

JJ's Epic Adventure

Discover your role in the EPIC Story

by Gary J. Weldon

To Amber Nichole:

My beloved daughter, biggest fan and favorite writing buddy. Thanks for patiently standing by while I crafted this work. May you experience the full joy of living out your significant role in the Story of Stories!

- Dad

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My Dreadfully Boring Life

It was three weeks into summer break. The morning sun filled her room as JJ yawned and stretched and reluctantly slid her feet out of bed and into her slippers. She made her way downstairs, following the smell of burning toast and fresh coffee.

“Good morning beautiful!” her dad said as he grabbed his packed lunch, kissed her mom on the cheek and headed for the door. “I hope you have a great day JJ! Don’t just sit around the house with your pretty little nose in a book. Try something new! You never know what kind of adventure awaits! Well, gotta go!”

JJ faked a smile as she watched him leave. “Adventure? Right!” she thought. “My life is anything but an adventure. Dreadfully boring is more like it.”

“What *are* you going to do today?” her mom asked.

“Nothing,” JJ quipped.

“You have to do something!”

“I dunno. I could go to the library, I guess.”

“Can’t you hang out with some of your friends?”

“I wish! Everyone is away doing something exciting. Cathy is on a cruise. Amber is in Paris for a whole month and Sarah is in Mexico, I think. I’m the only one who’s stuck here in this little town with nothing to do! I hate my life!”

“Now JJ, it’s not that bad! I agree with your dad, you should keep an open mind and maybe try something different today. You might be surprised at what you can discover!”

JJ just rolled her eyes and grabbed a piece of toast.

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The warm breeze blew against her face as JJ stood up on the bike pedals and zoomed quickly down the sidewalk. Her long brown hair - pulled back into a ponytail - was flying behind her like a flag. She stopped at the corner and glanced both ways.

“JJ!” a voice called out.

JJ turned and saw Mrs. Mulligan waving to her from her front porch.

“Oh no,” JJ sighed.

She stepped off her bike and turned it towards the house. Mrs. Mulligan was a kind old lady, but JJ thought she was a little odd. She had been a widow for as long as JJ could remember and most days she could be found working in her flowerbeds or sitting on the porch.

“Are you able to walk Honey again today, dear?” she asked. Honey was Mrs. Mulligan’s canine companion - a big-eyed, droopy-eared, grossly overweight beagle.

“Yes, Mrs. Mulligan.” JJ said, reluctantly. “I’ll come by after lunch.”

“You’re such a sweet child!” Mrs. Mulligan replied. “And such a big help too! See you this afternoon.”

As JJ rode off, she wondered why walking that old dog was such a big deal. Honey was so fat that a ‘walk’ only consisted of a couple really slow laps around the yard. What was most confusing was that Mrs. Mulligan would often walk with her, using her cane to point out the variety of flowers and plants that she was growing or telling JJ stories about the ‘good old days’.

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JJ placed her bike into the rack at the front of the library and made her way inside.

“Well, hello there JJ! It’s good to see you again!” said the short, balding man behind the counter.

“Hi Mr. Jackson! Do you have anything new for me?”

“Yes, I believe I do,” he said, turning to look at the shelves behind him. “This just came in yesterday!”

“You sure do read a lot of books,” Mr. Jackson said curiously as he handed the hard-cover novel to JJ. You must love a great adventure!”

“It’s the *only* adventure *I’ll* ever know,” JJ mumbled under her breath.

“What was that?” Mr. Jackson asked.

“Nothing... uh, thanks for the book! Have a nice day Mr. Jackson!” JJ opened the book and started to read it as she made her way down the steps toward the sidewalk.

She heard a sound and looked up just in time to see three girls on bikes heading straight toward her. “Hey, watch out!” they shouted, as they screeched to a stop.

JJ jumped out of the way, just avoiding a collision, but she lost her balance and fell to the ground, her library book skidding across the concrete.

JJ stood up and dusted herself off. She walked over and picked up the book. Thankfully it wasn’t damaged. Somehow it had fared better than she had. Her hands were raw from the fall and her elbow was starting to bleed.

“You should really be more careful!” Claire said. “We could have been severely hurt! And don’t you know that you’re not supposed to walk and read at the same time? Duh!”

The other two girls looked at each other and giggled.

Claire had been in JJ’s fifth-grade class, but she wasn’t JJ’s friend. Not even close. It seemed that Claire enjoyed making JJ’s life miserable. JJ had hoped that she’d be able to go all summer without even having to see her.

“Is that where you’re spending *your* summer,” Claire asked sarcastically, “in a dusty old book? We’re leaving for my family’s cabin tomorrow. It’s right on the lake. We’re going to go boating every day and have a campfire every night. My dad says it will be quite the adventure! But you probably don’t know anything about that, do you, little miss bookworm?”

Claire’s words cut deep, but JJ didn’t say anything. She just put the book into her bag and grabbed her bike off of the rack. She could still hear the girl’s laughter as she rode away.

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JJ left her bike in the driveway and walked around the house into her backyard. She sat down on the wooden swing that hung from the branch of a large maple tree. This was one of her favorite spots. Often, during the summer, she would go out there and read and dream of far-off places.

JJ stretched out on the swing and laid her head back against the armrest. Her elbow was starting to sting. She wiped a tear from her face and pulled out the book from her bag. She flipped to the first chapter and tried to read, hoping that maybe a good story would take her mind off of what had happened.

She found it hard to concentrate, though. Her head hurt from crying, and all she could think about was what Claire had said. She was frustrated, convinced that the only adventures she would get to experience were the ones in the pages of a storybook.

JJ laid the book against her chest, closed her eyes and mouthed a simple prayer, “All I want is a *real* adventure.” And with that she drifted off to sleep.

##

[There are intentionally no follow-up questions for this chapter]

EPIC Academy

The screeching of brakes abruptly awakened JJ. Startled and confused, her heart pounded as she sat up and looked around, quickly trying to figure out where in the world she was. One thing was clear, she was not in her backyard anymore.

“Come on, we’re next!” said the boy sitting next to her. He pulled on her arm as he stood up and stepped into the aisle. JJ followed as they joined the other kids exiting the bus.

“Where are we?” JJ asked.

The boy didn’t answer. He simply smiled and pointed to the sign on the front of the building they were approaching. The big bold letters spelled out ‘EPIC Academy’.

JJ stared at the structure in front of them. “Incredible!” she thought. Ten stories tall, as wide as a city block, and shaped like a gigantic open book, the EPIC Academy was no ordinary building.

She followed the others up the steps and through the large glass doors. “Amazing!” JJ couldn’t think of any better word to describe what she was seeing. The room she was standing in extended as far as she could see in every direction. Sunlight filtered through the glass roof and shone through a forest of tropical trees that spread out ahead of her.

“Welcome to EPIC Academy!” said a voice behind her.

Turning, JJ saw a kind-looking woman with dark brown skin and a big white smile. She was dressed in a crisp safari-like uniform, and a matching cloth hat. The name on her badge said, Umoya. “That’s a strange name,” JJ thought.

