

JIMI & RACHEL BRITTS

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TO
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A LIFE

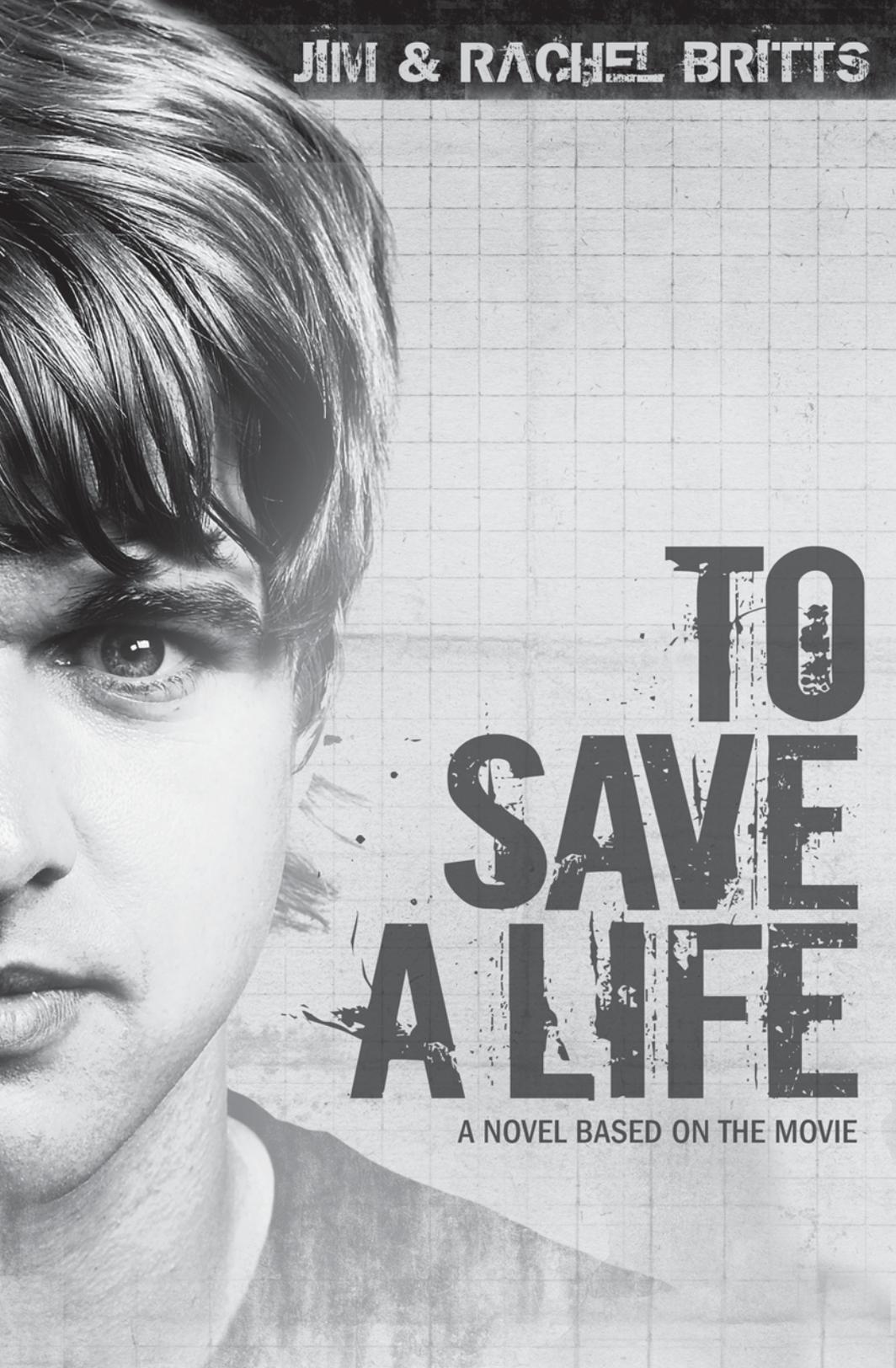
A NOVEL BASED ON THE MOVIE

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To Save a Life

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Outreach, Inc., Vista, CA 92081

OutreachPublishing.com

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ISBN: 978-0-9823744-6-7

Graphic Design & Layout: Alexia Wuerdeman

Printed in the United States of America

Advance Reader's Sample Copy – Not for Resale or Distribution

About This Advance Reader's Sample Copy

This novel is based on the movie *To Save A Life*, which is scheduled to release in theaters in early 2010.

Your Advance Reader's Sample Copy includes the first fifteen chapters of the *To Save A Life* novel. The complete novel will be released in October 2009. The graphics and content are not final, and Outreach reserves the right to make changes before the October 2009 release.

1

HOW APPROPRIATE, JAKE thought darkly to himself as he reluctantly stepped out of his truck into the somber drizzle. The tiny drops of water tingled on his skin, and he shuddered. *Why did I come here?* he wondered. *What good will it do now?*

He forced himself to walk toward the tiny group huddled ahead. They whispered and hugged and stood with their hands in their pockets, trying to warm their numb hearts as much as their bodies. There was Roger's mom, trying to look okay, but not succeeding so well. Roger's little sister stood close to her, just staring blankly ahead. There was Jake's neighbor, Mrs. Jones, looking sweet and kind as usual, but her eyes were red and puffy, and her ever-present smile was absent today. There was Clyde Will, tattoos peeking out of his dress shirt.

Just as Jake got close, a guy maybe thirty-five years old stepped apart from the group and started talking. He looked almost as awkward and unsure as Jake felt.

"Well, today we come together to remember the life of Roger Andrew Dawson." He paused, breathed in, and then continued,

“While we know there was so much life left in him, we thank God for the eighteen years we did have with Roger.”

Roger’s mom started shaking uncontrollably as she tried to hold back her sobs. Suddenly Jake’s tie started choking off his air supply. *Why am I here?*

It’s the summer before fifth grade—a hot July afternoon. Jake and Roger cruise slowly up and down their neighborhood on their bikes, listless and barely talking.

Suddenly, Roger turns to Jake with one of his mischievous smiles. “I got an idea,” he grins. “Oh, yeah. I’ve hit the gold mine. We’re going to be rich!”

Familiar butterflies flutter in Jake’s stomach. Roger’s craziest ideas always came out of nowhere. “Is this going to get me grounded again?” he protests.

“Jake, that’s a risk I’m willing to take. Anyways, who can say no to this smile?” Roger flashes his pearly whites.

Jake chuckles back another ripple of apprehension. But the lure of an adventure draws him in, and his curiosity wins.

Minutes later, Jake and Roger are sprinting down the street, each wearing their best effort at a costume: capes and masks found crumpled at the bottom of Jake’s closet, and two of Jake’s mom’s pillowcases. The boys’ gleeful shouts echo through the neighborhood. All inhibitions gone, Jake flaps his arms, bobs his head, and prances like a choking seagull, which sends Roger into a fit of laughter. He playfully shoves Jake, whose black cape tangles around his legs and sends him tumbling to the ground. Roger pounces on him, but Jake headlocks and pins Roger in a maneuver worthy of the WWF. “IIIIII am the chammm—pioooooon!” Jake belts out, arms lifted high in victory. He helps Roger up, and they adjust their capes and masks

before racing up the neighbor's lawn. They pound on the door urgently.

Mrs. Jones appears in the doorway, a woman of natural beauty whose smiling face makes her look much younger than her fifty years. But before she even says a word...

"Trick or treat!" Roger and Jake announce.

Mrs. Jones chuckles at the ragamuffin superheroes on her doorstep. "Boys, it's the middle of July!"

Roger delivers: "I love what you did with your hair!"

Mrs. Jones instinctively runs her fingers through her newly dyed, flame-red hair and succumbs. "Let me see what I got."

With Mrs. Jones' back turned, Jake and Roger give each other a silent high-five. This is easier than they expected!

Mrs. Jones returns a minute later with a granola bar and juice box for each of them. Before the loot hits the bottom of the pillowcases, Roger pulls a daisy from behind his back.

"And this is for you!" Even with the cheesy wink, his smile could not be more charming. As she accepts the flower with delight, the boys take off down the street, yelling, "Thank you!" over their shoulders.

At the corner, Jake looks back at Roger. "Hey, where'd the flower come from?"

Roger grins and points to the flower patch in Mrs. Jones' front yard.

"You're crazy, man!" Jake admires, and takes off sprinting ahead to the next house across the street.

"JAKE!!!"

Roger's scream jerks Jake's head up just in time to see an SUV speeding right toward him. His eyes connect with the absent-minded driver, who slams on the brakes too late. Jake freezes in panic as the car skids right at him.

“NOOOOOO!!!” he hears Roger scream again.

The next thing Jake remembers is being tackled from the side, falling to the pavement inches from the braking car. He hears the sickening crack of breaking bones. Dazed, with a small trickle of blood oozing from his skinned knee, Jake looks back into the street. His best friend lies motionless under the bumper of the car, his right leg bent in the wrong direction, his red cape covering his face like a shroud.

Jake trembled from the memory of that day eight years ago and just stared at Mrs. Jones, standing across from him in the rain. The guy who must have been the minister was still saying something.

“None of us know the pain Roger was experiencing or the demons that raged in his head. We don’t understand why God allows these things to happen, but we do know His heart. And we trust Him in the midst of our pain.”

Why am I here? Jake thought again.

It’s the beginning of seventh grade—a crisp autumn morning. Junior-high Jake dribbles the soccer ball down the field with incredible control, racing by the much-slower defenders. Parents yell like maniacs on the sidelines as he splits the defense. Sports has always come naturally to Jake; he is the resident first-pick for whatever game the kids are playing.

On the sidelines, attempting to match his best friend stride-for-stride, Roger cheers at the top of his lungs. He runs with a noticeable limp, dragging his right leg behind the rest of his body and falling further behind Jake with every awkward step.

Jake attacks a new pair of converging defenders and kicks the ball just out of reach of the diving goalie. Jake throws his hands up triumphantly, and everyone on the team surrounds him—almost everyone. Roger remains off the field, his jersey white enough to star in a laundry detergent commercial. He jumps up and down alone.

The referee blows the whistle to end the game. One of Jake's teammates, Doug Moore, pulls Jake and a couple of the other players over to his dad.

"Good game, boys!" Mr. Moore hands each of them a snow cone fresh from the snack bar.

Jake reaches for the icy treat and notices Roger standing just a few feet away. He smiles at his buddy through the bubble-gum flavor and starts toward him. But his teammates envelop him first and, distracted by their chatter, Jake starts rehashing his game moves at the crowd's insistence. *It was pretty amazing, after all, he thinks. Anyway, Roger's got his mom.*

Jake stared at Roger's mother, tears mixing with the raindrops rolling down her cheeks. *Where has she been? Jake thought. How could she have allowed this to happen?*

The young minister finished his speech, and Roger's casket sunk slowly into the ground as if it bore the weight of everyone there. Family and friends shuffled to the edge to drop in a handful of soil. Jake just looked at the clump of dirt in his hand. Every muscle in his body begged him to run in the opposite direction. At last, Jake stiffly tossed his clod in as well. The thud of the dirt on the casket echoed in his ears. This was his final insult: posing as one of Roger's faithful friends.

Yeah, friend.

A camera crew had set up equipment less than thirty yards away. For the first time in his life, the press repulsed Jake. He turned to slink back to his truck.

“Jake.”

The familiar voice stopped him mid-stride, and Jake slowly turned to face it. Roger’s mom threw her arms around him before he could respond. His arms couldn’t hug her back.

“I’m so, so sorry. It means so much that you came. You two—” Mrs. Dawson broke into sobs. Jake feebly patted her back, relieved when a relative walked up and squeezed her shoulder to signal that it was time to go.

Mrs. Dawson broke out of her desperate embrace, wiping her eyes with an already soaked tissue. “Where did we go wrong?” she begged. “Had you two spoken lately? Did he give any indication?”

Jake just shook his head and stared at his feet. Mrs. Dawson finally gave Jake a wistful look and trudged to the waiting car.

What am I doing here?

It’s the middle of freshman year—a fabulous Friday evening. The Pacific High School gymnasium is a zoo of cheering students and parents, charging the air with anticipation and rivalry, hormones and sweat. As the announcer practically sings the starting lineup, each player’s name prompts a new roar from the packed house.

“And starting at guard, averaging fifteen points and eleven assists, the Freshman Phenom...JAKE TA-A-A-YLOR!!!!” Jake flashes a smile and jumps off his seat, pumps both fists in the air, and joins his teammates in their pre-game chant.

From the opening tip, Jake leads his junior and senior teammates in hustle and determination. He dives for every loose ball and bangs around in the paint, somehow coming away with the rebound against much bigger players. In only his tenth game wearing varsity colors, Jake’s valiant efforts quickly prompt the crowd’s undying, screaming support.

With four minutes to go in the game, Jake has led his team to a five-point lead. His four sweet, nothing-but-net three-pointers, ten assists and handful of rebounds brought both fan and foe to their feet. Every vein in his body pulses with adrenaline; every nerve tingles with focus. His movements flow unimpeded by conscious thought.

Jake dribbles down the court, eyes scanning and evaluating each option in a nanosecond as it develops. He fakes to the right wing, then tosses a no-look pass to a wide-open teammate under the basket, who dunks the ball with authority. The next moment, Jake steals the inbound pass and takes it in for an uncontested layup.

Oh, life is good. Jake's nimble feet back-pedal to play defense, and his glance drifts toward the cheerleaders standing along the back wall. His eyes lock with a cute blonde freshman, also moving instinctively with her squad's routine. While the tumult in the gym thunders all around him, Jake's world stands still, his heart pounding in his chest. *Amy Briggs.* The very thought of her makes Jake shiver under his sweat, but only for a second. He shifts his focus back and powers on down the court.

The opposing point guard rifles a pass up the court to his open teammate hustling down the right sideline, and he races past Jake toward the basket. He threads a perfect pass back to Jake's man, who finishes off the give-and-go with a lay-up that goes unchallenged. Jake swears under his breath at his momentary lapse of concentration as his coach yells at him from the sideline. The in-bounder flings a half-court pass to Jake, who dribbles three steps and pulls up for another three-pointer, this time from four feet behind the line. Swish!

Jake takes no time to celebrate, stepping up to his man for a full-court press. There will be no more easy baskets on his watch.

After the game, Jake strolls out of the locker room where parents and friends wait for the players. He scores plenty of congratulations and high-fives. As usual his parents aren't there, but the sight of Amy Briggs, leaning casually against a pole, helps him forget it. She's surrounded by a cluster of guys from the freshman team vying for her laugh, but her attention is riveted on Jake.

"Twenty-two points, eleven assists. You make us freshmen look good," she smiles as Jake walks by.

"Uh, thanks." That pounding in his chest starts up again.

Amy deserts the crowd of boys to walk with Jake, and her bare shoulder brushes his arm. She motions to his sports bag. "Why do you have a little bird on your bag?"

"It's the mascot for the University of Louisville. I'm going to play hoops there someday." Somehow, it doesn't sound as cool spoken out loud as it did in his dreams. But Amy doesn't seem to notice.

"Oh," Amy giggles. "Well, are you going to the party tonight?"

"Okay." Jake pauses. "What party?"

Amy giggles again. "You are so funny. So, we could kind of go together?" She stops walking and faces Jake, catching him playfully under his arm. Her touch sends a current through his body. "Give me your phone," she whispers, stepping closer.

The cool confidence Jake commanded earlier on the court evaporates, and he fumbles in his pocket before his fingers find their target. He finally hands the phone to Amy, hoping she doesn't notice his sweaty palms. As she punches her number into his phone, Jake glances over her shoulder and sees Roger limping toward them.

Jake cringes. As Roger hobbles past the scattered, chattering pockets of people, their conversations lull, and their stares follow him. Jake even hears a

few snickers. *Why can't Roger just fit in?* The limp isn't nearly as defined these days, but it is still unmistakable, a continuing and annoying reminder of that fateful day three years ago.

Since middle school, Jake's natural ability to excel at any sport put him on the fast track to popularity. Unfortunately, "the accident" had eliminated Roger's chances of athletic success, and he just couldn't keep up with Jake's new and growing group of friends. Jake and Roger still hung out from time to time, but it was always Roger who called. And to be honest, Jake enjoyed his new "cool" reputation and sometimes feared losing it by being seen with Roger. Still, there was always a nagging guilt that he couldn't ignore.

"My friend, Roger—we were going to hang out. Is it cool if he comes too?" Jake asks reluctantly as Amy hands his phone back.

Amy follows Jake's gaze to Roger. "The car only has room for one more," she shrugs. "You know what I mean?" She squeezes Jake's fingertips before skipping away to her girlfriends waiting by a hot red Mustang with its top down.

Jake's eyes follow the enticing bounce of her little skirt—until Roger's voice brings him back. "Am I seeing things, or were you just talking to Amy Briggs?!" Roger beams.

Jake grins, still star-struck.

"Well, let's get out of here. My mom already ordered the pizza." Roger lightly punches Jake on the arm, just inches from where Amy had rubbed it.

Jake drops his eyes. "Rog, I can't come."

"What? We just talked before the game."

Jake glances up. How can he pass up an opportunity like this? "I kind of told Amy I'd go to this party."

Roger's shoulders slump and his smile fades. "Um, OK, cold pizza's still good. Where's the party?"

Jake takes a deep breath. "You can't come."

Silence. Roger steps back as if the words are a physical blow. After a moment, he scowls, “I get it. Things are different now.” He turns and limps away.

“Rog!” Jake calls out, half-apologetic, half-irritated that his friend doesn’t understand. With a sigh, Jake starts after Amy, but he hears Roger punch a locker before dragging himself around the corner.

Jake stood anchored to the manicured cemetery lawn, watching Roger’s mom walk away. The rain was still falling relentlessly.

“Freshman year, Mrs. Dawson,” he finally mumbled under his breath. “That’s the last time I spoke to him. Freshman year.”

2

MRS. DAWSON AND her relatives had left at least an hour before, and the few friends at the funeral had departed with them. The news van packed up shortly after getting some uncouth shots of the mourners and filming a brief statement by a reporter. And still Jake remained.

He now sat leaning against the tombstone of some Harriet Wesson, who had succumbed to this resting spot back in 1932. The showers had finally stopped, and the coolness of the dark granite chilled his aching body, but it didn't slow the frenzied whirling of his mind. Jake stared numbly at the cruel hole that marked Roger's life and wrestled with the events of the past week.

How did I get here?

It's the middle of senior year—a fresh, early spring day a little more than a week earlier. Jake walks to his usual lunch spot in the middle of the quad where the basketball team hangs out. On his way, three stunning freshmen girls, showing more skin

than clothes, walk by and wave at Jake. He has no clue what their names are, but they sure know his. He flashes his customary smile and nods, but keeps on walking as they giggle in response.

Matt McQueen, the six-foot-seven center, and Tony Henderson, the only junior in the starting five, are playing one-on-one with a wad of paper and a trash can. They are surrounded by the normal herd of twenty or so girls and guys, all trying to be associated with something cool. Matt, also known as the Mouth, keeps a running commentary for the onlookers.

“McQueen backs the poor lad down. He fakes right, fakes left and...Kareem-style skyhooks right in the back of the—!”

Jake jumps in and swats the wad of paper away. “Not in my house!” he yells, arms flexed like a bodybuilder. Matt and Tony bust out laughing—not the response Jake is hoping for. “What’s so funny, homies?”

Matt calls on the groupies for support. “This man just admitted that he lives in a trash can!”

They groan. Jake rolls his eyes and puts Matt in a playful headlock. “You boys just remember who gets you the ball!”

Shaking himself free, Matt consoles, “Just playin,’ superstar.” He straightens his shirt, then pops his collar with fresh attitude. “Just remember, the trash man comes on Wednesdays.” He ducks to avoid Jake’s pseudo punch, which morphs into a chest-bumping man-hug.

Doug Moore, starting power forward and Jake’s closest sidekick, leaves a cluster of hotties and pushes his way into the action. On the way over, he grabs an apple out of the hands of a poor unsuspecting freshman and claps it like a basketball.

“Let’s run it again,” Doug orders with a cockiness that inspires Tony and Matt to take off their letterman jackets and start throwing elbows. Doug

tosses the apple to Jake.

“Clock’s down to 5-4-3.” Jake sets the scene, crouching into triple-threat stance. His rocker step sends Tony flying. Doug spins around Matt, and Jake throws a perfect pass to Doug’s outstretched arm. He slams the fruit into the trash can, to the horror of the unfortunate freshman. Doug looks down at the mashed apple and shrugs at the helpless kid.

Jake raises his hands for high-fives. “A team effort.”

Doug puts his arm around his friend’s shoulder, “Leave that for the reporters. Louisville’s already paying your way.”

