



What a day!

Aubrey ran the back of her hand across her damp forehead and took a deep breath. The hot, sticky air outdoors made her thankful for air conditioning inside.

Every day the restaurant became busier, which meant more money from tips, but an exhausting routine as well.

As hostess, with a waitress who'd called in sick, she'd rushed around since coming in. A few times she helped the busboy clear off the tables, which filled almost as soon as they emptied.

A sea of faces formed a line of waiting diners. "A table for four?" Removing four menus from the pocket at the end of the counter, she led them, a couple, an older woman, and a young man, to a table by a window and laid down the menus.

"Well, well, imagine meeting Aubrey White waitressing in a restaurant." The familiar, mocking voice from the past caught her attention.

Startled, she looked up into the blue eyes and smirking mouth of Derek Hall. Her stomach took a dive.

"Derek." His father's voice held a warning.

Derek pulled out a chair and sat. He'd been a star football player for Greenlawn High. Talented and popular, he frequently

pushed the buttons between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and his teasing often bordered on bullying. As Leanna's friend, Aubrey became better acquainted with him than she would've otherwise.

Back then, he'd had a crush on her, but she refused to join his admiration society. She'd stood up to Derek, but girls like Haleigh Abbott often became a target of his bullying.

He'd been behind the wheel, DWI, the night Leanna died.

The last time she'd seen him was in court, where he'd been sentenced to four years in prison, followed by parole and community service for a drunk driving fatality. He didn't want to take responsibility for his action, trying to lay the blame on the girls for getting into the car with him.

"Uh—hello, Derek. I've worked here every summer since I graduated from high school." G-r-r. She didn't have to explain herself to him. Derek's arrogant attitude angered her now as much as it did back then.

She turned to the three older adults. Derek's mother and grandmother fixed their eyes on their menus. Only his father met her eyes briefly.

"I'll be with you to take your orders in a few minutes." She escaped as quickly as she could without being rude and blew a tendril of hair back from her face. Her hands shook as she stopped to pick up a heavy tray of dirty dishes to carry to the kitchen.

A few steps inside the door from the dining room, she suddenly crashed to the floor on her knees. Dishes and food scraps flew. She turned from the kneeling position to sit on the floor.

A sharp pain in her right leg drew her eyes to a long gash in her pant leg, just below her knee. The fabric darkened and red oozed out. She bit her lip to keep from crying. She must have fallen on a piece of broken glass.

Someone handed her a bunch of napkins, which she pressed against the cut. Embarrassed by her fall, the food stains on her

white blouse, and the chaos that erupted around her, she pushed her palms against the floor to get her feet under her.

“Wait, Aubrey!” Mr. Duncan, the restaurant owner, appeared and assessed the situation. “Okay, let’s get this mess cleaned up!” He probed her leg gently with his fingers before he helped her stand. “I don’t think anything’s broken. Go to the break room, sit down, and relax. I’ll get the first aid kit and be with you in a minute.”

The busboy and a couple of waitresses brought a broom and mop and began clean-up.

Aubrey took a deep, shaky breath and limped away. Dropping into a chair and stretching her leg in front of her, she rolled up her pant leg. With a napkin she wiped at the blood that formed rivulets down to her ankle, then pressed several napkins against the cut. She tried to still her trembling with three deep, cleansing breaths.

“Good job, kids.” Mr. Duncan spoke from the open door of the employee break room. “Better get back to work. There are hungry people out there.” Her boss turned toward her. “Now, Aubrey, let’s look at you.” He dragged out a chair and sat facing her, sliding his hands into latex gloves.

She bit her lip as he cleansed the cut and checked for glass embedded in the wound.

“How did this happen?” He pressed a gauze pad against it.

“I’m not sure, Mr. Duncan.” Aubrey shook her head. Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to give in to them. “It happened so fast. I’m sorry.” She watched him place several clean gauze pads and tape over the cut. “Is someone taking the order from my table?” As busy as they were, she didn’t want to give Derek an excuse to cause a scene.

“Yes.” His calmness calmed her. “I think you’re going to need stitches. Is there someone in your family available to take you to Urgent Care?”

“My mother should be home.” She pulled her phone from her pocket, then moaned. “Oh, no, my phone is smashed!”

“I’ve got it.” He had his phone already in hand.



AUBREY LAY BACK on the living room sofa, propped up by pillows, with a row of neat stitches below her knee. It throbbed. She moaned. “I can’t work, I can’t go anywhere, and my phone is broken.”

Complaining didn’t help. She could use her laptop to message, but it sat on her desk upstairs in her room. Her mother had left to get her pain medication and antibiotic at the pharmacy.

