

EYES ON THE UNSEEN PRIZE

S.J. Thomason

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my husband, sons, and extended family.

“The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day”
Proverbs 4:18 (NIV).

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”
Hebrews 11:1 (NIV).

“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the
pioneer and perfecter of faith”
Hebrews 12: 1-2.

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary”
2 Corinthians 4:18

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EYES ON THE UNSEEN PRIZE

Chapter 1

So Bobnoxious

From the top of the mountain Piper surveyed the ski slope before her. A bitter chill stirred within her, which caused her to question her abilities in mastering the run. Black diamond expert slopes always caused some angst. Moguls? She hoped not, but something told her they were there. Black diamonds almost always had moguls. Her body shivered and her teeth chattered.

“Looks really steep, Nick. I didn’t know Ruthie’s Run was a black diamond. I was thinking we were going to start on an intermediate run instead, to warm up. Could be some moguls under that powder.”

“Warm up? Piper, you crack me up. As if you won’t shred it up like you always do.”

Piper looked at Nick and smiled. His reassurance was comforting and his handsome features breathtaking. Tall and muscular with a dazzling smile that contrasted his dark hair and sun-kissed skin, he was perfect.

“Well, maybe,” she said, “as long as we can steer clear of any moguls.”

“We’ll do that. C’mon. Follow me. How hard can it be?” Nick lunged forward with his poles to tackle the formidable run.

“How hard can it be?” Piper chuckled as she dug her poles into the ground and pushed herself forward to follow him, beginning their first of many ski runs that day. The slope was steep, but its thick powder covering helped her to maintain control, despite her accelerating speed. A rush of adrenaline pumped through her veins and reminded her of why she loved skiing so much. And watching Nick ski in perfect form ahead of her reminded her of why she loved Nick so much. It had been more than three years since they had started to date and she was as blissful as she had ever been. She followed his path down the middle of the slope, which was lined on both sides by what seemed like hundreds of snow-covered pine trees. The only sounds she could hear were the sounds of her skis cutting through the snow and the gentle whistles of the wind as it danced around the mountain.

“Loving it!” Nick hollered out.

“Definitely!”

Piper marveled at the way the sun shone against the snow on the ski slope in front of her in a parade of shimmering lights. She was in God’s country, where the shadowy spirits had no place. The spirits hid from the morning sun’s light, but they didn’t hide from her. She could see them when they came out.

A few minutes passed before Nick slowed down and Piper caught up with him. They skied next to each other in parallel and flawless form. Faster and faster they traveled along before they came upon a part of the slope covered in moguls. Piper shuddered as they both skidded to a stop. The last time she skied over moguls, she broke her arm and ruined a vacation.

“Oh, man. How are we going to get through this? I hate moguls.”

“Let’s take it slowly, Piper. We’ll crisscross the slope. Follow me.”

Piper drew in a deep breath before following Nick across the slope in an almost horizontal direction. She was careful not to let her skis get caught between the bumps, but every so often

they did. Her legs felt like spaghetti as they hopped over the bumps as if she had no muscles at all. Time dragged on and on.

“Whew,” she sighed. “Glad that’s over.”

“Me too. I know how much you hate moguls. The lift is over there,” he said as he pointed to the bottom of a short slope in front of them.”

“Perfect.” Standing in line would give her sore legs a little bit of relief.

When they reached the chairlift line, Piper hugged Nick. “If not for the moguls, that run would have been perfect. Totally exhilarating,” she said, still catching her breath. Only a few people were ahead of them in the lift line, which formed at the bottom of three different ski runs. It wouldn’t be long before they were back atop the mountain ready to tackle another run.

“Let’s do a blue this time, Nick.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Nick put his arm around her waist and pulled her close to kiss her. “Sorry if that surprised you. I just can’t resist those gorgeous cherry-reds. Love you.”

“Love you too, Nick. You’re the best.”

She relished the time she was spending alone with Nick, yet knew that they would be joined by the others at some point in the day, hopefully much later. Quite a few friends were also on the mountain for the same reason they were there, which was the wedding of Chase and Cherie.