As Doug turns to the other guys, Jake secretly winks to the freshman and throws him an apple from his own lunch, then quickly turns back to the group. “It is a team sport and I’m telling you...we are sweet!”

“You’re sweet.” Amy’s moist breath tickles Jake’s ear as she surprises him from behind with a kiss and a steaming Styrofoam cup. Amy Briggs’ freshman cuteness has blossomed brilliantly into a full-blown gorgeous body. Her arms wrap snugly around Jake’s torso and he doesn’t resist. Jake raises his cup and inhales the mocha vapor to say thanks, then he twists to put his arm around Amy and pulls her closer.

“Where’s mine?” Doug pipes up.

“Why don’t you get your girlfriend to get one for you?” Amy smiles, coyly sipping her drink.

“You know I don’t have a girlfriend,” Doug argues.

“Hence you have no coffee either,” she smirks, twirling her cup right under his nose. This elicits a chorus of “ooh”s from the other guys.

Matt sidles up beside his friend and pats him on the back. “She got you, man.”

“Whatever,” Doug retorts. “Your mom got me last night.” Again, a chorus of “ooh”s.

Matt purses his lips and taunts Doug in a baby voice. “Ah, the big ugly said something funny!”

Doug, no longer smiling, turns to Matt and looks him in the eye. “And I’ll kick your ass if you keep calling me that.” All eyes suddenly are on him, so Doug’s smile slowly returns, and he slaps Matt lightly on the cheek.

Jake turns to Amy and whispers, “Wanna get out of here?”

She entwines her fingers in his. “You know I don’t need much to skip calculus.”

The bickering banter continues behind them, but Jake and Amy ignore it. They’re off to much better things.

Jake has actually been planning this little escapade for a while. The destination isn’t new to them—it’s their private little ocean bluff where they shared their first kiss. That was the summer after ninth grade, long before he had his truck and a license. He had told all his buddies about his smooth moves and how she had practically melted in his arms. But the truth was that Amy had been the initiator, and he had been so nervous that his retainer popped out. He was so embarrassed, but Amy had never told anyone.

Jake shudders at the memory, but today is different. He opens Amy’s door, leads her around back, and whips off the tarp covering the truck bed to reveal a picnic complete with a layer of sod, scattered wild flowers, and a basket on a red-checked blanket.

“Oh, Jake!” Amy gushes, cupping his face in her hands. “You are so romantic!”

“You’re right,” he shrugs with a grin, swinging her into the truck. “Let’s eat!”

They settle down to eat. Jake inhales his sandwich; Amy picks at hers. After eating, they relax in each other's arms watching surfers tackle the waves.

"Eighty school days, and then you leave for Louisville," Amy rests her head on Jake's shoulder.

"Gonna feel like eight hundred with my folks," Jake groans.

"Your mom's not that bad."

"My dad just won't stop riding me."

Amy nestles closer and whispers in his ear, "Don't worry, I'll protect you."

"You know him. He's still trying to live out his own failed dreams..."

"Jake."

Jake stops his rant mid-sentence and looks at her. She musters up the toughest face in her arsenal and flexes her biceps like a blonde boxer. Jake bursts out laughing and squeezes her muscles.

"Oooh, yeah, you are pretty tough. I bet you could take him."

Her stern façade melts into a smile, and their laughter entwines. Jake kisses Amy softly on her forehead.

"Let's be cool parents," Amy murmurs as she snuggles in next to him.

"Who said I wanted kids?"

"I did."

Jake furrows his eyebrows in mock disapproval, then yawns and slowly stretches his arms up over his head, then around her shoulders, under her arms, finally resting on her supple waist. His fingers crawl up under the edge of her lacy tank-top. "Great point," he concedes, and unleashes an ambush tickling.

"Stop, stop. Stop!" Amy squeals. As she catches her breath, she pulls an envelope from her back

pocket and waves it in front of Jake. “I got you a love letter.”

Jake grabs at it and leans over to peck her on the lips before opening the envelope. His eyes scan the typed page.

“What? You got accepted to Louisville? Early admission!” Jake is genuinely shocked. In all their conversations about the future, he had never once asked her to follow him to Kentucky. For every inch of beauty, Amy doubled it in brains, and her dream had been getting into Stanford.

Amy grins. “Now we can be together,” she answers simply.

Jake leaps to his feet and stands in the truck bed facing the preoccupied surfers. He throws his arms up and shouts into the salty breeze at the top of his lungs, “My girl’s AMAZING!”

After watching the sun dip below the waves, they slowly drive back into reality. Jake knows that homework, nagging parents, and silent tension await him at home, but for the next few minutes, they savor the bliss of playful chatter and inconsequential gossip. Jake is fully engaged in Amy’s story about their teacher, Mrs. Denison, when he notices a kid walking alone under the glowing street light ahead. The load of books he carries seems heavy. As the truck draws closer, Jake realizes Roger by the obvious limp. Unpleasant reminders flicker into Jake’s mind, so he tries to refocus on Amy’s tale of Mrs. Denison’s great-great-uncle who was a serial killer and ran for president. But then Jake sees a group of neighborhood skaters whiz by Roger. One of them bumps Roger, and he stumbles. Several of his books tumble to the ground. The kids don’t stop to apologize or even look back. Almost instinctively, Jake moves to pull his truck over, but then a sudden warmth on his leg compels him to look back at Amy. She is sliding her hand along his thigh; then

she waits. And whatever happened back there on the sidewalk suddenly doesn't seem so important. Jake folds his arm around Amy and pulls her close. She's the only thing on his mind now.

After Jake finally drops Amy off, he rolls his truck into his driveway and floats into the house, an elegant two-story custom in an exclusive neighborhood. As he opens the front door, he hears it: the muffled arguing of his parents from the bedroom upstairs. *I should have known*, Jake growls to himself. He doesn't even bother to turn on the lights, and his good mood dissolves as he starts up the stairs to do his homework.

Jake shoves his bedroom door open, sending a basketball flying across the room into a corner. He flips on the wall switch and slumps down on the bed, reaches for his backpack and yanks out a notebook, a pencil, and a worn math text. He bites down on the pencil and flips through the pages of the math book, but when he finds the page, he just stares at it. He takes the pencil out of his mouth and doodles around the quadratic equations, then stares a little longer into space. He flips over on his back and gazes at the ceiling, his head lying in the open book on his bed. The dark house is so heavy with frustration and the echoes of angry shouting, it's even seeping into his bedroom under the door. *Forget this*. Jake rolls to the floor, grabs his basketball from the corner, and bounds back down the stairs, leaving the math book open on the bed with the pencil in the binding. He jumps over the last two steps and lands hard on the wood flooring, adding a cynical *thump* to the hostility in the air.

While many of the other guys enjoyed the popularity more than the game, Jake had truly lived and breathed the sport since he could remember. The soft worn leather of his ball is a caress nearly as sweet as Amy's. Its bounce is always true, predictable. He savors the power of its response as

it springs through his legs, behind his back, and around his body down the street to the neighborhood court.

With no one around to hear him, Jake becomes his own commentator under the lights. "Louisville's down two with ten seconds to go...They inbound to Taylor who brings the ball up the court...As always, he's double teamed..."

A mere fifty feet away, a light shines from an upstairs window in the house across the street. Roger Dawson sits at his bedroom desk, typing intently on his MySpace page.

In times past, that lit window would have served as a beacon, calling Jake to its source. How many practice sessions had ended with Jake crashed on Roger's floor, tossing his ball in the air while complaining of the hardships of his young life. Since middle school, however, Roger's room had ceased being a sanctuary as much as an awkward reminder of Roger's accident. These days, the basketball court is all Jake needs to escape, and tonight he never even notices the light beyond.

Jake's reverie continues: "...There's no doubt in anyone's mind. Taylor is taking this shot...5-4-3... Taylor spins along the baseline, he elevates...2-1... Taylor throws up a three from downtown!" The ball swishes through the net. Jake's hands shoot up in celebration with the cheers in his head.

Far beyond Jake's concern, and in a much less celebratory mood, Roger, too, responds to voices only he can hear. He slips into his mother's room and searches through her nightstand drawer. When he finds what he's looking for, the cold metal touching his skin sends shivers through his heart. As Jake inhales the freshness of the evening breeze and shivers as it chills his sweaty body, Roger exhales as he finishes up his writing and shuts down his computer.

Jake dribbles home right past Roger's house, never noticing the bedroom light, even when it goes out.

Nine hours later, Jake and 2,500 other students converge on Pacific High for another day of the school routine. Jake strolls down Senior Hall, stopping to joke with some football dudes on the way to his locker. "Senior Hall" wasn't actually an official title, but for as long as anyone could remember, this was where the cool upperclassmen hung out. Those who weren't could just pass by. Everyone knew that stopping to "hang out" in Senior Hall was by invitation only, and the moment you scored one, your status climbed to new heights. Jake had been invited his sophomore year, as had Amy independently. They are now the very foundation of this esteemed part of campus. In fact, the table where Jake pauses to relive the highlights of last night's *SportsCenter* is the current collection center for homecoming votes, but he has no concerns. He and Amy are already a lock for this year's king and queen. While he's always denied caring, secretly he loves it.

And so, Jake reenacts Kobe's buzzer-beating fade-away jumper while his buddies interject their commentary, oblivious to Roger's limping entrance to his right. It's not like Jake would have acknowledged him anyway.

Roger's leg drags behind him, and his forehead is beaded with perspiration. A few inches more and Jake and Roger's paths would collide, but instead, they pass without interference or recognition.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

People scream, scramble like disturbed ants, and drop to the ground for cover. Light fixtures shatter, spraying the hall with glass. A girl shrieks from

behind a bank of lockers, “He’s got a gun!”

Jake finds himself face-down on the hallway carpet, partially barricaded by the tipped-over homecoming table. He peeks around the edge, and his eyes dart from face to face, searching for the source of all the chaos. He shifts his body to scan the rest of the room for the shooter. Or shooters? All around him is a cacophony of terror, but inside Jake’s head, the deafening rush of blood drowns it out. *This is so surreal*, he thinks—something that happens on TV, on the six o’clock news, in other cities, other schools, not right here, right now.

But it is indeed happening, and Jake cannot find the perpetrator. Where are Clyde and the rest of school security?

And then, Jake sees him—in the middle of the hall, pointing his gun in the air, black hoodie pulled over his head. Even with his back turned, Jake immediately knows it’s Roger. The pulse in his ears quickens.

What is Roger thinking?

Jake’s stomach lurches, and he forces himself to his feet, inching toward the hunched, black-clad figure of the boy he grew up with and had once called friend. Ten feet away, his shaking legs quit on him. He doesn’t fully recognize the cracked voice coming from his own mouth.

“Roger! Dude, what are you doing?”

Roger spins around, bitter hurt in his eyes. “You.”

“What are you doing?” Jake tries to hide his fear.

Roger’s face twists into a sardonic smile. “What does it matter?”

“We’re friends.”

“Yeah,” Roger repeats with a smirk. “Friends.”

“So put the gun down,” Jake begs as he inches again toward Roger. “Rog, you don’t have to do this.”

Roger gazes into Jake's eyes and utters four words that will haunt Jake for months afterward.

The pounding in Jake's head overwhelms him as he watches four security guards, Clyde at the front, crash through the doors behind Roger and rush the shooter. With a trembling arm, Roger raises the gun to his own chin.

"NOOOOOO!" Jake yells, deafened by the final crack.

A sobbing groan escaped Jake's throat as he banged his head against the unyielding grave stone. *What now?*



THE SHARP MORNING sun blazed into Jake's eyes, and he squinted as he turned into the Pacific High student parking lot. He pulled his truck into his usual spot, turned off the ignition, and took a deep breath, yet the strength to get out evaded him. So he remained crumpled in the driver's seat, gazing at the scene with detached interest, as if he was watching it on television.

Sitting on a hill a mile away from the ocean, Pacific High School was like any other campus, except for the killer view. The only explanation for how the school had scored such a prime piece of real estate was its hundred-year history—a century ago, there wasn't much else going on in town. But despite the daily view of breaking waves and dazzling sand, the hordes of crapping seagulls reminded everyone that living close to the beach wasn't always as fine as an episode of *Baywatch*. Jake had been lucky so far, but he knew other "experienced" students who carried an extra shirt in their backpacks. Today, however, seagulls were the least of the students' problems.

Everyone was returning to campus for the first time since Roger Dawson's shooting spree two weeks before, and Jake was dreading it. He stared at the students clustered around campus, greeting one another with hugs and exclamations. Most seemed to have enjoyed the unexpected time off and appeared tanned and relaxed. But for Jake, it had been anything but a vacation. He had nearly suffocated from the tension at home, between his parents' fighting and thoughts of Roger raging in his head. And instead of catching up on sleep, he'd spent each night tossing and turning, replaying scenes from his childhood, from the shooting, from the funeral. The same question kept plaguing him: *Could I have done something?*

But sitting in his truck all day wouldn't help, so Jake finally pushed himself out, taking one last survey of the scene. Even if he could ignore his troubled thoughts, the caution tape surrounding Senior Hall, metal detectors at the front gate, and camera crews and reporters clamoring for student interviews served as a hideous and unavoidable reminder.

Surrounded by all the chatter, Jake wondered how everybody would respond. Would it be OK to laugh at a funny joke? Would all the teachers insist on doing a quick-write or discussion on what had happened? Would it ever be possible to hang out in Senior Hall again? And why did they wait two weeks to reopen the school, anyway? Was that how long it took to fix things, or how long it should take to forget?

Jake didn't think he'd ever heard of a school shooting where the student had only shot himself. If other students had been killed or even injured in the process, there was a clear protocol to follow. And if Roger had just killed himself at home—well, schools had dealt with suicide in the past, too. But had any campus ever had to address it so traumatically and publicly? And then, Jake considered, most people didn't even know Roger, anyway. So there they all were, stumbling around in an attempt to just move on.

Jake trudged toward the new line of security to enter the school and passed a reporter wrapping up her story live on the air.

“We’re here live at Pacific High School as students arrive for the first time in two weeks after senior Roger Dawson opened fire in the school hallway, then took his own life. Security has been heightened at the school with police presence, metal detector searches, and ID checks. Grief counselors are available to meet with students dealing with post-traumatic stress. We will keep you updated as this story—”

“Hi, Jake!” Some freshman hotties broke into his trance, wiggling their fingers at him and giggling from a few places behind him in line.

“Ladies,” Jake acknowledged with a head nod, falling naturally back into old patterns. Another kid waved at him, and Jake smiled back. As he slowly folded into his old routine, the tension he’d been carrying for the past two weeks started to melt away. Each step forward brought him closer back to his life before the tragedy, and it felt good.

Once he got through the metal detectors, Jake headed toward his locker on the other side of campus. A couple of JV basketball guys standing by the chem labs knocked knuckles with him as he walked by, as did some of the water polo dudes by the pool. At the art quad, even the emo-goth crowd acknowledged Jake with a tip of the chin. A strut started to fill Jake’s step. He was Jake Taylor, after all—captain of the basketball team, homecoming king, and in only a few short months, he would leave all this behind to start his new life at Louisville.

He passed the band room, behind which the usual group of potheads were puffing away at one last joint before the school bell rang. Band wasn’t a popular class at Jake’s school, so the hallway was pretty empty, and the first-floor stairs tended to hide the group from the security crew. But today, Jake was kind of glad to see them—just one more sign that today could be business as usual. The gang nodded his way and offered him a puff. Jake had actually joined them once or twice in the past, but since accepting the Louisville scholarship he wasn’t taking any chances. So he winked and waved and kept on walking.

Passing by a group of girls, Jake couldn’t help but overhear part of their conversation.

“I was so scared,” the short one with dark hair gushed. “I mean, did you see him?”

“I know!” her curly headed friend chimed in. “He was like, so evil. I thought I was going to die.”

A third one questioned, “Did you even know who he was?”

Jake was out of earshot before that question was answered, but it didn’t matter. Instantly all of the frustrations he’d carried since the day of the shooting came flooding back. Jake winced, and he found himself wanting to shout at them, “*He was Roger Dawson. He was a senior, and he was my best friend!*”

But he didn’t. He didn’t even slow his pace. Instead, his legs moved faster, trying to outrun the voices crowding back into his head. *Maybe these feelings will just go away*, he tried to convince himself. They had to—he couldn’t live like this forever. He’d just made it five minutes without thinking about Roger. That was progress. So Jake just kept smiling back at everyone who sought his attention, maintaining the picture of a guy who had it all together.

He stormed the glass doors of Senior Hall, teeth clenched but head held high. He marched through, trying to stay focused, but the fateful hallway whispered to him. He couldn’t help wondering what final thoughts went through Roger’s mind as he walked through those very same doors. Now the scene replayed itself more vividly in Jake’s mind, and his head ached with all the scenarios of how he could have stopped it—should have stopped it. Jake’s fingers squeezed his temples to stop the throbbing, and his eyes closed. Suddenly he sensed he was about to run into something, and he swerved to avoid the head security guard, Clyde Will, standing two feet away.

“Taylor!” Clyde barked, jolting Jake out of his head games.

Jake was pretty sure he’d heard all 756 rumors about Clyde circulating Pacific High: ex-con from somewhere back east, former UFC fighter, played a stint for the Harlem Globetrotters, retired Navy Seal—the list was endless. Jake (and many others) had asked the buff, six-foot-five, tattoo-covered security guard numerous times to reveal the truth, but it seemed Clyde enjoyed the mystery. Jake didn’t know what to believe. Maybe the big

man was simply a security guard who cared about the kids he was always prodding to class.

“Hey, Mr. Will.” Jake tried to sound casual.

“I saw you at the funeral. Didn’t know you were a friend of Roger’s.”

“From a while back,” Jake mumbled, dreading where this was going. He thought about asking Clyde how he knew Roger, but he really didn’t want to get into it with so many people walking by. *Maybe another time.*

“You doing OK with this?” Even Clyde’s gruff voice couldn’t mask his concern.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s cool,” Jake lied, looking around at the craziness that was typical for Pacific High two minutes before the tardy bell. Students hurried to unload their backpacks into lockers, couples gave goodbye kisses that would help them survive a whole hour apart, and teachers stood by their doors trying to break the couples up. Jake’s eyes lingered at the far corner of Senior Hall; already all his buddies were there hanging out like nothing had happened. He shuddered.

“You sign up for a counselor yet?” Clyde motioned to a sign-up table a few feet away.

Jake caught a glimpse of the nearly blank page. “Nah, I’m good.”

“You should,” Clyde replied, his eyes piercing Jake’s soul.

“I’m cool, man.” Jake brushed him off. This conversation needed to be over.

“There you are, dawg! You hear they’re finally opening up the gym for the game?”

Jake spun around to see Doug strolling up, showing off his hand where a girl he’d just met had scribbled her phone number. His swagger and infectious smile screamed coolness—even the three-week-old goatee he sported looked like it belonged there. And as he rolled obliviously over the very same spot Roger had stood two weeks ago, a realization flashed before Jake: *Doug is everything Roger was not.*

Jake's friendship with Doug had always revolved around sports. They first met on their sixth-grade soccer team. Doug was the all-star goalie who, thanks to an early growth spurt, was able even as an eleven-year-old to fill the entire goal. In Little League, Doug was catcher to Jake's fiery pitches, and their team almost made it all the way to Williamsport. Pop Warner was another field where they triumphed together. But for both of them, their first love was basketball. They dominated the local basketball leagues all through junior high, and it was always understood that they would someday co-captain the Pacific High Pirates.

In addition to his athletic prowess, Doug's other self-proclaimed expertise was women. He bragged he could get any girl's phone number in less than five minutes. While Jake had been with Amy for three years, Doug had jumped from blonde to brunette to redhead every couple weeks for most of their high school career. Pacific High had a long list of broken hearts, thanks to Doug Moore. Jake had challenged him many times to just try and settle down, but Doug always playfully responded with a smile and a "Come on, now, that wouldn't be fair to the ladies."

Jake enjoyed their friendship, and right now it was a welcome relief. The thoughts whirling around in his head—well, they were definitely not something he wanted to talk to Doug about. Jake stepped away from the counseling table and knocked knuckles with his buddy.

"Wait. You? Signing up to see a shrink?" Doug joked.

"Are you kidding me? No!" Jake wondered if his grin was convincing enough. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Clyde shaking his head.

"Good. The team doesn't need you wiggin' out on us." Doug slapped Jake on the chest.

Keeping up the grin, Jake reassured him, "This...right here." He pointed to his head. "The wig-free zone."

Clyde placed his strong hand on Doug's shoulder, but his eyes burned through Jake, and his somber voice was clearly

intended for Jake's ears. "Nothing wrong with seeing a counselor."

"Chillax, Clyde," Doug coolly mocked the security guard, putting his own arm around him. "No one's going loco."

"OK, amigo." Clyde began to move away with a shrug, but his stare pleaded with Jake one last time.

