

More

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P R E C I O U S T H A N

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Rubies

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*Charm is deceptive,  
and beauty is fleeting;  
but a woman who fears the Lord  
is to be praised.*

*Proverbs 31:30*

*From Chapter 29, More Precious Than Rubies*

Gabe had finished his rounds and was leaving the department when he heard Rachel say, “Dr. Westbrook.”

He turned around. “Yes?”

“Dr. Rusk is stopping in this afternoon, and I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Well, I’m afraid he’s not out of the woods yet.”

“I know.” She paused. “Gabe, I feel terrible about what I said that day in your office. Today is proof that our friendship wasn’t a sham.”

He was quiet for a long moment, then said, “No, you were right.”

“No—”

“Your friendship was the most precious thing I ever had, but in the end I just... wasn’t worthy of it.”

“Gabe...”

He held up his hand. “And I will regret leaving you that summer for the rest of my life.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“I’m sorry,” he said and then left.

More

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P R E C I O U S T H A N

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Rubies

Published by Meadowlark Press

ISBN 0-9773591-8-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005935791

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For Donny

## *Thank you to...*

My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,  
my rock and fortress in this uncertain world.

*And...*

My wonderful family:

My beloved husband, Don, for his unending support,  
encouragement, love, friendship, *and* the information needed  
to write authentic hospital settings.

Matthew, Nathan, and Christian,  
our sons, now grown and never-ending blessings.

Emily, Kristy, and Elizabeth, our son's wives.  
God knew I wanted a daughter, and when I see these three lovely  
women he has brought into our family, I also see his  
love and caring for me. My cup truly overflows!

Our precious grandchildren, Alexander and Anastasia,  
and two more on the way.

My mother, Lois Vancil, for her perpetual  
encouragement and devotion.

My sister, Linda Morgan, and niece, Olivia Morgan. There  
are no words to express how much I appreciate your support.

*Also...*

Sarah DeVries, Emily Ives, and Rachel Moninger,  
readers of the first draft. I can't thank you  
enough for your enthusiasm and encouragement.

*And...*

The residents and business owners who keep  
Cannon Beach, Oregon, the jewel that it is. Thank you in  
advance for tolerating a little literary license!

The many readers who have cheered me on  
since the publication of my first book, *City of Roses*.

Your encouragement has been priceless.



# PART I



## O N E



She was taller than average, though delicately built, with a thick fall of straight brown hair that appeared almost too heavy for her face and long neck. Today her hair was braided, one ridiculously fat braid down her back, but that was of no consequence to him. He was noticing the downcast face and the absence of her usual smile as she whistled to her dog, got in her car, and backed down the driveway.

He watched until she was gone, then turned away from the window, picked up his bags, and headed up the stairs to change.

Things had gone wrong for Rachel Albrecht from the moment that she opened her eyes that morning and heard her mother yelling her name from the top of the stairs.

“Ooh,” Rachel grimaced with horror at her clock. “Coming!” She could hear pans banging, water running, and rapid footsteps echoing down from the rooms above, all signals that breakfast was in full swing at the Hyacinth House, her parent’s bed and breakfast inn, and she had no business laying about snoozing.

Two minutes later Rachel made her appearance, such that it

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was, in the doorway of the bustling kitchen. “Good morning!” she announced with a bright smile.

“Mrs. Westbrook is having her usual, and Mrs. Small wants the wild mushroom and pepper frittata.” Judith Albrecht, Rachel’s mother, carrying a laden tray, backed up to the swinging door as she spoke. “They’re on the veranda,” she added and then disappeared into the dining room.

“Hi, Grandma.” Rachel walked over to a plump woman slicing apples and pears at the counter, stuck out her lower lip, and hung her head.

“Good morning to you, Sleeping Beauty.” Ingrid smoothed back Rachel’s hair and kissed her cheek.

“They *can’t* be breaking up. Look at all they’ve been *through* together. They can’t just throw it all away!” It was twenty minutes later, and Rachel’s younger sister, Brittany, looked close to tears as she warmed into her favorite subject.

Rachel placed Mrs. Small’s frittata on the plate, added a fluted mushroom and a sprig of watercress, then stood back and peered at it with a critical eye. “Does that look okay?”

Brittany and Paige, a neighbor girl, lowered their movie magazine and looked up. “Looks fine,” said Brittany. “Just remember — always ask me if you start feeling artsy with the food.”

“I thought radish mice with a cheese omelette was very apropos...”

“Rach?”

“What?”

“Look at me.”

Rachel walked over, put her face two inches from her sister’s and peered at her, wide-eyed. “What?”

“*Ask* before you get artsy.”

Rachel turned back to her work. “Okay.”

“Here you go.” Ingrid handed Rachel a plate. “Anna’s apple and pear pancakes,” she said, referring to their neighbor.

“Thanks, Grandma.” Rachel took it, added a boring but safe orange slice and parsley garnish, and then turned to Paige. “Are you sure you don’t want anything? You could have breakfast on the veranda with your grandma.” Anna Westbrook was Paige’s

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grandmother, a wealthy widow who often had breakfast at the Hyacinth House when she was in town.

“No thanks. I already ate.”

Paige and Brittany huddled once more over the magazine, and Rachel had to maneuver around them several times as she set up a tray. Then she stood in front of them and said, “Sorry to interrupt, but...”

Brittany looked up. “What?”

“Do you think Hollywood would survive if you think about something else for five minutes? Like taking this tray?”

“Okay.” Brittany picked it up and left.

“How are things in Portland?” Rachel asked Paige as she dodged around her, gathering up the dirty utensils.

“Well... Portland is very Portland.”

“Nice to be out of the rat race over summer break?”

“Well, that depends on where ‘out of the rat race’ is.” Paige sighed as she pulled up a chair and sat down. “Unfortunately, for me it has to be here.”

Rachel pulled her mouth down, tilted her head, and clucked sympathetically. *A magnificent ocean-front summer house in Cannon Beach. You poor girl, what you endure*, she was thinking, but quickly turned back to the sink when Paige gave her sharp look.

“Gabe’s going to be here soon,” Paige said after a few minutes, referring to her older brother.

“Oh?”

“Tomorrow, I think. He’s arriving in Portland today.”

“Oh.”

“He’s finished his third year of medical school, still top in his class.” Paige walked over to the counter and helped herself to a strawberry. “He probably won’t stay here long. He has a lot of friends in Portland.”

“That’s great... Oh, Brittany,” Rachel turned to her sister as she re-entered the kitchen, “do you know where Mom went?”

“No.”

“She probably—” Rachel began, but stopped at the distant sound of coughing. “What’s that?”

“Mrs. Small.” Brittany turned to Paige and wrinkled her nose. “She coughs all the time when she eats. It’s so gross.”

“She can’t help that she had a stroke and has trouble

swallowing.” Rachel peered sideways out the window, trying to get a view of the veranda. She could hear more coughing and Anna’s raised voice. “Something’s wrong,” she said and then ran through the dining room and out the side door.

“What’s the matter?” she said when she reached Mrs. Small, who was standing slightly bent over next to the table.

“She was coughing really hard,” said Anna, who was standing beside her, “then she stopped.”

“Did she choke?” Without waiting for an answer, Rachel turned to Mrs. Small. “Are you choking?”

Mrs. Small didn’t respond, and her eyes were wide and terrified. A strange sound came from her throat, and then a weak cough followed. Rachel moved quickly between her and the table, knocking something with her hand. Barely aware of the sound of breaking china, she placed her arm around Mrs. Small’s shoulders and peered at her, trying to think clearly.

“Is she okay?” someone asked, and Rachel noticed that Ingrid, Brittany, Paige, and the other guests were standing nearby. She turned back when Mrs. Small wheezed and then coughed again.

“That’s good. Go ahead and cough if you can.” Rachel patted her shoulder. “You’re doing great.” She watched Mrs. Small, poised for action, but waited as the tiny white-haired woman laboriously drew another small breath and coughed weakly. Suddenly fragments of mushroom and egg sputtered about as she began to cough in earnest. “Good job... good job,” Rachel hugged her, weak-kneed with relief, then rubbed her back as she sat down. “You did great.”

“How silly of me.” Mrs. Small held a linen napkin up to her mouth.

“Not silly one bit,” Rachel said firmly, stepping back. “Are you okay? Do you want me to...”

“I’m so okay I’m going to sit here and finish my breakfast!”

“Good for you.”

“Rachel,” Judith said from the doorway.

“What?”

“Can I see you for a minute?” Judith was wearing the familiar strained smile that meant that Rachel had embarrassed her in front of the guests. For a moment she stared back, bewildered,

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and then remembered her appearance. She had overslept, had been late, and hadn't taken the time to get dressed.

Embarrassment crept up her face as she glanced about her. The Hyacinth House was critically acclaimed for its understated elegance and exquisite furnishings, all because of Judith's hard work, brilliant management, and impeccable taste. She strove tirelessly for nothing less than perfection in every part of her environment, but it was often apparent that she viewed her eldest daughter to be her biggest challenge.

With dread Rachel glanced down at her threadbare sweats, tattered T-shirt, and... Suddenly remembering something, she looked with even greater dread at her feet. She had remembered right; she was wearing only one green sock.

She felt her face grow hot as she turned from Judith to Anna and Mrs. Small, with their carefully coiffed hair — Mrs. Small with pearls and lace and Anna in a cashmere sweater set off by an ever-present ruby pendant. The other guests, a family of four, had been eating in the dining room, but were now standing nearby, staring as well.

"Sure, Mom." Rachel quickly walked back to the kitchen. Once there, she began to load the dishwasher but turned around when Judith entered the room, followed by Brittany and Paige, and held out several broken pieces of thin, colorful china.

"Oh!" Rachel gasped at the sight. "Grandma's Dresden..."

"Yes, Rachel, 'Grandma's Dresden.'"

"Did I—"

"Did you behave like a bull in a china shop and knock it off the table out there? Yes, you did."

Rachel fought back tears. "I feel terrible..."

Judith yanked the top off of the trash bin, threw the pieces in, and closed it with a bang. "Would you mind telling me why Mrs. Small was having her tea this morning with my mother's heirloom china?"

"You told me to use the Dresden for Mrs. Westbrook..."

"Mrs. Small is *not* Mrs. Westbrook!"

"I know, but they were eating together. I could hardly serve Mrs. Westbrook tea in the Dresden and Mrs. Small with something from Taiwan, could I?"

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“So you destroy my mother’s mother’s china because you don’t want poor Mrs. Small to feel bad.” Judith began gathering items from the counters and putting them away, noisily opening and closing cupboards and drawers. “I don’t know what you were so worked up about, anyway. That old lady is constantly hacking up hairballs.”

“I thought...” Rachel’s voice faded.

Judith dumped some silverware in a drawer, smacked it shut, and turned around. “Rachel, what is the *matter* with you?”

Rachel looked at her feet, still fighting the tears. “I don’t know.”

“Honestly, if I hadn’t been there when you were born, I’d seriously wonder what planet you came from. *Look at you!*”

“I know. I’m sorry. I—I have no excuse.”

“You won’t know the meaning of ‘sorry’ until you ever enter my establishment in a get-up like that again. And what’s this?” Judith suddenly reached over Rachel’s shoulder and yanked something out of her hair.

“Ow!” Rachel recoiled in pain and clutched at her head.

