

In Heaven there is no regret. In Heaven there is only wisdom.

Chapter 1

A brilliant point of light beamed from the corner of the room. It grew steadily larger, glistening in vivid rainbow colors. They blended with one another in spectral chords, a sort of visual music. Gradually, the beams of light organized into the shining shape of a man in a shimmering robe. Just inside an aura of rainbow light was a face like a hybrid of all human races, with unblemished, radiant skin. The dazzling entity hovered momentarily, its luminous green eyes absorbing the fleshy commotion that was locked into the four dimensions of space-time. It refocused on the spiritual dimensions, fixing its intense gaze on the opposite corner of the room. It raised its arm and extending an open hand to the immortal soul of Jake Simon.

Friday, June 2, 2008

It was the graveyard shift in the laboratory of Livingston Memorial hospital. Jake sat next to his wife, Teresa, who worked upstairs as an intensive care nurse. They were both in Serology, watching the wetness flow across the white membrane of the test cartridge. Teresa was three weeks late. They both knew it would be positive. Still, they had to see it with their own eyes.

Teresa scooted her chair closer to her husband. "We'll be all right, Jake. Don't look so worried. Mom's going to help, and we can always work opposite shifts."

Jake rested his hand on her shoulder, hoping nobody else in the lab would notice the tender moment. With a compact, pleasantly plump body, Teresa fit nicely into his arms. Her black, naturally curly hair was pulled back into a ponytail, unveiling big emerald eyes. For a woman pushing 40, she still turned plenty of heads. What she saw in him, he'd never know.

Jake reached into his lab coat pocket and handed her a new bottle of aspirin. "See if you can get that cotton out of there. My head's killing me."

"That's because you're stressing over the baby," she said as she took the bottle from him.

"We're not getting any younger, Teresa. It's going to be a high risk pregnancy. And are you sure your mom is up to this? She's in her sixties."

"We'll survive," she said pleadingly. "People do it all the time."

"I guess," he said. "Listen, speaking of survival, I never did get life insurance."

"Then we'll call about it in the morning."

"I wonder how much that's going to cost."

“Jake, you know how much we’ve looked forward to this. Why do you always have to put a price on everything?”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” he said.

Still, he had every right to be worried about money because money was something they didn’t have. It didn’t help that they’d gotten married so young, both at the age of twenty-one. Then there were the student loans. Teresa had tried to get into medical school, spending four years in a premed program, but she ended up going back to nursing school for three more years. As for Jake, after nearly flunking out of college and then spending fifteen years as a underpaid lab assistant, he’d finally gone back to school to get his two-year degree in medical technology, also paid for with student loans. Then came the two new cars and the new house filled with new furniture. Still, maybe she was right. They’d get by—as long as they both worked.

Teresa gripped his elbow and gave a gentle squeeze. “We’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

A blue plus sign appeared on the test membrane. Jake staggered in his chair, overcome by a rush of joy tinged with the dread of great responsibility.

“I knew it! It’s positive!” Teresa excitedly clapped her hands together. “My mom’s going to be so happy!”

Jake hugged her gently. There was no doubt about it now. Jacob Thomas Simon, forty years old as of last month, would soon be a father. “I guess it’s official,” he said. Suddenly, a sharp throb of pain swelled in his head. He winced and rubbed his temples.

“Jake, are you okay? You don’t look so happy.”

“I’m sorry, Teresa. I hate to ruin the moment, but I’m not feeling so good.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, you don’t look so good, either.” She put her cool hand to his head and felt for a fever. “You look pale.” She pulled the bottle of aspirin out of the pants pocket of her cotton-candy-pink hospital scrubs and skillfully plucked the cotton out of the bottle with her fingernail. “Here you go. Maybe this will help,” she said, handing him the aspirin.

They both walked to the front of the lab and stepped into the tiny break room. Jake took the coffeepot from the burner and poured coffee into a Styrofoam cup, hoping the caffeine would help his head.

“You know who I saw in the ER waiting room?” Jake said as he put the coffeepot back on the burner.

“Who?”

“Matt Anderson. You know, the guy who introduced us.” Jake tested the coffee with his finger for heat. “The guy who sits in a wheelchair because of me.”

Teresa reached up and turned his face toward her. “Jake, that was not your fault. You just did what anybody would have done. You’re lucky you weren’t killed. Now stop being so hard on yourself. You’ve got to think about the future.” She took his hand and pressed it to her belly. “Think about your baby.”

“Yeah,” Jake said, gazing at his hand pressed against her belly. “Well, anyway, speaking of babies,” he said. “Matt’s baby’s sick.”

“Baby? Matt’s got another baby?”

“It was news to me too. He apparently adopted it.”

“Wow, that’s great.”

Jake went to the sink and diluted the coffee with a little cold water. “Yeah, well, I guess being a big-time architect, he can afford it. I should have been an architect, an engineer, or something . . . something that paid better than this.” He shook four tablets from the bottle. “Then maybe you wouldn’t have to work.”

“Oh, *pleeease*, let’s not go into this again,” Teresa said. “Now you’re giving *me* a headache. You know I love being a nurse. I wouldn’t quit even if we could afford it.”

“At least you could cut back to part time,” Jake said, studying the four aspirin tablets in his hand.

Teresa noticed the pills. “You’re not going to take all four of those, are you? You’re only supposed to take two.”

“It won’t kill me.” Jake tossed them into his mouth and chased them lukewarm coffee.

“Jake! I can’t believe you just did that. Now you’ll get a stomachache to go along with your headache. Why do you always insist on learning the hard way?”

Jake cringed from the bitter coffee. “My head really hurts.”

“Why didn’t you take Tylenol or something that’s better for headaches?”

“I tried. I stopped by the pharmacy before I clocked in, but they were out of those little bottles of Tylenol.”

“Killing your stomach isn’t going to help. Besides, it’s probably your blood pressure. I keep telling you to see a doctor about that.”

“Doctors don’t know anything. I’ve worked with enough of them to know that. Look at my sister and Todd Heller.”

Teresa blew air, deflating puffed cheeks. “We’ll talk about this later,” she said and glanced up at the wall clock. “I’ve got to go. One of my patients has a med due at 11:00. Just think pleasant thoughts and try to relax. That’ll help more than anything.”

