

# Sophie Breaks the Code

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# Sophie Breaks the Code

Nancy Rue



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*Sophie Breaks the Code*  
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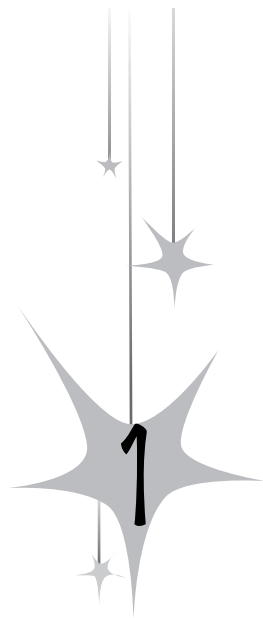
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So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.  
For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

— *2 Corinthians 4:18*



Sophie LaCroix groaned out loud in the hallway of Great Marsh Middle



School. “Can I just say I loathe PE class?” she said.

“Is *loathe* a Fiona word?” Kitty said as she linked her arm through Sophie’s. She giggled, the way she did at the end of almost every sentence.

“What’s it mean?” said Maggie, who hardly ever giggled.

Fiona pushed aside the stubborn strip of golden-brown hair that was always falling over one eye and continued to lead the way down the hall toward the PE locker room. “It means ‘hate,’” she said.

“Only it sounds smarter,” said Darbie in her Irish accent. She gave a firm nod, making her own reddish bangs dance on her forehead.

“I don’t feel very smart in this class,” Sophie said. “Coach Yates is always



yelling at me — and every time I try to explain something to her, my voice comes out all squeaky.”

The Corn Flakes grinned at each other.

“Your voice always comes out all squeaky,” Maggie said in her that’s-a-fact way.

“That’s just you, Soph,” Fiona said. “You’re just you, and we’re all just us.”

Sophie managed a little bit of a smile. Just being them was what made them the Corn Flakes. *Other* people might think they were ditzy and flaky and say the things they did were corny. But the Corn Flakes knew better.

“Hey, Cue Ball!” somebody yelled. Sophie felt her smile snap away.

“Get Kitty into the locker room!” Darbie said.

Willoughby and Fiona unlatched Kitty from Sophie, and Maggie shoved the three of them through the door with Darbie on their heels, just as Sophie felt her quilted hat being plucked off her head. She grabbed at her glasses so they wouldn’t go too.

“Catch, Eddie!” Colton Messik cried.

Sophie saw Eddie Wornom’s belly bulge out from under his shirt as he jumped up and caught Sophie’s hat. *Ewww*, she thought. Eddie hurled it at Tod Ravelli, whose face came to its usual point as he slam-dunked the hat into the trash can.

“Score!” Colton’s grin seemed to spread from one stuck-out ear to the other. “Hey, Cue Ball,” he said to Sophie. “You’re bald!”

*Like you haven’t told me that a bazillion times*, Sophie thought.

She waited until the boys had shoved each other into their locker room before she went calmly to the trash can and fished out her hat.

*At least they didn’t get to Kitty*, she told herself as she pushed it down over her shaved head. *That’s all that matters*. After all, she couldn’t expect Fruit Loops like them to understand how a Corn



Flake could part with all her hair to keep a sick friend from being the only girl in the whole school who was bald.

When Sophie got to her locker, the other Corn Flakes were almost changed into their PE clothes. Willoughby slung her arm around Sophie's shoulder and pressed their cheeks together, her almost-dark curls tickling Sophie's face. She was the only one of them who was short enough to do that — and even she was a few inches taller than tiny Sophie. "You're the best," she said in her bouncy voice.

"Trash can again?" Fiona said.

Sophie rolled her eyes.

Maggie shook her head at Kitty, so hard that her Cuban-dark hair splashed against her cheeks. "Boys are just lame."

There was a grunt from a few lockers down. Julia Cummings, the tall leader of the Corn Pops, tossed back her auburn hair.

"Someday you'll grow up and change your mind," Julia said.

She smirked at Anne-Stuart, one of her fellow "popular" girls, who gave the usual juicy sniff. She was pale and thin, and Sophie had never known her not to need a Kleenex.