Doug's hands pointed like six-shooters at his hips. "Palabra."

But Doug's attention was suddenly distracted by a passing underclassman wearing a tight shirt that revealed every detail of her petite frame. Forgetting all about the present company, Doug side-stepped into the path of the unsuspecting girl, causing her to run right into him.

"Hola, Stacy!" he crooned.

As Doug exchanged witty repartee with his new target, Clyde called out to Jake and motioned toward the counseling table. "Just think about it, OK?"

Jake barely nodded his head, and the security guard went back to work herding students into class before the late bell rang.

Doug was scribbling out the old phone number on his hand and inking in the new one underneath. He turned back to Jake, one eye still on Stacy as she flounced away.

"What about the other girl?" Jake pointed at the crossed-out number.

"Who?" Doug laughed, kissing his hand with a flourish.

Through the glass doors, they watched as scurrying students trampled over the caution tape as they hurried to class.

"This place is creepy," Jake remarked under his breath.

"That kid was just lucky I wasn't there."

"I was. It wasn't like that."

Doug softly slapped Jake's cheek. "Why are we still talking about this? That freak made us give up three games."

“Dude, shut up,” Jake brushed his hand away, annoyed. “It was intense.”

Doug stared at Jake. “What’s intense is the El Capitan full-court press.” He gave a cocky smirk to end the subject.

The school bell rang, and they knocked knuckles one last time before parting to go to their first-period classes. Jake turned toward the English building where Mr. Gil awaited him. Showing up a few minutes late to class was just one of the privileges of being a star athlete.

As Jake turned a corner, a copy of the Pacific High Enterprise lay on a nearby bench. There, on the front page, was a giant picture of Roger. Jake stared at the picture; if he hadn’t known better, he would have sworn Roger was staring right back.

4

THE PACIFIC HIGH gym was full beyond capacity for the final game of the season. Students overflowed onto the floor and along the walls. Normally, the administration would have stopped selling tickets due to fire codes, but even they were making exceptions tonight, allowing whatever it took to help the school move on with life. The Pirates each wore a black wristband in memory of Roger, but even the principal had admitted she didn't know who he was.

School spirit was high, erupting like a long-inactive geyser. Green and black pompoms fluttered everywhere, and air horns blared. The marching band filled the air with a riot of crashing cymbals, burping tubas, and strident trumpets, all of which melded into the sea of bodies and reverberated off the walls. Some juniors started a wave that surged around the gym fourteen times before faltering. At the top of the bleachers, seven chanting senior guys danced shirtless with the letters P-I-R-A-T-E-S painted across their chests. A visitor would have never guessed what had transpired just weeks before.

Unfortunately, while the Pirates had previously been on the cusp of making the section playoffs, three forced forfeits de-

stroyed that dream. Still, this game was against their cross-town rivals, the El Capitan Wildcats. EC had already locked up the No. 1 seed for the section, but Jake and the rest of his senior teammates couldn't think of a better way to end their high school careers than with an upset win.

The intensity of the game was a great escape for Jake. He was in the zone, his private world, where the only thing that mattered was that sympathetic orange ball. His troubles from the past few weeks were left in the locker room; nothing was going to disturb his concentration. Besides, he had something to prove tonight: The last time these teams had met, it was an El Capitan romp which Jake remembered like an old injury. Sitting alone in the locker room after the shellacking, Jake had promised himself that next time the teams played, the outcome would be different, no matter how poorly the rest of his team played. So tonight, in his gym, he only had one thing on his mind: revenge.

Jake waged his private war with ferocity. He was the only player on the court who had already signed to play Division I college ball, and his ability to find the open man and consistency in knocking down fade-away jumpers kept the Pirates in the game, even when the other guys struggled. The Wildcats shot out to an eleven-point lead in the first quarter, but the Pirates crawled their way back by half-time, thanks in part to strong play in the paint by Doug, but even more to Jake's above-average seventeen points and eight assists.

Jake's ability to create success out of nothing had snagged the scouts' attention as early as his sophomore year. Since then, he'd been interviewed by more college coaches than he could remember. At six-foot-one, Jake wasn't as big as most college-level players, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in hustle and hard work. Jake always seemed to see what others missed. He executed what he saw like an artist, making the others look good. He was every coach's dream. Still, there was only one school Jake ever dreamed of playing for. When the full-ride offer came from Louisville (a juggernaut in the world of college basketball), Jake easily made the fated choice.

With three minutes to go in the fourth quarter, the game was close, both teams swapping the lead back and forth. The gym had grown steadily louder with every Pacific basket until now, the noise was deafening. Of course, Jake heard none of it, remaining safe in the steady realm of his head. He sensed his guys were being buoyed by the wave of cheers, so he just kept pushing it. But while Jake was the heart and soul of his team, he still couldn't win the whole thing alone, and time was running out.

With just nine seconds on the clock, the El Capitan power forward stepped to the foul line to shoot his second free-throw, which would give the Wildcats a one-point lead. SWISH. Since the Pirates had no timeouts left, the ball was immediately inbounded to Jake, who raced up the court. He single-handedly broke the full-court press but couldn't shake his defender. Oblivious to the 1,500 fans on their feet screaming at the top of their lungs, Jake checked out his options, then locked eyes with his opponent.

"Four high! Four high!" he yelled to his teammates.

He head-faked right, crossed-over left, and flew by the sticky El Capitan defender toward the basket. The entire El Capitan defense collapsed on his attack. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Jake spotted his open man.

"6 - 5 - 4..."

Leaping from a foot inside the free-throw line, Jake delivered a behind-the-back pass to a not-quite-ready-but-wide-open Doug underneath the basket. Doug shot the ball hard off the backboard, sending it ricocheting off the front of the rim and into the crowd of defenders.

"3 - 2..."

Reacting quicker than a cobra strike, Jake crashed the board right into the middle of the much-taller El Capitan defense. His fingertips brushed the errant ball, tipping it toward the rim. His body was sandwiched by two EC guys, their momentum knocking him hard to the wood floor. The final horn sounded, and a suspenseful hush fell over the crowd as they

waited for the ball's decision. From the ground, Jake breathlessly watched it dance around the rim. Finally, unaware of the significance of its next move, it dropped nonchalantly through the net.

The gym exploded. Random articles of clothing flew into the air. Strangers embraced indiscriminately. The bleachers bled out onto the court, and the tide of bodies swept Jake up. Before he knew it, he was floating above the masses on someone's shoulders.

After handshakes with the opposing squad, hugs from half of the student body, interviews with the local media, and an emotional team meeting (where the coach told every guy on the team that he was like a son to him), Jake was finally alone in the Pacific High boy's locker room an hour later. His legs ached from playing all thirty-two minutes, his shoulder throbbed under a bag of ice from his crash landing, and a bump pulsated on the back of his head. And he felt just a little empty. After all, this was it—his days as a high school basketball star were over. With a tinge of sadness, he heaved his body off the bench, hoisted his Louisville duffle bag over the glacier on his shoulder, and slowly made his way down the long row of benches toward the door. His fingers traced the coolness of the lockers, and he took one last wistful look around. Finally, he emerged into the brisk Southern California spring night.

Scattered chattering clusters of basketball fans still remained. Jake discreetly scanned the small crowd of people looking for two specific faces but, as usual, his parents weren't there. He had become so accustomed to their lack of interest that he didn't usually even look anymore; but tonight was different. It was the last game of his high school career. His mom and dad had been on some business trip, but they had promised to be back in time. Nevertheless, Jake had already learned what a promise was worth from them. At some point during his freshman year, he just stopped inviting them to games. It was easier not to care. *Forget them*, he thought. At least Amy would be waiting for him.

As he turned toward the parking lot, something caught his attention about a guy chatting with one of Jake's teammates. Wearing an El Capitan hat and Pacific T-shirt, the guy looked strangely familiar. He held the hand of a cute little boy, who was giving everyone passing by a free high-five. The kid's dark complexion and tight curls didn't resemble the man at all, but they still looked related. Jake puzzled over how he knew him.

He couldn't be a scout—there was no way he'd be talking to Danny Rivers, the worst player on the team. *Maybe the man is Danny's supplier*, Jake chuckled. He wouldn't put it past Danny. On a team of only twelve guys, even though Jake really didn't know him that well, everyone knew about his habit. Rather than hanging out with the other jocks, Danny preferred the stealthy company of the stairwell potheads. *To each his own*, Jake figured and kept walking.

Danny didn't seem too interested in the conversation and was just leaving as Jake passed by.

"Good season, Taylor," Danny muttered.

"Yeah, good game, man," Jake replied automatically.

"I didn't play," Danny chuckled.

"Oh, yeah. Well, you know what I mean." Jake slowed his stride to allow Danny to walk by in front of him. Even though they were walking toward the same parking lot, Jake wanted to avoid a longer conversation.

Jake glanced back to the mystery man, who was now whispering in the little boy's ear. Jake racked his brain trying to figure out why the guy looked so familiar.

The man finally made eye contact. "Nice game, Jake!" He strolled over, hands in his pockets. The kid ran ahead to give Jake an enthusiastic high-five.

"Do I know you?" Jake asked, scrutinizing the guy's face.

"Roger's funeral."

"Oh." The memory of that miserable day flooded back. It felt like a toxin. But it was too late to run away, so Jake glanced around to see who was in earshot. "You're that priest."

The man chuckled as if Jake had told a joke. “You’re that point guard,” he countered. “My friends call me Chris.” He extended his hand, adding, “And this is my son Caleb.”

“Hey, Caleb.” Jake smiled at the boy and shook Chris’ hand. Caleb grabbed his dad’s leg and shyly waved back.

“What’s with the hat?” Jake scowled a little at Chris’s EC ball cap.

Chris smiled and took the hat off. “I know guys on both teams.” Under his breath he added, “Your last shot cost me \$20.”

“Seriously?” Not the words Jake expected from the mouth of a priest.

“No, I’m just playin’. It would have been a good gamble, though.”

Jake nodded, not exactly sure how to take this guy. *Isn’t gambling a sin? Are priests allowed to make jokes about stuff like that?*

“Sorry, man. My wife says I crack too many jokes.” Chris pulled out a card from his wallet and offered it to Jake. “Anyway, I just wanted to introduce myself.”

“I-I don’t know, I’m not really religious.” Jake hesitated.

Chris smiled back. “Neither am I.”

What is that supposed to mean? Jake wondered and awkwardly laughed, stuffing the card into his pocket. As he floundered for a polite exit, Amy appeared out of nowhere.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she chided playfully. She was still wearing her cheerleading makeup, but she’d changed into a silky tank-top that mesmerized Jake. He couldn’t help but let his eyes roam over her flowing curves, down her tiny denim skirt that left her long, slender legs bare. She was wearing her little black high heels, which Jake loved; they made her almost as tall as him, and he loved it when she draped her arms around his neck and looked him straight in the eyes with that gaze that told him she was so into him.

She enveloped him in her warm arms, tenderly kissing his lips—and completely ignoring Chris and Caleb.

“Did Doug thank you yet for bailing him out?” She pulled back slightly, her soft finger lightly tracing the contours of his face.

Jake suddenly remembered that Chris and his son were still standing a few feet away. Hyper-aware of Amy’s arms still draped around his neck, Jake turned her body to face them. “Amy, this is Chris.”

Chris extended his hand to shake, but Amy kept her arms tightly wrapped around Jake and just smiled. Jake wasn’t an expert in non-verbals, but he was pretty sure Amy had just told them that they could leave now.

Chris appeared to get the message, picking up his son and placing him on his shoulders.

“Everybody’s waiting for us,” Amy added, urging Jake with her eyes to come.

“Well, it was nice meeting you.” Jake politely offered his hand to Chris while slowly turning his body and full attention back to Amy.

Chris took his hand and held it firmly. “I know what you’re going through,” Chris said softly. “If you ever want to talk—”

Jake patted his pocket to signify that he had the number and gave a half-smile. Chris finally wrapped his arms around his son’s ankles and walked off.

Amy pulled her body even closer to Jake. “Who was that?” she asked, a little too loudly.

“Just some guy.” He looked back one last time at Chris walking away, then turned to Amy and swung her delicate body around until they both got dizzy.



IT WAS NEVER a question of *if* there was a party Saturday night—it was *where*. Some parties were bigger than others, but two things always remained constant: loud music and lots of alcohol. Inevitably, some student would announce to a couple of friends that his parents would be out of town for the weekend, and before you knew it, the place was packed with teenagers. Invitations weren't necessary; everyone just understood who was welcome and who was not.

It was always easy to find the hosts: They were usually the ones running around telling people to keep the music down, begging slobs to clean up after their own mess, and pretty much not enjoying themselves. Hosting one of these parties was a big responsibility, but it also could bring great rewards. For the lucky ones who managed to get through the evening without too much damage, the prestigious reputation was well worth it.

Tonight's party was at some sophomore named Emily's house. Or was she a junior? And was her name even Emily? It didn't matter. Saturday night was Party Night, and this weekend there was a big basketball win to celebrate. This always

meant more people and more booze. Cars were parked everywhere, legally and illegally, filling the cul-de-sac and surrounding streets of the upper-class suburban neighborhood. Hopefully none of the neighbors would need to get out.

Jake and Amy parked at the end of the next street and could hear the music pounding from the party house as soon as they stepped out of Jake's truck. Jake honestly wouldn't have minded going home to his empty house and just watching *SportsCenter* (with Amy, of course). The ache in his legs had seeped through his whole body, and he knew it would only get worse. But as the star of the game, his absence from the party would not be tolerated. So Jake inhaled the cool air and stretched his neck, pumping himself up to join in on the action.

He took Amy's hand and started walking, but she resisted, tugging him toward her as she leaned against the tailgate. He turned to face her, a curious grin playing at the corners of his lips. *Maybe this won't be so bad.*

She cocked her head and smiled, toying with the zipper of his jacket. Her fingers dropped to his beltline and lightly rubbed the bare skin underneath his shirt. He shivered and pulled her into a bear hug, loving that she knew just what he needed.

Jake still had to pinch himself every once in a while to make sure Amy wasn't just a dream. She could have her choice of any guy on campus, yet for some reason she chose Jake, and she'd remained faithful to him for three years. Before they became a couple—toward the end of freshman year—Amy unabashedly described herself as a boyfriend-shopper. She had never gone for more than a week or two without falling in love with the next guy in line. But with Jake, she told people she had finally found a guy “worth buying.” Jake didn't know he'd been for sale, but he sure didn't mind being bagged. Sometimes guys teased him that he was whipped, but he knew that any of them would jump onto Amy Briggs' leash at the first opportunity. And Jake loved being the guy she really wanted. It was almost as big a boost as basketball.

“You were amazing tonight,” Amy admired. “Did you hear me cheering for you?” She squeezed his biceps and added in a whisper, “You were so hot out there.” Her breath tickled Jake’s ear.

“Yeah, you looked great, too,” he responded, choosing the words he knew would make her happy. He bent to kiss her neck, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair, and wrapped his hands around her tiny waist.

Amy playfully pushed him away. “You weren’t really looking at me during the game, were you?”

Here was a test that would affect the rest of the evening. “I was! I swear!” Jake lied. Then he thought of a good one: “Why do you think the game was so close? I couldn’t focus.”

Amy giggled, wrapping her arm around Jake’s waist and pushing herself away from the truck. Jake draped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer. They walked the empty sidewalk, bumping hips goofily as if they were tied together in a drunken three-legged race. In a second, he’d have to put on his cool face, but for the moment, he would enjoy their silly side.

Amy was sexier than chocolate, but she was also more fun. His favorite times with her were away from the rest of their friends, when they could be a little crazy—like chasing seagulls down the beach at low tide, or seeing who could swing the highest at the park behind her house, or watching the Spanish TV channel on mute and creating their own dialogue (and then wrestling over the remote until neither of them cared anymore what channel they landed on).

Turning the corner into view of their peers, they smoothed their gait and glided toward the thumping house. Discarded cups and empty beer bottles littered the neighbors’ driveways and lawns as the party spilled into the cul-de-sac, and Jake and Amy were hailed by a chorus of the semi-cool kids relegated to the outer limits of the action. Teens with half-filled plastic cups of beer greeted Jake with unintelligible words of affirmation as he passed. Garbled shouts celebrated his fierce play, praising his sweet shot, glamorizing his heroic fall, and pumping him full of the recognition he craved. Some of the

guys roved Amy's barely clad body with their eyes, boosting his strut even more. His hand gripped her shoulder, silently but firmly reminding them all that Amy was his. His brief conversation with that Chris-guy had left him unsettled; it was good to be back in stride.

At the front door, self-appointed bouncers Matt and Tony welcomed them. "Reporters finally done with you?" Matt joked, knocking knuckles with Jake.

"Those guys at ESPN just won't leave me alone," Jake kidded back, but he continued to push through the crowd. Amy tugged Jake's arm toward the dance floor but he shook his hand free and let her go off on her own while he searched for the keg. He had to loosen up a bit.

Doug elbowed his way through with a couple of beers held high. "The party has arrived!" Doug slurred loudly, apparently well into his party-night routine. Jake grabbed one of the red plastic cups and downed it in a few gulps.

Doug raised his cup and shouted over the fray, "Can I get your attention everyone?" The music stayed loud, but Doug was louder. "Last night, yours-truly bricked a last-second shot that really was a lot harder than it looked." He ignored the chuckles. "Anyways, our main-man Jake here saved my—saved the day." He paused, then swung his cup higher. "To Jake...who always has my back!"

The masses raised their cups in unison and shouted back "To Jake!" They swallowed reverently, then went right back to whatever they were doing.

Doug belched and leaned heavily on Jake's shoulder, pulling an orange flyer out of his back pocket. "Check this out, Taylor." He waved it in front of Jake's face.

Across the top of the flyer, big letters announced "Wizard Wars Party" with the location and date the same as their party. In a scribbly font at the bottom, the caption "Costumes Mandatory" was underlined several times.

Jake was confused. "Wizard Wars?"

Doug's drink sprayed from his mouth as he laughed. "It's

some game geeks play. I gave this to a loser at school. He swore he'd come."

Jake shook his head. "You're crazy, man." He crumpled the paper and let it fall to the floor, heading to the kitchen for a refill.

A few more refills later, Jake and Doug still sat perched on the kitchen counter next to the keg. As Doug yapped incoherently, the realization wandered across Jake's mind that he'd lost track of Amy. He scanned the hordes just in case someone else had her on the dance floor.

Noticing Jake's wandering eyes, Doug agreed, "Lots of beautiful honeys here tonight."

One of them meandered by, brushing Jake's knee and giving him the eye over her tanned shoulder.

Doug whistled, "Ay seniorita!"

Their eyes followed her to the next room, which was packed with writhing bodies. In the middle of it all was Amy. Her skimpy top had somehow adjusted to reveal even more of her toned abs, and her belly-button jewel twinkled among the pulsing arms and legs. Jake moved toward her. It was time to reclaim his prize.

"You are one lucky man, Taylor," Doug drawled a little too loudly into Jake's ear.

Jake chugged the rest of his beer and sloppily shoved the side of his friend's head. "Go get your own, dude."

As he left, he missed Doug's mumbled reply: "But she's the one everyone wants."

Jake nudged through the crowd and winked at Amy as he approached. She drew him in like a magnet, and finally they meshed together as one. Unfortunately, Jake's ability to dazzle on the basketball court did not translate into coordination on the dance floor; but Amy's natural rhythm more than made up for it. He slid his hands around her waist and swayed along with her. What the basketball court was to him, the dance floor was to Amy. It was as if she were in another time and place as she moved her body in perfect rhythm to the music.

But while the beer had left Jake relaxed, it made Amy more intense. “Hold me,” she whispered in Jake’s ear.

Of course, he didn’t refuse, though he felt a little light-headed. She turned her back toward him and latched her soft arms around his head. He encircled her as the feverish music pulsed. All the troubles of the world were melting away.

Jake had no idea how long he’d been there, but all of a sudden he tuned in to Doug’s familiar voice calling once again for everyone’s attention.

“Check out this fruitcake!” Doug cackled over the crowd. In the doorway, Doug posed next to a young black-haired stranger dressed in a full wizard costume—starry robe, pointed hat, magic wand, and all. His dark eyes pierced Jake’s from under his purple hood. He held a trembling orange paper, as if for proof that he belonged.

“Hey, hey, what level are you?” Doug prodded, eliciting laughs from the rest of the party. “You gonna cast a spell on me?”

The guy just stood there, frozen. His eyes glistened and his lip quivered, but his feet seemed glued in place.