“Hi, I’m JJ,” she said hesitantly.

“I’m Umoya... and I’m sooo glad you are here!”

Umoya’s voice was smooth and gentle and captivating.

“Can I show you around, dear?” she continued.

“Sure, I guess.” JJ said. “Can you tell me where we are? I mean, I know what it’s called, but... how did I... why am I...?”

“Oh, Jennifer,” Umoya said softly. “We’ve got plenty of time to get into that.”

Umoya gently took JJ’s arm in hers. “Let’s go explore!”

As they walked ahead, two thoughts came to JJ’s mind: One, did Umoya just call her Jennifer? Only her parents and close family knew that was her name. She had used the nickname JJ since she was three. And two, Umoya sure is nice.

“This area is the Atrium and it’s one of my faaavorite places,” Umoya said as they walked along a stone path that wound its way among the trees and through tall grasses. JJ looked up and saw colorful birds of all sizes, perched among the branches.

“This place is beautiful!” JJ said.

Umoya agreed. “And there’s much more to see.”

The path curved to the right and led them out of the trees and toward a large stone wall, running the full length of the room and all the way up to the glass ceiling. It was filled with intricately engraved scenes of people and places and animals.

“It is made of solid granite,” Umoya said.

As they walked, JJ ran her fingers along the chiseled stone.

Umoya stopped in front of two large wooden doors. “In here is the Grand Library.”

JJ’s eyes grew wide. Umoya could see what JJ was thinking. “Oh, I’m sorry dear, we can’t go in there right now. The Story Master is working.”

“The Story Master?” JJ asked.

“Ah yes, the Story Master. He is the one who writes the EPIC Story,” Umoya replied.

JJ looked confused.

Umoya smiled. “You really don’t know why you are here, do you honey?”

JJ shook her head.

“Jennifer, here at the Academy you will get to discover *your* place in that amazing story.”

“My place?” JJ asked excitedly. The thought of being a part of something EPIC sounded too good to be true.

“Yes, your place.”

JJ looked toward the library. She knew nothing of an EPIC story or of this Story Master person, but in her heart she hungered for a taste of something ‘amazing’.

Umoya started walking. “Come, Jennifer, let me show you a few more things before lunch.”

JJ followed and tried to pay attention to the things that Umoya was saying but she couldn’t get her mind off of the library. “I’ve got to get in there,” she thought.

As they continued on the path, the sound of rushing water grew louder. They entered a clearing and stopped at a huge flat stone next to a large pool of water. JJ looked up at the large stream that was falling from the top of a rocky cliff and crashing into the deep blue pool below.

“This is Renewal Falls,” Umoya said. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Yeah, it sure is,” JJ replied.

“Let’s catch up with the others, it’s time to eat. You must be starved!” Umoya said.

JJ didn’t say anything but she had lost track of time and had actually forgotten about the other kids who had arrived at the Academy with her. She had been completely caught up in her time with Umoya. She wondered what the others had been doing.

The smell of fresh baked pizza grew stronger as they approached the dining hall. “JJ, the food here is just heavenly. I hope you’re hungry!”

They stopped at the entrance. “Hey, I have to run to my office for a bit, so I’ll meet back up with you right after lunch in the Auditorium, OK?” Umoya said. “It’s just on the other side of the dining hall. Everyone will be gathering there for a special presentation.”

JJ said goodbye, made her way inside and took her place in the food line. It seemed like it had been forever since breakfast and she was starving. She skipped the salad and veggies and stacked her plate high with four slices of hot pepperoni pizza and three breadsticks. “I might be overdoing it,” she thought. “Nah!”

She looked around for a place to sit, but most of the tables were full. There happened to be an empty chair next to the boy from the bus. She didn’t really know him, but he was more familiar to her than anyone else.

“Hey,” she said, placing her overflowing plate on the table.

“Hey,” the boy said. “I’m Evan.”

“JJ,” she replied.

“Hungry?” Evan asked, sarcastically.

“Just a little,” JJ said with a smile. “Sorry! It looked so good, I couldn’t help myself!”

“Hey, where did you disappear to when we got off of the bus and came inside?” Evan asked.

“I was exploring the Atrium with Umoya,” JJ replied. “She’s really nice!”

“Yeah, she sure is,” Evan said, looking confused. “Were you with her the whole time?”

“Yes, why?” JJ said. “What were *you* doing?”

“Um... I was checking out the Atrium too.”

“By yourself?” JJ asked.

Evan quickly changed the subject. “Hey, how about all those birds?”

“Uh, they were alright, I guess,” JJ replied. “But did you see the Grand Library? Now that was amazing! At least it looked amazing from the outside! Can you imagine how many different types of books are in there? I bet there’s a million or a bazillion or whatever is higher than a bazillion! I’d give anything to get in there! Wouldn’t you?”

“You really have a thing for libraries, don’t you?” Evan said.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” JJ said. “It seems to be the only place I can find what I’m searching for.”

“What are you trying to find? Evan asked.

JJ looked down at her pizza and took a deep breath. “An adventure,” she said.

Evan, looked around and then leaned in close. “I think I can help you,” he whispered.

“You can?” JJ asked.

Evan stood up from the table and grabbed his plate. “Yep, Adventures are my specialty! Just meet me out at the waterfall in 10 minutes.”

“But...?” JJ called as Evan walked away.

“Trust me,” he replied. “10 minutes. Waterfall.”

After she finished gulping down her lunch she casually made her way toward the dining hall doors. She looked around to make sure no one was watching. She wasn’t sure exactly what Evan had in mind but her curiosity was getting the best of her. After taking one final look, she slowly opened the door and slipped out into the Atrium.

She turned left and jogged down the trail toward the falls. Evan was sitting on the large rock next to water when she arrived.

“Hey, you came?” he said.

“You doubted?” she replied.

“Maybe a little. But I’m glad you came. Let’s go before somebody sees us!”

Evan started down the path, signalling for JJ to follow.

She hurried to catch up. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see!” he said.

They made their way around a bend, over a wooden bridge and turned to follow the path that ran along the stream. “Are you sure you know where you are going?” JJ asked.

Evan smiled and just shook his head. “I’ve been a Scout for almost four years and navigation is one of my best skills. Now come on, we’re almost there.”

As they continued, JJ noticed a few things that looked familiar. “Hey, this is the way to the...” She paused. Just ahead of them she could see the engraved granite wall.

“Welcome to the Grand Library,” Evan said, stopping in front of the large wooden doors.

“What are we doing here?” JJ asked. “We’re not allowed to go in there! Umoya told me so!”

“I thought you wanted an adventure?” Evan asked.

“I do, but...” JJ stuttered.

“Well, you’ll never get to experience one if you’re not willing to take a risk.”

Evan grabbed ahold of the large brass door handle. “Are you coming with me or not?”

JJ struggled to know what to do. She had never done anything like this. “What will happen if we get caught?” she wondered. “And what will Umoya think?”

Ultimately the promise of adventure was more than she could resist.

