

SHARED *Blessings*



**LESLEA
WAHL**

Welcome! The following short story is written as an introduction to characters in two of my Young Adult novels. Jake and Sophie appear in *The Perfect Blindside* and the upcoming *Extreme Blindside*. Ryan and Josie's story can be found in *An Unexpected Role*.

I have had a lot of fun with these four characters. In fact, they appear together in a few other short stories—*More Precious Than Gold* and *Unlikely Witnesses*. For those who love these characters, here is the chronological order is all of the stories:

Shared Blessings – the winter of their sophomore year of high school

An Unexpected Role – the summer between their sophomore and junior years

The Perfect Blindside – the fall of their junior year of high school

Extreme Blindside – the winter of their junior year of high school

More Precious Than Gold – the summer between their junior and senior years

Unlikely Witnesses – the summer between their junior and senior years

I hope you enjoy *Shared Blessings*!

Leslea Wahl

Shared Blessings

Leslea Wahl

Jake

DAD GLANCES OVER HIS SHOULDER as he pulls the SUV onto the highway. “I should have had you drive, Jake. You need to get your driving hours in.”

From the backseat, I glance out the window as we whiz past the vacant, snowy cornfields. “I’ll take a shift after we stop for lunch.” Plenty of time remains to get my hours in. I’m probably over the required amount already. These weekly drives from Kansas to the Colorado Rockies for training have made that task easy.

Mom looks over her shoulder. “I still can’t believe your new coach wanted you to participate in this event.”

“Me, either.” The last few months have been crazy. My passion for snowboarding jumped to a whole new level. We were all surprised when the coach I’d been working with for years suggested I start training with one of the elite halfpipe coaches. Training with this new coach throughout the fall proved an amazing experience. Being with him and the top athletes he works with...a dream come true. But when he suggested I participate in this weekend’s event—well, shocked is an understatement. I mean, the top of the top snowboarders will all be there. The Grand Prix is, after all, the qualifying event for the upcoming Olympics.

I shake my head at that thought. The *Olympics*. Of course, there’s no chance I’ll go. Only the top-three-scoring guys will make the team and represent the country while competing for the gold. But since Coach thinks I’m about ready to start riding at some of the elite competitions, he suggested attending this weekend’s event to get a little more experience. I’m stoked he thinks I’m ready to start competing with the top riders and also beyond excited to meet the athletes I’ve grown up admiring. This will be an epic weekend.

“Did you remember to bring your homework?” Once again, Mom turns her head to look at me.

“Yep.” I pat the backpack lying next to me on the seat.

Her eyes shift to the small brown bag on my other side. “What’s that?”

I pick up the velvety pouch. “Rick gave it to me. He said it’s kinda like a good luck charm.”

“Oh, that was nice of him.” She turns back to watch the black ribbon of highway in front of us. “Which audio book shall we listen to?”

“Anything.”

“How about *The Great Gatsby*?” she asks.

“Sure.” My dad and I answer in unison. Mom’s really the only one who cares what we listen to anyway.

As she switches from the radio to the audio book, I open the drawstring bag and turn it upside down. A gold cross and two notes spill out onto my lap. I unfold the lined paper to read Rick’s messy handwriting. His penmanship is as bad as it was in grade school.

Jake,

So proud of you, man. My aunt gave me this cross after my Confirmation. She found it in some antique store when she was traveling in Ireland. It’s a blessing that is supposed to be shared. So, I’m passing it on to you—a blessing for the upcoming race. Then you are to give it to someone you think could use a blessing. The attached note explains it better. It’s not that you need any extra help, but I wanted you to know that my thoughts are with you. Do us proud.

Rick

I rub my fingers along the intricately carved cross. Interconnecting loops, like a chain, outline the cross, and a cool design with swords and a shield adorns the center. Rick’s not usually the sentimental type, so the gift really means a lot. The two of us, along with our third cohort, John, have been buds for as long as I remember. Now we’re in high school and still as close as ever. They’ve been so cool the last few years, when I spent most weekends traveling to Colorado. I was gone a lot, but they always made me feel included. I’m lucky to have them.

I open the note card next and read the feminine, loopy handwriting.

Congratulations! You are the recipient of a specially blessed cross originally from Ireland.

This item has a unique history. I'm told that long ago, a princess gave it to a beloved friend. She had the cross blessed before the friend left on a long journey and gave him specific instructions. When the time came, he should hand off the blessed cross to someone else who might need a special blessing as they traveled through life. This cross is meant to be a reminder that someone cares and is praying for you. Just as you are blessed with special prayers, you in turn must pass the blessing on to someone you would like to pray for. Someone you feel could benefit from a special blessing. Then that person will do the same. Somehow, this cross made its way back to Ireland after many years of world travel. Let us continue this beautiful tradition. May God's blessings fill you with love, friendship, and wonderful moments on your journey through life.

What a cool idea. I rub my fingers along the intricate carvings and wonder how many places this cross has been.

* * * *

I stand at the base of the halfpipe, completely overwhelmed. The crowd is massive. None of the other competitions I've been to compare to this.

A hand clasps my shoulder and I turn to see Coach. "Jake, I'm glad you could make it."

"Hi, Coach. Thank you so much for letting me be part of this."

"You've got to start getting more experience sometime. Might as well be now. It's a great opportunity to watch the top competitors. You can learn a lot."

Before I can respond, his attention shifts, and he waves someone over. I follow his gaze to see Tommy Henderson walking toward us. *Tommy Henderson!* I've had this guy's posters hanging in my room since forever. One of the best parts of working with Coach is that he is also Tommy's coach. I've already met Max and Gus, the other two boarders who work with him, but I hadn't met Tommy. He'd been in Europe for a few months, traveling between competitions.

He strolls over and grasps Coach's hand. I stare at his signature spiky hair and goatee, stunned that I'm actually meeting my idol.

Tommy's gaze shifts to mine. "You must be the new Young Gun. Trying to unseat the

master?” His breath forms a cloud in the cold air.

I gulp. “Oh. No, sir.”

He laughs. “Just joking, kid. But hey, no calling me *sir*. It’s Tommy.” He extends his hand.

I’m glad I’m wearing gloves, so he doesn’t have to know how sweaty my hands are.

Soon Max and Gus join us. Even though our sport is an individual one, we are now considered teammates since we all work with the same coach and will be training together.

“Glad you’ve all finally met,” Coach tells us. “I have an announcement. I’ve agreed to take on one other snowboarder.”

“Another newbie?” Max nudges me.

Coach shakes his head. “This rider is quite experienced but thinks it would be of benefit working with me, and with all of you.”

Gus glances around at the other snowboarders milling around. “Who is it?”

Personally, I wouldn’t mind if it was Matt Brown. He’s closer to my age than any of the other top riders. Someone to pal around with might be nice.

Coach grins. “You won’t find your new teammate here. She’s not competing in the Men’s Halfpipe.”