A familiar voice lit up the slopes, yet not the voice she wanted to hear at that particular moment. “Yippee-i-yay! Living the dream, baby!”

She looked upwards and spotted a slender-looking man on a snowboard heading down the ski run next to Ruthie’s Run. Though teetering in and out of control, he laughed like mad as he headed towards the lift line. Piper wondered whether he was drunk.

“No way. Bob’s up,” Nick said with a laugh.

“Great.” Piper muttered. She was surprised he had risen so early, given his condition the night before when they had kicked him out of the bar. Feeling a little disappointed that her time with Nick was about to be infringed upon, she turned away from Bob and towards the chairlift. Maybe he would go his own way that day. Maybe he would bypass the lift and head to the bottom of the mountain. Maybe he didn’t see them. Maybe he would realize she and Nick wanted time alone with each other.

“Want some hooch?” Bob asked as he slid next to them in the lift line and yanked a flask from a pocket in his puffy ski jacket. His cowboy hat was tattered and his jeans were covered in snow, suggesting he had been in a yard sale on the slopes a short while before.

“Nope. Too early for me,” Nick said, “7:30 a.m., Florida time.”

Piper glared at Bob.

“None for you pretty lady?”

“C’mon Bob, you know I’m not into drinking.”

Bob swigged down some hooch and tucked the flask back into his pocket. “My first run this morning was epic. Love shredding freshies.”

“Oh yeah, we loved it too. Took Ruthie’s Run. Steep and sweet. Where’s Flypaper?” Nick asked as he scanned the slopes.

“Don’t know. He met a lovely lady in the bar last night. That’s all I can say. Vintage Flypaper.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll see him tonight at the Rowdy Rooster.”

“Yeah,” Bob said as he pulled out a can of chewing tobacco, pinched a dip, and tucked it into his upper lip. Now he had the appearance of a Simpson cartoon character. Nice.

“Can I ride up the triple with you guys?”

“Of course,” Nick said as he nudged and winked at Piper.

Moments later the three ascended up the mountain on the triple chairlift. Piper was surprised to find Bob sitting between her and her man. So Bobnoxious.

The luscious scent of grilled burgers wafted through the mountain air that afternoon, beckoning skiers to stop by for lunch. Bob, Nick, and Piper answered that call as they stopped at its purveyor, which was a woodsy sort of restaurant midway down the mountain at the bottom of a ski run. Skiers of all ages were present at picnic tables on the outside deck as they enjoyed their little slice of paradise among friends and family. They further basked in the powerful rays of the afternoon sun, which had cast enough warmth for many to shed their ski jackets. A band nearby played Tom Petty’s “American Girl” to the happy and boisterous crowd.

“Smells yummy,” Piper said to Nick and Bob as they took off their skis and snowboard and dropped them into slots on the ski and board racks.

“Definitely,” Nick said.

They walked in their clunky ski boots past the patrons on the deck and into the restaurant, soon finding their way to the cafeteria line.

“I’m going to get a couple of burgers,” Nick announced.

“I’m going to get a broccoli cheese soup in a bread bowl,” Piper said.

“Think I’ll have a liquid lunch,” Bob added.

Piper rolled her eyes, though no one saw. She was careful to hide any negative opinions of Bob from Nick.

Chase and Cherie were sitting at a table by a window, so the threesome walked over to join them. Piper looked forward to getting to know Chase, her good friend’s fiancé.

“Great seeing you guys. What time did you get out today?” Piper asked.

“Around 10. We skied the back of the mountain and cut a lot of powder. Perfect conditions man,” Chase said with a grin. He winked at Cherie, who smiled back at him. They looked sort of similar with their square jaws and dimples.

Piper and Nick put napkins on their laps and started to eat while Bob drank his beer.

“That’s cool. We’ll have to hit the mountain after lunch. We skied the front side of the mountain. Ruthie’s Run, Jolly Monkey, and Whippersnapper. Perfect day, man. Just epic.” Nick paused for about a minute before saying, “So lucky to be alive.”