“What’s this?” Judith repeated, holding up a strange object. It was a small tube, imbedded with some of Rachel’s dark brown hair and smeared with a dried blue substance. Judith peered at the label. “Cerulean Blue,” she read.

Rachel reached out and took it. “I started a new painting last night—”

“You fell asleep in your paints again, didn’t you?”

Rachel looked at the floor.

“*Didn’t you?*”

“Yes.”

Someone stifled a giggle, and Rachel looked over at Paige and Brittany, who were struggling to control their amusement. Not surprisingly, Ingrid was nowhere to be seen. She always disappeared when Judith was angry with Rachel.

Rachel faced Judith again. “I’m very sorry, Mom. I’ll go get cleaned up now,” she said and fled to her room.

## T W O



**H**e walked along a winding path high above the wild, rocky coastline until he found her sitting on a bluff facing the ocean. He kept quiet until he was almost immediately behind her and then said, “Tell me, how does a girl like you get to be a girl like you?”

Rachel turned around, incredulous, and then jumped up. “Gabe!” she yelled. “I can’t believe you’re here!” she said, hugging him. “You said you weren’t coming until tomorrow!”

“I decided not to go to Portland.”

“But how—”

“I was spying on you. I saw you leave the house.”

“But how did you know I was here?”

“I could tell that something was wrong, and this is where you go when you’re upset.” He held her at arm’s length and looked at her face. “I was right. You’ve been crying.”

“Yeah. It hasn’t been the greatest day.”

“Oh.” Gabe guided her back to the cliff edge, and they sat down, side by side. “You’re going to owe me a coffee, you know.”

“With a softball line like that? From *North by Northwest*, which I have the entire movie practically memorized?”

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“Okay, I’ll say it again, to buy you a little time. ‘How does a girl like you get to be a girl like you?’” It was an old game that he and Rachel had played for years. One would pitch a line of dialogue from an Alfred Hitchcock movie, and if the other couldn’t remember the next line, they paid for coffee. When the dialogue ran out, it was a stalemate.

“Lucky, I guess?”

“No, not lucky. Naughty. Wicked. Up to no good. Ever kill anyone? Because I bet you could tease a man to death without half trying — so *stop* trying.”

“I like it better with the Cary Grant accent.”

“Sorry. Maybe next time.” Gabe leaned back and rested his head in his hands. “This is the most beautiful place in the world.”

“Yes.” Rachel reached for her backpack and pulled out a blanket and a thermos. “I came prepared to stay and watch the sunset. Do you have plans for the evening?”

It was an hour later, and the low-hanging sun was now casting a pink glow over Rachel and Gabe, but they hadn’t yet noticed. “I’m sorry, maybe I’m just a little slow,” Gabe was saying. “Explain to me again why it is that your mother insists that my grandmother have her tea served in such exalted, priceless vessels.”

“Because she wants to make a good impression.”

“But why?”

“Because of Brittany. Mom has this notion in her head that your grandma has a special affection for her and that when Brittany goes to college in Portland in two years, she might take her under her wing and introduce her around to a lot of high-class, richy-rich people.”

“Why does that sound familiar?”

“Oh, it’s so Jane Austen! The penniless, dowerless young gentlewoman with a scheming, social-climbing mother, who leaves some backwater country village, goes to London, and is sponsored in the upper echelons of the aristocracy by a very well-connected and rich elderly widow.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Of course, she has no such hopes for me.”

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“Yeah, there’s no hope for you. I’ve known it for years.”

She smiled briefly and then continued. “In fact, she thinks that my rough edges run off on Brittany and hurt *her* chances. I think that’s why I make her so angry. Just knowing that we both emerged from the same gene pool could turn people away from Brittany. At least that’s how Mom sees it.”

“But you said your mother thinks you’re an alien.”

She laughed. “Yeah, but she could hardly tell that to your grandma, no matter how much it may help Brittany’s case.”

Gabe turned toward the horizon, noticing the sunset. “You better stop yapping now and watch the show.”

“Ooh, look. We’re missing it.” They silently watched the red sun, seemingly suspended just a few feet above the now-shining water, and then Rachel said, “The odd thing is that we all know what Mom *really* thinks of your grandma. Because of... *you know.*”

“Yeah.”

“I really gotta hand it to her. It must be very difficult, but she has exercised great longsuffering and tolerance in the interest of her daughter’s future happiness and success.” A note of bitterness caused Gabe to glance over at her, and she met his eyes and then looked down.

“I don’t blame you,” he said.

“The problem is, I *am* an alien. I honestly wonder where I came from, too. Mom and Brittany are so alike. Last week they went and got their hair highlighted and cut exactly the same way. Then afterwards they stopped at one of those automatic photo booths and had their pictures taken, acting silly like they were a both a couple sophomores.”

“A forty-year-old high school sophomore. Paints an interesting picture.”

“You know what I mean. People really do mistake them for sisters. They look alike and they *are* alike. Brittany would never, ever, in a million years, come up the stairs in a ragged T-shirt, one green sock, and a tube of paint stuck in her hair. I mean, someone could be dying. It just wouldn’t happen.”

“So, you’re saying that even if someone was dying, Brittany would make them wait until she put on her makeup?”

“No... you don’t understand.”

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Gabe adjusted his position and faced her. “I *do* understand. You forget that I’ve lived with people like that all my life.”

“Yeah, I guess you have.”

“Your mom takes you for granted. You’re working at that place all the time.”

She paused, then smiled. “Doggone it! You’re right!”

He laughed.

“You always did know how to make me feel better.”

He smiled at her, relieved to see the old merriment return.

She never stayed down for long. “Have you gotten much surfing in?”

“Some.” A dimple flickered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, what’s so funny?”

The laughter that she had been holding in came tumbling out. “Okay, I’ll tell you. A few days ago, Paige told me that the only reason you spend your summers here is because you have like this surfing *obsession*, and the only reason you hang around with me is because I’m the only who will go with you. She actually told me that she felt it was her duty to warn me so I wouldn’t fall madly in love with you and get my heart broken.”

Gabe sobered and looked out across the water at the rapidly-darkening horizon. “Of course you were devastated.”

“Well, they had to keep me away from sharp objects for a few days, but then I decided life was worth living.”

“I gather by your flippancy that your heart wasn’t exactly smashed into bits.”

“I would have been very sad if I thought you weren’t really my friend, and *that* was just an elaborate charade because I’m such a phenomenal surfing buddy.”

He continued to gaze at the horizon. “Well, I’m sorry about all that,” he said after a moment. “Paige can be a little...”

Rachel reclined against the small knoll behind her and let her head rest on the grass. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “I stopped paying attention to Paige a long time ago.”

It was nearly ten when Rachel arrived home and parked next to the detached garage. There was a light in the adjoining

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workshop, and she could see her father working inside. She walked to the open door and said, “Hi dad.”

“Hi Brit.” Peter Albrecht was holding a piece of carved wood in front of his eyes and turning it slowly back and forth.

Rachel smiled but didn’t correct his mistake. “How’s it coming?”

“Oh...” Peter picked up a piece of sand paper and began rubbing at the wood. After a moment, he glanced up. “Oh, Rachel. Where have you been? I think somebody was looking for you.”

“I was—” Rachel broke off and smiled when Peter suddenly threw the sandpaper down and walked over to his toolbox. “I was on a cruise,” she said after a moment.

“Oh?”

“To Alaska.”

“Um-hum.”

“It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing.”

“Sounds like fun.” Peter began to throw tools about as he dug into the box in earnest.

Rachel laughed. “Good night, Dad,” she said, turning away. She crossed the dark lawn, then walked up the back side of the house, where she could see Ingrid through the kitchen window, bent over the oven. She could also see Judith standing at the sink. Hoping that the morning’s disgrace was forgotten, she took a deep breath and walked up to the door.

“Oh, Rachel,” Ingrid said as she came in. “You’re just in time. I have a batch of bread just coming out of the oven.”

“Oh, yummy!”

“Where have you been?” Judith took an apple from a bucket and began peeling it.

“At Ecola Park watching the sunset.”

“Was Gabriel Westbrook with you?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“*Carolyn* was here, wanting to know if we had seen him.”

Judith wore what could only be described as a wicked smile.

“Apparently, she came home today, found his things were there but no sign of him.”

“Oh.”

“I said I hadn’t seen him — but when I told her that you were

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missing, too, you should have seen her face.” Judith laughed. “She looked like she had just swallowed a lemon.”

Carolyn Westbrook was Gabe’s mother, and Rachel had unwittingly annoyed her, thereby redeeming herself in Judith’s eyes. She turned and sat down at the table, unable to savor her good fortune.

“You must be hungry.” Ingrid placed a napkin and plate in front of her.

“Grandma, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about the teacup,” said Rachel. “I feel horrible about it.”

“Oh, don’t...”

“I’ll replace it. I promise. I’ll keep looking until I find one just like it.”

Ingrid filled a glass with milk. “On the Internet?”

“Now, Grandma, don’t... Believe me, it’s okay.”

“Not on the Internet. I don’t like it.”

“I don’t give any information about... your family in Germany or anything. It’s nothing like that.”

Ingrid folded her arms. “I don’t want you to.”

Rachel sighed. “Okay.”

Ingrid placed a thick slice of steaming, fragrant bread on the plate. “It was just an old teacup, anyway. It’s really not worth the bother.”

“But it was from your mother’s set. Grandma, you worry too much about things that just don’t—”

“Rachel, let it go,” said Judith.

“Okay.” Rachel looked down, trying to hide her frustration.

“Thank you,” she said after a moment, picking up her butter knife. “This looks delicious.”

“Mrs. Westbrook...” Ingrid began nervously, and then paused.

“Mrs. Westbrook,” Judith said, “has been here for almost an hour.” She raised her eyebrows meaningfully. “Visiting with *Brittany*.”

“It’s pretty late for her, isn’t it?” Rachel said and then looked up when the door opened and Brittany entered.

“Oh, Rachel, you’re home. Mrs. Westbrook wanted to see you.” Brittany held the door open for the tiny dark-haired woman.

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Judith jumped up. "Would you have a seat, Mrs. Westbrook?" she said, pulling out a chair.

"Thank you." Anna sat down and then turned to Rachel. "So, how's my grandson? You seem to be the only one who's seen him since he arrived home from college today."

Rachel cleared her throat nervously. "He looked fine, Mrs. Westbrook. I'm sorry that..."

"Now, now. I'm not asking you to apologize for something that's not your fault. That's not why I stopped by." A nervous teacup and saucer rattled as Ingrid approached, but Anna held up her hand. "No thanks, Ingrid, I'm not staying. I stopped in because I have something here that I thought Rachel might like." She turned back to Rachel, reached out, and a small cascade of gold and red fell onto the table. "There," she said.

Rachel was speechless as she looked at the familiar ruby pendant. She had never seen Anna without it around her neck until tonight. "I... I'm... I can't..." She broke off, unable to think of anything coherent to say.

"Please."

Rachel stared back at her and realized that for some reason, Anna genuinely wanted her to have it. "But why?"

"Because I want to."

"But you always wear it. It must be very precious to you."

"It is very precious to me. It belonged to my mother. She gave it to my aunt just before... just before she died in Germany. My aunt gave it to me some years later. I trust you will remember that and treasure it as I have."

"But..." Utterly amazed, Rachel looked at the others. They were staring.