Jake followed her to the back door of the lab. “Sorry I’m in such a foul mood,” he said. “I’ll feel better once the aspirin kicks in.”

Teresa poked him in the stomach. “I bet you didn’t eat either. You always get cranky when you’re hungry.”

“I am kind of hungry. I’ll grab something from the machines in a little bit.”

“We’ve got some brownies upstairs. Come up if you get a chance. Gotta go. Love you.” She pecked him on the cheek and walked out the door.

“Me, too,” he mumbled and wiped lipstick from his face. He looked around to see if anyone might have witnessed the show of affection. He was funny that way.

He walked over to the front desk, sat down, and rubbed his throbbing head.

As usual, Teresa was right. He needed to stop stressing out over this baby thing. And like she said, her mom would help. He hated to lay the whole burden of babysitting on her mom, but Jake’s dad worked all day and Jake’s own mom had died giving birth to him. That was a fine way to enter this world—by killing his own mother.

The pneumatic tube system chimed, and Jake heard the *chunk* of a specimen carrier dropping into the lab.

“What now?” he said and pried himself out of the chair. He stepped over to the tube system, pulled out the carrier, and removed a urine specimen. The urine had spilled out of the cup and into the zip-lock biohazard bag with the specimen cup floating on top of the cloudy yellow bladder refuse. “Great. Why can’t they ever get these lids on right?”

He logged the specimen into the computer and lumbered his way back toward Urinalysis. As he passed Microbiology, a ghastly stench accosted him, drawing the realities of his life painfully into focus. Ernestine Banks, wearing a torn lab coat and pink scrubs, was putting specimens into the fecal culture incubator, affectionately known as the *stinkubator*.

Ernestine, a twenty-five-year-old kid not long of college, had a bachelor's degree so she was in charge. With the baby on the way and bills to be paid, at forty years old Jake's going back to college was highly unlikely. He would never finish his bachelor's so he would never be in charge. It was just as well. He didn't have the backbone for the job anyway.

When Jake reached the Urinalysis aisle, he tossed the biohazard bag onto the counter and slid into a chair. Why couldn't he have been more like his brother or sister? Jake's brother was a respected major in the Marines, and his sister was actually a brain surgeon. Jake? He got to test urine the rest of his life. It might sound glamorous, but it's not.

As a kid, Jake hadn't pictured himself fiddling with foul-smelling urine in the middle of the night. No, he was going to be a rock star, and the band he'd played in had a real shot at the big time. He should have been wrapping up a world tour instead of doing urinalysis. And that might have been his life, that is, if their lead singer hadn't blown it at the Battle of the Bands.

"Hey, Jake," Ernestine startled him from his thoughts. "When you're finished staring at that urine, you need to go to ER and draw some blood—two adults and two babies."

Jake eyed his pudgy little boss with contempt. “Yes *ma’am*,” he sarcastically replied.

“Hey, just because you’re having a mid-life crisis, don’t take it out on me,” Ernestine said. “I’m just doing my job.”

Ernestine made his head throb harder. He imagined the patients in the ER weren’t feeling any better. Jake went back up front to carry out his little boss’s orders.

He grabbed a phlebotomist tray from the counter, pulled the specimen labels from the printer, stuffed them into his pocket, and walked over to Ernestine. She leaned back in a chair with her feet propped on the chemistry supervisor’s desk, reading a *Vogue* magazine.

“I’ll be back whenever,” he said, pausing to see if she would even offer to help, at least to hold one of the babies.

“That urine will be waiting for you when you get back,” she said with a grin, not even bothering to look up from the magazine. “I know how much you love urinalysis.”

Thanks a lot, Ernestine, tech in charge.

Jake went to the ER nursing station and picked up the computer printout that indicated the location of the patients to be stuck.

“Hey, Jake,” the ER nurse called from the nursing station. “Hate to tell you this, but when you’re done with that, we’ve got another patient for you.”

“And, Jake,” came a smug voice from the other side of the nursing station, “I’d like those labs back tonight, if that’s not too much to ask.”

Jake glanced over to see his high school nemesis, Dr. Todd Heller, sneering at him over the top of a hospital chart. It was bad enough that Jake had had to put up with

this guy in high school, but after Todd graduated medical school he landed a job in the ER.

Jake disregarded Todd and went toward the patient rooms. “So much for having a quiet night,” he uttered, “no thanks to lab-happy Todd Heller.”

“Pardon?” Todd said.

Jake turned to see Heller eyeing him with contempt. Jake’s cheeks warmed and another stab of pain hit his head. He started to reply, but said nothing. If he’d never stood up to Heller when he was a kid, no way was he going to confront Heller when his job depended on it.

The smell of vomit and disinfectant fueled Jake’s nausea as he went down the hall toward his first patient. He knocked twice and opened the door to an exam room. It reeked of alcohol, cigarettes, and body odor. “Is this Seymour Dunlap?”

Sitting in the corner of the room wearing a filthy NASCAR baseball cap was a corpulent man with black, quarter-inch razor stubble. “You must be the vampire,” he stated proudly as if this was a completely original accusation Jake hadn’t heard at least once a week.

Jake cut the pleasantries and set his tray by the sink. “The doctor’s ordered a blood culture, and I’ll have to take that from his arm.”

The man went to his feet. “His arm! How come? They always took it from his foot at the doctor’s.” The man huffed, tugged on his filthy sagging jeans, and stuffed his shirt back into his pants. “You’d better get it the first time,” he said, cracking his knuckles, “and don’t you be diggin’ around none neither.”

Jake's heart beat so hard he could count his own pulse by the throbs in his head. "I'll do the best he can," Jake said, his voice cracking. "If I can't get it the first time, I'll tell the doctor."

With the man's grunt of approval, Jake took the filthy baby and placed him on the bed while the father stood uncomfortably close, breathing his foul breath on the back of Jake's head. Jake peeled the screaming baby out of the pink spit-up-and-cigarette ash-laden blanket. His neck stiffened and the lights seemed to grow brighter. He couldn't go on. One of the docs would have to check him out, even if it was Todd Heller.

Suddenly, a nervous voice came over the intercom, "Code blue, ICU. Code blue, ICU."