Normally Jake would have been standing right next to Doug sharing in the prank, but not tonight. Tonight, Jake found himself ticked off. He was irritated at Doug. He was fed-up with the room full of drunks who had nothing better to do than laugh at this kid who just wanted to fit in. Even more than that, Jake was angry with himself. As upset as he was, he found himself doing absolutely nothing. *Why can’t you just leave him alone?* Jake screamed in his head, but his voice locked up in his throat. He just kept staring at the poor kid. *Why are you still standing there?*

Even though the kid was the center of everyone’s attention, Jake could swear the kid’s eyes were fixed solely on him. His gaze bore through Jake until he had to flinch and look away. Jake knew those eyes; they were just like Roger’s. Their horrible confrontation weeks earlier snapped back into Jake’s head as if it had never left, and he winced as it replayed again and

again. He narrowed his eyes in anguish and let his head drop.

The group had one more laugh as the boy finally turned away with a stifled sob, and Doug slammed the front door behind him. Jake jerked his head up and stared at the door, briefly considering running after him. He needed to prove he was different from the rest of these idiots, that not everybody was so cruel, that he—

Amy's hands crawled under his shirt as the music pounded unabated by the visitor. All other thoughts vanished at the touch of her fingers running along the elastic of his boxers and her warm breath whispering in his ear. She grabbed his hand and led him through the throng of bodies toward the staircase. She had his full attention, and he quickly surrendered to the opportunity at hand. At the bottom of the steps they passed Doug and Matt, who leered and gave Jake a knowing nod.

Halfway up, the staircase turned, and Jake paused momentarily on the landing, grabbing the railing to balance himself. He scanned the hordes partying mindlessly below. *Is this all there is?* his conscience questioned. But Amy kept tugging, and his troubled brain kept pushing, so he left the overlook and followed his girlfriend's invitation down the hall.



“IT’S THE PO-PO!” Matt yelled, startled out of his lethargy by the red and blue lights flashing through the front window. A heavy pounding on the door sent the students rushing the exits, knocking over everything and everyone in their way. Matt took one last gulp from his cup before tossing it aside and joining the chaos headed out the back doors.

Three cops busted through the front door and tried to block the exodus. Five more outside mopped up the students who thought they’d escaped. Students who attempted to drive their way out of trouble were caught by squad cars blocking the road, and many of those escaping on foot were impeded by their own lack of sobriety.

Upstairs, Amy scrambled to put her clothes back on. Jake had passed out as soon as they were done and was only now rising into semi-consciousness. Still naked under the covers, he groaned and put a pillow over his head. His head was already throbbing, and the muffled sirens and screams didn’t help. Amy ripped the pillow out of his grip and cursed under her breath. Jake’s eyes tried to follow her as she scurried around the room picking up their clothes, but it just added to

his headache, so he gave up.

“Do you hear the police? Get dressed!” Amy warned, throwing Jake’s jeans at his head.

Jake laughed and threw them back at her. “One more time!” he pleaded.

Amy angrily threw the pants back, harder this time. “I’m not kidding! Let’s go!”

“You know you want me...” Jake drawled with a sluggish smile.

Amy stomped over, glaring at him. Grabbing his hand, she tried to pull him out of bed, but Jake ripped his hand away, causing her to lose her balance and fall into the dresser.

Jake giggled. “Oops.”

“What is your problem?” she snapped.

Jake winked. “You’re stressing me out.”

She picked up his jeans for one last try, and his keys dropped out onto the floor. “Screw it!” she muttered and bent over to pick them up.

Jake still couldn’t understand the urgency and was distracted by the view down her blouse. “Baby, c’mon,” he grinned, reaching out to her.

Amy stormed to the door. “If you want to get caught and lose your scholarship, be my guest.” She peeked out into the hall and quietly slipped away.

Jake lay there while he came to his senses. When the reality of his situation hit, he spent a few seconds shouting obscenities into his pillow before sitting up. He was far from sober, but he managed to find his clothes and as he got dressed, he pictured the cops parading him downstairs totally naked. For a second, he actually considered letting them do it. *That’d give them a show.* He sputtered a laugh at the thought.

After much exertion, Jake stumbled toward the door, his shirt inside out, shoes untied, and jeans half-tucked into his socks. He peered through a crack in the bedroom door down

the staircase. *Ugh!* Standing guard at the front door were two policemen talking with the homeowners, who stood with arms crossed next to a set of luggage in the entryway. Jake knocked his head against the wall and cursed.

“We told her she could have a few friends over,” the mother cried, taking in the junk heap that her home had become.

“Are you sure you caught ‘em all?” the dad growled.

One of the policemen glanced up the stairs. “We’re doing a full sweep of the house right now—almost done.”

Jake cursed to himself again and silently closed the bedroom door. On the other side of the room was a sliding-glass door that opened to a small balcony. Jake stepped out into the dark and gazed over the railing. It was about a ten-foot jump to the cement patio below in the backyard. He crawled over the side and hung on like an awkward octopus, trying to coordinate his landing. Finally, he just jumped, hitting the ground hard and rolling onto his back. He choked back a groan, clutching his ankle.

A light switched on in the bedroom above. Jake forced himself to his feet and limped into the darkness of the backyard. At the side of the house, the wooden gate leading to the front was locked. *Just my luck*, he whined to himself, but movement on the other side caught his attention, and he peeped through a crack in the slats.

At the end of the long driveway, lined up on the curb, under the watchful eyes of a handful of cops, sat dozens of his classmates. He looked for Amy or Doug or Matt, but they were nowhere in sight. He groped through the pitch-black along the fence until he felt a cinder-block wall. With much pain and little grace, Jake lugged his 195 pounds of stiff, drunk muscle over the wall head-first, falling with an aching thud on the other side. *It could be worse*, he chided himself, sneaking through the neighbor’s yard and staggering away.

He re-emerged onto the street four houses down and one street over from the party. He slowly crept back along the path he and Amy had playfully walked together just hours earlier.

But when he got to the spot where he'd parked his truck, all he found was empty pavement. Even with all the beer in his system, Jake knew he was in the right spot.

"Amy!" he groaned and dropped to the curb. A police car drove by, and he ducked down into a shadow.

What had happened to tonight? Just a few hours earlier, he had been carried off the basketball court as a game-winning hero, and now here he was wasted, sitting on some curb, dodging the police, and stranded with no ride home.

Jake pulled out his cell phone. Amy was the last person he wanted to talk to, but who else could he call?

He tried Doug. He heard the ring, and then, "Hola! Doug here..."

"Doug, where are you? I'm still at the party—"

"Gotcha!" the voice mail interrupted.

Jake punched the "End" button and almost chucked his phone across the street—that stupid recording had fooled him at least a dozen times before.

Jake whipped through a list of names.

"Matthew, where the hell are you? Come pick me up!...Ha! Your grandma calls you Matthew..."

"Tony! Where are you, man? Don't leave me hanging."

Jake stood up and started pacing.

"Hector-hector-bo-bector. Banana-fana-fo-fector..."

"Bobby-boy! Hey! This is Jake. Sober up and pick me up."

"Deon-tae. Dude, where's your car? Ha! Call me...or text me...or help me..."

His voice sunk in misery.

"Jimbo!"

"Damian..."

"Joe?"

Each call ended the same—straight to voice mail.

“Aarrrrggghhh!” he finally exploded. Either all his friends’ cells had been confiscated on their way to lock-up, or they were all sleeping soundly in the comfort of their own beds. At this point, he hoped for the first one.

Jake banged his phone against his head and slumped down again on the cold cement curb. He debated attempting the long walk home, but his ankle was starting to swell from the jump. *Why did I drink so much?* Shaking his head in disgust, Jake stared down at the ground between his knees. There in the gutter lay the business card from that priest guy, Chris. It must have fallen out of his pocket with his cell phone.

Jake picked up the card and tried to get his eyes to focus on the type: *Chris Vaughn, New Song Community Church, Youth Pastor*. A cell number was listed underneath the title. Jake was about to flick it away, but something stopped him. His fingers rubbed the letters back and forth, and he read the name over and over. Finally, he opened his cell one more time.

“What the hell,” he mumbled.

7

CHRIS AND CARI snuggled on their ugly maroon garage-sale couch. Wedged between them was Caleb, fast asleep in his Spiderman pajamas, Alfredo the monkey tucked under his arm. Cari's eyes were moist as she sat engrossed in the *The Sound of Music* while Chris ran his fingers through his wife's tangled curls and watched his son's chest rise and fall with every precious breath. He'd assumed one of the perks of having a son would be renting more action/adventure movies, but so far, this had not been the case. Tonight's classic was the flip-side of a tough deal—Cari had approved of the boys going to the basketball game if, and only if, she got to pick the movie. Their premarital counselor had never warned him of the perils of a deal like that.

Still, if he was truly honest, he was enjoying the movie, and as the Von Trapp children reunited with the smiling Julie Andrews, something wet rolled down his cheek.

"Urgh! I hate chick flicks," he muttered, wiping at his eyes.

"Your secret's safe with me..." Cari whispered, adding with an elbow jab, "...girlie boy."

Chris waved his hand in front of his face and blinked rapidly. “No, seriously, I think some kind of bug flew in my eye.”

She nodded knowingly and nestled her head in the crook of his neck.

They both jumped when Chris’ cell phone rang, and Cari paused the DVD so Chris wouldn’t miss anything.

“Who’s calling at 11:30?” she complained, gently scratching her husband’s back with her fingernails.

“Hello?” After a moment, a long sigh escaped Chris’ throat. “I’ll be right there,” he conceded and hung up.

Cari sat up as Chris stuffed the phone into his pocket and threw his EC hat back on. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“Another drunk kid,” he sighed again. “Guess I shouldn’t have gotten the car detailed.” Although the call was unexpected, these kinds of late-night outings weren’t really foreign territory.

Chris grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. As he reached for the knob, he sensed he was being watched. He turned around to see Caleb standing in his bare feet and Spiderman pajamas clutching his little jacket from the coat closet just like his daddy.

“Where are you going, Daddy?” he asked, half-asleep and rubbing his eyes.

Chris hoisted his son in the air and carried him down the hall to his room. “Daddy’s got to go help a friend.”

“Can I come?” Caleb’s arms draped around his dad’s neck.

“I’ll tell you what, big man. You go to sleep now, and we’ll go to Costco for lunch tomorrow.”

Caleb’s eyes lit up. “Samples!”

Chris nodded and smiled. If his son were always so easily pleased, this parenting thing would be a piece of cake. He carried the boy over to his race-car bed and gently slipped him underneath the comforter, brushing untamed curls off his forehead and kissing him.

“G’night, Daddy,” Caleb murmured, folding his hands across his chest and shutting his eyes tight the moment his head hit the pillow.

Chris paused in the doorway, thanking God for Caleb as he always did when the boy was safe in bed. Then he trekked back into the living room, where his wife was folding their blankets and carrying the popcorn bowl back into the kitchen. He intercepted her, spun her into a pirouette, and dipped her dramatically, leaning over to kiss her goodbye and grab one last handful of popcorn.

Sill hanging in mid-air, Cari looked deep into his eyes. “Honey, I’m proud of you.”

He kissed her again. “Life of a youth pastor,” he shrugged. But he knew he didn’t have to explain it to her. He pulled her up and sent her into another twirl, then winked. “What a ride!”

Eight years earlier, Chris had used the same line when he dropped to one knee in the middle of Knott’s Berry Farm. They were still woozy from the jolting wooden roller coaster, Ghost Rider. He’d told her that, while he could not promise that they’d ever be rich or famous—or that he would even always have a full head of hair—if she’d only say “Yes,” he would promise that every night they’d be able to look at each other and say, “What a ride!” He had definitely delivered on that one, and those three words had become their mantra, evoking happy memories of their wonderfully crazy life together.

Cari swatted Chris’ backside on his way out. But before Chris could make it out the door, Caleb reappeared, Alfredo the monkey in tow.

“Caleb, I told you we’d hang out in the morning.” Chris adopted the sternest air he could, squatting down to look his son in the eye.

“Good moe-ning!” Caleb smiled mischievously.

Chris did everything he could to stifle a chuckle as he silently pointed back to Caleb’s bedroom. Caleb hung his head and moped back down the hall, dragging Alfredo behind him.



JAKE FELT LIKE he'd been sitting on that cold curb for hours, but it had really been only seventeen minutes when a greenish Toyota Corolla pulled up alongside him. In the flickering streetlight, Jake jumped to his feet, but the effects of too much alcohol and standing up too abruptly caused him to lose his balance, and he nearly fell a few feet short of the door. Too drunk to get embarrassed, Jake regained his equilibrium and stumbled into shotgun, greeted by a surprising whiff of orange and pine.

"Thanks," Jake said in a voice that sounded a little too much like Bullwinkle.

"A few too many?" Chris probed.

Jake laughed too loud, and a belch slipped out.

"Whew!" Chris waved his hand in front of his face. "What's up with Louisville?" he asked, pointing to Jake's red shirt.

"Basketball for the Cardinals, I'm playing—tweet tweet." He giggled at the sound of the word "tweet," then groaned because it hurt his head.

Silence filled the car like cotton balls, and the street lights whooshed by in a blur. Jake pressed his forehead to the cool window and closed his eyes. Passing on the obligatory small talk was okay with him.

But Chris shattered the quiet. “I’m curious...why did you call me?”

With great effort, Jake lifted his head—it now felt like a bowling ball on his neck—and turned to Chris. “Friends ditched me; parents would freak out.” He pronounced the words carefully, waving his hands like an orator.

Chris nodded. “What about your girlfriend—Amy, wasn’t it?”

As if on cue, Jake’s phone rang, and Amy’s face appeared on the caller ID.

“Speak of the devil,” he snickered, rejecting the call. Turning back to Chris, he shrugged. “She took my truck. Take a right at the light.”

Chris turned the corner into Jake’s neighborhood and let out a chuckling sigh. “Not your best night, huh?”

“I’ll drink to that!” Then, remembering that he was talking to a minister, he stuttered, “I mean, yeah.”

Chris started to pull the car over to the curb. Jake was confused. “This ain’t my house.”

“I know.”

Jake squinted out the window through his headache at what was once Roger’s mailbox. His heart began to pound, and he started gasping for air, but couldn’t seem to get enough. So he just stared at the dark house beside him, the particularly bleak and judging second-floor window staring back.

Chris turned the car’s engine off. “Tell me about you and Roger.”

Jake was caught off-guard, and his reflexes pushed back. “What do you care?”

Chris absorbed Jake’s pointed response with a ragged ex-

hale. “I just can’t get him out of my mind.” His fingers danced nervously on the steering wheel, and his eyes stared blindly into the swallowing darkness. “Roger came to my youth group once. The Sunday before—” His voice echoed in the car. “It must have been a last-ditch effort. And yeah, I talked to him—I shook his hand and moved on to the next kid.” He beat his palm on the steering wheel. “There he was, going through hell and hoping that church or God might be the answer—” His voice broke, and he could only muster a whisper. “It didn’t work. We...I... missed him. We let him down.”

Already softened by the beer, Jake found himself disarmed and his burdened heart unleashed by Chris’ confession. “There was a kid at the party tonight,” he blurted out. “They didn’t let him in because he wasn’t—he wasn’t cool enough.” He paused as the dam in his heart cracked even more. “Can you believe how messed up that is? He wasn’t cool enough?”

The weight Jake had been carrying for weeks melted and flowed from his soul. He couldn’t stop now, and he didn’t try. “The other guys didn’t want Roger around, so I ditched him. They’d mess with him, and I didn’t say anything. It was every day. I’d see him walking to school or in the halls—I didn’t even say hi. I was...too cool.” Jake’s voice finally collapsed, his eyes fixated on Roger’s lonely bedroom window.

They sat together in silence for several seconds. Then Chris quietly added, “I know what you mean. We have to own how we treated him.”

Jake turned to face Chris. “I was his only friend. And I—” He interrupted himself, half-hoping Chris would absolve him of his sins, or at least give him some spiritual words of advice to make him feel better.

Chris did neither. “So we’re both living with regrets.” He shrugged, turning the ignition. The car pulled forward. The street snaked around before them, and they drove deeper into the neighborhood as the homes became increasingly exclusive. “Which one is yours?”

“Around the corner. 1535. On the left,” Jake answered weakly, exhausted all of a sudden. But he couldn’t help asking

one more question. “What did you mean when you said you weren’t religious?”

Chris smiled as he pulled up to Jake’s house, the biggest one on the street. “I’m not religious because that’s not what it’s about.”

“But aren’t you like...a priest?” Jake persisted.

Chris chuckled. “Come by tomorrow morning and see for yourself.”

“I don’t know, man,” Jake retreated, speaking under his breath. There was no way he was going to church tomorrow.

“Not really your thing?”

Jake just shrugged.

Chris raised one eyebrow. “Well, neither is leaving my family on a Saturday night to pick up a drunk kid.”

“Touché,” Jake smiled. He deserved that.

“The service times and map are on the back of my card.” Chris shook hands for their second goodbye of the evening, and Jake stumbled out of the car.

“Thanks again, man,” Jake said, waving a little.

“Anytime. See ya tomorrow,” Chris winked, and the car grunted down the street into the darkness.

Jake couldn’t help shaking his head at the guy’s persistence. He limped quietly up his driveway.

Jake staggered into his room, flopped onto his bed still dressed, and was nearly asleep when his cell phone rang. He groaned and fumbled in his pocket to turn off the annoying song Amy had selected for her incoming calls. He would need to download a new one in the morning.

Four times later, Jake acknowledged she wasn’t giving up, but he was—at least for the night. He pelted the phone against the wall with enough force to stop the stupid song from ringing in his tired ears. Within seconds, he was sound asleep.

9

UNLIKE THE AVERAGE teenage guy, Jake was incapable of sleeping in. His buddies would brag about waking up at one or two or even five in the afternoon after a late-night party, but Jake could never stay in bed past nine. This especially stunk after big parties because, while others could sleep their hangovers away, Jake got to experience the last few hours of his fully awake. *Why did I drink so much?* he always asked himself as he stumbled to the bathroom with a migraine crushing his skull. The only remedy that ever worked was a lot of aspirin and a resolution to continue with his normal routine, despite his misery.

This routine always included grabbing the newspaper from the driveway and reading every detail from the sports page. Jake was pretty sure he'd never even glanced at the other sections unless there was a natural disaster or something.

Jake peeled the sports section out of the paper, tossed the rest of it on the kitchen table, and poured his normal bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios. Of course, the story that first caught his attention was the full-page spread on the cover that featured him getting clobbered by two El Capitan players as the ball

crawled over the rim for the winning shot. The title underneath captured the moment like a Polaroid: “Taking One for the Team.”

That was less than twelve hours ago. Jake’s mind sped through the eternity that had occurred since then, and he shook his head. He scooped a spoonful of cereal and glanced at the contents of his pockets, now littered on the counter from the night before. He lamented his missing keys in the pile of his wallet, gum wrappers, lint, and a business card.

Jake picked up the card and spun it around his fingers, trying to decide whether to take it seriously. The conversation from last night echoed through his throbbing head, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe this Chris guy could help him get rid of those annoying Roger-thoughts that wouldn’t stop. *It can’t hurt*, he finally conceded, and flipped it over to see the map on the back. Underneath it, Chris had handwritten:

*Come check us out
at 10:45*

The microwave clock read 10:27. Jake sighed indecisively and stabbed his spoon into the cereal bowl.

Just then, the front door opened and his parents trampled in, finally home from yet another business trip. As usual, they were arguing. Jake stuffed the card into his back pocket and stared into his breakfast.

His mom walked into the kitchen looking weary from their red-eye. Still, she was beautiful. Jake got most of his good looks from his mother; at age forty-five, she still made heads turn, although Jake was pretty sure his dad had stopped noticing.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Pam Taylor greeted her only child on her way toward the coffeepot.

Jake glanced up. “How was your trip?”

“Sorry we missed your game. I tried to get back in time last night, but Dad had so much work and he missed his flight. He landed the big beach condo account,” she replied.

“Where is he?”

“I see you were the last-second hero again.” Jake’s father entered the kitchen at his normal volume: loud. He slapped his own copy of the newspaper next to Jake’s.

His dad had aged well, too, and his good looks paired with his natural charisma had led him down a very successful path. With over fifty people working for him in three Southern California offices, Glen Taylor was already a millionaire several times over. The high-rolling lifestyle suited him well. The combined price of the Rolex on his wrist and the briefcase at his side probably could have clothed a small village, and then there were the countless suits, dress shirts, and ties hanging in his closet. He was a member of the local country club, cigar club, and flying club, and had recently talked about buying a boat and joining the yacht club. He got invited to prestigious parties and events, had friends in high places, and pretty much could have anything he wanted. He was a self-made man living the American Dream, and it seemed to Jake that he was riding it for all it was worth.

The only problem was he worked all the time, and he never really seemed to enjoy the accomplishments. Jake and his mom certainly did, but they had repeatedly assured him they would settle for a much simpler lifestyle if it meant he’d be home more often. Jake had given up on that dream years ago, but judging from so many of his parents’ arguments, it appeared that his mom had not.