"Grow up?" said chubby-cheeked Corn Pop B.J. "I don't *think* so."

A girl with more-blonde-than-red hair trailing down her back laughed — *way* loud — and looked at Julia like a puppy waiting for a treat. She was Cassandra Combs, the newest Corn Pop wannabe.

Sophie hoped the Pops would leave, but they just went back to putting on lip gloss. Sophie went into slow motion as she turned to the locker she and Kitty shared, dialing each number on the lock with precise care.

"You're gonna be late one of these days," Maggie said.

Willoughby went into the arm motions for a cheer. "Class won't be so bad today, Soph. All we're doing is running the track, and if you keep going, Coach Yates won't yell at you."



“Coach Hates,” Fiona put in.

Sophie kept her eyes away from them. “It takes me longer because I’m helping Kitty,” she said.

Kitty peeled off her bright pink T-shirt, revealing the tiny “port hole” in her chest just above her bra. Kitty had leukemia, and the hole was where a tiny tube had been inserted so the doctors could give her the chemotherapy medicine — which hopefully would stop her disease — through the tube instead of having to give her shots. Sophie crowded in close until Kitty pulled on the white tee with GMMS — for Great Marsh Middle School — sprawled across the front in the red and blue school colors.

“Thanks, Sophie,” Kitty whispered as she slipped off the quilted hat that matched Sophie’s. Sophie replaced it at lightning speed with a red bandanna.

Only when Kitty’s bald head was covered did Sophie step back. So far most of the Corn Pops hadn’t seen the hole or gotten a close-up view of Kitty’s head, and Sophie wanted to keep it that way. Even though chemotherapy had made all Kitty’s hair fall out, Sophie and the Corn Flakes thought Kitty’s naked head made her blue eyes seem bigger and bluer than ever and her tiny nose look even more like a piece of fine china.

But Sophie knew there would be no end to the Corn Pops’ blurting out things like: “I wouldn’t even come to school if I looked like that!”

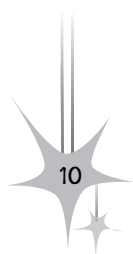
Just as she always did, Sophie whipped off her own cap like a knight removing his armored helmet at the end of a tournament, revealing her peach-fuzzed head before she tied on her bandanna.

Kitty giggled. “You’re so brave, Sophie.”

“They can’t hurt me,” Sophie said. “Besides, it’s only hair.”

“Or lack of,” Fiona said. She stood up from tying her tennis shoe. “You coming?”

“I’m not ready yet,” Sophie said. “I was helping Ki— ”



“You were foostering about, is what you were doing,” Darbie said.

Maggie gave a matter-of-fact nod. “You’re gonna get detention if you aren’t there when Coach Yates blows her whistle.”

“Your father will take your camera,” Fiona put in, “and then we won’t be able to make our next movie — ”

“I’m *coming!*” Sophie snapped. All five pairs of eyes widened, and Sophie softened her voice. “You guys go ahead, okay?”

The Flakes left. So did the Pops, finally. Sophie could now get into her gym clothes without them seeing that, unlike every other seventh-grade girl on earth, she didn’t even wear a bra yet. She still looked exactly the way she had in sixth grade. It didn’t take much to imagine what the Corn Pops would do if they saw that.

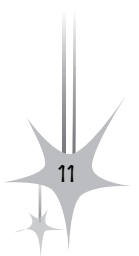
Sophie put her PE shirt between her teeth, letting it hang in front of her while she unbuttoned her top. She would just have time to wriggle out of the blouse, yank the shirt over her head, and tear outside to get in line before roll check started.

Just as she parted her teeth and let go of the T-shirt, Sophie heard sneakers squeal to a stop on the floor a few feet away. Cassandra was staring at Sophie’s bare chest, mouth open so her pale blue braces gleamed.

“Oh, my gosh!” she said. “I thought you were a boy!”

