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CHAPTER 1: NEW BEGINNINGS

Lily Thompson sat at her desk in the second row, gazing out the window of her new classroom, waiting for the day to begin. The sun was shining brightly, casting a warm glow over Denver Christian School's neatly kept garden. Birds were chirping outside, and there was a peaceful breeze rustling the leaves of the trees. It all seemed perfect—except for the strange fluttering in her stomach.

Her heart raced, and her palms felt clammy. She had felt this way before, but today was even worse. It was her first day of Year 7, the start of a new chapter at a new school. She had already been the star gymnast at her old school, and everyone had known her as the girl who could flip and twist like she was born for the sport.

But here? She felt like a small fish in an ocean full of unknowns.

A sudden thud against the window snapped her out of her thoughts. She jumped in her seat, startled. Everyone turned to look, and the class was momentarily silent. Then they erupted in laughter. A bird had collided with the window, its tiny body bouncing off with a confused flap of wings.

"Is it okay?" Max Hartwell, the class's resident soccer and running star, called out from the back of the room, a teasing smile on his face.

Lily frowned and stood up. "I'll check," she said, hoping to escape the awkward attention. She knew that Max was one of those boys who didn't need to try hard to be the centre of attention, and the last thing she wanted was for everyone to turn their eyes on her.

She stepped to the window, brushing her long dark hair out of her face, and peered outside. The bird had fallen to the ground, its wings fluttering weakly.

"Poor thing," Lily whispered, her heart sinking. She looked around the classroom. No one seemed to be noticing her, so she seized the opportunity. "I'm just going to the bathroom," she muttered quickly, hurrying out of the classroom and on to the verandah before anyone could stop her.

The cool air hit her face as she stepped outside. She knelt next to the bird, gently cupping it in her hands. Its tiny body felt fragile, and she could see it was shaking. She wasn't sure what to do. It was clearly stunned, and its wings seemed too weak to carry it far.

Just then, as if by some miracle, the bird looked up at her with bright, clear eyes. It chirped once—loud and clear. Then, it did something unexpected. It opened its beak and dropped a tiny rolled-up piece of parchment onto the grass at her feet.

Lily blinked in disbelief. Was this for real? She carefully picked up the parchment. There was no name, no mark, just a single line written in neat, perfect handwriting:

Expect the unexpected. Things are about to change.

The message sent a shiver down Lily's spine. What did it mean? Her thoughts were interrupted by the soft flutter of wings, and when she looked up, the bird had flown away, seemingly fully recovered.

"What just happened?" she whispered to herself, looking around as if waiting for someone to jump out and explain this odd turn of events. But no one appeared. No one except for Max Hartwell, who suddenly appeared at the door, a huge grin on his face.

"Did you see that?" Max asked, his energy practically buzzing through the air.

Lily held up the parchment in confusion. "I think I just saved a bird... and got a weird message. You didn't see it fly away, did you?"

Max shook his head, looking at the tiny scroll in her hand. "No way. What's it say?"

Lily handed him the message, still unsure of what it all

meant. "I don't know. 'Expect the unexpected,' it says. Things are about to change."

Max read it aloud. "Things are about to change? Well, I guess that means we're in for a pretty exciting year." His grin grew wider. "Are you ready for the unexpected, Lily?"

Before Lily could respond, the bell rang, signalling the start of class. Max handed her the message back with a playful wink. "Come on, let's go see what's in store for us today."

Lily pocketed the parchment, still wondering if she had imagined it all. As they walked back into the classroom together, her stomach fluttered again—not with nerves this time, but with something else. A sense of anticipation, of something waiting to happen.

Inside the classroom, the students were settling into their seats, and the teacher was just stepping up to the front. Mr Belevit.

Lily had heard whispers about him before. Some

students said he believed in every student, especially the ones who had broken their wings or forgotten they were already amazing. Others said he had a way of making even the most difficult lessons seem fun. But whatever he was, one thing was certain: He seemed to have an aura of purpose that made the room feel different.

Lily sat down at her desk, trying to push the oddness of the bird's message to the back of her mind. Max plopped down next to her, grinning as usual, his energy a stark contrast to the calm demeanour of their new teacher.

Mr Belevit smiled warmly at the class, his kind eyes twinkling behind round glasses. "Welcome, everyone, to the start of a new year. My name is Mr Belevit, and I am excited to guide you on a journey of growth this year. Not just in your studies, but in your hearts as well."

Lily felt her nerves ease as he spoke. There was something comforting about his presence. Max, however, was already bouncing his knee and looking for a fidget, eager to get to the good stuff.

Mr Belevit cleared his throat. "I'm going to start our

year with a simple lesson. Whatever you do, do it for God's glory, not your own. Even when you don't feel like doing something, do it for God. Then you will be helping your classmates as well. No one quits. No one gives in. So rise above just thinking about yourself. Expect the unexpected. Things are about to change!"

Lily's eyes widened. She hadn't expected to hear something so meaningful so soon.

Max, his attention momentarily diverted, shrugged. "Guess that means I'm going to have to learn to wear shoes and pay attention," he muttered under his breath, his usual mischievous grin returning.