Jake grabbed his tray and hurried to the nursing station. He filed in behind Dr. Ford, two nurses, and a blond respiratory technician. With the tubes rattling on his tray, he desperately tried to keep up, stumbling twice. They all reached the elevator and poured in through the door that Security held open. The doors closed, and the elevator rose. The pounding of his heart forged throbs against the anvil in his head.

The door opened. They rushed out toward the ICU. Jake followed close behind. He lost footing and caught himself against the wall. The code team threw open the ICU door and rushed into the room. Jake brought up the rear.

"Over here," the nursing coordinator said, pointing at a bed.

Jake stumbled ahead to the third bed from the door. He saw the blurry figure of Teresa doing chest compression on the dying patient.

Teresa grinned when her eyes found Jake.

In the dimly lit ICU, Jake squinted and studied the patient more closely. The patient was a practice CPR mannequin. It was just a drill.

“Sorry, Jake. It wasn’t my idea,” Teresa said as she leaned into the dummy and performed mock chest compressions. “We’re getting ready for the inspection next week.”

The code team chuckled with relief and took their position to complete the drill.

“That was good time, Jake,” the fuzzy figure of the Nursing Coordinator said. “But unless you think you can get some blood out of this thing, you can go back to the lab.”

Jake tried to focus on Teresa. He made out a silent *I love you* forming on her lips. He stood for a moment, breathing hard, struggling with thought. “I uh . . . me, too.”

He made his way out of the ICU. He opened the door to the hall. Bright fluorescent lights assaulted him, burning into his optic nerves. He stumbled to the elevator door with the phlebotomy tray in his right hand and his other hand cupped over his eyes. He jabbed at the down button repeatedly.

He had to get back to the ER. He was going to be a father. His health was nothing to play with. Something was wrong—very wrong.

“Come on!” he held the Down button with his thumb. The elevator whined into position. Doors reluctantly slid open. He stepped in and hit the first-floor button. He leaned back against the wall, steadying himself on the handrail. His stomach burned with nausea as the movement of the elevator took him down. His hand clutched his mouth to hold back vomit.

The doors opened. The lights attacked. He stepped off the elevator. He wrestled with his feet, placing one foot in front of the other. The ER double doors loomed ahead.

The hall seemed to spin. He lurched forward, catching himself against the hospital wall rail.

Keep going. The baby! Think about Teresa and the baby. Come on, Jake, move it!

He took three more steps and fell against the wall again.

MOVE! he told his legs. They would not obey. He opened his mouth to yell, but no sound came out. He saw the ER door ahead, undulating, clouded in a shadowy white fog. He heard the crash of his phlebotomy tray hitting the tile floor. He heard the tubes and syringes scattering. He heard nothing.

Chapter 2

From the black, silent void of unconsciousness, Jake emerged to find himself weightless, with no physical sensation at all. He hovered in the trauma room of the ER. Although he felt utterly calm from lack of physical sensation, he was real. He was pure thought, pure consciousness. But although he was clearly within the space of the trauma room, he somehow felt distant, as if separated by a barrier. He was obviously dreaming.

In this eerie, realistic dream, Jake did not actually see—because, to his knowledge, he wasn't actually seeing with physical eyes—but rather he *experienced* the action below. Muffled voices emanated from coworkers in hospital scrubs and flesh-tone gloves. They stood over a fortyish looking man stretched out on a table. His navy blue hospital scrub shirt was cut down the middle and exposed a pale, round stomach. Teresa's friend, Michelle, adjusted the fluid flow into an IV needle fed into the top of the man's limp hand. Sally, the blond respiratory tech, held a respirator tightly around the patient's

mouth and nose. She squeezed the rubber bulb, forcing air into his lungs, causing his chest to swell and shrink. A doctor rhythmically dented his chest with compressions.

Jake had seen this routine many times in his years of working at the hospital. That would explain why he was dreaming about it. But he'd never seen the procedure from that vantage point, hovering up above. He focused on the face of the man, which was partly obscured by the respirator mask. Just below his receding hairline, the patient's lifeless dark eyes stared into space.

They were *his own* lifeless eyes!

Okay, he told himself. *This isn't a dream, it's a nightmare.*

He refocused on the action. Ernestine, in her pink hospital scrubs, stood frozen in the corner beside the supply drawers. The doctor doing the compressions looked up at the clock. He dented Jake's chest three more times, gave one final shove, and stepped back. "Give it up, people. We've done all we can," he said and looked back up at the clock. That doctor was Todd Heller.

Definitely a nightmare.

He could not close his eyes, turn away, or wake up. He had no choice but to watch as the drama played out its strange plot. Ernestine wore *pink* hospital scrubs. Aren't dreams supposed to be in black and white? Or was that just a myth? And you don't actually think to yourself when you dream do you? Something else occurred: he didn't recall going to bed. Last he remembered, he was at work.

And dreams aren't supposed to be in color, he reminded himself. He refocused on the dying man. He wore *navy blue* scrubs.

As if by the phantom pain of an amputee, fear welled into his being.

My high blood pressure, the headache . . . an aneurysm! And I took aspirins, of all things to take. A bleeding aneurysm, and I took four aspirins! Jake, you idiot! They'll never stop the bleeding!

The respirator tech kept on pumping air into Jake's lungs.

Todd said something to her angrily. She squeezed off a final burst, causing one last artificial swell of his chest.

There was another muffled exchange among the staff. A bag of IV fluids slipped from Michelle's hand and burst on the floor. She bolted from the room in tears.

There was another exchange of words between Todd and Jenny, the charge nurse.

"I guess we'll call it 11:48," Jake could barely hear Todd say.

Then Jenny left the room.

No! Jake cried by thought. *Don't listen to him, he hates me! Keep trying!*

It was no use. Ernestine stood in the corner beside the supply drawers, gazing at Jake's body. Cynthia dabbed a tear from her cheek with her sleeve. She wept for Jake, but clearly she could not hear him. Then, one by one, they each left the room, all but Todd Heller.

Wait! Jake thought-yelled to them again. *Come back!*

He hovered there, watching the door, praying they would return with a miracle drug to restart his heart, to repair the damage to his brain. The door stayed shut, and his body stayed still. It just lay there on the table like a motionless object.

