sam shared with her, but messing them up.

"What?" Leah said.

"What I mean is it's time to be someone other than yourself. No that's not right either," Maddie said.

"Leah," Jackson said, "Don't worry. I won't leave you to the Anti-Nagah. Nick and I will protect you."

"Yeah!" Nick shouted. The two boys held their water guns up in the air.

"Well, I'd better go just to make sure all of you don't end up hurting yourselves," Leah said.

They all piled back into the prayer closet. "I'd ask you to wish us luck," Maddie said to Sam, "but I know what you'd say instead."

"May God's wisdom and presence be with all of you always," Sam said. Maddie closed the door. This time she didn't forget to pray and ask God to take them to the Spirit Realm.

16

Unlike visiting heaven, Quinton, Leah, Jackson and Nick were a little less fearless when it came to exploring the Spirit Realm. "Ewwee. I thought you said we were going to your school," Leah commented. "This place smells like the trash dump."

"Hey, look," Quinton said. "There's our house across the street. Neat." Quinton then turned his attention

toward the school. Black tar was oozing out of the windows.

"Oh, yeah," Maddie said as she remembered about Dillon. "I almost forgot to warn you about the newbie Dillon. He is the one who released the Anti-Nagah onto my school."

"Why'd he go and do that?" Jackson asked.

"Well, some of my classmates weren't too nice to him," Maddie said. She took a deep breath. "Oh, I wasn't either." She looked down at her feet as she continued. "So he cursed the school. That's what gave the Anti-Nagah permission to come here and begin spitting out the black tar. It eats up all the light and joy and goodness. Basically, it makes people angry and a whole lot of other nasty things. And it's only going to get worse. Last time I came here by myself. I foolishly gave Dillon my Twinkle Dust. He poured it down the drain. So don't fall for his tricks, any of you." Maddie looked around.

"Let's fill up our water guns at the water fountain by the playground," Maddie said. They all walked slowly towards the monkey bars. After all the water guns were full, Maddie gave one Twinkle Dust star to everybody out of her sack. As soon as the Twinkle Dust stars began to mix with the water, the water started to glow.

"Cool," Leah said.

"That rocks," Jackson said.

"Here, put some more Twinkle Dust stars in your pockets," Maddie said. "I'll hide the bag behind these bushes so I don't have to carry it around. When you run out of water mixed with the Twinkle Dust, fill up your water gun with more water. Use the ones from your pockets before getting any more out of the bag."

Armed with their glowing water guns, they entered the school through the side door. The school was shaped like a wide capital letter U. The door they entered near the playground led them into the long hallway of classes. These classes were at the end of the right side of the U shape. Classrooms filled the hallways going down the U. At the bottom of the U there were restrooms. The girls' restroom was on the right side, the side they started on. The boys' restrooms were on the left side.

Not a sound was heard. No pencils being sharpened, or children running down the halls. No papers being shuffled, or even the swoosh of the janitor's mop. The only sound was of the clock tick tocking away. There hadn't been any tar on the playground. There was a little in some of the classrooms where they started.

"We should break up into teams," Leah suggested.

Maddie wanted Quinton to go with her. She didn't say anything, though, because she didn't want him to know she liked him.

"Maddie, let's work on Room 112 together," Leah said. "All three of the boys can start on Room 113 across the hall."

"Make sure to leave the doors open so we can yell to each other if we need to," Quinton said.

"What about Dillon?" Nick asked.

"He probably wouldn't get violent. I don't think we should worry too much about him," Maddie said. "Just don't give him any of your Twinkle Dust."

Maddie and Leah entered the classroom. It contained crayon drawings of houses, children, and dogs on white paper taped to the walls. "This looks like a little kid's room," Leah said. The only black tar they found was under the teacher's desk. Maddie shot it with her water gun. In only a couple of seconds the tar was gone.

"That's awesome," Leah said. "Let me shoot the next one."

They walked out of the room. Before going into Room 110 they looked in on the boys. Leah saw Nick and Jackson shoot a large puddle of tar at the same time. They gave each other high fives. Maddie watched Quinton. He

examined each desk and looked into any place where the tar could be hiding.

"Good job, guys," Leah said. "We're heading into the next room."

"We should be ready for another one shortly," Quinton said. "I just have to open all of the drawers in the teacher's desk to check for tar. I could never get to do this on earth without getting in trouble."

Maddie and Leah went into one classroom after another. Eventually, they entered into a classroom with pencil drawn pictures on the walls. "These kids must be a little older," Leah said. "Their drawings are better."