While many parts of his dad frustrated Jake to no end, he always found himself striving to impress him. Or at least that’s what the shrink had said that one time they went for “family counseling” back in junior high. Sometimes Jake felt like a fly

going back for more honey, even though he kept getting stuck in it.

“Oh, Dad, it was perfect.” Jake stood up and reenacted his game-winning shot. “When that ball came off the rim, it was crazy! I just knew where it was going. And just as I was tipping the ball, these guys totally hacked me, and I hit the ground hard, and then—”

His dad slapped him on the back. “You’ve got a lot going for you Jake. Don’t be stupid with this kamikaze ball.”

Jake froze. *Would it have been so hard to say “nice shot”?*

“Do you know how easy it would be for you to lose your scholarship? Not like you’d get in with your grades. You’ve gotta be careful, son.”

Jake sighed. This was his old man’s favorite subject, and Jake sensed he was in for another sermon. But then, just as abruptly as he had walked in, his dad looked at his watch, slapped Jake lightly on the cheek, and headed toward the front door.

“I’m late. I’ll call.”

Pam barely managed to hand him a freshly toasted bagel and a clean tie. She was always trying to keep the peace. But Jake knew the truth: When his parents thought they were alone, they were anything but peaceful.

“You’re working on a Sunday? You guys just got home,” Jake yelled after him, partly for his dad to hear, but mostly just to yell.

Glen called back, always with the last word, “Someone’s gotta pay the bills, kid.”

Jake turned back to his mushy bowl of Cheerios, milk splashing on the table as he whisked it angrily with his spoon.

“What your father means is we’re proud of you.”

Jake looked up at his mom, who was wearing her smile like a fake ID. “Yeah,” Jake grumbled. “I really felt that when he came to that ONE game!”

“It’s been real busy at the office, Jake.”

“Mom, quit defending him.”

“He just—”

“He just doesn’t get it. This isn’t his life. It’s mine.”

It was obvious his mom wanted to say something, but she didn’t. As usual, she took no one’s side; she just picked up his unfinished bowl of cereal and took it to the dishwasher. Pam was a neat freak in the worst way. She seemed physically unable to leave something out of place, and her favorite companions were a bottle of Windex and a roll of paper towels. The shrink had called it a “coping mechanism.”

Oh well. Jake wasn’t in the mood for soggy Cheerios anyway. He grabbed his wallet and stomped to the door.

“Where are you going?” his mom called after him irritably.

“I’m going to church!”

Slamming the front door made Jake feel better for a second, but the empty driveway stirred him up again. He’d forgotten that Amy still had his truck. His hangover rushed back with a vengeance, and he glared at the sky, the street, the whole world.

Maybe the walk would do him good.

10

JAKE HAD DRIVEN by the old warehouse a million times but had never given it a second glance until this morning. Now he was standing in the parking lot, staring at the large red sign that said “New Song Community Church.” This looked nothing like the old church he used to visit with his grandma on Christmas Eve. *Aren’t churches supposed to have a steeple and stained glass?* Jake looked down at the T-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops he’d thrown on in his hung-over stupor. Was he supposed to be wearing a suit or something?

He started to have second thoughts about walking in, but before he knew what was happening, an old bald guy strangely resembling a bowling pin grabbed his hand and began pumping his arm like the lever on a slot machine. If the guy wasn’t careful, remnants from last night’s carousing and this morning’s cereal might be the jackpot.

“Hey! I’m Marv! Welcome to New Song! I’m so glad you made it. Come on in!” the guy gushed. Had he been waiting for Jake? Who was he? He could have been a greeter at Wal-Mart if he exchanged his outrageous Hawaiian print shirt for a blue vest.

And then the bowling pin hugged Jake! Jake tried not to cringe. He wasn't sure he knew exactly what a cult was, but this sure felt like one. Unable to escape, Jake let the happy guy lead him toward the entrance of the church. They walked together through the front doors and across the nearly vacant lobby. Another smiling man, this one with a shock of red hair, gave him a brochure, a pen, and a smile that beamed with weirdness.

Jake peeked in another door that led to a big auditorium. A man whose voice reminded him of his dad's deep baritone stood talking on stage in front of rows of chairs filled with listeners—some young, some old, some dressed-up, some not. He started to step inside, when a hand grabbed his elbow and spun him around.

"Jake Taylor? What are you doing here?" It was pothead Danny Rivers. He sounded almost accusing. Jake wasn't sure which one of them looked more surprised.

"What do you mean?"

Danny leaned in with a smirk. "Well, it's not like you're, you know, the church type."

"Uhhh, I'm just looking for Chris," Jake whispered back. Danny wasn't exactly the church type either.

"Vaughn? He's back here."

Danny led Jake back through the lobby, where a stoop-shouldered gray-haired woman tottered up to them. She grabbed both of Danny's hands like he was her long lost grandson.

"Tell your father I just love his preaching. I can see it in your eyes—you are going to be just like him." The woman gave Danny a wobbly pat on the cheek and shuffled back into the service.

"Your dad's the priest?" Jake marveled.

"Yeah, something like that." Danny frowned.

"How did I not know this?"

Danny shrugged as they turned the corner back to the youth area. “It’s not like it’s something I’m proud of.”

They passed a donut and coffee table, where Danny grabbed two old-fashioned glazed and ignored the jar requesting a fifty-cent donation. They walked toward a hallway where a peppy Filipina was sitting on top of a welcome table littered with leftover nametag stickers and markers.

“Jake, right?” she asked as she scribbled him a tag. She was cute, but definitely a little weird: Her rainbow-striped tank-top was paired with a camouflage skirt and army boots, and her multi-colored bangle bracelets reached all the way up to her skinny elbow.

“Yeah,” Jake responded, realizing for the first time that he was still wearing sunglasses. He took them off and casually placed them in his back pocket. He hoped his eyes wouldn’t give away his late-night activities. The bright fluorescent lights pierced his lingering headache, and he tried to conceal a grimace. Apparently his long walk in the fresh air hadn’t done as much good as he’d hoped.

The girl stuck out her hand. “I’m Andrea; welcome to Souled Out. Here’s a nametag.” She smiled warmly.

Jake took the sticker adorned with his quickly scrawled name and embellished with a smiley face. He let his fingers play with its stickiness. He hadn’t needed one of these things in a long time. And he wasn’t sure he wanted everyone to know his name today.

“Didn’t know it was Rainbow Bright day,” Danny scowled as he turned to walk into the youth room.

Quicker than a hummingbird, Andrea grabbed Danny’s hand and gave him the biggest, sweetest puppy-dog eyes. “Ohhhh, you didn’t get my call? Don’t worry, you can borrow this.” She slid one of her three dozen colorful bracelets onto his wrist and gave him a wink.

Danny ripped his hand away and kept walking.

“Thanks.” Jake waved his nametag to signal he was good to go.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Andrea smiled genuinely. Her whole face lit up with an inviting warmth. Jake was used to being greeted wherever he went, but not with this same geniality. He could feel his tentativeness slowly eroding.

“That girl freaks me out,” Danny muttered, his mouth stuffed with one last bite of donut. He threw his new bracelet into a garbage can next to the door and directed Jake to an old couch in the back of the room. The room was bigger than it looked from the doorway, extending forward to a wide stage where Chris stood talking behind a tall microphone on a stand. In front of him sat rows and rows of high school kids, some in chairs, some on the floor, and some sprawled on ugly, stained couches that lined the back wall.

“Where’s your nametag?” Jake whispered to Danny.

“Everybody knows me here,” he growled back.

On Danny’s approach, other students sitting on the couch scooted apart to make room; some even slid off to sit on the floor. Jake sat down next to Danny and slipped his nametag into his back pocket. A few girls in the back row smiled over their shoulders and silently mouthed, “Hi Jake,” then turned around giggling. A guy sitting next to one of them put his arm snugly around her and pulled her closer with a grunt.

Up in front of the room, Chris seemed to be incredibly passionate about whatever he was talking about. He was definitely dressed up nicer than the night before, but his jeans and polo shirt were a far cry from the suit and weird collar-thing Jake had seen priests wear in the movies. Jake leaned back into the worn couch and did his best to listen in on the end of Chris’ message.

“So in closing, let me ask you guys, what would you do for \$20? Would you French kiss a dog?” Groans echoed from around the room. “How about this—would you take your mom to the prom?”

Some kid in the front turned to his neighbor, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. “I’d take your mom—she’s hot.”

The whole room burst out laughing as the student raised his hands feigning innocence.

Chris walked over to the guy and knocked knuckles with him. “Thanks, Billy,” he winked, then whispered loudly, “but she’s way out of your league.” He turned back to the whole group. “We would do a lot of crazy stuff for \$20...But what would you do for a penny? Kiss your dog? Take your mom to the prom?”

The whole group looked to Billy, who said nothing.

“What’s crazy is that we treat people the same way. Some are worth our time and some we just pass right by—like they’re worthless.”

At this, Jake leaned forward, surprised at his own interest.

“See, in this story we just talked about, this guy gets jumped, and two people walk right past and won’t help him out. How many times do we do that? We just give a head nod and keep walking. Why don’t we help? Why don’t *I* help? Sometimes I just don’t know what to say, or I don’t want to get involved.” Chris sat down on a stool next to him on stage and looked silently at the group. Jake could have sworn he was looking straight at him.

“This past week, I conducted Roger Dawson’s funeral.” Chris pulled a framed copy of Roger’s senior portrait off his music-stand podium. Without saying a word, he stood up, walked across the room, and hung the picture on a nail right next to the door. In a much softer voice, he continued from the back of the room. “You may not have known that he came to our group the Sunday before he—” Chris pinched his eyes for a moment to regain his composure.

Those thoughts Jake had been trying to stuff down all week swelled as if on cue, and he shifted in his seat, hoping nobody noticed.

“It’s easy to cast blame. But last week, Roger looked at his life and said, ‘I’m not worth it.’ Whatever he had hoped to find here, he obviously didn’t.” Chris’ voice had faded to almost inaudible, but suddenly he erupted. “Do we get this?!...The consequences are huge if we miss it.”

Jake's head jerked back, filled with images of that terrible day in Senior Hall.

Roger is standing in front of him. The gun in Roger's hand trembles, yet it dares anyone to challenge him.

"You don't have to do this, man."

Roger looks Jake straight in the eyes and mouths those four words...those four awful words. He raises the gun to his chin.

CRACK!

Drums shattered the memory, and Jake's eyes sprang open. Perspiration beaded along his forehead, and the hair on the back of his neck stood stiff. Chris had finished, and magically a student band had appeared on stage. Everyone around Jake stood up and began clapping with the music. He noticed Andrea, the techni-colored nametag girl, was on stage singing passionately into a mic next to another girl Jake recognized from the pot crew. He thought her name was Kelsi, and he was pretty sure he had seen her wasted at the party last night. Yet here she was this morning, hands up in the air and eyes closed, singing fervently for all to see. Jake awkwardly attempted to clap like everyone else but felt like a seal at the circus. He endured a couple minutes and then made a beeline for the door.

He had made it halfway through the lobby, dodging the smiling bowling pin guy and the redhead arranging the coffee table, when he heard a familiar voice call his name. Jake reluctantly turned to face Chris, who was hustling around the corner to catch him.

"You made it!" Chris smiled breathlessly.

With nothing else to do, Jake shook Chris' extended hand.

"You OK after last night?" Chris asked.

While Jake appreciated the help from the night before, he begrudged the fact that Chris now had the upper hand. "Sorry I was late," he stammered.

"Hey, I'm just stoked you're here!"

Stoked? Jake hadn't heard that word since at least middle

school. “Um, I liked your speech,” he said.

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

From behind Chris, Danny’s dad walked up and interrupted their awkward conversation.

“Chris, I need to talk to you for a sec.” He sounded urgent.

“Yeah, yeah, but first you need to meet Jake. It’s his first time here. Jake, this is Mark Rivers, our senior pastor.”

Looking annoyed, Mark gave Jake a half-smile and a weak handshake. Jake took a stab at breaking the ice. “Yeah, I know your son, Danny. I’m on the basketball team with him.”

“That’s nice. Chris, a word?” Mark pulled him away, leaving Jake standing there alone.

Jake shifted his weight. Could he just leave? That didn’t seem quite right. He watched the dialogue between the two men from across the lobby. The way Chris stood and listened reminded Jake of himself when his dad was on a roll lecturing him. *What could Chris have done wrong?* Before he could observe too much, Chris was back, smiling but obviously a little rattled.

“Sorry about that...Girlfriend still got your truck?”

Jake nodded with a wry grin.

“I’ll tell you what. Give me ten minutes and I’ll give you a ride.” Chris patted him on the shoulder, then quickly retreated in time to meet the mass of students exiting the youth room.

“It’s high-five Sunday, guys! Slap me some skin! Joey! Sierra! Mike! Ronnie! Max! Ryana! How’s it hangin’ Larry-boy?”

Jake just stood and watched all this. This place was weird, but something about it was oddly appealing.

The ten minutes was really more like twenty, but eventually the crowds dissipated, and Chris was finally ready to go. Out of nowhere, Chris’ curly headed son bounded up and attacked his dad.

“Roarrrrr! I’m a polar bear!” Caleb announced as Chris swung him up and around in a circle.

"I thought you were a grizzly bear," Chris reminded him.

"I am a grizzly bear!"

"Well Mr. Bear, do you remember Jake?"

"Roarrrr!"

"How old are you, Caleb?" Jake asked the only question he could think of.

"Three!" Caleb shouted, holding up four wobbly fingers.

Chris folded Caleb's pinky finger down. "The boy's good at sports, not so much at math."

Jake smiled.

"Is he coming to lunch?" Caleb pointed at Jake.

"What do you say, man? A quick detour on the way home? It's on me."

Jake had nothing else planned for this afternoon, but this was a little strange. *Oh well, why not? It's free food.* "Uh, okay."

Caleb started squirming in his father's arms and reaching away from him. Jake followed his gaze and saw a pretty African-American woman walking up.

That explains Caleb's looks, Jake thought.

Cari grabbed Jake's hand in a firm shake. "You must be Jake. Chris told me you might be here. Did I overhear you were joining us for lunch?"

"I think so."

"Well, I apologize in advance," she grinned.

What did that mean? Jake puzzled as they walked out to the car together.

11

CALEB STOOD UPRIGHT in the shopping cart, clinging to the sides for balance as Chris pushed him down the aisles of Costco. Cari shook her head watching her boys play another round of their favorite supermarket game. The rules were simple: Shake, turn, and twist the cart in any way needed to get Caleb to fall. So far, there had been no serious injuries, so Chris happily continued the rodeo with no interruptions from Mom. Cari and Jake flanked either side of the cart, each with a hot dog in one hand and a soda in the other.

Chris sprinted ahead, zigzagging through the oncoming traffic, jerking the cart back and forth until Caleb nearly spilled out onto the cement floor. Cari gasped, but Caleb stood firm and squealed with laughter. A middle-aged woman with a cartful of groceries gave Chris a nasty look as she passed, but Caleb kept pleading for more. So without warning, Chris spun the cart around 180 degrees and joined back up with Cari and Jake. Caleb remained upright and grinned in satisfaction.

“I’m tellin’ you, this is the best deal in town!” Chris exclaimed for the seventh time. “And we haven’t even gotten to the best part yet!” He nudged Jake with his elbow.

Jake marveled at his situation. His family would never have even considered eating lunch in a warehouse store. On the rare occasions the Taylor family did go out to eat together, it was always at the country club or a fancy restaurant that required Jake to dress up. They certainly never had *fun* on these outings—there were only the forced conversations about the weather or work or school, and then inevitably his dad would see someone he knew and go talk with them while Jake and his mom watched their food get cold. If Jake was really lucky, he might get to enjoy another of his father’s famous lectures on the importance of hard work. But now, Jake was honestly kind of enjoying himself, in a very unusual, slightly out-of-his-comfort-zone kind of way. As he tried to walk and talk holding the cheap hot dog drenched with ketchup and onions, he couldn’t help wondering how things would be different if his family exchanged their expensive dinners for ones like this.

Caleb’s gleeful squeal interrupted Jake’s thoughts. “Daddy! Faster!” Caleb pointed forward, gripping the sides of the cart even tighter.

Chris jolted forward, finally throwing Caleb backward in the cart. “That’s one point for Daddy!” Chris bragged to his three-year-old.

“Chris!” Cari scolded.

Chris cocked his head with innocence. “That was fun, huh?” He reached in the cart and gently pulled Caleb upright.

“Do it again!” Caleb shrieked, laughing.

“Do what?” Chris feigned ignorance.

Just as Caleb started to answer, Chris lunged the cart forward again. Caleb lost his balance and fell on his belly.

“Two points!” Chris cried again.

Cari looked at Jake and shook her head. “Men,” she sighed.

From his sprawled position in the cart, Caleb looked up and exclaimed. “Samples!” He scrambled to his hands and knees.

“Now this is what I’m talkin’ about!” Chris grinned to Jake

over his shoulder.

The Vaughn men made a beeline to a table, where a sixty-year-old server with a name tag that read “Beatrice” was slicing up French bread pizzas.

“I told you this was going to be a great day,” Chris rejoiced as Jake and Cari caught up.

Back on his feet again, Caleb spun around in the cart and gave his dad a high-five. “I’m a race car driver!” Caleb announced to the grandmotherly pizza-lady. Caleb was just too cute to resist, so she gave them each an extra slice. Caleb attacked her with a surprise hug, and she beamed. Chris grabbed yet another slice.

Jake watched the whole thing from a few feet back, head lowered a bit and fists stuffed into his pockets. He couldn’t decide if he felt uncomfortable or jealous.

“They’re shameless!” Cari smiled, grabbing Jake’s elbow and tugging him closer. She gave him a wink. “So this is the time where I go looking for laundry detergent. Can you try not to let my boys make fools of themselves too much?”

“You’re leaving me alone with them?” Jake only half-joked.

“I’m leaving you *in charge*.” With that, she turned the corner down the next aisle.

Nine sample tables later, the boys’ pace and enthusiasm had waned a little. Chris gave Jake a turn pushing the cart, to Caleb’s delight, and the kid promptly drew Jake into a conversation that was only barely intelligible. Jake thought it might have something to do with playing soccer with his dad, but it didn’t matter—as long as Jake dropped an enthusiastic “Oh!” or “Really?” every few seconds, Caleb contentedly kept the conversation going on his own. Jake had never spent much time with little kids, but Caleb was a blast.

At the frozen fish aisle, Caleb turned his babble to another sample-lady, and Chris leaned toward Jake. “Can I ask you something?” he asked.

“Shoot.”

“Why do you think he did it?”

Startled at the question, Jake’s lungs seemed to collapse, and he hunched over the cart handle. In spite of the chilly conditions in the freezer section, his hands started to sweat.

“I think we’re both asking ourselves that same thing,” Chris continued.

Jake looked around at the nameless faces all around him in the aisles, pushing their carts along, choosing items from the shelves, living their lives with blank indifference. His mind struggled for a response, the pain simmering in his chest. Finally, he said, “If Roger could just kill himself like that, what does that say about life?”

Chris nodded. “I know. Things like this kinda make you think.”

Jake frowned. This wasn’t the response he anticipated from a minister. *Isn’t he supposed to have the answers?*

They continued to stroll down the aisle, Caleb rambling off his new list of friends by memory. Jake walked in silence, waiting for Chris to fill the void. At the next sample table, Caleb grabbed a little cup of ravioli and presented it to Jake like a birthday gift. Jake took the cup without a response, so Caleb contentedly dug into his own, burrowing his nose and tongue in the sauce.

“What do you want out of life, Jake?” Chris suddenly asked.

A year ago, Jake would have responded without hesitating. But now... “I don’t know,” Jake admitted. “I’ve spent my whole life trying to be a sports star. For what? What’s the point? My dad’s successful, but my parents hate each other. They’re not happy.” Jake stared straight ahead as people passed them in every direction. He finally muttered, “At least Roger’s not hurting anymore.”

Chris stopped the cart and faced Jake. “Maybe life is more than that.”

Jake chuckled sarcastically, knowing where this was headed. “Oh, like what? God?” he quipped.

“That’s something you need to figure out,” Chris answered,

unabashed. And then a smile crept onto his face as his eyes locked in on something behind Jake. Jake turned around to see Cari approaching them from the right. Chris grabbed his shoulder. “Remind me to give you something in the car.”

Cari walked up carrying her box of laundry detergent, as well as a new pink skirt. Caleb turned to her and grinned over the side of the cart, covered in tomato sauce. “Oh my gosh, Chris!” Cari cried.

Chris glanced at his messy son, then smiled at his wife and gave her a wink. “Cute skirt!”

Back in the car, everyone laughed as the radio blared. “OK, OK, my turn,” Chris shouted, sounding the horn to get their attention.

“This should be interesting,” Cari grinned, flipping through the stations. She finally landed on the Oldies.