Piper nodded her head. *So true.*

She turned her attention to Bob, who was picking something from his teeth. Hopefully someone else will ski with him after lunch. Flypaper, please come. Please.

Bobnoxious was nice enough, but he was cramping their style. He chugged down his beer, leaving a silly looking foam mustache above his upper lip. Charming.

“Hey, I’ve got a story for you,” Bob said as he used his sleeve to wipe the beer foam from his upper lip. His attention was mainly focused on Nick and Chase.

“Of course you do, Bob. You always have a story,” Chase said. “That’s why we like you. Good for entertainment.”

“So I got kicked out of the bar last night. What was its name? The Rowdy Rookie?”

“Rowdy Rooster,” Nick responded.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s it. I was hanging out with Flypaper, you know, Juan. He was attracting the ladies like flies, as always, and I was waiting to inflate the deflated ego of one of his rejects. That’s when I spotted her. Betty. Sweet Betty. She was a red-headed spitfire of a beauty and she was half in the bag, just the way I like my ladies. So I decided to sing her a song. That’s when all hell broke loose. I guess the bar owners didn’t appreciate it when I jumped onto the stage and grabbed the singer’s microphone.”

“That was only part of it, Bob,” Piper said, “It was *what you sang* when you grabbed the microphone: Jimmy Buffett’s “Why Don’t We Get Drunk.”

“Was that it? I was thinking I was singing church songs.”

“Church songs? You don’t go to church, do you Bob?” Piper asked. She could see Chase out of the corner of her eye shaking his head.

“Nope. I’m on vacation from church. I went all the time when I was in that Lutheran grade school so I’ve earned time off for good behavior. I even remember some of the hymns. I’ll sing one for you. “*Holy, holy, holy.*” Then he stopped and laughed. “Can’t remember the next line.”

“You should come to our church sometime, the Fellowship Church. It’s a little feel good for your soul,” Nick said.

“Maybe I’ll do that,” Bob said before burping. “But right now, I’m ready for another beer. Anyone want one? I’m buying.”

“Sure, I’ll take one,” Chase said. “Church talk makes me thirsty *and* crazy. Let’s talk about something *interesting* instead. Bob, I’ll bet you were hilarious on that stage. I’m bummed we left early.”

“You know it Chase. Anyone else want a beer?” Bob stood up.

“I’ll take one,” Cherie said, “Thanks Bob!”

“I’m good for now,” Nick said.

Piper smiled at Nick, proud of his resistance. She knew he liked to drink, but he didn’t drink much around her, which she appreciated. Hopefully the week in Colorado would feature a sober Nick. For that matter, hopefully their lives would feature a sober Nick. Being a teetotaler, Piper didn’t need to worry about her own sobriety.

Her focus shifted to Chase’s comment about church talk making him crazy. She needed more information about that and about anything else that made Chase tick. Her duty was to make sure Cherie was making a good choice.

“We’re so happy for you guys,” Piper said to Cherie and Chase. “Can’t wait for the wedding this weekend.”

“It’s going to be beautiful, right on the top floor of the Kensington Lodge with a panoramic view of the mountains,” Cherie said.

“Yeah, her parents set us up,” Chase added as he winked again at Cherie. “Cherie comes with perks, you know. We’re heading down to Atlantis in the Bahamas after this for our honeymoon. Casinos, fishing, boating, beaches, lazy rivers. Paradise. I’ll tell you what. It doesn’t get much better than that.”

In the background, Piper could hear Mungo Jerry’s “In the Summertime” playing. Words about a rich daddy and a poor daddy resonated. She looked over at Chase and narrowed her eyes, wondering whether his love for Cherie was genuine.

“I’ll tell you what Chase,” Nick said. “I feel like we’re in heaven right here in the mountains.”

“Oh, me too,” Piper added.

