

# Chapter 1

Sorryl hunched closer to his brother and pulled his arms into his shirtsleeves in an effort to keep warm. The five-year-old glanced up at his brother. Trey was still trying to force himself to eat the moldy crust they had discovered in a garbage heap. Hunger pangs gripped his stomach and Sorryl reluctantly pulled one arm from his shirt and took another nibble of his bread. He swallowed without chewing so he wouldn't have to taste it.

Trey glanced at his little brother in understanding and wrapped an arm over his shoulders as they tried to lend each other warmth and strength. In order to ignore the taste of the bread he was attempting to eat, Trey allowed his mind to wander, something he usually avoided these last weeks. The six-year-old tried to keep his thoughts on the present lately. The past was too painful, and the future too frightening and lonely to dwell on.

Suddenly, Sorryl leaped to his feet, "Trey, watch out!"

Trey's head snapped up, but he was too late. An older boy roughly grabbed him and pulled him to his feet, sneering, "Whad'ya know, Albert. I think this is just the type of boy we were looking for." His raspy voice broke off in a harsh laugh as the boy smirked at Sorryl. "And you, I'm sure you want us to let this boy go, 'ey?"

Sorryl clenched his fists at his side and threw his chin up, "Yes. You put him down now!"

"What is he? A friend? Why should you care what we do with him?"

Sorryl's eyes flashed, "Let him go!"

Albert spoke now, "We-e-e-ll." He drawled. "Maybe we'd let him go. But you'd have to do us a favor first."

Sorryl just bore his eyes into the boy.

"So, you think you're tough, do you? Brady, look at the little spitfire. He's trying to shoot daggers through me!" Albert mocked.

Brady laughed and shook Trey, "It seems your little companion thinks he can get you free."

"Leave him alone!" Trey growled through clenched teeth.

The boys just laughed, "You youngsters sure do like to think you're tough. But you're really just sissies. You'd never get away from us."

Sorryl could stand no more. Recklessly, he lunged at the boy called Brady. He caught the tormentor off-guard, but Sorryl's small body was not enough to have much effect on the bigger boy.

"Sorryl, don't!" Trey pled, but he was too late.

Albert seized Sorryl and dangled him above the ground. His voice took on a coaxing tone, "Now, we know you want your little friend released, but you'll have to do what we tell you or we won't let him go."

Sorryl just let out an infuriated yell and kicked the boy in the shins.

Albert dropped him and his voice grew threatening, "Now. You will go and get that money box on the corner there. When you give it to us, we'll let this other boy go."

Sorryl's eyes flew wide. He leaped to his feet. They were asking him to steal? His mind raced as he groped for another option, but none presented itself. He mutely glared at the boys, trying not to show how terrified he was. Albert shoved him in the direction of the vendor with the money box and demanded, "Go! You know there's no other way."

Sorryl hesitated and glanced at Trey.

With an evil grin, Brady twisted Trey's arm. Trey clamped his lips shut in an attempt to keep from crying out, but a strangled yelp escaped anyway.

Sorryl's chest burned with anger and fear, yet felt limp in helplessness at the same time. Reluctantly, he moved off to do his detestable duty... or whatever it was.

He entered the crowded street and crept toward the money box. He could feel his heart hammering within his chest. Pausing a few feet from his target, he glanced around to be sure no one was looking before he took the last few steps and reached up. He grabbed hold of the box. Now to get away with it. Suddenly, Sorryl jumped as rough hands locked about his small arms. He twisted around to see who it was and a gasp of despair escaped him. Inwardly, he panicked. *No! It can't be! I'm done for now!* Sorryl strove to break free of his shock and cried, "No, sir! Please! I won't take it!"

"You're right, you won't!" growled the New York City police officer, shaking the boy he had seized. Suddenly, there was a shout and clatter of feet in the alley nearby, but when the officer turned to see what it was, the only thing that met his gaze was an astonished boy lying in the filthy street.