"I think this is Mr. Blount's fourth grade class," Maddie said. She looked around the room and saw a green apple and a red apple sitting on the teacher's desk. "Yep. Mr. Blount's class. He leaves those plastic apples on his desk all year long. I've heard that at the end of the year, he gives the kid with the best attendance the red apple. The green one goes to the kid with the best spelling."

"Not much motivation if you ask me," Leah said. She picked up the green apple to examine it. "Gross." Leah dropped the apple. Black tar was on her fingers.

"I'll save you," Jackson shouted standing in the doorway.

Maddie remembered how angry she became when she accidentally touched the tar. She hoped Leah wouldn't be too mean to her little brother. Jackson squirted his water gun in Leah's direction. Pretty soon she was soaked with the Twinkle Dust.

Leah turned and faced Jackson. She continued shooting him with her water gun until she ran out. They were both soaked but smiling.

"Uh-oh," Jackson said. "I just used the last of my Twinkle Dust rescuing Leah."

"That's ok," Maddie said. "There's a restroom nearby. Just follow the hallway around a turn until you see the sign. Go fill up your water gun there."

Jackson shot off in the direction of the bathroom. "Maybe we should get you some paper towels from the girls' bathroom to help soak up your hair," Maddie said.

"Good idea. I need a fill up for my water gun too."

Maddie looked at her gun. She was also out of Twinkle Dust. "We'd both better fill up." Out of the corner of her eye, Maddie thought she saw a couple of black balls of tar being thrown down the hall. *Oh, no,* she thought.

Dillon's throwing the black tar at us and we're completely out of Twinkle Dust!

17

Maddie froze. She was afraid to face Dillon again. Leah began walking towards the door. "Wait," Maddie whispered. "Didn't you see that?"

"Did you say something?" Leah responded. She stopped at the door and faced Maddie. Another black ball of tar went flying through the air in the hallway. Leah caught a glimpse of it. Both girls quickly pressed themselves up

against the walls next to the door. Each one peered around their side of the door.

The girls saw Nick throwing what looked like large black balls of yarn in Jackson's direction. Jackson jumped and ducked to avoid them. He grabbed one of them and threw it back at Nick.

"What are you doing?" Maddie said.

The boys dropped their balls. "I found these balls in the teacher's lounge," Nick said. "We were just having fun playing a little dodge ball."

"You certainly scared them," Quinton said. He laughed as he walked out of one of the classrooms.

Maddie got angrier than she'd ever been since she first visited heaven. "We weren't scared. Come on, Leah." The girls stormed out of their room and headed towards the girls' restroom. Leah dried her hair with brown paper towels. After they'd finished filling up their water guns, they met up with the boys. They were all in the left side of the U part of the school with the second long hallway of classrooms.

"Let's have a contest," Jackson said. "Girls against boys. We'll see who can shoot the most black tar."

"What does the winner get?" Nick asked.

Jackson rested his chin on his knuckles. "The winner could get . . ."

Leah interrupted. "The winner could get out of this place. Come on. Let's just get back to work so I can go home."

"You're just afraid that we'd beat you," Jackson said. "Girls are always such sore losers." He shoved the hand that wasn't holding the water gun in his pocket and sulked off. Nick ran after him, followed by a slower paced Quinton.

"Come on, Maddie," Leah said. "Let's start in this classroom. It looks like they teach Spanish in here. There's a piñata and two huge sombrero hats."

Maddie followed Leah into the room where Maddie spent three hours a week practicing Spanish. "Si, mi amiga."

They all worked their way up the long hallway. Slowly the black tar was becoming less and less visible as they shot it with their Twinkle Dust. The cafeteria sat in the center of the U shaped school. It had doors to it on each side of the school. The doors leading into the hallway, where they first started cleaning the tar, had chain locks. The doors on the other side of the school leading to the cafeteria didn't.

Black tar seeped out of the closed double doored cafeteria entrance on all sides. "Alright everybody," Maddie said. "Lets fill up at this water fountain before tackling the cafeteria." Each filled water guns to the top. Maddie used the last of all of the Twinkle Dust stars. *I hope we have enough to get rid of the rest of the tar,* Maddie thought. *Maybe Dillon left. I hope he took the Anti-Nagah with him and that this tar is all that's left. I don't even know what the Anti-Nagah looks like. I wonder if I'd be able to tell what it is.*

Jackson and Nick hosed down the doorway, clearing off all the tar. Quinton pulled open the heavy cafeteria door. Not one of them was ready for what they saw inside. The cafeteria was almost completely covered by black tar. It dripped from the ceiling. It dribbled into the vents. It even covered the entire floor. There was not one white floor tile that wasn't covered by the tar.