Somehow Sophie got her shirt pulled on and ran past Cassandra and out to her line just as Coach Yates was ending the long toot on her whistle. The coach, her too-tight, graying ponytail pinching her face, gave Sophie a look with a warning in it. Sophie was just glad she didn’t yell. They’d found out the first day that this lady could bellow like an elephant. What really stunk was that they had her for PE *and* sixth period Life Skills. That was a lot of bellowing.

Coach Yates blasted out the order for them to run twice around the track, and Cassandra gathered the Corn Pops around herself. They took two steps and exploded into high-pitched shrieks and



turned around to gawk at Sophie's chest. She was sure they were going to rush up to her and rip off her T-shirt just to check out Cassandra's story.

"Now what are they up to?" Darbie said at Sophie's elbow.

"Something heinous, guaranteed," Fiona said.

Sophie moaned inside. Fiona's favorite word for evil, *heinous*, was perfect for this situation.

"I know exactly what they're doing," Willoughby said. "Don't forget I was a Corn Pop before you guys saved me from them." She nodded wisely. "Cassie's trying to pass one of their tests for being accepted into the Corn Pops. She has to tell them something they can use for ammunition."

Sophie's stomach went into an immediate knot.

"What do you think it is?" Kitty said.

"What was yours when you got into the Corn Pops, Willoughby?" Sophie said quickly. The Corn Flakes shared everything, but this situation was way too embarrassing, even in front of her best friends on the planet. Her heart started to knot up too.

"You don't even want to know," Willoughby said.

"Let's get a move on, ladies — or you'll be doing three laps!"

They all broke into a run at the sound of the coach's roar, except for Kitty, who only had to walk as far as she could. Sophie peeked back at her over her shoulder. Kitty looked so small and puffy-faced and quivery all by herself. She and the rest of the Flakes had tried hanging back with her before, but Coach Hates had said a big-time NO to that.

"No Corn Pop better say an evil word to Kitty," Fiona said.

"We can't do anything evil back to them if they do," Maggie said.

"Our blasted Code," Darbie said. "Sometimes it's a bit of a bother."

The Code was actually the thing Sophie loved most about the Corn Flakes. They had vowed never to put anybody down, even



though people did it to them. And not to fight back or give in to bullies, but just take back their power to be themselves. And to talk to Jesus and obey God's Word, because God gave them the power to be who they were made to be. The Code made Sophie feel noble, like a maiden from medieval times who was as honorable as any knight of the Round Table—

*Her name was Aurora, and she was the leader of six young maidens. She had led them to the Code and they lived by it, vanquishing vixens and villains with sheer goodness.*

Willoughby gave Sophie a poke that brought her out of her dream world. She was pointing at the Corn Pops, who were a half lap behind them. They all had their heads leaning toward Cassandra, who appeared to still be enchanting them with her tale.

*There isn't THAT much to tell about one flat chest,* Sophie thought.

"I think Cassie passed her first test," Willoughby said.

"So what's her next one?" Fiona said.

"Now she has to do something about whatever she just told them."

Sophie swallowed hard.

"They're gonna get in trouble if they do anything to US," Maggie said. Sweat was making plastered-down sideburns in front of her ears. "After all the stuff they got caught for at the end of last year."

Fiona turned around to run backward so she could face them. "That was a whole different school, though. The teachers here don't know about all that. The Pops are starting over with a clean slate."

"No fair," Maggie said. "We have to keep them from making fun of Kitty."

Sophie put a hand on her knotty side. They could protect their Kitty, she knew. But she wasn't sure how she was going to protect *herself* now that Cassie had seen—



But then she shook her head. *It doesn't matter*, she thought. *I won't LET it matter. They can't hurt me.* She tried to ignore the knot that was now twisting the *rest* of her insides like a whole bag of pretzels.

*I will hold up the Code like a Shield of Honor before me, Aurora vowed to herself. And I will turn my thoughts to another, more noble cause — which surely I will find, because I always do —*

"This probably sounds lame next to having leukemia," Willoughby said, "but I'm scared about cheerleading tryouts."

Sophie pulled her mind back to the Flakes. "Why?" she said. "You're good."

"We should know," Fiona said. "We've been watching you practice 24/7."

"You're so gonna make it," Sophie said.