Finally, truth began to settle. He was doomed to be a ghost until Jesus returned, until the resurrection, or whatever was supposed to happen next. He didn't know. He hadn't gotten to that part of the Bible yet.

Suddenly, a brilliant point of light beamed from the corner of the room. It grew steadily larger, glistening in vivid rainbow colors. They blended with one another in spectral chords, a sort of visual music. Gradually, the beams of light organized into the shining shape of a man in a shimmering robe. Just inside an aura of rainbow light was a face like a hybrid of all human races, with unblemished, radiant skin. It was the most beautiful thing Jake had ever seen—frighteningly beautiful.

Jake willed himself to the corner of the room. *What . . . who are you?* Jake thought to the being.

In a rich, glorious voice, it spoke. “I am called Eleazar. I am your ministering angel.”

An angel? Jake thought back.

“Yes, Jacob. Do not be afraid. Instead, rejoice! For I have come to usher you into heaven.”

Please, don't take me now. I can't die now. I'm about to be a father!

The being raised a glimmering hand, gesturing for Jake to take it easy. “Calm, Jacob. Do not be frightened. Rejoice and be glad! I will now take you to the Lord.”

But what about Teresa and the baby? I never did get life insurance. I can't die without life insurance.

“Trust in God, Jacob. He will provide.”

God shouldn't have to provide. I should have been ready for this. Isn't there any way you can heal me? Can't you send me back?

“Look.” The being pointed at Jake's body.

Todd Heller tossed a white sheet over Jake's corpse. He uttered a few final words, walked out of the room, and closed the door behind him.

"Take my hand, Jacob, and I will usher you into paradise, a place so wonderful that it defies description. Once there, you will forget your earthly concerns. But you must, by your own free will, take my hand and come with me willingly."

Jake concentrated on the angel's hand. He focused on Eleazar's eyes and the unconditional love written in every perfect curve of that face. A powerful urge drove Jake to reach out. . . but he just wasn't ready. Not yet.

Are you sure there's no way? Jake asked again.

"Look, Jacob." Eleazar pointed to Jake's sheet-covered body. "You have been pronounced dead already. If God resurrected your body now, you would be considered a living miracle. You are not prepared to handle that responsibility. No, the only way would be for God to place your soul back into your body at an earlier point in time while it still lives."

So there is a way!

"With God, all things are possible. All things."

Then let's do it! Please, just give me a second chance. That's all I ask.

The angel regarded Jake for a moment and then spoke with a hint of irritation.

"Never have I encountered a charge so stubborn as you." Eleazar paused, as though he were mulling over a thought. "I suppose . . . if it is truly your desire—"

It is! It is my desire!

Eleazar's eyes glazed over. He lifted his head and seemed to be listening to a voice. He nodded and lowered his head to face Jake.

“Jacob, you will require special treatment. God anticipated this reaction to the death of your body, for He knows you better than you know yourself. He wanted you to hear yourself admit that you are not yet ready for heaven. That way, you cannot deny the wisdom of what must now be done before your entrance into God’s kingdom. God would go to any extreme for the good of just one of His flock. That is His way.”

So what are you saying?

“God will grant your request by giving you this second chance. Do you not desire to relive your youth with the knowledge that you now hold?”

Who wouldn’t jump at the chance to relive their youth knowing what they know now? But was that really possible?

“With God, all things are possible,” Eleazar said. “You must understand that because God created physical time, He is therefore outside of physical time. Think of time as a long river with a beginning and an end. God looks down upon the entire river, seeing all things at once. Likewise, He moves along the river of time just as you would walk across this room. God will now place your soul upstream in this river of time at the source of your deepest regret, the summer of 1986. However, I must warn you: when God allows evil to happen, it is often because it is the least of evils. The alternative could be worse. Are you certain of this?”

Look, Jake thought to the being, I’d love to go back and have a second chance, but—

“Then you have made your choice. Go now to the heaven of your heart.”

The angel waved his arm, and in a tremendous flash, everything went blank.

A brilliant light burned pink behind *physical* eyelids. Jake slowly opened his eyes, squinting under the glare.

A raspy voice emanated from the air. “Up and at ‘em. Times a wastin’. You snooze, you lose.”

He could clearly see his *dad* with his hand on a light switch. He then flicked it on and off several times for an annoying strobe-light effect.

“You don’t want another tardy on your last day, do you?” Dad said. Then his shoes clogged against hardwood floors as he walked down the hall.

Jake pulled the covers over his face as a shield from the onslaught of hundred-watt light bulbs. He let his again physical eyes adjust to the light while his racing heart quickly roused him from his new body’s apparent post-sleep haze. Once his eyes had adjusted, he slowly pulled the covers back, sat up, and cautiously examined his surroundings. U2, Duran Duran, and INXS posters plastered scuffed drywall. A shiny, black bass guitar with gold tuning pegs leaned against an amplifier, and Tears for Fears sang “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” from a clock radio.

The hair on his scalp stood on end. Surely this was a dream. But there it was, in non dream-like color. It was his old teenage bedroom, and somehow he knew it was the last day of school of his senior year. That way Jake could see all of his old friends, and he wouldn’t even have to study. God knew Jake well.

Chapter 3

Jake swung his bare feet out from under the covers and sat on the edge of his bed, looking at the old desk he had rarely used for studying. There, on his cluttered desk in front of his boom box, next to a love note from Teresa, beside Altar Boys and Stryper cassettes, was the last exam he'd failed dated May 20, 1986. He reached over and picked up the exam, running his fingers over the date at the top, making sure it was real and not some strange hallucination. He shifted the paper in his hand and—"Ouch!" He felt the sting of a paper cut. It was real all right.

But what was he supposed to do next? Was he just supposed to get dressed, pick up Teresa, go to school, and act as if the next twenty-two years had never happened? He looked around the room for any sign of an angelic being, hoping to be filled in little more. "Hello?" he whispered. "Are you there?"

No answer came. He could hear only the music from the clock radio and Dad's clanging around in the kitchen. That angel had just dropped Jake off in 1986 and gone back to heaven. Apparently, the rest was up to him.

"Okay," he said to himself. "Concentrate. See what you can remember."

Since this was his old—that is, his young—brain, all of his old memories should have been new ones. If he was going to get very far in 1986, he had to make sure he still remembered everything. Did he remember all of his friends' names? Did he remember where and at what time his classes met? He searched every closet of his mind. Yes, he remembered everything. It was almost as if he'd never left. He even remembered which final homework assignments he never got around to finishing.

