



THE RIDGECREST RACKET

JEAN PENNINGTON



A PATCH THE PIRATE BOOK

The Ridgecrest Racket
Book Three from *The Willow Valley Kids* series.

Copyright © 2017 by Majesty Music, Inc.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Majesty Music publishes music and other resources
for the purpose of spreading the gospel and biblical truth
to edify the church and encourage the family.

Majesty Music, Inc.
733 Wade Hampton Boulevard
Greenville, South Carolina 29609
www.majestymusic.com

ISBN: 978-0-9964021-4-9

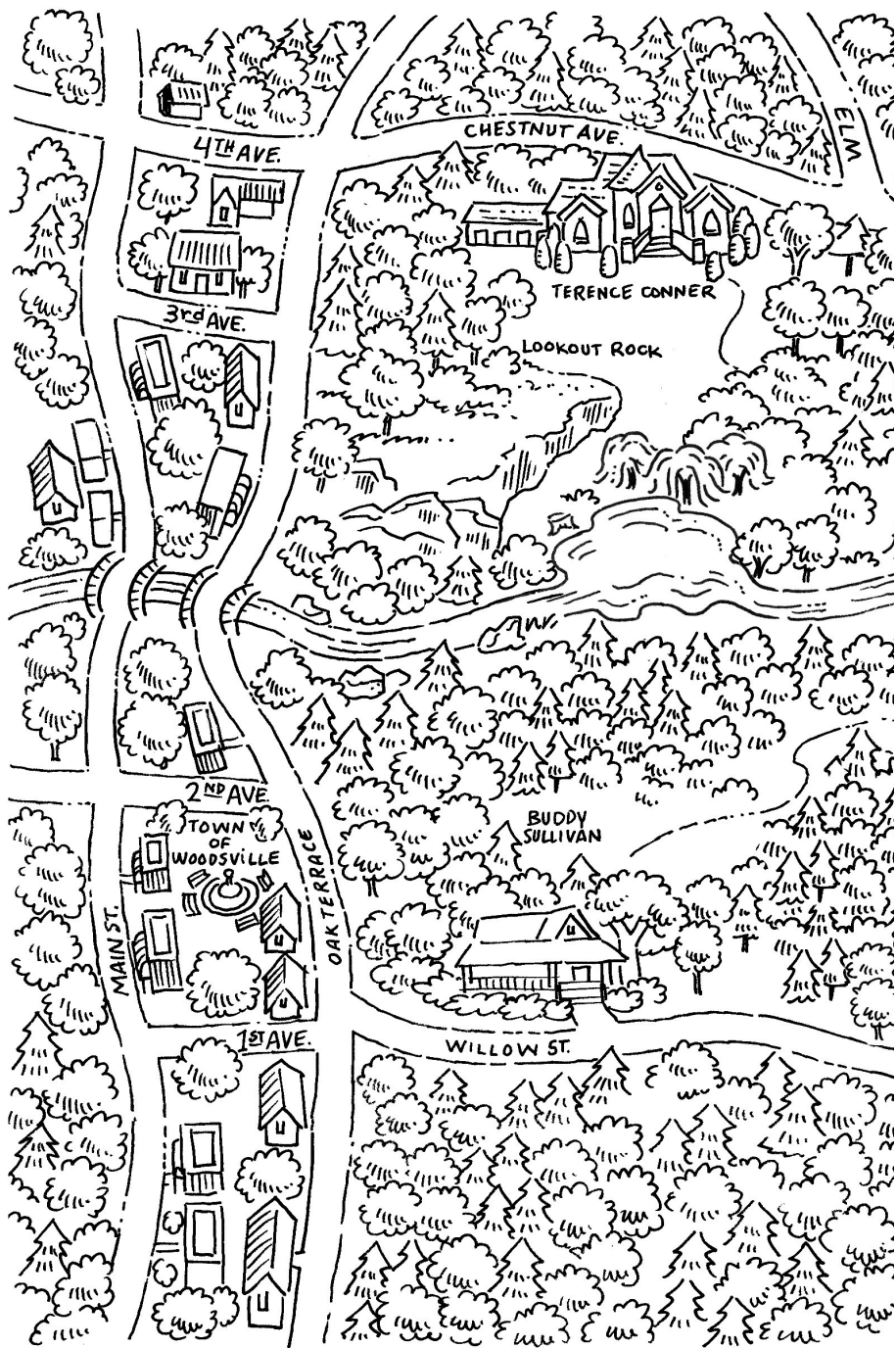
Editor: Christiane Emory
Illustrations: Julie Speer
Book design and layout: Dwight Reid