“Ok, I’m in. Let’s go.”

##

Chapter 2 - EPIC Academy (Review)

Discussion Questions:

1. What does the Epic Academy look like (A giant open book)
2. Who greeted JJ when she arrived? (Umoya) What did she do that JJ thought was strange? (Called her by her real name)
3. What was JJ's favorite part of the Academy? (Library) Why? (Because she loves books)
4. What did JJ hope to find at Epic Academy? (Adventure) Why? (She feels her life is boring)
5. Have you ever felt that your life is boring? What would you like your life to be like? [Just take responses]

Key Scripture: Ephesians 1:11-12 (The Message)

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

Additional follow-up questions:

1. What did JJ have for lunch? (pizza - four slices)
2. What do you think Evan was hoping to find at the Academy? [not explicitly stated] (meaning, purpose)
3. What did Evan say JJ would have to do to experience an adventure? (take a risk)
4. What do you think the Epic Story is about? [Just take responses]
5. Where do you think you should go to find your role in the Epic Story? Why? [Just take responses]

Meet the Master

Evan turned the handle and pushed on the heavy wooden door. It creaked eerily as it opened. JJ was peering over his shoulder.

“Do you see anything?” she whispered.

“Not yet, it’s pretty dark,” Evan replied.

They took a few steps into the library, squinting their eyes, trying to make out their surroundings. All they could see were dark shadows cast from a dim light up ahead.

CLACK! came a sound from behind.

JJ squealed and grabbed ahold of Evan’s arm. “What was that?” she said.

“It was just the door closing,” Evan answered. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t look like there’s anyone here.”

They tiptoed ahead slowly, trying not to make too much noise.

“Are you going to hold onto my arm the whole time?” Evan asked.

JJ immediately let go. “Sorry, I... No... Umm... I’m good.” She was glad that it was dark so that Evan couldn’t see her bright red face.

As they got closer, they could see that the light was coming from a small lamp sitting on an old wooden desk. The desk was up on a wide platform, about six feet above the main floor. The platform, which was surrounded by an elegant wooden railing, appeared to be some sort of work area. A brown leather chair sat in front of the desk.

With Evan still leading the way, they slowly walked up the carpeted steps leading to the platform.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” JJ whispered.

Evan looked at her and smiled. “Absolutely!”

They walked around the chair and stood beside the desk.

“Woah!” JJ said. “Do you think this is where the Story Master works?”

Laying open on the desk was a leather-bound journal, the pages filled with hand-written words that they didn’t recognize. JJ reached out to touch it.

“Hello?” a man’s voice called out from the dark.

JJ’s heart stopped. She pulled her hand back and looked over at Evan. He looked back at her too, his eyes wide with fright. They knew that they needed to hide but they were too scared to move. They could hear footsteps approaching the platform.

“I was just looking!” JJ squeaked out. “I didn’t touch it, really!”

JJ and Evan moved closer to each other. They could hear the man coming up the steps. JJ thought she might pass out.

“Well, hello there kids,” the man said as he stepped into the light. He walked up, rested his elbows on the back of the chair and gave them a big grin. “Oh, now don’t be frightened. I won’t hurt you.”

JJ was comforted by the man’s kind demeanor. With his wavy white hair and matching beard, he had a trusting, grandfatherly look to him. Slim reading glasses rested on the end of his nose.

“Are you the Story Master?” Evan asked.

“The one and only!” he replied, taking a slight bow. “And you must be Evan. So good to see you!”

“How do you know my name?” Evan asked.

“I know more than your name, son. I know every word of your story. I wrote it, after all. And Jennifer, it’s good to see you as well.”

“Jennifer?” Evan said, looking at JJ.

“I’ll explain it later,” she said.

“Well, what brings you kids in here?” the Story Master asked. “I wasn’t expecting to have any visitors today.”

“Books,” JJ said nervously.

“... and adventure,” Evan added.

“Well, I’d say you’re in the right place as I have a lot of both.” the Story Master said.

“Sir, I don’t see any books,” JJ said, looking around.

The Story Master laughed gently. “We just need a little more light.”

He opened up the top drawer of the desk. Inside was a large blue button. “Evan, would you like to do the honors?”

“I guess,” Evan said nervously. “What does it do?”

“You’ll have to press it to find out.”

Evan slowly reached toward the drawer. He placed his hand on the surface of the button and began to push.

“BOO!” the Story Master shouted.

Evan screamed like a little girl and jumped back away from the desk.

The Story Master’s hearty laughs echoed throughout the library. “Oh, that never get’s old!” he chuckled.

JJ smiled.

“I was just kidding Evan. Go ahead and give it a push. I promise I won’t do anything this time.”

Evan stepped forward and pushed the button. A loud rumbling noise filled the library. The platform they were standing on started to shake. A blinding light shone into the room from above. JJ shielded her eyes and looked up to see what was happening. The best she could tell, the ceiling was opening up and letting the sunlight in.

“Wow!” JJ exclaimed. As the light filled the library, she began to make out features that were only shadows before. The platform they were on stood in the middle of a very large eight-sided room. Books lined the walls on every side. The library extended the full height of the Academy building, with an open walkway on each of the nine upper levels. There was not a wall anywhere that was not packed full of books.

“I think I’m in heaven,” JJ said out loud.

The Story Master laughed. “Not quite.”

“Where did you get all of these books?” Evan asked. “There are more books here than a hundred libraries like the one back home.”

“Well, Evan. I didn’t ‘get’ them anywhere.” the Story Master said. “I wrote them.”

JJ and Evan looked at each other and then back at the Story Master.

“You wrote them all?” JJ asked.

The Story Master smiled. “You seem surprised.”

“How did you come up with up with so many different stories?” Evan asked.

“Believe it or not, it’s actually just *one* story,” the Story Master replied.

“The EPIC story?” JJ asked.

“Yes Jennifer, it is. It’s the grand story of all stories. One I started writing a long, long time ago.”

“I’ll say,” Evan added.

“Hey, would you like to see me work?” the Story Master asked. “I love having company!”

“Sure, I guess,” they replied.

The Story Master sat down in the leather chair and pulled a fancy pen from his shirt pocket. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he looked up at Evan and JJ. “Here we go!” he said with a big smile.

When he touched the pen to the paper something magical started to happen. As he was writing, letters and words rose from the page and swirled around them. Some of the words joined together and transformed into vivid images.

The Story Master continued to write fervently, pouring his heart out through his pen. His expressions were intense. At times he was smiling, and at others he looked terribly sad. JJ was certain she saw tears.

Evan elbowed JJ and pointed up. Above them the words and images spiraled into the air and out of the library roof. They had never seen or experienced anything like this before. They watched in wonder as the Story Master worked his magnificent craft.

All at once the cloud of words disappeared. The Story Master had stopped writing. He laid down his pen and sat back in his chair. “Well, what’d you think? Pretty cool, huh?”

JJ and Evan were speechless.

Finally JJ broke the silence. “Sir, can you tell me more about this story that you are writing? Umoya told me that, somehow, I have a place in your EPIC story. Is that true?”

