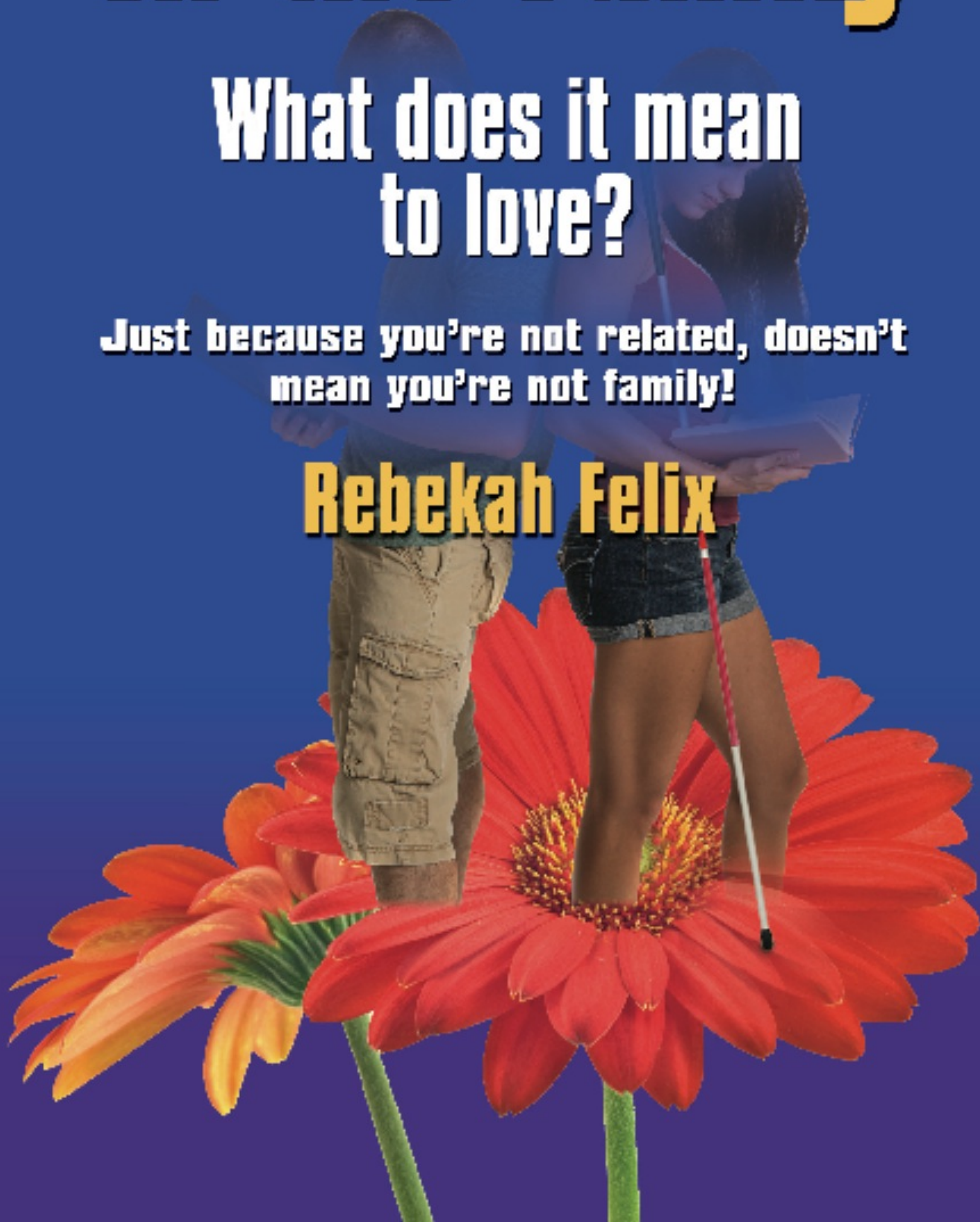


In the Family

**What does it mean
to love?**

**Just because you're not related, doesn't
mean you're not family!**

Rebekah Felix





Aliyah is tired of others teasing her because of her blindness. Her only friend, Kyra, pretends they'd never met in order to protect her reputation. Aliyah grows hopeless but, when her secret admirer, Hayden, introduces himself, her world changes. As they prepare to graduate high school, jealousy and greed threaten to tear apart the group. Can they learn to love themselves, each other, and God the way the Bible instructs?

In the Family

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In The Family

Rebekah Felix

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Dedications:

This book is dedicated to my family, including all my brothers and sisters in Christ. I'd like to give a special thanks to my younger sister, Emma, for inspiring me and giving me so much input during the editing process of this book.

Chapter 1

Voices echoed the words Aliyah hated most.
"That blind girl is so weird!"

The faded footsteps danced around her as they laughed and teased her about her white cane. They followed her from the ground to the trees to the clouds.

"You don't belong at our school!" a girl shouted.

"Yeah, you don't belong in *any* high school!" another girl insisted.

Next came more running, then hiding, then buzzing. Aliyah jerked to a sitting position, hitting her head on the bottom of the bunk above her. She uneasily punched a button on her alarm clock, sighing as the noise stopped.

"You okay?" a girl asked from the bottom of a bunk bed across the room.

"Yeah, just a bad dream," Aliyah mumbled, rubbing her head.

As she headed for the bathroom, she heard several girls emerge from the room across the hall. Then a third bedroom door opened and a woman stepped out.

"Girls, hurry up and get ready for school!" she bellowed into Aliyah's room.

"Okay, Ms. Mary," Aliyah and several other girls replied.

She rushed to get ready. As she brushed her long, brown hair, another girl walked into the bathroom and stared thoughtfully into the mirror.

"Ooh, Aliyah, can I curl your hair real quick? I just *love* playing with it!" the girl requested.

"Sure," Aliyah nodded. "Thanks, Kyra."

As Kyra put the finishing touches on her friend's hair, Ms. Mary called from the common area, "Let's go to breakfast, girls!"

"Coming!" Aliyah ran for her shoes and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute." Ms. Mary stepped in front of her. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh yeah." Aliyah raced back to her room and grabbed her long white cane. The girls walked to the cafeteria together.