Anna picked up the necklace, then placed it in Rachel's hand and held her fingers closed. "Please take it. I want you to have it."

Rachel held up the square-cut ruby in its antique gold setting. After a moment, she turned it over, squinted at some strange letters that were engraved on the back, then looked at Anna.

"It says, 'To my beloved Miriam, you are more precious than rubies. Gabriel.'"

Rachel met her eyes. "Gabriel and Miriam... your mother and

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father?"

"Yes."

Rachel stared at the words until she found her voice again. "But why... me?" she asked, thinking of Anna's family. Paige, her own granddaughter, was Rachel's age.

Anna stood up. "Because you are unique, genuine, caring, and kind. I knew it before, but I was especially moved by your behavior this morning. I used to know someone like you... long ago, in another life..." Her voice trailed away, and she turned and walked to the door. "There you have it. Don't get a big head. Good night." She opened the door, then stopped and turned to Brittany. "Thank you again for your charming piano playing."

"You're welcome," said Brittany.

"Mrs. Westbrook," Rachel stood up. "Thank you with all my heart, and you have my word that I will treasure your mother's necklace always."

## T H R E E



**T**he fast food restaurants, arcades, and tourist attractions that abound in Seaside, Oregon, are conspicuously absent in its refined neighbor, Cannon Beach, an artistic community tucked in next to the hills and cliffs that overlook Haystack Rock, the third largest monolith in the world.

The sun was hanging low over the little town that Monday when Gabe and Rachel rode their bicycles down the main street. “How was work today?” Gabe asked.

“Tiring. We were short-handed again. I passed meds for hours.”

“Sounds fun.”

“I saw your grandma again.”

“Oh, yeah, with the nursing home ministry.”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to her. We were really swamped.”

“Oh.”

“I was surprised the first time I saw her there. With that church I mean.”

“People are always surprised at her choice of church, being Jewish.”

“She said she became a Christian after she immigrated to

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America.”

“Yes.”

“Anyway, we love it when that group comes. They’re really good to the residents.” Rachel cruised ahead of Gabe up to the front of the market and dismounted from her bicycle.

“So when will you be an official registered nurse?” Gabe dismounted as well, and they walked their bikes up to the rack.

“I’m going to take the boards in the fall,” Rachel said as they entered the store. “It doesn’t make much difference at the convalescent center whether I’m an RN or an LPN, so I’m not in a big rush.” Rachel had just graduated from Clatsop Community College with an associate degree in nursing. Already a licensed practical nurse, she was now eligible to test for licensure as a registered nurse in Oregon.

“It must be nice to be done with school,” said Gabe. “I’ve still got a few years to go.”

“No kidding. After seven years of college, you still have how many left?”

“One year of med school left and a few years’ residency after that, depending on what specialty I pick.”

“Sheesh!”

Gabe smiled at her. “I know, what am I, crazy?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Rachel said, and then stopped, nonplused, when Gabe extended his arm. “What?”

“Go ahead, twist. I’ll throw it all away and never go back, just be a beach bum for the rest of my life.”

“Yeah, I can just see you in twenty years, an aging surfer, roaming about Cannon Beach, kind of the town mascot.”

“And people will say, ‘He had so much potential.’”

They paid for roast beef sandwiches and cookies and then exited the store. They had just reached their bikes when a voice behind them said, “Excuse me?”

It was a slight, pale man with longish curly blond hair and tortoise-shell glasses who looked to Gabe to be in his late twenties. “What?” said Rachel.

“I couldn’t help but notice that you’re riding bikes, not driving.”

“Yes?” said Gabe.

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“And yet you walked out through the automatic door, when there was a manually-opening door right beside it.”

“Oh.”

“You’re both obviously able-bodied and healthy, and I just wanted to call your attention to what appeared to be a thoughtless waste of electricity.”

There was a twinkle in Rachel’s eyes as they met Gabe’s for a brief moment before she said, “We’re sorry...uh... What’s your name?”

“Ian Hodge.”

“We’re Rachel and Gabe. Sorry, Ian, we were talking, and we didn’t even notice the other door.”

“That’s why I brought it to your attention. Nobody in this backward community appears to *notice*. I have never seen such a collection of atrophied minds, completely incapable of critical thought.” Shaking his head, Ian began walking down the sidewalk.

Rachel and Gabe looked at each other and smiled. “No doubt just got off the bus from the nearest university town,” Gabe said as he took the bag from Rachel and they pulled their bikes out of the rack.

“Yeah, there were a few like him up at Clatsop.”

They pedaled to Whale Park, sat on a bench, and unwrapped their sandwiches. Before long, Ian appeared, sat down as well, and nodded soberly. “Rachel and Gabe,” he said.

“Ian, we meet again,” said Gabe. “Would you like to share lunch with a couple backward beach bums?”

Ian looked with obvious distaste at the roast beef sandwiches. “No thanks.”

“Why not?” Rachel smiled amiably. “I’ll own up to the atrophied mind, but the food should be safe to eat.”

Gabe was mildly astonished that she succeeded in making Ian smile. “No, thanks, I don’t eat meat,” Ian said. “And about the mind, don’t feel too bad. You’re not alone. The average citizen is half-witted, and hence not to be trusted to either his own devices or his own thoughts.”

Gabe smiled, recognizing the words of H.L. Mencken, then glanced at Rachel, who was chewing thoughtfully, and waited with anticipation for her response.

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“To quote a Hindu text, ‘He who desires to augment his own flesh by eating the flesh of other creatures lives in misery in whatever species he may take his birth,’” Ian continued.

Gabe pointed to a piece of beef. “Are you saying that I’m going to be this cow in my next life? Or will I be the salmon that I ate last night?”

“I’d rather be the salmon,” said Rachel.

“Since you’re obviously incapable of metaphorical thought, I’ll just say that the text is simply a friendly warning.”

“Balder and dash,” Rachel replied.

“What?”

Rachel and Gabe looked at each other and smiled. “Pish crawling insanely up to the topmost pinnacle of posh,” she added.

“Okay, okay, I get it. Mencken.” Ian looked deflated.

“You started it!” said Rachel. “You remind me of a string of wet sponges.”

“Tattered washing on the line,” said Gabe.

“Stale bean soup.”

“Rumble and bumble.”

“Flap and doodle.”

Ian stood and bowed, unsmiling, before Gabe and Rachel’s laughing faces. “Thank you for your witty quotations and enjoy your lunch,” he said and walked away.

“Ian, come back,” Rachel called after him. “I couldn’t resist! We were kidding! You started it!”

Ian kept walking, and she stood and ran after him. Gabe watched as she trotted alongside Ian for a few moments until he finally stopped. As often happened, he found that he couldn’t take his eyes off her, standing in her old tennies, shorts, her lopsided ponytail swinging as she tilted her head, entreating Ian to come back. The sight of her, coupled with her unaffected, friendly manner as she took Ian’s arm and led him back to the bench, inspired within Gabe a familiar feeling that he had become adept at hiding. She took his breath away.

## F O U R



“**R**ap-rap-rap!” It was Saturday morning, and Carolyn Westbrook awakened, opened one eye, then another, and peered around the semi-dark bedroom. She looked at the blanket-covered mound that was her husband, Ronald, and then turned toward the clock. It was five-ten.

She stood up and stretched. The sun was barely up, and cool, moist sea air was wafting into the room through a partially-opened window.

“Rap-rap-rap!” The sound was coming from outside, and Carolyn knew what it was. Nevertheless, she walked over to the window and looked out.

“What’s that?” Ronald had roused and turned over.

Carolyn left the window, walked over to the closet, and yanked a robe off of its hanger. “Well, it could be our eldest son wearing a ridiculous black suit, crouched underneath our neighbor’s wisteria at five in the morning and banging on their basement window... but why would I ever imagine something so ridiculous?” She pulled the belt of her robe around her and glowered at Ronald, who was fishing about for his glasses.

“What?” he said when he put them on and saw the look on her face.

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“Every year I think he’s going to outgrow it, but he’s just as obsessed with that neighbor girl as he was when he first met her five years ago.” She looked out the window again, where Gabe was still crouching under the wisteria. Now she could see Rachel’s face in the window, and it appeared that they were communicating through gestures.

Ronald sat up. “Oh, they’re just buddies,” he said.

Carolyn opened the door, stepped out, and then turned back. “Believe me, Ronald, Gabriel does not think of Rachel Albrecht as his ‘buddy.’ Far from it.” She closed the door and headed down the stairs.

Ten minutes later, she stood at the kitchen window with a mug of fresh coffee in her hand and watched Gabe and Rachel, both wearing wet suits and carrying surfboards, walk across the sand. She turned away, mentally cursing the good weather. Where was all the rain that Cannon Beach was so famous for, anyway?

“That was fast.” Carolyn turned around and found that Ronald was standing behind her, watching the pair as well.

She shook her head. “I happen to know a lot of girls who would spend an entire afternoon getting ready for a date with Gabriel. I just hope that Rachel took a minute to brush her teeth!”

“I’m sure she brushed her teeth, Mom.” Paige entered the room and walked over to the coffee pot. “She’s not *that* bad.”

“What are you doing up at this hour?”

“Same as you. Woody-Woodpecker.”

“Oh.”

“I have to get ready, anyway. Remember, Corrine and Shanna are coming out today.”

“Oh, yes.”

Paige looked over Carolyn’s shoulder, out the window. “Oh, *isn’t* that sweet?” she said in a sugary tone.

Carolyn turned back to the window. Gabe and Rachel were now laughing and running about in the waves. Suddenly Gabe grabbed Rachel, supporting her as a large wave crashed around them. Carolyn sat down at the table, leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “I think I feel a headache coming on,” she said.

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An hour later, Carolyn had showered, dressed, and was reading on the veranda when Gabe approached and leaned his surfboard against the porch. “Hi Mom,” he said.

“Done surfing already? It’s not even seven yet.”

“Rachel has to help in the kitchen, so she had to go in and get ready.”

“Do you have any plans for this afternoon?”

“No, Rachel’s working.”

That set her teeth on edge, but Carolyn managed to force a smile. “Good, then you can take me to Astoria to pick up my car from the shop. Your father is going back to Portland this morning.”

“Sure, no problem, just let me know what time.” Gabe said and turned away, heading toward the side door.

The absent ruby pendant was the first thing that Carolyn noticed when Anna joined her on the veranda, forty-five minutes later. “Where’s your necklace?” she demanded.

“I gave it away,” Anna replied.

“You gave it away? To who?”

“Carolyn, I don’t want you to take this wrong.”

“Take what wrong? There’s nothing for me to take wrong, because you’re going to tell me that you gave it to Paige, aren’t you?”

Anna was silent.

“Anna, tell me you gave it to Paige.”

“Carolyn, I’m sorry. After much thought, I chose to give the necklace to someone else.”

Carolyn stared at her and then said, “That necklace is a family keepsake. Paige was the rightful owner. You had no right—”

“Carolyn, you know how much I love Paige.”

“Who did you give it to?”

“She’s a great girl, but the necklace was my mother’s—”

“Anna, *who*?”

“I gave it to a special person who reminds me of her. A person who I felt was worthy—”

“*Who*?”

“Rachel Albrecht.”

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Carolyn slowly leaned back. She was quiet for a few moments, and then she said, "Rachel Albrecht. Of course."