“Yes, Jennifer, that’s true,” the Story Master said. “No one is left out. Everyone has an important role to play.”

The Story Master looked over at Evan. “That includes you too, son.”

Evan smiled.

The Story Master stood up from his chair. “Well kids, understanding the EPIC story is not complicated. Actually it’s pretty simple. But, I think that sometimes the best way to learn about it is to experience it first-hand. Are you up for an adventure?”

JJ was thinking that she’d already seen more adventure today than she had in her whole life.

Evan spoke up. “I’m in!”

He looked over at JJ.

“Me too!” she said.

“Great! The Story Master said. “Have a seat in those chairs.”

JJ and Evan took their places in the wooden chairs on the far side of the desk.

“Now close your eyes tight and, together, count to ten out loud,” the Story Master directed.

JJ was feeling nervous. She reached over towards Evan. He reached back, grabbing her hand in his.

“Come on guys, no peeking! Ready, set, go!”

“One, two, three...” they began.

Together JJ and Evan were about to embark on a journey into the heart of the EPIC Story.

##

Chapter 3 - Meet the Master (Review)

Discussion Questions:

1. How many sides does the Grand Library have? (eight)
2. How would you describe the Story Master? (old, wavy white hair, a beard, funny)
3. What happened when the Story Master started to write? (words and letters went into the air and formed into images)
4. How did the Story Master know Evan and JJ's names? (He is writing their stories)
5. What kind of adventure do you think Evan and JJ are going to experience? [Just take responses]

Key Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-6 (The Message)

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Additional follow-up questions:

1. What happened when Evan pushed the blue button? (the ceiling opened up)
2. Where did all of the books in the library come from? (the Story Master wrote them)
3. What do you think was actually happening when the Story Master was writing? [just take responses]
4. Who did the Story Master say has an important role in the Epic Story? (everyone, including you)
5. If you were writing the Epic Story, what would it be like? [just take responses]

Rescue!

“... four, five, six,” JJ and Evan continued counting. “... seven, eight, nine...”

As they spoke the last number, Evan opened his eyes, unsure of what he might see.

“Uh, JJ, we’re not in Kansas anymore!” he said.

“Kansas?” JJ asked. “I’ve never been to Kansas!”

She opened her eyes and looked around. “Oh, boy! We’re not in the library either!”

They discovered they were sitting on the front porch of a log cabin. Across the road, a few horses grazed in the open pasture.

JJ went to stand up and realized that Evan was still holding her hand. “Hey!” she said. “You can let go now!”

Evan blushed a little as he opened his hand. “Sorry,” he said timidly.

“Where are we?” JJ asked.

“I’m guessing Eden Hills State Park,” Evan said.

“What?” JJ asked.

“It’s on the sign over there. It says Eden Hills State Park.”

JJ looked where Evan was pointing. “I’ve never heard of it.”

She walked across the porch to the front door of the cabin. She pressed her face against the screen trying to see inside. “I don’t think anyone’s here.”

Evan came up behind her. “It looks like some kind of office. Let’s go in.”

“After you,” JJ said.

“I think this might be a ranger station,” Evan said as they looked around the room. “Look at all the maps and radio equipment.”

“Where are the rangers then?” JJ asked.

“Listen,” Evan said. “I hear something.”

“Hello? Helllloooo?” they called out.

A tall man in a ranger’s uniform walked out of the back room. “Hey kids, I’m glad you made it! Is this your first time?”

“First time?” JJ asked.

“You know, being Jr. Rangers,” the man said.

JJ looked over at Evan.

Evan spoke up. “Yes sir, this would be our first time, sir!”

“Well, glad to have you both on board. And, you don’t have to call me sir. ‘Ranger Chris’ will be just fine.”

“Yes sir, Ranger Chris, sir,” Evan said.

JJ rolled her eyes. “Oh, brother.”

“So what do you kids know about being a Ranger?”

They both stared at him blankly.

Ranger Chris walked over to a large map that hung on the wall. “Let’s start with the basics. Our job is to help everyone who comes here have the best experience possible. And while Eden Hills State Park is a wonderful place, there are dangers too. And if someone gets into trouble, we stand ready to help them out.”

Evan hung on every word that Ranger Chris said. JJ was wondering how being a Jr. Ranger was going to help them understand the EPIC story that the Story Master spoke of.

“So, what do we do first?” Evan asked excitedly. “Do we ride in a helicopter, rappel down the side of mountain, arrest some poachers?”

“Easy now, son. A good day here at the ranger station is one where we don’t have to do much of anything. That means everyone is safe.”

“Hmph,” Evan groaned. He was ready for some excitement.

“So what *are* we going to do?” JJ asked.

“Grab those buckets over there and follow me,” Ranger Chris said. “I’ve got just the thing.”

They followed him out the front door and around the side of the station. “Here it is!” he said.

Ahead of them was an old Ranger’s Jeep. At least that’s what they thought it was. It was covered from top to bottom with a thick layer of dirt. The star was barely visible on the side of the door.

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“This doesn’t seem like much of an adventure,” JJ said as she scrubbed the fender with a soapy cloth.

Evan shook his head. “I used to think I wanted to be a park ranger. But this is boring.”

“It’s looking good guys!” Ranger Chris said as he loaded equipment in the back. “Our work isn’t non-stop excitement, but we always stay busy. We use the down time to make sure everything is ready for when we *are* needed.”

Just then, another ranger came running around the side of the station. “Chris come quick! We’ve got an emergency call!”

“Stay right here!” he said to Evan and JJ and dashed inside.

Evan smiled. “Finally, some action!”

In a matter of seconds Ranger Chris and the other man appeared from the station and ran toward the Jeep, each carrying armfuls of gear.

“Get in!” Ranger Chris yelled.

Before Evan and JJ could fasten their seatbelts they were racing at breakneck speed down the road.

“Kids, this is Ranger Pete. Pete, these are our Jr. Rangers for the day.”

Ranger Pete look back at Evan and JJ and then over at Ranger Chris.” Are you sure it is a good idea to bring a couple of kids on a call like this?”

“We don’t have much of a choice, now do we,” Ranger Chris said, “And besides, we might just need their help.”

“I guess,” Ranger Pete muttered.

“Now Pete, tell me again where the call came from.”

Pete looked down at the map he was holding. “It was from a young lady over at the river bend. It seems her boyfriend was climbing out on a branch over the river. He lost his balance and fell in. The current washed him downstream toward Timber Falls. She said he’s stuck against some rocks and can’t make it to shore. She’s afraid he’s going to be washed over the falls.”

“We don’t have much time!” Ranger Chris said. “It could take us twenty minutes to get over there if we take the main road. I know a shortcut. Everyone hold on!”

JJ and Evan grabbed whatever they could reach. The Jeep hurtled to the right, sliding as it made the sharp turn. Ranger Chris had chosen to take an old service road. It was barely wide enough. Branches scraped the sides of the vehicle as it raced down the gravel lane.