As Aliyah stepped into the food line her ears tuned into a conversation in the distance.

"Isn't that the blind girl?"

"Yeah, watch out for her! She might run you over!"

As the giggling began, Aliyah frowned and thought, "Once again, they think I'm a weirdo." She shuffled to the counter and received her food.

"Kyra, are you still there?" Aliyah heard many voices, but none of them answered her. She walked through the cafeteria, but didn't hear any voices she knew. Finally, she settled at an empty table and ate alone.

After breakfast, Aliyah walked alone to her homeroom class. She sat in her desk at the front of the classroom. It sat apart from all the other desks, creating space for her large Braille books and devices that other students didn't need. The teacher stepped in front of the class as the bell rang.

"It's amazing to think that a lot of you will be graduating from Apple Wood Academy next month. I've known some of you since you were freshmen," he began.

As he talked, Aliyah's thoughts drifted to her graduation. Soon, she'd be done with high school, but she only had one real friend to celebrate with. Her mother's voice popped into her head, "If you aren't popular, but you managed to keep one real friend that would stay by your side no matter what,

you did great." Aliyah silently sighed. She knew her mother spoke the truth, but it seemed so hard to accept.

When the lunch bell rang, Aliyah made her way to her locker and unloaded her armful of books. Before closing the door, she felt around on the top shelf and discovered a rose. She pulled out a little white bag and placed the rose inside. The bag held dozens of other roses in all different colors. Most of them crinkled with dryness. Then she felt someone grab her wrist.

"There you are!" Kyra's voice sounded. "I've been looking for you—is that another rose?"

"Yeah, what color is it?"

"Red, this time," Kyra responded cheerfully. "Someone obviously likes you."

"I know, but I've been finding these roses for years. Who knows if he'll ever reveal himself?"

"Just relax. I'm sure he'll find the courage to tell you before we graduate and he misses his chance," Kyra encouraged, patting her friend's shoulder.

"Maybe..." Aliyah sighed.

"We should eat lunch together," Kyra decided.

"Yeah, if you don't disappear again," Aliyah joked.

"I know I do that a lot, but I'm sorry. These crowds get pretty hard to navigate."

Aliyah shrugged. "You're telling me."

They walked to the cafeteria together and joined the line. This time, Aliyah kept up with Kyra and they sat at the same table. Aliyah smiled as she thought, "Someone to talk to while I eat!" Towards the end of lunch, when all the other students left their table, Kyra turned to her friend.

"I've been wanting to tell you something." Her voice suddenly became shaky.

"What's wrong?" Aliyah asked, putting her hand on Kyra's shoulder. "Is it Jason?"

"Yeah, he broke up with me during homeroom." Kyra fought back tears.

"Did he say why?"

"Because he found someone else." Kyra shook her head. "I bet she's prettier and nicer than me."

"No, I bet she's just giving him things that you won't," Aliyah figured, thinking back to their last conversation about Jason. Kyra had told her about how he wanted her to act and what he wanted her

to do. And if she didn't do those things he'd become irritated. Aliyah hugged her friend. "It's probably for the best. He didn't treat you right anyways."

"I guess," Kyra sighed, but she still let herself cry for a moment.

Even though the warning bell had already rung, Aliyah wouldn't leave her friend until she finished crying. She'd always been the one Kyra came to when she had boy trouble. Aliyah didn't have the slightest clue why. She'd never dated a boy before and didn't have much advice to give.

"I'll see you after school," Aliyah said as they left the cafeteria. "Just hang in there, okay? Tonight, we'll have some girl time and forget about those silly boys."

Kyra giggled. "Okay, it's a deal."

They parted ways and Aliyah walked into her English class. Once again, she sat in a desk at the front of the room separate from everyone else. She faced the other desks as she dreamed about sitting with the other students. As she turned back to her seat, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"It's Aliyah, right?" a low, soft voice asked.

"Yeah," Aliyah replied, wondering what to say next. Should she ask for his name? Ask what he wanted? She froze.

"My name is Hayden. I've seen you around a lot and I was hoping we could hang out," he explained.

Aliyah's eyes widened with surprise. She broke out into a smile, "Sure! Anytime...just let me know."

"Okay—"

"Everyone, please sit down," the teacher interrupted.

"I'll catch up with you," Hayden whispered and slipped back to his seat.

Aliyah had to sit down before the dizziness caught up to her. She wondered what exactly had just happened. After awhile, she gave up trying to concentrate on schoolwork. Why did Hayden want to hang out with her so badly? What made him different?

After school, Aliyah walked outside onto the grass field. The sun warmly bathed her skin. She scanned around with her cane and after tapping what felt like a tree trunk, stood under it.

"It's sad," Aliyah said to herself. "I'd love to sit by this tree all day...." She finally headed for her

dorm and thought as she walked, "Thank you, God, for such a pretty and refreshing day."

Aliyah danced around in her dorm room as she folded and put away her laundry. She hummed the tunes of many familiar songs as she went. Kyra walked in and stopped short.

"What are you so happy about?" she asked with a laugh.

"Oh, Kyra, someone actually said hi to me today!" Aliyah squealed.

"Oh really?" Kyra gasped. "Who?"

"His name is Hayden. He's in my English class."

Kyra's smile suddenly turned mysterious. "Oh, you didn't say this person was a boy. He could be the one leaving you roses!"

"Maybe, but he didn't say anything about that."

"Give it some time," Kyra advised. "Is he a day student, or does he stay in the dorms?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask," Aliyah shrugged.

"Well, what *did* he say exactly?"

"Just that he'd like to hang out with me sometime," Aliyah replied, as she put away the last of her clothes. "I can't believe someone actually talked to me that isn't in my dorm!"

"It only took four years," Kyra teased. "Well, *almost* four years."

Aliyah giggled sarcastically, "I love you too!" Then she sighed. "I've always wondered why people have problems with talking to me. Maybe it's this." She lifted her cane from its spot in the corner and gave it a little twirl.

"Well, at least there's *someone* out there who's willing to look past your blindness. Maybe he's the one for you," Kyra suggested.