“Yeah. It’s nice here too,” Chase said. “Be right back.” He stood up and headed towards the men’s room, yet stopped short of its entrance when he caught his reflection in a mirror along the way. Piper watched him as he smiled at himself while running his hands through his thick, wavy blonde hair.

Hmm. Narcissist?

“You must be so happy, Cherie. You’ll be the first of the bunch to marry, just as you always predicted.”

“I’m very happy.”

Piper looked at Nick and felt a little sad, wondering whether she and Nick would be the next ones to marry. It had been three years already. Three years!

“You guys make a good looking couple,” Cherie said.

“Thanks! You and Chase look great together too,” Piper responded, “like Swedish supermodels.”

“Wow! Thanks for the compliment.” She paused for a minute and added, “Oh. On the church thing. My parents are always evangelizing and talking about church, which sort of turns Chase off. We’re not into church. I consider myself spiritual, not religious. And Chase doesn’t believe in God, or anything like that. I guess I’d sort of like it if he did. Maybe he would be a little nicer to people. That’s one of the things I’m hoping to change about him.”

“I hope so too,” Piper responded, feeling a sense of concern. The words “mean atheist” flashed across her mind.

Bob approached with three mugs of beer in his hands and placed them down on the tables. “Cheers,” he said as he sat down and drew a long swig from one of the frosty mugs.

“Cheers,” Cherie responded as she took a sip of her beer.

Piper watched Chase come out of the men’s room. He was talking on his mobile phone in an animated way as he paced back and forth in front of the bathroom entrances. She wondered about the identity of the person on the other end of the line.

Could it be another woman? Hmm. He never had a hard time attracting women. She envisioned his yearbook pictures with the prom and homecoming queens. Big smiles and big hair. He had big hair back then too.

Piper spotted several dark shadows above Chase’s head, which appeared to be hovering over him as he paced back and forth while talking on his phone. Within a few minutes, he headed down a hallway and out of everyone’s sight. The dark shadowy forms disappeared with him. She tucked that memory into a crevice of her mind.

Chapter 2

The Love Warriors

Piper entered the Rowdy Rooster with Nick by her side just after 9 p.m. to look for their friends. She was a little tired after a long day on the slopes, but she figured she had a little more time before turning in. The bar was packed with patrons whose loud voices fought the band's music for attention. The Love Warriors were playing George Strait's "A Father's Love" as Nick and Piper strolled along. Piper hummed along as she strolled hand in hand with Nick.

Within moments, they found Flypaper and Bob sitting on bar stools next to a bar. Piper could not believe that Bob was still up, given that he had been drinking all day long and hadn't had any food at lunch. It was like he was waging a war on himself. Why? Hopefully he had eaten something at dinner.

"We missed you on the slopes Juan," Nick said.

"Yeah, but I'll be out there with you tomorrow. I enjoyed Peyton's company today," Flypaper said in his slightly detectable Hispanic accent.

"Where is she now?" Nick asked.

"On a plane heading back to Philly. We'll be in touch. She's a very classy lady," Flypaper said with a wink and a grin. "We had a special time together."

Very classy one-night stand? Indeed.

"That's cool," Nick said.

Piper knew why the ladies were so attracted to Flypaper Juan. He was handsome, muscular and macho, with neatly trimmed hair and a perfect posture and stride that exuded confidence. He was always dressed well; never a wrinkle or a stain. Plus he knew all of the right things to say. It was a shame that he was always on the hunt and probably always would be. No one would ever satisfy that man's needs. When he broke up with the women or stopped calling them, he always told Nick that "something was missing," never realizing that a woman could never provide that "something." He was missing God.

The band was singing the Allman Brothers' "Ramblin' Man" in the background as Piper and Nick took their seats at the bar next to Juan and Bob. The Rowdy Rooster was a woodsy-looking bar. Old skis, tennis rackets, hockey sticks, and fishing poles covered the walls between at least ten big screen televisions, which were airing several sports games. There were three large circular bars and a good number of thick wooden high top tables and chairs. It was a favorite of the locals due to its drink specials, and a favorite of Piper and her friends due to its proximity to their hotel rooms. The bar was located on the first floor of the Kensington Lodge where they were all staying. At one end of the bar was a fireplace. Wall-sized windows overlooking the mountain were at the other. Piper looked about the crowd, hoping to find one of her girlfriends for some girl talk. Cherie's long honey-colored hair captured her attention.