“*She*?” Max says, exchanging a look with Gus.

Wasn’t expecting that.

Tommy tilts his head. “Rachael Edwards? I’ve been telling her for months that she should work with you.”

Coach confirms with a nod.

“Do we have to clean up our language?” Max asks.

Tommy playfully punches him. “Don’t worry about Rachael. She’ll have no trouble standing up for herself.”

Coach claps his hands. “Okay. Let’s see what happens today and who might be making the Olympic team. Good luck to you all. Jake, you’re in the first set of riders. You should get to the top of the run.”

Tommy slaps my shoulder. “Just have fun, kid.”

I grab my board and set off toward the starting area. I expect my nerves to jangle but since there’s zero chance that I will place anywhere in the top ten, I’m surprisingly chill—just stoked to be here and to watch these guys.

* * * *

The day flies by. My first of three runs is probably the best I’ve ever thrown down. The praise from my parents and Coach feels great. I watch all the other riders, in awe of their runs. The level of tricks is sick. A few of the guys crash and burn. I figure their nerves got the best of them.

With the second set of runs, things start to get interesting. I manage another solid performance. When I come down after my turn on the halfpipe, I hear some murmurings. The halfpipe world is a small community, people are probably trying to figure out who I am. This second round of runs starts to knock people out of contention, including Gus. Poor guy. Tommy, Matt Brown, Harris Redmond, Max, and Flip Barkley lead the pack. I’m not out of contention yet. I find that both satisfying and downright unbelievable.

The third round begins, and a buzz of excitement rolls over the crowd. I’m in the first group that’s anywhere close to the top ten, but it’s still an impossible longshot. I get ready for my run, bursts of electricity coursing through my nervous system. This is my last run with these top contenders—for now. Time to give it all I’ve got.

I start down the hill toward the lip of the halfpipe, then pick up speed and shoot up the wall. Flying off the edge, I begin the twists and turns that always wow the crowd. My landing is solid, and I rocket up the other side. I’m higher than usual above the coping edge but I focus on my trick and refuse to panic. I spot the landing then continue to the other side, momentum shooting me far above the halfpipe and watching crowd.

No doubt my mom is clinging to Dad’s arm. She hates this last trick because of the blindside landing. I nail it though. As I make my way to the waiting crowd, I’m stunned by the roar of the spectators. I know I had a good run, but the deafening cheers are far more enthusiastic than I

expected.

The scores are posted, and I stare at my name on the board. Has there been some mistake in calculations? Because if these scores are correct, then I've narrowed the gap with the top contenders.

Tommy rushes over and wraps his arm around my neck. "Dang, kid. I may have underestimated you."

All I can do is grin; no words even come to mind.

I find my parents in the crowd, and we watch the remainder of the competition together. Max falls on his final landing, taking him out of contention. By some miracle, my name doesn't move off the top five list. I sit at number four behind Tommy, Flip Barkley, and Matt Brown. Only the top three riders will make the Olympic team, so I'm out of the running for that, but still jazzed that I've placed so high. This personal achievement is shocking. Maybe that blessing from Rick helped after all.

The overwhelming energy in the air, along with jangled nerves, have messed with many of the athletes. It's painful to watch as top riders fall, slip, and struggle with landings. The three guys ahead of me on the scoreboard all have phenomenal runs and the results remain unchanged. Tommy has clinched the number one spot. Flip is second and Matt is third. Our Olympic team is set.

As the crowd begins to disperse, I notice Matt talking with his coach. They seem to be arguing about something. That's odd. He made the team, after all. I start stuffing gear into my bag, keeping one eye on Matt, who turns and rides the lift up to the starting area. Is he taking another run?

Sure enough. I stand next to my parents and watch him adjust his board and helmet, then glide down toward the halfpipe. He must want to improve some aspect of his score. I can't imagine what. The guy looked solid.

The remaining spectators watch, as well. Matt's tricks seem sharp. He flies up the wall and pulls himself into a series of twists.

Then it all goes wrong.

As he's plummeting back toward the ground, his leg smashes into the wall, ricocheting him into the middle of the halfpipe. I flinch, not sure which is more terrifying, the sight of Matt lying limp and clearly injured, or the horrified screams around me.

My mom clings to my arm. "Oh, my gosh."

In moments, emergency personnel swarm around the downed snowboarder. He's loaded onto a toboggan and taken away.

God, please help him to be all right.

* * * *

Later that night as we relax in our hotel room and relive my runs, Dad's phone rings.

"Hello? Oh, hi." His eyes flick to me. "Yes, he's here. I'll put you on speaker so we can all hear you." He taps the screen then lays the phone on the bed. "Okay, Coach, go ahead."

"Jake, how're you doing?" Coach's gravelly voice fills the room.

"Great."

"You were amazing today, kid. I'm proud of your focus and performance."

"Thank you, sir. Have you heard anything about Matt?"

"Yes. That's why I'm calling. He apparently wanted to fix a little something that was off in one of his tricks. I just heard that he broke a leg and will be unable to take his place on the team."

I shake my head, hurting for him. Having that Olympic dream snatched away must be devastating.

"Jake." Coach's voice draws me back into the conversation. "Do you know what this means?"

Mom's hand covers her mouth. My mind tries to keep up, but nothing registers through the shock of it all.

Coach continues. "You are now the third snowboarder to represent the United States in the upcoming Olympics."

I stare at the phone, not quite grasping the enormity of Coach's announcement.

Dad wraps his arm around my shoulders, then says a few more things to Coach. I feel like I'm underwater. A roar of noise makes it hard to concentrate, and impossible to understand their conversation.

The Olympics? *Me?* This can't be real.

* * * *

"Jake, you ready to go?" Mom pokes her head out of the hotel bathroom.

"Yeah, almost." I turn back to the note I'm writing at the desk in our hotel room.

Matt,

I'm so sorry about your crash. You are such an amazing snowboarder and having this happen must be devastating. I don't know if you're religious at all, but I wanted to give this gift to you to let you know you're in my prayers. I hope you'll have a fast recovery and we can meet up at some events soon.

Jake Taylor

I stuff the note into the bag. "Okay, I'm set."

Dad zips his suitcase shut. "You sure you want to stop by the hospital? I'm not sure Matt will be up to seeing anyone."

"I know. He probably doesn't want any visitors, but I'd like to drop this off anyway. Maybe a nurse can deliver it to him or something."

Mom smiles at me. "Your gesture is sweet, but he just had a huge dream ripped away from him. I'm sure it will take him some time to get over."

I stand and reach for my backpack. "I know. It just doesn't feel right to take his spot and not say something."

Dad sinks onto the bed. "I still can't believe it. You're going to the Olympics."

I shake my head. "What a crazy life."

Sophie

“SOPH, ARE YOU AWARE THAT we live in the most boring town in the world? Or at least here in Colorado.” Kate makes the comment while perched on the wooden bleachers in our high school gym. We’re watching our pathetic basketball team scrimmage.