Aliyah shook her head, "Come on, we're not even dating."

"You never know."

As Kyra flopped on her bed, Ms. Mary walked in with several other students, "Alright, girls. Let's get ready for dinner."

Kyra faced Aliyah and spoke in almost a whisper, "Hey, if Hayden stays in the dorms, we'll probably see him at dinner."

Aliyah shrugged and stuffed her laundry bag under her bed. The girls headed out for the cafeteria together. After walking a little while, she realized she didn't hear the voices of her dorm mates anymore.

"Kyra?" Aliyah called and heard many voices, but once again, none of them answered her.

As she entered the cafeteria doors, she thought, "Great! This *always* happens. They run off and leave me behind and I always end up eating alone." She frowned as she shuffled into the food line. With her tray, she walked around, but as usual, didn't hear the voices of anyone she knew. Aliyah finally settled at an empty table.

The voices of other students flooded the cafeteria, but Aliyah felt like she sat in pure silence. She heard some girls making plans for the weekend and wished she could go, too. She thought about saying hi to someone sitting behind her, but her stomach tightened as she thought, "If only I could just—"

"May I sit with you?"

Aliyah's eyes widened as she pulled herself out of her thoughts and faced the new voice.

"Sure," she answered automatically. "Hayden, right?"

"Yeah, how could you tell?" he asked.

"I recognized your voice," Aliyah informed him with a smile.

"Why is a sweet girl like you sitting alone?" Hayden questioned with a nervousness that Aliyah could hear in his voice.

She giggled, "I don't know. I don't really have many friends."

"I wish more people would look past your cane and realize what a lovely person you are." Hayden touched her cane as it leaned in her elbow.

"You must've seen me around a lot if you know that much about me and we've barely talked," Aliyah figured.

"I see you with your dorm mates all the time," Hayden nodded. "I know that your brown hair glows red in the sun, your eyes look like the sky, and you never seem to have anything mean to say."

Aliyah's eyes widened. "If everyone else thinks I'm weird, why don't you...? Not that I want you to or anything, but—"

Hayden rested his hand on her shoulder, "I know what you mean. The very first time I saw you was probably three years ago. My friends teased you behind your back, and I went along with them. But as I watched you, I saw you laughing and acting like a regular person."

"You actually paid attention to that?" Aliyah blinked.

"Yeah," Hayden nodded. "They called you socially unacceptable, but I had no idea why. They said you were mean, but I saw you smiling and being nice to everyone you talked to. You seemed to be able to hear some of the things others said about you. You probably thought no one saw you frown or cry but I did."

"If you're nice enough to pay attention to my feelings, why didn't you let me know you actually cared?" Aliyah wondered.

Hayden swallowed, "I wanted to say hi, but I was nervous, so I started putting roses in your locker. I hoped it would at least give you a little joy until I got the courage to talk to you."

Aliyah's jaw dropped. Emotion stunned her body. Finding out that someone actually cared about her made her want to cry. But if she cried, what would he think of her? A few tears popped out anyway. But instead of teasing her, Hayden grabbed a napkin and delicately dabbed at each drop.

Greatly touched by the gesture, Aliyah knew she had to say something, "Please meet me tomorrow. I

want to get to know you too...and maybe we could exchange numbers."

"Sure," Hayden smiled as they both pulled out their cell phones.

When Aliyah's phone began to talk, she waited for a gasp or rude remark. But Hayden just sat there smiling.

"You ready?" he asked.

Aliyah nodded and he began to recite his number. They talked all throughout dinner. Afterwards, the two of them walked to the door together.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Hayden said kindly.

"I can't wait," Aliyah smiled, and they turned in the opposite directions to go to their dorms.

Ms. Mary and most of her dorm students sat in the common area watching TV. When Kyra saw Aliyah, she followed her into their room.

When the door closed, Kyra began, "I saw you sitting with a boy. Was it Hayden?"

"Yeah, he came to sit with me. But let's not talk about that. You and I are supposed to be having girl time and forgetting about all those silly—all those boys."

Kyra laughed, "You were so enchanted by him that you can't even say 'silly boys.' We will have our girl time after you tell me what happened."

"Okay," Aliyah sighed as they both sat on her bed. "It turns out he was the one who's been leaving me all those roses. There was just so much to take in at once. It was like he really cared about me and accepted me for who I am."

"That's exactly what's going on," Kyra declared. "You should give him a chance."

"Of course I'm giving him a chance. We exchanged numbers and we're meeting tomorrow."

"Good for you," Kyra patted Aliyah's back. "It'll be a nice change—you coming to me to talk about boyfriend stuff instead."

"Hold on a minute, we're not dating," Aliyah corrected.

"The way this is going, you *will* be."

Aliyah giggled. "Can we just have some girl time and not think about who's dating who for once?"

"Sure," Kyra said with a laugh. "But when you guys start dating, you won't be making that kind of request."

Aliyah playfully pushed Kyra and she grabbed a pillow in defense. They broke out into a little pillow

fight. Afterwards came popcorn and a movie with their dorm mates, followed by homework and another pillow fight. This time, everyone participated. The radio blasted some of their favorite songs and they sang along. The girls laughed at how terrible they sounded and tried to make their voices sound better.

Ms. Mary walked out of her room to find a little party going on. She turned down the music, "Sorry to be a party pooper, guys, but it's time for bed."

"Aw..." the girls glared at the rather deceptive clock and proceeded to clean up their messes.

As they climbed into bed, Kyra looked at Aliyah. "You're going to have the time of your life tomorrow."

"I hope so," Aliyah murmured as she pulled her blankets over her shoulders.

Chapter 2

The next morning Aliyah woke up wondering why her alarm clock hadn't startled her awake. Yawning, she lifted the lid to her watch and felt inside. "I must've been so excited about Hayden that I woke up fifteen minutes early," she thought and rolled out of bed.

Aliyah spent the extra time picking out her outfit and doing her hair, making sure to put on earrings and body spray. She thought it made a difference, but no one commented on it. Before leaving for breakfast, she beckoned Kyra into the bathroom.