"Nick, I'm going to go talk to Cherie."

"Okay."

She walked over to Cherie, who was sitting at a table by the fireplace, and pulled up a chair.

"Hey there. Great band."

“Yeah, I love this band.”

“Where’s Chase?”

“He should be back soon. I think he went to the bathroom. You look great tonight, Piper. Yellow is a good color for you; nice contrast to your complexion. And I love your bob hairstyle. It’s very flattering. Nick is lucky to be dating you.”

“Chase is lucky to be marrying *you*, Cherie.”

Cherie smiled. “I’m the lucky one. He’s a sweetheart.”

“Nick’s a sweetheart too. So how did it all begin with you and Chase? What led to your first date?”

Still smiling, Cherie recounted their story. “It all started in an accounting class. Chase sat next to me one day and we talked about high school and our mutual friends. One thing led to another and over time our conversations became more personal. Then he asked me out. Our first date was incredible, very romantic. He picked me up with a dozen roses in hand and took me to a movie.”

“Sounds romantic,” Piper said.

“Yeah,” she said as she shook her head. “It was. Most guys aren’t romantic, but Chase loves the romance. He always brings roses. And he’s just so handsome...”

“Well, that’s wonderful.”

Cherie shook her head in confirmation as she held her chin high, seeming proud of her accomplishment. She had succeeded in her goal of being the first of their friends to marry.

Piper looked away to survey the crowd while taking a gentle sip from her oversized glass of ice water. She could feel her friend’s eyes upon her, waiting for an endorsement of a spectacular romance, but she resisted. Cherie was already on top of the world with everything that she had ever wanted. No need to confirm that.

A slight twinge of jealousy gnawed at her, which she mitigated by focusing on the first flaw in Chase she had discovered, his atheism. Then she focused on a second flaw, his mean streak. Cherie had indicated that he needed to be nicer. She recalled the way she saw him looking at himself in the mirror and the way he said that Cherie comes with perks.

So she’s marrying a mean, narcissistic atheist who may be after her for her money.

“Okay, random question. I know your parents go to church. So why don’t you? If you got Chase into a good church, you would definitely be able to change him into a believer.”

“I don’t think so. I know that you know we used to go to church when I was little, but I stopped going when my parents became Baptists when I was in college. Baptists seem too evangelical. Other Christian religions aren’t any better for that matter. I read all the time about church leaders of all faiths who take advantage of their parishioners...”

“Cherie, if you found out there were jellyfish on a sliver of the beach, would you stop going to the beach altogether?”

“No, of course not,” Cherie said, with a sigh and a slight shrug of her shoulders. “I see what you’re saying, though. Even so, I won’t be going to church. I’m spiritual, not religious. It’s not like I don’t believe in God. It’s just that organized religion bothers me. I’ve been reading a lot of books lately about the Eastern faiths, which seem more enlightened. More advanced. I believe in Karma and reincarnation and a less *personal* God. The Eastern faiths say that God is part of everything in the universe, part of all nature. And because God is a part of everything in the universe, we shouldn’t attempt to distinguish between what’s good in the universe and what’s

evil. It's all the same. Enlightenment can be reached when you understand that and when you lose yourself and become one with God and the universe."

"So, you subscribe to the notion that after you die, you might wake up *for no explained reason* in the body of a cow?"

"I don't know about that."

"Well, that's what the Bhagavad-Gita says. It says when one dies in a mode of ignorance, he takes birth in the animal kingdom."

"Hmm. Well, I'm not ignorant, Piper. And that's a Hindu belief. I'm more of a Buddhist."

"Buddhists think the same way. They believe that all life is sacred and that people can be reincarnated into the animal world. That's why they're vegetarians. They don't want to eat Grandma."