“Can’t disagree.” Through the lens of my camera, I focus on one of the players. “But thank goodness we have an activity to occupy our time.” Last year, when we were eager little freshmen, we both joined the yearbook committee. Remaining active with that this year keeps us busy. We visit all the sports teams and organizations to take photos and write articles for the yearbook.

“True.” She answers through a yawn.

We watch as a younger player trips during a dribbling drill and his basketball rolls across the floor. A fellow teammate tries to avoid him by leaping over his body, but the fallen player picks that exact moment to stand, and soon they are both sprawled across the wooden floor.

Kate shakes her head then looks my way. “Have enough photos? Shall we move on to our next activity?”

“Sure.” I stand and stretch. I let my camera hang from my neck and follow Kate down the bleachers and out the gym doors.

The moment we step into the hallway, a trio of skateboard riders flies past us.

“Hey!” Kate scolds. “We’re walking here!”

One of the skater boys, Chad, brings himself to a stop. He flips long bangs out of his face. “Sorry, dude.”

Kate’s fists settle on her hips. “Do I look like a dude?”

He grins at her. “That would be a negative.” Then he’s off to catch his friends.

She rolls her eyes. “I hate winter around here. No one can hang out outside. We’re all cramped into this one building.”

I nod then lead the way toward the cafeteria to find the cheerleaders. We round the next

corner and are almost trampled by the wrestling team jogging through the halls.

Kate's right. There are way too many people in this building. I keep moving in the direction of the cafeteria while I watch the stragglers scurry after their teammates.

"Soph! Watch out!"

I turn my head but can't stop myself from plowing right into someone. "Watch where you're going!" I snap, even though I was the one with my mind elsewhere. I push away from the solid being in front of me. Instead of coming face to face with some sweaty athlete, my eyes focus on a black shirt and white collar.

I jump back. "Father Scott!"

He laughs. "Hi, Sophie. Are you all right?"

"Oh. Sure. Sorry, I wasn't watching where I was going."

He nods. "I noticed."

My cheeks burn. I'd just yelled at my priest. Is that something I need to confess?

Kate breaks the awkward moment. "Hey, Father. What are you doing here?"

"Principal Carter and I are golf buddies. Just came by to chat with him about what courses we need to hit when the weather improves."

Then it happens. I start to ramble. "Oh! Did you know that Leadville has the highest golf course in America? It's almost two miles above sea level." I bite my lower lip. Blurting out random pieces of information has got to be the most annoying nervous habit ever.

His eyebrows rise. "I was not aware of that."

I grimace. "Well, now you know."

He grins. "I should let you ladies get back to whatever you were doing. Although, I guess you can't do exactly what you were doing since there are no more boys to watch."

My cheeks burn even more. "What? No. We weren't watching them. I mean, we were, but just because they were in the way."

He laughs. "Anyway, see you both at youth group this week?"

Kate nods. "Sure."

“Absolutely.” I’m still blabbering. “Oh, and again, I’m sorry for smashing into you.”

“No problem.”

He walks away and Kate laughs. “Super smooth, Soph.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, that was embarrassing.” Although not as embarrassing as it would have been if I’d run into our previous priest. Elderly Father Thomas really made me nervous. At least Father Scott was young and super cool.

We finally reach the cafeteria and I pull open one of the double doors. We’re expecting just the cheerleaders but find yet another crowd. In one corner, a group of kids are painting sets for the school play. The robotics team is set up in another corner—although truth be told, the future engineers don’t seem to be working much on their remote-control vehicles. They’re staring at all the girls as they stretch before practice.

“Sophie!” My name echoes through the cafeteria, and everyone looks my way.

I smile at Mitchell, the exuberant friend who announced my arrival. He scurries over to greet me. His bear hug makes it hard to breathe for a moment.

Disgust flickers across one cheerleader’s face. Mallory has the distinction of somehow being the most popular girl in our class as well as the most stuck up.

“Hi, Mitchell,” I manage to squeak once he unwraps his arms from around me.

This is the sweetest kid I’ve ever met. The majority of people in town treat him like everyone else, not caring that he has Down Syndrome. But Mallory doesn’t fit into that category. I glance toward the set design crew that he had been with. “Are you helping with the winter play?”

He nods. “Yeah. We’re painting.”

“Very cool.”

“Do you want to help us?” His eyes light up.

“Thanks, but no. We’re here to take photos of the cheerleaders.”

“Okay.”

I expect him to head back to the set design folks but instead he follows us.

Jemma, the head cheerleader, smiles as we approach. “Hey, Sophie, Kate. Are you here to get

some pictures?”

I nod. “Just continue with your practice and I’ll take a few shots. Kate will jot down some notes. We’ll probably do a spread of the different games and events where you perform, so I’m not sure what pictures we’ll end up using.”

“Sounds good.”

Mallory swishes past us and Mitchell grabs her arm. “That’s pretty.”

He’s looking down at her bracelet. Multi-colored jewels shine under the cafeteria lights. He’s right, it’s a beautiful piece of jewelry. I’m glad his focus is on the bracelet and not on the smoldering anger that transforms the face of its owner.

Mallory yanks her arm out of his grasp. “Why don’t you stay out of my personal space?” Blond hair swoops over her shoulder as she stalks away.

Mitchell looks at me, confusion clouding his face. “Doesn’t she think it’s pretty?”

I pat his shoulder. “I never know what Mallory is thinking. We’ll take a few photos here then come over and get some shots of the sets. Okay?”

“Sure!” He beams and rushes back to continue painting.

Kate holds up her notebook. “Maybe I should write an article about being nice to others. Mallory must have missed that lesson in kindergarten.”

I bite back the snide comment about Mallory that passes through my head. Instead, I smile, raise my camera and begin snapping photos.

* * * *

“Dinner!” Mom’s voice drifts up the stairs.

The thunder of noise Sam makes as he bolts over three steps at a time is ridiculous. How can one little twerp be so loud?

I push away my homework and head down to join the family.

Dad and Sam are waiting at the kitchen table when I get there. Mom joins us, carrying the last plate of spaghetti.

Dad leads the prayer, then Sam dives into his food. I twirl my pasta onto my fork as I watch my brother slurp noodles into his mouth. He makes eating less than appetizing sometimes.

“Sam, slow down.” Mom hands him a napkin.

“How was school?” Dad asks.

Sam answers with a thumbs-up as he chomps on a piece of garlic bread.

I tear my gaze from the culinary disaster. “It was fine. Boring, as always.” What an understatement. “Hey, Dad, when’s your next shift at Breck?” Dad’s a doctor here in Silver Springs but he occasionally works at the Breckenridge ski resort clinic.

“Not for a few weeks. Want to join me the next time I go up?”

“Yeah. Nothing exciting ever happens around here.”

“Oh!” Mom says. “Speaking of exciting, I’ve got some news about Ryan.”

My athletic cousin always seems to have something cool and interesting going on.