"Carolyn—"

"How could you give it to someone from *that* family. You've heard the rumors about those Albrechts!"

"That they're a den of Nazi sympathizers?"

"Yes!"

"Of course I have."

"Then how could you give your mother's necklace to one of them?"

Anna stood and started down the stairs. "Oh, they're just rumors. Well, I'm going to go next door for breakfast." She paused and turned around. "I hope you're not too upset, Carolyn."

Carolyn looked over at the veranda of the neighboring house. Rachel had just carried a tray out and was putting plates in front of a young couple. She watched her for a moment with narrowed eyes, then turned back to Anna and said, "Of course not."

Gabe was enjoying Carolyn's uncharacteristic silence during the drive to Astoria that afternoon, but when an ancient Volkswagen with a bumper sticker that read, "Don't honk! I'm peddling as fast as I can!" cut them off on Highway 101 and she said nothing, he began to get concerned. "Is everything okay, Mom?" he asked.

"No, since you're kind enough to inquire, everything is *not* okay."

"What's wrong?"

"Did you have anything to do with the necklace?"

He had walked right into it. "The necklace?"

"Grandma's ruby necklace. You know, the one and only thing she has ever owned that belonged to her mother? The one that — without a word to anyone — she just up and gives to Rachel Albrecht of all people?"

"Yeah, Rachel told me. I'm sorry, Mom. I know how upset you must be, but Grandma must have had her reasons."

Carolyn didn't answer. She just looked out the window, and when she turned back a few minutes later, the necklace was

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seemingly forgotten. “So, have you made any new friends at Stanford?”

“No, Mom. I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“And why not? You haven’t been with anyone since Kristen, and that was at least five years ago.”

“Same reason as last time you asked me.”

“Oh.”

It was at least a mile before Carolyn spoke again. “She has no idea, you know.”

Gabe paused, then said, “I think that’s best for now.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Well, at first she was too young. She was only sixteen, and I was twenty-one.”

“Yes, and she’s just become a silly habit. It’s about time you grow up and face it.”

“It’s been five years, Mom, enough time to know it isn’t just a habit. It’s Rachel or nobody. I’ve faced it, and you need to face it, too.”

“Well, she’s twenty-one and you’re twenty-six,” Carolyn snapped. “She’s old enough now.”

There was finally enough room to pass the Volkswagen. Gabe signaled, accelerated around it, and then said, “I’m... waiting.”

“Why?”

“Because the Bible says not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, so I just keep praying and waiting for God to show me what to do.”

“Well, I think that’s very wise. You know, Gabriel, that I would never want you to compromise your religion.”

Gabe glanced at her. That was the first time he had ever heard her express support for his “religion” as she called it. “When the time comes, and I know in my heart that it will, we’re going to want your blessing, Mom,” he said after a long pause.

“Oh, Gabriel, I like Rachel. She’s a nice girl, but she’s not in your league at all. You just need to... get around more, meet more people. Just be patient, and you’ll come to your senses and find a nice girl some day and forget all this nonsense about bed-and-breakfast-nurse-surfer girls.”

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Gabe turned and briefly met her eyes. “You can go on believing that if you insist, Mom, but someday you will have to face reality. Your future daughter-in-law *will* be Rachel Albrecht or nobody.”

## F I V E



Rachel brushed the remainder of the cheese off of the grater and brought the bowl over to Brittany who was standing at the kitchen table putting the finishing touches on a plate of raw hamburger that she had molded into the shape of a cake.

“Here’s the cheese.” Rachel looked at her watch. “We better hurry this up. I need to leave for work in a half hour.”

“Okay,” Brittany said, and they began sprinkling the raw meat with the shredded cheddar cheese. “Where are the carrots?”

“Right here.” Rachel brought them over, and they poked the raw carrots into the concoction.

“All finished,” Brittany said after she added a large candle.

“Okay, let’s go.” Rachel picked up a bag, and Brittany picked up the cake. “Come on,” she said to Pepper, their dog, who had been eagerly watching.

Out on the back lawn, Brittany set the cake on the picnic table, which they had previously decorated with balloons and crepe paper. Rachel took three hats out of her bag, placed one on her head, one on Pepper’s head, and handed one to Brittany who had lit the candle. Then she picked up the cake, and they stood in front of Pepper who began to leap about with

anticipation.

“Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you,” They sang together until the third line, when Brittany stopped and looked, horrified, over Rachel’s shoulder.

Rachel turned around. A Mercedes convertible was parked in the Westbrook’s driveway, and two girls with sleek hair and long tanned legs were standing next to it with Paige.

“Bye, Rach. I’m outa here.” Brittany pulled off her party hat and ran back to the house.

“Hey!” Rachel called after her and then turned back to the three girls. “Hi!” she said. “Shanna and Corrine, right?”

“Yes,” said one of them. “Hi, Rachel.”

“We’re having a birthday party for Pepper.” Rachel pointed to the dog who leapt up and almost got a bite of his cake. She held it higher and said, “Do you want to come? He’s four today.”

“Uh...” Paige’s personality always changed when her Portland friends were around, and today was no exception. “No thanks.”

“This is a hamburger cake, but you’re probably wondering about the carrots. We put them on because he loves them!” Rachel looked down at the dog. “Don’t you, Pepper?”

The girls just stared.

“Really! Watch.” Rachel pulled a carrot out of the hamburger and tossed it to Pepper who caught it and munched happily.

“See?”

“Good, Rachel.” Paige rolled her eyes at her friends. “Come on.”

Rachel watched the three girls until they were gone, and then smiled down at Pepper. “Sorry about the interruption, boy.” She held the cake out and resumed singing, “Happy birthday to you...”

It was late afternoon on the following day when Gabe leaned over Rachel’s shoulder and said, “What have you got there?”

Rachel jumped up and turned around, clutching her sketch pad to her chest. “Oh! Gabe! You scared me!”

Gabe walked around and sat beside her on the bench in Whale Park. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. It’s nice to see you.”

He smiled back. “Well? Can I see?”

She reluctantly lowered the sketch pad. "I strayed a little from the original idea."

Those were his favorites. He took the pad and examined the drawing. She had apparently begun a serious sketch of horseback riders crossing Ecola Creek, but to his secret delight, it had devolved into comical doodles of cartoonish wildlife. There was a sea lion, with Rachel's face and ponytail, sunning herself, while behind her, on a surfboard riding the crest of a large wave, was a tufted puffin that had Gabe's eyes. Also on the surfboard was a suitcase, bulging open with books, stethoscopes, and other items. They were going to land on top of her at any moment, but Rachel the sea lion was completely oblivious.

He handed it back. "I like it."

"Just a sketch of one of the many migratory birds who hang out at Cannon Beach every summer."

"That's me."

She tore the page out and began to crumple it up.

"I'll take that if you don't want it."

"Sure." She handed it to him.

They sat in silence for awhile as the sun sank lower, causing the breaking waves to glisten with a palette of shades ranging from shining white to dark grayish blue. "You know it's at moments like this, that I just know in my heart that God created this beautiful world," said Rachel. "You can't look at such beauty and not know that there *has* to be an artist behind it."

"There is."

Rachel was silent for awhile and then said, "An artist that not only has the capacity to create breathtaking beauty, but sometimes with such whimsy and humor."

"Like you?"

She turned and looked at him for a long moment. "That was the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," she said and hugged him.

Gabe held her for a moment, then released her and looked away.

They sat silently, watching the colors of the sky and water deepen and change. After a few minutes, Rachel said, "There

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are times that I know from the depths of my soul that God created all of this for us to enjoy because he loves us. Just by looking at it, I feel him. I feel how much he loves me.”

“Since the creation of the world, God’s eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what he has made, and so men are without excuse,” said Gabe.

“Who said that?”

“Paul. In Romans.”

“Right now I believe it, but you know... it goes away. I’ll go to class or talk to someone, and then...” She shrugged. “I guess reason comes back. In order to believe all this was created by God, you have to believe the Bible is literal, and it’s been proven that it’s not.”

“How?”

“Lots of ways. For starters, the world isn’t only six thousand years old.”

“Maybe it is.”

She looked down. “You know, I’ve done a lot of thinking since the last time you and I talked about this subject. You have no idea how bad I want to believe like you do. I can see your relationship with God, and I know it’s real... At least I know it is to you.”

They were quiet for a moment, and then Gabe said, “How do you know the world isn’t six thousand years old?”

“Oh, come on. It’s only been proven over and over!”

“By scientists?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, and they’re *never* wrong!”

Rachel laughed.

“Do you know that if scientists just discovered Mount Saint Helens and didn’t know that it had blown its top off in 1980, they would tell you that its sediment layers *had* to have taken millions of years to have formed? Sediment layers that didn’t exist twenty-five years ago?”

“No.”

“Or that in all of the fossils ever found from the supposed eons of time it took for us to change from fish or whatever to humans, there are no intermediate species anywhere? I would think there would be a spectrum of fossils, illustrating the

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process. I don't know..." He stopped and smiled at her. "Fish skeletons with feet... people skeletons with fins."

Rachel laughed again.

"There are many, many fossils of distinct species, but nothing linking one species to another. You'd think with it being such a long, gradual process, they'd be everywhere."

"Yeah, I guess they would." She knitted her brow. "I'm... Oh!" She suddenly stopped and looked over Gabe's shoulder. "Ian!" she yelled, waving.

Gabe turned around and recognized Ian Hodge, across the street, heading toward them.

Rachel turned back to Gabe. "I met him earlier. He works at the Barista, and I said I would meet him for an ice cream cone after he got off work. Do you want to come?"

"Oh, I don't—"

"Please! I haven't seen you since yesterday morning."

"Okay."

"Good." She stood up. "You don't want to leave me alone with that guy, anyway. I might start wearing Birkenstocks and... weaving goat hair or something."

He stood beside her, and they watched as Ian waited for some cars to pass, then crossed the street. "What is it?" Rachel asked.

Gabe had been observing a puffiness around Ian's sandaled feet. "I wonder..."

"Heart failure? So young?"

Gabe shrugged as Ian joined them. "Hi, Ian," he said.

"Gabe."

"I invited Gabe to join us. I hope that's okay?" said Rachel.

Ian shrugged. "Sure," he said, and they headed up the street.

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting in the park with their ice cream cones. "Rachel says you work at the Barista," said Gabe.

"Yes."

"Summer job?"

He nodded. "I'm going to start working on my doctorate at Portland State in the fall."

"Really? In what?"

"Education."

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“Not literature?”

“That was my undergraduate.”

Gabe nodded and then paused. “Can I ask you a personal question, Ian?” he said after a moment.

“Yes,”

“Do you have a history of some kind of valvular heart damage?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You have ankle edema, and after just a short walk you’re pale and sweaty,” said Rachel. “Symptoms of congestive heart failure.”

“What are you guys, doctors?”

“Gabe is starting his fourth year at Stanford Medical School this fall, and I’m a graduate nurse,” said Rachel.

“Okay, rheumatic fever, age fourteen. Caused severe valve damage, and so, you’re right, I suffer from chronic CHF. I also have some kidney problems, so the doctor is a little reluctant to recommend any corrective surgery.”

Rachel, looking stricken, leaned back and said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” said Gabe. “That’s really... awful. Do you have a good cardiologist?”

“I guess.”

“Did you have Strep?”