Lily smiled, but her mind kept returning to the bird, and the message, and the strange feeling that things were, indeed, about to change. She didn't know how or why, but somehow, she felt like her year was going to be much more than just a new beginning.

CHAPTER 2: THE EQUATION FOR GROWTH

The classroom buzzed with anticipation as the students settled into their seats. Max sat near the back, balancing his soccer ball under his desk, while Lily stared at her notebook, trying to quiet her racing thoughts. She couldn't shake the feeling that something extraordinary was about to happen.

Mr Beleavit entered the room, his presence calming the chatter like the hush of a breeze. He set his coffee on the desk and smiled warmly at the class. "Good morning, everyone. Today, we're going to tackle something that many of you might find... challenging: maths."

The collective groan was immediate. Lily winced, and Max rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath, "Here

we go."

Mr Beleavit chuckled softly. "I know maths isn't everyone's favourite, but have you ever thought about doing maths for God?"

Max raised an eyebrow, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Maths for God? Is He going to do the hard problems for us?"

The teacher's eyes twinkled as he picked up a whiteboard marker. "Not quite. But when you approach something—even something difficult—with a heart to honour Him, it changes how you see it. It's about growing a positive attitude and using every challenge as an opportunity to trust Him and help others."

Lily raised her hand hesitantly. "But what if we're just... not good at it?"

"An excellent question," Mr Beleavit said, nodding. "We're not all starting at the same level, and that's okay. I promise we'll begin where you can thrive and grow step by step."

Max leaned back, unimpressed. “And what if we still hate it?”

Before Mr Belevit could respond, Max’s soccer ball flew across the room, caught the corner of his desk, and hit him squarely in the stomach. “Ow!” Max exclaimed, doubling over.

The class erupted in laughter. Mr Belevit smiled knowingly. “Sometimes, life has a way of reminding us to adjust our attitudes.”

“Yeah, like a soccer ball to the gut,” Max grumbled, rubbing his side.

“Exactly,” Mr Belevit said with a wink. “Let’s begin.”

He handed out worksheets with simple problems. Lily looked down and was surprised to see they weren’t as daunting as she’d expected. Relieved, she picked up her pen and tried to make a start. But as she began, something incredible happened.

Her pen started writing on its own.

Lily froze, watching in awe as her pen formed neat, cursive letters across the page. The words shimmered briefly before settling into the paper:

“Remember, Lily, do this for God, not just for yourself. You’re already amazing because He made you so.”

She blinked, unsure if anyone else had noticed. A quick glance around the room showed that everyone was focused on their own work. Was this real?

Max nudged her, breaking her trance. “You okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” she whispered, tucking the paper under her notebook. “I think so.”

Meanwhile, Max stared at his worksheet with growing frustration. “What’s the point of this? I’m never going to use sums in a soccer match,” he muttered.

As if on cue, his soccer ball circled seemingly appeared from nowhere, hit the corner of his desk and crashed into Max. “Ow! Seriously?”

Lily stifled a laugh. “Maybe it’s trying to tell you

something.”

Max groaned but picked up his pencil, muttering, “Fine. Positive attitude. Let’s get this over with.”

Mr Beleavit moved through the room, offering encouragement. “Remember, every challenge is an opportunity to grow—not just in skill, but in character. And when you do it for God, it has purpose beyond these walls.”

As the lesson continued, the classroom door creaked open. A hush fell over the room as a small kangaroo hopped in, its fur glistening as if it were dusted with stars.

“Good day, everyone!” the kangaroo said cheerfully, bowing slightly.

The students gasped in unison, and even Max dropped his pencil.

“Ah, this is Roo,” Mr Beleavit said casually. “He’s here to help.”

The kangaroo hopped up to Max’s desk, tilting his head. “A bit grumpy, aren’t we, mate? You’ll find life’s much easier when you approach it with a little faith and a lot of heart.”

Max blinked. “A talking kangaroo. Great. This day just gets weirder.”

Roo grinned. “Weird? Maybe. But isn’t life more fun that way?” He turned to Lily. “And you, young lady, remember—your pen isn’t the only thing that carries messages. Your heart does, too. Trust it.”

With a playful hop, Roo bounded toward the door. “Call for me when you need help,” he said with a wink. “I’ll be around.”

As the kangaroo disappeared, the students erupted into excited whispers.

Mr Beleavit clapped his hands. “Back to work, everyone. And remember: Whatever you do, even maths, do it for God. Expect the unexpected, and you might just find miracles in the ordinary.”

Lily smiled, the message from her pen still warm in her mind. Max groaned as he picked up his pencil again, but this time, there was a flicker of determination in his eyes.

Later, as they walked out of the classroom, Lily turned to Max. “Do you think this is what the bird’s message meant? ‘Expect the unexpected?’”

Max shrugged, his grin returning. “If it means talking kangaroos and pens that write on their own, I’d say we’re in for an interesting year.”

Lily laughed, feeling a new sense of excitement bubbling inside her. For the first time, maths—and the year ahead—didn’t feel like a chore. It felt like an adventure.