When Trey saw his brother in the policeman's grasp, he leaped to his feet again, his heart pulsing. Flames of anger tore at his chest. He glanced behind him to see where Albert and Brady had gone, but the cowards had already fled around the corner. He turned back to this new trouble, gulping down the anger. *It won't do you any good to stay upset, Trey. You'd better just calm down and figure out what to do,* he silently reprimanded himself. *Jesus, please help me!* For a moment, he hesitated. What should he do now? He made his decision with a burst of courage and determination, "Sir! Sir! Please!" The officer grabbed Sorryl's ear and he cried out. Indignation burned in Trey's chest. He shifted his gaze from the pink spot spreading across his

brother's ear to the officer's irritated back. *How dare that officer.* Resolutely, he squared his shoulders and pounced onto the policeman.

"Hey! Y-you scoundrel!" the officer yelled, catching his balance just in time. He glared angrily at the two street urchins.

Suddenly, shame flooded Trey. He knew he was supposed to respect the officer, but he had been so desperate to rescue his brother. A vision of his mother rose before his eyes and he drew in a sharp breath. *I'm sorry, Mama*, he sobbed inwardly. Her image's eyes met his, full of sadness and love. Trey's heart clenched within him. No matter the desperate situation, he should have had more respect toward the officer. He silently cried, *Mama! Why can't you be here to help me know what to do?* No answer. He had known there wouldn't be, not from his mother. Not ever again. He clenched his eyes shut. Oh! Why had the world suddenly become so cold and unfriendly these last weeks? Why?

Trey's next words carried this lonely ache and a plea for help into their respectful, though desperate tones, "Please leave him be! It wasn't his fault! Those boys made him. Oh, please!" His voice broke and he tried to choke back a sob. Why did those boys have to find them and harass them? Didn't they know it was already hard enough to live?

The police officer only sputtered angrily and shook the boy off his back, catching hold of him as well. "I saw no other boys! Where are your mother and father?"

At this question, pain filled the brothers' eyes. They looked down with a choking sound, but gave no other response. How could they speak? If they opened their mouths, the boys feared all the built up pain and sorrow that chiseled relentlessly away at their hearts would burst out. The officer definitely would not take kindly to that. So the dark-haired brothers clamped their quivering lips and blue eyes shut and mutely awaited their fate.

At their silence, the officer pressed on in half-accusing, half-sarcastic tones, "Afraid to tell me, huh?" He paused to growl under his breath, "Little troublemakers," then impatiently rattled Trey, who seemed to be the more vocal one, "Better tell, it'll be better for you that way."

Trey laboriously worked his lips, but no words would come. Finally, he stuttered brokenly, "Th-they're g-gone." He gulped down a sob that caught in his throat.

"Oh, likely excuse," the policeman pressed on. He was tired of all these street kids making trouble. "Have they left on vacation without you?" he scoffed.

"N-no s-sir."

"Well, then, where are they?"

Trey gulped, swallowing around the lump in his throat. He *must* make his voice work and answer the officer. He finally managed to whisper, "I-in... H-Heaven, s-s-sir."

The officer muffled an incredulous guffaw, "Oh, so you're an original. Usually they say, 'a long ways away, sir,' looking ever so innocent."

Sorry! watched his brother, unable to speak. He wished he could help him, but... no words would present themselves.

Trey swallowed hard. "I-I m-m-mean, s-sir..." he halted painfully.

Believing the stubborn boy might actually be acknowledging the truth now, the officer gave him a prompting pinch on the cheek.

Trey flinched, resisting the urge to place his hand over the stinging cheek. The officer shouldn't know how it had hurt. Instead, he drew a shaky breath and continued with difficulty, "I mean that they're..." He gulped, "D-dead." Trey's face contorted in inward pain for a moment before it relaxed into an unreadable expression as he shoved his hurt deep down. He thrust out his chin in determination against the wave of grief that endeavored to rise to the surface once more.

At last, the officer understood, "Well then, you are orphans, and belong in the orphanage." He paused a moment. He hadn't seen many street kids this well mannered, even considering his perception of the older one's obstinate attitude. He couldn't help but think they must have had a good mother long enough to adopt some of her gentleness and learn some good manners. Yet, they would probably soon be tough and hardened like the rest of the unfortunates running around. He could see it happening already. He'd best get them while he could. With this last thought, the officer began dragging them in the direction of the Children's Home.

