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*Journeys of the Heart Mary's Story*

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# Journeys of the Heart

*Crystal's Story*

Tom Gale



LOVING YOUR HEART  
COMMUNICATIONS, LLC

***Journeys of the Heart Crystal's Story***

*By Tom Gale*

Visit us at: [www.journeys-of-the-heart.com](http://www.journeys-of-the-heart.com)

This book is a work of fiction. However, its contents are inspired by true life stories of teenagers everywhere.

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Published by

*Loving Your Heart Communications, LLC*

*Portsmouth, VA 23703*

*admin@lyhcc.com*

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013911671

ISBN 978-1-938500-02-2

*Printed in the United States of America*

First Edition: August 2013

Cover Designed by Debi Garcia Virginia Beach, VA

This book is dedicated to all the teenagers who  
are often prematurely judged because of their  
age and their external appearance.  
May those of us who call ourselves  
adults see past these things.

Above all else,  
let us look for their hearts,  
and when we find them,  
let us listen intently.

May we stop continuing to heap upon teenagers  
layers of behaviors and belief systems  
that only hide the true beauty  
which they were created  
with from the beginning.

Teenagers are a **gift** to this world.  
Will we embrace them?

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## *Introduction*

Here is the second book in the series, *Journeys of the Heart Crystal's Story*. This book is especially meaningful to me because I love teenagers. My years in high school were full of many great memories.

The teenage years can be an exciting time for some, but for many it's everything but that. Often it is a very scary time. So much change is going on with their bodies, their environments, and their relationships. There's an awkward tension in growing up from being a child to a young adult. Adolescents are not always sure whether they want to keep moving forward or retreat back to childhood. I can understand and relate to all of those feelings.

Crystal found herself having to face many of these same challenges. In my first book, *Journeys of the Heart Mary's Story*, it ended with Crystal telling her mom that she had been molested by Grandpa, Mary's dad, as a little girl. Since his recent death, Crystal was plagued with flashbacks of those times with Grandpa. Crystal's heart was crying out to be seen, heard, loved, and accepted for who she was, not for what Grandpa tried making her to be.

Crystal's life took a radical turn as a 15-year-old during her sophomore year. She discovered that as a result of some deep healing she received regarding the abuse, she was now being drawn towards her peers, especially those kids many labeled as the outcasts or on the fringe. These teens were often marked as such because of their outward appearance or behaviors. They were misunderstood because of certain beliefs they held and didn't fit into the boxes of conformity that society or culture had created. They were judged regularly, and their hearts suffered because of it.

You know who I'm talking about, don't you? Are you a teen who doesn't quite fit in to any of the "acceptable" cliques at your school? Are you often left feeling as if you were on the outside looking in only because you didn't have the looks, or the brains, or the athleticism? Maybe you didn't have the clothes, or the money, or a car to drive your friends around in.

Ironically for Crystal, she did have the looks and the brains but chose not to hang out with the popular kids. She saw through their judgmental attitudes placed upon the "haves" and the "have-nots." Because her heart was sensitive, Crystal was offended by the way she saw others treated for such superficial reasons. Her heart was drawn to love and accept those who didn't fit in with the majority. She discovered that the unlovable kids around her became the easiest ones to love.

Come join me and Crystal in the journey with her heart.





# 1

## *What Happened?*

Each of our journeys began the moment we were born into this world. We had no choice in the matter of who our parents would be. Nor do we have any control over our circumstances. What we faced in childhood molded us more deeply than we'd like to believe into the person we would become. Each experience, each interaction with other people in our growing up years, had a profound impact upon our heart's development. Sadly, for most, our hearts started being wounded early on, often unintentionally, by those who loved us most. But there were also those who said they loved us, but chose to intentionally mishandle our hearts as a child, which caused great wounding. Both were true for Crystal.

At the end of *Journeys of the Heart Mary's Story*, Crystal opened up to her mom for the first time and told her how Grandpa, Mary's dad, had sexually molested her as a little girl. Mary was shocked at this revelation. She so wanted to believe that her dad had only sexually abused her, but to now find out that he also hurt her daughter was unbearable.

Let's listen in on Crystal and her mom's conversation at the diner that started in *Mary's Story*.

"What was it Grandpa did to you, honey?" Mary

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asked with deep concern.

"It didn't happen a lot, just when you'd drop Anna and me off to visit for the weekend."

Mary was stunned. Both guilt and anger overwhelmed her in the moment.

"I am so sorry, Crystal. I never knew Grandpa was hurting you. Had I known he was a perpetrator, I would have never left you and your sister alone with him in any context."

"It's my fault, Mom. I never told you."

"It was never your fault, Crystal. Grandpa was an evil man to do such things to you."

Crystal continued, "I remember when I was three or four years old, he would have me sit on his lap and would bounce me up and down on his legs. At the time, I didn't think twice about it. Sometimes he would take his hand and put it under my dress and touch me between my legs. It didn't hurt. I just figured that was what grandpas did," Crystal said with little emotion.

"Grandpa also liked giving me a bath. We would get in the tub together. He made it into a game where he would wash some part of my body, and then I would wash that same body part on him. Again, I didn't think twice about any of this. This was our usual routine every time I would spend the night at his place."

"Do you know if Grandpa also did things to Anna?" Mary asked with great hesitation and fear.

"Not that I'm aware of. Grandpa said I was his special little girl. He said we had to keep the bath times our little secret; otherwise we wouldn't be able to do it anymore. We probably took baths together until I was 10 or 11 years old. Thinking back now, he stopped once I got my first period."

"That monster! I remember him saying those same

things to me as a little girl, the exact same words and phrases,” Mary said with rage. She wished he was there so she could strangle him and make him suffer for what he had done, not only to her, but to Crystal as well.

“Mom, I can tell you are really getting angry. I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner. It’s all my fault. I should have known not to take baths with Grandpa until I was almost a teenager,” Crystal said while tears streamed down her face.

“Oh no, honey, it’s not your fault. I’m not mad at you at all,” Mary said looking straight into Crystal’s eyes. “I am mad at my dad for touching you the way he did and fooling you into thinking this was normal, acceptable behavior between a grandpa and his granddaughter. He would have gone to prison for such behavior had he been caught, not to mention all the horrible things he did to me as a young girl and teenager.

“Let’s leave now and get the car where we can talk further.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Mary paid the bill on their way out and they walked to the car.

“May I just hold you in my arms for a minute?” Mary asked Crystal.

“I would like that, Mom.”

As Mary wrapped her arms around Crystal, she said, “Crystal, I don’t know what to say or do right now. I know your heart has been confused and wounded by what Grandpa did to you as a little girl and I am so sorry for that. Would it be okay if I ask God to somehow help you in this moment?” Crystal nodded her head yes as Mary continued holding her close. Crystal closed her eyes and rested in Mary’s arms.

“Dear God, Crystal needs your help now.”

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After a few minutes of silence, Crystal opened her eyes and began sharing what transpired.

“Mom, I just found myself standing in what looked like a desert area. There was sand everywhere, no plants at all. It was brown and rather lifeless looking.

“There was this huge black crow or raven flying around up above me in the sky. I stared at it as it soared on the wind. The crow swooped down towards me and grabbed me with its talons, lifting me off the ground. It cawed as it took me higher and higher, straight up into the sky. I got scared, though. It didn't feel safe being that high up. The crow's head turned, looked back at me, and sneered. Its face was evil looking.

“Now everything down below me on the ground looked really small. And then the crow just let go of me and I fell.”

Crystal's body flinched in Mary's arms as she continued telling of her encounter.

“All of a sudden I saw this huge eagle appear in the sky. It swooped down underneath me and I landed on his back. I was holding on to his feathers tightly as he took me down safely to the ground. I felt very tired so I got off the eagle's back and curled up on the ground. The eagle wrapped his wings around me which completely surrounded me. I felt safe. Then it began to snow. I huddled up under his wings as the snow fell harder and harder, covering the eagle completely. Then I fell asleep.

“When I awoke, the snow had stopped. I crawled out from under the eagle's wings and could see the sun shining. Mom, the eagle was dead,” Crystal said as she wept in Mary's arms.

Mary still didn't know what to say or how to understand all that Crystal had just shared with her. Slowly, Crystal relaxed again into Mary's arms and

opened her eyes. She stared at her mom for a moment and said, "That eagle was Jesus. He died for me. Mom, Jesus gave His life for me. He rescued me from that evil crow that wanted to destroy me. Jesus died for ME! This is the first time ever I can honestly say that I know He died for me."

Mary cried as they held each other tightly. "Yes He did, Crystal. Jesus died for you."

"I can't explain what I'm feeling in my heart right now, Mom. There is this warmth, a peace, and a love, like I've never known before."

"I think that's what it feels like when Jesus is living in our hearts," Mary said.

"I was always taught that Jesus died for me, but now I know that beyond any doubt."

"I am so excited for you, Crystal. You have always had such a compassionate heart. I think Jesus has been in your heart longer than you realized."

"Mom, I haven't told you this, but when I am at school each day, there are certain kids around me who are looked on as outcasts by everyone else. They are ridiculed because of their looks, or what clothes they wear, or their wild hair styles. There are kids with lots of tattoos and piercings. I know one girl that has at least five piercings on her face, not counting all the ones on her ears. She also has this spider web tattoo on her neck that everyone can see. Most kids stare at her like she's some freak, but I just know she's not.

"Mom, my heart is really drawn to these kids. It actually aches when I see them being mistreated by others with such cruel words, sometimes said right to their faces.

"Their outward appearance doesn't matter to me. It's like I can see past all the external stuff right into their

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hearts. I see their inner beauty, but they are also hurting and I want to help them.”

Mary was taken aback by what Crystal had just shared. Certain thoughts raced through her mind concerning the types of kids Crystal had described. She caught herself sensing some fear being stirred up. Mary wondered if Crystal was getting in with the wrong crowd at school. Should she be concerned? Dan would especially not like hearing about these kids Crystal was drawn to. But then Mary’s heart spoke to her, “Listen to Crystal’s heart . . .”

Slowly Mary responded to all that Crystal had just shared.

“Oh, Crystal. I hear you and your heart! I am so proud of you for wanting to love and accept these kids for who they are. I remember the kids in my school who everyone ridiculed, your dad being one of them. God gave me eyes to see him for who he was. His heart was good and beautiful. God created him just as He created all the rest of us and He doesn’t have favorites.”