CHAPTER 3: THE MAGICAL PORTAL

The next morning, Lily and Max were eager to get to school, though for entirely different reasons. Max was buzzing with excitement about the strange events in their maths class. Lily, however, felt a deeper anticipation—as though something even more incredible was about to unfold.

On the bus ride, Max leaned in toward her. “Okay, so we’ve got a self-writing pencil, a soccer ball with moves like a pro, a talking kangaroo and that weird stuff Mr Beleavit keeps saying. What do you think it all means?”

Lily smiled faintly. “I’m not sure, but maybe it’s more than just... magic. Maybe it’s meant to teach us something about trusting God or doing things differently.”

They arrived at Denver Christian School to clear skies and crisp air, their first class taking them outdoors for a science excursion to the Tree Top Walk. The metal walkways wound high above the ground, offering stunning views of the forest canopy below. Lily inhaled deeply, savouring the moment.

“Whoa,” Max said, leaning over the rail. “It’s like we’re in the middle of nowhere—but cooler.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Lily teased. “This is a ‘no running’ zone.”

As they ventured further, Lily felt something strange—a faint warmth prickling at her skin. Ahead, nestled among the towering trees, a shimmering ribbon of light hovered mid-air, undulating like water.

“Max,” she whispered, pointing ahead. “Do you see that?”

Max squinted, his playful expression giving way to confusion. “What is that?”

Drawn inexplicably, Lily moved closer. The air grew

charged with energy, the light emitting a soft hum that resonated in her chest. Max hesitated behind her.

“Lily, wait. What if it’s... dangerous?”

“It’s beautiful,” Lily breathed, reaching her hand toward the glowing ribbon. The moment her fingers touched it, a wave of warmth surged through her.

The world around her seemed to bend and fold, colours swirling together like paint on water. Before either of them could react, the light enveloped them both.

When the sensation faded, Lily and Max found themselves standing in a vibrant, otherworldly landscape. The grass beneath their feet flickered like crushed emeralds, the trees above them swayed with a rhythm that seemed almost alive, and a golden river wove its way through to the horizon, glittering in the sunlight.

Max turned in circles, his jaw slack. “Where... are we?”

Before Lily could respond, a rustling sound caught their

attention. A shadow bounded toward them from the thicket. Startled, Max stepped in front of Lily.

A kangaroo emerged. Its fur gleamed, and its dark, intelligent eyes sparkled with mischief. Without preamble, it tilted its head and spoke.

“G’day, mates!” the kangaroo said with a warm, lilting accent. “Welcome to Wonder’s Edge! My real name’s Kipper. I’ll be your guide.”

Max stumbled backward. “It—it talks!”

Lily gasped. “Wait... you’re the kangaroo from before, aren’t you?”

Kipper chuckled, his tail swishing. “Sharp as a tack, this one. Didn’t think I’d leave you to wander about on your own, did ya?”

Max crossed his arms, trying to look unimpressed. “Okay, Kipper. If this is your world, what’s the deal with the glowing light? Why are we here?”

Kipper tapped his chin with a paw, as if deep in thought.

“Ah, now that’s the question, isn’t it? Some might say you were chosen. Others might say you’re simply in the right place at the right time.”

Lily narrowed her eyes, curiosity overriding her surprise. “And you’re supposed to help us figure it out?”

“Right you are!” Kipper said, hopping closer. “But first, you’ve got to see the heart of it all—the Source. Everything starts there.”

Without waiting for a response, Roo bounded away, his powerful legs propelling him effortlessly across the beautiful grass.

Lily grabbed Max’s arm. “We have to follow him!”

Max hesitated. “What if this is a trap?”

Lily smiled. “If God brought us here, don’t you think He’ll help us through it?”

Max sighed but nodded. Together, they ran after Kipper, their feet cushioned by the soft, jewel-like grass. The kangaroo led them to a clearing where the golden river

met a massive, glowing tree with roots that seemed to pulse with life.

“This,” Roo said, gesturing to the tree, “is the Gateway. The choices you make here will shape the paths ahead.”

Max looked at the tree, his usual skepticism wavering.

“What kind of choices?”

“The kind that reveal who you are,” Roo said softly, his playful tone replaced by something deeper. “Trust, courage, faith—all tested here.”

Lily felt a tug in her heart. The journey was just beginning, but already, she sensed that this place held answers to questions she hadn’t even asked yet.

As the golden light of the tree reflected in her eyes, she knew one thing for certain: they were part of something extraordinary, and with God’s guidance, they would find their way.

CHAPTER 4: THE VISION OF SOPHIA

“Sit here,” Kipper said, motioning to a smooth, circular stone embedded in the ground. Its surface glistened faintly, like ripples on a pond. “This is where the vision will appear. It’ll show you what you need to know.”

Max glanced nervously at Lily. “So, we’re just supposed to sit and wait? That’s it?”

Lily nodded, her heartbeat quickening. “I think it’s part of the journey, Max. We have to trust it.”

They sat side by side on the stone, the cool surface sending a faint chill through their legs. Roo settled nearby, his powerful tail curled around his feet as he watched them with a calm expression.