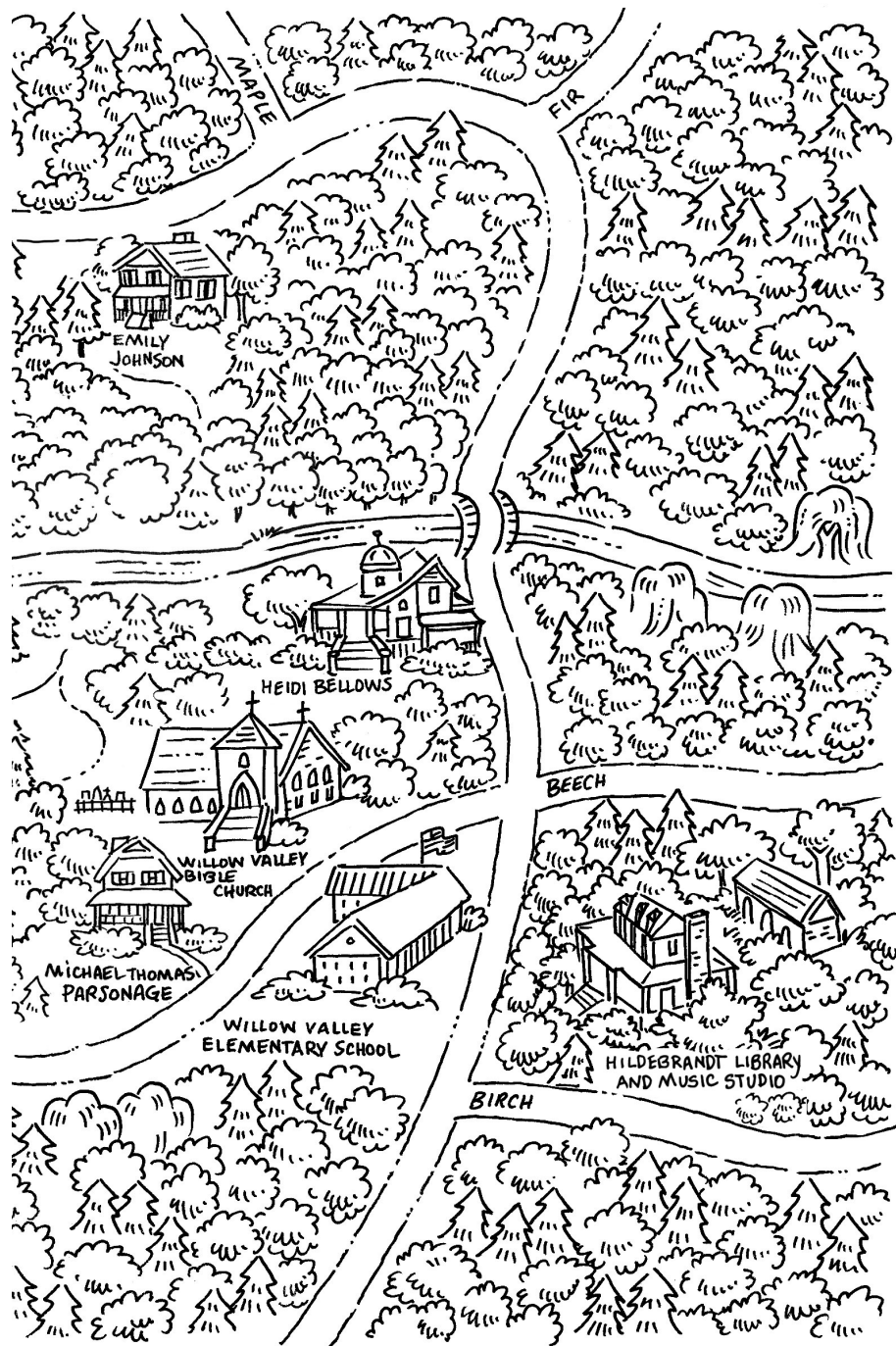
For nearly three decades, Jean Pennington has authored multiple children's stories, devotions, and plays for the international *Patch the Pirate* children's choir club.

Jean is the mother of six children and grandmother of three. She lives in South Carolina with three children still at home, two cats, and one lazy dog. God is her faithful Shepherd (Ezekiel 34:11-12).



Julie Speer has been drawing since she could first hold a pencil. She thoroughly enjoys having a career drawing illustrations for kid's books, textbooks, stickers and games, as well as *Highlights Hidden Pictures*. Julie and her husband have been blessed with four children who also love to draw! Julie and her family live in Greenville, South Carolina.





*To my faithful father and mother,
Robert and Joanne Purdy,
. . . and to all mothers in hard places.*

*Yea, the sparrow hath found an house,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
even thine altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King, and my God.*

Psalm 84:3

Contents

ONE

Unwelcome Assignments 1

TWO

Hidden Dangers 26

THREE

Doubts and Fears 49

FOUR

Counterfeit! 76

FIVE

The Great Deceiver 104

SIX

Catastrophe Strikes 127

SEVEN

All Knotted Up 153

EIGHT

Kidnapped! 179

NINE

Celebrations 208

Part one: Unwelcome Assignments

Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not.

Isaiah 35:4



Perhaps everything should have looked and felt different all of a sudden. But as Buddy Sullivan left his mother's office on Main Street and pedaled his bike toward home, he felt perplexed that everything looked and felt exactly the same.