“Mom, would you ask God to help me? I’m not out to change these kids in any way. I just want to get to know them and love them for who they are.”

“Yes, honey, I will ask God to help you love these kids just like He loves them. Are you ready to go home now?”

“I am, Mom. Thanks for taking me out to lunch today and having this time together. I never expected all of this to come out. I am excited, though, to get back to school and see what new friendships will form.”

“I, too, am excited to see what unfolds for you,” Mary said with a big smile. “And thank you, God, for today.”

# 2

## *Crystal's Friends*

As Crystal rode the bus to school the next morning, she reflected on yesterday's time with her mom. Her heart pounded with passion for those kids she wanted to connect with on campus.

Crystal's high school was your typical public school. It housed grades 9-12 and had approximately 1,800 students. Her sophomore class numbered about 500 kids.

This high school had the usual struggles with drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, date rape, teenage pregnancy, and kids dropping out. Crystal knew the kids on her school bus who were the drug dealers.

She would love to get her driver's license soon and maybe start driving to school. Crystal didn't know that her mom was going to let her have Grandpa's car. Since his death, Mary had decided to keep her dad's car so that Crystal would have a vehicle to drive around in.

Crystal was strong academically and took most of the accelerated level classes in math, science, and English. Schoolwork came easy for her but she didn't flaunt her intelligence among her peers. Crystal also enjoyed playing volleyball but decided that it would require too much of her time this year so she didn't go out for the team. She received flack for that decision from some of

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her teammates. Because of it, most of them wouldn't talk to her anymore when they saw her in the hallway or in the classroom.

Crystal's first class started at 8 am and her last class finished at 3 pm. There was a one hour lunch break at noon.

The kids she wanted to hang out with often left the school grounds so they could smoke without getting into trouble. There was a small park down the street where they liked to go. Crystal decided she'd join them for lunch there.

Upon arrival, she approached a familiar face in the group, a girl named Savannah.

"Hi, Savannah," Crystal said cheerfully.

"Oh hey, Crystal. How's it going?" Savannah asked.

"Good."

"Crystal, this is my boyfriend, Dylan.

"Hi, Dylan."

"Hey, Crystal," Dylan answered.

"It's been awhile since we have really spoken to each other," Savannah said. "I remember you from Hillside Community Church years ago. My family attended Hillside Community Church forever. I used to go to the youth group but haven't been much the past few years. I saw you there but it was probably four or five years ago."

"That's it. You're right. It was at Hillside Community when we were in the middle school youth group together," Crystal said.

"I hated going to church. The sermons were so long, boring, and irrelevant to me. The youth group girls thought they were all high and mighty. I felt so looked down upon and judged by them. I haven't gone much since ninth grade. My parents and I fight all the time about me not attending. They think I'm going to become influenced by all the wrong things if I don't stay plugged



in at Hillside. I told them if I stayed there it would make my life worse. They have no clue and don't understand a thing I'm trying to explain to them," Savannah said exasperated.

"I would agree with you about the sermons and the girls in the youth group. Recently, my mom hasn't been going to church and has allowed me and my sister to not go if we don't want to. My dad disagrees with her. He thinks that's what you are supposed to do on Sunday mornings. If you don't, God will be unhappy with you," Crystal said.

"When will parents ever listen to us?" Dylan added in.

As they shook their heads in agreement, Colton walked up and joined the three of them.

"Hey, Dylan, how's it going? Savannah, what's happening?" Colton asked. "And I don't believe we've ever met. My name is Colton. Who are you?" as he looked at Crystal.

"I'm Crystal."

"Are you a junior or senior?" Colton asked.

"No, I'm a sophomore," Crystal replied.

"Glad you could join us today, Crystal. I heard all of you talking about going to church," Colton said.

"Savannah's parents can't stand me because we're dating and I wasn't raised in church. They seem to think I'm a bad influence on her and have made it pretty clear they don't approve of our relationship," Dylan said with some anger and pain in his voice. "Why don't they take the time to get to know me and quit judging me? Just because my parents are divorced and my dad is in prison, that doesn't mean I'm a bad person."

"You're right, Dylan. It's too bad they don't get to know you. I think you're pretty cool," Colton said proudly.

"You got that right," Dylan said with his head held

high.

“Dylan and I love each other, but my parents think that 18 year olds can’t be in love. We’re supposedly too young. They are so quick to label him as a non-Christian just because he doesn’t go to church on Sundays. They have no idea what his relationship is with God,” Savannah said defensively.

Colton quickly stepped in, “Going or not going to church doesn’t mean anything. What matters is if you have a relationship with God.”

Crystal was excited about the conversation she heard going on between everyone. She wondered if they talked about God often during their lunch breaks, so she decided to ask.

“Do you guys always talk about God?”

“Sometimes, as well as anything else about life,” Savannah piped in.

“I love this conversation!” Crystal said with much enthusiasm.

“Are you one of those religious fanatics who wants to come in here and try to save us? Oh . . . wait, I see a bright light coming . . . Is it . . .? Yes, it’s Jeeeeeesus? Save this sinner, Son of God,” Dylan said sarcastically.

“Oh no, Dylan, not at all. My relationship with God is the most important one I have, but I don’t want to shove Him down anyone’s throat. I was raised in the Christian religion and I’m finding more and more that what I was raised in is unappealing to me. Even my mom has been talking with me lately about how it’s not about religion, but about having a relationship.”

“Your mom sounds like a cool lady,” Colton replied.

“She is pretty cool. She had a really tough childhood and was raised in a very religious home. Her dad was a pastor.”

“Religion brings death,” Colton stated.

“All of this religious talk about going to a building on Sunday morning and how that’s supposed to be a sign of something good in a person, I just don’t get it. My mom has been questioning her beliefs recently, and we have stopped going on Sundays for the past few months,” Crystal said.

“It’s time to head back to class. Hey, Crystal, glad you joined us today. Can I walk you back to campus?” Colton said.

“Sure, Colton.” Crystal said. “Thanks for letting me join in, guys. I enjoyed it so much. Bye Savannah, bye Dylan.”

“Later, Crystal,” Dylan said.

“See you later,” Savannah smiled.

“Crystal, tell me a little about yourself,” Colton asked as they walked back to class.

“Well, you know I’m a sophomore. What about you, a junior or a senior?”

“I’m 17 and a junior.”

“I’ve been raised in Bozeman my whole life. I love God and I so liked the conversation we had at the park today.”

“There is a group of us that often meet during lunch. God is a common topic of conversation as well as anything else that deals with life as a teenager,” Colton said. “There are others you’ll probably meet over time who sometimes join us, maybe a dozen or so, if all of us make it.”

“I can’t wait to meet them all! It sounds like you know God, Colton.”

“Yes I do. I know God and love Him but I don’t like most of the labels people like putting on each other about Him. I don’t like calling myself a Christian because of the negative connotations of that label. You said it well, Crystal. It is all about having a relationship with

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Him, not a religious belief system.”

“I love Him and I know God so loves me. I just want to love those around me, especially the kids at our school who have been treated like outcasts,” Crystal said.

“I hear you. I’ve been labeled like that because of my tattoos and piercings. The ‘Christians’ think it is wrong to have them on my body so they tend to reject me or say that I’m in sin.”

“How stupid is that?” Crystal replied. “I can tell you love God and that you really care about those we hung out with today.”

“I feel the same way you do, Crystal. I know what these kids are going through. Hell, I know what I go through. How about we talk about this more after school? Do you have time this afternoon to go get a coke or some coffee? I have a car and can drive, if that’s okay with your parents.”

“I’d love to talk more. Let me call my mom and check but let’s plan on meeting in the school parking lot by the main doors at 3:15.” Crystal could hardly contain herself.

“See you at 3:15,” Colton answered with a big smile.

Crystal gave her mom a call before going into geometry class.

“Hello,” Mary answered. “Is that you, Crystal? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine, Mom. I had the coolest thing happen at lunch today. I went down to the park near campus and there were these three kids talking, two seniors and one junior. You’ll never guess what they were having a conversation about.”

“I give up. What, Crystal?”

“They were talking about God, religion, going to church, all that stuff,” Crystal said hardly able to contain her excitement.

“That’s wonderful, honey.”

“This one boy named Colton, who loves God, asked if we could go grab a coke after school and talk more about God. Is that okay, Mom? He has a car and I’ll be home in time for dinner.”

“I can hear your excitement, Crystal, but I don’t even know this boy.”

“Mom, he feels safe. I don’t get any weird vibes around him. Pleeeeeeease?”

“I guess. I ask one thing, though. Text me where you two are going to be, just so I know,” Mary said with some hesitation.

“I will, Mom. Thanks so much. I need to run to class now. I’ll text you around 3:15 when we leave. Love you!”

“Bye, honey. Be home by six.”

“I’ll text you when I’m on my way home, Mom.”

# 3

## *Colton*

“Hey, Crystal,” Colton said as he walked out the front door of their school.

“Hi, Colton. My mom said it’s okay to head out with you. I just need to let her know where we’ll be and I do need to be home by six,” Crystal said.

“How about we go down the street to that small coffee shop? They have hot or cold drinks there,” Colton suggested.

“Sounds good to me. Mmmmm, a nice mocha-latte would be great! What do you like to drink?”

“I don’t like coffee at all. I’ll probably get a coke. Here we are.”

“You were right when you said it was down the street. Let me call my mom real quick.”

Crystal dialed her mom’s number, “Hi, Mom. Colton and I are just down the street from school at this coffee shop called Deb’s Diner.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with that one. Your dad and I would go there after school at times to get something to drink and talk. See you by six tonight?” Mary asked.

“I’ll be home by six,” Crystal said as she finished the call.

“The time at the park today was so fun!” Crystal said

to Colton with enthusiasm.

“Yes, it was. Most of the kids that hang out there do feel like outcasts on campus. I can relate to them because of the way I’ve been judged by the tattoos and piercings on my body. Sadly, my worst experiences have come from others who call themselves Christians,” Colton said.

“Really? So when did you find God?”

“I can’t take the credit for finding Him. He found me at a time in my life where I was self-destructing.”

“Do you mind telling me what happened?”