As soon as they were seated, the stone began to

glow more brightly. Swirling patterns of light emerged, mesmerising and fluid. The air around them grew cooler, charged with an unexplainable energy, and then, as if the world itself shifted, the forest blurred away.

Before them appeared a vision—a luminous figure bathed in soft, golden light. It was a young lady, serene and radiant, with an air of wisdom that made her seem ageless. Lily’s breath caught.

“Sophia,” Max whispered, his voice trembling.

The figure smiled gently, her voice resonating within their minds like a song carried on the wind. “Lily, Max. I have been waiting for you.”

It was unmistakably Sophia—Max’s older sister. Yet, here in this magical vision, she seemed larger than life, her presence both comforting and commanding.

“This is a place where truth is revealed,” Sophia said, her voice calm yet filled with weight. “The path ahead will require courage, trust, and patience. But first, you must understand what truly matters.”

Lily’s chest tightened. She had always admired Sophia’s wisdom, but hearing her speak like this felt surreal, as though a deeper part of her soul was being called to attention.

Sophia continued, her expression both loving and serious. *“Max, you’ve always been eager to race ahead, to move quickly, to win and be the best. And that’s amazing! But your school work is not about rushing to the finish line. It’s about taking your time, learning, and growing with each step you take. It’s about the steady, sure progress that builds you from the inside out, not the quick fixes that promise instant results. Don’t let the world tell you that the fastest way is always the best way, especially in the classroom.”*

Max’s brow furrowed slightly as he thought about her words. He’d always wanted to be the best at everything, especially in sports. And he was! It was hard to imagine slowing down, but deep inside, he felt a stirring. *Was that what Mr Beleavit had meant?* He had talked about trusting God and moving with patience, but now it felt different. More real.

Sophia turned her warm gaze to Lily. “Lily, you’ve been given great gifts—gifts that inspire others. But those gifts are not for your own glory. They are meant to serve, to encourage, and to build others up. Remember, you are already amazing. God says so. You don’t need to prove yourself to anyone. Rest in that truth, and use your talents to reflect His love.”

Lily’s throat tightened. How many times had she pushed herself to meet the expectations of others? To hear that she was already enough, that she didn’t need to strive for perfection, was both humbling and freeing.

Sophia’s voice softened. “The world will offer you shortcuts, quick fixes that seem easier. But those paths will never build the strength of character you need. True greatness is found in faith, perseverance, and in how you lift others along the way.”

The vision began to fade, but Sophia’s presence lingered in their hearts. Her final words echoed softly: “Remember, you are already amazing. Trust God, and you will find the strength to walk the path before you.”

As the light dissipated, the clearing returned to view. The air felt lighter, as though the weight of their doubts and fears had been lifted.

“Well?” Kipper asked, hopping closer. “That’s some wisdom, eh? What’d you think?”

Max looked at Lily, his face thoughtful. “I think... I finally get it. Being the fastest and the best is great. But in class, we need to trust God for patience and grow one step at a time.”

Lily nodded, her voice soft but steady. “And it’s not about what others think. It’s about using whatever God’s given us, whether a strength or even weakness, to help others and honour Him.”

Kipper grinned, his eyes twinkling. “Now you’re catching on. The path ahead won’t be easy, but remember—you’re never alone, and you’re already amazing just as you are.”

The stone beneath them dimmed, its glow fading into the forest floor. Yet, the lessons they had learned felt

etched into their very beings, unshakable and clear.

Max stood, his usual energy returning with a grin. “So, what’s next?”

Lily rose beside him, feeling lighter than she had in weeks. “Whatever it is, I think we’re ready.”

“Good answer!” Kipper said, bouncing away. “Come on, mates. There’s plenty more magic where that came from.”

With a newfound sense of purpose, Lily and Max followed Kipper deeper into the vibrant, magical world. Whatever challenges lay ahead, they knew they could face them—with God’s guidance and the lessons of Sophia lighting their way.

CHAPTER 5: THE MAGICAL CHOICE

Suddenly, the twinkling world around Max and Lily seemed more alive than ever. Vibrant forests with trees taller than skyscrapers, rivers glittering like silver, and leaves that hummed softly. The air seemed heavy, buzzing with energy, as if the world itself was holding its breath.

They stood at the edge of a lake so calm it mirrored the sky perfectly. Clouds and stars blended into a dreamy reflection. A gentle breeze swirled around them, carrying faint, musical whispers.

“This way,” said Kipper, hopping onto a wooden pier. At the end of it, a small boat waited, its surface covered in swirling patterns that seemed to glow faintly. The kangaroo’s grin was part mischief, part mystery. “Hop in!

The Island of Choices is just across the water.”

“What’s so special about this island?” Max asked, eyeing the shimmering lake suspiciously.

“It’s where you’ll make a choice that could change everything,” Kipper replied, his tone serious now. “But don’t expect it to be easy. The right choice might surprise you.”

Lily glanced at Max, nerves fluttering in her stomach. She didn’t love the sound of this, but she trusted Kipper. Swallowing her doubt, she stepped into the boat.

As they drifted across the lake, magic unfolded before their eyes. Colours rippled across the water—bright greens, fiery reds, deep purples—flowing like living paint.