The sky overhead was still the deep, intense blue of autumn. Cars passed him on the road as people went about their normal activities, more or less unaware that Buddy even existed. And Buddy's stomach was growling with hunger as it usually did in the wilderness of time between his lunch at school and the dinner he would share with his mother when she got home from work.

Nothing has really changed at all, Buddy told himself.

But he knew in his heart that somehow everything had changed, in a very solemn and important way.

That's what death does, Buddy knew—which was why he was confused about the fact that to him, everything still felt the same. It wasn't that he didn't have feelings, Buddy reasoned to himself. It was just that he didn't know *how* to feel.

"Are you okay?" his mother had asked him after giving him the news. "Do you feel sad?"

Buddy shook his head and shrugged. "I'm fine," he told her, and it was true. He guessed it probably affected her more than it did him. After all, she had known him—whereas Buddy didn't even have a picture of him. It was better that way, his mother had told him one time; and he believed her.

Buddy's tires bumped over the ruts in the gravel driveway that ran alongside the small house he shared with his mother. Rocks flew up as he skidded to a stop in front of the large, somewhat dilapidated shed in the back. He ditched his bike next to the shed and glanced at his watch. There was no time to run inside and grab a snack. He was going to be late to the meeting—and the others would want to know why.

He pushed through the bushes at the back of his yard—his own private entrance into the peaceful afternoon shade of Willow Valley. Although October was half over, the huge old trees that stretched their branches overhead still held firmly to their allotment of summer leaves. The entire valley basked in the warm sunlight, in quiet defiance of the fact that winter would eventually come.

The tension in Buddy's chest began to ease as he traveled the well-worn path down the steep hillside. For him, Willow Valley was the one place he was on equal footing with his friends. At school, Buddy struggled to make passing grades; at his friends' houses, he was often painfully reminded of how little he and his mother possessed. But in the gentle wildness of Willow Valley, Buddy and his friends were all the same: just a group of regular kids who had discovered the treasure of true friendship.

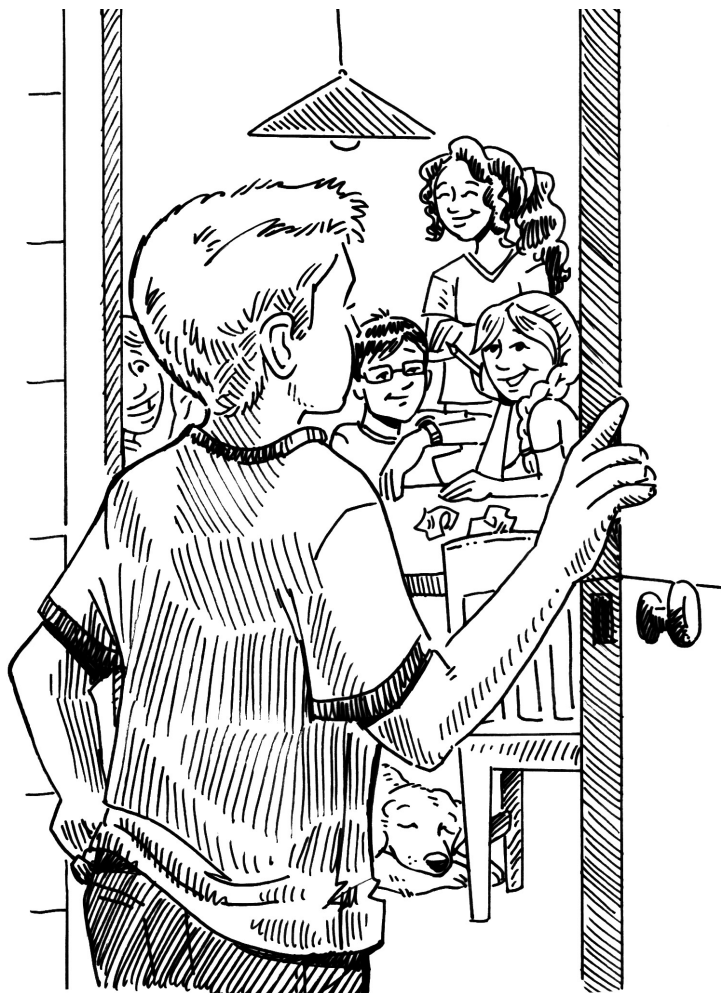
At the bottom of the path, a small, swiftly-flowing stream wound through the floor of the valley. Buddy turned to the right and followed the trail along the edge of the water through a meadow of long grass. Soon a small wooden building came into view, nearly hidden in the deep shade of several tall pine trees. This shed was the headquarters for their club of five. They called themselves the Willow Valley kids.

Just beyond the clubhouse, a small pond glistened between the trees, its surface ruffled by a comfortable breeze. Beside the pond stood three large old willow trees guarding the shoreline. Buddy paused and looked toward the water longingly. He wondered if there would be time to go fishing when the meeting was over. Then he turned into the doorway of the clubhouse.