A couple minutes later, the Jeep skidded to a stop and the rangers jumped out. “Come on kids, we don’t have any time to waste!” Ranger Chris yelled.

“Pete, you take this rope and stay on this side of the river. Position yourself just upstream from the young man. Radio me if you have any trouble. We’ll see you when we get to the other side.”

Ranger Pete grabbed the rope and ran off toward the river.

Ranger Chris looked at Evan and JJ. "You guys come with me!"

"Where are we going?" Evan asked.

"We have to get to the other side of the river," Ranger Chris explained. "There's an old rope bridge just up here a bit. We'll cross there and make our way down to where we'll set up for the rescue."

"Is the young man going to be ok?" JJ asked.

"We'll do everything we can," he answered. "We've had a lot of rain lately. The river is not a safe place right now."

They took off running along a small trail and soon they arrived at the rope bridge.

"Are you sure this bridge is safe?" Evan asked. "It looks kind of sketchy!"

Ranger Chris draped the ropes he was carrying over his shoulder. "It'll be fine Evan. As long as you don't fall off, that is."

"Somehow that doesn't make me feel any better," Evan mumbled.

"Do exactly what I do and you'll be fine." Ranger Chris yelled back. With his hands on the side ropes he carefully placed one foot in front of the other on bottom rope. The bridge sagged under his weight. "Are you guys coming?"

Evan motioned to JJ. "Ladies first!"

"You're quite the gentleman!" JJ snapped as she followed Ranger Chris out onto the bridge. She didn't think that she was afraid of heights but she had never found herself balancing on a piece of rope above a raging river before. Her heart was pounding.

"Don't look down!" Ranger Chris called out as he stepped onto the other side. "You can do it! Just keep your eyes on me and take one step at a time!"

Ranger Chris grabbed JJ's hand as she reached the far side. She turned around just in time to see Evan slip.

"Help!" he cried.

Evan was hanging on with just one hand and one leg. Ranger Chris pushed past JJ and hurried back out onto the bridge.

“My hand is slipping! Hurry!” Evan shouted.

Ranger Chris grabbed Evan’s arm and lifted him back onto his feet.

Evan was trembling and held tightly to Ranger Chris. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have looked down!” he said.

Ranger Chris looked at Evan. “Don’t worry. I’ve got you.”

With one hand steadying himself, Ranger Chris bent down, reached around Evan, picked him up and placed him on his shoulder.

“Oh boy, I’m going to die!” Evan hollered.

Ranger Chris laughed. “Not on my watch you’re not!”

He placed Evan down next to JJ. “Come on, there’s someone that really needs our help!”

Soon they arrived where the young lady was standing next to the river. “Please help him!” she cried.

Ranger Chris motioned to Ranger Pete on the other side of the river. “I’m ready. Throw it over!”

Ranger Chris caught the end of the rope and secured it to a small tree. Ranger Pete did the same with his end.

“Ok, here’s what I need you to do,” Ranger Chris told the kids as he handed them a different rope. “I’m going to hook the other end of this rope around the young man when I reach him. When I give the word, you need to pull him in with all your strength. Ma’am, I need you to help too.”

“Yes sir,” they all replied.

“What about you?” JJ asked. “How will you get back?”

“No worries.” he said. “I’m tied to that cross rope. I’ll be fine.”

Ranger Chris waded out into the rushing river and worked his way toward the young man. “Hang on just a little longer! he called out. “I’ll have you free in just a few minutes.”

He reached the man without too much trouble and began to hook the rope around him.

“Chris! Watch out!” Ranger Pete yelled.

JJ looked upstream. A large log was floating down the center of the river, headed straight toward Ranger Chris and the young man.

Ranger Chris hurried to secure the rope. “Pull now!” he yelled.

Evan, JJ and the young woman pulled with everything they had. The young man didn’t budge.

Ranger Pete looked at the log that was getting ever closer. “Chris, you’ve got to get out of there!” he hollered.

Ranger Chris worked fervently trying to free the young man. The strong current was making it extremely difficult. “Keep pulling!” he shouted.

The log was now just feet from crashing into both of them. Ranger Chris braced himself against a rock and gave the young man a huge push. JJ and the others fell backwards as the line grew slack.

“Chris!!” Pete shouted from the other side of the river.

The log barrelled into Ranger Chris, knocking him away from the rocks. He disappeared under the water.

“No!!” JJ screamed.

Together they quickly pulled the young man over to the edge where he could climb out. His girlfriend helped him up onto the bank.

Evan and JJ stared at the river looking for signs of Ranger Chris. There was nothing. JJ felt sick. Evan reached out and squeezed her hand. They both closed their eyes to pray.

##

Chapter 4 - Rescue! (Review)

Discussion Questions:

1. When JJ and Evan finished counting and opened their eyes, where were they? (Front porch of ranger station, Eden Hills State Park)
2. What was their first Jr. Ranger assignment? (Washing the Ranger's Jeep)
3. How would you describe Ranger Chris? What is he like? (just take responses)
4. What do you think happens to Ranger Chris? Why? (just take responses)
5. What can we learn about the Epic Story from this chapter? (It's like a rescue mission, it can be dangerous, it may involve giving up your life for someone else, the ranger - Jesus - has our back)

Key Scripture: John 3:16-17 (NLT)

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

Additional follow-up questions:

1. What was across the road from the front of the Ranger Station? (Field with horses)
2. What instructions did Ranger Chris give to JJ and Evan to make it across the rope bridge safely? (“Do exactly what I do”, Don't look down, Take one step at a time, Keep their eyes on him)
3. How did the young man end up stuck in the raging river? (Climbing out on a branch and fell in)
4. What job did JJ and Evan have in the rescue? (Pulling the young man to shore) Could the rescue have been done without their help? (maybe, but would have been more difficult)
5. Why didn't Ranger Chris try to get out of the way of the oncoming log? (the log would have hit the young man and he wouldn't have been able to rescue him)

Adventurers in Training

“JJ... Evan... Are you OK?”

They opened their eyes to see that they were back in the library. The Story Master was standing in front of them.

“Where’s Ranger Chris!” JJ shouted.

We have to go help him!” Evan begged. “He’s in the river, sir!

The Story Master knelt down and grabbed their hands in his.

“Ranger Chris is alright,” he said. “There’s no need to worry.”

“But how did he...?” JJ began.

“He’s OK, JJ,” the Story Master interrupted. “Believe me, that’s not how his story ends?”

Hey, it’s time for us to go to the welcome presentation. That will answer a lot of your questions.”

“Wasn’t that over hours ago?” JJ asked.

“Nope, it’s just about to start,” the Story Master said. “Let’s get going! You won’t want to miss this!”

They quickly followed the Story Master out of the library and across the Atrium. Quietly they opened the Auditorium door and stepped inside. The lights were dimmed and, at first, it was hard to see. It appeared that every seat in the large, theater-like room was full.

“I think there’s a couple seats in the front,” the Story Master whispered.

Sure enough, they found three empty seats in the front row. As they sat down, music played and images of kids from all over the world were displayed on the big screen.