“Celeste called. A college out east is interested in Ryan possibly playing for them this summer.”

“College?” He’s my age, a sophomore in high school. How can colleges be interested in him?

She nods. “They often invite high school players to play on their summer teams, but usually no one as young as your cousin.”

“Wow. That’s cool.” I always knew he was good at sports, but I didn’t really know how good he was until he made the varsity baseball team as a freshman. That accomplishment might not be a big deal here, where the coach is lucky to find enough players to even have a team, but everywhere else—it’s huge.

“Maybe you can send him an encouraging note,” Mom suggests.

“Something other than your usual back-handed compliment or joking remark,” Dad adds.

“Hey,” I say. “That’s how Ryan and I show our affection.”

My parents shake their heads.

“Done!” Sam yells. Like eating dinner had been some kind of race.

I stare at his face, smeared with spaghetti sauce. Honestly, how do boys turn from this kind of

mess to the cute teens girls want to date? Not that there are any cute teen boys in this town. None I'd want to go out with, anyway. I've known them all forever and find none of them appealing.

Mom excuses Sam and he plods over to the sink with his dishes in hand.

Finally. Now maybe I can enjoy my dinner without his disgusting distractions.

"Hey, I've got something for you," Dad tells me.

As I finish chewing the bite in my mouth, he reaches toward the kitchen counter and grabs a small, brown drawstring bag. I wipe my hands on a napkin then take the velvety pouch from him.

"Dr. Bennet was up at the Snowboarding Grand Prix event over the weekend," Dad explains. "One of the injured riders tried to throw this away but a nurse rescued it. Dr. Bennet thought you might find it interesting."

I reach into the bag and pull out an intricately-detailed gold cross about the size of my hand. I open the accompanying notecard and read aloud the beautiful calligraphy.

"What a wonderful idea," Mom says.

"Yeah," Dad agrees. "Guess whoever received it last didn't appreciate it, though."

I trace the intricate details on the cross. "What a shame."

"So, I guess you get to start the chain once again," Dad says. "Any idea who you might give it to?"

I shake my head. "No. I'll have to think about that."

"I love the Celtic details." Mom leans in to peer at the cross. "The design in the center looks like a family crest."

Ideas swirl through my head. "Maybe I can search the Internet and find the family it belonged to. The note said she was a princess. How cool would it be to find out more?"

I'm halfway to my room, eager to discover more about the unknown Irish family, when my cell phone rings. It's Mitchell.

"Hey, Mitchell. What's up?"

"Mallory says I stole it."

I enter my room and sit at my desk. "Stole what?"

“Her pretty jewels.”

“Her bracelet? It’s missing?”

“Yeah, and she yelled. Said I took it. In front of everyone. But I didn’t.”

Mallory. How can she be so mean? “Of course, you didn’t. I’ll try to find out what happened. Okay?”

“Thanks, Sophie. You’re good at figuring things out.”

I scroll through my contacts and find Mallory’s number. Hard to believe there was a time, albeit a very short time, when we were friends. Well, *friends* is pushing it. Really just somewhat friendly classmates.

“Sophie,” she answers. “What do you want?”

“Why did you accuse Mitchell of stealing your bracelet?”

“Because he did.”

My eyes roll at the unpleasant sass she always delivers.

“Did you see him take it?”

“No.” She draws the word out. “But you were there when he said how pretty it was. It doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together.”

Good thing Kate’s not in on this conversation. She’d make some comment about Mallory’s lack of genius. I continue my questioning. “When I was there, you were wearing the bracelet. Did you take it off?”

“Well, duh. Doing the moves in our routine with a bangle-y bracelet wouldn’t work. I put it on top of my backpack, in the corner with all the other girls’ bags.”

“Did you check on your backpack at all during practice?”

“No. Why would I?”

I close my eyes. Conversations with Mallory are *so* difficult. “You have no proof that Mitchell stole it. I wish you hadn’t accused him in front of everyone.”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Ask him nicely if he had seen it?” This girl wears on my patience.

“It’s an expensive bracelet. If he doesn’t return it to me first thing in the morning, I will head straight to the principal’s office.” The call ends.

Maybe I’ll make a list of everyone who was in the cafeteria and start interviewing everyone. Maybe someone saw something. But that can wait until later. Right now, I want to find out more about this cross. And I still have to decide who to give it to next.

At my computer, I delve into a search for Irish family crests and soon come across a site with hundreds of them. Within a short time, they all start to look alike. Finally, just as I start to get a little discouraged, I come across a match. *Yes!*

With a surname to go on, I’m able to dig up more information. What I find is fascinating. While not royalty, this was a wealthy family near Limerick. The daughter and her male cousin were the best of friends. They did everything together and dreamed about sailing from Ireland for a life of adventure. But the young lady became sick. The boy vowed to stay in Ireland with her, but she made him promise to travel anyway and live an adventurous life for her. The day he left, she gave him the cross, which the local priest had blessed. The holy object was meant to keep her cousin safe on his journey. Once he arrived, he was to give the cross to someone he met who needed a blessing. This was a way that part of her could travel and also live a life of adventure. During the crossing, a fellow passenger on the ship tried to steal the cross in hopes of impressing a fair maiden. The true owner thwarted the theft and kept his beloved cousin’s wish.

I lean back in my chair, my fingers tracing the details of the cross. Who knew reading this story would solve both of my quandaries?

I flip through the pictures on my camera until I find proof of my suspicion. Then, using the school directory, I place a call to one of the Robotics team members.

“Hello?” A gruff voice answers the phone.

“Jason?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s Sophie Metcalf.”

“Um... okay.”

“I know you took Mallory’s bracelet.”

“What? No way!” he insists. “I’m not a thief.”

“Listen. I have proof. I was taking photos of the cheerleaders practicing and guess what I captured in the background?”

“What?” His voice cracks.

“A little contraption moving across the floor toward the backpacks. Any guesses who appears to be holding the remote control?”

“No.”

“So, my theory is that you took Mallory’s bracelet so you could magically ‘find’ it and come to her rescue. Did you assume she would be so grateful that she would give you the time of day?”

“Umm...”

Boys. “I couldn’t care less about your stupid plan that would never work in a million years because Mallory is too self-absorbed to care. But I do care about Mitchell and can’t believe you let Mallory blame him. So, here’s what’s going to happen. You are going to return the bracelet first thing tomorrow. I don’t really care what you tell her except that you will make sure she knows that Mitchell had nothing to do with it.”

“Okay,” he mumbles.

“And,” I continue, “you will be extra nice to Mitchell because you owe him. If you do all that, then I won’t show Principal Carter my photos.”

“Fine,” he mutters.

I hang up. The boys in this town are so unbelievable. What I wouldn’t give for a new one to move here.

With task number one completed, I turn to my other dilemma—which isn’t really a problem anymore, since I know the answer. I pull out a piece of paper, ready to compose a note. Like the Irish maiden, I know cousins can be more than relatives. They can be friends. I start to write.