“About five years ago, when I was in sixth grade, my dad left my mom. My older sister had just graduated from high school and had gone off to college. The school year had just started. When I came home from school one day, Mom was sitting on the couch crying, holding a piece of paper in her hand. I asked her what was wrong. She told me when she came home from work that afternoon, my dad had left a note on the table saying he wanted a divorce. He had fallen in love with another lady and they wanted to get married.”

“That’s horrible, Colton. Didn’t your dad say good-bye to you?”

“In the letter, he said to my mom, ‘Tell Colton I love him and I am sorry.’”

“That was it? He didn’t call you or anything? Did you ever see him again?”

“No, he didn’t. This other lady lived in another state. I guess he quit his job and moved away. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“That makes me so mad! How he treated you was wrong! Can I give you a hug?”

Crystal got up out of her chair and went over to Colton, wrapped her arms around him, and gave him a

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big, warm, genuine hug.

“Thanks, Crystal.”

“Well, I know I would want a hug after telling someone all of that.”

“Dad left that year. My world was shattered and my mom was crushed. It’s been just the two of us at home and her job hasn’t paid that well. We get by, but it has been difficult.

“Looking back, I realize now how I started withdrawing from everyone around me. In seventh grade, I met a kid that introduced me to drugs. At first it was only marijuana, but that just led to harder stuff. I was angry at what my dad did, very angry, and I started becoming really mean towards my mom. I blamed her for Dad leaving. I know now that’s not true, but at the time I needed to blame someone.”

Colton took a sip of his coke and continued, “My seventh and eighth grade years were horrible, taking drugs and stealing to support that habit. I started drinking, my grades were failing, and I just didn’t care about life anymore. My mom couldn’t control me at all. I rarely was home after school or on the weekends. She was having her own struggles, trying to survive and cope with being a single parent to an out of control teenage son.”

“Wow, Colton! What you had to go through being so young was horrible. Keep talking . . .”

“In ninth grade, I came into high school a mess in so many ways. I had this scowl on my face that sent a message to anyone around me to stay away. I was full of hate and anger towards my dad, but also towards myself. One day during lunch break, I walked by myself down to the park where we were today, just to be alone. I saw a group of kids there hanging out. They looked cool. One of



them saw me sitting by myself and walked over to me. His name was Scott, and he was a senior. He noticed me and reached out to me. I had been feeling pretty invisible, partly by choice, but my heart was crying out, 'Does anyone see me? Does anyone care about me?' When my dad left, I had concluded there must be something wrong with me. In my mind, I had figured out that he didn't like me because he didn't leave until my sister went off to college. It was all my fault.

"Scott saw me that day and cared for me, a drugged out, angry young guy who was sending the message to anyone who got near to back off. Scott wasn't threatened by my demeanor. He saw past the hard exterior I tried hiding behind."

"Continue, continue. I can hardly wait to hear the rest. I know it must get better because of who I see you are today," Crystal added.

"For the next few months, Scott took me under his wing. Whenever I'd go to the park, he and the others he hung out with would welcome me in. They weren't much different than me. Each one had their own story. Each one had faced some pretty crappy things in their lives too. I wasn't alone anymore."

"That's neat, Colton. They seemed to really care for one another," Crystal added.

"They did. We were viewed by most of the kids in school as the druggies, the stoners, and the freaks. People assumed all kinds of things about us incorrectly. With this group, I learned that you don't judge someone by their outward appearance. Scott saw past mine. He saw my heart. He loved and accepted me for who I am, even though I was a total mess.

"I grew pretty close to Scott. He had become the older brother I never had in my life. With my dad out of the

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picture completely, it was as if God put Scott there for me. Scott loved God and showed that love to me in so many ways. He didn't preach at or try to convert me. He just loved me. I think He modeled love like Jesus did when He walked the earth. Scott came out of a similar background like I was in when we met that year. He had done drugs and had even dropped out of high school his sophomore year. God found him though, transformed his life, and he came back to school and graduated at almost 20 years old."

"I love hearing stories like this. God sure does love each of us, doesn't He?"

"Yes He does and He showed it best to me through another person, Scott. By the end of my ninth grade year, I had gotten off most of the drugs and started talking to God some. He has changed my life, Crystal, just like He did Scott's. I haven't stopped going to the park ever since that day, almost three years ago.

"What's your story, Crystal?"

"Thanks for sharing so openly with me, Colton. I feel like I've known you a lot longer than just one day.

"My story is quite different than yours. My life has been pretty boring compared to yours, but life hasn't been perfect either. My parents are still together even though I'm not close with my dad. He's not around much. There just isn't any connection between us when he is around. My dad lost his parents in a car crash right after he graduated from high school and Mom says their deaths changed him forever.

"Mom's cool. She went through a lot in her childhood. There was sexual abuse by her dad, my grandpa, who just died recently. He also abused me some in ways I didn't even realize were wrong.

"I have a younger sister, Anna, who is 13 and in

eighth grade. We are pretty close.”

“Wait a minute,” Colton interrupted. “Your grandpa sexually abused you? That’s terrible, Crystal.”

“Yes it was. God really helped me just yesterday heal some places in my heart around that abuse. For the first time in my life, I now know without a doubt that Jesus died for me.”

“That’s cool. He sure does love us, to give His life like He did. Why did you come to the park today?”

“My heart is drawn to the kids who hang out at the park. I know I may not fit in exactly. I don’t have any tattoos or smoke cigarettes like a lot of them do. I don’t dye my hair but I do hope to become friends with some of them anyway.”

“Even though you may not appear to look like the rest of us, you will find this group is very accepting of just about anyone. All of us have had to face some form of rejection from our peers on campus, but when we gather in the park, that’s our safe place where everyone feels accepted for who they are. You probably caught Dylan’s comment to you today, when he asked if you were one of those religious ones trying to come in and save us.”

“Yeah, I heard him. It saddened me that he would even think that about me.”

“He has nothing against you, but we’ve had some who call themselves Christians come around and just want to change us to become like them. Their message focused on our appearance and behaviors. When they realized we weren’t going to go cut our hair different, quit smoking, or go to their church services, they stopped showing up to hang out.”

“That’s sad to hear, Colton. They didn’t seem to care about who you were, just how you acted?”

“That’s right, Crystal. All that mattered was our

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supposed 'sinful' behaviors that they felt obligated to change. I don't think Jesus was or is hung up on them. I think He's more focused on our hearts. Didn't He come to love us and help us discover who He made us to be?"

"You know what? I've gone to church my whole life. I get so tired of most sermons or talks at youth group being about what I can or can't do. It's hard to not think of God as one who is keeping track of my every action or thought. It's as if He takes note of every time I screw up and then I have to somehow make amends for my mistakes. That's kind of how my dad is. He watches my every move and is quick to point out when I don't line up to his 'checklist' of right behaviors."

"Didn't Jesus die to break the power of sin and to come live in our hearts?" I thought He was all about restoring broken relationships, not sin management programs," Colton added in.

Crystal nodded her head. "All I know is that He loves me, period. And if I make a mistake, that doesn't change a thing about how He sees me, loves me, or accepts me unconditionally."

"The group that hangs out at the park each day is more like Jesus in their love for one another than most Christian kids who have tried to come in and change us. I agree with you, Crystal, God is all about love.

"Have you heard about WWJD, what would Jesus do?" Colton asked.

"Yeah, our youth group went through that a few years back. I came away feeling it was asking the wrong question," Crystal replied.

"It was not the question that bothered me as much as the thousand different answers to that question of how Jesus would respond in any given situation. I think there's really just one answer to that question."

“Really, Colton? What do you mean? I recall my notebook having those thousand possible answers, depending on the circumstance.”

“The one answer to that question, ‘What would Jesus do?’ is that Jesus would show love to the person or people in that situation. We can ‘do’ all the right things, but if love isn’t the motivation behind the doing, it’s all pointless. We may fool others around us with what you called the ‘checklist of right behaviors.’ Didn’t Jesus see through the Pharisees’ actions of His day? They knew the Bible inside and out, had all the right behaviors down, and kept the Law without fail.”

“I’m sure they got straight A’s in right behaviors,” Crystal said sarcastically.

“That’s right. They would have gotten straight A’s, yet Jesus got really pissed off at them, more than any other group or person.”

“You sure seem to know a lot about God, Jesus, and the Bible,” Crystal stated.

“Scott shared with me much when I was in ninth grade. God spoke through Scott in so many ways. It went deep into my heart.”

“He sounds like an amazing guy. So what ever happened to Scott after he graduated? Did you keep in touch with him?” Crystal wondered.

“He actually joined the military, the Army, I believe. He wanted to become a Chaplain. I don’t know whatever came of that, though. The last thing he said to me was, ‘Colton, you have a new heart, a good heart. Jesus lives there in you and isn’t ever going to move out. Listen to His voice. Follow Him, even in the whispers. His love will always lead you. There is no greater journey than His, to be walking with Him day by day. He loves you, Colton, more than you’ll ever fathom.’”

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“Great advice!” Crystal said.

“Yeah, he was quite the friend. I’m glad you’ve decided to join us in the park. You will enjoy getting to know these kids. I love hanging out with them.

“Now, I’d better get you home on time for dinner,” Colton said with a smile. “I wouldn’t want your mom to worry you’re out with some strange guy.”

“I’d like you to meet her when you drop me off.”

They headed out of the coffee shop, got in Colton’s car and went to Crystal’s house. Mary saw them pull in the driveway and came out to greet them.

“Hi kids.”

“Hi Mom! I want you to meet my friend from school. This is Colton,” Crystal said with excitement.

Colton extended his hand out towards Mary’s. “Hi Crystal’s mom,” Colton said with a warm smile.

“You can call me Mary,” as she reached out and took Colton’s hand in hers. “Crystal was so excited when she called me today to ask about spending some time with you. I look forward to hearing all about your visit together.”

“You have a lovely daughter, Mary. Her love for God and people is so real. I’m glad we were able to connect today and share our stories.”

“I can’t wait to talk with you, Mom, all about today in the park at lunchtime and my time with Colton.”

Crystal went over and gave Colton a hug, “Thanks for sharing your story with me and filling me in on the kids at the park. I’ll see you there tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there, Crystal. Mary, it was good meeting you. Have a great evening.”

“Bye, Colton. Hope to see you again sometime,” Mary said sincerely.