Willoughby shook her head. "You know the Pops will try to make me mess up."

"Yeah," Maggie said from several steps behind them. She was now puffing like a train. "They hate you worse than any of us right now because you dumped them."

Willoughby pushed a bunch of curls up from her neck. "If one of you would try out with me, I wouldn't be so scared of what they might do."

"Not me," Maggie said.

"You don't want me either," Darbie said. "With my long legs, I'll make a bags of the whole thing."

Fiona was already shaking her head. "I'd end up getting right in their faces if they even looked at you wrong."

"Sophie?" Willoughby said. "What about you?"

A laugh gurgled up out of Sophie's throat. "Are you kidding me?"

"I need *somebody*." Willoughby's voice quivered. "I can't do it by myself, and I want this really, really bad —"

*Aurora drew in a breath, and with it came the courage she was so known for. I don't know the dance, she thought. But I must*



*be at the side of my fellow maiden in her distress. Until she learns the power of the Code, I must stand by her—*

Fiona snapped her fingers in Sophie's face. "Where did you go, Soph?"

"You have a new character, don't you?" Darbie said.

Without even hesitating, Sophie said, "Aurora — medieval maiden."

"Our next Corn Flakes Production!" Fiona said.

Maggie grunted behind them. "Don't say anything else. We don't have the Treasure Book with us to write stuff down."

"But what about the cheerleading tryouts?" Willoughby said.

Sophie smiled what she hoped was an Aurora smile. "I'm there for you," she said.

Willoughby shrieked in that way that always made Sophie think of a poodle yipping. She tried to hug Sophie while they were running. They both got an extra half a lap from Coach Hates.

At the end of class, Kitty was all proud that she'd walked a quarter of the way around *one* lap. The Flakes carried her into the locker room, yelling, "Kitty rocks!"

Sophie ran in ahead of them to clear a space on the bench so they could set Kitty's wobbly self down. Something caught her eye as she rounded the corner. On Sophie's locker door were two wads of cotton stuck on with duct tape, and above them was a piece of paper with a message scrawled across it: *Use these under your shirt until you get some real ones!*

Behind her the Flakes were rounding the corner. Sophie's hand flew up to yank it off, but the tape wouldn't let go.

"What is *that*?" Darbie said.

Sophie got the cotton balls and the paper down just as the Corn Pops also came around the corner. When they saw Sophie, they smothered their mouths with their hands. Cassie sidled up to her and spit through her braces, "I'll show you where to put them."



The other three Pops collapsed in a heap as Sophie's Flakes looked on, baffled. Only Cassie's narrow face was Corn Pop cool.

"I know where to put them," Sophie said. She stuck the taped side of both cotton balls under her nose like a mustache and turned to the Flakes.

"You look like Albert Einstein!" Fiona said. The rest of the Flakes cackled.

Behind them, the Pops laughed even harder, but Sophie pretended they weren't there. She just helped Kitty out of her shirt without anybody seeing her port hole, keeping the cotton balls stuffed under her nose the whole time. Kitty giggled until her cap was safely back on her head.

But Fiona held Sophie back on the way to fourth-period math. Her bow of a mouth was pulled into a small pink knot. "Are they teasing you about not having a bra that's padded out to here like they have?" She held her hands six inches from her chest.

"You knew?" Sophie said.

"Hello! I'm your best friend! So who saw? Cassie?"

Sophie nodded.

"Figures," Fiona said. "She tries to make herself look like J-Lo or somebody."

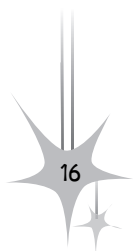
Sophie laughed. "We're not supposed to say evil stuff about them."

"Even if it's true?"

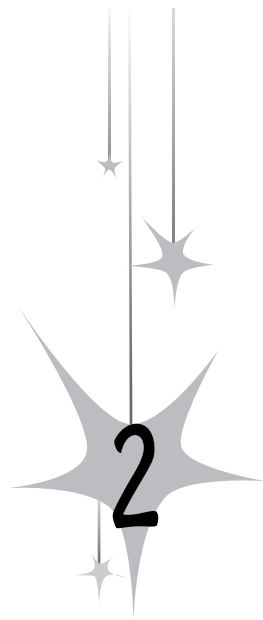
"That's the Code," Sophie said.