Maddie first glanced at the tar on the floor. *It can't get worse than this,* she thought. She gasped when she walked through the door. In the far right corner of the cafeteria against the wall she saw a terrible sight. Maddie was now sure that she knew what the Anti-Nagah was. She thought to herself, *It just got worse, much worse.*

18

In the far right corner of the cafeteria was a giant black ball of tar, touching from floor to ceiling. It had holes and looked like a circular bird's nest. Tar spit out in all directions. The worst sight of all was Dillon standing in the center of it. Maddie had never been so

afraid in her life. She remembered Dillon laughing when he poured her Twinkle Dust down the drain.

"So you've come back," Dillon shouted. "And I see you've brought help. Well, you shouldn't have. It's too late." Tar shot out from the top of the ball and landed on all of them.

Leah dropped her water gun on the ground and ran into a janitor's closet in the cafeteria. She shut herself in. Jackson and Nick started wrestling each other. "It's your fault I fell out of that tree," Jackson said. "If you hadn't squirted the tree with the hose, I wouldn't have gotten hurt."

They rolled around, getting more and more tar on themselves and each other. "I'm not the one who wanted to play fireman anyways," Nick said. He grabbed Jackson's shirt.

Maddie froze. *What was Sam thinking sending all of us here, she wondered. He probably could have done this without me at all.* Her anger started focusing on Sam instead of the Anti-Nagah.

Quinton aimed his water gun at the round bird's nest of evil. "Take this!" he shouted. The Twinkle Dust hit the black ball of tar directly in the center. Some of the tar started vanishing.

"You did it. It's working," Maddie shouted. She stood next to Quinton, and they both shot at the Anti-Nagah until they got close to running out of all of the Twinkle Dust.

It looked like they were winning. The last of the Twinkle Dust was used. A large hole opened up in the black ball. Dillon didn't move from his position. Maddie could see his lips moving, mumbling something. Suddenly what looked like a large black hand came from the back of the ball and smashed into the hole. Tar re-recovered the hole.

Jackson and Nick were still wrestling. They rolled into Quinton, knocking him on the floor. "You two need to grow up," Quinton said. He began trying to tear the two boys apart. They stopped fighting with each other and began fighting with Quinton.

Maddie collapsed on the ground. "Oh, God, please help us," she prayed. "I'm afraid, but I'm asking and I'm listening." Images flooded her mind. She saw Dillon eating his cereal alone at his house. She saw herself and her friends laughing as he got into Ms. Redman's car with a black eye. She saw the woman with the gold headpiece dancing in the volcano.

Then Nick accidentally got shoved into Maddie. She stumbled and her locket fell to the ground. For the first

time, it came open. Maddie crouched down and picked it up to look inside of it. There was a yellow faded piece of paper inside. Maddie unfolded the tiny paper and read the words written on it. *The greatest of these is love, 1 Corinthians 13:13.*

Maddie put the paper back in the locket, closed it, and placed it around her neck. She stood up, now knowing what she had to do. *Thank you Grandma Jean,* she thought. She went to the Anti-Nagah. As much as it repulsed her she got closer. She headed toward Dillon. As much as she was afraid of the anger in his eyes, she got closer. Maddie moved so close that she was able to touch the outside of the Anti-Nagah.

The anger was rising up inside of her. *No, I can't give in,* she thought. Maddie pushed against the wall of the Anti-Nagah. It felt like seaweed. Maddie stood in front of the ball facing Dillon. She was only an arm's length away from him.

"Dillon, I forgive you for releasing the Anti-Nagah on our school. Please stop." Maddie clasped her hands together and shook them back and forth. He just stared at her with his cold, black eyes.

"Forgive me? I didn't ask for your forgiveness, and I don't want it." The tar spewed out in increasing amounts.

"Dillon, I know the other students were mean to you. But that doesn't mean you have to do this."

"They deserve it," he said. His eyes bore into Maddie. "So do you!"

Maddie didn't know what to do. "God," she prayed in her mind, "what now?"

In her mind she heard that same voice repeat the phrase she heard last time she went to the Spirit Realm. It said again, "Where there is light, darkness cannot dwell."

"But I don't have any more Twinkle Dust," Maddie prayed. "I don't have any more Light."