"It's 7:30!" Dad hollered from the kitchen. "If you plan on picking up your girl, you'd better stop talking to yourself and get moving."

Jake sprang out of bed in one fluid movement, surprised at how quickly his young, limber body achieved the task. For the first time in his life, he actually felt confident. With the wisdom of forty years and his knowledge of the future, he felt like he could conquer the world.

Okay, maybe conquering the world was a bit much, but at least he could go to his graduation. He could make sure he won the Battle of the Bands. And then there was Matt. He could keep Matt out of that wheelchair.

He felt his face go pale when he realized something else. He could stop September 11 from ever happening. Then there would be no war in Iraq. But how? Who would he tell? Who would listen to the warning of a lab technician from Livingston, North Carolina?

“I’ve got 15-years to figure that one out,” Jake said to himself.

But taking care of Teresa and the baby wouldn’t be so hard. Knowing the future, he could provide a great life for them. As long as he sold before the stock market tanks in 2000, with stock in Intel, Microsoft, or Wal-Mart, he could make Teresa and their future baby not only comfortable, but stinking rich!

“You’d better hurry,” Dad yelled again.

“Yes, sir,” Jake said. “I’m working on it.”

Dad was right. This was his second chance, and he didn’t want to waste a minute of it. So he shuffled through the dirty clothes the old Jake apparently had left on the floor and made his way toward the door.

“*Sir?* Are you feelin’ all right, son?”

Jake had forgotten how disrespectful he was as a teenager. He’d have to remember to be more disrespectful in the future. “It’s the new Jake,” he hollered.

Jake went to the bathroom, reached for his electric razor and froze, engrossed by the image in the mirror. Lean, slightly muscular legs in boxer shorts supported a slender abdomen. He had a full head of black hair parted in the middle and touching his shoulders in the back. He pulled off his T-shirt, flexed his chest muscles in the mirror, and sucked in his flat gut so he’d look even thinner. He had fewer freckles, less chest hair, and—he twisted to see his back better—yes! Not one hair on his back yet.

“But look at my face,” he said, cringing. The pink, tender blemishes that were randomly dispersed on his forehead, cheeks, and chin were all overshadowed by a big, juicy zit complete with a white head, stuck there on the tip of a blackhead-speckled nose. The years had not been so cruel after all.

He shaved, showered, and wiped his face with Stridex pads. He then stepped back into his bedroom, donned his undergarments, and stood at his closet door, gawking at the display of obnoxious '80s garb.

Did he actually wear this stuff? As silly as he felt, if he was going to be in the '80s, he had to play the part. He sifted through his wardrobe and pulled out a bright orange Don Johnson "Miami Vice" jacket. "I think not," he said and continued ruffling through his clothes. He passed on the parachute pants from his sophomore year, laughed at the many-zippered Michael Jackson "Thriller" jacket, and then settled on some black jeans and a bright yellow Jams shirt with black, red, and blue designs.

As he pulled on a pair of Reeboks, a clicking noise came from down the hall, the sound of his dog's toenails on the hardwood floor. Peanut, the brown dachshund he'd grown up with, pushed open his bedroom door and entered the room.

"Peanut! Hey there, buddy." As Jake bent down to pet him, Peanut rolled to his back and thumped his tail on the floor.

When Jake was nine years old, he'd picked Peanut from the litter, and this dog had pretty much grown up with him. Most of the time growing up in that house, Peanut had been Jake's only ally. Seeing his dad was one thing, but seeing Peanut was something else. Peanut had died just before Teresa and Jake got married. In 2008, he'd just seen his dad the previous week, but he hadn't seen his little resurrected friend in nearly 20 years.

"Come on, Peanut. We'll catch up later. I'm runnin' late."

Jake walked down the hall and into the den, stopping just short of the tacky gold-colored rug that was centered on the hardwood floor. Aside from his dad's new La-Z-Boy

recliner, most of the furnishings, including the avocado green couch, dated back to before he was born, when his mom was around to decorate the house.

Dad rustled the newspaper in the eat-in kitchen, reminding Jake that he'd better stop daydreaming and mentally prepare himself for the odd reunion he was about to have. He took a deep breath, walked into the kitchen acting as normally as possible, and poured a cup of coffee. "Good morning, Dad."

Dad sat at the kitchen table dividing his attention among the newspaper, black coffee, and burned Pop Tarts. "Good morning?" Dad said and shifted newspaper pages. "I'm usually lucky to get a grunt out of you before 10:00 a.m.."

Dad was unusually tall and lanky for a Simon, taking his genes from his mom's father. Deep worry lines were etched across his forehead, and his bushy eyebrows could use a serious trim. Unlike his father, Grandpa Simon, Dad still had a full head of graying black hair, and he was surprisingly thin for a man in his early fifties. Then Jake noticed his dad's hand. He was still wearing his wedding band eighteen years after Jake's mom died.

"Says here our nuclear plants aren't all that different from Chernobyl," Dad said. "Says we'll have our own meltdown within twenty years."

"I'd say we're safe for at least twenty-two years." Jake couldn't help himself. This was not going to be easy.

Dad lowered the paper and peered at Jake over the top. "What, are you psychic now?"

"Let's just say . . . I've got other things to worry about."

“Well studyin’ obviously ain’t one of your worries. Coffee?” Dad raised his bushy eyebrows. “Since when did you start drinkin’ coffee? And black at that.”

Jake replied with the only excuse he could think of. “Well . . . I’m eighteen now. I’m officially a man.”

“Well, maybe since you’re *officially* a man now, your grades will show it. When I see your final report card, I expect to see some *manly* improvement out of you.”

“Maybe I will take some cream and sugar,” Jake said, changing the subject.

But Dad was on a roll. “You just got no idea how much it costs to live nowadays. If you ever plan on getting married, you’d better hit those books. Nowadays, if you don’t have a college education, you’d be lucky to afford not to live under a bridge, let alone raise a family. If you hit the books half as much as you hit those guitar strings, you’d make straight *A*’s.” Dad wadded his napkin, threw it onto the table, and stared at Jake in utter disappointment.