Fiona sighed. "I know," she said. Then she gave Sophie a sideways grin. "But you have to admit: you got them with the mustache."

Sophie grinned back. Yeah, she definitely had.



But as soon as Fiona and Sophie went into Miss Imes' math room, all mirth — as



Fiona called it — disappeared. Sophie dreaded this class almost as much as she did PE.

She had barely dropped into her seat when Miss Imes said, “Sophie.”

She was standing over Sophie's desk. With her dark eyebrows shooting like arrows toward her short, almost-white hair, Miss Imes pointed to her head and mouthed, *Off*.



This was the only class where the teacher made Sophie stick to the no-hats-in-class school rule. Kitty was allowed to keep hers on in the fourth-period section because she had a medical reason. Miss Imes had told Sophie

the first day that she didn't qualify for that. Slowly Sophie slid her cap off and put it in her lap.

"Hey, Cue Ball," Colton Messik whispered.

Sophie ignored him and adjusted her glasses as she stared, unseeing, at the board.

"If it weren't for your face, I wouldn't be able to tell the front of your head from the back."

*I can't WAIT to tell Fiona how hilarious he is,* Sophie thought, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, it's pretty weird back here," Colton whispered on. "It's like your nose is missing. And your eyes. Dude, somebody stole your face!"

*I WISH somebody would steal YOURS,* Sophie thought. This would be so much easier if Kitty were in their class, instead of her and Maggie and Willoughby being in another seventh-grade section for academics. Sophie always felt braver when she was showing Kitty how to handle these ignorant little children.

*Aurora slid her Sword of Vengeance back into its sheath and lowered her head. "Father," she whispered to God, "please forgive me for my evil thoughts." Aurora knew that revenge belonged to God alone. Her job was to protect her maidens by teaching them to live by the Code. A Code that came from the Father himself. With her eyes closed and her face turned up to the Light, she could feel his strength coming into her again —*

"Sophie LaCroix."

Sophie opened her eyes. Miss Imes was scowling down at her.

"Class," she said. Her voice was brisk and pointy like her eyebrows. "Your first test is this Friday, and I warn you, if you are not prepared, you will most definitely fail it. You came to me highly recommended, and I expect top work. So far, with the exception of Tod and Fiona, very few of you are giving me that. Am I clear?"



Sophie nodded. After all, Miss Imes might as well have just *said* she was talking right to her.

*I would LOVE to give you top work*, Sophie thought as she hunkered down over her paper. *But I've hardly understood a thing you've ever put up on the board. I'm lost!*

*Lost in a sea of numbers that even she, Aurora, could not navigate —*

Sophie felt something tickle the back of her head. She forced herself not to turn around.

*No wonder I'm having trouble concentrating in here*, she thought. *I wish I could sit next to Fiona. She'd help me focus.*

But Miss Imes had scoffed at that suggestion when they'd made it the first day. "I don't think much math would get done," she'd said. "And besides, Fiona is going to be working ahead of the class. She has an excellent mind for mathematics."

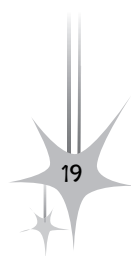
Sophie felt the tickle on the back of her head again, but she simply wrote down the next problem and stared at it. For at least three minutes. She could hear Fiona coughing, the way she always did when she saw that Sophie might be drifting off into dream world. But it wasn't that this time. Sophie just didn't get it.

And heaven knew what Colton was still brushing against her head. The thought of him touching her made her feel like things were crawling under her skin.

*Oh, gross — he isn't BLOWING on me, is he?* Sophie thought with horror.

She couldn't stop herself this time. She slid her hand across the back of her head and flicked it a few times, like she was shooing a fly. The room erupted.

Miss Imes glared over the top of her half-glasses. The classroom went as still as a morgue. When she looked down again, Sophie started to pick up her pencil. But there was something black on the palm of her hand. It was smeared with something. Like ink.