"Well, I also believe that all life is sacred. And I don't think we can rule animal reincarnation out. What if you died and found yourself in the body of a cow?" Cherie asked.

"I'd jump from a bridge."

"Oh, that's nice. Suicidal cow."

"I'm not going to have to worry about that Cherie. Another Eastern belief implies that if the universe weren't present, God wouldn't be present, because God is the universe, not the creator of the universe. Is that what you believe?"

Cherie took a deep breath and paused as she sipped water from an oversized glass in front of her through a long straw. "I guess" she answered, while squirming in her seat.

Piper couldn't tell whether she was becoming annoyed or whether she wanted to continue the conversation. Or perhaps she wasn't quite sure of her position on the matter. Maybe she hadn't devoted much time to this particular study. Many people don't. She chewed on that thought for a few moments before determining that Cherie might be among a growing group of indifferent, apathetic, and incurious people who were neither passionate about theism or atheism or any of the answers to the big questions of life. She pictured Cherie with other members of this particular group as they attempted to find their way through a sea of darkness by shining flashlights on their feet.

But Cherie wasn't an indifferent type. She was caring. Piper recalled her appreciation for her old friend. Once when she had the flu, Cherie stopped by her house with a warm bowl of chicken soup. Another time when she was struggling with her Spanish lesson, Cherie tutored her. She was always doing things like that, always thinking of her friends and going the extra mile. She was a great person who didn't deserve to be marrying a mean, narcissistic atheist after her money.

The band played a few of its own songs, which helped to lighten Piper's somewhat solemn mood. One of the songs made her think that she needed to continue the conversation about God.

Should I continue that conversation or let it go? That would make things easy. Let it go. Something told her to let the atheism go. There's always time.

A few minutes later, the flat screen television to the right of Cherie caught Piper's attention. A hockey game had been playing, but now a news flash covered the screen. Piper read the following words as they scrolled by, "*California avalanche claims the lives of a father and his two sons while skiing.*" A photograph of a mother, father, and three young boys was displayed over the words.

Piper considered the current state of the mother and remaining son. How sad. They probably thought they had plenty of time to do and say the things that they wanted to do and say too.

“Take a look at the screen, Cherie. Always bad news. Always sad news. Why do we so rarely hear good news? God bless that family.”

“Gosh, that’s horrible,” Cherie said. “Thank God it was in California and not Colorado. Could have happened to us!”

Now Piper knew she had to say something, so she wasted no time before adding, “So, how are you going to change Chase’s mind about the whole God thing? It’s not easy to change people’s minds. I’m not sure you’re going into your marriage with goals you can achieve.”

“Well, to be frank, Piper, it won’t be easy. It will be about as easy as it is for you to get Nick to stop drinking. Remember how you always told me that you would never marry an alcoholic? You didn’t want to marry a man like your uncle Sully. Well, just take a look at Nick up there at the bar with a beer in one hand and a shot in the other. Not exactly shying away from the sauce, is he? And I’ve seen him do that before. Fortunately for me, I don’t worry too much about judging Chase’s religious beliefs. Or whether he drinks too much. I don’t like judging people.”

“Ouch,” Piper said. She wasn’t sure what else to say, but turned her attention towards Nick to confirm whether what Cherie was saying was true. Old Uncle Sully reappeared in her mind, making her wince.

Alcoholic. Uncle Sully is definitely an alcoholic, but Nick? Hopefully he won’t have too many. He doesn’t overdo it that often. I’ll bet those drinks in his hands will be his last.

“I hope I didn’t offend you,” Cherie added. “I didn’t mean to be offensive. It’s just that you’re always judging people’s faults. I figured if you’re going to be focusing on Chase’s atheism that you would also one day be focusing on Nick’s alcoholism. Whether an atheist or an alcoholic, both are good guys. Maybe those are their only faults. No one is perfect. No one.”

Piper thought of her tendency to judge others. The last thing she wanted to do was to judge others. She knew that judging was wrong.