A thick mist rolled toward them, curling like a living veil. The boat glided silently through it. When the fog cleared, Max and Lily gasped.

The island rose out of the water like something from a

dream. Its shore was golden, glittering in the sunlight. A winding path snaked up a hill to a massive tree at the top. The tree’s trunk glowed faintly, its roots gripping the earth like giant hands. The branches stretched toward the sky, cradling glowing fruit that sparkled like tiny suns.

Kipper leapt from the boat onto the soft sand. “Welcome to the Island of Choices,” he said, his voice filled with wonder.

Max and Lily followed, their feet sinking slightly into the warm sand. The air around them seemed alive, buzzing with possibility.

The glowing path called them upward. As they walked, the sound of the lake faded, replaced by a strange melody—a mix of wind, rustling leaves, and faint voices singing in harmony.

At the top of the hill, they reached the enormous tree. Its bark looked like silver, polished and smooth. The fruit hanging from its branches radiated a gentle warmth. In

front of the tree stood a flat stone holding a pair of golden scales.

Kippy turned to them, his expression serious. “This is where your choice will be made.”

“Wait, what choice?” Max asked, squinting at the scales.

“One side of the scales represents the easy path,” Kipper explained. “Quick success, instant results—but it doesn’t last. The other side is the harder path. It takes time and effort, but it leads to true growth.”

Lily frowned. “So, how do we choose?”

Kipper pointed to the glowing fruit above them. Two larger fruits, brighter than the rest, slowly detached from the branches and floated gently down, landing softly in Max’s and Lily’s hands.

“These fruits hold your intentions,” Kipper said. “What you truly want deep down will guide your decision. Choose wisely.”

Lily stared at her fruit, feeling it pulse softly in her

hands. She thought of all the times she’d worked so hard in the things she loved—winning in gymnastics, being popular in school. But Sophia’s words echoed in her mind: *Whatever you do, do it for God. Then you will be helping others as well. You are already amazing. No one quits. No one gives up!* Could she change her mind and choose a path that helped her grow in life, not just things she was good at?

Max turned his fruit over in his hands. His mind flashed to all the times he’d stormed out of class when maths got too hard or quit on something because it didn’t come easily. What if this was about more than just choosing to try harder? What if it was about doing things for God instead of thinking only of himself—even when things didn’t go his way?

The scales shimmered, waiting.

Max stepped forward first. He placed his fruit on the side marked with the symbol of a mountain—a steady climb, promising growth and helping others on his journey.

Lily followed, her heart thumping. She set her fruit on the same side.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the scales began to glow, brighter and brighter, until a beam of light shot upward into the tree's branches.

Suddenly, the fruit on the tree burst into sparkles, and glowing words appeared in the air:

"With faith and an amazing attitude, miracles happen."

The ground trembled—not with fear, but with power. Max felt something shift deep inside him, like a locked door had finally opened. He could picture himself tackling math with confidence, choosing to stick with it, even when it felt impossible. Lily felt a similar warmth flood her heart. She saw herself trusting in God, encouraging her classmates and using her talents to build them up.

The tree's trunk radiated, and a swirling portal opened in its centre.

"You've chosen the harder path," Kipper said, smiling

proudly. "It'll challenge you, but it will make you stronger—and miracles will follow. Step through the portal. Your journey continues."

Max turned to Lily, his grin wide and full of excitement.

"You ready?" she asked, holding out her hand.

"Always," he said, taking it.

Together, they stepped into the portal. Light surrounded them, lifting them toward whatever awaited on the other side. Behind them, the tree stood tall, its branches glowing with the promise of what was still to come.

CHAPTER 6: STEADY PROGRESS

Lily and Max stepped through the portal, and the world around them instantly transformed. They stood in the heart of a magical forest, where trees towered overhead, their dancing leaves changing colours like a living rainbow. Birds with iridescent feathers flitted through the air, their songs filling the space with warmth and harmony. The path ahead glowed faintly, winding its way through the trees as if beckoning them forward.

“Wow, this place is incredible,” Lily murmured, her eyes wide with wonder.

Max adjusted his backpack, a grin spreading across his face. “It feels like we’ve stepped into another world. What’s next?”

Kipper, ever the enthusiastic guide, hopped forward, his

eyes gleaming with excitement. “This part of the journey is all about steady progress; it’s about trusting each step and honouring God in everything you do. Ready to test yourselves?”

Lily and Max nodded, though both felt a flutter of uncertainty in their chests. Together, they started down the mysterious path, which twisted and turned through the vibrant forest.

As they walked, they heard a familiar voice call out from above. “Ah, the travellers return!”

Max and Lily looked up, their faces lighting up in recognition. It was the magical bird who had crashed into their classroom window!

“Mr Blue is the name,” squawked the happy bird.

Mr. Blue flapped down toward them, his brilliant feathers sparkling in the sunlight. “Ah, you’ve made it this far! But the next challenge requires more than just courage. You’ll need teamwork, patience, and a bit of maths!”

Lily raised an eyebrow. “Maths? In a place like this?”