"Well? Do I look okay?" Aliyah asked.

Kyra's eyes scanned up and down her friend's body, "Yeah, but I had to look really hard to figure out what was different." When Aliyah's eyes widened, Kyra patted her shoulder. "You are very pretty even if you don't perk up your hair and put on earrings. Besides, I don't think Hayden cares what you look like. If he did, he would've acted like all the other kids in school."

As Kyra walked out of the bathroom, Aliyah stood there pondering her friend's words. Did that mean people didn't like her because she didn't dress up every day? Would people give her a chance if she covered herself head to toe with glam? She shook this idea out of her head. Aliyah knew very well the words her mother always repeated, "If you have to dress up to impress someone then that person isn't worth dressing up for."

Deep in thought, she headed for the door. Ms. Mary put her hand on Aliyah's shoulder. "Your cane?"

"Oh, right." Aliyah turned back to her room and grabbed her cane.

Her mother's voice stuck in her head as she walked to breakfast. Eventually, her ears tuned into reality and listened for her friends with no luck. Would Hayden notice? Once she received her tray, she faced the tables and froze. Should she look for a friend? Or sit alone and wait for someone? Just when it seemed like she'd been standing there a little too long, a hand rested on her shoulder.

"Why don't you come sit with me?" Hayden requested in a perky tone.

"Okay," Aliyah smiled, relieved.

Hayden led as they walked to an empty table. He pulled out a chair for her and sat next to her with a smile.

"Kyra is your friend, right?" Hayden asked.

"Yeah," Aliyah confirmed.

"Why doesn't she sit with you very much?"

"We get separated in the crowds a lot," Aliyah reasoned.

She didn't notice Hayden's face darken. He glanced over at Kyra, laughing with a bunch of girls at another table. He opened his mouth to say something, but then frowned and closed it. Instead, he turned to his food as he searched for something else to say.

"Do you have any friends that don't go to this school?" Hayden eventually asked.

Aliyah lowered her eyes. "No...I'm here because my mom thought I spent too much time alone."

Hayden let out a little laugh. "Boarding school was her first choice to try and get you to meet people?"

"I always thought there was another reason, but she claims there isn't," Aliyah explained.

"Well, it doesn't really matter as long as you're happy." Hayden placed his hand on her shoulder again. "Are you happy?"

Aliyah turned her head away. "I guess there's not really anything I can do to change my situation, so I try to embrace it. If nothing else, I have joy from God."

Hayden's face lit up. "You've got wisdom uncommon for your age."

Aliyah giggled. "You sound like a father."

"Really? Well, my father never talks that way to me," Hayden shrugged.

"Oh." Aliyah turned to her food. Then she lifted her head and asked shyly, "So why are you in boarding school?"

"It was my choice. I wanted to get away from my family. But I told my dad that I thought I'd learn better if I went to boarding school," Hayden responded calmly.

"Why did you want to get away from your family?"

Hayden's face tightened up. "It's dysfunctional. The biggest problem is my dad. He wants control of everything. And if he doesn't get control, he gets

violent. I can't go home and come back without bruises..."

Aliyah's face sobered and she put her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. That must be hard."

"The only reason why I'm not depressed about it is because of my faith in God and his power," Hayden grinned. "He brings me a lot of joy in many different ways."

How special it seemed that Hayden chose Christianity. She began to wonder why it mattered so much to her. If someone wanted to be her friend, she'd still talk to them even if they didn't share the same faith. Then she began to wonder if it mattered because she liked him, but pushed away the idea. Still, it stuck to the back of her mind.

"I guess we both feel that way," Aliyah finally said, realizing she'd left her hand on his arm a little too long. She drew it back, her cheeks flaming.

"Yeah."

Aliyah could hear it in his voice—a beautiful smile. Why did he want to smile just then? She felt like she was exactly what others said about her—socially unacceptable. The burning in her cheeks redoubled as she analyzed each mistake in her head. The bell abruptly rang and she jumped,

dragging herself out of her thoughts. Hayden laughed quietly. Aliyah's cheeks grew even redder.

"You have nothing to worry about," Hayden told her softly.

Aliyah smiled. "I hope we can meet up at lunch."

"Yeah, see you then."

In homeroom, the teacher went on about graduation, but in Aliyah's mind, she focused on how big a screw-up she seemed to be. Every time she tried to beat herself up about it, she heard her mother's voice, "You're focusing too much on the details." When homeroom ended, Aliyah walked out into the hall and felt a hand on her arm.

"So?" Kyra urged.

"So what?" Aliyah blinked.

"Has he asked you out yet?"

"Kyra!" Aliyah playfully elbowed her friend and they giggled. "I haven't even known him for twenty-four hours yet!"

"I know, I know, I just think it's funny." Kyra linked arms with her friend and they started to walk. "Or maybe I'm just trying to help myself get over Jason."

"Aw, you don't need a man to complete you," Aliyah said comfortingly.

"I wish I felt that way." Kyra frowned.

"You will. It'll just take some time," Aliyah reassured her and they came to a fork in the hallway.

"See you later." Kyra pulled her arm away and turned down one of the halls.

"See ya!" Aliyah headed in the opposite direction.

When the lunch bell finally rang, Hayden emerged from a classroom with two of his friends. They headed down the hall side by side.

"Are you going to sit with that blind girl again?" one of the boys asked.

"Yeah, is there a problem with that?" Hayden wondered.

"You know what everyone says about her. She's not worth your time. And I thought you said you were just going to sit with her once because she looked lonely," the other boy mentioned.

"You guys should get to know her. She's nothing like what everyone makes her out to be," Hayden told them. "She's pretty much the opposite."

"Whatever you say." The boys darted ahead of him as they went through the cafeteria doors.

Meanwhile, Aliyah stood in the girls' bathroom with a teary-eyed Kyra. She could hear the lunch room filling with voices on the other side of the wall.

"I've just got to find someone to love!" Kyra cried.

"Life's not all about falling in love," Aliyah comforted.

"But I've been through guy after guy and none of them are right for me! Maybe there's something wrong with me! Maybe I'm weird!" Kyra's face dripped all over.