Ian nodded. “It was going around at my school, but when I came down with a whopping sore throat, my mother didn’t take me to a doctor.”

“Why not?” said Rachel.

“I don’t know.”

“She must have been frantic when you got rheumatic fever,” said Rachel.

“Well, it got her a lot of sympathy and attention. People even gave her money.”

Gabe looked at Rachel, who was staring at Ian with a look of horror. They sat quietly for awhile, and then Ian finished his ice cream and stood up. “Well I should go home now.”

“Where do you live?”

“With my mother in Seaside. She’s a waitress.” He began to walk down the street, “See you later.”

Rachel stood as well, shaking her head as she watched him

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walk away. “Unbelievable,” she said.

## S I X



**M**onday afternoon Carolyn paused in pruning her miniature boxwood hedge, reached under a rhododendron, and pulled out a croquet ball. She stood, picked up a badminton birdie that she had previously found, and walked across the driveway to the back lawn of the Hyacinth House. "Hello?" she said to Judith, who was painting the rail of the veranda.

Judith looked up. "Oh, hello, Carolyn."

Carolyn held up the birdie and the ball. "I found these under my rhododendrons, which probably explains why your guests were tromping about in my yard yesterday afternoon." She placed the items on a chair and stalked back over to her yard.

"Well, and a good afternoon to you, too," Judith muttered as she resumed her work.

Rachel watched the interchange, then turned back to Ingrid who was pruning the roses. "Here's the wheelbarrow, Grandma," she said, wheeling it up to her. "Do you want me to fill the sprayer?"

"I don't know." Ingrid examined a leaf and shook her head. "We have terrible aphids, but I think it's going to rain."

"Good afternoon, Ingrid, Rachel." They looked up and saw

Anna walking across the lawn carrying a shallow cardboard box.

"Hello, Mrs. Westbrook," said Rachel.

"I divided the iris tubers in my yard in Portland on Saturday, and I brought some back for you, Ingrid. They're the purple ones that I was telling you about."

"Oh, how nice!" Ingrid dropped her clippers as she awkwardly attempted to pull off her gloves. She reached down and picked them up, then dropping one of the gloves. "Thank you," she said, taking the box.

As Anna lingered, chatting with Ingrid, Rachel picked up her clippers and began to prune the roses, placing the thorny stalks into the wheelbarrow. After a few minutes she glanced over toward the Westbrook house. Paige and her friends were reclining on chaise lounges on the veranda, and Gabe was in a hammock out on the lawn, absorbed in an enormous textbook.

Presently, Anna left, and Rachel continued pruning away new canes and unwanted growth while Ingrid selected and clipped rosebuds to use in her flower arrangements. They were nearly finished when Rachel looked up and saw Gabe walking across the lawn toward her. Paige and her two friends, she noticed, were now standing on the driveway. "Looking good," Gabe said when he reached her.

"Unfortunately, we have aphids," said Rachel.

"In that case, I think we should leave." Gabe took her arm.

"Come on."

"Where?"

"We're walking to town." He gestured at the three girls who were still lingering.

"Do you mind?" Rachel asked Ingrid.

"Of course not."

"Come on," Gabe said again.

"Well, I don't think I look..." Rachel nervously pulled off her gloves, glancing at the girls and then over at Judith who was now cleaning her paintbrush.

"You look sweet." Gabe began to pull her along. "Come on."

"Okay, give me a second to run in and get my jacket."

"Corrine just got back from a tour of Europe," Paige told

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Gabe. It was an hour later, and Rachel was tagging down the sidewalk after the group, listening to the girls chatter.

“Where did you go?” Gabe asked.

“France, Spain, and Italy,” said Corrine.

“Gabe has been to Europe,” said Paige.

“Then you’ve discovered, as I have, *true* culture,” said Corrine.

“I mean, nothing against this place.” she glanced behind her at an art gallery that they had just visited.

“I’ll grant you that Cannon Beach ain’t Versailles,” said Gabe.

Rachel felt a few sprinkles of rain on her face. She reached under her jacket for the hood of her sweatshirt, but stopped when Corrine exclaimed, “It’s starting to rain! Oh, it’s cold!”

She was wearing only a light shirt. Rachel took off her jacket and held it out. “Do you want to borrow this? I have a sweatshirt.”

Corrine just stared back at her for a long moment, then turned to Paige and Shanna with an astonished smile. Rachel stood still for a moment, then turned away.

“Here.” Gabe pulled his sweatshirt off and handed it to Corrine. “Would you condescend to wear a Stanford hoodie, or would you rather take your chances with pneumonia?”

Corrine pulled the oversized sweatshirt on and beamed at him. “Thanks.”

“Oh, Corrine, you look so cute,” said Paige. “Let me take your picture. Gabe, come here. I want to take your picture with Corrine.”

“Now, why would I do a silly thing like that?” Gabe said with an amiable smile. He took Rachel’s arm, led her slightly ahead of the others, and then put his head close to hers as they walked up the sidewalk. “Now confess,” he said. “No beating around the bush. Where did that jacket come from? Neiman & Marcus?”

“No.”

“Bloomingdales?”

“No.”

“Harrod’s?”

“Isn’t that in London?”

“Avon Celli? Spencer Hart? James Lock & Co.?”

“No, no, and no.”

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“My dear girl! What were you thinking?”

Rachel laughed.

“Where *did* you buy it?”

“Costco.”

“Costco! Costco! My favorite store! I’m going to wear the jacket.” He took it, put it on, and then turned around. “Paige! Paige!” he said in a high voice.

The three girls were staring. The sleeves ended just below Gabe’s elbows, and the jacket was stretched dangerously tight across his shoulders. “What?” Paige said.

Gabe continued to imitate her voice. “Rachel loaned me her jacket! Don’t I look cute?” He put his arm around Rachel.

“Don’t you want to take our picture?”

Paige laughed nervously. “Yeah, right Gabe,” she said, turning away. There was an awkward silence for a few moments, then Paige walked over to a store window. “Isn’t this your father, Rachel?” she said, pointing to a sign that said, “Peter Albrecht, Local Artist and Craftsman.” Next to the sign were several brightly painted, handmade tables and chairs.

“Yes,” said Rachel.

“Your father made those?” Shanna asked her.

“Yes.”

“The carving and painting and everything?”

“Yes,” said Rachel. “He learned it from his father, and his father learned it from *his* father. It goes back for generations in Germany, the Black Forest.”

“Rachel carries on the tradition. She paints,” Gabe said, handing the jacket back to her.

“Well, not this kind of painting, and I don’t build furniture...” Rachel broke off when a soaking gust of rain suddenly swept over them.

“We better head back; it’s really starting to come down,” said Gabe.

“Is your book okay?” Rachel asked as they walked rapidly up the sidewalk. “It won’t get wet?”

Gabe looked at the plastic bag that contained an antique book he had previously bought. “Not if we hurry. Come on.” He took Rachel’s hand, and they began to run toward home.

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Ten minutes later, Gabe entered the side entrance of the house and stopped in the utility room where he carefully dried the bag and then opened it. The book looked fine. He then set it down, pulled off his wet shirt, and rubbed his face and hair with a towel.

The fireplace in the kitchen was crackling when he walked through to the living room where Mona, the maid, was lighting another. “Looks like you got caught.” Carolyn looked up from a magazine. “Where are the others?”

“They should be along soon.” Gabe loped up the stairs. “I’m going to change.”

“Okay. Dinner’s at six.”

When Gabe entered the kitchen later, he found Anna washing lettuce and Mona taking a roast out of the oven. Paige was sitting on a barstool folding napkins.

“I found something today that I thought you might like,” Gabe walked up to Anna who turned around, drying her hands on her apron.

“Oh?”

Gabe held out the book that he had purchased earlier. “Here.”

Anna looked at it and smiled with delight. “*Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis. I love this.” She opened the front cover. “It looks...”

“It’s a first edition.”

“Oh, Gabe, it’s beautiful. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.” Gabe turned toward Paige. “Where are your cronies?”

“Still getting ready. Where’s Rachel? Isn’t she having dinner with us? Isn’t Rachel Albrecht *always* included in *everything* now?”

“Okay, Paige.”

“What’s the matter?” Carolyn came in from the dining room and walked over to the cupboard.

“It started to rain, and Rachel asked Corrine if she wanted to wear her jacket, and Corrine didn’t want to.”

“Oh.”

“It was Rachel’s fault. What was Corrine supposed to do?”

"Of course," said Carolyn.

"So Gabe puts on Rachel's jacket, and it was really embarrassing." Paige glared at Gabe. "You hurt Corrine's feelings."

"Sorry, Paige. I was annoyed, but there were better ways that I could have handled the situation." Gabe caught Anna's eye and saw a twinkle of understanding before she turned away.

"Gabriel, when will you understand that you just *invite* these awkward moments?" said Carolyn. "It really would be much kinder to both Rachel and our guests if you would face the fact that certain people just don't *mix* well."

Everyone turned in surprise when Anna suddenly clunked a stack of china down next to Carolyn and then stood looking at her with a placid smile. "Here are the plates, Carolyn. Dinner is almost ready if you and Paige would finish setting the table now."

Rachel entered the house through the side door and walked into the kitchen. "Oh boy, do I smell spaghetti?" she said to Brittany who was putting a cloth on the table. "I'm starving!"

"Mom's mad about the napkins, Rach."

Rachel stopped and clapped her hand to her forehead. "Oh! I forgot to tell her!"

"Forgot to tell me what?" Judith entered the kitchen and stopped in front of Rachel. "You're wet!"

"Yeah, we got caught in the rain," said Rachel. "I'm sorry about the napkins, Mom. I ironed them that way because I saw a neat way to fold them, called the cock's comb? You just—"

"Rachel, I'm not interested in a new napkin fold right now. I have enough things on my mind."

"Okay."

"I had to iron all of them over again. It took nearly an hour."

"I'm sorry. You should have told me. I would have done it."

"Well, I *could* have done that, but you weren't around, now were you?"

Rachel knew when it was a good time to make herself scarce. She began to edge toward the door. "I'm sorry, Mom..."

"I thought you were with Paige and her friends." Judith had

turned away and was looking out the window.

“Yes, and—”

“Then why are they just getting back now, and you’re already here?”

“Well, I was with Gabe, too, and we kind of got separated from them.”

The door to the basement stairs opened, and Ingrid walked in. “Oh, Rachel,” she said, “you’ll catch cold! Run along and change.”

“You know, Rachel,” Judith turned away from the window and opened a cupboard, “you’d be much better off to cultivate a friendship with Paige than waste your time with her older brother.”

“Paige doesn’t want to be friends with me.”

“And whose fault is that? You *could* fit in if you would just make an effort.” Judith began placing glasses on the counter. “It would be a much more productive use of your time than following Gabriel Westbrook around like a puppy dog.”

“I don’t!”

“I just don’t want you to start getting any grandiose expectations about his intentions.”

“I’m not!”

Ingrid glanced from Judith to Rachel, then lifted the lid and stirred the spaghetti sauce. “Run along and change, Leibchen,” she said, “before you catch a cold.”

“Anna Westbrook likes me.” *Now you’ve done it*, Rachel thought.

“Yes, Anna Westbrook likes you,” Judith snapped, “and it’s a complete and total waste. She could really have helped Brittany, but...” She looked at Rachel and then stopped.

“But there’s no such hope for me?”