“Exactly!” Mr. Blue chirped, a mischievous gleam in his eye. “You’re about to cross a bridge, but to make it across safely, you’ll need to solve a puzzle together. It’s not about the answer—it’s about how you work together and trust God with every step.”

Max glanced at Lily. “A puzzle? Okay, I’m in.”

Mr. Blue smiled and nodded to the sky. “I’ve invited some friends to help you along the way.” With a flutter of wings, two more birds appeared: a crimson parrot with an air of authority, a wise snowy owl with gleaming golden eyes, and a tiny yellow canary filled with energy.

“The puzzle,” explained the parrot in a deep, commanding voice, “is all about solving a math challenge. But here’s the catch: You’ll solve it step by step as you cross the bridge. Each solution will guide your next step forward.”

The snowy owl’s voice was calm but firm. “It’s not just about getting to the other side quickly. It’s

about learning to trust each step, work together, and encourage each other, even when the answer seems far away.”

The canary fluttered with excitement. “And remember—when you honour God and work together, miracles happen!”

Max looked up at the swaying rope bridge ahead, its ropes creaking with each gust of wind. “Okay, I get it. But... how do we start?”

Mr. Blue flapped his wings and pointed to the first plank. “Your puzzle starts here. To take the first step, solve this: What’s 2 times 2?”

Lily bent down, thinking carefully. “Well, that’s easy. 2 times 2 is 4.”

Max grinned. “Great! Only step on the glowing planks. They are the steps that God has put before us so we won’t give up!” As they stepped onto the first glowing plank, the bridge creaked, but the words “You can do it” glowed softly beneath their feet.

But there were no more glowing planks ahead, and the rope bridge swayed precariously in the breeze.

“This one’s trickier,” Mr. Blue called down from above. “To make the next step, solve this: What’s 4 times 6?”

Lily furrowed her brow. “Okay, 4 times 6... That’s 24.”

“Right,” Max said, “so the next step is 24!”

With that, they looked ahead, a number 24 appeared on a step, and they stepped forward. As they did, glowing letters appeared, saying, “Trust the process. Keep going.”

The bridge was getting higher now, and the chasm below seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance.

“Now, a little harder,” Mr. Blue chirped. “What’s 7 times 3?”

Max thought quickly. “21!”

“Correct,” Mr. Blue said, and a plank ahead glowed with the words, “You’re stronger than you know.”

They stepped onto the plank, and the bridge wobbled

slightly, but they kept moving, their confidence building with every correct answer.

“I’m starting to get the hang of this,” Max said, his feet light on the bridge. “I guess math isn’t so bad when we do it together.”

Lily nodded, her heart pounding but her spirit lifting. “And it doesn’t matter where we start, just as long as we keep going.”

They approached the next plank, which seemed further away than the others. The ropes creaked and groaned beneath their feet as the wind picked up.

“For the next step, solve this: What’s 14 minus 6?”

Lily hesitated for a second. “Hmm... 14 minus 6 is 8.”

“Right!” Max said, and they stepped onto the next illuminated plank that was now showing the words, “Keep going, you’re almost there.”

The final stretch of the bridge loomed before them. They were so close to the other side now. The final plank

appeared, but this one was different. It didn't have a question written on it.

Mr. Blue's voice echoed from above. "For this last step, trust your hearts. You've solved the puzzle together, step by step. Now take a leap of faith."

Max looked at Lily. "We can do this. Together."

With a final deep breath, they stepped onto the last plank. The bridge creaked under their weight, but they made it across. As they reached the other side, the glowing words beneath their feet lit up one last time: "You are already amazing."

Max let out a long breath. "That was intense... but kind of fun, too."

Lily smiled, her heart full. "Yeah, it wasn't about how fast we went. It was about trusting each step."

Mr. Blue and his friends landed beside them. The snowy owl gave a small bow. "You've passed the test. You've learned the power of steady progress."

The crimson parrot nodded, his voice full of pride. "And remember—when you work together and honour God, miracles happen. You are already amazing, not because of what you achieve, but because that is how God made you."

Lily and Max shared a quiet, knowing smile. Their journey was far from over, but with each step, they were becoming more and more of who God had made them to be. Together, they continued down the path, ready for whatever challenge lay ahead.

CHAPTER 7: THE RETURN HOME

The bright light enveloped Lily and Max once again, and for a moment, it felt as though the very air around them was humming with excitement. The sound of the magical forest—the birds, the wind, the comforting hum—faded, and in its place, they felt the familiar tug of the real world. The world seemed to snap back into place, and there they were, standing side by side on the Tree Top Walk, with their classmates ahead of them.

Max blinked and rubbed his eyes. “What just happened? I swear we were just in that magical forest. Were we really there, or did we dream it?”

Lily nodded, her heart still racing from the adventure. “I think it was real. We were there, Max. And we’ve learned so much.”

Just as they stood there, trying to take it all in, a calm, steady voice cut through their thoughts. Mr Beleavit appeared before them, standing with a quiet smile that radiated wisdom.

“Well done, both of you,” he said, his voice warm and encouraging, as if he had seen their journey unfold and was proud of how far they had come.