Dear Ryan...

Ryan

“HEY, MCNAULTY!”

I turn to see Rip and Ben walking down the hall toward me. *Wonder what they want?* I shut my locker and wait.

Even though we’ve been teammates since last year, when I made the varsity baseball team as a freshman, none of the upperclassmen have given me the time of day. Sure, when I made a great play, they acted like we were best friends. But as soon as the games were over, I was once again an underclassman nobody. Our school and the ridiculous social hierarchy—it’s exhausting. It sure made last year’s baseball season lonely.

When they reach me, I nod in greeting. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Listen.” Rip leans against a neighboring locker. “I’m having some of the guys over tonight and thought you might want to come.”

I glance at my two teammates. Is he serious? He’d invite a lowly sophomore? Maybe he’s reluctantly figured out I’m not going anywhere.

Ben seems to notice my hesitation. “It’s just some of the team. It’ll be chill.”

Rip nods. “Yeah, we figured we should take advantage of a Friday night with no basketball game to attend.”

“Um, yeah, sounds fun.” Can’t miss the chance to actually bond with them.

“Do you need a ride?” Ben asks. “I could swing by and pick you up on the way. Rip lives pretty far out of town. It’s a little hard to find.”

“Sure, that’d be cool.” A license would be so nice. Only another two months. I have no idea how I’ll get home, though, since I’m sure my curfew is much earlier than theirs. I’ll deal with that later—that’s a problem for future Ryan.

Maybe this season will be a good one, after all.

* * * *

“Who’s going to be there?” Mom quizzes as she hands me a plate of cookies.

“Just the team.” I reach for the warm chocolate chip cookies. I might be a little too old for an after-school snack, but there is no way I’m turning down something this delicious.

“But they’re all older.”

“So?” I should’ve known this wouldn’t be easy.

She leans against the granite counter. “Well, that makes me uncomfortable.”

“Mom, it’s the first time they’ve invited me to do something.” I’ve got to convince her.

“Come on. It’s not like it’s a party.”

Her right eyebrow raises. “How do you know?”

“Because they told me it was just the team. Don’t assume the worst. Besides, I’m a good kid.”

Why is she always so suspicious? It’s not like I’ve given her reason to be.

She tilts her head. “Will parents be there?”

“Yeah.” I chomp into a cookie. Will Rip’s parents be around? I have no idea, but there’s no way I’m asking an upperclassman that question. I’d never hear the end of it. Or get invited again.

She bites her lower lip for a moment. “Well, only if you promise to call if anything feels off. I’ll come get you.”

Yes! But then I think about my little sister and her early bedtime. “But what about Annabelle?”

She narrows her eyes. “Since your dad’s out of town, I’ll just wake her and bring her along.” She scrutinizes me for my response. “I mean it. I need to know you will call if there’s a problem.”

Dad’s schedule as an airline pilot is sporadic. Another reason it’ll be great to get my license. “Okay. But Ben told me they just usually all crash there for the night.”

She shakes her head. “Sorry, I don’t feel comfortable with that. Why don’t I just plan on picking you up around eleven?”

Just what I need—my mom coming to pick me up. “That’s okay. I’m sure I can find someone to give me a ride home.” I shoot her my sweet, innocent look. “How about midnight?”

She playfully glares at me. “Eleven-thirty.”

“Deal.”

“Oh!” She claps her hands. “I almost forgot. You got a package.” She reaches across the counter for a bulky manila envelope.

I wipe my hands on my jeans, ignoring the napkin next to my plate, and reach for the envelope. “From who?”

“Sophie.”

Sophie? That’s odd. I don’t think my cousin has ever sent me anything before. I carefully examine the package, not sure I can trust it. I try to remember who pulled the last prank in our ongoing war. Is it her turn to get me back? I don’t think so. As far as I can remember, she had the last laugh over Christmas break when she convinced me to jump in the hot tub. Little did I know it wasn’t heated.

I rip the envelope open and pull out a brown, velvet pouch.

“What’s that?” Mom leans closer.

“I’m not sure.” I peek inside, and then pull out a gold cross with a cool crisscross design on it. At the center of the cross is a family crest or something.

“Wow, that’s pretty,” Mom says.

“Yeah, it’s cool.” I read the notecard, then hand it off to my mom while I unfold Sophie’s note.

Dear Ryan,

I bet you’re wondering why I sent something to you. And I bet you are suspicious of my intentions. I can’t deny that I like having you worried I’m somehow punking you. It makes me rather happy to have that power. But you can relax. I’m actually sending you this because I heard about your chance to play ball for a college team and I wanted to send an extra blessing your way. Our usual display of affection includes one of us pranking the other, but this time I thought I’d actually let you know that someone in Colorado thinks you’re pretty special. Don’t let it go to your head, though, or try to use it against me—or you’ll be sorry.

Your favorite cousin,

Sophie

I pass Sophie's note to my mom.

"That was sweet of her. What a nice idea," she says.

"Yeah, it is." Her blessing and prayers mean a lot. Sophie and I like to give each other grief, but truth be told, we would do anything for each other. I'd never admit it to her but she's actually one of my best friends. I grin. Guess she feels the same way. As I head upstairs to get ready for the evening, I ponder who I should give the cross to next.

* * * *

I smash the ping pong ball across the table.

Ben swings and misses. "Nice shot, McNaulty."

Our ping pong game in Rip's basement has gotten more intense with each serve as we wait for the other guys to show up.

Ben and I continue our close game until voices waft down from upstairs. A high-pitched squeal is followed by laughter.

Ben sets his paddle down. "Sounds like the girls are here."

Girls? "Thought it was just the guys hanging out." I try to sound casual.

Ben grins. "Yeah, that's how it usually starts but then the word tends to spread."

He abandons our game and heads upstairs. I'm left standing alone in Rip's basement, trying to figure out what to do. This evening of chillin' with the team has apparently expanded into a full-blown party.

I head upstairs. Two of the football players carry a silver beer keg through the house to the back porch, where people lean against the icy railing to smoke. I glance around. A few girls are perched on the kitchen island, discussing whose playlist to choose. In the living room, one couple is snuggled together on the couch. Out the front window, more headlights stream down the long drive.

Watching all the commotion makes my stomach twist. I'd always wondered what the cool upperclassmen parties were like. They always sounded epic. But seeing it in person makes me uncomfortable. Things could quickly get out of hand and I want no part of it. This scene is a sharp contrast to how I usually spend my Friday nights, hanging out with the kids from my youth group, playing games, watching movies or, if it's nice outside, playing flashlight tag. The kids in this house would think that was completely lame.

I glance around one more time and know without a shadow of a doubt that this is not my crowd. Could I ever find a way to fit in? Would I *want* to?