She whirled around in time to see Colton passing a black Sharpie over his shoulder to Anne-Stuart, who smothered a thick laugh. Colton had been writing on the back of her head with a *Sharpie*? What was now permanently engraved on her scalp for every hyena in middle school to go into hysterics over?

Sophie wasn't sure what she would have done if the bell hadn't rung at that exact moment. She clapped her hat onto her head and mowed down three people trying to get to the door. Miss Imes met her there.

"Your citizenship grade is falling, Sophie," she said. "You'd better get serious."

When Sophie got out into the hall, Fiona was leaning against the outside railing next to Darbie, holding a piece of paper with a smiley face on it.

"I can't smile!" Sophie said.

"No, *eejit*," Darbie said, pronouncing "idiot" in her Irish way. "That's what Colton drew on the back of your noggin!"

"Can you get it off?" Sophie said.

They scurried for the restroom, the minutes before the next bell ticking away. Fiona scrubbed Sophie's head with soap and a paper towel, until Darbie announced that it wasn't budging.

"We'll all be getting detention if we don't get to lunch," she said.

Sophie punched her cap back on and they ran for the cafeteria. Maggie, Willoughby, and Kitty were waiting, and before Sophie could even sit down, Darbie said, "The Loops are being *eejits* again." She pulled up the back of Sophie's hat just enough for the Flakes to take a peek.

Flake eyes bulged and hands came up to mouths. But all Sophie saw was Kitty, staring in horror.

"You don't think he'll try to do that to ME, do you?" she said.

"No way," Maggie said. "We'll protect you."



Sophie squeezed out a giggle that she hoped was convincing. “Colton is *so* not an artist,” she said. “Is this lame or what?”

A slow smile broke across Darbie’s face. “He made a bags of it, that’s for sure.”

Fiona nudged Kitty. “You draw way better than him.”

Sophie felt an idea pop up like a spring. “Can you make it look better, Kitty?” she said. “Anybody have any Sharpies?”

“I do.” Maggie dug into her backpack. “What colors do you want?”

Sandwiches were left uneaten as Kitty went to work on the back of Sophie’s head, amid much coaching from the other Flakes.

“Bigger lips!” Willoughby said.

“More eyelashes, Kitty,” Fiona told her. “And draw in glasses too.”

When Kitty was finished, they declared it was good enough for a TV cartoon.

“I wish I could do it on myself!” Kitty said. She giggled.

Darbie drew her eyebrows together. “I just wish we could drop the Code for once and do something back to those blackguards,” she said.

Darbie pronounced it “blaggards,” which Sophie loved, but she shook her head.

“No way,” Sophie said. “Then we’re as heinous as they are. I’m never breaking the Code no matter what happens. Besides —” She shrugged. “This is all small stuff.”

“You’re so good, Sophie,” Darbie said.

Sophie trailed Fiona and Darbie on the way to science, her mind spinning. It was cool that Darbie thought she was good. Still, she was really glad they were going to their girls’ group Bible study after school. She needed a good boost.

Mr. Stires, their science teacher, was at the door, cheerfully greeting them with his shiny bald head and his toothbrush mustache.



As soon as Sophie was past him, she felt something tug at her backpack, and suddenly all her books were pouring out of it onto the floor. She leaned over to pick them up, and her hat fell too.

“Dude!” said Colton Messik behind her. She felt him poke at the back of her head. “I didn’t do *that* face!”

“Lemme see.” Tod stepped on Sophie’s science book to get behind her.

Sophie turned her head to give Tod a full view and then looked back at him. Everything came to a point at his nose, until he started to laugh.

“No, man,” he said to Colton, “you can’t draw that good. That is cool!”

“Shut up!” Colton said. He punched Tod in the side with his fist. “It’s not funny!”

“Yeah, it is. Hey, Julia, check it out!”

Anne-Stuart arrived behind Sophie with Julia, and Sophie ducked her head forward so she wouldn’t get nose gunk all over her when Anne-Stuart snuffled.

“That’s cuter than your real face,” Julia said to Sophie with an actual giggle.