Fear gripped Trey and Sorryl's hearts anew as they were pulled along.

Sorryl silently berated himself for even attempting to steal, even if it was to save his brother. Now he had gotten Trey in trouble with the officer too. But it was too late for regrets now. He *had* done it, and because Trey had tried to defend him, now his older brother was forced to pay the consequences with him.

Their hearts throbbing like the frantic fluttering of trapped birds, Trey and Sorryl strained against the police officer in an attempt to escape. They had heard dreadful stories of the orphanage and it struck terror within their souls. But it was no use to struggle. The officer was too strong for them.

Trey felt as though his heart was dying within him. Glancing at Sorryl, he knew his little brother felt the same way. It seemed as though their world, which they had thought had already been completely destroyed when their parents had disappeared, had found some way to further crumble around them in this one, short, yet torturously long, afternoon.

Growing irritated at the boys' struggles, the officer tightened his grip, striving not to let them wiggle free. Suddenly, he felt a restraining, though gentle, hand laid on his arm.

He turned with a scowl toward whoever dared interfere and was met by the imploring blue eyes of a young lady. Her chestnut hair curled about her face in soft waves. Though she barely came up to his shoulder and her carriage was somewhat shy, he instinctively knew there was power behind her words, perhaps more than his six foot frame held. It seemed her purpose was so set that anything in the way would melt before it. Her gaze that held so much... peace?... struck him and he averted his eyes.

"Please, sir," she began, summoning all the courage her heart could find. "They're so young," was all she managed at last with a glance at the trembling boys who were standing taught and dry-eyed.

Despite the vagueness of her plea, the officer understood, “Well, all the better for them to be in the orphanage. They can’t stay on the streets.” His answer came rather roughly because he was still irritated with the boys, though this stranger’s manner made it impossible for him to remain angry with her for interceding for these waifs.

“Well, what if they have relatives who could take them,” she insisted. She cast up a silent plea, *Oh, Lord. Please help me! If only I could penetrate the hard shell I sense You telling me bitterness has created in this officer and reach that caring heart that is hidden beneath!*

“Listen, lady, the orphanage will find out about details. My job is just to keep ‘em out of trouble. They’re lucky I’m not lugging them off to jail.”

The soft-spoken lady was not to be discouraged so easily. She suppressed a shiver at the thought of the small boys being put in jail and pressed on, “May I speak to the children a moment, sir?”

“I don’t know why you’d want to.” After an undecided pause, he grudgingly gave in, “Guess it can’t hurt. But don’t blame me if you find something missing. I caught the little one swiping a money box.”

“I know. I saw,” the young lady murmured. She blinked back tears as she stooped down in the dirty street. She didn’t want the boys to have to look up to see her. “What are your names?” she asked tenderly. They looked at her with matching blue eyes; eyes full of honesty... and pain.

“I’m Trey. He’s Sorryl spelled with a ‘y’, ma’am,” the older boy answered, heroically stifling the flow of tears that *would* prick his eyes. This lady reminded him of his mother. Besides being gentle and caring, she even looked a lot like her. And her eyes, her eyes seemed so kind.

“What beautiful names!” she exclaimed with a feeling smile, barely keeping her composure as tears assailed her once more. She dreaded bringing up the subject she knew she must. It seemed they hadn’t been orphans for long and the last thing they needed was to have a wound torn open again. Finally, she continued reluctantly, “Do you still have a house, where you lived with your mama and papa?”

Trey’s searching eyes met hers. “No. We were in a...” his voice trailed off as he sought for the proper word. He finally ventured, “...in a sharing house. And the owner threw us boys out when they found out Mama and Papa were dead and weren’t paying anymore.” His answer was uttered nonchalantly in a detached tone, but the shaky sigh that followed gave him away, piercing the lady’s heart to the quick. With her motherly instinct she could see the barricade he had thrown up. *Someone so young should never find need for such a thing*, she thought sadly. She glanced at the smaller boy. Trey had said his name was Sorryl... spelled with a ‘y’. Apparently, that was very important to them. She nearly smiled, but its shadow quickly disappeared as she observed the small boy. He was trembling a bit, but his lips were clamped tightly shut, for he, too, was trying to ward off the pain in his obviously tortured heart. She sighed.