If she didn’t work, she didn’t get paid. Mr. Duncan insisted she stay home tomorrow, echoing the doctor’s orders: give her leg a day of rest. An x-ray had revealed no other damage from her fall. This was simply an annoyance. She’d been through much worse.

Winning the girls’ basketball championship her sophomore year in high school had been exhilarating. Aubrey and Leanna had both played well, but Leanna scored the most points for the team, even though she was only a sophomore. Everyone knew Leanna would win a sports scholarship for college and become a basketball star.

“Derek has his car, and he wants to take us for a victory ride. Come on, Aubrey.” Leanna pulled on her arm.

“No, let’s wait for the team victory ride around town on the school bus. That’s a tradition for championship teams.”

“Aw, come on, Aubrey. We’ll be back in time for that.”

Three days later, Aubrey woke up in the hospital with a broken hip and other injuries. Her world had changed forever. She should have died, not Leanna. Since her friend hadn’t believed in Jesus, she hadn’t been ready to die.

When she heard the back door close, Aubrey wiped tears from her eyes.

Mom walked into the living room with a pharmacy bag and a

bottle of water and handed them to Aubrey. "The instructions are on the bottles in the bag."

"Thanks, Mom." She pulled out two pill bottles.

"How are you doing?" Mom, the most caring person she knew, laid a small pillow under her knee.

"Other than the pain and the fact I can't work, I'm fine." She regretted the sarcasm in her voice. "I'm sorry, Mom. It's not your fault I'm lying here."

"Apology accepted. Is there anything else you need?"

"My laptop and book are on my desk upstairs. Will you get them for me?"

She swallowed her pills while Mom went upstairs.

After messaging her sister-in-law, her friend Christina, and a few other people, she read for a while. Drowsiness overcame her, and she slept for a couple of hours before supper.

That evening, her brothers went to Willie's building site, to build shelves for his florist shop. Her parents sat in the living room to watch the news and read.

Positioning herself comfortably on the sofa, Aubrey opened her laptop to look up the websites her advisor had told her about, with information about scholarships.

A scholarship would mean less money she'd have to borrow and pay back.



AUBREY AWOKE to the sound of footsteps in the hallway and on the stairs, and to the smell of coffee.

On a normal day, she would be joining her family in their morning ritual. She flipped back her covers and sat up. Moaning in the process, she swung her legs over the side of her bed. All five feet, eight inches of her body ached from her fall yesterday. The stitches made a line several inches long below her right kneecap, the area bruised and tender.

The front door closed, and her father's car started. Probably

her brothers were finished in the bathroom by now. Time for her to get up.

She pushed to her feet, slowly shifting weight to her right leg. It supported her. Some of the stiffness drained off as she shuffled to the bathroom.

This morning's Bible reading from the book of James focused on patience, aka endurance or perseverance. Her own present trial, her wounded knee, was nothing compared to the persecution the early Christians suffered. They lost their jobs, their property, and even their lives by taking a stand for Christ.

Good grades, popularity, and success had always been easy for her. The only exception had been the long months in the hospital, rehab, and physical therapy after the accident. Then she'd endured physical pain and mental anguish because of her own poor choices.

Patience had a lot to do with faith, believing God and trusting Him to bring her through the challenges she faced. She didn't think she interfered with Him by using the physical and mental abilities with which He'd gifted her.

Praying for patience came hard. She had to admit her own weakness.

After dressing in khaki shorts and a light blue knit top, she braided her hair in a single plait down her back and made her bed. Everything took a little longer to accomplish this morning.

Holding the bannister firmly, she walked down the stairs, then limped into the kitchen, and collapsed into a chair.

Her mother looked up from writing on a piece of paper, the grocery store circular spread beside her. "Are you okay?" Her gaze searched Aubrey's face, then traveled to her knee and back. "Are you hungry?"

She nodded. "I am and I am." Normally she would serve herself. Instead, she propped her right leg on another chair. "Just some oatmeal and a banana, please." She shook her head. "I did a really stupid thing yesterday. It was embarrassing. Even though I

need the money, I'm not sure I could face everybody today." She sighed. "I feel so ... useless."

"You'll be fine. The doctor said to just watch for infection." Mom set a bowl, a spoon, and a banana in front of Aubrey. She spooned steaming oatmeal into the bowl and took a carton of milk from the refrigerator.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please."

Mom placed a tea bag in a cup and poured in hot water. "Mr. Duncan called to assure us that the restaurant's insurance will take care of any expenses from your accident. He seemed really concerned." She set the cup in front of Aubrey.