Max exchanged a quick look with Lily, their minds still racing. Their adventure had taken them through magical forests, tricky puzzles, and powerful lessons. And now, standing in the real world again, it felt almost surreal.

“What’s next?” Max asked, his voice full of eager energy, as though the adventure was far from over.

Mr Beleavit smiled knowingly. “The journey doesn’t end when you step back into the familiar. You’ve learned about faith, doing it for God, about steady progress and about helping others. But now, you’ll see how those lessons work in the real world—in your daily lives.”

Lily felt a spark of understanding in her chest. The adventure might have taken them out of the world, but the true journey—of living with purpose, of trusting God in every moment—was just beginning. She felt a warmth spreading through her as she processed the reality that their lessons had only just started to make sense.

Later that day, back at Denver Christian School, Max raised an eyebrow. “Are we supposed to do something about that?” He nodded toward a group of classmates gathered on the lawn. They were laughing and joking, but Lily could see Jenna struggling with a cartwheel and Lucas having trouble concentrating on a math problem.

“You are,” Mr Belevit said simply. “You’ve been given wisdom and strength, but it’s not just for you. It’s to help others. Not by doing everything for them, but by showing them what you’ve learned and guiding them through their struggles.”

Lily’s heart tugged at the thought. Jenna had always struggled with gymnastics, and Lucas, well, he’d always been distracted. Maybe, just maybe, she could be the

encouragement they needed.

“I think I understand,” Lily said softly, glancing at Jenna. “It’s about encouraging them, even when it’s tough. Helping them see that they can keep going, step by step.”

Max, ever the go-getter, grinned. “Right! We’ve learned how to keep going, and now we can help others do the same.”

With a quiet nod from Mr Belevit, the two friends made their way toward their classmates. It wasn’t about grand gestures or dramatic speeches. It was about the quiet acts of kindness, the steady encouragement to press on, one step at a time.

Lily approached Jenna, who was trying yet again to complete a cartwheel, her frustration evident. “Hey, Jenna,” Lily said with a smile. “Want me to show you something?”

Jenna looked up, a little embarrassed. “I don’t think I can do it. I keep messing up.”

Lily knelt down beside her, her voice full of understanding. "I've been there too. But I've learned that when I take it slow, focus on each little step, it starts to come together."

Jenna blinked, looking at Lily with hope in her eyes. "You think I can do it?"

"I know you can," Lily said, her heart full of belief. "Remember, it's not about being perfect. It's about steady progress. Focus on your form and take your time. I'll be right here."

Jenna gave it another go. This time, she made it further. A bright smile spread across her face. "I did it! It wasn't perfect, but I did it!"

Lily grinned. "See? You're already amazing."

Meanwhile, Max had joined Lucas and the boys trying to solve a math problem. Lucas was fidgeting with a fidget toy, clearly distracted. Max leaned in with a friendly smile. "Hey mate, what's up?"

Lucas sighed. "I can't concentrate. My mind is all over the place."

Max nodded, sitting down beside him. "I get that. I get distracted too. But here's what I learned: when I get distracted, I just take a step back, focus on one thing at a time, and keep going, even if it's slow. I can't fix everything at once."

Lucas looked at him, his eyes wide. "Really? It's that simple?"

Max grinned. "It's not always easy, but it works. And it'll work for you."

With a nod, Lucas took a deep breath and returned to the problem, a little more focused this time. "Okay, I'll try."

As the day went on, Max and Lily found themselves encouraging and guiding their classmates, one person at a time. It wasn't the big, magical moments they had expected, but they were helping—and that felt better than anything else. They were walking in the lessons they had learned, living out their faith, step by steady

step.

CHAPTER 8: THE ULTIMATE TEST

Several weeks later...

The final bell rang, signalling the end of another school day. But to Lily and Max, it felt less like an ending and more like a new beginning. As they walked through the schoolyard, the familiar noise of children getting ready to leave for the day seemed distant, as if the world had shifted around them. They were no longer the same people who had walked into school just weeks ago. Their minds were buzzing with everything they had learned, and their hearts were full of excitement for what lay ahead.

Max glanced at Lily, his face thoughtful. "Can you believe how much has happened in just a few weeks?"

Lily smiled, a deep sense of peace settling over her. "I

know. It's been wild. But I think the real adventure is just starting."

Max paused, looking at her with curiosity. "What do you mean?"

Lily adjusted the straps on her backpack. "It's not about the big moments. It's about using what we've learned—about trusting in God and helping others—to make a difference in the small moments. That's where the real adventure begins."

Before Max could respond, the world around them seemed to shift once more. A gust of wind stirred the trees near the schoolyard, and out from behind them bounded a familiar face—a kangaroo. Not just any kangaroo, but Kipper!

"G'day, mates!" Kipper called, hopping toward them with a gleam in his eyes. "Didn't think I'd miss all the fun, did ya?"

Max stood frozen, his jaw nearly touching the ground. "You... You're back?"

Kipper winked. "Of course! I've been keeping an eye on you two. You've learned a lot, but now comes the real test."

Max and Lily exchanged a glance, confusion mixed with excitement. The real test? What could that mean?