The officer shuffled his feet impatiently, still holding the boys’ arms tightly. This lady reminded him of his mother, who couldn’t bear to see a child suffer. He had once been that way, too. But now... Well, now he didn’t quite know what the matter was, but he somehow felt... dead inside.

The lady glanced up at him in a mute request for his patience, and then turned back to the boys, “Did your family have some friends?”

“We just came here, we didn’t know anyone yet, and Grandma and Gran’pa died in the sickness.” Trey answered, unable to keep the pain from venturing into his voice and eyes once more. He bit his lower lip to stop its quivering. His heart felt as though it would burst any moment.

Sorryl startled them by finally speaking as the pain and confusion in his heart throbbed into words, “And Mama and Papa are gone, ‘cause a man with beer ate them in his car.” A solitary tear stole past the little boy’s self-constructed barrier and sparkled down his cheek, leaving a clean trail upon the noble face.

Suddenly, the lady had to glance away from him. She could no longer bear the pain in his young eyes that looked far too old.

“He means they were in a car accident, really,” Trey explained, holding his chin higher and blinking rapidly as he felt his barricade weakening.

The officer cleared his throat and shifted uneasily. He was beginning to see a painful image of himself in Trey, and even in the quieter Sorryl. With a pang, he suddenly realized that it was not rebellion which caused the older boy to thrust out his chin, but rather determination not to reveal the pain that was tormenting his young heart. *Something I understand all too well*, he thought almost bitterly. He could still feel the pain weighing in his chest like a hard rock. It hadn’t become that way all at once. No. His heart had gradually callused over his thirty-three years of life as he harbored the pain in a hidden corner of it that he strove to pretend was nonexistent.

Still waiting for the lady to finish her conversation, he glanced down at the boys and suddenly noticed the redness of their arms where he was gripping them. Without knowing why, he quickly loosened his hold, still keeping enough of a grasp that they would not manage to slip away, and averted his eyes, ashamed for the first time in a long while of his learned insensitivity.

“All right. Let’s be off now,” he ordered, softening his tone a bit, but still speaking rather shortly as he swallowed the rising lump in his throat. He glanced at the lady, who stood as he began pulling the boys in the direction of the orphanage, “If you want to talk with the rascals, go to the children’s home.” And, with that, he pulled the pain-filled boys down the street, a little more gently this time. Sorryl glanced back at her, stumbled, was righted by the officer, and then disappeared around the corner.



A warm tear slid down Annaleah’s cheek. Her heart swelled as she stared at the place she had last been able to catch a glimpse of the officer and boys through the crowded streets. “Poor dears,” she whispered, meaning the police officer as well as Trey and Sorryl. Finally pulling her eyes from the corner around which they had

disappeared, she suddenly remembered the shopping she was supposed to be doing and turned toward the store. All thoughts of her mission had fled when she had encountered the police officer and boys. She wished she could have done something more for them.

Finally, she finished her shopping and distractedly made her way home. She knew she had forgotten at least one item, but no matter how much she tried, she could not force her mind to focus on the task at hand. As she walked through the crowded city streets she allowed her thoughts to linger on the boys. The buildings that loomed above her and the mud on the sidewalks went unheeded as she swept along with the afternoon throng. Someone jostled against her shoulder, causing her to almost lose her balance. Glancing up as she steadied herself, she caught sight of another man carrying some large boxes and stepped aside just in time to avoid another collision. She sighed and inwardly scolded herself, *You'd better pay attention to where you're going or you'll get run over, Annaleah*. She grimaced. She disliked the bustle and cramped feeling of the city just as much as her husband did.

