



Fading Tracks
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*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen.
For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

— 2 Corinthians 4:18

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1

LANDMARK SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

Thursday, 5:22 p.m. to 6:16 p.m.

Twelve-year-old Jeri McKane tore the Landmark School calendar off the wall. The rows of giant red Xs blurred as the calendar sailed through the air. Each X in February had marked a day closer to Parents' Weekend at the end of the month. Only now it wouldn't happen—at least, not for *her*.

Jeri read the message on her computer screen again.

Hi, Sweetie. It breaks my heart, but I can't make it for Parents' Weekend. It's a two-day drive to Virginia, then two days for the activities, plus another two-day drive back to Iowa.

Carol, my boss, said I can't be gone that long—not while sales are down so much—and I can't afford to fly. I'm so disappointed. I'll call soon, and I'll be praying for us both. Love and hugs, Mom

Jeri slumped in her chair, biting her lip. When this kind of thing happened, she felt so lonely and homesick that she was tempted to give up her precious scholarship and move back home. She wondered again whether going to a great school was worth traveling so far from home. Tossing back shoulder-length hair, she dialed her mom's cell phone.

"Mom? I got your email and—"

"—can't take your call right now, but please leave—"

"Voice mail!" Jeri disconnected.

Back at the computer, Jeri hit "reply." Her email name, JerichoGirl, popped up, and she typed a reply:

I called but got your voice mail. Please
call me tonight. I love you, Mom.

She clicked "send." Within seconds, a new email popped up on her screen.

This is an out-of-office auto responder. I'm not available, but in case of emergency, contact Carol at the number below.

Jeri deleted the message, trying not to let a machine make her feel rejected. If only she could talk to her roommate. Rosa's missionary parents were in Chile, and Rosa understood the longing ache that hit Jeri so hard sometimes. Where was she anyway? It was already 5:30 and nearly dark. She should have returned from her field trip over an hour ago.

The stink of wet wool socks rose from the hissing radiator under their second-floor window. Tiny clumps of snow on the socks had melted onto the wooden floor. Jeri breathed on the frosty glass and rubbed a spot clear. Leaning against the radiator, she let the heat burn through her jeans as she stared outside. A row of mini icicles hung from the eaves like frozen fringe on a shawl. In the bare dogwood below, someone had stuck a mitten on the end of a twig. In the wind, the skeletal arm beckoned at girls who hurried by.

Jeri jerked the heavy window open and grabbed her binoculars from the windowsill. The gloomy, overcast sky seemed to seep into their room. Girls dressed in blue school uniforms rushed past Hampton House on shoveled sidewalks. Leaning out, Jeri focused the binoculars and

searched in both directions for her roommate's fuchsia scarf and hat.

No Rosa.

Below, a dark shape low to the ground glided toward some thick bushes. Leaning out farther, Jeri focused the binoculars there, but the animal had already disappeared behind the shrubs.

A door slammed in the hallway, making Jeri jump. She dropped the binoculars into a snow pile below.

"Good grief." Fuming, Jeri slammed the window, turning the row of tiny icicles into a shower of miniature daggers.

She raced downstairs, grabbing the newel post at the bottom to keep from falling on the polished floor. In the dorm's living room to the left, four girls studied by the crackling fire. Handmade mountain crafts decorated the heavy oak mantelpiece. Jeri grabbed her coat from one of the antique hall trees.

Outside, she retrieved her binoculars from the snowbank under her bedroom window. Light from the living room shone out, revealing the outlines of two snow angels. Four days ago, after several inches of fresh snow, Jeri had shown Rosa how to make snow angels. She smiled, thinking of Rosa flopping around in the powdery drifts.

Jeri crept toward the thick bushes, hoping the cat or dog was still there. She squatted down, and light from a

street lamp revealed a couple very large paw prints. This was some fat cat, Jeri thought, poking the bushes.

“Kitty?” she said softly. “Here, kitty.”

The bushes rustled, either from the freezing wind or the animal. Jeri poked a stick into the shrub. “Come out, kitty.” She parted the bushes and peered through. Rats. Gone.

Shivering, she ran back inside the sixth-grade dorm and closed the heavy front door.

“Might as well leave your coat on,” the house mother said, changing out of her Air Max Nikes. An athletic woman in her forties, Ms. Carter rarely missed her late afternoon workout at their fitness center. “It’s time to eat.”