"Don't worry," the kangaroo said, reading their expressions. "You've learned to trust in God, to keep going even when it's hard. But now, it's time to put that into action. It's time to show what you've really learned."

Lily felt a surge of anticipation. "What do you mean by that?"

The kangaroo paused, then grinned even wider. "I'm talking about the inter-school cross-country tomorrow. It's your final challenge."

Max blinked. "The race? That's the test?"

The kangaroo nodded. "Not just the race, but what you've learned on your journey. It's one thing to finish the race, but it's another thing to run it with purpose."

Can you show everyone what it means to truly trust in God? Can you help others along the way? Can you live out the lessons you've learned, even when the path gets tough?"

Lily's heart raced. This wasn't just about running anymore. This was a test of everything they had learned—about faith, about perseverance, about encouraging others. This was about putting into practice what it meant to live with purpose.

Max looked at Lily. "We can do this. We've come this far. And it's not just about us winning—it's about showing others how to win too."

The next day, the inter-school cross-country race was buzzing with excitement. The students from all the schools gathered at the starting line, their nerves evident as they stretched and chatted with friends. Max stood at the front of the group, his legs itching to race, his mind focused. Beside him, Lily bounced on her toes, ready to run but with a steady calmness that came from knowing she had something more than speed on her

side.

The horn sounded, and the race began. Max surged ahead, his legs moving in rhythm with his breath, but just as quickly, he saw Lily falling behind. He turned, slowed his pace, and waved her on.

"Lily, come on! You've got this!" Max called, his voice full of encouragement.

Lily smiled, grateful for the support. She caught up, and the two of them began to run side by side, their strides matching perfectly. But as they pushed forward, they both remembered what Kipper had said about running with purpose. It wasn't just about crossing the finish line first—it was about running for something greater than themselves.

Max looked at Lily. "We're not just running for us. Just like during maths, we're doing this for God. Let's give our very best and show everyone what it means to run with purpose."

Lily nodded, determination filling her. "Yes, for God, not

for glory.”

They pushed harder, but this time, their focus wasn't on the competition. As they neared the halfway point, Max saw a boy from another school, Thomas, stumbling behind. His face was flushed, and his legs were starting to slow.

Max felt a tug at his heart. Without thinking, he slowed his pace. “Thomas, you can do this! Keep going!”

Thomas looked up, surprise flashing across his face. “I don't think I can finish,” he panted.

Max smiled. “You're not alone. Let's run together.”

Max decided to run beside Thomas, encouraging him with each step. Lily, a few paces ahead, glanced back at Max. She could see him helping Thomas and remembered how much support had meant to her in her own struggles.

“Come on, Max! Keep going!” Lily shouted, her voice full of faith.

As Max ran alongside Thomas, he found himself thinking about all they had learned. He had run races before, but this time, his heart was focused on helping someone else. It wasn't only about winning. It was about showing God's love through actions.

Meanwhile, Lily, not far behind, noticed a girl from another school, Emily, stumbling and falling to the ground. Emily was clearly exhausted, struggling to get up.

Lily felt an urgent desire to help. She slowed, running back to Emily. “Are you okay?”

Emily looked up, tears in her eyes. “I can't keep going.”

Lily knelt beside her, offering a hand. “I've been there too. Let's get you back on your feet. You don't have to do this alone.”

With Lily's encouragement, Emily stood up and wiped her tears away. “Thanks, Lily. I can do this.”

“Not about being first, Emily. It's about finishing strong,

even when it's tough," Lily said with a smile.

Together, they began running at a steady pace. Lily kept pace with Emily, encouraging her as they made their way forward. With each step, the race felt less about speed and more about their shared journey of perseverance, trust, and faith.

As the finish line came into view, Max and Thomas, side by side, crossed it together, with Lily and Emily not far behind. There were no cheers for who crossed first. They had all crossed together, each helping one another through the race.

The announcer's voice rang out. "And the winners are: Max, the first boy, and Lily, the first girl to cross the finish line! Congratulations!"

The crowd erupted in applause, but for Max and Lily, the real victory was in how they had run the race—with purpose, with support, and for God. They had given their best not for themselves, but to honour Him.

As they stood on the podium, receiving their awards,

they caught sight of a familiar face in the bushes - Kipper, grinning from ear to ear.

"Well done, mates!" Kipper called. "You've run with heart. You didn't just race for yourselves—you raced to honour God, and that's the real win."

Mr. Blue, perched on a nearby branch, nodded approvingly. "You two are already amazing, just by running with that kind of heart. Don't forget this lesson—it's not just about races or awards. It's about giving your best in everything, even when it's hard. That's how you honour God."

Max and Lily exchanged a look, the weight of the lesson sinking in. They had learned that running with purpose was about more than a race. It was about how they approached everything—school, friends, even maths. Everything was an opportunity to give their best for God.

As they walked off the podium, a deep sense of peace filled their hearts. They had already won the ultimate

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race—not just by crossing a finish line first, but by living with purpose and helping others along the way.

With Blue and Kipper by their side, and the lessons they had learned close to their hearts, they knew the adventure was far from over. The journey of faith was just beginning, and they were ready for it.

It was going to be the most magical, amazing year ever!

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