"You are exactly twelve minutes and seventeen seconds late," Terence Conner announced as Buddy stepped into the room.

"Should I write that in the notes?" Emily Johnson wanted to know. She drew a pencil from its place tucked behind her ear and grinned a welcome at Buddy.

"Only if it happens again," Terence replied, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. He did not smile (because Terence hardly ever smiled), but the others all knew he was joking.



Buddy took his place in the only empty chair at the round table. To his left sat Michael Thomas, captain of the school basketball team, whose father was the pastor of Willow Valley Bible Church. Michael's dog, a large golden retriever named Bobo, lay sprawled underneath the table. To Buddy's right, Heidi Bellows

observed him thoughtfully with large eyes that were nearly as dark as her curly black hair.

Here and there on the tabletop were crumpled napkins, and Buddy perked up. “Is there food?” he asked hopefully. Heidi reached into a basket and handed Buddy a very large and soft pretzel crusted with salt.

“Freshly baked this afternoon by Bridgett,” she told him. Bridgett was the German woman who cooked and kept the house running for Heidi’s family. “Here’s some mustard to go with it,” added Heidi. “And three more pretzels are still left in the basket if you want seconds, thirds, or fourths.”

“We ate ours while we were waiting for you,” explained Emily.

Buddy sank his teeth into the warm sweetness of the pretzel and felt his uneasiness melt away. Food nearly always made everything better.

“Now that we’re all here, we can get started,” Michael declared.

Terence took a small wooden mallet from the window ledge next to him and rapped it three times on the table to signify the official beginning of their meeting. Terence, who was the smartest kid in Woodsville, liked to do things by the book.

“I called this meeting to discuss two items of concern arising from school today,” he told them. “The first one has to do, of course, with the upcoming science project.”

Michael groaned out loud. “I’ve been dreading the science fair since kindergarten!”

It was true. In all the grades leading up to this one, the children had heard horror stories about the big science project—complete with a paper and a project display for the science fair.

To make matters worse, a new teacher had arrived this year, fresh from a university in Chicago. Miss Larkin was all business and no fun.

“Don’t worry,” said Terence. “Miss Larkin said we can work on our projects in groups of two or three. I propose that we boys band together in one group, and you two girls do the same.”

Buddy licked the mustard from his fingers and nodded. “That sounds like a good plan,” he said. “But are you sure you want to take on Michael and me, Terence? You’ll be in danger of losing your straight-A status—especially with that new kid in our class.”

Buddy was talking about Dylan Kodiak—a new student who seemed to be good at everything. On the last two math tests, he tied Terence with perfect scores, to the shock of the rest of the class. No one had ever come so close to Terence’s brilliance at Woodsville Elementary School.

Terence frowned and adjusted his glasses. “Just promise me you’ll work hard and do exactly what I tell you to do,” he answered. “Miss Larkin will be assigning us topics on Monday.”

“So what is the other matter of business?” Emily wanted to know. She pulled on the end of her very thick and rather messy braid of honey-colored hair. “Is there a mystery to solve, by any chance?” Since their last adventure, it had seemed unusually quiet around Woodsville.

Terence shuffled his papers. “I regret to inform you that the second item also has to do with school. If you remember, at the beginning of the year the school principal informed us that we would be required to perform fifteen hours of community

service each semester in order to receive the citizenship award. Only two months are left in the semester, and we haven't begun working on this yet."

Michael flicked at a bug on the table. "I meant to sign up to teach basketball at the YMCA, but today I saw that Dylan Kodiak has taken the last spot."

"There are plenty of spaces still available for volunteering at the hospital," Heidi said.

"That's because nobody wants to work there!" remarked Buddy.

"I do," said Emily, sitting up straight. "I think it would be fun to help at the hospital. Let's all sign up there, and then at least we can be together."

"At this late date, we're really not left with any other choice," Terence told them. "The hospital it is."

Michael sighed loudly and slouched back into his chair. "Working at the hospital around all those sick people and . . . and *old* people sounds like a nightmare to me! It better not interfere with basketball practice!"

"It won't be so bad. You'll see," said Emily cheerfully. Then she grinned. "You never know—helping at the hospital may change your whole life! Maybe you'll decide to be a doctor."

Michael fiercely wadded up one of the napkins, his frown only deepening. Terence chewed on his pencil and looked thoughtful. The girls began to gather up mustard packets and clear the table. The meeting was over.

Buddy swallowed the last bite of his third pretzel and gave silent thanks that no one had asked him why he arrived late.

"Anyone want to go fishing?" he asked.

By Monday, Buddy had almost pushed his mother's important news out of his mind. Then history class happened.

"Today for your homework, I want you to create your own family tree," said Miss Larkin. She passed out a paper printed with the outline of a tree without any leaves.



"Write your full name down at the bottom of the tree," she instructed the class. "On the two branches above it, write the names of your mother and father. Above each of their names, put the names of their parents . . . and so on. See how far back into your family tree you can go."