Jake could almost see Elvis gyrating as “Hound Dog” bounced from the speakers, and he had to laugh.

Cari nodded and pointed at Chris. Chris cleared his throat and crooned, “*You ain’t nothing but a hound dog, cryin’ all the time. You ain’t nothing but a hound dog, cryin’ all the time...*”

Jake cracked up, imagining Chris with duck-tailed black hair, swinging his hips in a white leisure suit cut to his navel. Then Cari abruptly pushed the power button, leaving only Chris’ voice to continue, “*Wellllllll, you ain’t never caught a rabbit and you ain’t no friend o’mine!*”

Caleb put his hands over his ears and wailed, “Daddy, stop!”

“Don’t tell me that wasn’t amazing!” Chris cried. Jake and Cari groaned, and Chris hung his head, pretending to be hurt.

As the car neared his house, Jake sighed with contentment. He couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed so much. He gave Caleb a final high-five and unfastened his seatbelt.

As Jake reached for the door handle, Chris said, “Looks like you got company,” and nodded toward Jake’s driveway.

Five feet away stood Amy, leaning against Jake’s truck, now

freshly washed and waxed. Her arms were folded across her stomach, her mouth was turned down in a half-pout, half-snarl. Her eyes shot fireballs. Chris waved to her, but she didn't respond.

"Do you think she saw me?" Jake covered his face with his hand and slumped down in his seat.

Chris smiled. "Good luck out there."

Cari turned around in her seat and looked Jake in the eye. "Look, I don't know anything that's going on, or who did what, or whatever. But us girls, we just want to be listened to." She reached over the seat and squeezed his arm. Jake nodded and slowly climbed out of the car.

"Can he babysit me?" Caleb asked, waving his pudgy hand at Jake.

"Hey, Jake!" Chris called out. Jake looked back into the car as Chris pulled out his own pocket Bible and handed it to him, along with a CD. "Take these."

"What are they?"

"Just check 'em out."

Jake took the gifts and slipped them into his back pocket. He shut the car door and turned to slowly walk the gauntlet toward Amy.

He measured each step, giving his brain an extra second or two to calculate a strategy. Jake knew from experience that his first words were critical to the outcome of the argument; his opening words had splatted like water balloons on pavement too many times before, but he convinced himself that today, he wasn't going to blow it. As his feet reached the truck, his eyes lifted off the ground, and he sat down on the bumper next to Amy.

12

“HEY.” JAKE TRIED to smile. Amy remained a statue, cold and unflinching. Strike one.

Jake stared straight ahead, evaluating his options. He decided to let her make the next move.

The seconds of heavy silence ticked by, like he'd pulled the pin on a grenade. Still, Amy didn't budge. Jake started to fidget. Out of the corner of his eye, he tried to read her body language, but he only got distracted by her tight blue tank-top with those lacy straps and her little white daisy-dukes on top of those long, golden-brown legs. Jake battled to stay focused, when he suddenly realized she always seemed to dress like this when they were in a fight. It couldn't be a coincidence. *Women never fight fair.* With effort, he put up his guard and looked away.

“Oh my gosh, Jake! Where have you been?” Amy finally exploded, getting up from the tailgate to face him directly. The little diamond pendant hanging around her neck winked at him, drawing his gaze. Again he fought back and concentrated on the neighbor's house over her shoulder.

“I don't even want to talk to you,” she fumed, crossing her

arms. “I’ve called you like a bazillion times, and you don’t even have the decency to...” Her voice started quivering a bit. “...To call back.” She dropped her arms to her sides, her slender fingers hanging inches from Jake’s knee.

Jake breathed in deeply through his nose. It was his turn again, and as much as he abhorred the thought of plunging deeper into the drama, he decided against faking an apology. He gripped the edge of the tailgate and glared at Amy. “I’m sorry—did I miss the part where you apologized for stealing my truck?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Amy sputtered. “You were acting like a complete idiot. Do you realize what you’ve put me through?” She re-crossed her arms, and her left spaghetti strap fell off her shoulder.

Jake waited for her to fix the strap, but her arms didn’t move, and he was riveted by that little piece of lace. Again his mind wandered. He attempted to refocus his attention, but even staring eye to eye, Jake had no response. Looking away showed his weakness, so he tried to piece back together what had happened last night while staying strong and defiant. Everything seemed so foggy all of a sudden. What exactly had he said and done? He’d definitely not thought about it from her perspective. It had seemed like any other party night, but maybe there was more to it.

“Say something!” Amy impatiently stepped closer, leaning over with her hands on his knees and her face right in his.

He kept his gaze at eye-level. If she got any closer, they would be kissing. *Is that what she wants?* Jake startled himself with the realization that he didn’t really want to kiss her.

“I went to church today,” Jake replied impulsively.

He had hoped this change in topic might release some of the tension; it didn’t. But it caught Amy by surprise. She removed her hands from his knees and straightened her back so that she was now a full two inches taller than the seated Jake.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, my dad used to do the church thing, and then he left us,” Amy scoffed.

Jake had never known Amy’s dad; he had left long before they ever met. In their three years of dating, she had only brought him up a handful of times. From what Jake could deduce, her dad simply decided he didn’t want to be the head of a family anymore. One day Amy had the normal mom and dad, and the next it was only Mom. Her dad had sent a birthday card each year; Amy kept them in the bottom drawer of her desk, all unopened. One time Jake had joked about opening the envelopes just to see if there was any cash inside—Amy hadn’t spoken to him for an entire day after that. Now she was comparing Jake to this man he knew she despised. Strike two.

“Amy, I’m not your dad,” Jake countered and stood up from the tailgate so he was face to face with her.

“Well, what’s going on, Jake?” she shot back. “You don’t go to church. And who’s that guy I keep seeing you with? You’re scaring me!” She turned her back to Jake and combed her fingers through her hair.

Part of Jake wanted to just reach out and grab her waist and enfold her in a reassuring hug. Instead he fought back. “What do you want me to do? Say I’m sorry? OK, I’m sorry for you stealing my truck!” His own aggressive tone surprised him, but seriously, what did she expect? He sank back down on his tailgate, causing the whole truck to creak noisily. Amy spun around, causing her other spaghetti strap to slip down, as well. Jake locked his eyes on her face.

“I’m sorry? I’m sorry! You don’t talk to me for almost an entire day, and that’s all you got?” Amy was now screeching. A tiny tear formed in the corner of her right eye and rolled down her cheek. She hastily brushed it away.

Jake was used to the raised voice, but not to the tears. Amy had no problem expressing herself, but she just didn’t cry very often, and never because of him. What was going on here? *How did I let this happen?*

Jake tenderly took hold of her hands and interlocked his

fingers with hers. He pulled her closer until their knees were touching. “Amy, maybe this isn’t the best time. I’ve just got a lot on my mind right now,” he whispered, trying to soothe her.

Amy retreated from Jake’s grasp. “What? About us? Is that it—you make love to me Saturday nights and then confess on Sundays? Is that the new plan?”

Strike three.

“Amy, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jake sighed. He placed his hands delicately on her hips, stroking the sides of her stomach with his thumbs.

“At least I talk!” Amy double-chopped Jake’s grip and turned her back once again.

Jake breathed in sharply. He hadn’t wanted to admit the raging in his mind over Roger’s death, but why not? His recent conversations with Chris had already started the dominoes falling, so Jake decided to tip a few more. *Maybe she’s right. Maybe talking about it would help. Maybe she could actually help me sort this out.* He took another deep breath, willing Amy to understand. “You know that kid who killed himself?”

“Yeah, so?” Amy didn’t turn around. Her tone and pose still oozed irritation.

“I knew him.”

Amy looked back suspiciously, as if trying to decipher whether Jake was actually sharing his heart or just trying to change the subject. “It’s sad,” she responded vacantly, “but seriously, it’s not like he—”

“Mattered?” Jake jumped in.

Amy turned around. “No. I was going to say, it’s not like he was your friend.”

“We were *best* friends,” Jake corrected, his heart starting to beat faster. It struck him that it was easier to talk about this stuff with Chris. *Why is this so difficult?*

Amy didn’t look like she was buying it. “Jake, we’ve been going out for three years. I never even met him.”

“We grew up together. His house is just around the corner.” Jake’s voice cracked as he pointed down the street. It suddenly occurred to him that his friendship with Roger had ended the very moment his and Amy’s had begun. Maybe that was why he struggled to share with her: Her beautiful face reminded him that he had chosen to focus on her instead of Roger. What if he had chosen differently? Would he still be with Amy? Would Roger be alive? Jake decided Amy didn’t need to help him answer those questions. He had made the choice alone, and now he would bear the blame alone.

Amy broke into Jake’s self-interrogation. “So your former friend almost kills people, and *you* feel bad.” Her voice was quieter now. “Get over it. It’s not your fault.”

Jake shook his head. “Then whose fault is it?” He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and stood back up from the tailgate to pace.

“Nobody. His. The parents. I don’t know.” Amy shrugged. Her irritation was melting into concern, and she grabbed his arm to stop his pacing, turning his body toward hers. She placed her hands on his biceps and added softly, “Jake, it wasn’t your job to watch over him.” She slid her arms around Jake and whispered coyly, “You can watch over me.”

Normally, this would have sent Jake’s heart racing, but now it had little effect. He withdrew and focused his attention on a single crack in the driveway. Maybe she could just pass the blame onto someone else, but he couldn’t. The anger about last night had subsided, but Jake was more bothered than ever. “I’ve just got a lot to think about,” he muttered.

Amy slipped her hands into Jake’s back pockets and pulled him even closer to her. Her straps still hung helplessly on her arms, allowing her tank-top to shift further and further down. “I know what you’re thinking about,” Amy smiled at him, pouting her lips.

This was her one look that Jake could decipher with certainty, and yet here he was, disinterested. Earlier that day, he had been talking to Chris about the existence of God, and it just didn’t feel right to now escape his plaguing questions by

going upstairs with his girlfriend. Even so, Jake wasn't one to say no, especially when she was saying yes. But really, what did that say about him?

Suddenly, Jake was aware of Chris's gifts resting in his pocket right next to Amy's fingers. He let her hold him for a few awkward moments, then pulled back.

"Do you think there's a God?"

"What?" Amy removed her arms from around his waist and fixed her spaghetti straps as if they'd just fallen. "You're acting so weird," she groaned, resting her hands on the top of her head.

They stood there in the driveway, looking anywhere except at each other. This wasn't exactly where Jake had envisioned the conversation going, but she was the one who had complained about him not talking. Silence settled like soot between them, neither making the next move. Finally, Jake closed the tailgate on his truck. "Come on, I'll drive you home." He instinctively reached in his pocket for his keys, but Amy still had them. He weakly smiled. "Can I have my keys?"

"No," Amy shot back, pulling his Louisville Cardinals keychain out of her back pocket and throwing them at him anyway. Wordlessly, she climbed into the passenger side of the truck. Her door-slam sent a clear message: This fight was not over.

Jake sighed. His attempts to douse the fire had only made it worse; but what could he expect when he couldn't even extinguish the inferno raging inside him.

Well, at least I've got my truck back.

13

THEY DROVE TO Amy's house in complete silence. Jake wasn't sure which was worse, the fire or the ice. Amy remained squished against the far side of the truck's bench seat, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. In the stillness, Jake couldn't help noticing the sparkling windshield and a forest-pine scent wafting through the cab, the polished dashboard and controls, and the vacuumed carpets. He knew this was Amy's way of making up to him and that a simple "thank you" from him would work wonders, but stubbornness took over, and he sulked in silence, firmly planting his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel.

They finally reached her house, and Amy flung her door open and jumped out before the truck fully came to a stop. As her door swung back, Amy delivered her first and last words of the ride: "You're welcome!" The door slammed shut before Jake had a chance to respond. She marched into her humble house without looking back.

"Thanks," Jake mouthed, pounding his fists on the steering wheel.

Two and a half hours later, Jake lay on his bed staring at the

ceiling. He'd tried to do homework for almost an hour but couldn't focus on English or Econ. This wasn't the first time he'd been distracted from doing homework in his bedroom; his twenty-seven-inch flat screen, surround-sound stereo, and three different video gaming systems were just a few of the ways his parents spoiled him, and Jake was sure his GPA would be higher if *Madden 360* had never been invented. But on this early Sunday evening, his two-thousand-dollar entertainment system held no appeal. Sprawled on his back on his queen-sized bed, Jake's eyes just wandered around his room, his mind racing like Dale Earnhardt, Jr.

Everything on Jake's bedroom walls screamed Louisville Cardinals. His fascination for this college two-thirds of the way across the country began when his mom bought Jake a Louisville basketball T-shirt for his seventh birthday, a year the Cardinals made it to the Final Four. She thought her son would look good in red; she had no idea that it would become his favorite piece of clothing.

But Louisville became a fixation, and over time that fixation became an obsession, probably fueled at least in part by Jake's father's disapproval. "What ties do we have with Kentucky?" Glen Taylor had often questioned irritably. He'd say it was ridiculous to be such a fanatic when there were plenty of respectable teams closer to home. So each year during March Madness, Jake always picked the same team to go all the way. Eleven years later, it was well-deserved destiny when he was offered the full-ride scholarship to Louisville.

His eyes finally fell on his mahogany nightstand, where the pocket Bible and CD from Chris rested in front of a framed candid of Jake giving Amy a piggyback ride last summer. They were both smiling widely in the shot; they looked so blissful. Jake's gut wrenched. Why did Amy have to make such a big deal of things? Why couldn't she just hear him out? He thumped his head against his pillow and glanced again at Chris' stuff. He leaned over to pick it up. He'd never seen a Bible that small. The one on his parents' bookshelf was much thicker—and much dustier, for that matter. Jake flipped through the feathery pages and scanned the camouflage cover. Was it legal for

Bibles to be anything other than black? And did people really even read these things? He was pretty sure the one on their shelf hadn't been opened in years; maybe when his grandma was still alive—she had been a very religious person. Jake rested the Bible on his chest and grabbed the CD. The royal-blue face was splashed with graphic water droplets, and white letters titled it *Devo2Go. Sounds like some kind of sports drink*, Jake mused. At the bottom of the sleeve were simple instructions to download its contents onto an mp3 player. Intrigued, Jake went to his computer and pulled up his iTunes account. Within minutes, he was back to his comfortable position on his bed, headphones in place. Ready or not, Jake pressed play.

“Thanks for checking out *Devo2Go*,” Chris’ familiar voice spoke into Jake’s ears. “This is Day One of our ‘Life’s Questions’ series. Since you’re listening, I’m going to presume you’re at least interested in God...You know, God gets a bad rap these days. There’s all this crap going on all over the world, and we wonder why He doesn’t do something. Why doesn’t He stop it? But do you think maybe God wants to ask us the same question? The cool thing is, God is not afraid of or offended by our questions. In fact, He welcomes them. Turn in your Bible to Luke 9:18-20.”

Jake lifted the camouflage Bible from his chest, unsure of where to go. He wondered if it had a Table of Contents. Just as he opened the front cover, Chris’ voice directed him: “If you’re using the *Soldier* Bible, turn to page 922.”

Jake turned and noticed that his heartbeat had picked up speed, just like it did when he used to pull his *Penthouse* magazines from underneath his mattress. He wasn’t sure which one would require more explaining if his parents happened to barge into the room. He got up and locked his bedroom door, just in case.

When he located what seemed to be the right verse, he read silently along with Chris.

“One time when Jesus was off praying by himself, his disciples nearby, he asked them, ‘What are the crowds saying about me, about who I am?’ They said, ‘John the Baptizer. Oth-

ers say Elijah. Still others say that one of the prophets from long ago has come back.' He then asked, 'And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?' Peter answered, 'The Messiah of God.' Jesus then warned them to keep it quiet. They were to tell no one what Peter had said."

Jake paused his iPod and reread the verses one more time, unsure of what to think. *Am I missing something?* Still clueless after skimming it another time, Jake pressed Play again.

"Today's Life Question is simple: Who do *you* say Jesus is?" Chris' voice continued. "It's the most important question you'll ever have to answer, and you'll have to decide for yourself. Think about it, and we'll talk more tomorrow."

The track ended, and Jake stopped his iPod, looking up at the ceiling, hands crossed behind his head. How was it that he had come so far in his life without ever thinking about these things? A knock on his door interrupted his concentration.

"Jake? I made you dinner so you can eat while you're studying," his mom's muffled voice echoed through the door, and the doorknob clicked.

"Just a minute!" Jake jumped, stuffing his Bible—of all places—under his mattress. He got up and opened the door, where his mom stood holding a large bowl of macaroni and cheese, one of his favorites.

"Why was the door locked?" His mom looked a little hurt. She handed him the steaming bowl and a cold can of soda.

"I didn't even realize it was. Guess it's just a bad habit." Jake feigned nonchalance.

"How's the studying coming along?"

"Just about finished."

The next morning, Jake walked briskly through the parking lot of Pacific High with a smile on his face. The sun mimicked his cheer, having already fought through the marine layer that normally blanketed the school for the first few hours on spring days. It was already seventy degrees and fair, and Jake inhaled the warmth deep into his soul.

He'd left home early to stop by 2Spoons Coffee to pick up Amy's favorite morning drink. He'd tossed and turned all night rehashing the previous thirty-six hours, and he knew he could have handled things a little better. Jake confidently carried Amy's grande-double-shot-espresso-mocha-latte-with-lots-of-whipped-cream toward their lockers. This recipe had gotten him out of a bind before, so how could it go wrong on a glorious day like today? Besides, Amy could never stay mad at Jake very long when he turned on the charm.

Jake turned the corner around the gym, greeting everyone with an Orbit smile. While Senior Hall was where Pacific's brightest and most beautiful hung out, behind the gym by the band room was where the other end of the spectrum spent their free time. Under the stairwell was the normal pot smoking group that Jake had intentionally ignored throughout the basketball season. Jake always thought it was a bit ironic that they chose the physical education department as their place of choice to get high. Jake shot a glance at the eclectic group taking a few last puffs of pot under the stairwell before the morning bell. Seven students huddled together while one stood guard looking for passing security.

Out of the darkness, a familiar voice called out to Jake as he passed. "Season's over. No more drug tests."

It was Danny Rivers. Had it just been yesterday that they spoke in the church lobby? Now they were socializing in a cloud of marijuana. Jake chuckled—another irony.

"What's up?" Jake smiled with a touch of disdain. He was on a mission to make things right with Amy, but struck by the incongruity of the situation, he paused.

Danny offered a hit, apparently oblivious to the paradox.

Jake declined but cautiously approached the group, stopping a few feet away to maintain his separation. He listened, incredulous, to the conversation.

"This week is gonna be hell," complained Kelsi, taking a hit of her own.

Jake looked at the beret, camouflage capris, and army boots

she sported—a rebel of her own making, in sharp contrast with the nice-girl image she portrayed on stage yesterday. He wondered if the two worlds were difficult to balance. As Jake watched, it became obvious that she was the leader of the group—the huddle listened to her diatribe like a choir focusing on their conductor.

“Mr. Bee is such an A-hole. It’s like he doesn’t want us to have a life,” Kelsi blabbered, pausing to glare at Jake and curtly ask him, “What?”

“Uh, nothing,” Jake answered, turning his attention to Danny to avoid her stare. “Long time no see.”

Danny didn’t even turn to respond, seeming to pretend not to hear. Unfazed, Jake took a few steps toward Danny and the others. He had never had a problem with the group before—but this morning was different. *They go to church. Danny’s dad is the pastor. They shouldn’t be like this.* Jake couldn’t balance this spectacle with his recent conversations with Chris. Was this the real side of religion?

“Does the good preacher know about this?” Jake half-smiled and raised an eyebrow.

“He has no clue,” Danny smirked with an edge Jake had not anticipated. “Anyways, smoking weed’s not in the Bible.”

“I guess you would know,” Jake scoffed.

“Besides, who cares?” Danny retorted.

“What about God?” Jake shot back. The impulse surprised him, but he wanted to know.

“You believe that crap?” The entire group of smokers laughed.

Jake looked at Danny, surprised. “You don’t?”

“I believe what I believe,” Danny declared confidently.

The kid standing guard coughed a mumble under his breath, “Security.”

Danny and the rest of the group quickly dropped their joints, stomped them out, scooped up the pieces and stuffed

them in their pockets. Kelsi and another guy pulled out bottles of cologne and sprayed them into the air. Jake took a few steps away to disassociate himself from them. Backing away, he bumped right into a frowning Clyde Will.

“What’s going on here?” Clyde’s voice challenged more than questioned.

Jake’s heart skipped a beat, knowing what this must look like. His mind ran through a list of horrifying consequences if he got suspended for drugs, all the more horrendous because this time, he was innocent.