“Well, you just said yourself that you can’t even get Paige to like you.”

*Gabe likes me*, Rachel thought.

Judith went to the door. “Peter,” she called down the stairs, “dinner’s ready!” Then she returned to the counter. “I don’t know what I was hoping for with Anna Westbrook anyway.”

The subject matter was going from bad to worse. Rachel edged toward the door.

## *More precious than Rubies*

“What about Anna Westbrook?” Peter entered the room.

“All her piety and showing off being such a good church-going Christian. She doesn’t fool me. When she stops telling those stories about what supposedly happened to her parents in Germany, then maybe I’ll believe she’s sincere.” Judith stopped and glared at Rachel who had made it to the door.

“Be back in a jiffy,” she said, opening it.

“Why were you looking like that?”

Rachel turned around. “Looking like what?”

“They *are* lies. Those people are liars,” said Judith. “Ask your grandma; she was there. All those stories that Anna Westbrook and her ilk tell, they’re all made up, aren’t they, Mom?”

“Of course,” Ingrid said soothingly and then turned to Rachel. “Go down and change before you catch pneumonia and then come back up and have some nice hot spaghetti.”

Rachel turned and went down the stairs, wishing she didn’t have to come back for spaghetti. She wasn’t hungry anymore.

## S E V E N



Attending college in urban California had given Gabe a passion for Oregon's scenery, especially the Coast Highway's combination of lush old-growth forest and breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean.

That Wednesday afternoon, however, Gabe's mind was elsewhere. After he exited the highway and headed down the hill into Cannon Beach, he picked up his phone and hit redial. He had gotten Rachel's voice mail before, but this time the phone rang three times and then was picked up.

"Hello, Gabe." Judith didn't wait for a reply. "Rachel went out and left her phone here in the kitchen."

"Oh," said Gabe. "Is she still at work?"

"No, she came home and then left again."

"Okay, thanks." Gabe lowered the phone and frowned as he pulled up to a stop sign in the middle of town. He had hoped that Rachel would have reserved a little of her precious time for him that afternoon. With all this infernal rain, there had been no early-morning surfing for three days, and he had barely seen her.

"Hey Grumpy!" someone yelled. It was Rachel, standing on the curb with a big smile.

He rolled down the window. "Hello," he said as he eased into

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a parking spot beside her. "I was just trying to call you. You know you it wouldn't hurt to take your cell phone with you when you go places."

"Oh, I guess I forgot it," she said. "Ian and I were just having coffee." She motioned over at Ian who was sitting at a table outside of the Barista. "Come and sit with us."

Gabe put the car back into gear. "No thanks."

"Why not?"

Gabe tried to keep his expression neutral. "I have things to do... Now, wait a minute!" he exclaimed as she crouched down and rested both arms on the ledge of the open window.

"I can see that you're going to leave me with no choice but to use the big guns," she said.

"What?"

"I have a secret weapon that I've been keeping for emergencies."

He turned off the key. "Okay, let me have it."

She stood up. "Okay, ready?"

"Yes."

"He said, 'What was she dressed in... Scotch Tweed, wasn't it?'"

Gabe stared back.

Rachel laughed. "And *she* said, 'Oatmeal Tweed.'"

"I haven't the foggiest idea as you well know," said Gabe.

"Then *he* said, 'I knew it had something to do with porridge.'"

"Okay, you got me."

"*The Lady Vanishes.*"

"I owe you one... later."

"No, you owe me one *now.*" She opened the door. "Come on!"

Gabe stepped out on the sidewalk and walked with Rachel toward the coffee shop. "You know, at times you can be a little pushy."

"Well, I've missed you lately."

That made everything better. Gabe turned and smiled into her eyes just before they walked up to the table. "Hi, Ian," he said.

"Hello."

"How are you doing today?"

## *More precious than Rubies*

“Okay.” Ian regarded him soberly. “I thought you were a student.”

“I am.”

“What kind of car is that?”

“A Peugeot 307 CC.”

“Are you wealthy?”

Momentarily at a loss for words, Gabe glanced at Rachel.

“Have you ever heard of P.J. Westbrook? The men’s store?”

Rachel asked Ian.

“Of course.”

“That was Gabe’s great-grandfather. His father is president of the company now.”

Ian gave him an accusing look, and Gabe found himself staring defiantly back. “What do you expect, an apology?”

“I’d like to see that.”

“What on earth for?”

“For being just one more link in the chain of corporate domination, degradation, and exploitation of the weak that comes from the United States and is perpetrated on the rest of the world.”

Gabe sat down. “And you think that every loaf of bread that my grandpa earned through his ingenuity and hard work was taken straight from the mouths of poverty-stricken children.”

Ian sipped his coffee. “That’s an oversimplification.”

“Well, like all socialists, you’re a little misguided, Ian. People like my great-grandfather didn’t take bread out of the mouths of starving children. They created many more loaves for everyone.”

“Yeah, and many more guns to spread domination and oppression all over the planet.”

“Well, I’ll grant that he probably helped pay for the guns that we used to dominate and oppress France and England during the second world war,” Gabe said mildly and then turned to Rachel. “I’m going to get the coffee. The usual?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Gabe went inside and put in the order. Five minutes later he returned with the two steaming cups and found Paige, Shanna, and Corrine lingering next to the table.

“Hi Gabe,” said Paige. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, I just saw Rachel and Ian on my way back, so I stopped. Have you met Ian?”

“Yes, just now.”

“Here.” Gabe handed Rachel her coffee and sat down beside her.

“We’re going up to the Crab House for dinner,” Paige told him. “Do you want to come?”

“No thanks. You go ahead.”

Corrine opened one of her bags, pulled out a paperback book, and handed it to Gabe. “I found this really cool book about museums in Europe. We’ll have to take a look through it sometime, since we’ve both been there.”

“Sure.” Gabe flipped through the book and then handed it back. “Looks interesting.”

“I couldn’t believe I found it, because remember just the other day we were talking about Europe and the art and culture and stuff?”

“Begg a question,” said Ian.

“What?” said Corrine.

“Well, as Stanislaw Lee put it, ‘If a man who cannot count finds a four-leaf clover, is he lucky?’”

Corrine’s smile became uncertain, and she looked away.

“Okay.. Well, catch you later.” Paige turned back as the girls walked away and gave Gabe a look.

“Ian Hodge, the man with the razor tongue,” Gabe said after they were gone. He leaned back and gave Rachel a look that said, *Have you had enough?*

She met his eyes, then turned to Ian. “Well, I probably should be going now.”

“Bye,” said Ian.

Gabe stood up. “Yeah, I’m done, too,” he said and then turned to Ian. “You know it would probably be easier on your heart if you would lighten up a little about things.”

Ian stood as well. “Thank you for the advice, Dr. Gabe,” he replied amiably and then headed down the street.

Gabe and Rachel walked over to the passenger door of his car, and he opened it for her. “Where to?” he asked after he walked around and slid into the driver’s seat.

She shrugged.

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“Are you hungry?”

“Actually, yes.”

“How about dinner?”

“Great.”

“Someplace out of town, where we won’t run into anybody we know?”

“Sure.”

The next morning’s sunrise unveiled a flawless blue sky that set off a newly-scrubbed world. Freshly showered after an hour of early-morning surfing with Rachel, Gabe whistled tunelessly as he carried his coffee out to the veranda. “Hi, Mom,” he said to Carolyn who was sitting on a chaise lounge reading the paper.

“Good morning,” she replied. “Beautiful day.”

“Yep.” Gabe picked up the front section of the paper and sat down at the table. “Are you done with this?”

Carolyn nodded. “I see you were up at the crack of dawn again...” she began, then sat up and peered across the veranda. “I wonder who that is?”

Gabe looked over and saw a familiar blond figure lingering on the public walkway that separated their house from the bed and breakfast. “I know him,” Gabe told Carolyn as he stood and walked over to the rail. “Ian!” he called.

Ian turned around. “Oh, Dr. Gabe. Good morning.”

“Taking a walk to the beach?”

“No, I’m wondering...” He pointed to the bed and breakfast. “Is that where Rachel lives?”

“Yes, but she’s busy right now. She helps her mother serve breakfast to the guests every morning.”

“Do you know when she’ll be done?” Ian walked around the porch and mounted the stairs.

“She’s usually done before nine.” Gabe motioned to an empty chair. “Have a seat. Would you like some cereal?”

“Thanks.” Ian sat down.

“Mom, this is Ian Hodge. He’s a graduate student from Portland, working in town for the summer.”

“Hello, Ian,” Carolyn said just as the phone began to ring. She stood and went inside.

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Gabe followed her and returned with a clean bowl and spoon. He placed them in front of Ian, handed him the cereal box, and pushed the milk in his direction. "Why are you looking for Rachel?"

"Just for a visit." Ian set down the milk and began to dump sugar into his bowl. He looked at Gabe and smiled. "Is that okay with you?"

"I don't think..."

"Are you and Rachel a couple?"

Gabe sipped his coffee and watched a flock of seagulls squabble out near the water. "It's fine with me if you visit Rachel, Ian."

"I knew you weren't a couple. What is she, just a buddy? Your little summer sidekick?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because you're not that smart. You've been friends for years, right? She's just become kind of a habit?"

Gabe set his cup down and looked at Ian. "Rachel is not just a habit to me." He said the words slowly and distinctly.

"What's the matter, then? Mommy wouldn't approve?"

"What is this all about? Is this a challenge? Are you in love with Rachel, Ian?"

"Well, you don't find a well-read twenty-one-year-old every day. Call me weird, but that's the kind of thing that gets my poor beleaguered heart beating faster."

Gabe leaned back, suddenly wanting to change the subject. "What exactly is wrong with your heart? Mitral valve regurgitation?"

"Mitral and aortic valve regurgitation and cardiomegaly."

"Hmm."

"The rheumatic fever damaged my kidneys as well, rendering me ineligible for surgical intervention."

"I've been reading up about your condition, and I'm seriously considering specializing in cardiology."

Ian finished his cereal, stood, and extended his hand. "Maybe someday you'll be my doctor." He started down the stairs. "You said Rachel will be done about nine?"

"Yep." Gabe leaned back and smiled at Ian's retreating back. He wasn't worried. He knew that Rachel would never be

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interested in Ian Hodge.

Behind the screen door, unbeknownst to Gabe, Carolyn watched Ian leave as well.

The breakfast rush was over by eight-twenty, and at eight-twenty-one Rachel was out the door and walking across the lawn, eager to enjoy the beautiful day.

“You’re done early.”

Rachel looked up and saw Gabe standing at the rail of his porch. “I know! It’s not even eight-thirty.” She grinned as he trotted down the stairs and met her on the path. “And I don’t have to go to work. I have the whole day free.”

“You couldn’t have picked a better one.”

They paused, looking at the unusually blue ocean, and then she said, “So, what are you doing today?”

“Going for a walk with you.”

“Oh? When?”

“Right now. Come on.” Gabe guided her toward the stairs that led to the beach.

“Ian Hodge was looking for you earlier,” Gabe said later as they walked along the water’s edge.

“Really?” She looked up, astonished. “What for?”

“He said just to visit.”

“Oh.”

“I told him you were working until nine, and he acted like he’d probably come back then.”

“Oh.”

Gabe glanced sideways at her. “Looks like you’ve made yourself a new friend.”

“Well, I guess he’s a nice guy. A little weird, maybe.”