But now comes a new dilemma. Do I risk making my teammates mad and make my exit or stay and pretend for one night to be one of them? That might be the easiest solution. But just as I'm trying to convince myself that is the smartest option, I notice some of the lacrosse guys eyeing me. I don't think my teammates would do anything to harm me but there are a lot of upperclassmen here who might find it fun to haze the one sophomore in the crowd. The more they drink, the more appealing that idea might become.

Nope. It's best to leave now before anything bad can happen. But how? I can't call my mom to get me. I'd be ridiculed forever. Besides, I don't know the address. Even if I did, she might never let me go out again if she saw this.

January in Minnesota eliminates walking home. I'd freeze to death. I remember passing a gas station at the turnoff to Rip's road. If I can make it that far, I'll have a location and cross streets when I call someone to get me—a friend or a rideshare car or, as a last resort, my mom.

Music blares and a group of girls begin to dance. One of them spins in a circle, beer sloshing out of her cup. Yep. Time to get out of here.

I grab my jacket and then stop. Is it best to sneak out or fess up? No one would probably miss me. But what if they did? It might make things worse in the future if some of the team decides to make a big deal of me disappearing from a party and want to teach me a lesson. Ugh. Why is this school so horrible? People can be so cruel if you're not part of the cool group.

My dad's words of wisdom come to me. He always says it's best to just tell people how you

really feel. I'm going to have to spend the whole season with my team. Better to let them know now that I'm not into partying.

I take a deep breath. *A little help here, God?* I don't see Rip anywhere but spot Ben chatting with a few girls from the pom squad. I tap him on the shoulder. He turns to look at me and glances at the coat in my hand.

"Hey, you takin' off?"

"Yeah, man. Thanks for the invite but this just isn't my scene."

"Oh, okay. Want me to drive you home?"

I glance at the beer in his hand. *Like I'd get in a car with you right now.* "Nah, man. I got it. Thanks." I breathe a sigh of relief that he doesn't make a big deal of me leaving.

I pull my coat on and head out the door, sidestepping around a new group of kids making their way into the house. Then I start the long trek down the deserted road toward the gas station. Thank goodness I brought gloves and a knit hat along.

I glance back at the warm house one last time. Why is our school so full of parties? My exasperated sigh creates a cloud in the bitter cold air. Half those people are just trying to act cool to fit in. What a waste.

I pick up the pace so I don't freeze to death on the snow-packed road. The crunch of my footsteps is the only sound around. So much for being one of the guys. Doubt I'll get invited again. But would I really want to? Not really. But they are my team. Don't teammates hang out? My shoulders sag at the thought of being the only one not included. I really don't want to deal with another long season like last year.

Finally, the light of the gas station comes into view. A welcome beacon in the cold night.

By the time I make it inside, my feet and fingers are numb. The greasy-haired station attendant glances at me but doesn't even bother to take out his earbuds. Doesn't matter. I'm just happy to have warmth.

I pull out my phone and place a call to my friend Isaac from youth group. He's a few months older and has a license and a car. Hopefully, he can come.

A half hour later, I'm warm and toasty in the passenger seat of Isaac's car.

"So, how'd you end up at an upperclassmen party?"

I shake my head. "I thought it would be just the team hanging out. I should've known better. There are way too many kids at my school who are into the party scene. You're lucky to attend St. Vincent's." A bunch of the youth group kids go there. My folks would probably let me transfer but sports are better at the public school.

He shrugs. "Life's not perfect there, either."

"Yeah, but at least I'd have more friends to hang out with." I had a few guys I did stuff with but lately I'd been spending more and more time with the youth group guys. Being around like-minded people is sadly underrated.

Isaac gives me a crooked smile. "That reminds me of the talk Joe gave us back in the fall, about friendships."

Huh. "Oh, yeah. I totally forgot about that." Our youth group leader did have some good tips about finding true friends.

Isaac taps the steering wheel. "Hey, I'm thinking of setting up a game night tomorrow. You in?"

"Yeah, let's do it." He pulls into my driveway and I give him a light punch on the arm.

"Thanks, man, for coming to pick me up."

"Anytime. That's what friends are for."

* * * *

Isaac's reminder about our youth group leader's talk was just what I needed. Over the weekend, I spend a lot of time thinking about my teammates and I realize...that's all they are. Teammates. They aren't my friends and they don't have to be. Those who share my values are my true friends. Maybe I can find a way to fit in with them someday, but for now, it doesn't matter.

I also spend time trying to figure out who to give the cross to, and quickly rule out any of my teammates. They could probably use the blessing but would never appreciate it. They'd think it

was weird. My friends from youth group would all appreciate the prayers, but are they really the ones who need it the most? Probably not.

By the time I'm back at school on Monday, I have an idea. I'm lucky to have my youth group, which keeps me centered and focused on right and wrong. A lot of kids in this school probably don't have that support. I can't imagine trying to deal with this cliquy culture on my own.

I shut my locker and head down the hall toward the Commons. They keep a table there where people put things they no longer want but others might be able to use. I'll place the velvet pouch there. Maybe the Holy Spirit will guide someone who feels they need a blessing to that table, and they can take the cross. An anonymous blessing. I like it.

"Hey, Ryan." My friend Josh joins me in the hallway. "You free to work on that group project this evening?"

I shake my head. "Sorry. No can do. I'm going to the opening night of the school play."

"Really?" He looks at me like I've lost my mind. Maybe I have. "Do you need extra credit or something?"

"No." I grin. "I'm going to support my fellow students."

He stares. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. Someone talked me into going to the fall musical and I actually found it kind of interesting."

He cocks his head to the side. "Somehow, I don't feel like you're telling me the whole truth."

My grin widens. There's no way I'm telling him the real reason I'm going.

"Whatever, dude." He shrugs. "I'll look for another time this week."

I drop off the pouch at the community table.

God, please help the person who could use a special blessing find this cross.

Josie

BIG FAT SNOWFLAKES DRIFT PAST the window and land silently on the fluffy white blanket that covers the grass—something that won't be visible for a few more months. The delicate snow jewels spin and dance as they gracefully make their way from the sky, reminding me of the Waltz of the Snowflakes in the Nutcracker ballet.

“Ms. DelRio.” The stern voice of my English teacher brings me back to reality.

My gaze shifts to Mrs. Turner. While her voice has the scolding teacher tone, she seems to be holding back a smile. I think she's used to my daydreaming.

“Sorry.” I glance around the classroom and am mortified at all the eyes on me.

Come on, stay focused. The last thing I want is to draw attention to myself—which tends to be a difficult task for me to accomplish. For some reason, I've always had trouble being like everyone else. As much as I try to act like all the other kids, my propensity for clumsiness makes it impossible to be normal. At a high school like mine, this trait is not a good thing. At Lake Forest High, not being part of the popular crowd, or at least an upperclassman, opens a student to all sorts of ridicule. Neither popular nor an upperclassman, I've been walking on the proverbial eggshells for the past year and a half.