"Thanks, Mom." She inhaled the tea's warm fragrance as she stirred in sugar and added a little milk. "Mr. Duncan is a super boss. He treats his employees and customers well. I think that's why his restaurant business is so successful."

Her mother left for a meeting at church and a trip to the grocery store.

After eating her breakfast, Aubrey placed her dishes in the dishwasher and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. The stitches pulled as she limped into the living room. Her leg hurt, but she'd do without pain medication if she could.

The stillness shouted at her. What could she do? Her new phone should arrive tomorrow so she could contact friends and find out what was happening in the world. Her book and laptop lay upstairs on her desk because her focus this morning had been getting down the stairs. Climbing up the stairs right now was not an option.

Oh, for the days when she took the stairs up two at a time and jumped down three stairs from the bottom.

She grabbed the TV remote and flipped through the channels. Nothing interesting on.

The family photo albums on the bookcase caught her attention. Although Mom had photographs stored on flash

drives, she chose to keep photo albums she could hold and show visitors.

Aubrey pulled them from the shelf, stacked them in her arms, and made her way to the sofa. With a groan she sat, propped her sore knee on a small pillow, and leaned back against some larger cushions. Getting herself into a comfortable position, she laid back her head, totally bored.

“How could you be so clumsy, Aubrey?” A day off had not been her plan for today.

Mr. Duncan needed her at work, and she needed the money. Why had she let Derek’s presence shake her up? She should have watched where she stepped.

Purple, black, and blue bruises surrounded the tiny stitches below her kneecap, the area swollen and tender. The pain had eased a bit without medication.

The family calico cat, Sweetie Pie, glided into the room with a brief “mew,” and invited herself to join Aubrey on the couch. The cat sniffed the scrapbooks and stared at her.

“Silly old cat.” Aubrey rubbed her hand across the cat’s soft fur and scratched behind her ears. Sweetie Pie began to purr. She’d been a kitten the year of Aubrey’s accident and had kept her company through many lonely hours.

The Whites had a couple of dogs during Aubrey’s growing-up years. Willie had suggested a pot-bellied pig when he was in middle school, but Mom said an emphatic no. The cat was their only pet now. Sweetie Pie curled up against Aubrey’s side and went to sleep.

Aubrey opened the album numbered one. Her parents smiled back at her from photos of their wedding and their early life together. As she turned the pages, each of the children appeared in the family circle in order of birth: Mike, then her, Willie, and last Jesse.

Would she marry, or would she remain single and focused on her career? She imagined herself in a wedding photo with Jeremy as the groom. Marriage, if she ever married, was still in the



future for her. She closed the first album and pushed the thoughts away.

The second album included many photos of the Three Sisters: at summer camp, at the mall, being silly together, playing games with their brothers, always smiling. So many memories they'd made together when they were kids.

Only a few photos of the threesome were in the third album. Most of the photos here had been taken during Aubrey's later teen years, not so long ago: she and her brothers in their sports uniforms, Willie in his gardens, she and Leanna playing basketball.

Aubrey leafed slowly through the pages with pictures after the accident: in the hospital, in rehab, and therapy.

The photos reminded her of the loneliness and pain as she recovered, mourned Leanna's death, and struggled to overcome survivor's guilt. By this time, her best-friend relationship with Haleigh Abbott and Katie Mann had ended. Though the physical and emotional strain of the accident and therapy took its toll, she healed.

Aubrey rubbed at the ghost pain in her left hip and repositioned the pillow under her right knee. Renewed throbbing in her knee and the ache in her body convinced her that she needed to take the overdue medication.

The cat looked up at her reproachfully for disturbing her and went back to sleep.

The next photos took her back to the White family vacation at Yellowstone National Park, and another vacation while hiking a part of the Appalachian Trail, her high school graduation and Willie's, and Jesse goofing around in his cap and gown. She yawned as she closed the album and checked her watch. Mom should be home any time.

The fourth album contained recent pictures, and she knew her mother would soon be adding Mike's wedding photos. Aubrey relaxed against the pillows and closed her eyes. What could she do next?

Her eyes popped open. The fog cleared from her mind. How long had she been asleep?

The last album lay on her stomach. She dropped it to the floor on top of the other three and shifted to a more comfortable position. Sweetie Pie protested, jumped off the couch, and stalked out of the room.

Her mom opened the front door. "Come in."

"Hello, Mrs. White." A familiar male voice rumbled.

A chill passed down her spine.

Footsteps in the hallway. Mom entered the living room. "Are you ready for some company, Aubrey?"