A voice on the video started to speak. “Are you tired of living a life that’s just average? Do you spend your days wishing for adventure? Do you want a life of purpose and meaning?”

JJ and Evan were nodding their heads to every question.

The presentation continued. “Well, here at the Academy, we help you embrace your unique role in the story of stories. You’ll learn how to become who you were created to be, an EPIC Adventurer!”

The film ended and the voice boomed, “Welcome... to EPIC Academy!”

Everyone clapped as the curtain closed in front of the screen and the lights in the auditorium came on.

A spotlight illuminated Umoya as she walked out on to the stage.

“Good afternoon kids. I’d like to officially welcome all of you to EPIC Academy! I think all of you know who *I* am. It’s now my pleasure to introduce you to someone verrrry special. He is our resident storyteller, chief instructor and an all around great guy. Let’s stand up and give an awesome welcome to THE Adventurer of Adventurers... Chris!”

Evan looked quickly over at JJ, his jaw wide open. They both turned to look at the Story Master. He winked at them and smiled.

The whole auditorium erupted with applause as a tall figure made his way out from behind the main curtain. The spotlight shifted to center stage.

“No way!” JJ gasped.

“Ranger Chris!!!” Evan shouted, jumping up and down and waving his arms trying to get his attention.

Chris made his way to the front of the stage, smiling and waving to everyone. He looked down at Evan and JJ and gave them a thumbs up.

JJ was bouncing with excitement. Tears of joy began to stream down her cheeks. “It’s really him!” she shouted to Evan. “He’s alive!”

Chris raised his hands to quiet the crowd. “Thank you all so much! I’m as excited to see you as you are to see me! What we have to share with you here at EPIC Academy is life-changing. Take it from me, living a life that’s EPIC is not always easy, but trust me when I say that it is SO worth it!”

“There’s someone else that we want all of you to meet today. Without him, none of this would be possible. He’s the one that carefully crafts each one of your stories. Over the years, He’s been called a lot of things. You might know him as the Story Master, I simply call him... Dad. Dad, come on up here!”

The Story Master made his way up the steps and gave Chris a big hug. He turned and waved to the audience.

Evan and JJ stared at each other in disbelief. “I didn’t see that coming!” JJ said.

Chris continued, “You have come to this place from all different circumstances and for all different reasons. It’s our hope that in the time we have together that we can help prepare you live out the life you’ve been created for. Of course, we understand that not everyone is ready today to commit to becoming an Epic Adventurer. So, before we get started with the official training, we’d like to give those who would rather go home now a chance to do just that.”

JJ had been so caught up in all the action that she hadn’t really thought much about home. Her mom, her dad, her summer break.

“There’s no shame in choosing to leave,” Chris said. “So, if you’d prefer to return home - just like you’ve never left - go ahead and make your way to the back.”

The Story Master spoke up. “Please know that we care for you all dearly.”

“And we’ll be with you in spirit,” Umoya added.

JJ turned around and saw a handful of kids making their way toward the exit. Anxiously she looked at Evan. “What should we do?”

“We?” Evan asked.

“I mean me, what should I do?” JJ asked. “What about you, are you staying?”

“I’ve got nothing much at home,” Evan replied. “I’m definitely staying.”

A million thoughts raced through JJ's mind. Her old life wasn't that bad, was it? What would an "Epic" life look like? She thought about the familiarity of her sleepy town and comfort of a good book. What if she didn't have what it takes to do something Epic? What place does a bookworm like her have in an adventure, anyway?

"I can't!" JJ blurted out. "Good luck Evan. I'm going home!"

JJ turned and hurried to the back, joining a small stream of kids who had made the same decision. As she reached the door, she turned back to take one last look.

"JJ!" came a voice from down the aisle. "JJ, wait!"

JJ looked to see who was calling out her name. It was Evan. He was pushing his way past the others.

"JJ, you can go home if you want to, but first let me say something. You told me that you wanted real adventure in your life more than anything else. That's what they're offering us here at the Academy. If you leave, every day you'll wake up and wonder what could have been. Is that the way you want to live?"

JJ looked at the exit door and then back at Evan. "No, of course that's not what I want but... I'm afraid."

"That's the way it always feels before something amazing happens," Evan said.

JJ stared at the floor, struggling to know what to do.

Evan placed his hand on her shoulder. "JJ, you can do this!"

She looked up at him and smiled. "Ok, count me in!"

~~

Later that day, at dinner, JJ and Evan got a chance to talk with Chris.

"We thought you were a goner!" Evan said.

JJ elbowed Evan. "No, we were just very worried about you. How did you get out of the river, anyway? Are you really a Ranger? And the Story Master's son?"

“Wow, that’s a lot of questions and thanks for your concern.” Chris answered. “Let’s just say this, rescue is one of the things that I do, but I don’t just work in the park. And yes, he’s really my dad. You know, you guys should consider yourselves lucky.”

“Why’s that?” they asked.

“Well, some people have a hard time understanding what the Epic Story is really all about, but you got to experience it first-hand with me in the park.”

“We did?” JJ said.

“Yep. You were caught up in my Dad’s story, working alongside me to help someone who was alive, but just barely hanging on, and you were doing whatever was needed, including facing fears and taking risks, to help get them free and safe.”

JJ and Evan didn’t really know how all that worked but they nodded their heads and pretended to understand. They were just glad that Chris was OK and that they were able to spend some more time with him.

~~

The silence of the next morning was broken by the loud blast of a bugle. Evan moaned and rolled over, pulling his pillow over his head.

“Come on men, rise and shine! The day’s-a-wasting!” Chris shouted. “We’ve got a lot of training to do! Now move!”

“What time is it?” one of the boys groaned.

“It’s o’ five hundred, and it’s time for you guys to fall in!” Chris insisted.

Surrendered to the fact that they had no choice, all of the boys in the dorm slowly dragged themselves out of their beds and stood in a makeshift line.

“Why does adventure have to start so early?” Evan mumbled.

“What was that, son!?” Chris barked in his best drill sergeant voice.

“Nothing sir!” Evan replied.

“Okay boys, let’s go, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover before breakfast!” Chris shouted as he corralled them out the door. “Now, move, move, move!”

~~

Over in the girls dorm, there was a similar scene. JJ and the other girls were thinking twice about their pursuit of adventure. Umoya’s approach was somewhat more gentle than Chris’s but she was receiving the same resistance.

“5:00 is way too early to wake up on a summer morning,” JJ complained as she followed the others out the door.

~~

At breakfast, Evan saw JJ across the room, but he didn’t get to speak with her. As soon as he gulped down his food, his dorm was off to the library for their first educational session.

The last thing he thought he would be doing in the summer, was schoolwork, but here he was at EPIC Academy, fidgeting in his seat and struggling to pay attention as Umoya lectured on the history of the EPIC story.

An hour later, Evan was having a hard time completing his assignment. Umoya noticed and came over to him. “Can I help?” she asked as she pulled up a chair.

“Are you allowed to do that?” Evan asked.