Despite her self-scolding, her mind took flight once more, playing back the scene that had taken place only an hour before. She groaned inwardly as she wondered if somehow she could have stopped the officer from carrying the boys off to the orphanage. But then, she couldn't have just left them in the street, prey to other relentless persecutors. She could have taken them home if they would have come with her... but then, what would Spencer have said to that. She smiled. What would he say if he knew she had confronted the police officer? She could see the smile that always played about his lips when her fiery spirit emerged from her usually quiet demeanor. She remembered the first time he had observed it. He had just looked at her for a moment, trying to hide his surprise, and then smiled that smile which was now so familiar. Now two years later and after seven months of marriage, she still loved that smile.

Suddenly, Annaleah glanced up. With a laugh, she realized she had passed her house. Shaking her head at herself, she retraced her steps, then let herself into the house and put away her purchases. Her mind flitted back to Trey and Sorryl as she took up a dust rag and attacked the furniture. There must be something they could do for those children. There had to be! Her mind searched for solutions. One by one, they presented themselves. And one by one she discarded them. The boys' sweet, yet troubled, faces persistently rose before her, their names etched forever in her memory. "Trey – loyal and brave. Sorryl – gentle and sweet. Trey and Sorryl – noble, and in need of help..." *But what help can I give?* Her heart wrung within her at her helplessness. Suddenly, her dusting hand stilled as she stood up straighter. *Yes! Yes! That's just the thing! Perhaps we could! I'll talk to Spencer as soon as he comes home. Well, after I let him rest. He needs it after working in that factory. Thank You, Lord! An answer! Well... if Spencer agrees. It really is a wild plan. I wouldn't blame him if he ran out of the house as soon as I told him what it was.*



Spencer Trestle paused on his doorstep to release a sigh and shook off the heaviness he felt from working at the factory.

When he opened the door and entered the house, Annaleah rushed to greet him.

He hugged her close, enjoying the lavender aroma of her hair. Then he held her at arms length and looked deep into her eyes as he always did, “To see how she had fared that day,” he always told her. He smiled to himself. Despite her attempts to hide it, he could tell Annaleah was trying to push something aside that was pressing on her heart. “So, what is it, Annaleah?” he asked almost playfully, yet with a touch of earnestness.

“What?” she answered, trying to affect an innocent attitude as she gave him a peck on the cheek, blinking back tears in spite of herself.

Spencer just looked at her with searching, green eyes.

She laughed, “I can never hide anything from you, can I? I was planning to let you have a rest first, but now I see you won’t take one until you know what is troubling me. Come take your coat off and get cleaned up, then I’ll tell you.”

An amused smile twitched the corners of Spencer’s mouth, “What? You don’t like me when I’m dirty?”

Annaleah laughed again, smacking his shoulder with a twinkle in her blue eyes as he took his light jacket off. “No, it’s just I want you to be comfortable first, instead of barraging you with more to think about as soon as you come home.” He smiled and pulled her into another hug before heading to the bathroom.

He quickly washed his hands and splashed water onto his face, which was blackened from the greasy machines he worked with. He wondered what could have so preoccupied Annaleah. Well, he would soon find out. He finished drying his hands and returned to the hallway where Annaleah had hung his coat. He smiled when he saw that she was still there, thoughtfully staring at the ceiling as if in conversation with the Lord. He gently took her arm and led her to the living room where he seated himself on the couch and pulled her down next to him. “Now. What seems to be the trouble?” he asked.

Annaleah sighed and attempted a smile, “I was out shopping today...”

A grin played about Spencer’s lips, but he knew Annaleah had something serious on her mind, so he resisted the urge to exclaim in pretend shock, “Wow! How amazing! When did you learn to do that?” Annaleah loved it when he teased her, but now was not the time, so she was allowed to continue without interruption.

“...And I saw this dear little boy, his name turned out to be Sorryl – spelled with a ‘y’ – attempting to steal a money box.”

Spencer nearly chuckled at Annaleah’s description of a ‘dear little boy’ who was stealing a money box. But she didn’t notice his reaction.

“Then I realized his brother, Trey, was being roughly held by some rich-looking boys, but they threw him down and ran away when the police officer showed up...”



When she had finished her account of what she had witnessed, she exclaimed with feeling, "Oh! It pierced my heart!" She paused a moment before continuing, "I felt so awful for letting the officer drag them off to the children's home. It just seemed I could have done something more."