“Bye, Colton,” Crystal waved while he drove off.

“So, honey, you seem all excited about this boy.”

“Oh, Mom, Colton’s a great guy, but there’s nothing more. I have never met a guy who loves God like he does. And he has such wisdom for his years when it comes to walking with God. I look forward to becoming close friends with him.”

“That sounds great, Crystal. Let’s head in and you can tell me all about it . . .

# 4

## *Savannah and Dylan*

The next day at school during lunch break, Crystal headed to the park. She was excited to see who might be there and who she could get to know a little bit better. Crystal was still smiling about her time yesterday with Colton and getting to know his heart better. The first person she saw at the park was Savannah.

“Hi, Savannah,” Crystal said with a wave of her hand.

“Hey, Crystal,” Savannah replied.

“Hey,” Dylan said as he looked at Crystal.

“Isn’t it a gorgeous day today?” Crystal said with a bubbly voice.

“What are you so happy about?” Dylan enquired. “Are you smoking something you shouldn’t be?”

“Oh no, it’s not that at all. I’m just glad to be alive,” Crystal said smiling at the two of them.

“You’re weird,” Dylan said.

Crystal just smiled back at him.

“Savannah, you said yesterday you don’t like Hillside Community and haven’t been attending there anymore. It sounded like your parents are getting on your case about this. Is it hard at home right now?”

“Yeah, it is. My parents are so strict, all in the name of God. I believe I have a relationship with God, but with



all of their rules they expect me to keep, it causes me too often doubt if I even know Him. I get confused because I thought God loved me for who I am, but they make it sound like God will only love me if I obey their rules.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Savannah,” Crystal added.

“It didn’t seem that bad when I was in elementary school, but once I became a teenager, then the rules seemed to increase ten-fold. I was a pretty good kid when I was younger, but the moment I started to venture out and discover who I am, then the bullcrap started hitting the fan.”

“It’s okay to say bullshit, Savannah,” Dylan said.

“Just like that comment. I have felt so oppressed by every word I use or action I do. I sugarcoat everything so my parents are happy with me. They always ‘love’ me as long as I am within their strict guidelines. But boy, when I take one step to the right or left, especially the left, they show such disdain, and withdraw their love immediately. They aren’t afraid to tell me exactly about their disappointment in me whenever I don’t do right in their eyes. How are your parents about these things?”

“They are somewhat similar to your mom and dad. My dad is far more hung up on the rights and wrongs. My mom has been lightening up lately. God did some major work in her heart recently and I can see such a softening. She is showing a love for me for the first time that I know comes from her heart. She’s really trying to love me for who I am and not for what I do or don’t do.”

“That’s cool,” Dylan added in.

“Can we trade moms, Crystal?” Savannah asked.

“Do you remember, Savannah, in middle school when we went thru WWJD at Hillside?” Crystal asked.

“Yes I do. I hated it. My parents loved it because it reinforced their thinking that the Christian life is all

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about right behaviors. They love quoting the Bible at me whenever I don't do what they think Jesus would do. I used to like reading my Bible, but because of the way they throw it in my face all the time, I quit reading it a couple years ago. I almost hate it because it conjures up such negative feelings in me every time someone uses it to defend their belief about something. I could just scream thinking about this bullshit."

"Now didn't that feel better speaking the truth?" Dylan asked as he smiled at Savannah.

"Colton and I were talking about WWJD yesterday. We agreed that it missed the point. Jesus was about loving us in spite of our behaviors. He sees us for who we were created to be. Is that so difficult? I just have a hard time picturing Him walking around keeping a checklist of do's and don'ts on my every thought or action," Crystal stated.

"Listening to you two discuss all of this behavior stuff, am I glad my mom's not like yours. With my parents divorced and my dad in prison, she has busted her ass for me and my other brothers and sisters for the past several years. She doesn't expect me to be perfect. I couldn't have asked for a better mom," Dylan said with pride.

"She is an amazing mom," Savannah said wholeheartedly. "I wish she were my mom."

"She sounds pretty neat," Crystal said.

"I know one thing. She loves me no matter what," Dylan concluded.

Crystal was so glad to hear Dylan say more than one or two words at a time. Her heart ached for the circumstances his mom was under raising five kids by herself. She could tell Dylan really loved his mom too. That was encouraging to see. Here was a teen and their

parent truly loving and accepting each other instead of the stereotypical tension that many, if not most, teens and parents experience.

“So how long have you two been dating?” Crystal asked.

“It’s been just over a year,” Savannah answered. “Dylan’s mom is very supportive of our relationship. I feel she treats me just like her own daughter. I’d rather hang out at his house than my own. Whenever Dylan comes over, my parents don’t say much and their looks send daggers flying at him from every direction. I have tried to explain how great Dylan is to me, how he treats me with respect as a girl. Dylan truly loves me, but they won’t see any of that about him. Instead, they judge him because his parents are divorced and his dad’s in prison. Because his mom works every Sunday at the diner waiting tables, Dylan doesn’t attend church anywhere. He stays home and watches his brothers and sisters. Do they ask any questions about him or his family? No, they just sit back in their self-righteous crap and throw stones at him and his family. They’ve never even met his family.

“Dylan’s mom works almost two full-time jobs to make ends meet. Dylan works as much as he can at the pizza shop to help her with the family bills. He has stepped up as the oldest boy and is trying to fill his dad’s shoes. I am so proud of him and his mom for working so hard to keep the family together. I would gladly take his family and their circumstances any day over my own. The one thing in their household is being loved.”

“Wow, Savannah. I can hear your passion for Dylan and his mom. That is so rare to see. You really do love him and it sounds like his family loves you,” Crystal said.

“No doubt about it, Crystal. They do love me as their

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own. And my parents wonder why I like hanging out at his place so much instead of at my own home. Go figure.”

“Okay, you two can stop talking about me and my family,” Dylan said.

“It seems to me that the two of you care deeply for each other. That’s great to hear and see!” Crystal said sincerely.

“Thanks for asking about us, Crystal. I need to start heading back to campus now. I have a quick meeting with a teacher about a test I missed yesterday,” Savannah stated.

“It has been so much fun talking with you two. I could spend the whole afternoon here. Thanks for being so real with me. That means a lot,” Crystal said.

“You’re actually not too weird, but pretty cool,” Dylan added in as he and Savannah headed back to campus.

Across the park grounds, Crystal saw Colton talking with a girl she didn’t recognize, so she headed in their direction. As she got closer, the girl looked at Crystal and stopped talking.

“Hey Crystal, I want you to meet a friend of mine, Alexis,” Colton said.

Alexis was dressed in all black. Her hair was black, her make-up was black, her finger nail polish was black, her jewelry was black, and she wore a black trench coat. She was not comfortable with Crystal walking up to her and Colton.

“Hi, Alexis. Glad to meet you!” Crystal said enthusiastically.

“Really, Colton. You got to be kidding me,” Alexis said to him and walked away.

“Did I say something wrong?” Crystal wondered.

Colton answered, “No, you’re fine Crystal. Alexis isn’t

too keen on meeting new people. She's a very private person and prefers being alone. It has taken me months to get where she'll finally talk to me. She used to walk away from me too."

"She looks so sad and mad, all at the same time," Crystal said.

"You hit it on the head, Crystal. That's exactly how she usually feels, very sad and very mad. Ready to start heading back to campus? I'll walk with you."

"That sounds great, Colton."

"Your time talking to Savannah and Dylan went well?" Colton asked.

"It was wonderful," Crystal said with a big smile.

# 5

## *Alexis*

The weekend rolled around and Crystal didn't feel like waiting around until Monday to be able to see some of the kids again at the park. She wondered if they hung out there on the weekends. She decided to call Colton to find out.

Colton answered his cell phone seeing it was Crystal calling, "Hi, Crystal. How's it going?"

"Great, Colton. How about you?"

"Great on this end too."

"I was wondering if the kids hang out at the park on the weekend."

"Sometimes they do. You just never know until you drive over and check it out. If I'm in the area, I stop by to see if anyone is there. The nice thing about the weekend is that there isn't the time limit we have with our lunch break. I've had some lengthy conversations with a few of them on the weekends. Why do you ask? You want to head over there today?" Colton asked.

"I was thinking of who I met this past week. I would sure enjoy some more conversations. I really want to get to know them better and I hope they want to get to know me too," Crystal said.

"I was actually thinking of heading over that way later

this afternoon, maybe around three. Would you like me to swing by your place and pick you up?”

“That sounds like fun. Let’s plan on it unless you hear differently from me.”

“I’ll be there at three.”

“Okay, Colton. See you then!”

Crystal hung up the phone and headed outside into the backyard where her mom was working.

“Hey, Mom? Is it okay if Colton picks me up around three and we head over to the park near school to hang out with whoever is there today?”

“That sounds fine with me, Crystal. We haven’t had a chance to talk the past day or so. How’s it going with the kids at the park?”

“It’s going great, Mom! I know you’ve only met Colton but I got to spend some time yesterday with a girl named Savannah and her boyfriend, Dylan. We always seem to talk about God, church, and life at home.”

“That does sound great, Crystal. Are you feeling like you’re connecting with them?”

“Oh, yeah. . . Everyone has been so easy to talk with, except there was this girl yesterday named Alexis. She didn’t like it when I walked up to her and Colton. He introduced me to her but she turned around and walked away without saying a word to me. Mom, I could tell her heart was so sad and mad, both at the same time.”

“It sounds like she’s guarding her heart. I bet she has experienced some very painful things already in her young life.”

“On the outside she puts on this strong front, but her body language tells everyone, ‘Stay away from me!’

“I could tell behind that tough veneer she so wants to be loved and accepted for who she is. Colton said it took a few months trying to talk with her before she felt safe

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enough to really say anything about herself.”

“I’m so proud of you for wanting to love her, Crystal. It sounds like she really needs it. I know those feelings of guarding my heart. I didn’t want to let anyone get near me emotionally. I was afraid if others saw what was going on inside of me, they would surely not like me, and then reject me.”

“I’m hoping she will let me become her friend. I’d really like that. How can anyone’s life at our age be so bad that you have to keep everyone at arm’s length?” Crystal asked.

“Often it’s because of some very deep hurts, Crystal. People who she thought she could trust may have betrayed her and hurt her badly. Again, I can relate to her if that’s the case.”