Umoya chuckled. “Yes, I am and it would be my pleasure.”

Patiently she worked with Evan through each and every question. She didn’t give him any of the answers but she skillfully guided him where he needed to go to find them.

“I wish regular school was this easy!” Evan exclaimed as he finished up.

~~

Out in the Atrium, at the obstacle course, JJ was struggling too. But for a far different reason.

“Go! Go Go!” Chris shouted. “You can do it JJ! Don’t give up!”

JJ just hung there on the rope, three feet off of the ground and not even halfway up the wooden wall she was supposed to be climbing over.

Physical activity was never one of JJ's strengths. She was much more comfortable in a library than she was on a sporting field.

"JJ, do you know what's waiting for you on the other side of that wall?"

"More obstacles?" she said.

"No! It's Adventure!" Chris said. "The very thing you've been longing for. But it won't come easy. You're going to need some muscle to help you over the humps."

JJ gritted her teeth and tried again but she was unable to lift herself any higher. "I can't do it," she cried. "I just need a little help!"

She looked over and Chris was gone.

"Great!" JJ moaned. "Just when I need him, he disappears."

JJ felt a tug on the rope. She looked up and saw Chris sitting on the top of the wall, smiling.

"Hold on!" he shouted as he started pulling her up little by little.

Emboldened by Chris's assistance she braced her feet against the wall and started to climb.

Before JJ knew it she was cresting the top and dropping down the other side.

"Watch out Adventure, here I come!" she shouted as she ran off.

Chris grinned as he watched her go.

~~

Later, in the library, JJ felt like she was in heaven. "I just love the smell of books!" she said as took her place at the table. She scribbled page after page of notes as she listened to Umoya, finding every detail of the EPIC story simply fascinating.

Evan was taking his turn on the obstacle course. He was through the tires, across the bars and over the wall in no time. “Look out Adventure, I’m coming for you!” he yelled as he sprinted across the finish line.

~~

At dinner JJ and Evan compared stories of their first day of training.

“My head hurts,” Evan complained. “I think it might be full.”

“Well, I’m exhausted,” JJ sighed. “I don’t think I can move another inch.”

“You’re not thinking about giving up are you?” Evan asked.

“Not a chance!” JJ said confidently. “I’m in this all the way!”

~~

The next few days played out just about the same as the first: early mornings, tough challenges and intense learning. JJ began to grow stronger and more confident. Evan started to enjoy learning. The training was hard but Chris and Umoya had a way of making everything fun, interesting and enjoyable.

Even the Story Master got in on the action. Each night, just before bed, everyone would gather around and he would tell all sorts of fantastical tales. The characters and settings of each story were quite different but they would all end in the exact same way: the good guys would win, someone would be saved and then there’d be a huge party. All of the kids loved it.

~~

JJ rolled over in her bunk and sleepily opened her eyes. She could see the early morning sun shining on the dorm room floor. Frantically, she sat straight up. “What time is it?” she thought. “I must be late!”

She looked around and all of the other girls were still in bed too.

Just then, the dorm door opened and in walked Umoya. “Good morning JJ! How are you today?”

“Confused,” JJ replied. “Aren’t you going to hurry us out the door this morning?”

“Nope, not today,” Umoya said. “Your training is complete. The time has come to send you off on your own Epic adventure.

JJ paused, thinking about what that meant. “Do you think I’m ready?”

Umoya walked over and sat down on the edge of JJ’s bunk. “You are as ready as you need to be. Remember, this is not something that you do alone.”

~~

After breakfast everyone gathered outside on the front lawn of the Academy and took their place in the rows of white chairs. Chris, Umoya and the Story Master stood side by side on the stage looking out at the kids. Chris stepped up to the microphone.

“This week you’ve learned about the Epic Story and we’ve helped you get started on this new journey. Today you will graduate from Epic Academy, but it is not the end of your story. No, your life of adventure is just beginning. There are many more chapters that have yet to be written, and we’ll be with you every step of the way.”

One by one each student was called forward where they received a badge and a group hug. Every child left the stage with a huge grin.

JJ was nervous as she walked up the steps. Umoya greeted her with a smile. “You are now ‘Jennifer the Epic Adventurer,’” she announced as she pinned the badge on JJ’s shirt.

Chris, Umoya and the Story Master gathered around her. “We love you Jennifer!” they said as they squeezed her tight. JJ’s fear of the future melted as she savored this incredible moment.

She made her way off of the stage and followed the other kids to the parking lot where buses waited to transport them to their new Epic life.

Evan stepped onto the bus just after JJ did. “Can I sit with you?” he asked.

“Sure, I guess,” she replied.

The doors closed and the bus lurched forward. JJ leaned her head against the window and watched the Academy fade into the distance.

JJ looked over at Evan. "Are you nervous?"

"Me? Nervous? No... Well... maybe just a little," he stuttered.

JJ smiled. "I wonder what type of adventure we'll have?"

"Epic," Evan replied. "It will most definitely be Epic!"

JJ leaned back and gazed out at the passing countryside. Everything was quiet except for the steady hum of the bus engine. She closed her eyes and quickly drifted off to sleep.

##

Chapter 5 - Adventurers in Training (Review)

Discussion Questions:

1. What did we learn about Ranger Chris? (He's OK, works at the Academy, is the Story Master's son)
2. What is the purpose of the Epic Academy? (Help kids find their place in the Epic Story/ become an Epic Adventurer)
3. What important decision did JJ have to make? (Whether to stay at the Academy or go home) Why was it so hard for her? (Fear of unknown future, felt unqualified) What changed her mind? (Evan's encouragement)
4. How did the Story Master's night-time stories always end? (Good guys win, someone saved, huge party)
5. What did each student get for graduating from Epic Academy? (Adventurer Badge, Group Hug) What did the Story Master, Chris and Umoya tell JJ as they hugged her? ("We love you Jennifer!") How did that make her feel? (Joyful, not afraid)

Key Scripture: John 1:12-13 (The Jesus Storybook Bible)

For anyone who says yes to Jesus,
For anyone who believes that Jesus said
For anyone who will just reach out to take it
Then God will give them this wonderful gift,
To be born into a whole new life
To be who they really are
Who God always made them to be -
Their own true selves -
God's dear child

Additional follow-up questions:

1. Where were JJ and Evan when they opened their eyes? (Back in the library)
2. How did JJ and Evan react when they saw Chris up on the stage? (Evan jumped up and down waving, JJ cried and shouted "He's alive!")
3. What would have happened if Evan didn't go after JJ? (Went home, been sad about her decision)
4. How did Chris describe the Epic Story? (Caught up in his Dad's story, working alongside him, helping out others)
5. What was the most important thing the JJ and Evan learned at the Academy [just take responses]

A New Chapter

“JJ! JJ!”

JJ opened her eyes to see who was hollering out her name.

Her mom was walking across the yard toward her. “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you! Lunch is ready.”

“Mom! It’s you!” JJ shouted as she sat up.

“Of course it’s me,” her mom replied. “Who else would it be?”