For breakfast and supper, the sixteen girls in Hampton House walked to the dining hall with Ms. Carter and her assistant, Miss Barbara.

“Be right back.” Jeri ran upstairs, left the binoculars on her bed, and then stopped at Abby and Nikki’s room down the hall. Abby sat sketching at her desk, a pink goose-neck lamp spilling a pool of light on her paper.

“Chow time!” Jeri said.

Taped above Abby’s desk were her drawings of castles and cathedrals, plus several photos of Abby with her mom back in Bath, England. *What a funny name for a town*, Jeri thought, *and what a long way from Landmark Hills, Virginia*.

“Coming.” Abby took her blazer from the back of her chair and slipped it on. “Where’s Rosa?”

“She’s MIA. Her field trip was done at four, but I haven’t seen her. She’d better show, ’cause she *promised* to have her advice column done on time.”

For their media project, she and Rosa (along with Abby and her roommate, Nikki) were publishing a small sixth-grade newspaper. Jeri covered current events, Abby was artist and photographer, Nikki handled sports, and Rosa did the advice column. Rosa still had to write her section, and then Jeri had to format the paper and run off twenty copies . . . by tomorrow morning at eight o’clock.

There was clomping on the stairs, and Nikki appeared in the doorway dressed in a black hat and leather vest. She strode to her side of the room, where walls held snapshots of her horse, Show Stopper, and a row of blue ribbons from her dressage competitions. No family photos at all, though, as if she’d been hatched from an egg.

Abby sniffed the air, her face a picture of sheer agony. “You’ve been in the barn. I smell horse poo on your boots!”

“You’re imagining things.” Nikki leaned over to check—and admire—her tooled-leather cowboy boots. Then she took off her Stetson and shook out her mane of hair. She reached for her MP3 player just as the brass bell clanged.

“Girls!” the house mother called. “Let’s go!”

They hurried downstairs to line up. Miss Barbara, the twenty-five-year-old assistant, hurried them along. Her

yellow and orange print shirt practically glowed in contrast to her bleached white hair. As they headed outside, Jeri thought the wind just might rip off one of Miss Barbara's fake eyelashes. Braced against the cold, Jeri fell into step behind Nikki and Abby. As they passed the bell tower, chimes played the familiar "Now the Day Is Over." Only six o'clock, and it was nearly dark already.

Suddenly a piercing snarl—almost a scream—ripped through the frigid evening air. Half a dozen girls shrieked.

Abby grabbed Jeri's arm in a viselike grip. "What was that?"

Jeri shuddered. "I don't know, but it creeps me out."

"Don't worry!" Like a mother hen, Ms. Carter gathered as many of the girls around her as she could reach. "It's just an animal out in the woods."

"That bobcat?" Nikki asked, glancing up at the wooded hills behind the school.

"Well . . ." Ms. Carter hesitated. "From the sounds of it, yes. But it's a long way away."

Jeri recalled the big paw prints near the bushes and waved her hand high. "I think I saw some bobcat tracks near the dorm." Several more girls squealed. "Honest! I saw an animal outside my window just before supper. The paw prints looked like a really big cat."

"Let's keep moving." Ms. Carter shooed the girls along. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

“Don’t they eat meat, though?” Nikki asked.

“Yes.” The house mother grimaced. “But they eat small animals—cottontails, mice, squirrels, even skunks—not girls.”

Nikki lowered her voice. “They eat big animals like deer too. They sneak up on them when they’re asleep.” The stiff wind blew hair in her eyes. “Bobcats kill their prey by biting the animal’s neck.”

“That will do, Nikki,” Ms. Carter called over her shoulder. “If we leave the bobcat alone, it’ll leave us alone.”

Jeri pulled her coat collar up and scanned both sides of the walk as they crossed the campus to the dining hall. The Virginia hills didn’t have a lot of bobcats, but they’d been sighted occasionally. If Rosa were there, she’d be freaking out. “I bet Rosa’s already at supper,” she said to Abby. “She might be late with homework, but she’s *never* late for food.”

Actually, no one dared to be late to the dining hall—not if they wanted to eat. Headmistress Long—privately nicknamed The Head or Head Long—had strict rules about dining hours, dress code for meals, posture while eating, and volume of conversation. Rules were made to be obeyed. Not bent. And certainly not broken.