There was hardly time to put the page away before Miss Larkin was passing out the cards on which were written the dreaded science project assignments. Then the final bell of the day jangled through the hallways.

The Willow Valley kids made a beeline for the new library just down the road to discuss their topics and make a plan.

The Hildebrandt Library and Music Studio stood off from the road, nearly hidden by ancient oaks and huge magnolia trees. The grand brick mansion had long ago been the estate of Oliver and Priscilla Hildebrandt; but now, thanks to some help from the Willow Valley kids, the property had been converted into a library for the community of Woodsville. The large, high-ceilinged parlors and bedrooms were now filled with bookshelves and reading tables.

Behind the library, in the building that had once been a carriage house, some local music teachers offered private lessons. All throughout the day, a steady stream of young students (including Heidi Bellows) came and went, while sounds of piano, violin, cello, and harp drifted across the grass through the large open windows.

Toting school backpacks and empty lunchboxes, the five Willow Valley kids tromped along the winding driveway and up the wide steps to the covered porch of the library.

"Should we sit out here or go inside?" asked Heidi.

"It would be a crime to go inside on a day like this!" declared Emily. The others quickly agreed. It was a perfect autumn afternoon, and they had been cooped up in classrooms all day.

The porch of the library was as wide as a room and ran across the entire front of the building. The children walked past several rocking chairs and a long wooden bench to a table in the

far corner. Dumping their backpacks on the bench, they took their school notebooks to the table.

“If only Bridgett would bring over some warm cinnamon rolls with milk—then this would be perfect!” said Buddy.

“Try to take your mind off food for once,” Terence told him. “We have work to do—and even more than we first imagined.”

“Are you talking about the science project?” Michael wanted to know. “We just have to write a paper and make a display for the science fair—right?”

“It won’t be that simple,” Terence said grimly. “You’ll see what I mean when you hear what topic Miss Larkin gave us.” He opened his notebook and pulled out a white card.

“What does the fossil record demonstrate about the evolution of plants and animals?” he read.

The other children stared at him in dismay.

“Seriously?” said Michael, finally. “We’re supposed to do a project in support of Evolution?”

“That’s not fair!” Emily exclaimed. “Miss Larkin should know that some people believe that God created the world. I mean, Evolution is just a theory, right?”

“What is our topic?” Heidi wanted to know.

Emily scrounged in the pocket of her sweater and pulled out the folded card. “How and why did dinosaurs become extinct?” she read. “I hope Miss Larkin will let us use the Bible for our answer.”

“Don’t count on it,” answered Terence.

“So what are we going to do?” asked Buddy. “No other teacher has ever done anything like this.” Everyone looked at Terence to see what he would say, since he was the smartest kid in school.

“The main reason they make us do these projects is so we learn about the Scientific Method,” he finally said. “You know—gathering facts, making a hypothesis, and then testing whether or not it is true.”

Michael chewed on his pencil. “So . . . as long as we use the Scientific Method for our project, she shouldn’t care so much about anything else, right?”

“It sounds like she’s already given us a hypothesis,” Buddy pointed out, “that fossils prove that the Theory of Evolution is true.”

“So what if we gather facts that prove it is false?” said Terence. “Real facts won’t argue against the truth of the Bible.”

“I see why you said this project will take more work for us,” said Buddy. “We’re going to need some help with this.”

“My dad might be able to help,” said Michael. “Maybe he has some books in his library we can use.”

“Ask him about dinosaurs too,” said Emily. “For now, though, we should get to work on our other homework—that family tree thing.”

While his friends started filling in the blanks on their family trees, Buddy stared at his page. Slowly he wrote his mother’s name above his own. Then he put down his pencil. After a moment, Heidi noticed that Buddy was not working.

“Do you know your father’s name?” she asked him.

Buddy shrugged. “I know it,” he said. “I just don’t really want to write it.”

“Do you know anything at all about your dad?” Michael wanted to know. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” he quickly added.

"I don't mind, I guess," answered Buddy. "Especially since I don't know very much. He left my mom before I was even born."

"Didn't your mom try to find him?" asked Terence.

"She didn't want to," Buddy answered. "She just says that we're both better off without him. I don't think he was very nice to her."

"I like your mom," said Emily. "I can tell she loves you a lot!"

"I just wish she was a Christian and came to church with me," said Buddy.

"Do you think you'd ever want to meet your dad?" asked Heidi.

Buddy fiddled with the corner of his paper for a long moment before answering. "Actually, last Friday my mom told me some news about my dad," he finally said and then stopped. Somewhere high in the trees, a crow cawed loudly. Snatches of piano notes drifted from the music studio behind the library.

"My dad died last week." It was the first time he had said it out loud.

Heidi gasped and pressed her hands to her mouth.

"Oh, Buddy—I'm so sorry!" said Emily.

"That's pretty big news—even if you didn't know your dad," Michael said. "How . . . how does it make you feel?"

"Kind of strange," Buddy answered. He didn't know what else to say.