"Calm down." Aliyah pulled a paper towel out of the dispenser and handed it to her friend. "Why don't you come sit with Hayden and me today? I think you need a break from your boy-obsessed friends."

Kyra laughed, despite the tears, "Is that what you think of them?"

"Not exactly, but it sure does seem like that's all they talk about," Aliyah replied with a smile.

"...I think you're right," Kyra wiped her tears. "I would definitely like a change. Talking about boys all the time isn't going to help me get over Jason."

The girls walked out of the bathroom. Kyra took her friend's hand. Aliyah thought, "I can't remember the last time she held my hand."

When they exited the food line with their trays, Aliyah turned to Kyra and spoke quietly. "Do you see him?"

"Hmm..." Kyra scanned the tables. "No."

Aliyah's face stiffened. "Let's just sit at an empty table."

"Okay," Kyra said, glancing around the room.

Hayden emerged from the crowd with his food. He proceeded to look for Aliyah among the less crowded tables. He froze when he saw Kyra sitting with her. Would it be better to say hi or leave her alone? A hot sensation burned his cheeks as he thought. After a moment of building up his courage, Hayden walked over and set his tray down across from Aliyah.

"May I sit here?"

"Yeah," Aliyah responded quickly, joy filling her face.

Hayden looked at Kyra and thought about the last time he saw her. She and Aliyah walked together in the halls, and when she saw another group of girls, she silently ran ahead. And she sat

with them at lunch while Aliyah ate alone, thinking Kyra lost her in the crowd. Immediately, Hayden heard the words ring in his head, "She's taking advantage of her blindness—"

"Are you going to keep staring at me weirdly?" Kyra interrupted his thoughts.

"I'm sorry, it's just that...you look like my sister," Hayden lied nervously.

Kyra didn't notice, but Aliyah could hear his nervousness like a ringing bell. "What's your sister like?"

"Well, she was very sweet and wanted everyone to be happy." Hayden flinched. "Until she got hit by a car."

"Wait a minute," Kyra looked up. "I look like your *dead* sister?"

"Uh...." Hayden's cheeks reddened.

Kyra started laughing, "Just kidding! I know what you meant."

Aliyah sat quietly. She wanted to show Hayden sympathy—especially after finding out about his dysfunctional family. But it seemed awkward when Kyra acted so goofy. Her thoughts scattered when a sudden splash of water hit her face. She screeched.

"Wake up!" Kyra shouted.

"Ky-ra!" Aliyah elbowed her. "I wasn't sleeping!"

Kyra laughed, "I swear, you are too quiet sometimes!" As Hayden's eyes turned flinty, Kyra squeezed her lips shut. It felt like messing up in front of Jason all over again. "I'm gonna go wash my hands."

As she got up and walked away, Aliyah frowned. She sensed the embarrassment in her friend's voice. Not only that, but she worried Kyra had pointed out one of her flaws in front of a new friend. Her scowl deepened. New friends rarely came around. She didn't want to lose the few she had.

Hayden leaned forward. "I don't think you're too quiet."

"You don't?" Aliyah lifted her head in surprise.

"No," Hayden confirmed, grinning. "When you're not talking, you're just thinking or you don't have anything to say. There's nothing wrong with that. It's part of your personality."

"Oh...but I'm shy," Aliyah stated. "Everyone says that's a bad thing."

"It's not." Hayden shook his head. "It's perfectly normal to be shy sometimes. And some people are

more outgoing than others. It just proves that everyone's different."

Aliyah felt like melting in his soft, kind voice. "But people tell me that being shy or quiet just makes you look like you're too scared."

Hayden blinked. "You don't have to be afraid, but it's okay if it overtakes you sometimes. It happens to everyone. Just remember that God is your strength, and God can do anything."

Aliyah sat silently, deep in thought. She expected Hayden to say something like, "You can't just stop talking after that." But instead, he kept eating his food as if nothing happened. It occurred to Aliyah that maybe she was worried about nothing. Around others, it might be an issue, but not with Hayden.

After school, Aliyah realized that she hadn't seen Kyra since lunch. She hurried down the pathway towards the dormitories. In the common area, several girls laughed at something blasting from the TV. Aliyah went straight through to her room and heard the faint sounds of someone crying. She extended her hand to find the bathroom door closed, so she knocked.

"Kyra, are you okay?"

The door opened, "Liyah, I'm such a failure!"

"No you're not!" Aliyah wrapped her arms around her friend. "You are simply human. How could any human be perfect?"

Kyra sniffed. "I just don't know how any boy could ever love me."

"You're still stuck on that?" Aliyah sighed. She turned Kyra toward the mirror. "People say that when you look through a mirror, you see yourself. Look at you! You are an amazing person and you don't need a boy to love you to know it!"

"That's the same advice I give you when you get upset over not having many friends," Kyra noted.

"I know, but we both should follow it."

Kyra hesitated before saying, "I'm sorry I embarrassed you today."

"You didn't embarrass me. You brought up an opportunity for Hayden to show that he accepts me for who I am. And because I have you to thank for that, you shouldn't be sorry," Aliyah replied.

"But it was a mistake," Kyra sniffed.

"Maybe, but God turned it into something good like he does with every bad thing," Aliyah explained.

"You're right," Kyra admitted. "You're a great friend."

The girls hugged and went out to the common area. As the week went by, Aliyah spent more time with Hayden. He found her at every meal and began to walk with her to English—the one class they shared.

Aliyah's week grew chaotic as she tried to hang out with Hayden and comfort her best friend. Kyra seemed to need her attention whenever she thought she could have some time alone with Hayden. Though they planned girl time in the evenings, Kyra kept talking about her ex-boyfriend, her new crushes, and wondering how things were going with Hayden. Aliyah worried Kyra spent too much time thinking about boys.

Eventually, Sunday evening came around. The girls all sat in their common area watching TV when Ms. Mary walked into the room and sat in an empty chair.

"Girls!" she voiced. The room grew silent. "We're going to have a hangout tonight. We will be leaving in ten minutes. If you don't want to go, please don't make a mess in here."