“I know,” Sophie said. “I’m thinking of having it done the same way.” She grinned. “But I’m not going to let Colton do it.”

By now the entire class was crowded around Sophie’s head. Right in front were Darbie and Fiona, who were giving her thumbs-ups and jerking their heads toward the Loops and Pops. Sophie had to agree that their usual enemies were looking impressed.

Except for Colton, who gave Tod a shove. “It’s lame, man — it’s stupid.”

Tod, Julia, and Anne-Stuart stared at him, and Sophie watched the realization spring into their eyes one by one: they had forgotten they were supposed to think everything Sophie and her friends did was dumb.



“That is, like, such an immature thing to do,” Julia said, tossing her mane.

“But it’s so Sophie,” Anne-Stuart said.

Tod pointed his finger at Sophie and gave a hard laugh. “Lame again,” he said.

*Aurora pushed away the inner knot that strained against her brocade gown. I have nobler causes, she reminded herself. I must protect the sickly Katrina, and the happy Willow, who so much wants to dance. The words of vixens and villains cannot hurt me.*

Sophie felt a smile, the kind Fiona always described as wispy, spread across her face. *The Code of the Medieval Maidens* was going to be such a great film.

The minute the Corn Flakes got to the Bible study room at church after school, Fiona made Sophie take off her hat so Dr. Peter could see her decorated scalp. His eyes twinkled behind his glasses, which he pushed up by wrinkling his nose.

“That’s a hoot!” he said. He ran his hand over the back of his head. “The barber cut mine so short this time, I could have one of those done too.”

“You can’t do it,” Maggie said, her voice Maggie-factual. “You’re a grown-up.”

He grinned at her. “Don’t spread that around,” he said.

He lowered himself into a beanbag chair like the ones all the girls were sitting in — Gill and her friend Harley, who were two of the very-cool athletic girls the Corn Flakes called Wheaties, plus Fiona, Maggie, Willoughby, Darbie, and Sophie. Kitty wasn’t with them. She was too tired at the end of the school day to do anything except take a nap.

But Kitty’s pink beanbag was there beside Sophie’s purple one, as empty as the Kitty-place inside Sophie. She always tried to make sure Kitty got to Bible study. When she had first found



out she had leukemia, Kitty had been afraid she would die and not go to heaven. Sophie and Dr. Peter had been helping her get to know Jesus so she wouldn't be afraid of that anymore. Dr. Peter even went to Kitty's house and taught her the lessons when she couldn't be in class. Still, Sophie wanted her there, right beside her, so she could be sure Kitty was getting it —

“All right, ladies,” Dr. Peter said. “Open up your Bibles to Luke 22:31–34.”

Sophie picked up the Bible with the purple cover. All their Bible covers matched their beanbags — that's how amazing Dr. Peter was. She was totally ready to put herself right into the story they were about to read, which was the way Dr. Peter taught them. With any luck, it would help her with the Corn Pop/Fruit Loop situation, not to mention Miss Imes and Coach Yates —

“Now,” Dr. Peter said, “we're at the end of Jesus' time with his disciples, and they're having their last supper together. Let's try to imagine —”

Sophie didn't even have to hear the rest of the instructions. Dr. Peter had been her special therapist for all of sixth grade, and he had taught her how to put herself in the Bible stories to help with all the heinous things she'd had to deal with back then. Now that he was their Bible-study teacher, she got to work on it even more.

Sophie closed her eyes and decided to be Simon Peter himself. It wasn't even that hard to pretend she was a boy anymore.

Something poked at Sophie's insides. “*I thought you were a boy!*” Cassie New Pop had said. “*Use these until you get some real ones.*”

“Everybody ready?” Dr. Peter said.

Sophie replaced the Cassie thoughts with an image of herself, sitting on the floor near Jesus.

*Jesus is so easy to listen to, Sophie/Simon thought. Not only is everything he says like warm bread in my mouth, but his eyes —*



*his eyes are always so kind, even when they're stern. Sophie/Simon could never get enough of the way Jesus looked at her — as if no matter how much she messed up, he would help her be better —*

“Jesus has told them that one of them is going to turn him over to the people who want to kill him,” Dr. Peter said. His voice sounded far away. “And that has shaken everybody up pretty good.”