Terence cleared his throat. "A psychology article I read suggested that it is normal for children to grieve for a parent they never knew."

The others knew better than to ask why Terence was reading a psychology article and how he could remember it so well. Terence

read everything, and he somehow remembered everything he read.

“Well,” said Heidi, “I’m glad you know you have a perfect Heavenly Father, Buddy. God doesn’t make mistakes, and He will never abandon us.”

“Maybe that’s what you should write on your paper,” said Michael with a sideways grin. “Just write ‘God’ on the father side. What can Miss Larkin say to that?”

Emily’s eyes began to sparkle, and she giggled. “I have an idea, Buddy. You can just make up an imaginary family tree. We’ll help you come up with names. Miss Larkin won’t know the difference. It’s not like she can check or anything!”

And that’s what they did. Soon every blank on Buddy’s paper was filled with the most interesting and outlandish names they could think of, like Apollo Sylvester Galloway and Marcella Penelope Remington. Their sides ached from laughing, and all of them—even Buddy—felt much better.

“We should probably go home,” Heidi finally said. They began to put their papers and notebooks in their backpacks.

“Remember, tomorrow after school we go to Ridgecrest General Hospital,” Terence told them.

Michael made a face. “I guess I have to go, since my mom is the one driving us.”

“Don’t worry, Michael,” said Emily. “We’ll all stick together, and it won’t be so bad.”

But Michael worried that for him, it *would* be bad—and he was right.



“Before you begin your volunteer work here at Ridgecrest General, there are important rules you must follow at all times.”

Nurse Bates looked sternly through her thick glasses at the five children standing in front of her.

“First of all, never interfere in any way with the work of the nurses and doctors. Second, always respect the privacy of our patients. This means never entering a room without first knocking and hearing an invitation to come in. This also means leaving all personal belongings of the patient exactly as you find them.”

Nurse Bates adjusted her glasses and continued. “Do not ask nosy questions about the patient’s medical condition. You are simply there to help and serve—not to satisfy your own curiosity.”

Michael glanced in Emily’s direction to be sure she had heard the part about satisfying her curiosity. Nurse Bates went on.

“Thirdly, you ought not to be anywhere in this hospital except for the areas in which I have instructed you to do your work. If you feel you need to go somewhere else for any reason, you must obtain permission from me first. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the children murmured.

“Very well,” said Nurse Bates. “Follow me, and I will show you what you will be doing this afternoon.”

The children walked behind Nurse Bates down a hallway and crowded into the elevator. The ride up to the fifth floor was awkwardly silent. When the doors finally slid open, they arrived at a busy nurse’s station where phones were ringing and people were coming and going.

“This is one of our busiest floors,” Nurse Bates told them. “Here we provide rehabilitation care to patients needing extra time to recover from surgery or illness. Most of the people on this floor are elderly. They may stay several weeks and sometimes even months. And some will not go home.”

Emily squeezed Heidi’s hand. The boys looked exceedingly uncomfortable. What would Nurse Bates tell them to do? Even Emily was having second thoughts about working at the hospital. No wonder no one else had signed up.

Nurse Bates led them down the long, crowded hallway to a utility room that looked similar to a kitchen. A counter along the wall was filled with small water pitchers and plastic trays.

“This is our ice maker,” Nurse Bates told them, pointing to a large shiny appliance. “For the time you are here this afternoon, I would like you to fill these water pitchers with ice and water, place them on a tray, and deliver one to each room. Remember, you are to knock loudly on the door and wait for an answer from the patient before entering.”

Nurse Bates paused and looked at them. “Do you understand my instructions?” she asked.

The children nodded, too afraid to speak.

“Very well,” said the nurse. “Split up and get to work then. I will be at the station next to the elevators. Notify me at once if you have any problems or questions. And remember, do not violate any of the rules I have given you.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the five children answered. None of them could imagine daring to disobey this strict nurse.

“How many hours do we have to volunteer?” asked Buddy with a shudder when the door had safely shut behind Nurse Bates.

Michael twisted his face into a fake smile and made his voice high like a girl’s. “It won’t be that bad, Michael, you’ll see!” he said, mocking Emily’s words to him the day before. Emily glared at him and snatched up two of the water pitchers.

“We’ll do the rooms to the right,” she announced, lifting her chin and tossing her braid. “You boys can do the ones down the hall the other way.”

Slowly the boys filled up three pitchers and set them on trays.

“Let’s get this over with,” said Terence, opening the door and propping it with his foot for the other two to pass through, each of them carrying a tray with a full pitcher.

Terence headed toward the first door and motioned for Buddy to get the one across the hall. Michael walked past them until he came to the next room. He hesitated, his stomach clenched with dread. Finally, he knocked loudly on the door, the way Nurse Bates had instructed.

Was that a voice he heard? It was hard to tell with all the noise from the hallway. Michael slowly pushed the door open. The room beyond was dark and smelled stale. He saw the form of a person lying still in the bed. It was a very old man, and his eyes were closed.