“As I was saying...” Mrs. Turner continues without drawing further attention to me. Bless her! “For our next assignment, you will be working in pairs.” A murmur builds in the previously quiet room. Mrs. Turner holds up her hand. “Pairs which I will assign.” She ignores the collective groan. “You and your partner will compare and contrast literary works that have been made into movies. You will both read the book and watch the movie. In a few weeks, you will present the differences and similarities to the class together.” She holds up a piece of paper. “I have provided guidelines for you to follow.”

She hands the stack of papers to a student sitting in the front row to hand out, then begins announcing the pairings.

Please say Josie and Liz. Please say Josie and Liz. I don't know why I bother with my internal chant. There's no possible way she would let us work together. Teachers always feel the need to split up friends. But it would be so fun to read a book and watch a movie together. Maybe we could convince her to let us choose *Les Miserables*. I'd love to see that movie again. We could even do a third segment and include the Broadway musical! It would be fantastic!

"Josie..."

I squeeze my eyes shut. *And Liz.*

"...and Ashlyn."

Noooo. Please, anyone but her. Ms. Captain of the JV volleyball team is the last person I want to spend time with.

I slump in my seat. It's exhausting to always worry about what I say and do to avoid ridicule from the "in" crowd. Ashlyn is one of the worst, always trying to make a name for herself with the popular upperclassmen.

I glance her way and am greeted with a dramatic eye roll. I feel like returning the gesture but can't risk having her mad at me. I need to stay under the radar for a few more months, until the end of the school year. If I can just make it through the rest of the winter and spring, I will be an upperclassman and my troubles will be over. Or at least, they will lessen.

After class is dismissed, I wait as Liz gathers her books.

She shoots me a sympathetic look. "Tough break getting paired with Ashlyn."

"Yeah. But with my luck, not really surprising."

"Mine isn't much better. Have you ever heard Marshall speak a word? How am I going to get him to discuss a book?"

I follow her out the door. "Why couldn't Mrs. Turner let us work together? It would be so much fun."

"That's the point. Don't you know we're never supposed to have fun doing schoolwork?" She shifts her backpack to her other shoulder. "Hey, did you remember we're assigned to sit and sell tickets to the play during lunch?"

“Argh. Can’t we just pretend that we tried? No one is going to buy tickets to the show. Trying to sell them at lunchtime is always a waste of time and so embarrassing. I hate how the popular crowd stares at us like we’re complete theater nerds.”

“We *are* theater nerds.”

I shove her shoulder. “No, we are not. We are highly-trained thespians.”

“I don’t think being musical theater enthusiasts qualifies us as highly-trained.”

When we reach the cafeteria, we sidle up to the table that is our impromptu ticket counter.

“Oh, good, you’re here. Since tonight is opening night, it would be great if we could fill those seats,” perky Katie sing-songs. She thrusts a metal box into my hands. “The tickets are in here, along with forty dollars in change.” She narrows her eyes. “All the money better be there when you return it to Mr. Abrams.”

“Don’t worry, not a penny will be missing. Or added,” I mumble.

Katie sweeps out of the cafeteria with her head high, like a princess wearing a tiara. As annoying as she is, I sometimes wish I could be more like her and own my inner theater geekiness—not care what anyone else thinks. I just can’t get past my desire to someday be part of the “in” crowd.

“You set up, and I’ll grab us some lunch.” Liz shuffles toward the food line.

I sigh and settle in for the hour of torture. The chances of someone actually wanting a ticket to our winter play is almost non-existent. The only students who ever show up are those whose teachers promise extra credit for attending. It’s a shame too, because *The Curious Savage* is a really great play, but no one other than our family members will ever know.

I plop my backpack on the table, and a stack of flyers sails across the linoleum tiles. Fabulous. I’m contemplating how to pick them all up without anyone noticing when a body blocks my view.

I glance up at my new project partner, Ashlyn. This can’t be good.

I venture a cautious greeting. “Hi.”

She glances over her shoulder at the scattered papers. “You’re a walking menace.”

I glance around like I have no idea what she's talking about. How does she know I didn't intend to spread the news about our latest production throughout the cafeteria in exactly that way?

She crosses her arms across her designer sweater. "So, we have to work together." From the tone of her voice, it's the worst thing that's ever happened to her. Well, guess what, sister—I'm not thrilled about this arrangement either.

I nod and form a diplomatic response before speaking. "Yeah, I guess we do. How do you want to work this? Should we both read the book on our own then get together to watch the movie? We could each present about one of the aspects."

She glances over her shoulder. Is she hoping none of her popular friends will see her chatting with me? Then she places her hands on the table and leans forward. "I have a different idea. I'm really busy, so why don't you read the book and watch the movie and then tell me about it. Sound good?"

I stare at her icy blue eyes. What I wouldn't give to wipe that smug smirk off her pretty face. But before I have a chance to answer, she links arms with one of the passing basketball players and disappears into a sea of bodies.

When Liz returns with our lunch, she glances at the flyers that cover the floor. "Trying a new advertising method?"

I glance at the trampled papers. "Yeah, maybe we can at least get the janitor to come to the play."

She sets down the tray of food and we bravely pick up the scattered flyers while trying to avoid getting our fingers stepped on. We ignore the looks that are clearly meant to tell us we are pathetic.

With the chore accomplished, we eat our lunches and I fill her in on Ashlyn's visit.

Liz stabs a meatball with her fork. "What a leech. What are you going to do?"

I shrug. "What choice do I have? I can't rock the boat, and she knows it. The popular crowd knows they have all the power around here. Unless I want to risk public humiliation, I will keep

my mouth shut.”

Liz shakes her head. “I hate that they get away with treating people like dirt. I wish we could just avoid her. She’s trouble.”

“With a capital T.”

“Which rhymes with...wait!” Her hand flies up like she’s stopping traffic.

I flinch. It’s not like her to leave a musical theater reference incomplete. She must have earth-shattering news. “What?”

“I totally forgot to tell you that Mr. Abrams has decided on the spring show!”

“*Oh.*” A little chill runs down my spine. Thinking about the next show is always such a thrill. “What did he choose?”

She keeps her mouth shut for a few moments, killing me, but effectively building anticipation.

“*The Music Man.*”

“Really?” A classic musical. Nice. Finally, some good news. I start thinking about the characters. “I’m sure Cameron will be cast as Professor Harold Hill.”

She rolls her eyes. “Is there even a doubt?”

I elbow her. “I still don’t know what you saw in him.” Liz and Cameron briefly dated last year during *Guys and Dolls*. He’s handsome and has an amazing voice, so he always gets cast as the male lead, even though he too is only a sophomore. Needless to say, it has gone to his head. He’s now the poster child for egotistical.

She raises her hand. “I plead temporary insanity.”

* * * *

After lunch, I carry the untouched box of tickets to the theater room.

Mr. Abrams is at his desk, stuffing his face with a sandwich. He nods a greeting while he finishes chewing.

I place my little burden on the corner of his desk. “Here you go.”