“I’m hoping to find out a little more about her from Colton today when he picks me up.”

“Who else did you get to meet this week?” Mary asked.

“I already mentioned how yesterday I had the chance to get to know Savannah and Dylan better. Savannah’s family attends Hillside and I recognized her from a class we were in together there during middle school. She doesn’t like going to Hillside anymore, even though her parents try forcing her to go. Her parents’ actions are actually driving her further away from them and possibly God, but they don’t even realize it. She said they are only concerned about her keeping a lot of rules they say the Bible teaches and that God expects of her. It was the whole WWJD thing Hillside taught us.”

“Crystal, could you relate to what she was saying? Your dad and I have tended to be just like her parents, haven’t we?” Mary asked sheepishly.

“Well . . . kind of,” Crystal said slowly, not sure if she



could be totally honest with her mom.

“It’s okay to be real with me, Crystal. You won’t hurt my feelings. I know your dad and I have put a lot of rules on you and your sister, Anna.”

“Okay. You and Dad have, but since your heart got some healing over the past several months, you have really backed off from all the rule stuff. Dad still does but he’s gone half the time so it’s easy to ‘behave’ while he’s around. I feel now you are trying to love me for who I am. I see that in how you aren’t telling me I can’t hang out with the kids in the park. I think Dad wouldn’t approve of these kids but would label and judge them for their outward appearances.”

“You’re probably right, Crystal. I haven’t said anything to him about your new friends because he’ll probably think they’ll somehow lead you astray or be a bad influence. We’ll cross that bridge with your dad when the time is right.”

“Thanks, Mom. At times I think the world would be a better place if we were all blind and couldn’t see with our eyes that which is only skin deep.”

“That’s an interesting thought, Crystal. I’m thankful God is giving your eyes the ability to see past the externals and to see their hearts. Spending time with Tom and Sandy totally changed my perspective on how I see people now. When I listen to my heart’s response to another person walking by me, it usually responds with a yearning to see past the walls, past the hurts in their life, and see their heart, who God made them to be as a person.”

“That’s all I want to see, Mom, is their hearts.”

“So you said Colton is picking you up at three? We’re just eating leftovers tonight so if you can make it for supper, great! If not, that’s okay too. Let me know if we

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can plan on you. If Colton would like to join us, he's invited."

"Thanks, Mom. Let me see how our time goes and if we connect with anyone at the park. If we can make it for supper, I'll invite him to join us. It might be good for Dad to meet him. You saw how Colton had several visible tattoos and piercings."

"Yes, that will be interesting if Colton joins us."

"Colton's going to be here in a couple hours so I think I'll take a quick shower and get ready," Crystal said as she headed back into the house.

It was three o'clock when Colton pulled up in front of Crystal's house. Her dad was in the driveway washing the pickup truck. Dan stopped scrubbing the whitewalls and stared at Colton as he got out of the car and walked towards him.

"Hi, you must be Crystal's dad. My name is Colton," as he extended his right hand towards Dan.

Dan had no clue what was going on. His only thought was, "Who is this guy?" Dan hesitantly shook Colton's hand.

"Yes, I'm Crystal's dad. My name is Dan. And how do you know my daughter?"

"We go to school together. I'm picking her up to go to the park for the afternoon."

"Crystal didn't mention any of this to me. I'll go inside and tell Crystal you're here."

"Thanks, Dan. I'd appreciate that. She's expecting me," Colton said with a smile.

Dan was totally caught off guard with Colton's presence. He saw his tattoos and piercings and said to himself, "This guy is not safe for my daughter. She is barely 16 years old and she **is not** going to date someone like this."

Crystal was right. She knew once her dad met some of the kids she was starting to hang out with, he would judge them for their outward appearances. As Dan walked in, Mary met him near the front door. He looked intently at Mary with concern written all over his face and said, "There is some guy here named Colton to see Crystal."

"Oh yes, Dan, she's expecting him. He's picking her up to head down to the park near campus to hang out with some friends for the afternoon."

"You mean you know this guy? He doesn't look like the kind of guy I would want our daughter going out with."

As Crystal walked hurriedly down the steps from upstairs, she overheard her dad's comments about Colton. She glanced at her mom with eyes that conveyed how bothered she was by her dad's judgments about Colton.

"Dan, Colton is a fine young man. Crystal met him earlier in the week at school and I met him that same day."

"Is he into drugs?" Dan blurted out.

"No, Dad. He's not like that. He loves God and I wish you'd quit judging him before you even get to know him."

"Watch your attitude young lady!" Dan said tersely.

Crystal walked out the front door frustrated. She wondered, "Why would I even want to bring Colton home for dinner if my dad is going to treat him so meanly."

"Crystal, let us know if the two of you will be joining us for dinner tonight," Mary asked sincerely.

"I'll text you, Mom," Crystal answered back, not saying anything to her dad as she walked by him.

Colton could tell Crystal was upset about something as she approached his car.

“Hey, Crystal. What’s wrong?”

“It’s my dad. He can be such a jerk at times. Let’s get out of here.”

“I had a father like that once,” Colton added in.

They got in the car and drove towards the park. Crystal stared out the side window, too embarrassed to say anything about her dad’s comments regarding Colton.

Colton decided to speak first, “Let me guess, your dad thinks I’m not a safe person. He probably thinks I’m on drugs and that I’ll be a bad influence on you.”

“How did you know that, Colton? Did he say those things to you when you pulled up to the house?”

“No, he didn’t have to. I could tell by the way he looked at me. This isn’t the first time I’ve had a girl’s dad think these things about me. I know my tattoos and piercings scare some parents off, especially religious parents.”

“I’m so sorry, Colton. My dad is pretty clueless when it comes to seeing past a person’s outward appearance. He is so quick to judge someone way before he ever gets to know them. My mom invited you to join us for supper tonight but I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.”

“I understand. Let’s see how our afternoon plays out. If God wants me to come over for dinner, He will make that clear. I don’t have to make anything happen.”

“We’ll see . . .” Crystal said exasperated.

They arrived at the park and looked around expectantly.

“I don’t see anyone. How about we go sit at one of the picnic tables. Maybe someone will show up in a bit,” Colton suggested.

“That sounds good to me. I’d like to hear more about Alexis if you’re willing to tell me. My heart was aching for

her yesterday when she walked away from me.”

“I want to be careful what I share about her. It took months before she would even have a conversation with me. What I can tell you is that she is a loner. She used to rarely hang out with us at the park but now shows up from time to time. The goth kids tend to hang out only at night in some old abandoned building somewhere downtown.

“Alexis showed up for the first time at the park about this same time last year. She came maybe once a week for the first few months. She kept her distance even though several kids tried welcoming her. I could see that same sadness in her that you picked up on yesterday. I could tell she was hurting inside, but she was so guarded.”

“That’s exactly what my mom said, that she’s very guarded.”

“Every time I saw her I would wave for her to come join us, but she wouldn’t. Then I decided to start approaching her. She would listen to me, but wouldn’t say anything in return. She just stayed by herself. I wondered at first if she could even talk. It must have been two months before I heard her say one word to me.

“She came by one weekend when I happened to be here in the park. I was by myself sitting like we are at a picnic table. She walked right up to me but her head was down. She wouldn’t look at me. She sat on the corner of the bench with her back towards me. I said Hi and asked how she was doing. I told her how I was glad to see her again and hoped one day we could get to know each other a little better. She didn’t say a word but turned around and looked up at me. She had a black eye and some other scrapes and cuts on her face. I remember she had tears in her eyes too.”

“Oh Colton, that must have been horrible to see. What did you do?” Crystal asked with great concern.

“I slowly got up, walked right over next to her, sat down and asked if I could give her a hug. She nodded her head yes. I gently wrapped my arms around her and put my hand on the back of her head, guiding it toward my shoulder and said, ‘You are safe here with me.’ She started crying softly. I then quietly spoke in her ear, ‘I’m not going anywhere . . . I’m sorry someone hurt you like this. I do care for you.’”

“Wow, Colton! I think I would have just started crying with her.”

“I wanted to. Sadly, I’ve known other girls who have been abused, usually by their boyfriends. It makes me so mad that I want to go find them and kick their asses. I am so protective of girls when it comes to being abused,” Colton said with tears now in his eyes.

“God has sure given you a sensitive heart for the hurting. I am so glad we met this week.” Crystal got up and gave him a hug. Colton received it with open arms. He saw the sincerity in Crystal’s love expressed to him and was grateful for her too.

“So what has happened since that day?” Crystal wondered.

“Let me continue the story . . . After several minutes, Alexis quit crying and pulled back away from me. The first words out of her mouth were ‘I’m sorry.’ I responded by saying, ‘I don’t know your name but you don’t have to ever be sorry for wanting to be loved in a safe way.’

“She told me that day her name was Alexis and what had happened the night before by her boyfriend of three years. Since that day, she has continued coming to the park maybe three to four times a week now. She’s always by herself and still hasn’t let anyone else from the group

get close to her besides me. She has actually started opening up with me more about her background and, let me just say, it is a very sad story for someone who is only 18 years old.”

“God has given you great patience and compassion to continue reaching out to her for so many months now.”

“Yes, He has. I care deeply for her. Even though she’s older than me, I feel like a big brother to her, wanting to care and protect her as I would my own sister.

“Don’t take it personally how she walked away from you yesterday. I’ll get a chance this coming week to explain more of who you are and, hopefully, in time, she will let you into her world.”

“Hopefully . . . thanks for sharing those things about Alexis with me. My heart feels badly for hers.”

“So does mine. Well, it doesn’t look like anyone else is coming today. How about I get you home and I think I’ll pass on the dinner invitation for tonight. Let your mom know I appreciated her thinking of me and inviting me. Let’s give your dad some time regarding me as a person.”

“Okay, Colton. Thanks for understanding and being patient with my dad too.

# 6

## *Grace and Faith*

Several days went by. Crystal continued to meet up with the kids in the park during her lunchbreak. She enjoyed the friendships that were developing. She was shocked at how real and transparent these kids were with their lives, compared to many others she knew at school who preferred wearing a mask.

“Hi, Colton,” Crystal said as she walked up to him and the two girls he was standing next to..

“Hey, Crystal. I’d like you to meet Grace and Faith. They are seniors here on campus,” Colton said smiling.