Michael tiptoed around the end of the bed and set the tray and pitcher down on the table. Just as he turned to leave, the man in the bed stirred and then let out a long, low moan.

Michael froze. Then moving as quietly as he could, he sped back to the door and pushed through it into the hallway. Panic clutched his chest, and he looked around in desperation. Should he tell someone that this man was in distress? What if the man was dying?

Michael did not know what to do, and he wished with all his might that he had chosen a different volunteer job. As much as he hated to admit it, everything about the hospital terrified him.

Just then a small, cheerful-looking nurse with a nametag that said *Molly* bustled toward him along the hall.

“Um . . . excuse me,” said Michael. “The man in this room seems to be having some trouble!”

“Mr. Collins?” asked Molly, smiling at Michael. “Oh, don’t mind him! He’s always moaning and groaning like that. It took me days to get used to it. It’s just how he is. If he needs real

help, his monitor will go off or he will press his button to call the nurse.”

Michael nodded and attempted to smile before walking reluctantly back to the utility room for another water pitcher. This volunteer work could not end soon enough.

The next day after school, Michael went directly to the office.

“I need to sign up for a different volunteer job,” he told Mrs. Swanson, the school counselor. He waited nervously while she opened her file drawer and pulled out a large folder.

“Right now you are signed up for the hospital,” she said, peering through her reading glasses at a form. “Is there a problem?”

Michael gulped. “It’s just not working out for me,” he said. He didn’t want to admit that hospitals, sick people, and especially old sick people scared him to death. “Is there anything else I could do?”

Mrs. Swanson shuffled through the papers in the folder. “There’s still an opening at the florist shop—helping to arrange and deliver flowers. And one more spot is available at the day-care center, in the toddler room. Do either of those sound good to you?”

Michael sighed and kicked at the carpet with his sneaker. “No, ma’am,” he finally said. “I guess I’ll have to stick with the hospital.”

“You can always see if someone else would trade with you,” Mrs. Swanson told him.

Michael thanked her for looking and turned to leave. He had already asked lots of other kids if he could trade with them—but no one wanted to work at the hospital.

4

On Michael's way home from school, he stopped at the church to see if his dad was in his office. He found Pastor Thomas on his knees next to the printer, a stack of smudged and wrinkled prayer meeting bulletins on the floor next to him.

"Is the printer jammed again?" asked Michael.

His father scratched his head. "This machine has lived a long and useful life, but I think it's about time for both of us to be put out of this misery!" He pulled himself to his feet and rubbed his knees. "How's school going?"

"Terrible!" said Michael making a face.

"Tell me about it," said Pastor Thomas, sitting down in his chair.

"Well, first we have this stupid science project about Evolution and fossils—and I don't even believe in Evolution. And worse than that, I have to do work at the hospital every week and I hate it!"

"What do you hate about it?" asked his father.

“Everything!” Michael said, looking miserable. “I hate being there. It smells bad, and the nurses are bossy and act like they wish we weren’t there at all—especially Nurse Bates. And then having to see all those old people in their rooms and not knowing what’s going to happen . . .” —his voice trailed away.

“It’s not that I don’t want to help people,” he finally said, his eyes pleading for his father to understand.

Pastor Thomas nodded. “It’s normal to be scared of being around sick and old people. Believe it or not, I’ve had to struggle with that myself.”

“Really?” asked Michael. “But you visit people in the hospital all the time.”

“Exactly,” said his father, grinning. “And now it doesn’t bother me nearly so much as it did in the beginning. The more you do it, the more familiar you become with what can be a very difficult and unpleasant environment.”

“It’s more than just difficult and unpleasant,” said Michael, “which is why I want to do something else!”

“It doesn’t look as though God is letting you off the hook that easily,” his father said. “There are people in that place—many of God’s own children—who need the encouragement of someone like you caring about them.” Pastor Thomas paused, thinking for a moment.

“This reminds me of a situation in the book of Jeremiah,” he told Michael. “Enemies of the old prophet Jeremiah convinced the king to throw him into an underground water tank and leave him to die. The tank—called a cistern—didn’t have any water in it, but the bottom of it was filled with mud. The bad guys let Jeremiah down into the cistern with ropes, and he sank into

the mud. When the friends of Jeremiah heard what happened, they hurried to rescue him. By now he was weak and feeble. His friends cared for him so much, they dropped down soft rags for him to put under his arms so the ropes would not injure him when they pulled him out.”

Michael sat quietly, listening to his father.

“Jeremiah was in a very difficult and unpleasant place! No doubt it smelled terrible down there in that cistern, and he could not do anything to help himself. Still, God cared for him by sending people to support him in his hard place.”

Michael chewed on his lower lip, thinking about the story his father told him.

“So . . . I guess I have to go back,” he finally said.

“How about if I go with you next time?” Pastor Thomas answered. “It’s been a few days since I’ve been up there, and there is one person in particular I need to visit. Come to think of it—I think you would greatly benefit by meeting this gentleman.” He smiled at Michael. “God works in mysterious ways, you know!”