Chase walked up and lit up a huge grin. “No one is perfect? No one except, of course, me. Just a picture of perfection.”

“Yes, you are perfect honey,” Cherie responded. “We were just talking about our romantic first date.”

“That was a good time, for sure. Piper, in case you haven’t heard, I’m more romantic than any of the Orange Bay High guys.” He winked and added, “And I’m even more romantic than Nick.”

“You’re too much, Chase,” Piper responded, feeling a little upset that Chase overheard the tail-end of their discussion.

“Too much? Too much of a lover,” he added as he gave Cherie a generous hug and blurted, “Baby, I love you!”

“I love you too,” she said, “ya’ big hottie!”

Ugh. Piper turned away from them and towards the band to listen to Randy Travis’ “Three Wooden Crosses.” After a few refrains, Piper asked them, “What do you think of the band? I just love country music.”

“Well. I’m not a big fan of redneck music,” Chase answered as he pulled out his mobile phone. “And this song kind of creeps me out. I liked last night’s band a lot better.”

Piper watched him as he typed something on his phone and disconnected himself from the conversation.

“Geez, Chase,” Cherie said. “Since when does a Florida native not like country music? I like it and I’m from Minnesota.”

Chase didn't respond, as he was too busy texting something.

"So who are you texting anyway?" Cherie asked.

A long pause followed.

"Chase, who are you texting?" Cherie asked again in a louder voice than before.

"Huh? Oh, I'm just placing a couple of bets with Oren on a playoff game."

"Oren? I don't know Oren," Piper said. "Is he going to be at the wedding?"

"Nope. He's in D.C. lobbying for tobacco and firearms."

"Lobbying *for* tobacco and firearms?"

"Suffice it to say he's unconventional," Chase said. "You need a certain moral flexibility when you hang out with Oren."

Piper raised her eyebrows. "Who would want to hang out with someone like that?"

"I've never met him either, Piper," Cherie added. "But from everything I've heard, he's a real piece of work."

"Yeah. That's fair. But he's fun. That's all that matters," Chase said. He downed the rest of the beer that was sitting in front of him and slammed the empty glass on the table. Then he signaled the server with a wave. "Ready to party! Whew! I guess I like *some* country. I like party music. Hank Williams Jr. Toby Keith. David Allen Coe. Man, they're good. But the preachy stuff. I don't like that stuff at all. And some of the females are way too whiny and complain-y." He shook his head as he picked up his drink. "Anyone ready?"

"I'll just take a soda," Cherie responded.

"None for me," Piper said. "I'm going to head back over to Nick. He's sitting at the bar with Bob and Flypaper."

"Sounds good. We'll come over and chat with you guys in a little while," Cherie said.

Piper returned to her chair next to Nick at the bar and sat down. Bob and Flypaper were on Nick's other side and the music was holding their attention, so she put her hand around his waist and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Nick," she whispered, "Do you think that Chase is right for Cherie?"

"He's okay. Why? You don't?"

"I don't know. Something about him sort of creeps me out." Piper looked into Nick's deep sapphire eyes, waiting for a confirmation of her negative thoughts.

"The atheism? Obviously his beliefs aren't the same as ours."

"That or something else."

Piper scoured the files of her mind to identify recent times either she or Nick had had interactions with Chase. Chase's bachelor party in Key West came to her mind as more evidence of his potentially smarmy ways. She wondered what happened at his bachelor party and whether things got slimy. She looked over at the table where Cherie and Chase were sitting and wondered why she cared so much about them and their situation anyway. Was it about protecting Cherie, or was it something else? Was she jealous? Or was it the atheism?

Maybe the dark spirits were bothering her. She could still see them hovering over Chase like sharks circling around a bleeding body in the ocean, waiting to pounce on their prey. She knew that her friends couldn't see the demons. That unpleasant little piece of insight was something only she held. She also knew her friends would likely taunt her if she said anything about the demons. No one would believe her. That was the way her family always reacted. So she kept that information private.

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