“Hi, Grace. Hi, Faith. So glad to meet you.”

“Hi, Crystal,” Grace and Faith said simultaneously.

“Is this your first time here in the park?” Grace asked.

“No. I’ve only been coming for about a week now,” Crystal responded. “How about you two? Do you come often during your lunch breaks?”

“We try to when our schedules allow. Since it’s our senior year, we seem to be very busy with a lot of things. When we can make it, we really enjoy talking with everyone. We consider those here in the park to be our closest friends,” Grace said.

“How did you find out about us meeting in the park



during lunch?” Faith asked.

Crystal replied, “I heard comments from other kids about the ‘weirdos’ who hung out in the park during lunch. So a couple weeks ago I thought I’d check it out. I met Colton first and then several others, Savannah, Dylan, and Alexis. I guess I’m now one of the weirdos.”

“You don’t seem too weird to us,” Grace said with a smile.

“Tell me a little about yourselves. You seem like two really sweet girls.”

“I like to share the story of how I was even born because I believe I’m a miracle. The short version is, my parents tried for 15 years to have a child. They tried everything science and medicine had to offer and spent a lot of money in those attempts. They finally gave up and were considering adoption. Just before they were to meet with the adoption agency, my mom got really sick. At first she didn’t think twice about it, figuring she must have a flu bug. Well, after several days of this, she realized maybe, just maybe, she was pregnant. She went to her doctor and to everyone’s surprise, she was pregnant with me. They named me Grace, which means ‘favor.’ My parents believe for some reason God chose to give me to them.

“They had hoped to get pregnant a second time, but that never happened. I’m their only child.”

“What a neat story, Grace. I love your name and, whenever I hear it, I think of God’s favor for all of us,” Crystal said.

“Different from Grace’s story, I have two sisters named Hope and Charity. I was raised in South America as a missionary kid. My dad was a missionary with an organization that reached out to tribal groups in isolated regions along the Amazon River. He would often fly into a

remote area with a pilot and the two of them would spend days getting to know the native people who lived there.”

Faith continued, “My sisters and I were born in Brazil. I’m the oldest. Four years ago, during the summer before my freshman year, my father was killed in a plane crash. They were flying to some area for the first time during a bad rain storm. We believe the plane had some mechanical malfunction. It took a few days before the officials found the wreckage but there were no survivors. My mom and my sisters and I were devastated. Mom decided to bring us back to the United States so I could start high school here. We have other family here in the Bozeman area,” Faith said.

“I am so sorry to hear that about your dad, Faith. How sad . . . I’m not sure I could survive what you have gone through. My dad had both of his parents killed in a car crash his senior year of high school and my mom says he has not been the same ever since.”

Faith added, “My dad’s death was really hard on me and my sisters, but coming to the USA as teens was really shocking. I was 14 years old, Hope was 13, and Charity was 12. We spent our entire lives growing up in Brazil where life was very simple. I’m thankful when Mom moved us back here that we didn’t land in some big city like Chicago or Los Angeles. It has been an adjustment for all of us but with our extended family supporting us, we are doing quite well.”

“Thanks for sharing those things with me, Faith. I’m glad to hear you and your family are enjoying life here in Bozeman. So how long have you been hanging out in the park?” Crystal asked.

“Grace and I have been coming for a good part of the past two years. Both of us discovered we were lesbians at

about the same time. We met in a math class, were attracted to each other, fell in love, and here we are today.”

“I’ve never known any lesbians besides my next door neighbors, Bonnie and Betty, who I think are. They’re the two sweetest old ladies, like grandmas to me and my younger sister, Anna.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? If they are too personal, don’t answer them. I won’t be offended. I respect your privacy,” Crystal said sincerely.

Faith looked at Grace and said, “Sure, ask away. We’re not ashamed of who we are and are actually glad you’re willing to ask us questions instead of judging us immediately.”

Crystal started, “I’m so sorry to hear how others have mistreated you. I know in the church I had attended, we were taught that homosexuality was a big sin and basically God hated anyone who was gay. I knew that couldn’t be true because God is love. Didn’t Jesus die for everyone anyway?”

“Exactly,” Grace responded first. “My parents believe in God but we didn’t go to church much. They emphasized that knowing God was important, not just knowing a lot about Him. They taught us what you just said, Crystal, that God loves all of us. When I realized at age 16 I was attracted to Faith and not to boys, I actually told my mom and dad rather quickly. They were very loving and supportive in their response towards me. They have welcomed and embraced Faith too.”

“My story hasn’t been quite that smooth,” Faith explained. “Having been a missionary kid, there were all kinds of assumptions, expectations and obligations placed upon you in the name of God and the Bible. In Brazil, I don’t recall homosexuality ever being discussed.

## 54 Crystal's Story

After our move here to Bozeman, we attended a local church service where the sermon was all about that topic.

“At the time, I didn’t know I was a lesbian but I accepted what the pastor was teaching. What started bothering me, though, was how often, be it in a sermon or a youth group class, the topic of sexuality came up regularly. I never heard one positive message on sexuality. Every message was a negative one warning us about the evils of sexual sin, especially homosexuality.

“There was this negative, judgmental tone towards anyone who called themselves gay or lesbian. The pastor would say all the right sounding words like love the sinner, hate the sin, but what I often saw and experienced was hate the sin and the sinner. If there was any one thing my parents taught us in Brazil, it was to love everyone like God does, unconditionally. All I have heard in sermons since moving to the USA has been, ‘We will love you **if** you act a certain way and profess a certain set of beliefs.’ I wasn’t seeing their love at all being like God’s.

“I went along with it, kind of in one ear and out the other, until my sophomore year when I met Grace. Just like she said, I was attracted to her, not to boys. It’s not like I didn’t have other girls as friends, because I did. And I definitely had boys hitting on me my sophomore year. There was this deeper, more intimate connection with Grace. I knew I wanted to be with her. Here we are, two years later.”

Crystal asked Faith, “So how did your mom respond about you and Grace? Was she supportive?”

“It was difficult at first. When I told my mom that Grace and I were dating, she just cried. She didn’t seem mad at me and never lashed out, but she seemed

confused. Like I said, the topic wasn't one really talked about much in Brazil. I know she was concerned about me and didn't want me to get hurt by the backlash from others. The problem was that she had met Grace and her parents and loved them dearly. She was conflicted inside. She was being taught something very black and white at the church, but it was the complete opposite of how I was living out my relationship with Grace. She saw that her own daughter who loved God, also loved Grace.

"My mom went to the pastor and he said I needed demons cast out of me. My mom refused to believe that. He then told my mom if she didn't bring me to their deliverance meeting, she was being disobedient, and God's judgment would fall upon our whole family.

"My mom struggled for months but refused to take me to those meetings. She shed many tears, prayed many prayers, but not once did she tell me I was an evil person, deep in sin, had demons, or that God's wrath was going to send me to hell."

"That's wild, Faith! I can't imagine what you and your family went through. How did you survive this?"

"Well, my mom, who reads her Bible all the time, asked God to make it clear what He said about the whole topic of homosexuality. The more she studied, the more she found it wasn't as black and white as her pastor had taught. She must have taken several months to read anything and everything, pro and con, on this topic. After much prayer and study, she concluded the Bible and God weren't against what Grace and I had in our relationship.

"Unfortunately, that conclusion didn't go over well with the pastor. He called my mom into a closed door meeting with the other leaders and said she and her family were no longer welcomed in their congregation.

She was told she was a failure as a mother, and that my life as her daughter in a lesbian relationship would destroy the whole family. Mom didn't agree with them or believe it. She was glad to leave such mean and judgmental people behind us."

"That must have hurt all of you. What about your sisters? How did they handle it?" Crystal asked.

"It was hard. Kids from that church's youth group were aware we had been thrown out of the church and why. We were ridiculed at school too. The first year was difficult, but God got us through it all. He put others in my life, mainly those here in the park that loved and accepted us for who we are. Grace and I would love to get married one day but we know that can't happen easily. It will all depend on which state we live in since most still oppose same-sex marriage."

"So Colton, what do think about all of this and what they've been through?"

"I love these two girls. They are great friends to me. We accept, support, and encourage each other in our journeys, All this hate talk with Bible verses flying everywhere . . . I just don't see Jesus acting this way. What I find interesting is if it were so wrong, so evil for two people of the same sex to truly love and be committed to each other, why did He never say anything against it in any of the Gospels?"

"It really saddens my heart, and I believe God's heart too, the judgments and condemnation placed upon the gay community in the name of God."

"Yep, I'm with you, Colton," Crystal said.

"Thanks Crystal for letting us tell you our story. I can see God's love in you by the way you genuinely care for us and don't judge us," Grace said for the two of them.

"What about you, Crystal? What's your story? We'd

love to get to know you better,” Faith said.

“I would love to share my story with you. It’s rather boring compared to yours,” Crystal said.

Colton stepped in, “Sorry to break this up girls but it’s almost one o’clock. Time to head back to campus. Maybe we can all do coffee sometime?”

“I’m up to that,” Crystal replied.

“Count us in. With winter starting to set in, more indoor get-togethers over something warm to drink sounds wonderful. Just let us know when and where,” Grace said.

“Will do. Let’s go!” Colton said with a big smile as he put his arms around Grace and Faith while they walked back to school.

# 7

## *Let's Meet*

“Hi, Mom, I’m home,” Crystal yelled as she walked in her house after school.

“I’m upstairs, honey,” Mary answered back.

Crystal went into the kitchen and grabbed a snack of peanut butter on crackers and some juice. Within minutes Mary came down the steps and joined her daughter in the dining room.

“How was your day, Crystal?”

“It was great. I did well on my English test this morning. My geometry test is tomorrow afternoon, but it should be easy.”

“Glad to hear that. Did you go to the park today during your lunch break?”

“Yes, I did, and Colton introduced me to Grace and Faith. They are two really sweet girls. They shared with me some of their stories. Faith grew up in Brazil for the first 12-13 years of her life. Her dad was killed in a plane crash doing some missionary work in the Amazon.”

“How sad,” Mary added in.

“Grace was born to her parents as a surprise. For 15 years they tried getting pregnant but nothing worked. Once they gave up and started to pursue adoption, her mom got pregnant. Don’t you just love her name, Mom?”