“Yeah.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, and then Rachel said, “I’ve been thinking about our conversation the other day.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve come to a realization.”

“And that is?”

“That there are only two groups of truly honest people in the world. Those who are sold out to God, like you, and atheists.”

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“Oh?”

“When you really think about it, how can there be a middle ground?” She looked at him and hesitated. “I’ll confess right now that I’m a hypocrite, because *I’m* not in either one of those groups.”

“Yes.”

“But how can people just go through life believing in, or pretending to believe in, a supreme being, and at the same time think he’s just a ball of mush who never does anything of significance?”

“You’re right.”

“And when they try to understand all the hard questions, like how and why did we end up here on this earth, they don’t even include this vague mush-God into the question.”

“I know.”

“I mean, to the point where they go through amazing gyrations, practically twist themselves into pretzels, in order to keep him out of the picture. And the ironic part is that most of them say they *believe* in God. I mean, there really aren’t that many actual, self-proclaimed atheists.”

“There are two rules in the game of science and origins,” said Gabe. “Number one: Given enough time the impossible is possible — no matter how convoluted, ridiculous, and improbable. Number two: Under no circumstances is God *ever* included in the discussion.”

They walked along in silence for a few minutes, and then Rachel said, “When you really think about it, if you believe in God, it should be all or nothing.”

“Yes.”

“And I do believe in God.”

“I know you do.”

“But there are things that still hold me back from... completely buying into the whole thing.”

“Such as?”

“Well, creation.”

“What about it?”

“You made some really good points, but I’ve heard a lot of evidence on the other side.”

“For example?”

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“Well, what about all the rocks and fossils that have been scientifically dated to be millions of years old?”

He smiled at her. “Oh, is that all?”

“Excuse me? Is that *all*?”

“Well, suppose that a doctor had an opportunity to examine Adam one week after creation.”

“Yes?”

“What do you suppose he wrote down in the chart as Adam’s approximate age?”

“Oh...” Rachel wrinkled her brow.

“Probably around thirty?”

“Yes, but he was just created a few days before... You’re right. I see. God didn’t create Adam as a newborn but as a grown man. Same with everything else.”

They walked along in silence for a few minutes, and then Gabe said, “I agree with you. If a person truly believes that God exists, you’d think it would be an earth-shattering, life-altering discovery.”

“Yes.”

“That reminds me of a study that was conducted some years back. College students who professed a belief in God were asked if they thought that he had the intellectual capacity to understand advanced mathematics, physics, and science.”

“Oh?”

“The overwhelming majority said that they thought those subjects were probably over his head.”

Rachel shook her head.

“Many people say that they believe in God but then refuse to give him the honor he deserves.”

“Yes.”

“Yet when God is honored, it benefits everyone, because the result is greater respect for ourselves *and* each other.”

“And how’s that?”

“Because he is the Almighty God who created each one of us. And not on some mass-production line, either. He designed and created each of us individually... by hand, I guess you could say.

Rachel smiled.

“He created you. He knows every hair on your head. He

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cherishes you. Jesus had equality with God, but he didn't consider that something to grasp or cling to. He chose to enter the earth as the most weak and defenseless of humanity, a newborn baby, and then to experience poverty, fatigue, pain, thirst, and temptation only then to be tortured and murdered by the people that he created. He did that for you. You are that precious to him."

Rachel felt a rush of longing so intense that tears stood in her eyes. "I *want* to believe I'm that precious," she said.

Gabe was silent for a moment, and then he reached over and took her hand. "You are." He paused, swallowed, then resumed, "He created Rachel, a thing of breathtaking beauty, whimsy, and humor." He began to turn away, then suddenly turned back and kissed her. Then he let go of her hand and walked over to the water's edge.

Rachel stood still. Vaguely aware that she could feel her heart beating, she tried to order her thoughts. After a moment Gabe walked back to her. "I hope that was okay," he said.

Rachel took a deep breath and attempted what she hoped was a casual smile. "Yes."

He nodded.

Suddenly Rachel remembered what Judith's words, "Don't get any grandiose ideas about Gabriel Westbrook's intentions." How many times had she received that warning in the past five years? A thousand?

She took another breath and, attempting a light tone, said, "Don't worry, I won't get any grandiose ideas about your intentions." As soon as the words were out, she was instantly embarrassed.

Gabe gazed at her for a long moment, his eyes solemn and intense. He opened his mouth as if to reply but then closed it and looked away.

They began to walk again, and Rachel tried to calm her thoughts. After a few minutes the silence became burdensome, the first time that had ever happened between them. "It's such a beautiful morning," she finally said.

"Yes, it is."

"What time—" she stopped. "Ian said he was coming by at nine?"

## *More precious than Rubies*

“Yes.”

“What time is it?”

Gabe looked at his watch. “Five after.”

“We better turn back.”

Twenty minutes later the Westbrook house came into view. As they grew closer, they saw that Paige, Shanna, and Corrine were sitting on the steps with Ian.

“Hi, Ian,” Rachel said as they approached. “Gabe said you were looking for me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Rachel and Gabe mounted the stairs, stepping around Ian and the girls.

“Iced tea?” Gabe asked Rachel.

“Sure.”

“Ian?”

“No.”

Gabe picked up the pitcher, and Rachel sat down at the table. “So, do you have the day off from the Barista?” she asked Ian.

“No, I have go pretty soon.”

“Thanks.” She looked up when Gabe handed her the glass.

“Well, enjoy the morning while you can.” Gabe took a pencil from his pocket and laid it on the table. He was always carrying pencils at odd times, a habit Rachel speculated he must have picked up at medical school.

“Enjoy what? It’s cold and windy,” said Ian.

“I know,” said Corrine. “It’s *always* cold here.”

“My parents have a condo in La Jolla,” said Shanna. “I don’t know why I even bother to come to the Oregon Coast when I could go there.”

Rachel looked at the gray-blue water, haystack rock, and the sea cliffs and lighthouse in the distance and briefly wondered if she had entered a parallel universe inhabited by the aesthetically-impaired. Then she met Gabe’s eyes and could see that he was thinking the same thing.

“Oh, yeah, give me California beaches any day,” said Ian. “You never can have enough roller-blading morons, broken glass, and litter.”

“Yeah...” Shanna nodded her head as if she had never thought

of that before.

It was odd, Paige and her shallow friends gathered around Ian, hanging on his every word. Rachel observed them for a moment, then picked up the pencil and doodled on a napkin.

“Anyway, go on with what you were saying, Ian,” said Corrine.

“I was saying that Cannon Beach’s renowned fourth of July parade is another example of the Christian Taliban hiding behind the American flag in a frenzied ritual of fanatical patriotism.”

“Ooh,” said Shanna as the others stared.

“So, I regret to say that I won’t be attending this year.”

“What do you mean by the ‘Christian Taliban,’” asked Corrine.

“Bible-waving religious nuts. If you look, you’ll see that they’re all over town, hiding behind every bush and rock.”

“Oh.”

“God’s elect are always irritating us,” said Ian. “They take a fiendish delight in torturing us with tantrums, galling us with gammon, and pelting us with platitudes.” He turned with a sweeping gesture toward the table. “And now if we can have silence, please, Rachel here will tell us who said that.”

Rachel laid down the pencil and looked up. “I don’t know. It sounds like Bierce or Mencken.”

“Bierce,” said Gabe, and Ian nodded.

“Well, you’d never catch me at such a dumb event,” said Paige, “because it’s just so... Cannon Beach.”

“Oh, come on, what’s wrong with waving a few flags on the fourth of July?” Rachel picked up the pencil again. “I love it. I always go.”

“Well, being a member of a privileged group, middle class and white, you can afford to be patriotic,” Ian told her. “Why shouldn’t you love a system has benefitted you so immensely at the cost of others?”

“At the cost of who?”

“Who? Millions of your fellow human beings who have been sacrificed all over the world on the altar of American-style prosperity.”

“Don’t you know?” Gabe smiled at Rachel. “It’s the favorite

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American past-time next to baseball. We Americans so enjoy persecuting the downtrodden and defenseless.”

Rachel tilted her head at him. “Oh really?”

“Really. We mostly do it after famines, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis... invasions by nasty people. We throw money at them, aid workers, medical supplies, military support, food. Oddly, though, they actually act happy to get it... pesky little masochists.”

Ian turned away with a dismissive gesture. “I know your type, Gabe. You’re a parrot, simply regurgitating the propaganda that is fed to you by the corporate-dominated media.”

“And I know *your* type, who can’t even say the word ‘corporate’ without a sneer.”

There was silence for a few moments, and then Shanna said, “I went to an anti-war rally last year.”

Ian turned to her. “Where?”

“At school.”

“You must feel very proud of yourself.”

“Well—”

“For donating one paltry hour to the cause and then immediately resuming your round-the-clock support of corporate-driven genocide.”

“I don’t support genocide!”

“What does your father do?”

“He’s the president of Multnomah Bank.”

“Does he give you money?”

“Yes. I’m a student.”

“Then you’re no better than the offspring of those who built the death chambers at Auschwitz.” Ian paused and looked sternly at the three girls. “Stop gaping. The truth hurts.”

There was silence for a few moments, and then Paige looked at her watch and jumped up. “Oh! We’re going to be late for our pedicures.” She motioned to the other two. “Come on.”

After they were gone, Ian stood. “Well, I better head off to work.” He looked at Rachel. “Feel free to drop by anytime. I’ll buy you coffee.”

“Sure.” Rachel stood as well. “I gotta go, too. I’m supposed to take Brittany to Seaside.”

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Ian turned to Gabe but didn't say anything. He merely grinned at him before he headed down the steps and was gone.

When he was alone, Gabe leaned across the table and picked up Rachel's doodled-on napkin. She never appeared to catch on to his efforts to always keep a pencil within her reach.

He smiled as he examined the sketch of a barn owl with tortoise-shell glasses and the same facial expression that Ian had worn minutes before while lecturing Shanna. Ian the owl was perched on an untidy pile of opened books, his brows drawn together, wagging a taloned finger.

Gabe turned the paper sideways and read what Rachel had printed on the spines of the books. In block letters on each one were the words, "American Library of Grouchy Dead Guys." One was titled "I'm So Smart and You're So Stupid, by H.L. Mencken." Another said "Christians are Dumb, or, In Pancho Villa I Trust, by Ambrose Bierce."

Smiling, Gabe carefully smoothed the napkin and took it into the house.

## E I G H T



The good weather was still holding one afternoon a week later, and Gabe stretched out on the hammock, eyes closed, with an open cardiology book on his chest.

He was just dozing off when a door closed and a loud, animated conversation erupted from the direction of the Hyacinth House. He listened until the conversation ended and the door closed once again, then stood and followed the walkway around the B&B to the veranda. There he found Brittany sweeping and Rachel wiping the rail with a cloth.

“I just wanted to show it to her. I wasn’t going to just leave it...” Rachel was saying, but stopped when she saw Gabe. “Oh, hello. I hope we didn’t disturb you.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I decorated the veranda rail with sand and sand dollars, and Mom didn’t care for it.”

“Oh.” Gabe sat on a lawn chair and watched Rachel wipe the sand off of the rail. She seemed quieter than usual, and he felt a twinge of anxiety that it was because of his emotional behavior on Monday morning.