The adult in Jake should have been offended, but his dad was right. He should have done better. This time, he *would* do better. “You’re right, Dad. I’ve been nothing but lazy. But when college starts this fall, I promise you’ll see a big improvement.”

Dad stared at Jake in thought for a moment, then narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you patronize me, young *man*. You’ve always been good at talkin’. Now let’s see what your report card has to say for you.” Dad stood, picked up his coffee mug and plate, put them in the sink, and walked out the back garage door.

Dad was *not* a morning person.

Chapter 4

After breakfast, Jake stood in his driveway gawking at the transportation of his youth—the 1967 T2 Volkswagen Bus. Just like the guy from “Eight is Enough,” his VW Bus was essential equipment for an aspiring rock band, highly valued for hauling their sound system to gigs. He got this thing while visiting his grandparents, his mom’s parents, out in Knoxville, Tennessee. Finding it in a *Bargain Mart* ad, he’d bought it from a fanatical University of Tennessee football fan who’d painted it UT Big Orange. The orange paint was faded from age, sun exposure, and lack of waxing. It had a couple of dents, a few scratches, and holes in the interior vinyl, but it still ran good—most of the time. But what he liked most about this van was that it was paid for, and paid for completely by his own efforts. Dad had offered to help him buy more reliable transportation, but Jake didn’t accept charity, not even from his own father.

Jake opened the door, tossed his backpack onto the rear bench seat, climbed up over the front wheel and into his old van, settling into the vinyl chair. Gazing at the big round steering wheel, he recalled how much he'd missed this old beetle bus of his youth. Then, when he fastened the lap belt, it occurred to him that the next day would be his last day to drive this van. Well, at least that was the way it had happened the first time around.

The first time around, not wanting to suffer the indignation of riding to graduation with his dad and grandparents, he'd driven himself to graduation. He'd taken a shortcut to the interstate down Red Mill Road. It was a dangerous, winding road with "slippery-when-wet" signs and blind curves. He was rounding the last blind curve when a black Toyota Celica came into his lane. The Celica belonged to Marty Tibbs, a notorious pothead at Freemont High. Upon seeing Jake's van, Marty had apparently braked as well, creating only a minor accident instead of a major catastrophe, but it was still serious enough to keep Jake from graduation. While his peers, to the applause of friends and family, received their reward for twelve years of academic drudgery, Jake got to spend the afternoon in the emergency room getting five stitches just below his lower lip. Since the cost to repair the van far exceeded the van's book value of \$900, the insurance company considered it totaled. They sent him a check for \$900 and sent his VW Bus to the junkyard.

"Not anymore," Jake said, putting the key into the ignition. On his way to graduation tomorrow, he'd take a different route, or he could always go with his dad and grandparents. Either way, this time around, he was determined to be at graduation, and he'd save his van from the scrap heap.

After the third turn of the ignition, the rear engine pattered to life and hummed a rhythmic putt-putt-putt-putt as the van rested in neutral. Jake reached over and pushed Play on his tape deck sitting in the open rectangular hole that served as the van's glove compartment. "I Ran", by the Flock of Seagulls blared from the speakers. The whole van shuddered and vibrated from the loud bass. Out of respect for his neighbors, however, Jake turned the volume to a moderate level.

Jake mashed the clutch and pulled the gear stick into reverse, cringing at the grinding noise it made. The old van whined as it pulled out of the driveway and onto the street. He ground the gears into first and motored along the pothole-patched streets toward his wife's . . . that is, his girlfriend's house.

This should be interesting.

Teresa was born in Puerto Rico, but when she was three years old, her dad transferred to Atlanta with his job at IBM. In Atlanta, Teresa grew to the age of seventeen and learned perfect, slightly Southern-accented teenage English while retaining fluency in Spanish. Then in the summer of 1985, her dad was transferred again, that time from Atlanta to Livingston. She was raised in a Christian family, maintained a 4.0 grade point average, and aspired to be a cardiologist in the future.

Jake, on the other hand, was a native of Livingston, was raised with practically no formal religious training, did good to maintain a 2.0 grade point average, and aspired to be a rock star. Somehow, despite their differences—call it chemistry or God's will—they managed to fall in love.

While driving toward Teresa's house, Jake wondered how she would look and what she would say. And what would he say to her? Sure, it was just Teresa, the girl he'd

spent half his life with, but this Teresa was not Teresa Simon. She was Teresa Morales. So how did he act when he was eighteen? Should he open the van door for her or just unlock it? Should he kiss her or hug her? If he kissed her, would it be a peck on the lips or on the cheek? How did he act at this point of their relationship when he was really eighteen-years old? That was how he should act now. He should act as if nothing had changed. He should act as if he was simply excited about the last day of school. If he acted any other way, she'd be suspicious.

Given his circumstances, maybe it was best to say as little as possible until he had some time to get re-acclimated to 1986. He needed to get his bearings so he could better formulate a plan of action and a plan of behavior. For once in his life, he should think as much as possible—and this was the hardest part—say as little as possible. As Grandpa Simon used to tell him, “Even a fool can appear wise—if he keeps his trap shut.”

Jake reached her house and hesitantly pulled down the driveway. Before he could open his van door, a happy teen bounced out the front door of the house, hopped down the porch steps, and skipped toward his van clutching a purple Trapper Keeper to her chest. She had a firm, petite figure and was dressed in a white ESPRIT T-shirt and two-tone jeans that were entirely too tight. All Jake could do was gawk at this skinny, joyful figure with big piercing emerald eyes and black, curly hair held back by a green butterfly clip.

This is just too weird, he thought as he reached over to unlock the door.

She opened it, sprang up into the van, and tossed her purple Trapper Keeper onto the back seat. “You’re late,” she said and pointed at her Swatch watch complete with black protective Swatch guards. It was surrounded on both sides by some of those black,

rubber Madonna bracelets. On her left index finger, she wore Jake's class ring with white cloth tape wrapped around the band so it would fit. "Let's go. I wanna talk to Janet before class," Teresa said, then bent over to peck him on the cheek.

Jake just sat there sprouting goose bumps, gazing at this blameless child who was oblivious to the true age of the man she had just kissed. Instead of the rush of nostalgic joy he had anticipated before this moment, he felt like a pedophile.