*“I would never do that!” Sophie/Simon shouted to herself.*

“And now Jesus is going to tell Simon Peter that Satan will test the disciples, especially him.”

Dr. Peter began to read. Sophie kept her eyes shut tight and her mind wrapped around Simon Peter, his bread still in his hand as he listened —

“‘Simon, Simon,’” Dr. Peter read, “‘Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.’”

*Sophie/Simon felt her neck go stiff, and she dropped the bread onto the plate.*

“‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death,’” Dr. Peter read.

*Sophie/Simon’s heart was beating hard as Jesus turned to her.*

“‘I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.’”

*Sophie/Simon shook her head, over and over, even as Jesus looked into her with his kind eyes.*

“You’re kidding, right?” Fiona said.

Gill raised her hand. “There’s no way he said he didn’t know Jesus. Couldn’t happen.”

“You’re going to find out in your homework reading,” Dr. Peter said. “But let’s talk about this some. Do any of you think you would deny you knew Jesus?”



“How about NO!” Sophie said. The rest of the girls shook their heads.

Dr. Peter sat forward in his beanbag. “You’re right. You don’t deny him — but all of us mess up on letting him be as important in our lives as we should.”

“Mess up how?” Fiona said.

“Sometimes we get too busy to pray,” Dr. Peter said.

Sophie knew she was okay there. Every night she imagined Jesus, the way Dr. Peter had taught her to, and talked to him. Sometimes she even did it during the day.

“Not reading the Bible is another one.”

“We’re good on that one,” Willoughby said. “We’re here!” Sophie thought she was going to break into a cheer.

“Okay, here’s another one. When we worry and try to fix everything on our own, we’re denying that God can help us and that he wants to help us.”

There were head shakes and head bobs. Sophie scratched under her nose. *I really don’t worry that much*, she thought. *God gave us our Code and we follow it, so we’re really okay — except in PE — and math —*

There was a thinking silence.

“Just think about it and watch for it,” Dr. Peter said. His eyes twinkled. “Nobody has to confess right now.”

Fiona grinned at him. “That’s good, because I could be here for days!”

*Amid the laughter, Aurora stroked her Shield of Truth. Was it really so amusing, she wondered, to think of one’s denials of the Code? She sighed from the depths of her golden soul. There was much to teach the maidens. But leading them into Truth would be the noblest thing she had ever done. Even though she didn’t know where to start, she knew God would show her how. Hadn’t she already*



*been guided to dance beside the maiden Willow so she wouldn't have to dance alone? Hadn't she already stood up to the villains and vixens for the maiden Katrina, all with the Spirit of Mirth? What was there she could not do as long as she stayed with the Code — which she most certainly would?*

“You going to sit here all day like Miss Muffet on her tuffet?”

Sophie blinked up at her own reflection in Dr. Peter's glasses. The room was empty, and the Flakes' voices were fading down the hall.

“Not Miss Muffet,” Sophie said. “The medieval maiden Aurora.”

Dr. Peter broke into a grin. “Are you working on a new film?”

“It's not just a film. I think it's going to teach the rest of the Flakes how important it is to stick to our Code, you know the one.”

Dr. Peter nodded. In the last year, Sophie had told him all about everything Corn Flake.

“I can't wait to see how it turns out,” Dr. Peter said. He squatted down beside her. “Just be sure you're giving Jesus equal imagination time. Especially if you feel like you're escaping into the maiden Aurora when you shouldn't be.”

“I'm not,” Sophie said. “I'm getting all my assignments done — well, except math, but I'm gonna try harder — and I'm getting along with Daddy and Lacie and everything.”

He stood up, nodding, and Sophie scrambled out of the beanbag. “Just one more thing,” he said. “Be sure you do the assignment for this class as soon as you can, okay? Because, Sophie-Lophie-Loodle, I think you just might be put to the test.”

“Okay,” Sophie said.

But on the way out of the room, she chewed on her lower lip. What assignment was he talking about?