An apparently unruffled Kelsi spoke up cheerfully. “Sorry, Mr. Will. We were just having a prayer group before school. The hallway is too noisy.” She switched back into her nice-girl guise like a pro.

Clyde scowled and waved his hand in front of his face. His eyes rested on Jake, but he spoke to the others. “I think a few of you might have put on too many *puffs* of cologne this morning.”

Kelsi boldly stepped even closer to Mr. Will. “These guys got really bad B.O.,” she whispered, wrinkling her nose and eyebrows.

Clyde looked them over one last time, lingering again on Jake. “Go to class,” he finally ordered.

“Good call. We want to be early,” Kelsi smugly agreed as she led the group of saints away from the stairwell. Jake followed, but Clyde grabbed his shoulder and held him back. Jake smiled, trying to hide his fear and agitation, but his stomach plunged.

“Didn’t know you were the praying type, Jake,” Clyde grilled as the group disappeared.

“Isn’t everybody?” Jake squirmed.

“Just be careful who you ‘pray’ with,” Clyde warned and released Jake on his way.

By the time Jake got to his locker, the bell was about to ring. Amy was waiting there, two coffees already in hand. The sour scowl on her face awakened Jake to the realization that his detour had taken much longer than he could afford, and his hopeful morning was flushing rapidly down the drain. The hot

drink that had scorched his hand earlier was now tepid, and the fluffy whipped cream had melted into a thick creamy film. Jake's confidence dissipated like the morning fog, and the dread of impending failure slowed his previously buoyant steps.

"Where have you been?" Amy spun away from Jake toward her open locker, blind to the pictures of the couple in happier times plastered on the inside walls.

"Uh, I got this for you." Jake offered her the coffee.

"Hello, I have one." Amy waved an identical cup in his face.

"I just thought—"

Amy grabbed Jake's gift and took a sip. "Mmmm, lukewarm coffee. My favorite." She dropped it into a nearby trash can as if it were an old sock, then sniffed suspiciously. "Do I smell pot?"

"No! It's not mine," Jake stammered. He screwed up his face in a pleading grimace. Amy just laughed and slammed her locker shut. "Sure, church boy," she scoffed and walked away toward class.

Jake growled a sigh. He clenched his fists and collapsed against his locker, his head bouncing heavily against the cold, rattling steel. The day had started with such promise. He tossed his coffee in the trash can and shuffled off to class.

14

SECOND SEMESTER OF senior year only really mattered to two types of people: those battling to be valedictorian (which Jake definitely was not) or those trying to make up for three and a half years of screwing around (not Jake's deal either). Most everyone else skated by in a state of indifference. Some liked to call it senioritis; Jake called it cruise control.

After Jake's flop of a morning, the assonance in line seven of some Shakespearean sonnet and the symmetry to the y-axis of some function held zero relevance. Sitting at his desk, Jake mentally checked out, trying instead to calculate how to pick up the pieces of his life. Lunch was the only subject that held any appeal, but even that had its own problems: He'd have to face Amy again. By the end of fourth period, he still hadn't landed on an acceptable Amy-strategy.

Finally the lunch bell rang, and Jake dragged himself past the long cafeteria lines toward his usual hangout. The pleasant sunny morning had become uncomfortably hot, and Jake grumbled to himself as he walked past the lunch tables. In his four years at Pacific, he'd not eaten one meal there. It wasn't like the lunch area was specifically set aside for the uncool,

but it was just where they all seemed to flock. Jake's friends much preferred the grassy hill on the far side of the open quad, their elevated spot an unintentional but constant reminder of their respective social position.

As he headed toward the hill, Jake unexpectedly spotted Andrea, the rainbow girl from church, at a table just a few feet away. He'd never noticed her sitting there before—but then again, why would he? Her long brown hair fell in a French braid down her back, accented by bright red hoop earrings that Jake was confident he could've fit his hand through. She sat with two other girls who had similar taste.

Jake quickly turned his head to avoid a hello. It's not like one quick introduction at church meant he had to acknowledge her at school, right?

"Jake!" Andrea yelled in the same cheery voice from the day before.

Jake pretended to be surprised to see her. "Hey! Andrea, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Good memory," Andrea beamed, standing up from the table. "How's it going?"

Jake moved closer to her so they wouldn't have to talk so loudly. "It's all good," he lied. He hadn't seen them yesterday inside the church, but now in the sunlight he noticed a few cute freckles dusting her nose and cheeks.

Andrea stepped even closer and crossed her arms. "Jake, does anybody ever ask you how you're really doing?"

Jake's heart skipped. *Does she know something? Did Chris blab to the whole group about the stuff I'm dealing with?*

"What do you mean?" Jake answered guardedly.

"It's just, I was watching you walk across the quad, and it didn't look like everything was 'all good.'" Andrea held up her bag of chips. "Frito?"

Jake grabbed a chip with no interest in eating it. He fiddled with it in his hand, then blurted, "Today's just not going how I thought it would go." He wasn't sure why he said it—maybe it

was something in her face—but it felt good to unload.

Andrea nodded her head like she understood and finished off the bag of Fritos. “It was cool to see you at Souled Out,” she said.

Jake looked around. People walked by in a steady stream, but it didn’t seem like any of them noticed the odd couple sharing a bag of chips. “Yeah, it was kinda cool,” Jake answered sincerely.

“Are you coming tomorrow night?”

“Tomorrow?” Jake repeated, confused.

Andrea laughed to herself, crumpling up the empty chip bag and hooking a finger onto one of her gigantic earrings. “Chris didn’t tell you?” she grinned. “Tuesdays are youth group. Seven p.m. at the church.”

“You go to church twice a week?” Jake was staggered.

“Oh my gosh, I’m scaring you, huh?” Andrea playfully punched his shoulder. She was a good six inches shorter than he was, so it was more like an uppercut. Jake smiled, enjoying her playful charm.

Suddenly, Andrea covered her heart with her hand and gushed, “I’m sorry! Natalie and Carla, this is Jake.” She motioned to the two girls sitting at the table behind them, watching their conversation like a tennis match. Both sported braces and an obvious crush on the senior basketball star in their midst.

Jake didn’t really feel like making any more friends, but he greeted them anyway. “Hi.” He waved absently, hoping this would be the end of their interaction. His path to making up with Amy had already been derailed once today, and he really wanted to get back on track. Time was ticking away.

The girls waved back in unison, goofy grins plastered across their faces. A piece of lettuce from Carla’s sandwich was wedged into her braces.

Jake’s smile weakened, and he sought a polite escape. He dropped the Frito still rattling in his palm and wiped his hands against his shorts uneasily.

During this whole encounter, Jake hadn't noticed Amy and Doug standing fifteen yards away. They had been walking by just as Andrea offered Jake her chips. When she touched Jake, Amy had stormed away, and Doug had started toward Jake and Andrea.

Suddenly, Doug's six-foot-six frame cast a large shadow that swallowed Andrea and startled Jake. Andrea warmly smiled at him over Jake's shoulder and looked to Jake to make the introduction. Jake dropped his head and cringed. This was why he had tried to avoid this encounter in the first place. He shuffled his feet as the tension built.

"Jake, what are you doing?" Doug said, almost accusingly.

"Doug!" Jake tried to play cool, knocking knuckles with his friend like they met with strange girls all the time. He pointed at his new company. "This is Andrea, Natalie and—"

"Carla," Andrea chimed in, still smiling.

Natalie and Carla redirected their grinning gaze to Doug, their matching braces glinting in the sunlight. Doug barely glanced their way with a look of disgust. The girls got the message and retreated to the remainders of their brown bag lunches.

"Am I missing something?" Doug demanded.

Andrea apparently hadn't noticed that she was no longer a part of the conversation and boldly patted Doug's elbow. "Jake and I were just talking about Sou—"

"Social Studies," Jake quickly finished. The moment it slipped out, he wished he could take it back as he watched Andrea's face. Her smile remained, but her eyes were all-too-reminiscent of Roger's when Jake had ditched him for Amy that night. Could he never escape?

Doug slapped Jake on the back. "Whatever. Let's get out of here."

Jake glanced at Andrea apologetically, but she had turned away. With a sigh, Jake turned to follow Doug back to their usual lunch spot. Doug waited for him to catch up, then threw his arm around Jake's shoulder.

"Bro, what are you doing with those chicks?"

Jake ignored him.

15

THIS IS TOTALLY *stupid*, Jake thought to himself. He slumped in the seat and doodled with his finger on the car window. Pros and cons had battled in his head for the past hour and a half as he sat behind the wheel of his truck in the darkness. One hand gripped the door handle, the other held the key still resting in the ignition. *Why am I afraid of going in?* Then he thought, *Why am I here in the first place?*

Students trickled out of the church in groups and singles, each in their own worlds. There was Andrea, hugging a couple of the other students on her way toward a shiny new Lexus. Jake was sure she hadn't missed him at youth group after his stunt at lunch yesterday. Danny and Kelsi walked out hand-in-hand. *It figures*, Jake snorted. The couple paid no attention to most of the people they passed. A number of other students squawked and flirted and tossed a football until they either got picked up by their parents or drove away in their own cars. But they all seemed oblivious to the lone truck sitting in the far back corner of the lot.

Jake watched enviously the ease with which they were all able to fit into this church thing. They didn't stress about what

others would think, they didn't struggle with what to believe, and they sure weren't carrying their friend's suicide on their shoulders. Was there any hope for him?

Jake sighed. The past ninety minutes of internal debate left all his arguments a moot point now that the service was over, and there was no way he could enter this stream of activity now without being noticed. Jake scolded himself for waiting so long to leave. Now he'd have to wait until the others had gone to avoid their questions and stares. Oh well, what was another fifteen minutes anyway?

One by one, the parking lot emptied of students and cars until only one was left, one which Jake knew all too well after last weekend. The lights inside the church finally went out, and Chris walked wearily to the car, tossing his bag in the front seat. He got in and started his engine, but instead of heading out toward the street, he drove directly over to Jake's truck, as if they had agreed on the rendezvous.

Chris pulled up alongside and rolled down his window. Jake did the same.

"So she gave you your truck back," Chris called over his engine.

Jake nervously chuckled, a little embarrassed that he'd been found out.

"How long have you been out here?" Chris asked.

"The whole time," Jake admitted. There was no point trying to play it cool here—not now, not with Chris.

Chris turned off the engine, got out of his car, and walked over to Jake's open passenger-side window. He rested his arms on the window frame and peered in. "Why didn't you come in?"

"I don't know." Jake ran his hand nervously through his hair. His fingers ached; he hadn't realized how tightly he had been clutching the steering wheel. "I'm just not sure."

Chris opened the passenger door and took a seat next to Jake. "Not sure about what?"

That was precisely the question he had spent the past hour

and a half asking himself. Maybe saying it out loud would help. “So...I believe that you believe,” Jake began. “But why are there so many fakers in there?” He paused for a moment, then added quickly, “I mean, I’m not calling your group fake. I just think—”

Jake stopped midsentence as Chris started to laugh. Jake looked at him, puzzled.

“Jake, I know there are fakers in the group; in fact I probably know of more than you.” He nodded in agreement. “But you know what? So does God.”

Jake didn’t see how that made it any better.

Chris smiled sadly. “I don’t know; I guess there are always going to be people who are willing to settle.” He gazed into the empty parking lot for a few heavy moments before turning back to Jake. “But you know, that’s not what it’s about, Jake. It’s about you. What are *you* going to do?”

A chilly breeze swept across Jake’s sweat-beaded forehead as he digested Chris’ words. Jake knew all kinds of people who took the easy way in life, but his full scholarship was evidence enough to him that he wasn’t one of them. He had fought back so many times against his dad’s accusations of slacking off; now he wondered if he had been struggling in the wrong direction. He couldn’t deny the voice inside him longing to know if there was something more to the life he was currently living.

“So let’s say that I...I don’t want to settle,” Jake said carefully. “Is it worth it?”

Chris’ fingers drummed on the dashboard reflectively. “Jake, I’ve asked myself a lot of the same questions you are. At some point, we’ve all got to ask ourselves, ‘What’s my life going to be about?’ Pleasure and success is great, but it’s exhausting. We end up constantly chasing after it, because none of it ever lasts. We get drunk time after time and sleep with as many women as we can, trying to convince everyone that we’re the greatest thing they’ve ever seen, trying to make ourselves happy—and we always end up at the same place: totally alone.” Chris kept his gaze fixed on Jake.

Jake broke eye contact and gripped the steering wheel again, turning to his reflection in the driver's side mirror. He couldn't find the confident face of the guy that had everything going for him. Instead, staring back relentlessly were eyes full of fear and uncertainty.

"I'm happy enough," Jake responded, his voice pockmarked with trepidation. He wasn't even convincing himself.

"Well, it wasn't enough for me, Jake." Chris shrugged. "I finally had to look honestly at my life and ask the question, 'Is there something more?' Look, I'm telling you, if you are willing—I mean really, truly willing—to search hard, and to ignore everything that friends might say or whatever might happen, I'm telling you, Jake, you're going to find that He's more than worth it."

The church parking lot lights went out, leaving them in complete darkness. Jake glanced at the outline of Chris in the light of the moon. His head hurt; his mind had never swam so hard or so deep. Did Chris even fully understand the risk he was asking him to take?

"And if nothing happens?" Jake questioned, hoping Chris could promise some sort of money-back guarantee.

Even in the shadows, Chris' grin was unmistakable. He opened the door of the truck and stepped one foot out. "Well, I don't know how it's going to happen or when it's going to happen, but Jake, give it some time. One thing I've learned about God is He won't leave you hangin'."

Jake coughed uneasily; he'd never heard someone talk about God in such a personal way. He glanced at the clock on the radio; it was a few minutes past ten.

"It's late, man." Chris reached back through the open door and shook Jake's hand, patting him on the back with the other. "Next time, let's meet in my office. There's more light there," he joked as he shut the door.

Jake turned his key to start the car. What had he just agreed to? While he was intrigued by what Chris said, he couldn't just drop everything and become a Jesus freak. He yelled out the

window just as Chris was getting into his car. “Hey! I’m not just gonna become some Christian.”

Chris looked back at Jake and laughed. “Good! I wouldn’t want you to!” he shouted as he pulled his door shut.

A few hours later, Jake lay in bed, wide-awake in the darkness, his mind assessing the past three weeks of his life. He identified at least a dozen times over the past few years when he had consciously walked by Roger without saying a word. *What could I have done differently?* His mind kept returning to that awful day, standing just inches away from his childhood best friend holding a gun. His attempt to talk Roger down had been pathetic at best, his last-second words of comfort worthless. Jake rehearsed different words that might have met with more success, but no matter what he said, each scene ended in the same way: Roger raising the gun to his chin, staring directly at Jake as the blast rang out.

Jake threw off his covers and sprang to his desk. The glow of his laptop filled the dark room as he cracked it open and typed in his password. The arrow on the screen glided toward the Internet icon, and up popped his homepage: ESPN. But the sports scores that Jake usually followed with devotion remained unread. Instead, he typed two words into the search engine that he’d never thought much about before: *teen suicide*.

He’d had no reason to pay attention to the subject in freshman health class, but now he could think of nothing else. He simply had to find out what he could have—or should have—done to help Roger. He clicked “Search” and leaned over the keyboard as the list populated on the screen in front of him.

WHAT'S TO COME...

The following content is unedited and for review purposes only.

In the brief excerpts that follow you will have a glimpse of the remaining story line of this compelling novel.

These excerpts were selected to give you the flavor of the remaining chapters and to reveal just a little about the struggles Jake faces. You will definitely want to read the entire novel!

CHAPTER 16

“I forgive you!” Amy engulfed her boyfriend in her arms as he tentatively approached her in the Pacific High hallway. Any fears of their extended conflict being irreconcilable were dashed away with a long kiss.

CHAPTER 16 B

The taste of alcohol was nothing new to Jake, but this was his first since deciding to dry up a few days ago, and apparently his taste buds had enjoyed the break. The bitter room-temperature liquid drenched his taste buds with sourness, and he grimaced before swallowing it down. What was happening to him?

Immediately Chris’ words from the other night flashed to the forefront of his brain. “Look, I’m telling you, if you are willing—I mean really, truly willing—to search hard, and to ignore everything that friends might say or whatever might

happen, I'm telling you Jake, you're going to find that He's more than worth it."

Was this worth it?

CHAPTER 16 C

Jake fumbled for a reasonable explanation for his erratic behavior, but his brain was covered in clouds. There was no point hiding the truth any longer, especially from Amy, but he didn't actually know what he was doing. "I left because..." he faltered.

"Because...?" Amy tried to help him finish.

"Because, I want to give Jesus a fair shot," Jake muttered, embarrassed.

CHAPTER 17

Jake walked in the door to his bedroom, unsure of anything. Amy said she wasn't mad at him, but Jake knew that was a lie. She had agreed to go to church with him, but was that really what he wanted? He sat down at his computer, not looking for anything in particular, but he found his fingers directing him to MySpace. Before he knew it, he was searching for Roger Dawson. Who had his childhood friend become, and how had he gotten to the place where suicide was his only option?

CHAPTER 18

Jake and Amy strolled into the New Song Church front lobby. While Amy would rather have been stuck in quicksand, she was a woman of her word. Besides, she hoped to gain insight into whatever was going on in her boyfriend's head. Jake had now been coming to New Song for three weeks, and once Amy realized that this was not just a passing phase, she agreed to join him...once. They had been growing more and more apart and she was desperate to get things back to the way they were.

CHAPTER 19

As Jake fought his own personal battle, Amy stood alone just outside the church, worlds apart.

Eventually, Doug drove up, and she jumped into his Jeep. The smile on Doug's face showed he

was more than happy to be inconvenienced on a Sunday morning, if it meant being Amy's knight in shining armor. The smile on Amy's face indicated she would far rather be with someone else, but had nowhere else to turn.

"DAMN IT!" Jake yelled out angrily. Immediately, all eyes faced him. "Did anyone even hear what he just said?"

Even as the words streamed out, Jake wanted to take them back. This was not the kind of attention he enjoyed. Maybe on the basketball court, when his dominating talent left him cool and confident. But not here. He was in completely uncharted territory right now.

The startled room sat silently waiting to see what would happen. Chris, too, stared at him speechless. Jake considered just walking out and never looking back, but once again, his feet stayed still and his mouth started moving.

"I'm, I'm new to this whole thing, so stop me if I'm sinning or something," he started quietly. "But how *the hell* are you going to change anything if you can't even get it right here?" The more the words flowed out, the more passionate Jake became. "Chris' speech was so true, and like five seconds later you pretend like it never happened...My girlfriend came today, and left...because she felt *judged*. And nobody even noticed..."

CHAPTER 20

"Don't slack off, son. You got to work hard to be successful." *Jake had heard this speech at least once a week since junior high.* "This is what separates the good from the great. You got your whole life ahead of you son. Don't screw it all up." Jake hated the don't-screw-it-all-up-speech. He turned to retreat to the safety of his bedroom.

“Don’t worry dad, I’m not going to disappoint you.”

CHAPTER 21

Chris didn’t mean to be a punk, but he couldn’t help himself. “You know maybe we shouldn’t let any kids come who aren’t perfect.”

CHAPTER 22

“Um, well, I just wanted to say hi. I’m Jake.”

“I know,” the kid said, this time just staring down at his book. Then, after a pause, “I’m Jonny Garcia.”

Andrea must have seen Jake struggling and walked up with perfect timing. “Hi, I’m Andrea.” This time Jonny was really surprised.

“This is my new friend Jonny,” Jake introduced her.

“So are you gonna join us or not?” she cut straight to the punch.

“Jonny’s got homework,” Jake offered, trying to cut through some of the awkwardness.

Jonny helped him out, “Yeah, I got a test.”

“Well, we’ll be here every day,” Andrea smiled, and sort of just danced away.

Left by himself again, Jake decided to make his escape, too, although he was sure he wouldn’t look so graceful. “Seriously,” he concluded, “come join us some time.”

Jonny looked up once more to gauge the sincerity of this offer, which gave Jake a good look at his face. Suddenly it hit him. This Jonny was one of the four friends Roger had on his MySpace page.

CHAPTER 23

“Ever since you got religious, you suddenly don’t have time for any of your friends,” Doug snarled.

“I’ve invited you to have lunch with us every day.” Jake knew the image-conscious Doug would never allow himself to be seen eating with some of Jake’s new friends, but that was hardly Jake’s fault.

“Us? Jake we’ve been best friends since sixth grade soccer. It’s always about you. Jake Taylor the prom king. Jake Taylor the MVP. You know it’s true.”

Jake stood there silently. What was he supposed to say? Sorry for being more popular and talented than you? Anyway, the gossip around school was that Doug and Amy were already hooking up. What kind of friend would do that?