"Us? Make messes?" a girl giggled.

"Yes, you guys make plenty of messes," Ms. Mary laughed along.

Kyra nudged Aliyah's arm. "The boys will be there."

"I know," Aliyah squealed.

Most of the girls headed out when the time came to leave. Ms. Mary stopped Aliyah at the door.

"Where's your cane?" she questioned.

"Oh yeah." Aliyah grabbed it and rushed outside.

The girls walked down a short pathway to a building that resembled a gym. The boys' dorms could be seen on the other side of the hangout room. Inside, the girls glanced around the chairs and tables, TV, board games, Ping-Pong table, and Air Hockey game. A microwave and vending machine stood in the back of the room.

Aliyah found an empty table and pulled out several Braille books. Kyra went to a couch by the Ping-Pong table and watched two boys play competitively. She noticed Hayden standing by one of them, cheering him on as if they knew each other. Kyra stood up.

"Hey boys! Can I play the winner?"

"Why not?" one of them replied, as he hit the ball.

Kyra noticed Hayden's expression change when he saw her. Without even thinking, she gestured to the table where Aliyah quietly sat.

"There's Miss Antisocial if you wanna talk to her."

The other two boys laughed and Hayden frowned. "You guys sure aren't very nice to her. She's not antisocial."

"Most people come to a hangout to hang out, not to do homework," one of the boys stated.

"Michael," Hayden sighed. "She's just shy."

Distracted, Michael didn't notice the ball flying right at him, and it fell to the ground, "Looks like you're playing Daniel."

Kyra grabbed the Ping-Pong paddle from Michael's hand, "You're on!"

As the game began, Hayden frowned and quietly stepped away, walking over to Aliyah. She heard him coming and lifted her head.

"Hey," Hayden greeted and sat next to her.

"Hey," Aliyah smiled.

Hayden gazed down at her homework. Curiously, he ran his fingers across the formed dots.

"It's like a code," he remarked abruptly.

"Huh?"

"Braille," Hayden clarified. "When you read, you look like you read from left to right. But when you write, it looks like you're writing backwards."

Aliyah smiled and pulled out a rectangular item made of metal and something that resembled a short pencil with a ball-like handle. "This is a slate and stylus. It's like writing with pencil. These little holes are Braille cells. You have to poke the dots from the back of the paper, so you have to write everything backwards."

Hayden inspected the two objects. "Sometimes I see you with an electronic device that writes Braille."

"Yeah, that's a note-taker. It's easier because you don't have to write backwards," Aliyah explained.

Hayden ran his fingers over the dots on the open book once again. He stared at the slate and stylus and wished he could read and write Braille.

"When you're done, would you like to play a game with me?" Hayden requested.

"Sure," Aliyah agreed.

The eagerness to hang out with Hayden overcame her. She knew that he couldn't read Braille and wouldn't know if she finished her homework or not.

"I'm done," Aliyah finally declared.

"Okay, I'll go get whatever game you wanna play."

Aliyah frowned, "I have a hard time playing board games. Most of them require the ability to read."

"I have an idea. I'll be back." Hayden walked off.

Aliyah stuffed her homework supplies into her bag and cleared the table before he came back. This time, he sat across from her and set a box between them.

"It's called Mancala," Hayden told her. "It's completely tactile. You just move stones around in these little dips in the board."

"I've never heard of it before," Aliyah commented. She placed her hands on the wooden game as Hayden set it up.

"I used to play it with my sister all the time." Hayden put a stone in her hand. "See? These are the pieces."

Aliyah bounced the stone in her palm, "How do you play?"

Hayden explained the rules and they jumped right into it. Daniel and Michael watched from another table. Kyra sat with them, still gloating about how she won the Ping-Pong game.

"I get it, Kyra. You're a good player," Daniel murmured for the third time.

"Guys, it looks like Hayden really wants to be friends with that girl now," Michael interrupted.

"First of all, I think they're already friends," Kyra began. "And secondly, of course Hayden really wants to be friends with her! Maybe you guys didn't know, but he's been leaving roses in her locker for years now."

"He has?" The boys glanced at each other. "Then he's been lying to us!"

"Oh?" Kyra stared.

"He said he was just going to say hi to her to make her feel better about herself, but that he really didn't want to be friends with her," Michael explained.

"He's obviously just trying to avoid getting teased," Kyra asserted bluntly.

"I just don't understand why he would want to be friends with someone like that." Daniel shook his head.

"Well, I think you guys sometimes misjudge her. She really is a sweet girl and I'm sure that if you took the time to get to know her, she'd turn out to be everything those rumors aren't," Kyra advised. The boys stared uncomfortably at her and she swallowed. "Y-You know, that's what Hayden would say if you tried to talk him out of being friends with her."

The boys nodded. "Definitely."

Chapter 3

That night, while the girls changed into their pajamas, Aliyah hummed joyfully, a broad smile across her face. Kyra frowned, remembering how easily Daniel and Michael influenced the way she talked about Aliyah. What kind of friend was she if she couldn't even stand up for one of her closest buddies?

"Oh, Kyra, what does Hayden look like?" Aliyah asked cheerfully.

"Well," Kyra turned to face her friend, "he's got this dark blond hair with brown highlights in it and big brown eyes. His hair is kind of long. It barely touches his shoulders, and it's kind of curly. And he's got bangs."

"What color is his skin?" Aliyah questioned.

"I guess it's on the darker side of white. He might be slightly tan, but I didn't really look that closely," Kyra explained. "Why do you want to know so badly?"

"Oh, I'm just wondering." Aliyah waved her hand dismissively.

Kyra shook her head. She knew Aliyah didn't ask those kinds of questions very often. She thought, "Whenever you say you're just wondering, there's always more to it." But for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to say it out loud.

Instead, Kyra said, "It's my turn to ask you a question."

"What?" Aliyah plopped on her bed.

"If you asked Hayden to do something for you, do you think he'd do it?"

"I think so," Aliyah nodded.

"Then I need you to do me a favor." Kyra's cheeks reddened.

"Okay...what?"