Spencer smiled, "A couple years ago I would have been astonished to see the quiet Annaleah confronting a police officer. I know better than that now. You never could stand to remain still if someone was being wrongly treated. You did more than many others would have done."

"But that doesn't make it enough. It isn't the minimum I should reach for, but the maximum."

Spencer put his arm around her, "Well then, what is the maximum?" He suddenly wondered if he would regret asking. Annaleah sometimes had wild ideas, though usually good ones.

"Well. I puzzled and puzzled. And all of a sudden the verse came to my mind where God says to take care of the orphans and widows..."

Spencer blinked. So what exactly was she proposing? That they somehow help the orphanage the boys had been taken to? When Annaleah remained thoughtfully silent, he prodded, "And?"

Annaleah looked up and locked her gaze with his. She could feel her heart racing within her. Now she would find out what he would think of her proposal. *It's all up to You after I tell him the suggestion, God. Even I thought it was crazy at first.* With a deep breath, she plunged forward, "My idea was that we could adopt them." The words dropped like soft, yet shockingly cold, snowflakes and the room was filled with silence when they drifted away.

Spencer sank into his seat and blinked. His mind silently repeated her words in astonishment, *Adopt them?*

Annaleah's voice was quiet when she spoke again, almost to herself, "When the idea came, I felt like God was telling me, 'These are the children I have given you to take care of for me, Annaleah.' As I thought about it, I realized we had the space and—"

Spencer's mind reeled and he didn't realize he interrupted her until he was already speaking, "But the space is for *our* children. Remember? We wanted a big family."

Annaleah met his troubled gaze and quietly said, "Well, couldn't these boys be part of it?"

Spencer fought to rise above the shock surrounding him. He sighed. "It's a pretty major decision. Besides, there's millions more just like them."

"Not *just*," Annaleah clarified in a quiet voice, toying with the rug at her feet. *Did I hear you wrong, Lord? I didn't mean to shock him so badly.*

"Well, in the same plight, or nearly the same," Spencer defended. His chest clenched within him as he clutched the ideal dreams he had held since he married Annaleah. He felt as though they would crumble if they took in these street kids.

Annaleah sighed. She understood her husband's struggle in accepting the idea of adopting orphans off the street. She knew she probably would feel the same way if she hadn't seen the two children with her own eyes. It just seemed as if God had

gently spoken to her heart, telling her, *My daughter, here are some blessings for you. Take them. Cherish them. Train them. Give them a merry heart. They need it. As I have said, 'A merry heart does good like a medicine.'*

Finally, Annaleah paused in her methodical foot-brushing of the rug and sat up straighter, tucking her hand within his, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shock you so. Perhaps it wasn't as great an idea as I thought. I was scared when the idea first struck me, but I felt so like it was what was meant to be..."

Spencer squeezed her hand and tilted her chin so her downcast eyes were once more gazing into his, "How about we at least go to the orphanage and see if they found any relatives or friends. Meanwhile, I'll think about it some more. And pray," he added with a smile.

Annaleah wrapped her arms about him, "Spencer, did I ever tell you you're just the most wonderful husband a girl could ask for?"

Spencer smiled and playfully tweaked her hair, "Many times. I'm afraid soon I shall have too high an opinion of myself if you say it many more times."

Striving to shove his misgivings aside, he rose to stoke the fire. It was so difficult to comprehend the idea of taking in an orphan who had been caught stealing, and one that lived right in their city on top of it. Annaleah and he had thought of adopting foreign orphans, but adopting one from their own city? That thought had never occurred to him before. He sighed. Maybe he would feel differently if he could see the boys who had so easily captured Annaleah's heart. For reasons he could not explain, he felt a deep down hope that it would be so.

Annaleah spoke from the couch, "I suppose we had better wait a week so they have time to find any relatives, though. Hadn't we?"

Spencer shoved a log onto the fire, "Yeah, I suppose that would be a good idea."

Annaleah sighed as she gazed at the leaping flames that matched the tumult within her heart. It was going to be a long wait.

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