“Wait,” Jonny yelled, reaching his arm through the window to retrieve his books. The sleeve of his sweatshirt got caught on the door, exposing the inside of his arm which was covered with dozens of long, deep cuts. Some of the cuts had to be recent, still dark red, not close to being healed. The moment felt like slow motion: their eyes met, each waiting for the other to say something, to do something. Jonny tensely grabbed the books and turned back towards his house.

CHAPTER 24

“I guess he’s just really busy at the office.” Pam stood back up and resumed her counter cleaning. Jake was pretty sure it was already spotless. “I haven’t seen Amy for a while?”

It had been over a week since her kiss good bye. He finally had to accept the obvious. “We broke up.”

Pam spun around to face Jake directly. “What? I liked her. She was good for you.” Pam placed her hands on her son’s shoulders to comfort him like a good mother should.

“It’s not a big deal,” Jake lied. “I think we’re just on a break. We’ll work it out.” He knew that was highly unlikely, especially after Doug’s cocky claims that afternoon. He was sure Doug was just trying to get under his skin, but what if he wasn’t? How could he do that? How could she?

“What happened honey?” Pam was now sitting next to him. On the surface, she appeared to be taking this harder than him.

CHAPTER 25

“Did you hear Chris got in trouble?” Danny’s familiar voice abruptly crowded into his irked thoughts.

Danny was another guy Jake had no interest in being around, but with all the people he was rapidly wanting to avoid, it was hard keeping track.

“What?” Jake responded, trying to seem as disinterested as possible.

“It was that time you were cussing,” Danny laughed. “Man, that was awesome!”

With images of Doug and Amy plastered in the forefront of his brain colliding with the thoughts that Danny had raised, Jake struggled through the morning classes like a prisoner going into trial. In just a few weeks, Jake had lost his girlfriend and best friend, and was now possibly the reason for a pastor losing his job. And then, of course, there was Roger. Would that weight ever go away?

CHAPTER 26

“Okay, you can forget everybody else’s name, except this guy. This is Chris,” Jake explained to Jonny as they walked through the packed youth room that night. At school that day, Jake could see the anxiety in his new friend’s eyes as he introduced him to stranger after stranger. He had hoped the lunch time group hadn’t scared Jonny away, and when he actually asked what this Souled Out thing was all about, Jake eagerly offered him a ride.

“I don’t know how you did it. This place is different because of you,” Chris remarked as he glanced around the room alive with a buzz he’d never seen before. There were new faces all over the place, and a spirit of community pervaded the air.

CHAPTER 27

Nothing was predictable anymore. Who would have ever predicted Clyde, the toughest security guard Pacific High had to offer, surprising the ever growing lunch group with two foot sub sandwiches?

The people he hung out with seemed to have this contagious joy that could bring Jake a smile in the hardest of circumstances. And somehow he felt safer in the presence of Andrea, Jonny, Billy and the others, than he had ever felt around his basketball friends. A freedom to be himself, and not always worry about saying something stupid or appearing to have it all together.

Probably the biggest surprise for Jake had to be the ease with which it came for him to believe in God. It wasn't like there was one moment that he just knew, but one night sitting in the parking lot with Chris, it just all clicked. Chris encouraged him to get baptized, so one week later Jake found himself getting dunked in the frigid Pacific Ocean. Immediately after emerging from the water, he was mobbed by the entire youth group. He learned later that this was Souled Out tradition.

Jake was home.

CHAPTER 28

"Mrs. Dawson," stuttered Jake. "I'm sorry I wasn't a better friend to Roger. I-I didn't know."

He couldn't even look her in the eye.

Esther turned to Jake and grabbed his shaking hand, knocking the picture to the floor. "None of us did. And I was his mother. He was my son." She was crying now.

CHAPTER 29

Jonny stared at the ground for a minute, "You think Andrea would go with me?"

"Andrea?" A surprised Jake repeated. Jake's first thought was that she was way out of his league, but he quickly noticed

that Jonny's face had blanched white as he awaited Jake's hopeful approval.

"You got a game plan?" Jake asked with a wink and cocky smile.

A confused Jonny shook his head in shame, like somehow he'd come to school without doing his homework. "No-no, I don't have a game plan."

Jake put his arm on Jonny's shoulder and the two begin to walk again.

"You see that's the best part," Jake grinned. "If you can make them feel like a million bucks...then they're like putty."

Jonny's goofy smile erupted and his eyes twinkled. "Okay, are you going to be there?"

"Of course...not," Jake laughed. "You gotta fly solo on this one. But I'll help you train."

CHAPTER 30

There she was, sitting on the curb in front of his house. She wore Doug's letterman jacket over a little red dress Jake used to love. It was obvious that she had been crying.

"Amy? Are you okay?" Jake tentatively took a seat next to her on the curb. She didn't object.

"I missed you at the party," she mumbled under her breath, never once looking up from the gutter.

"I haven't been to one in over a month," he reminded her.

"I know."

Jake looked at Doug's jacket. Just the embroidered letters of his name made him mad. "Where's Doug?"

"The party, probably passed out." Amy smiled for the first time, "I stole his jeep."

Jake smiled back at the irony of it all.

The two sat in awkward silence for what seemed like forever. The southern California April air wasn't cold, but the

breeze against his sweaty workout clothes made Jake shiver. Amy looked Jake directly in his eyes, the first time since she had said goodbye at church. His heart ached, wishing he could get her back.

And then she dropped the bomb.

“Jake, I’m pregnant,” her voice cracked.

CHAPTER 31

Jake exploded, loud enough for everybody around them to hear. All of the junk from the night before couldn’t be held in any longer and spewed onto his undeserving friend. “Yeah, I suck. That’s why I picked you up. That’s why I’m always defending you. That’s why I helped you get a date in the first place—a date that *you* screwed up. That’s why I didn’t tell anybody about your little problem.” Jake made slicing motions on his arm.

Jonny reached his limit. “I don’t need you man! I was just fine before you ever bothered me.” He pushed his way through the throngs of students, desperately in search of escape

CHAPTER 32

Chris poured them each a glass of milk, and waited for Jake to speak.

“I’m in trouble,” Jake offered vaguely.

“What’s wrong?” Chris prodded.

“Everything!”

“Hm...How about a few more specifics?”

Jake covered his head with his hands. “Well, my parents are getting a divorce. He paused.

“Jake, I’m so sorry.”

“And Amy’s pregnant.”

“Well, what do I do?”

“Jake, have you talked to God about all this?” Chris suggested.

“God? I don’t even want to talk about him.”

“God didn’t do this to you.”

“Well he didn’t stop it. Here I am, going to church, reading my Bible, all that crap, and this is what I get?”

“Jake, God’s not punishing you.”

“It sure feels like it. Look at my life. It’s falling apart.” The anger was starting to spill over again. “*This* isn’t working! It’s not worth it.”

“And He’s not worth it because he won’t make your life all better and all your problems disappear. But,” Chris paused again, “God is on your side, Jake.”

Jake shook his head, “It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Whether you’re feeling him or not, it doesn’t change the fact that He’s here for you.”

CHAPTER 33

Jake found himself sliding from the edge of the bed onto his knees. Chris had said it was okay to talk to God about anything, but would God really be listening? He got back up and sat on the bed, heart speeding and hands wet from perspiration. Why was this so difficult? Jake slid back to his knees with no idea what he should do or say next. Then the words started to flow, coming from the parts of his brain he normally tried to ignore.

“Um, God, I don’t know if I’m allowed to be mad at you, but I am. All this is happening to me and I’m trying my best to do what’s right, but everything just seems to be getting worse. Chris says that I can ask you for help. I don’t even know that that means, but I know that I need it. I need you.”

CHAPTER 34

He knew Amy’s morning coffee stop routine, and arrived at her house a few minutes before seven. He grabbed the box that he’d spent packing till 3 AM and headed for the door. Although he knew what he was doing was absolutely crazy, he had never been more sure of a decision in his life.

CHAPTER 35

Jake walked back into his house a little after 1PM. In that parking lot, they found a cute little café where they enjoyed breakfast together. Neither of them were in the mood for school that day. They talked and talked about everything over fresh squeezed orange juice and pancakes. As horrible as he'd felt just twenty-four hours earlier, and as real as his problems still were, somehow he knew there was hope. He and Amy were far from back together, but just being with her again brought an unconscious smile to his face. He'd also never seen her eat so much; that eating for two thing was no joke.

The good feelings ended the moment he entered the kitchen. Sitting at the table were his parents; they didn't look happy.

CHAPTER 36

I've called him a ton of times, but I'll try again."

Jake pulled out his cell and punched in Jonny's number, it went straight to voice mail. "Jonny, this is Jake...Andrea and I are here, just wondering where you are. Call me back."

Jake was confident there would be no call back, this was his fifth message.

CHAPTER 37

"You're a fake!" Doug shouted venomously at Jake who didn't get up from the hallway carpet. "you got your little Jesus lunch group doing whatever you tell them to do. But you're the biggest fake of them all. Well, no one's fooled, Jesus-boy."

CHAPTER 38

"I was deeply disturbed to hear from my son last night that one of your students got his girlfriend pregnant," Pastor Mark announced to Chris, as soon as the youth pastor sat down for their "urgent" meeting. Chris was blindsided.

"Where did Danny hear this?"

“He overheard you two talking in your office last night.”

Dear New Song Church Leadership Board,

It is with great sorrow that I must inform you that my service as youth pastor here has come to an end. Due to differences in ideology and vision for the future, I will now seek employment elsewhere. I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve here the past five years.

Sincerely,

Chris Vaughn

But how would he break it to the students? They were his kids. Leaving them felt like abandoning his family. It wasn't fair. Chris agonized over the thought of it, and decided to save that step for another time. He printed the letter, stuck it in a manila folder, and placed it in the top drawer of his desk.

CH 39

Amy was miserable. Pregnancy was a difficult time in a woman's life when she had tons of support. When she didn't, it seemed near impossible.

Amy had never known what it was like to not be the center of attention, but up until now, that attention had always been positive. She had always been the one that all the guys were in love with and all the girls wanted to be. Suddenly she found herself as the one all the guys were glad they never got with, and all the girls were glad they weren't. Add to this her mom being furious with her, Doug despising her, and Jake...Well, she had ruined things with Jake. Even though he was trying to be sweet, she knew she couldn't go back to that well too many times.

And so she walked alone.

CHAPTER 40

Jake thought about Jonny, wishing he were here to hear this, wishing he had never heard the junk Jake had let loose on him.

Quietly, unnoticed by anyone, Amy slipped through the door and found a seat on the floor.

Chris continued, "...And some of you came tonight feeling totally alone. Your response is to simply let God love you. The rest of us may try, but we will fall miserably short. Only God is the friend who will never let you down, whose line is never busy.... And maybe some of you came here tonight, hurting for someone else. You want to know your response? You show them God's unconditional love. You be his hands and his arms. It might not be easy—but don't give up. Again, love wins!"

CHAPTER 41

Danny inwardly smiled as Jonny entered their classroom for the first time all week. There was something different about him, or maybe it was that there was nothing different. Back again was the black long sleeve hooded sweatshirt. Jonny silently took his seat, dropping his backpack on the ground as he stared toward the front of the room. Danny waited for his chance.

Students rustled around restlessly, unusually silent, waiting for someone to say or do something. Could there really be a bomb on campus? And if so, had anybody thought about the foolishness of not allowing anybody to leave?

Jake observed Danny Rivers making his way up to the front, and a sick feeling washed over him. Anything that Danny was involved in couldn't be good. Most eyes followed him as he approached Clyde and whispered something into his ear. Jake watched with baited breath...Did he know something? Or was he confessing to the crime?

CHAPTER 42

Danny sat alone in the small Pacific High detention office with an armed police officer just outside the door. He'd already counted the number of tiles in the ceiling, waiting for his fate. Why had he held onto Jonny's cell phone? It was the only evidence they had against him.

He heard a few muffled voices outside the door, and then

Chris and Jake entered the room. Danny immediately stood up and pointed angrily at Jake. What was he doing here? He turned angrily to Chris, “Why’d you bring him?”

Jake stayed by the door.

“Why am I here and not your dad?” Chris asked calmly.

Danny turned to Jake now with tears forming in his eyes. “It was my fault! It was me.”

With a shaking hand, Jake put his arm around Danny. He hadn’t seen this coming. “It was all our faults.”

Later that night, Jake wearily turned on his bedroom computer and opened up Roger’s new MySpace page. He nearly fell out of his seat as he looked at long list of people requesting to be his friend.

CHAPTER 43

Jake, Amy, and both of their moms sat expectantly in the Vaughn living room. Chris had explained the process to them several times before, but now that the time had actually come, the magnitude of their decision weighed heavily.

“Frank and Jan are really an amazing couple,” Chris reassured the group. “They’re long-time friends of ours, and have struggled so long to become parents. So, they’ve been dying to meet you ever since I told them. And they are really excited about an open adoption, so the child will grow up knowing who you are.”

Jake turned tenderly to Amy, “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Amy smiled and nodded resolutely. Her mom rubbed her shoulder.

“Well, Cari’s with them outside. Let’s do this!”

Jake grabbed Amy’s hand. Chris opened the door. A cute couple in their thirties tentatively entered the room and approached the teenagers.

CHAPTER 44

“Mark?” Chris set his pen down.

“My son and I talked for three hours last night. He told me everything,” Mark started right in.

Mark looked around uncomfortably, then added, “I’ve decided to take a leave of absence...If I can’t lead my own son, I’m sure not in a place to lead the whole church...I wanted you to be the first to know.”

CHAPTER 45

Three weeks later, Chris preached to the entire church.

“...Faith is a journey. The journey is not so much about a destination but a transformation...”

Out of the corner of Chris’ eye, he spotted Jake’s mom walk through the back door and stand just inside the room. He wished he could stop the sermon to tell Jake his mom was there, but that would be weird.

“...Looking back, sometimes don’t the richest times come right in the midst of our hardest times? But God made us to live in community. To laugh, cry, hurt, and celebrate with each other no matter what we’re going through...”

Almost three months later, to the day, Jake held Amy’s hand in the delivery room as she screamed at the top of her lungs for more drugs. Jake was pretty sure he had never been more proud of her. To think that he and Amy were somehow responsible for making this tiny little girl was almost unfathomable to him. The look on Frank and Jan’s faces when they handed baby Emily over into their arms was more than enough proof that they had made the right decision.

CHAPTER 46

Jake opened the envelope to find two pieces of paper. He started to read the first, written in Jonny’s familiar chicken scratch.

Dear Jake,

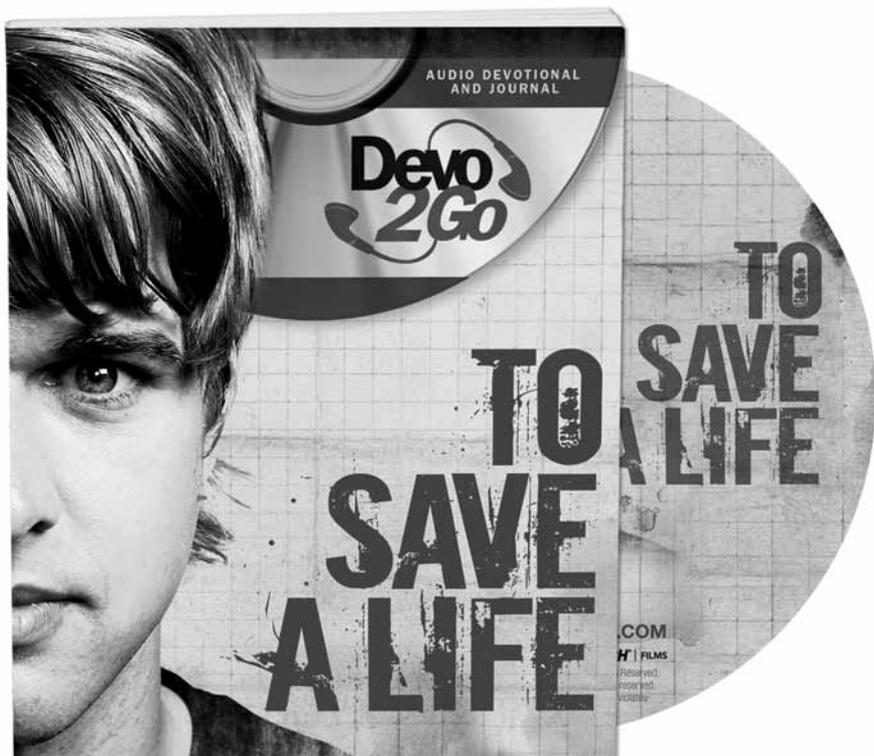
I'm sorry if this paper smells like rose. I got it from my mom's room and I didn't realize the scent until I was almost done. Anyways, I wanted to say this in person...

CHAPTER 47

Jake returned home for his summer break. Before he drove home, something told him to go see Roger. He'd thought a lot about Roger that first semester in college. In the early evening, he made the long trek to the place where he had stood in the rain almost two years earlier.

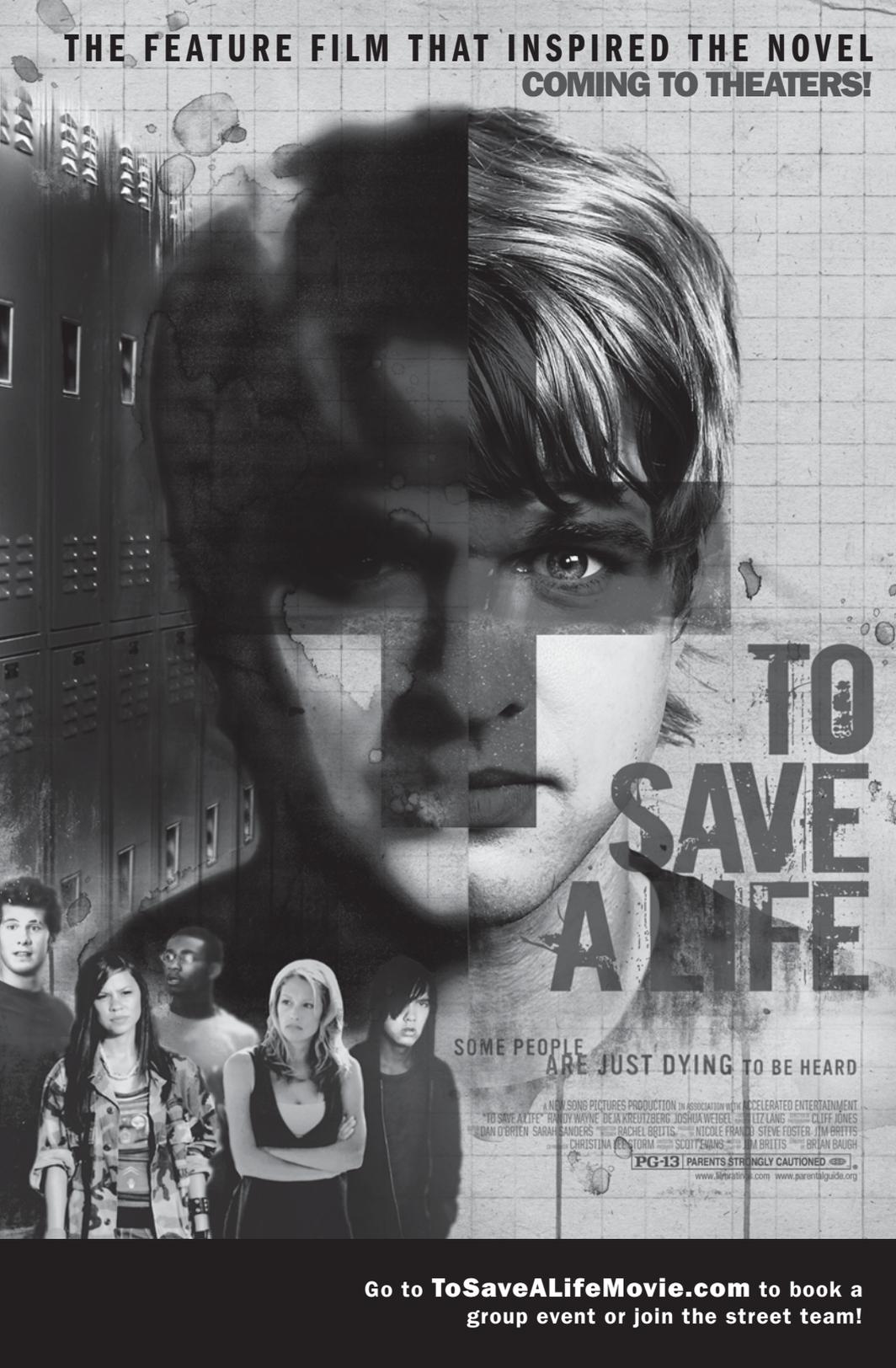
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Available: October 2009
Category: Fiction
Price: US \$14.99
ISBN 978-0-9823744-6-7
Format: Trade Paper
Trim: 5.5" x 8.5"
Rights: Worldwide