He looked out toward the water, reflecting on the incident for the dozenth time. He and Rachel often had insightful conversations, sometimes lasting hours. At odd times their

minds seemed to unite, and Monday morning was not the first time that he had felt a nearly overwhelming closeness to her.

He watched Rachel as she gathered the sand dollars together, placing them in a box. She wasn't there yet, but the nature of her questions, even her doubts, filled him with hope, because they revealed an honest and seeking heart, something that he knew the Lord would not turn his face from.

When she was finished, she walked down the stairs, sat on the bottom step, and shook her head. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"If you would just ask me when you're feeling artsy, you wouldn't get yelled at so much." Brittany carried the broom down the stairs and began sweeping the walk.

"I know, I know." Rachel sighed and turned back to Gabe. "So, what are you up to today?"

"Lying on the hammock."

"Oh, yeah. Life's tough," she said with a smile. "Still reading up on cardiology?"

"Yeah."

"Have you settled on that for your residency?"

"I think so, if I can get accepted."

"With your class standing, you get your choice, don't you?"

"Well, I should have a shot at it."

"I'm sure you'll get it."

He hesitated and then said, "I don't know where the residency would be. I know it would be in a big city hospital and could be anywhere in the United States." He watched her for a moment, wondering how she would feel about leaving the small town environment that she had always known.

"I hope it's not too far away. I would miss you if you couldn't come back to visit very often."

Gabe opened his mouth to reply, then closed it and looked away. He was getting way ahead of himself. "How was work yesterday?" he said after a moment.

"Fine." She looked at her watch. "I'm expecting Ian any time. He said he was going to stop by after work."

"Oh."

"I don't know if I should bring this up. It's really none of my business, but I'm worried about him."

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“Why?”

“His heart problem. Did you know he smokes?”

“Really?” said Gabe, astonished.

“Yes.”

Gabe shook his head. “I have many opinions of Ian, but I didn’t think he was stupid.”

“It’s not just tobacco, either.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, he lives close to the convalescent center, and he’s dropped by a couple times. I had lunch with him yesterday.”

“Oh.” *That little sneak*, Gabe thought.

“I rode in his car, and when he opened the glove compartment, I saw a bag of pot.”

Gabe shook his head. “That’s extremely risky behavior with his heart condition, but he has to know that.”

“Yes.”

“Well, there’s nothing you can do about it. I have a feeling that nobody tells Ian what he should or shouldn’t do.”

“No, I would imagine that no one does.”

“Ian’s here,” Brittany called to them, motioning toward the back of the house, and a moment later he came into view.

“Hi, Ian,” said Rachel. “How was work?”

“Scintillating.” He pulled a lawn chair over and sat down.

“How’s it going?” he said to Gabe.

“Great.”

They were quiet for a moment, and then Rachel turned to Gabe. “Ian and I had an interesting discussion over lunch yesterday. Basically about the same things that you and I were talking about.”

“Oh?”

“I think you’d be surprised at some of his views.”

Gabe shifted in his chair. “I can imagine.”

“No, really. Actually, you agree with each other.”

“Oh?”

“I told him some of the things that you said, and Ian said he believes they’re true.”

“He believes they’re true *for me*.” Gabe turned to Ian. “Right?”

Ian nodded.

“All paths lead to God?”

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“Yes.”

“Well, that sounds nice, but it’s not truth.”

“And you have a monopoly on the truth?” said Ian mildly.

“If everything is true then nothing is true,” Gabe said and then looked up when Ingrid backed around the corner of the house, carrying a bucket and unwinding the hose.

Rachel stood and trotted over to her. “Oh, Grandma, let me help you.”

“Thank you.” Ingrid handed her the hose. “Would you water the planters after I fertilize?”

“Sure.” Rachel grasped the hose, began unwinding it, then glanced over at Ian. “Oh! Ian Hodge, this is my grandma, Mrs. Kuntz.”

“Hello.”

“Hello, Ian. Hello, Gabe,” Ingrid said as she sprinkled white granules among the flowers in each planter and hanging basket. After she was gone, Ian leaned back in the chair and said, “So, *that’s* your grandma.”

Rachel gave him a sharp look. “What have you heard about her?”

“Not much.”

“She’s a very nice person.”

“I’m sure she is.”

They sat in silence for a moment, and then Gabe said, “I’m a little surprised at this sudden goodwill toward Christians, Ian, after some of your statements the other day. What was the phrase you used? ‘Christian Taliban?’”

“I’ll make you a deal, Gabe. You show me a truly sincere Christian, and I’ll show you a little goodwill toward them.”

“Ouch!” They turned to Rachel who was examining the hose nozzle, holding one finger to her mouth.

Gabe stood and walked to her. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m trying to adjust the spray level, and I bent my nail back.”

He took it from her. “Let me see.”

“The Christian Taliban are what I call an extreme subset of Christians,” said Ian, “who believe their way is the *only* way, and everyone else is going to hell.”

“As opposed to *everybody’s* way is the only way?” Gabe pushed at the nozzle adjustment dial with no success. “Is that

even good grammar?”

“If Jesus were here right now, he would have nothing to do with those narrow-minded, holier-than-thou, Bible-thumping crusaders who want to impose their narrow view of morality on everyone, because—”

“Wait. I know this one,” said Gabe. “Because Jesus socialized with sinners and outcasts and said not to judge.” He turned on the water, and a stream burst forth that could have peeled paint.

“Yes.”

“In other words, Jesus didn’t care *who* he ate with. Go figure. He just liked sinners. Do you think he would have had dinner with slave traders even as Africans were rotting in the holds of their ships?” *Calm down*, Gabe told himself.

“That’s hardly—”

“But he would have condemned the Christians who were fighting to stop them because they were *judging*?” Gabe picked up a stick and pushed it against the nozzle dial. “Because they were imposing their version of morality on the slave traders?”

“You can’t apply what was true two hundred years ago to what is true today,” said Ian.

“Oh, yeah. Relativism again.” Gabe suppressed a sudden urge to turn the water on him. “Well, if you think today’s peaceful anti-abortion protester is imposing his morality...”

“You can’t compare anti-slavery abolitionists with today’s pro-life nuts. They’re two completely separate things.”

Gabe gritted his teeth. “Why? The abolitionists were trying to impose their version of morality on the slave owners, weren’t they? You could even say that they were trying to create a theocracy in the slave states. Isn’t that the kind of jargon you guys love to use?” He bit his lip and briefly glanced at Ian as he worked at the stuck nozzle. Why did the guy irritate him so much? After seven years of college, Gabe had encountered his type by the hundreds, fellow students *and* professors, but no one had ever gotten under his skin like that sloppy, whey-faced, long-haired little... He clenched his teeth as he worked at the dial. The piece of junk wasn’t budging. He wedged the stick against it and pushed until it popped off and cold water spurted in their faces.

“Ooohh!” Rachel shrieked. They stood, shocked, for a split second, then he threw the sputtering hose across the lawn as she ran to turn off the water.

Gabe was still wiping water out of his eyes and shaking himself off when the door opened, and Ingrid appeared on the porch with a tray. “We have that chocolate cake...” she began and then stopped when she saw Gabe and Rachel. “Oh, my goodness! Just a minute, I’ll get you a towel.” She set the tray on the table and disappeared back into the house.

Rachel pushed Gabe and yelled, “Look at me, you big dork!” Then she doubled over with laughter, evaporating Gabe’s embarrassment and ill-temper.

They were still laughing a minute later when Ingrid hurried down the stairs with towels. “What happened?” she asked.

“The nozzle came apart while Gabe was trying to adjust it.” Rachel grinned at him. “It must have been defective or something.”

“Excuse me? I didn’t quite get that.” Ian walked over. “Did you say *it* was defective or *he* was defective?”

“Oh... I see,” Ingrid said, her expression revealing the opposite. She turned and motioned uncertainly toward the table. “We still have some of that chocolate cake,” she said to Rachel. “Would you and your friends like some?”

“So explain to me about your grandma, Rachel,” said Ian. It was an hour later, the cake was gone, and they had walked out to the edge of the surf.

“Why?”

“Because my boss at the Barista told me that she was the daughter of an SS officer in Nazi Germany.”

“Oh? And did he also tell you all about the swastikas and jack-boots that we keep hidden in our basement?”

“No.”

This was sensitive ground. Gabe moved over to Rachel’s side, suddenly watchful of her.

She was silent for a moment and then shrugged. “I’ll tell you what I know, but it’s not much.”

“Okay.”

“Grandma lived in a little town in Eastern Germany until she

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was about ten, and then her family moved to Berlin.”

“Oh.”

“Then, after the war, for some reason, her parents decided to pack up the family and move to Argentina.” She shrugged again. “That’s about all I know.”

Ian stared. “Really!”

“Really. Draw your own conclusions.”

“Then what?”

“Well, she moved to the United States in the fifties, married, and had my mom and my aunt. Her parents died in Argentina in the seventies. My grandpa, her husband, died ten years ago.”

Ian stood quietly and then said, “She doesn’t seem...” He stopped.

Rachel was near tears, and Gabe moved closer. “I was telling you the truth,” she said. “She’s a wonderful person.”

“Oh.”

“But she’s almost too eager to please, and at the same time she’s paranoid and anxious, always looking over her shoulder.”

Ian was quiet, and Rachel looked up at him. “That’s not *all* you heard, right?”

“No.”

“Well, whatever you heard about my parents, that’s true, too. They’re racist, antisemitic, Hitler-lovers. How do you like that?”

Her chin was trembling. Gabe briefly took her hand and said, “Rachel.”

“Well, *are* they?” said Ian.

“In some ways.”

“In what ways?”

“They don’t believe the Holocaust happened, and they hate Jews. In my opinion, they hate Jews *because* of the Holocaust. They don’t believe it, so they think Jews are liars and slanderers.”

“And I suppose if you explain that to an Auschwitz survivor, it just makes everything all better.”

A tear ran down Rachel’s cheek, and Gabe suppressed an overpowering impulse to put his arms around her. “We *know* a Holocaust survivor,” she said.

“Who?”

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“Gabe’s grandmother.”

Ian looked at Gabe, who nodded, then turned back to Rachel. “What does your grandma think of her?”

“All I know is she acts like a scared puppy whenever she’s around.”

“What do your parents think of her?”

Rachel looked down. “That she’s a liar.” When Ian didn’t respond, she looked up at him. “They’re not monsters, Ian.”

“Oh?”

Another tear spilled over. “Suppose your father murdered someone, but the truth is too painful, and you can’t accept it. You make up long, convoluted excuses to refute all of the overwhelming evidence against him. It’s horrible and cruel, because you cause the victim’s family even more pain by calling them liars.” More tears came. “But it still doesn’t mean that you condone what your father did. It doesn’t make you as bad as he is.”

Ian put his arms around her. “I understand,” he said.

“My parent’s *aren’t* Nazis. They’re closed-minded and stubborn, but that doesn’t make them like Hitler.”

“I understand,” he said again, still holding her.

Gabe backed away, bemused. Ian was standing in his place. *He* loved Rachel. *He* should be the one holding her and comforting her. After a moment, he slowly turned away and began to walk across the sand.

“Where are you going?” Rachel took a step toward him.

“I... gotta go.” Gabe hardly knew what he was saying. “Mom... uh... needs me...” He gestured vaguely toward the empty veranda of his house and then resumed walking toward it. “See you later.”

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