The voice shouted, "You've let go of who you were, Maddie. Become who you were meant to be. You are called to be the light."

Maddie remembered the bloom-me-not flowers and how they opened up only when they were touched by love.

"Dillon," she began, her voice shaky. She took a deep breath, the foul smell of tar filling her nostrils.

"Dillon," she began again. "I told you I forgive you for releasing the Anti-Nagah. It's not you that I need to forgive. It's you that should be forgiving me."

Maddie saw the coldness in Dillon's eyes begin to thaw slightly. She continued, "I didn't stick up for you when

my friends made fun of you. It was me who looked the other way when I saw you walking down the hall. I smart mouthed you outside of my house. I could have helped or tried to be your friend, but I didn't."

The tar from the Anti-Nagah began attacking Maddie. It worked its way up her legs, up her waist, up her neck. She was almost covered in tar. "Dillon, I'm sorry." Maddie managed to get the words out before the tar covered her mouth and head. She collapsed under the weight of all the evil. Maddie soon felt herself falling into a deep sleep, a terrible sleep filled with nightmares and scenes of hatred.

Dillon's cloudy eyes began to clear up. He shook his head and looked down at Maddie. A single tear fell from his eye and landed on Maddie's shoulder. "I forgive you," he said, then collapsed next to Maddie.

Maddie sensed her strength return to her. She felt like she was floating on a cloud. A strong feeling of joy welled up inside her. It grew and grew until it burst. White light exploded out of Maddie's heart. Instantly the ball of tar exploded. The white light leapt onto all the black tar, like a lion pouncing on its prey. In a matter of seconds all of the tar was gone.

All three boys ceased wrestling. Jackson and Nick sat there dazed. Quinton stood up and ran over to Maddie. He crouched down next to her, hugged her, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Way to go Maddie!" he shouted as they stood up. Maddie blushed.

"Is it safe to come out?" Leah yelled. She slowly cracked the door open. When she saw that all of the tar was gone, she ran out of the room. Nick, Jackson, and Leah all gave Maddie hugs and high fives.

Maddie went over to Dillon. "Dillon, will you be my friend?"

"Will you be a friend to all of us too?" Quinton said.

"Sure, guys. I need you," Dillon answered. Quinton reached over, patted Dillon on the shoulder, and helped his new friend up. Dillon smiled for the first time since the day he started his new school.

19

After their defeat of the Anti-Nagah, everyone—including Dillon—crammed into Maddie's prayer closet to go to heaven. Dillon was introduced to Sam.

"I have a question," Maddie said to Sam. "How was Dillon able to travel to the Spirit Realm and release the Anti-Nagah in the first place? I thought you can only go to the Spirit Realm or to heaven if were a Steele, or if you are with one."

"You're right," Sam said. "Maddie and Jackson, Dillon's grandfather is actually your Grandma Jean's brother Alfred."

"Wow," Dillon said. "I've never known anything about my dad's side of the family, other than about my grandfather Alfred. My dad said that Grandpa Alfred stopped talking to his family a long time ago."

Sam looked at Dillon. "Not only is Dillon a Steele, but he has a special purpose. Maddie, yours is to bring heaven to earth. Dillon's is to bless and not curse. His words have the ability to release life and healing. Or they can release death and hate, which brings the Anti-Nagah."

Dillon looked at his new group of friends. "I promise I'll try to only talk good about people. Well, I'll try. I'll surely try."

Jackson lightly punched Dillon on the shoulder. "Come on, cuz. Let's explore this place." Maddie, Jackson, and Dillon conversed all about their family while the entire group roamed around heaven together.

*

When school started the next Monday, Maddie was finally happy to go to *Willow Creek Christian Academy*. At lunchtime her girlfriends saved her a seat at their usual

table in the cafeteria. "Maddie, please sit by me today," said Teresa Hamilton.

"Thanks, Teresa," Maddie said. "But I think I need to go over there and sit with Dillon." Maddie walked straight past her usual table. She stopped at a lunch table that only had one lone person sitting at it. "Hi, Dillon. How's it going?" Maddie said. She sat down.

Dillon gave her a great big smile and they talked on and on about their favorite adventure in heaven.

Maddie could hear Teresa Hamilton loudly saying childish things at the popular girls' table, something about "Maddie and Dillon sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Maddie ignored Teresa and happily continued her quiet conversation with Dillon. The teasing no longer bothered her. She had learned how to bring heaven to earth and made a special friend in the process.