And Faith has two sisters, Hope and Charity.”

“All of those names are beautiful, Crystal, just like yours.”

“Ohhhh, Mom,” Crystal said rolling her eyes.

“Grace and Faith are the first two girls I have ever talked to who are lesbians. They shared with me their discovery of liking girls over boys and how they met at school two years ago. They seem to really love each other, but it hasn’t been easy. They have had many kids ridicule them at church and school.

“Faith’s mom and her family were thrown out of their church because she didn’t believe the Bible was against the relationship Grace and Faith had. It has been awful how they have been treated not only by their peers at school but by those calling themselves Christians. That makes me mad!”

“I can hear the anger in your voice, Crystal.”

“They were so kind and accepting of me. They didn’t have to open up and share anything that personal with me, but they did. They took the risk, hoping I wouldn’t be another gay basher.”

“I’m proud of you, Crystal, for loving and accepting them well today. God has placed such great compassion in your heart for others who don’t get to experience that often from others.”

“Is Anna home?”

“She’s already next door at Bonnie and Betty’s.”

“Since it’s getting to be winter now and the weather isn’t that great, especially the cold temperatures, what do you think if I asked Bonnie and Betty if they would open their home up for me and my friends to meet at once a week? I’d ask you and Dad to let my friends come here, but I know Dad wouldn’t go for that.”

“I think that’s a great idea. I bet they would love to

open their home up to your friends. They know what it's like to be misunderstood and mistreated by others. You're right about your dad. He's not ready yet to accept your friends. I would love to help Bonnie and Betty by providing some snacks or drinks for these get-togethers. Let Bonnie and Betty know that, ok?" Mary said.

"I'm heading over there now to ask them," Crystal said as she ran out the back door.

For those of you who haven't read *Journeys of the Heart Mary's Story*, Bonnie and Betty are introduced there. You'll find out a lot about their journey if you read the book. Both ladies are quickly approaching 60 years old and best described as two amazingly loving, grandmotherly types. They have been together as a couple for over 25 years. Crystal and her sister Anna like hanging out there often after school, indulging in the world's greatest homemade desserts.

Bonnie and Betty have also been like a mom to Mary over the years, especially this past year when they reached out by loving her so well when she was facing some difficult realities about her childhood sexual abuse.

Crystal walked in next door and announced, "Bonnie, Betty, it's me."

Within moments Betty came walking out to the porch area.

"Hi, Crystal," Betty said as she gave her a big hug and kiss on the forehead. "Anna is finishing up a chocolate chip pumpkin bar that Bonnie just made this afternoon. They are still warm. Would you like one with a dollop of vanilla ice cream?"

"Boy, would I. I could smell them the minute I walked in. They're making me drool! You and Bonnie make the

best desserts. I think Anna and I tell you that every time we come over.”

“Hi, sis!” Anna responded.

“Hi, Crystal,” Bonnie chimed in.

“These pumpkin bars are wonderful as always,” Anna said half mumbling while chewing her last bite.

As Crystal sat down to start devouring her pumpkin bar with ice cream, she excitedly shared with Betty and Bonnie about her new friends at school.

“I’ve wanted to tell you about some new friends I met at school. During my lunch break, I walk down to the park and there is a group of kids from my school that hang out there. Most of them are viewed as the outcasts on campus and often made fun of by a lot of their peers,” Crystal said.

“I’m glad you have found some new friends, Crystal. I’m also sorry to hear that your new friends seem to be rejected by most of their classmates,” Betty said.

“I’m curious why you chose to become a part of this group at the park?” Bonnie asked.

“I didn’t share with either of you the time I had with Mom recently, where God met me and healed my heart deeply.

“I told Mom how Grandpa had touched me in ways that were inappropriate as a little girl. I had somewhat forgotten about it until his recent death. I started having flashbacks and nightmares and told Mom about them. She asked God to help me and He did.

“The main thing I noticed different about me after that encounter with God was a feeling to want to befriend the kids at school others make fun of the most. I found out these kids meet at the park during the noon lunch break, so I walked down there one day. I was a little scared not knowing if they would accept me. Boy was I

surprised. They not only welcomed and accepted me, but they have been so real with me about their own lives. They have shared some very personal things about their pasts. They discussed their struggles at home, at church, and with other kids at school.”

“They sound like a fine group of teenagers, Crystal. I know I am speaking for Betty and myself when I say that we can relate to some of their struggles. What we have had to experience in our adult lives hasn’t been much different. It’s sad to hear, though, that as teens they have to face the ridicule from their own peers. Not being seen and heard hurts our hearts deeply,” Bonnie said.

Betty spoke up with a question, “With winter setting in, isn’t that going to make meeting in the park difficult? You know how the temperatures get in Bozeman in December. It is usually only in the 20s or 30s during the day and often in the single digits at night.”

“I’ve been thinking about that also. I was wondering if we might be able to meet here at your place from time to time, either some weeknight or maybe a weekend day. I don’t want to assume anything, but I know you would love these kids once you meet them,” Crystal said with enthusiasm.

“We would love to open our home to your friends,” Betty said while she looked at Bonnie. “If these kids are in anyway like yourself, which it sounds like they are, we would love to meet them and have them over.”

“Thank you so much,” Crystal said as she went over and gave Betty and Bonnie a big hug. “Even though on the outside my friends may not quite look like everyone else, their hearts are like gold.”

“When can we meet them?” Bonnie asked with delight.

“I will see Colton tomorrow at school and mention my

idea to him. I'll get back to you soon.

"What do you think it might look like, us meeting here at your home?" Crystal asked the ladies.

"If it's during the week, maybe after dinner, say around seven, we open the doors. Betty and I will provide some snacks and drinks. How about we wrap it up by 10? We are two old ladies you know," Bonnie said with a snicker.

"And if it is a weekend day or evening, we're very flexible and can plan that on short notice. You know we like cooking, so we would be willing to provide lunch or dinner. By the way, how many might you be expecting to come?" Betty asked.

"I'm guessing 5-10 kids. I've only met six so far, but I'm sure there are others. I can ask Colton. He knows everyone. Maybe we could help with the snacks. Mom said she would like to." Crystal said.

"We will let your mom know if we need her to provide anything. Maybe she can provide drinks and we will do all the food," Betty said.

"I'll tell her. I need to go now and work on my homework but thanks for the pumpkin bar and your willingness to open your house to my friends," Crystal said.

"We look forward to meeting everyone. Let us know what date works out best," Betty said with a smile.

Crystal couldn't wait until the next day to see Colton so she called him. He answered his phone.

"Hi, Crystal. What's up?" Colton asked.

"I just got home from being next door at my neighbor's house. Their names are Bonnie and Betty. They have been like grandmas to me my whole life.

"I was telling them about you and the other kids in the park. They said they would love meeting everyone so

## 64 Crystal's Story

I asked if they would open their home up to the group sometime,” Crystal said with great excitement in her voice.

“That sounds good to me. The weather is starting to get colder now. Were you thinking a weeknight?” Colton asked.

“They were open to anytime. They said if it was during the week, coming over after dinner around seven until about ten. They’ll provide some snacks and drinks. They make the best desserts. Seriously, they should be on one of those TV cooking shows.

“They sound like two very giving ladies. I can see why you are close to them.”

“Oh, they are so giving. They are like the grandmas I never had as a child. My sister and I go over to their house most days after school to hang out and, of course, get a snack.

“So do you think the other kids will want to do this? It will give us more time to spend together and get to know each other.”

“I can’t say for sure, but I think they will. Alexis may not want to be confined in such close proximity. She likes her space the park provides,” Colton said.

“I especially hope Alexis will come. I really want to get to know her and let her see that I genuinely care for her. I can so easily see past her hard exterior. Her heart is actually quite tender.”

“I hear you, Crystal. Alexis does have a very tender heart. I’ve seen glimpses of it. She is a beautiful girl!

“Let’s ask the kids at the park tomorrow if anyone would like to do what you suggested.”

“Sounds like a plan, Colton. How about we suggest this Thursday evening?” Crystal asked.

“Thursday works for me,” Colton replied.

# 8

## *Why Do They Hate Us?*

The next day as Crystal walked to the park during the noon hour, she saw everyone she had met so far were there: Colton, Savannah, Dylan, Grace, Faith, and even Alexis. Most of them were huddled together talking. Alexis was sitting by herself on a picnic table about 50 feet away and having a cigarette.

Crystal joined the group and said, "Hey everyone."

"Hi, Crystal," several responded.

"I've been talking about your idea of meeting at your neighbor's home possibly this Thursday evening," Colton said looking at Crystal.

"Betty and Bonnie are two of the sweetest ladies you will ever meet. When I had told them about each of you, they asked me if they could meet you," Crystal said enthusiastically.

"I would like to meet them too," Grace and Faith both replied.

"They sound cool," Dylan said.

"Colton, have you said anything to Alexis about getting together Thursday?" Crystal asked.

"Not yet. She's been sitting over there by herself the whole time since I got here. I'll talk with her."

"So what time Thursday?" Savannah asked.

"Seven would work well for Betty and Bonnie. Don't

eat much dinner because, I guarantee you, they will have enough desserts and snacks to count as a whole meal," Crystal explained.

"Are Bonnie and Betty lesbians?" Grace asked

"I think so. I have never come out and asked them that. I know they have been together ever since I've known them. They commented to me how they could relate to some of the hassles we face as a group," Crystal answered.

"What do you mean 'we' face? Who hassles you, Crystal? You are kind of the odd-ball here among us," Dylan said with his usual bluntness.

"Actually, you are somewhat right, Dylan. On campus I used to not get harassed much at all, but since I have started hanging out with you and the rest here in the park, the hassles are starting to come at me too. Girls from my church youth group see me in the halls and won't even speak to me anymore. My dad was quick to judge Colton when he met him last week, just because of his tattoos and piercings. I know it may not be much compared to what you have had to endure, Dylan, but it does hurt," Crystal said quietly.

"I wasn't getting down on you, Crystal. I'm sorry," Dylan said sincerely.

"I like you guys, all of you. Even though we have only known each other for a couple weeks, I like hanging out and getting to know you. I want to spend more time with you than what we have here in the park. I'm glad you want to meet at Bonnie and Betty's. Their home is a safe haven for me, safer than my own home," Crystal said.