"Well, his friend, Daniel, is a really nice guy and I want to go out with him," Kyra began.

"Wait, are you wanting me to tell Hayden to tell his friend to ask you out?" Aliyah blurted out, her cheeks turning just as red.

"Yeah, what's so hard about that?" Kyra flipped back the blankets on her bed.

"It's awkward," Aliyah giggled. "Could you imagine it? 'Oh, by the way, Kyra wants me to ask you to have your friend ask her out.' What in the world do you think he'd say? Or think?"

"Come on, 'Liyah! Help me out! I obviously can't win his heart on my own. I'm too much of a failure!" Kyra reasoned.

Aliyah frowned. "First of all, we've been over this! You're not a failure! And secondly, it's that kind of attitude that's gonna send you down a path with the wrong guy."

"Please?" Kyra begged. "I really want to be with him."

"Well..." Aliyah crawled under her blankets. "I'll think about it."

Kyra smiled. "If you do it, I'll be really grateful."

"I know," Aliyah acknowledged. "Good night."

"Night!"

Hayden sat in his bed awake as the clock struck midnight. He stared at the bunk bed across the room where his two friends sat gazing back at him.

"Hayden, you need to stop hanging out with that girl. She's ruining your reputation," Daniel was saying.

"I don't care about my reputation," Hayden replied.

"Why not? If you hang out with her, people will tease you and you'll be at the bottom of the social food chain!" Michael warned him.

"So what? One true friend is a lot better than a bunch of untrue friends," Hayden decided.

"It will eventually bring us down, too! We wanna stay your friends, but you're going to ruin our statuses if you keep hanging out with that girl," Michael urged.

"What are you saying?" Hayden snapped. "That you won't be my friend if I keep hanging out with her?"

"Yep," Michael nodded.

"That's not what I'm saying, though." Daniel shook his head. "I'll still be your friend no matter what. But I still don't think it's a good idea to be friends with that girl."

Hayden stared. "Right, you'll stay my friend even if I become so unpopular that it would ruin your social status. In the same way, I won't break my friendship with Aliyah, even if it ruins *my* social life."

Daniel's eyes widened. "I didn't think of it that way."

"Well, I did, and I still don't like it!" Michael covered his head with his pillow.

"I just don't understand what you guys think is so wrong with Aliyah," Hayden murmured.

"She's blind," Daniel stated plainly. "Doesn't that make her kind of...useless?"

"No!" Hayden gasped, frowning. "She's anything *but* useless. Have you guys ever taken the time to get to know her? She's really a great person."

"Kyra said you'd say that," Daniel shared.

"Huh?"

"She also said you've been leaving roses in her locker," Michael added. "She says it's been going on for years. And do you know what that means?"

"...No," Hayden scratched his puzzled head.

"It means you lied about the reason why you started talking to her in the first place," Michael clarified.

"So? What's wrong with showing a girl a little kindness?" Hayden asked. "What's wrong with wanting to be friends with a sweet person?"

"Never mind," Michael grumbled. "You don't understand."

The room went silent. After a long while, Hayden still sat awake pondering his friends' reactions. He seemed oblivious to Daniel's approach.

"Hayden!" he whispered as he came to the edge of the bed.

Hayden jumped. "Daniel, what are you doing awake?"

"What are *you* doing awake?" Daniel repeated.

Hayden sighed but spoke kindly, "What do you need?"

"All those roses you put in Aliyah's locker—you weren't doing that just to be kind, were you?"

Hayden just stared at him.

"You love her, don't you?" Daniel asked in a gentle voice.

"...Yeah," Hayden admitted. "Every time I saw her, I watched everything she did to see why people made fun of her. But even though I was looking for flaws, I kept seeing this really sweet girl. And eventually, I started to have feelings for her. But going to say hi was a challenge, so every time I saw her frown or cry, I found a rose from the garden behind the school and slipped it in her locker."

"And, let me guess. Before you knew it, those feelings turned into a deep love. That's why you finally said hi to her," Daniel predicted.

"Yeah," Hayden frowned. "I should've talked to her much sooner than this."

"Hayden, you have to tell her you love her," Daniel insisted.

Hayden's face turned pure red. "I don't know if I can. I don't even know how."

"But you have to do it. It's only fair. And in my opinion, I think she's already falling for you, anyways," Daniel reasoned.

"But how can I tell her?" Hayden looked around nervously.

"Don't look at me. I've never done it before," Daniel admitted. "But please make sure you tell her somehow."

"Okay, okay, I'll figure something out," Hayden agreed.

A voice sounded from the bunk above them, "Good, now can you guys *please* stop talking about girls and just go to sleep?!"

Hayden and Daniel's eyes bulged. Daniel stood up. "Yeah, sorry."

* * *

The morning light flooded through the cafeteria windows onto the breakfast line as Aliyah stepped into it.

"Kyra?" she called.

As usual, no voices replied. But this time she didn't worry about it. Hayden would come and sit with her. As she took her tray and exited the line, Aliyah remembered Kyra's request. She wondered what the right thing to do would be.

"Aliyah!" Hayden's voice broke through the crowd.

She turned to him. "Yeah?"

"I have a seat for you," Hayden looked down at her tray in one hand, cane in the other. "Can I carry your tray today?"

"Sure," Aliyah smiled.

He carefully took the tray from her. "This way."

They walked through the throng and stopped at an empty table. Hayden pulled out Aliyah's chair again and set her tray in front of her.

"Thanks," Aliyah grinned, but inside, she squealed with excitement and pure shock. Since when did any boy want to give her so much attention?

"Any time," Hayden sat next to her.

That annoying thought crept back into Aliyah's mind. She had to decide whether to ask Hayden about Kyra or ignore her best friend's request. The feeling made her breakfast taste like rubber.

"You okay?" Hayden asked.

Aliyah wondered what she did to make her discomfort so obvious, "Y-Yeah...well, it's kind of weird."

"What is it?" Hayden put his hand lightly on her shoulder.

"Well, Kyra wants me to ask you if you could talk your friend into asking her out," Aliyah finally presented to him.