JJ looked around, surprised to see that she was in her own backyard.

She stood up, placed her book down, and ran over to her mom, giving her long hug. “I missed you so much!” JJ said.

“Uh, you did see me at breakfast,” JJ’s mom replied, looking confused. “Did something happen when you were at the library?”

“The library? Well, yes, but that’s not where...” JJ was struggling to figure out why her mom did not seem at all concerned with the fact that she’d been gone for days.

“I mean, I went to the library and then Claire almost crashed and I hurt my elbow and then I was at the academy with Evan, and I met the Story Master and Chris almost drowned in the river and Umoya...”

“Slow down JJ. Have you been reading those crazy adventure books again?”

“Yes, but... No... this was real!” JJ insisted.

“I’m sure it was honey. Let’s get you a bandage for your elbow and then something to eat. Lunch will clear your mind. It sounds like you had a big morning.”

~~

In between bites JJ told her mom every detail of her experience at the Academy. Her mom listened but all she would say was, “That’s nice, dear.”

“Were they handing those out down at the library?” her mom asked, pointing to JJ’s Epic Adventurer Badge.

“Noooo...” JJ groaned, growing increasingly frustrated. “I got it at the Academy.”

“Ok, if you say so,” her mom replied. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to walk Mrs. Mulligan’s dog this afternoon?”

JJ sighed. This is not how she imagined her Epic adventure to be. “It seems like nothing has changed,” she mumbled as she excused herself from the table.

~~

JJ arrived at Mrs. Mulligan’s front door looking visibly upset. “Hi JJ. Everything OK?” she asked.

“I dunno,” JJ replied.

“Now, now sweetie, it’s going to be OK. Let’s you and me have a seat here on the porch and talk about it.”

JJ sat down next to Mrs. Mulligan on the cushioned bench. Honey, her dog, laid at their feet.

“Mrs. Mulligan, do you believe that we’re all part of a big story?” JJ asked.

“You mean the Epic Story? Yes, JJ. Yes I do. Is that what’s bothering you?”

“Well, kinda,” JJ said. “I just thought that if I was part of a story like that, then things would seem much more, well... Epic.”

Mrs. Mulligan smiled and squeezed JJ’s hand. “Dear, I’ve been around for quite a while, and what I’ve learned to do is trust that the Story Master knows what he’s doing. You can’t always see what he’s working out behind the scenes, but there’s no doubt that it will be Epic.”

JJ thought deeply about what Mrs. Mulligan had said. They talked more about the Epic Story and the Story Master and after a while they decided that it was time to take Honey on her walk. JJ led the dog around the yard and listened to Mrs. Mulligan tell stories of her youth. JJ had never realized it before, but Mrs. Mulligan's life had actually been pretty adventurous.

JJ left Mrs. Mulligan's feeling encouraged and excited to experience a new chapter in her life. She didn't know what to expect but she was determined to keep her eyes open for what the Story Master was planning next.

JJ didn't have any other plans for the afternoon so she pedaled over to the neighborhood park. She figured that no one would be there and that she could spend some quiet time working out how she might find an adventure.

As she rode into the park she saw someone sitting on the swings. It was Reagan, a girl she recognized from school. JJ remembered that she had moved into town just a few months ago and had struggled making new friends. Like JJ, she had been a frequent target of Claire and her companions.

JJ had hoped that she could have the park to herself and considered just heading home. "I wonder what the Story Master would want me to do?" she thought.

As she tried to figure it out, she felt like she could almost hear Umoya saying, "It's ok, JJ, I'm here with you," and Chris shouting, "You can do it!"

JJ decided that she would stay. She laid her bike down in the grass and walked over and sat down on the swing next to the girl. "Hey," JJ said.

"Hey," Reagan replied, staring at the ground as she shuffled her feet in the dirt.

"How's your summer going?" JJ asked, hoping to strike up a conversation.

Reagan continued looking down. "Boring, dreadfully boring. Everyone I know is away doing something exciting. I'm the only one who's stuck here in this little town with nothing to do! I hate my life."

JJ started laughing.

"It's not funny!" Reagan insisted, finally looking up.

“Oh no, I’m sorry, I’m not laughing at you,” JJ said. “I think it’s funny because I’ve said the exact same thing.”

“You did?” Reagan asked.

“Yes, I sure did. I know exactly how you feel. But, you know what, I’m starting to look at things a little differently. Have you ever heard of the Epic Story?”

“Is that a book?” Reagan asked.

“It’s much more than that,” JJ said. “Let me tell you about it...”

JJ explained the Epic Story the best she could. She told Reagan that she too has an important role to play in it. She told her about how nice the Story Master is, how Chris sets people free and how warm Umoya’s smile is. The one thing JJ didn’t tell her about was Evan. She thought that just might confuse the issue.

When JJ was finished, Reagan spoke up, “Hey, would you like to come over to my house?”

“Sure, I’d love to!” JJ replied.

As they left the park, JJ felt like Chris, Umoya and the Story Master were giving her another big hug.

Reagan’s house was just a couple blocks from the park. They laid their bikes in the yard and dashed up the front step.

“Mom! I’m home!” Reagan yelled out as they headed into the kitchen.

“Hi honey. Hey, who’s your new friend?” Reagan’s mom asked.

Reagan looked over at JJ. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name!”

“Jennifer,” JJ said confidently. “You can call me Jennifer.”

“Very nice to meet you Jennifer,” her mom said. “I’m glad to see Reagan find someone to...”

The chime of the doorbell interrupted her.

“Who’s here?” Reagan asked.

“It’s probably your Aunt Jana,” her mom replied. “Remember she’s in from Oregon and is going to be staying with us for a few weeks. Oh, and I forgot to tell you, she’s bringing her son along too. He’s about your age but I doubt you remember him. ”

“Oh brother,” Reagan moaned. “That’s all I need is an annoying boy around here to get in my way.”

JJ followed Reagan and her mom out of the kitchen. Reagan’s mom opened the front door. “Jana, great to see you!” she said. “Come on in! I’m glad you guys are here!”

Jana pick up her suitcase and stepped inside. Her son quietly followed.

“Jana, you remember Reagan, and this is her new friend Jennifer. Reagan, say hi to your Aunt Jana and your cousin... Evan.”

Reagan mumbled a soft hello. JJ just stood there in shock. She couldn’t believe what she seeing. All she could think was, “This summer is going to be Epic!”

~ The End ~

Chapter 6 - A New Chapter (Review)

Discussion Questions:

- 1.. How did JJ's mom respond when she told her about her adventure? (Didn't believe her)
2. What changes did JJ notice when she arrived back home? (Nothing really) How did that make her feel? (Frustrated)
3. What advice did Mrs. Mulligan give JJ? (Trust that the Story Master knows what he's doing)
4. How did JJ decide what to do when she was at the park? (Considered what the Story Master wanted, listened for guidance)
5. How do you think learning about the Epic Story affected JJ's, Evan's and Reagan's future? [just take responses]

Key Scripture: Ephesians 2:10 (The Message)

He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