She cocked her head to the side and eyed him suspiciously. "Are you, like, okay, Jake? You're acting kind of weird."

Her words shook him from his trance. "No, I'm fine. I just uhh . . . overslept. I'm still half-asleep, that's all."

"You can sleep in class. *Vamonos!*" she told him to get moving in Spanish.

Jake instinctively replied with a memorized Spanish sentence, telling her to put on her seatbelt first. "*Primero, ponte el cinturon.*"

She gave Jake an odd look. "How did you know how to say that in Spanish? You didn't learn that from me." Teresa appeared curious yet delighted. "You're not dating another Puerto Rican are you?"

"Well, uhh, I wanted to surprise you. I've been studying Spanish on my own."

"Really? That's great. Bring me your book sometime. I want to see it."

"Okay," he said and made a mental note to buy a Spanish book.

He started the van. It pattered and spat when it backed out of her driveway, and they headed toward school. Thankfully, as usual, Teresa did most of the talking.

“Anyway,” she said, “I want to talk to Janet about that waistoid, Kevin, she’s dating. I mean that guy, like, doesn’t give a crap about her. I mean, she was like, ‘He stood me up and didn’t even call.’ And I was all, ‘Well, you need to dump that loser.’”

As Jake drove to school trying to follow what she was saying, he marveled at her childlike lack of sophistication. He didn’t remember her abusing the lingo of the ’80s as she so eloquently did. Did she actually say *crap*? Naturally, she had changed somewhat physically, but he was in awe at the mental changes that college, church, and life in general had made in her over next twenty-two years. Had he also changed that much? When he was her age, did he not notice her abuse of the English language because he also spoke the way she did? If so, he should talk that way again.

Before Jake could formulate a lingo plan, the scenery of the 1986 suburbs grabbed his full attention. As he pattered down Providence Pike, taking in the scene, it wasn’t what he saw that intrigued him. It was what he *didn’t* see. Where video stores, movie theaters, grocery stores, entrances to subdivisions, and strip malls would stand in 2008, now sat only empty fields and cow pastures, soon to be gobbled up by corporate America.

Situated in a valley of western North Carolina, Livingston was bordered on two sides by the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The French Broad River ran down the center of the valley and cut the town of 90,000 in two.

After a quick tour of what used to be and was again, they arrived at their high school, Freemont High, the largest school in Hartford County. They drove slowly past the yellow convoys of school buses, cars, and familiar book-toting students, eager to get the last day over with. He pulled his beat-up van into the senior lot and searched for a space

among the Audis, BMWs, and Corvettes of the upper crust of Freemont High, noting an odd absence of mini-vans and SUVs.

Jake parked next to a Pontiac Fiero. He climbed out and met Teresa at the front of the van. She wove her fingers into his and clutched tightly. They walked hand in hand among the rows of parked cars toward the school. As strange as his situation was, the hand-holding-walking-together thing seemed even more awkward. Over the years, Teresa had become like an old shoe—broken in and comfortable. Now she was like a new pair of shoes that were two sizes too small. Their stride once had the same rhythm, as they seemed to walk as one. Now they were somehow out of tune, out of rhythm. But in a week or two, once he'd relaxed a bit and let his teenage brain do what felt natural, they'd soon be back in step, or at least more in step. At least he hoped so.

When they reached the front door, Jake freed his hand to hold the door open for her. They stepped into the commons area where lunch was served in the afternoon.

“See if you can spot Janet,” Teresa said.

Jake took in the scene with fascination while scanning for Janet. Van Halen's “Why Can't This Be Love” echoed in the concrete commons from a boom box that would only be tolerated on the last day of school. Students milled about with their hairspray-puffed hair and wearing their pocket pants, IOU shirts, and gaudy plastic jewelry. They were talking, laughing, and yelling in a buzz of excitement that went with the last day before summer vacation. Then he noticed something else: a refreshing lack of tattoos and body piercing—not one perforated nose, eyebrow, or tongue in sight. With no beepers or cell phones either, they seemed to be strange anachronisms, dated by absurd wardrobes that Jake once thought normal.

Still scanning for Janet, Jake eyed some colorfully clothed kids sitting at round tables next to the windows that stretched up to the high ceiling of the two-story commons. Other students ascended and descended stairs that led to a concrete balcony that was part of a round corridor leading to four wings of classrooms. Kids leaned against the chewing gum-speckled balcony rail watching the action below.

Janet skipped over and slid next to Teresa. “Hey, guys, what kept you? You’re like, way late.”

“Don’t blame me,” Teresa said, pointing at Jake, peering at him out of the corners of her eyes.

Janet had moved to Livingston from California over the previous summer. Since she and Teresa were both newcomers, they’d hit it off when school started last fall. Janet was precious to Teresa. To Jake, she was an annoyance. But now, as she stood gabbing in her neon-orange canvas basketball shoes with a ’60s peace symbol written in blue ballpoint pen, he was too amused by her to be annoyed by this poster child for the big ’80’s.

Somebody hollered, pulling Jake’s attention to the jocks standing under the stairway. There, standing in the middle of the jocks was the leader of the pack, Todd Heller—the guy who had pronounced Jake dead. This young version of Dr. Heller had short-cropped Aryan blond hair that stood on end and was spiked with mousse, making him look like a hedgehog. Since he was voted Most Likely to Succeed *and* Mr. Fremont High, the entire school had been misled into looking up to Todd, not unlike the way Germany had revered Hitler.

From the clatter of voices, Jake heard a voice yell for him. “Jake! Up here.” Jake looked up to see Rob waving from the balcony. Rob was the guitar player and singer in Jake’s band, Two Left Feet, a name Rob came up with after seeing Jake dance.

“So when do you want to see *Top Gun*?” Jake heard Janet say. “Tom Cruise is *soooo* totally awesome.”

“Totally,” Teresa agreed.

“Hey, Teresa,” Jake said, pointing to the balcony. “Rob’s yellin’ at me. I’ll be right back.”

“That’s cool,” she said and let go of his hand.

Jake worked through the jocks and headed toward the stairs. Suddenly, his foot hit an unseen barrier. He lunged forward and plowed into Joe Thompson, Freemont’s three hundred pound star lineman. Joe caught Jake with his elephantine hands and kept him from hitting the floor. The sting of humiliation burned Jake’s face as a fit of laughter broke out around him.