"Thanks for joining in with us, Crystal. We don't mean to be an exclusive group that meets in the park. We are actually quite open to anyone joining us as long as they leave their judgments elsewhere.



“We used to meet on campus in the cafeteria but that didn’t work out. Too many kids hassled us. Then we tried hanging out in the parking lot, but that didn’t work either. So we ended up here in the park.

“I’m excited to meet your neighbors, Crystal. Thanks for telling them about us,” Savannah said.

“I’m going to go talk with Alexis and tell her about Thursday night,” Colton said.

“I hope she comes,” Crystal said.

“I do too, Crystal. She has been showing up here at the park for most of the past year but tends to be stand-offish. We give her space because we respect her and care for her. We know you can’t force a relationship to happen,” Grace said.

“Colton is the only one she talks to and we’re okay with that. The home setting may be too confined for her Thursday night, but we’ll see. I’m going to ask God to give her the strength to come and be with us.” Faith added.

“So I’ll see everyone Thursday night at seven. I won’t be here in the park tomorrow because I have a dentist appointment during lunch. Bye, everyone. I need to get back early to study a little before my Geometry test at one,” Crystal stated.

“Bye, Crystal,” everyone said.

On Thursday night, Crystal arrived early at Bonnie and Betty’s, anxiously waiting to see who would show up. Bonnie and Betty didn’t hold back and prepared three delicious desserts, as well as chips and salsa, cheese and crackers, and a variety of drinks. The doorbell rang and Crystal went to answer it.

“Hi, Grace and Faith. Come on in!” Crystal said with a big smile.

“I hope it is okay that we brought two other friends

with us, John and Paul,” Grace said sheepishly.

“Hi John, Hi Paul. Everyone is welcomed. There are no limits here. As long as everyone can fit in the family room, Betty and Bonnie won’t mind,” Crystal said confidently.

Next in was Colton and not too far behind him were Savannah and Dylan. Crystal took everyone around and introduced them to Bonnie and Betty. Of course, Bonnie and Betty greeted each one with a big smile and hug, like any loving grandmother would do. The only one not present was Alexis. This didn’t surprise Colton, but Crystal was saddened by this fact.

Everyone went through the dining room where an array of snacks was spread out on the table. Each person grabbed a plate full of food, a drink, and found a seat in the family room.

Bonnie spoke first, “Betty and I would like to welcome each and every one of you into our home. We have known Crystal ever since she was born and have watched her grow up into an amazing young lady. She has told us about each of you and we receive each of you as we would her. Our home is your home. Betty and I hope this is the first night of many more like it to come. Thank you for being here.”

“Didn’t I tell you they were two of the greatest ladies you’d ever meet?” Crystal said proudly.

“Thank you for opening your home to us,” Savannah said.

“Yeah, thanks. And your desserts are kick-ass,” Dylan said in his usual style.

For the next 30 minutes, everyone enjoyed sitting around, talking to one another, and eating their snacks. Colton was sitting near Crystal when the doorbell rang.

“Who might that be?” Crystal wondered.

Betty answered the door, "Come on in and join us. My name is Betty," as she gave the girl at the door a big hug.

Colton and Crystal saw it was Alexis and went over to welcome her. "Thank you, God," Faith said to herself.

Alexis didn't care for the focus being on her in the moment, but she was able to receive the warm greetings from everyone. Bonnie gave her a hug and showed her the snacks. Alexis put a few things on her plate, grabbed a drink, and came in to sit down with the rest of the group.

Colton looked at Alexis and smiled. She actually smiled back ever so slightly.

"I have a question," Dylan spoke out rather bluntly. "Why do most people hate us?"

Everyone in the room was caught off guard and an awkward silence filled the space. They looked first at Dylan and then glanced around at each other, waiting to see who might say something next. Bonnie and Betty sat there almost in tears. They could hear the pain behind Dylan's words. They could tell he sincerely wanted to know the answer to the question he posed.

To everyone's surprise, Alexis spoke first. "We aren't like them," she said.

Now everyone was in shock because Alexis said something. Besides Colton, she hadn't spoken anything to anyone for the past year.

"I agree, Alexis. We aren't like everyone else, are we? And yet we are," Colton said.

"Why do we have to all look the same, act the same, and believe the same things to be accepted?" Dylan added in.

"May I ask something?" Bonnie said. "How many of you have the same question Dylan just asked?"

Everyone's hands went up.

"How many of you feel hated or judged because of

how you look?" Bonnie asked.

Alexis, Dylan, Savannah, and Colton's hands went up. Bonnie asked a second question, "How many of you feel hated or judged for what you believe in?"

Everyone's hand went up except for Crystal's.

"So Crystal, you feel everyone likes you no matter what?" Dylan asked.

With tears in her eyes, Crystal said, "No, Dylan. The only thing I am feeling judged for is choosing to love you guys and hang out with you. What is so wrong with that? I don't understand that response."

Silence was in the room again and tension was in the air. These were some heavy questions to be thrown on the table so quickly tonight. Who was going to speak next?

Colton began to respond, "Why do most of the kids at our school want everyone to conform to a certain external look, be it hair style, make-up, jewelry, or the clothes we wear? Wouldn't it be boring if we all looked the same? And so what if I choose to have tattoos and piercings? Why do I seem to get from most kids at school this idea that we need to conform to one specific standard, theirs? And it's not enough that we don't look like everyone else. Without even asking us, they conclude things incorrectly and make false assumptions about who we are as people because of our external appearance. That really pisses me off!"

"I am so tired of being judged by others who are totally ignorant of whom I am," Dylan said.

"I hear you, man," Colton said looking at Dylan.

"For Faith and I, we can go along for quite a while without anyone judging us, but when they find out we are lesbians, it's like we suddenly have this contagious disease. We can't even find a church to attend because people have been so quick to label and judge us. They

treat us like lepers. I feel we have this big letter L plastered on our chest,” Grace said.

Faith added in, “Why does our choosing to love one another cause so many to completely freak out? People who appear at first to accept us do a complete about face once they find out we are lesbians. They can go from loving us to hating us within the time it takes to snap your fingers.”

“We know how that feels, girls. We’ve gotten that same treatment for the past 30+ years we’ve been together, especially from religious people,” Betty said with great empathy.

“We can relate too,” John and Paul said simultaneously.

“We aren’t a couple, but because we are gay, it’s like there’s a target on each of our backs with a big capital letter G in the bull’s eye that many shoot at regularly. I fully understand why most teens don’t come out about their gayness because of the ridicule and persecution they know they will experience. It can be very painful emotionally,” John said.

“It is sad how many gay and lesbian teens are bullied and even commit suicide because of the verbal and physical assaults against them,” Betty said.

“Way too often in our society,” Bonnie added in.

“I am so sorry to hear how all of you are so regularly mistreated. I didn’t realize it was that bad,” Crystal said.

“Get used to it. As long as you choose to hang out with us, you’re gonna feel the heat, even from those you least expect it. Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Dylan said.

“I am confused and frustrated about all that I’m hearing regarding the ways we get treated by those who call themselves Christians. I thought God was all about loving us for who we are and we are to love others in a similar fashion. Their hurtful words aren’t anywhere

near the love that I know God is found in,” Crystal said with such angst.

“I don’t get it either, Crystal,” Colton piped in. “I know people look often at the externals but God looks at our hearts. I ask Him every day to give me eyes to see people’s hearts, to see past their clothes, their make-up, their attitude, their belief system, or even their possessions. All of those things are so fleeting, so shallow, and so temporary. Our heart is the essence of who we are. That’s what I want to see in others, who God created them to be.”

“I want to see people the same way, Colton. And I want others to see the real me, not just my looks or my brains,” Crystal said.

“You two make it sound like God truly cares about the real person. Why is it that almost every supposed Christian I have ever met isn’t like their supposedly loving God? Savannah’s parents are the perfect example of total hypocrisy. They are the most freakin two-faced people I have ever met. I can’t even stand to be around them because they make me feel so much lesser than them. It sucks. I love Savannah so much and can’t stand her religious parents. God help me!” Dylan said with frustration.

“Crystal, I know I may be stepping out of line here but might I suggest something?” Betty asked.

“Go right ahead,” Crystal replied.

“I have so appreciated the level of honesty and transparency each of you has shown tonight in this discussion. I don’t know if I have ever been around a group of teens like yourselves.

“It appears many of you have had some pretty negative experiences from those who call themselves Christians. I was wondering if you might allow a friend of ours to join us the next time we get together. His name is

Tom. I think you'll like him. He's closer to my age than yours, but he might help with some of your questions. If Tom were here, he would describe himself as one who loves Jesus but can't stand Christianity. He was a part of religious Christianity for almost 30 years but came up against a lot of the same negative experiences you are now facing. The Jesus he knows now is the nonreligious Jesus. What do you think? Would you like it if he came to share his story with us?"

"Tom helped my mom earlier this year through some very bad things that were destroying her life. She not only was healed up from a lot of the sexual abuse she experienced as a child from her dad, but she has also started living from her heart for the first time. My mom is discovering who she is, who God made her to be, and I am on the receiving end of her love being expressed to me like never before. Tom is the gentlest, kindest, and most sincere man I have ever met. I'd love to hear what he has to say," Crystal said.

"Sounds good to us," Grace said for her and Faith.

"We're in," Paul and John added.

"Okay," Savannah said.

"As long as he doesn't try to shove religion down my throat, I'll hear him out. But if he does try to shove religion or the Bible down my throat, he'd better look out. I'm not afraid to speak my mind," Dylan said.

"Tom sounds like my kind of man," Colton said.

"We'll see. I can't stand pushy, religious, Bible thumpers," Alexis added.

Bonnie looked at Alexis and said, "Dear one, Tom is none of what you just described. Your heart will be spoken to by his. Betty and I so appreciated his love expressed to us and others during times we were with Crystal's mom earlier in the year."

"I'll contact him and ask if he'd be willing to join us

next time. When might that be?" Betty asked. "Next Thursday night, same time?"

"That will work for me," Colton said first.

The rest of the teens nodded their heads yes.

"And if there are others you can think of who might like to join us, either at the park or next Thursday, invite them. Everyone is welcomed!" Crystal said in her bubbly way.

I guess I'll be getting an invitation soon from Betty to come to their next get together on Thursday. I look forward to it.