They climbed the eight steps up to the dining hall and passed between two pillars that stood guard on either side of the front door. A massive crystal chandelier hanging from the high cathedral ceiling illuminated the entryway.

After leaving their boots and coats in the cloak room, they headed directly to their assigned tables.

Jeri scanned the room, but no Rosa. Where *was* she? For the first time, Jeri was uneasy. The van had been due back nearly two hours ago. Something must be wrong.

After getting their food, Abby and Jeri said grace silently. Jeri picked at her spinach salad. Across from her, Nikki had alfalfa sprouts stuck in her braces, as if she'd been grazing in some field.

Abby elbowed her roommate. "You've got junk hanging out your mouth."

"Sssssssso?" Nikki asked. "Is that a p-p-problem?"

"Stop it. You know you shouldn't make fun of Houston," Abby said.

Jeri agreed. Nikki and some of the other girls often mimicked the school's stable hand, Houston Wiley, who stuttered. Houston *was* scruffy, Jeri admitted, with his thin beard and too-long jeans. But she liked him. He worked hard taking care of the horses—at least, the school's horses. Girls like Nikki, who brought her horse to school, took care of their own.

Nikki waved her fork at her roommate. "Are you g-g-gonna p-p-preach at me?"

Jeri dropped her fork with a clatter. "Since you practically live in the horse barn, I'd think you'd be nicer to Houston. Remember, the fundraiser was his idea. *You'll*

probably use that fancy new Equestrian Complex more than anybody.”

To raise money the last six weeks, the Landmark School girls had done many things. They’d sold candy, magazines, and nuts throughout the town. Businesses in town had donated TVs and sports equipment—even a snowmobile—that were raffled off at a basketball game. Nikki’s fancy dressage riding group had performed to a sold-out audience. Each Friday, the money raised that week was announced. Several wealthy parents and some businesses had pledged to match whatever money the girls raised. The fundraising would end the next day, with matching funds due Saturday.

“You can be so mean to Houston,” Jeri said.

“Like when?” Nikki protested, all wide-eyed innocence.

“Like when you locked him in the tack room, for one thing.”

Nikki snorted. “Come on, it was hilarious! He was all panicky, kicking the door and yelling. A grown man!” She snickered. “I thought he’d strangle me when he finally got out.”

“I would if I were him.”

As she ate, Jeri glanced at the door every few minutes, but no one else arrived. She picked at her chicken and rice, and her unrest about Rosa increased. A sense of urgency nibbled now at the edges of her mind. Where was she? Why was she so late?

Abby tucked her blonde hair behind her ears. “Too bad we won’t know which dorm won the candy-selling contest till tomorrow night. We could have written about that for our newspaper.”

“I’m sick of the whole fundraiser,” Jeri admitted, turning away from the door. “If I see Heather’s dad’s picture in the paper again, I’ll barf.”

Heather Langley’s dad was one of the wealthy parents matching what the girls raised. His picture was in the Landmark School’s newspaper, the *Lightning Bolt*, every Friday as he handed that week’s matching check to The Head. All the other parents and businesses were giving their matching funds at the end. There’d probably just be one group photo of them.

Jeri sighed. “If only there was something *big* to investigate and report on.”

“Here she goes again.” Nikki scooped a mountainous glob of sour cream onto her baked potato. “Ever since that reporter talked to our class, you’ve been a real snoop.”

Last fall a local reporter, Jake Philips, had described to their current events class how he single-handedly got several criminals arrested. “Investigative reporters *have* to snoop, or they’d never uncover anything,” Jeri said.

Halfway through their peach cobbler, Headmistress Long rose and clinked her fork against her water glass until the dining hall was silent. Her face was pale, but her voice was strong. “Girls, I have an announcement. Remember, there’s no cause for alarm.”

Holding her breath, Jeri studied the headmistress. Her eyes were sharp and unwavering. They took in everything in the room, but gave nothing away.

“Do stay calm, ladies. There will be no hysterics.”

Jeri almost choked on her cobbler. What was going on?

“She’s freaking me out,” Abby whispered.

Jeri nodded.

The headmistress patted her long coiled hair where it was pinned up in back. “Our school van, driven by our art teacher, Mr. Reeves, was carrying six girls home from the Fieldstone Art Museum this afternoon . . .” She paused to clear her throat. “There’s no easy way to tell you. They’ve all disappeared.”