Hayden laughed softly, "She's one funny person."

"Um, yeah," Aliyah shrugged.

"Which friend?" Hayden asked, and Aliyah froze.

"Well...I don't remember," Aliyah admitted. "I know she said his name, but—"

"It's okay. I can only think of two friends she could be referring to. She was hanging out with them last night," Hayden told her.

Aliyah nodded, "Yeah, whoever she was hanging out with last night has to be it. She implied that's where she met him."

Hayden laughed again, "One night and she wants to go out with him?"

"Hey, you're the one who said she's funny," Aliyah giggled.

Hayden playfully gasped, "Who, me?"

"Of all people?" Aliyah played along.

They both laughed. The easiness to get along with her reminded Hayden of what Daniel suggested in the middle of the night. He knew he had to tell her, but not at that moment. Not only did he find himself too nervous, but he wanted it to be at least a little special. A cafeteria at breakfast time didn't seem very romantic. As the students headed to class, Hayden met up with his friends in the hall.

"You know, Kyra was flirting with you guys last night," Hayden informed them abruptly. He knew immediately how ridiculous he sounded.

"Huh?" The boys raised their eyebrows.

"Well, I could tell that she was really into one of you, but I'm not sure which one," Hayden reported.

"And you just thought of this now? Why didn't you mention it last night?" Michael questioned.

"I don't know but it's obvious she likes one of you," Hayden persisted.

"Well, we've got to figure out which one because that girl is smoking hot and both of us would jump at a chance to date her!" Michael declared. "Just remember, Daniel, all is fair in love and war."

"Yeah, yeah," Daniel waved his hand. "So I call her first."

"Hey, no dibs! Whoever gets to her first talks to her first," Michael demanded.

"Deal!"

When the two of them disappeared around the corner, Hayden shrugged. "I'm sure glad I'm not involved in that."

Just before lunch, as Kyra put her books in her locker, Michael and Daniel discreetly raced down the hallway to meet her.

"Kyra!" Michael called, pushing ahead.

"Yes?" She turned away from her locker and only saw Michael.

"You know, that shirt looks really nice on you. I think this would match it." He pulled out a flower-shaped barrette that happened to be the same color pink as her top.

Kyra's eyes grew wide with delight. "Oh, thanks!" She immediately took it and put it in her scruffy blonde hair.

Michael smiled, but then he saw Daniel waiting just out of Kyra's view. He gestured for Michael to leave. "Well, I have to go talk to my English teacher. I'll see you later."

"See ya!" Kyra waved. "And thanks again!"

Soon after Michael left, Daniel walked up, "Hi!" He greeted abruptly.

"Hi," Kyra's face turned pink.

"I-I was wondering if...you would eat lunch with me," Daniel stuttered.

"Oh, sure!" Kyra grinned. "That'd be great."

In the cafeteria, Hayden and Aliyah sat at their usual empty table by the window. Hayden glanced across the room and saw Daniel leading Kyra to an empty seat and Michael trying to give her a piece of cake. He laughed.

"What's so funny?" Aliyah asked.

"Well, I told my two friends that Kyra seemed to be flirting with them last night. I said it was obvious that she liked one of them, but I wasn't sure which one. It looks like instead of asking her, they've entered a battle to see who will impress her the most," Hayden explained. "Daniel is having lunch with her but Michael popped up trying to give her a piece of cake."

Aliyah giggled. "She is going to be *so* mad at me."

"She doesn't have a right to be mad at you. She pretty much did this to herself," Hayden stated

with a smile. "And if she does get mad at you, you can just hang out with me."

"Aw, thanks," Aliyah said sweetly.

Hayden affectionately patted her shoulder. At first, Aliyah felt he acted a little too nice. But it seemed so natural. A new kind of joy filled her heart—a kind she didn't know she could feel. New friends were always a good thing, but this felt different—even better.

After lunch, Hayden walked with Aliyah to their English class. As they turned a corner, Kyra popped up in front of them. This time, she wore new earrings and a necklace.

"Aliyah!" she growled, scrunching up her eyes.

"Whoa, not sure if I wanna know what you want," Aliyah took a step back.

"What did you two do? Those boys are *fighting* over me! Do you know what it's like to have boys fighting over you?" Kyra grabbed Aliyah's sleeve. Then her eyes widened. "Why am I asking you that? Of course the answer is no! Well, guess what? It *sucks!*"

Hayden frowned. "Give her a break, Kyra. She couldn't remember who you wanted."

"Well, why not?"

Aliyah stood in silence. Noticing her discomfort, Hayden glared at Kyra. "Just tell them which one you like and get over it."

"It doesn't work like that," Kyra insisted. "*You* tell them!"

Hayden shook his head, "Even if it takes awhile, you should be the one to tell them. It's better that you take a long time to tell someone you like them than to go through others to do it."

"But—"

"I don't think it's right for me to help you. I probably shouldn't have said anything at all to them. Either you tell them who you like, or you let them keep fighting over you. It's your choice," Hayden recommended bluntly, but not meanly. He reached over and pulled Kyra's hand off Aliyah's arm. "Please don't be mad at her. It's not her fault." His tone grew softer.

Without another word, Kyra scowled and ran off. Hayden pressed his hand to his stomach as he wondered if he did something wrong. Aliyah faded into her own thoughts. She tried to remember the last time a man bothered to defend her—a man besides her father.

Finally, Hayden put his hand lightly on her shoulder. "We should get going."

Aliyah smiled up at him. "Thanks."

Hayden stared, wondering what he did to make her so thankful. The scene replayed in his head. Was it that he defended her when her friend chose to gang up on her? It seemed so natural he didn't expect a "thank-you."

"It's what friends do." Hayden tapped his fingers, still resting on her shoulder.



Aliyah is tired of others teasing her because of her blindness. Her only friend, Kyra, pretends they'd never met in order to protect her reputation. Aliyah grows hopeless but, when her secret admirer, Hayden, introduces himself, her world changes. As they prepare to graduate high school, jealousy and greed threaten to tear apart the group. Can they learn to love themselves, each other, and God the way the Bible instructs?

In the Family

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