He swallows. “Thanks. Any buyers?”

I shake my head. “No. Not today.” I don’t know why he keeps insisting that we even try. All it does is point out to everyone that we are the lowly theater geeks.

“Oh, well, one of these days.”

Not likely. “I heard a rumor that the next show will be *The Music Man*.”

“Yes. I figured you and Liz would be happy since you two love musicals as much as I do.” He smiles. “Auditions will have to be pretty soon, though, since we’ll have to work around spring break.”

“I guess I’d better start thinking about an audition song.”

“Let’s get through this week of performances first.”

I hear him but my mind is already searching for the perfect song.

He leans back in his chair. “We may need to recruit some kids from the nearby elementary schools to be in Professor Hill’s band. Don’t you have a little brother? Maybe he and some of his friends could be in the show.”

Riley? In a show with me? No possible way. “Theater isn’t really his thing. Besides, he’s pretty busy with baseball in the spring.”

His face twists. “Well, I’m sure we’ll find a school that would like to participate. Hey, how’s your mom’s new book coming along? My nieces really enjoyed her last one.”

“New book?” How should I know? Everyone always thinks it’s so interesting that my mom’s an author. I try not to burst their bubble but it’s really not as glamorous as it sounds.

“When I saw her at the holiday showcase, she told me that she has a new book coming out this spring.”

“Oh. Maybe. Honestly, when it comes to her books, I kind of zone out. She always has some story she’s working on.”

He grins. “I would think you’d take more of an interest. From what Liz has said, those books made you a mini celebrity.”

I roll my eyes. My mom likes to include my clumsy incidents in her books. My “Josie-isms,” as we call them. When I was little, finding myself in her books was kind of cute. My classmates

loved to scour them to find the sections about me. As I've gotten older, those parts have lost their charm. Luckily, her books are for middle school students. I won't need to worry about any of my high school classmates reading my mother's new novel.

"It sounded like this new story will be a little different than her usual middle-grade books," Mr. Abrams says.

"I doubt that. She has the whole middle-grade angst down pat."

He glances at the clock on the wall. "Aren't you going to be late for class?"

"I'm counting on it. I have gym next."

"I wouldn't want to stand in the way of your physical education." He pulls out a pad of tardy slips and scribbles my name on one.

I really don't understand the point of gym class. I get plenty of exercise dancing in all our shows. I'd like to see those P.E. teachers try the tap routine that we learned for the fall production. It took months of practice and was much more physically demanding than the stupid games we play in gym. Seriously, what skills does dodge ball teach?

Mr. Abrams hands me a piece of paper. "Here you go."

I reluctantly take it. "Gee, thanks."

"See you in a few hours for opening night."

I drag my feet on my way to the gym. My mind shifts to the new show.

The Music Man. That show has some great parts. I'll need the perfect song for my audition. I hum a possibility as I walk through the empty gym. Yes, that one might work well. Would I make more of an impression if I added a little choreography? I twirl across the basketball court toward the locker rooms.

The tune playing in my head reaches the song's climax. I end the dance with a high kick and throw my arms out in a final dramatic gesture. *Oops!* My shoe sails through the air. That's when I notice I'm not alone. Pure horror fills me as my adorable ballet flat floats like a graceful leaf to the floor, where it lands in front of three of the cutest members of the baseball team. The expressions range from Scotty's look of fear, to Chase's pure contempt, and Ryan's amused grin.

If only I could exit stage left right about now. Totally humiliated, I retrieve my shoe.

“Sorry.” I shoot them a little smile then scurry away. My stomach clenches. Why can’t I just act normal? Why is that such a challenge for me? How will I ever fit in with the cool kids when I do dumb stuff like this? *Come on Josie, just hang in there for a few more months. Then you’ll be an upperclassman and things will be better.*

Gym class is humiliating, as always. I’m picked last for the basketball game. Then I trip over my own feet and land on my face. Will this day never be over? I’m so frustrated and exhausted. At least tonight will be fun. Being on stage is the only time lately that I feel like myself.

Leaving the gym, I plod through the Commons and move past the Community table, where people share items they no longer want. At a glance, I spot the usual books and other such items. But a brown, velvety bag catches my eye, and I veer closer to take a look. A note is attached to the bag. I pick it up and read: *If you’re in need of an extra blessing, the contents of this bag may be for you.*

Hmm...

I reach for the bag. An extra blessing sounds pretty fantastic right about now.

I hope you enjoyed this short story. If you are interested in more adventures with these characters, please check out the following stories:

The Perfect Blindside

Fresh off a championship medal, Jake Taylor's parents have dragged him to a middle-of-nowhere town in Colorado, far from where he wants to be. Smart and savvy, Sophie has spent the summer before her junior year of high school avidly following Jake Taylor in every article she can find, but now she sees the "truth" behind the story — he's really just a jerk. When the only thing they can see is each other's flaws, how can Jake and Sophie work together to figure out what's really been happening at the abandoned silver mine? Follow Sophie and Jake into secret tunnels as they unravel the mystery and challenge each other to become who God wants them to be.

An Unexpected Role

The devastation of a ruined summer.

The gift of a second chance.

Can Josie learn the lessons she needs in order to discover her true self?

After a humiliating event and overwhelming peer pressure, 16-year-old Josie flees her home to spend the summer with her Aunt on a South Carolina island. Her fresh start turns into the summer of her dreams as friendships grow, romance blossoms, and a series of thefts surround her with excitement. However, when tragedy strikes someone close to her, Josie realizes there are more important things than her reputation. As she sets out to solve the mystery she has become entangled in, she not only realizes the importance of relying on her faith but along the way also discovers who God wants her to be.

Unlikely Witnesses

When four friends vacation together in the Colorado Rockies, they expect a week of hiking, biking, and rafting – not being interrogated by the FBI.

Between Josie's mishaps, Jake's celebrity status, and Sophie and Ryan's friendly feud, their peaceful family vacation turns into a comedic adventure. But, when these four teens stumble upon a mystery, things become downright dangerous.

The fun and intrigue of this short story is paired with a reminder that if we live our lives as Christians, we never know when we might be a witness for Christ.

Secrets: Visible and Invisible

An old tale of murder and forbidden love leads to a modern-day treasure hunt for four teens helping at a summer camp.

You might also be interested in my newest novel, *Where You Lead*.

Teen Eve Donahue's lonely existence changes in an instant when visions of a mysterious stranger haunt her. Certain God is calling her for a mission, she bravely says yes and begins her quest to meet this young man.

Thousands of miles away, Nick Hammond has been dealing with his own unusual experience, an unwavering certainty to convince his father to run for political office. When these two unlikely teens finally meet, their belief that God has called them to work together sets them on a journey of faith to untangle a web of deception involving international trade agreements, lost confederate gold, and a blossoming romance. As they follow century-old clues, they realize God can call us all in big and small ways. We just need to listen.

Leslea Wahl