On Thursday afternoon, Pastor Thomas himself drove the Willow Valley kids to the hospital. The staff was familiar with him because of his frequent visits. The woman at the reception desk greeted him with a smile, and two doctors wearing scrubs called out his name as he passed them in the lobby on the way to the elevator. Even Nurse Bates smiled when she saw Pastor Thomas. Michael felt proud to be walking beside him. The hospital did not seem so frightening with his father close by.

Nurse Bates went with them up to the fifth floor and once again assigned them to fill and deliver water pitchers. As the

other children got started on the job, Michael went with his father down to the very end of a long hallway.

Pastor Thomas knocked loudly on the door of room 538.

“Come in if you dare!” a man’s voice called out in a cheerful tone.

Pastor Thomas grinned at Michael and then pushed the door open.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Dean. How are you feeling today?” he said to the man.

“Pastor Thomas!” the man exclaimed, his face crinkling with pleasure. “Why, I’m so much better than I deserve—especially since you have come to visit! Who is this fine young man?”

Michael smiled and stepped forward to be introduced. Dr. Dean’s handshake was firm and warm, though he appeared to be frail and very old.

Unlike most of the rooms along the hall, this room was filled with sunlight, its window blinds pulled all the way up. Even though Dr. Dean was lying in a bed, Michael could tell he was a tall man. His face was wrinkled and brown from a lifetime in the sun, and his dark eyes sparkled. White hair stood out in a fringe around his ears. He smiled joyfully at his visitors.

“What brings you to my corner of the world today?” he wanted to know.

Pastor Thomas sat in the chair next to Dr. Dean’s bed.

“My son and his friends are volunteering on this hall each week,” he said. “Since you are a lifetime member of Willow Valley Bible Church, I wanted to be sure Michael got a chance to meet you.”

"I see," said Dr. Dean. "So on Thursday afternoons, I can expect to be waited on hand and foot, is that right?"

"Yes, sir," answered Michael. Dr. Dean gave a hearty laugh.

"Good, very good! The nurses around here are overworked and underpaid. They deserve all the help they can get!"

"Michael's still getting used to being in the hospital," Pastor Thomas told the old man.

Dr. Dean leaned eagerly toward Michael.

"You know, I used to hate the hospital—I avoided it at all cost!" he said. "But now—now that I've been here a while, I've almost come to enjoy it. All the activity, people coming and going, breakfast, lunch, and dinner brought to my room—it's been kind of nice. The only thing I miss is the cracker and peanut butter sandwiches I usually fix for myself every afternoon at home." He winked at Michael. "My secret treat!" he said, his eyes sparkling.

"I like crackers and peanut butter too," said Michael. "Maybe I can bring you some next time I come."

"I would like that very much!" said Dr. Dean. "Very much indeed!"

Pastor Thomas put a hand on Michael's shoulder.

"Michael, why don't you get busy with your responsibilities, while I have a talk with Dr. Dean. I'll come find you when I'm finished."

"Yes, sir," Michael answered. "It was nice to meet you, Dr. Dean."

"The pleasure was all mine!" exclaimed the old man heartily. "Be sure to come back and visit after you've filled all those water pitchers. Speaking of that, why don't you give mine a refill while you're at it."

Michael grinned and went to get the plastic pitcher from the table under the window.

"And if you happen to see any crackers or cookies lying around . . .," said Dr. Dean.

"I'll see if I can get you some," Michael promised.

He walked quickly down the hallway toward the utility room. His father was right. Just in the short time he had been here, the hospital did not seem so dreadful and gloomy. And he knew he could always look forward to talking to Dr. Dean when he came. Maybe Dr. Dean would help him not be so afraid of being around sick and old people.



Dear Father, please help me to learn to serve others . . . even in a place like this, he silently prayed. *Help me to comfort and help others the way Jeremiah's friends helped him.*

As Michael was filling Dr. Dean's pitcher with ice, he suddenly heard a commotion from the hallway.

"My money!" a high, quavering voice was shouting. "My money is all gone!"

Michael stepped into the hall to see several nurses gathered around an elderly woman. She stood at the door of her room in a fluffy bathrobe, her large red purse dangling from her hand.

"It's all gone! Oh, who would do this to a poor helpless woman?"

Two nurses quickly helped the woman back into her room. Molly, the friendly nurse Michael had met last time, walked briskly past him to the nurses' station.

"Hand me the phone," she said to one of the women behind the desk. "I'm calling the police!"

Just then Emily and Heidi returned to the utility room. Emily's eyes shone with excitement.

"Did you see that?" she whispered loudly to Michael. "There's been a robbery—right here in the hospital!"

"I know what you're thinking," said Michael, groaning.

Emily gave a little hop. "It's a mystery! Another case for the Willow Valley kids to solve!"

Michael shook his head in disbelief. "Emily Johnson!" he said. "How is it that you always manage to get us stuck smack-dab in the middle of *trouble*?"