Joe, the gentle giant who had always been unusually kind to Jake, helped Jake to his feet and said, “You all right there, Jake?” Joe was the only one not laughing.

“I’m fine. I just tripped. Sorry ‘bout that,” Jake said while scanning the floor and surrounding faces for the cause of his fall. Then he spotted the grinning Todd Heller.

Rage boiled in Jake, enough to pop the zits on his face. He was sick and tired of Heller’s picking on him! What had he done to deserve this? If Jake were not a Christian, he would have punched Heller in the nose.

Todd noticed Jake’s anger, and the smirk left his face. “You got something to say, Simon?”

Yes, Jake had plenty to say. For fear of losing his job, he might have put up with this guy when Todd was a doctor, but not now. This time, Todd Heller was just a kid, and Jake was a man. This time, Jake was determined to act like a man.

“Yeah, I . . .,” Jake said.

Christianity had nothing to do with Jake backing down from Todd. It was because Todd was six inches taller and a good fifty pounds thicker. Jake instinctively cut his losses and went up the stairs toward Rob. Once again, Todd had humiliated Jake, and once again, Jake had done nothing about it. Just like old times.

Jake reached the top of the stairs to find Rob waiting for him.

Rob raked his fingers into black wavy hair that was cut close on the sides, revealing a gold stud in his left ear. “Way to go, Jake. Took a little tumble there, did you bro’?”

“I had a little help,” Jake said.

“Well, just think,” Rob said. “After tomorrow you’ll never have to see Heller again,” Rob said.

“I hope you’re right.” Maybe this time Rob would be right.

“Anyway,” Rob said. “You going to the party at Misty Cooper’s tomorrow night?”

Jake remembered the party well. It was the one he regretted missing because of the accident he’d had earlier that day. “What party?” Jake asked in his most sincere, not-hiding-twenty-two-years-of-future-knowledge voice.

“Duh! Where have you been?”

If you only knew.

“Everyone’s going to be there,” Rob said, tugging on acid-washed jeans that were sliding down his thin hips toward his black-and-white-checkered Vans. Unlike in the ’90s, in the ’80s it was embarrassing for someone to see your underwear. “So what time you picking me up?” Rob asked.

“I’ll ask Teresa and get back with you,” Jake said.

“Ahh, man, don’t bring her. She’s such a goody-goody,” Rob said. “Why not just the guys?”

Rob didn’t like Teresa. It was nothing personal. He was just jealous. Rob and Jake used to hang out together until Teresa entered the picture. “Maybe you can get your parents to drop you off,” Jake said and waited for his reaction.

“Eat my shorts, dude.”

“No thanks, Rob, I’m on a diet. How about I pick you up at 8:00?”

“8:00 o’clock it is. Listen, I’ve got to run by my locker before class. See ya,” Rob said. He spun around and loped his way into the moving maze of teenagers.

Jake turned to go back down the other stairway—the one Heller wasn’t in front of—so he could join Teresa downstairs. While dodging underclassmen coming toward him in a steady stream, Jake focused on a Coca-Cola shirt and a pair of red shorts. His eyes then drifted up to the face of the wearer, Melissa Blanchard. She drilled him with a cool, calculating glare.

When Jake had met Teresa at a youth group, he was dating Melissa at the time. But when he met Teresa, he dumped Melissa for Teresa. He’d always felt guilty about the way he’d handled Melissa, but Teresa and he were meant to be. Destiny demanded action. So there was a breakup, nasty words were said, and tears were shed. Jake hadn’t

talked to Melissa since. He'd literally gone to his grave regretting how he'd treated her. And now, by the grace of God, Jake had his chance to redeem himself. This time around, things would be different.

"Hey, Melissa," Jake said, catching her by the arm as she passed by.

She eyed Jake's hand with contempt.

He let go before she bit him. "Sorry," he said.

"So where's *she* at," Melissa said with a suspicious tone, obviously wondering why Jake was breaking the imposed silent treatment.

"She's downstairs. But listen, I want to talk to you about something."

She looked at her own red Swatch watch, letting Jake know he was wasting her valuable time. "I'm listening."

"Look, I know what I did to you wasn't very nice, but I never meant to hurt you. I just wish we could have some way, you know, parted as friends or something."

She softened her face and studied Jake thoughtfully. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the five-minute warning bell rang. "Listen, I need to go," she said. "But. . . ." She tilted her head to the side and gave him a perky smile. "You've still got his number, don't you? Call me sometime."

"Okay," Jake said, knowing he would not dare. "See ya later." He watched her glide into his past once again. He had made his peace, and it felt good.

"CALL ME SOMETIME!"

Jake spun around to find Teresa piercing him with a glare that made Melissa's glare look like a mother's gaze upon her newborn baby. She gripped her Trapper Keeper tight against her chest, turned, and plowed through the corridor.

Jake followed close behind, trying to keep up. “Wait! Teresa, you don’t understand.”

“What’s not to understand?” she shouted over the roar of stampeding youths. “You’ve still got the hots for her.” She kept charging forward, refusing to look at him.

“Teresa, don’t be silly. I swear I’m not going to call her. I love you.”

At that, she stopped. At first, he thought the *I love you* must have done the trick, but it hadn’t. She stopped because she was at her locker. “No wonder you acted so weird this morning,” she said. “You were going to dump me for her this time!” She dialed in the combination to her Master Lock and yanked it open.

Jake caught the locker door as she flung it open. “No, that’s not it. Look, you know how I dumped her for you, right? Well, I just wanted to apologize for hurting her, that’s all. You said yourself you felt bad about stealing her boyfriend. Don’t you see? After today, I’ll never see her again. I don’t want her to go on hating me the rest of her life.”

“I am so sure, Jake. And that’s why she wants you to call her?” She still would not look at him. She just shuffled books and pens around in the top shelf of her locker as if she were looking for something.

“She just misunderstood. I swear, Teresa, if I was going to dump you, why not just do it now? You’re my life. You know that.”

She tried to close her locker, but Jake held the door. “Do you mind?” she said. When he let the door go, she slammed it shut and locked it. “Don’t bother waiting for me after class,” she said in a slightly softer tone. “I’ll take the bus.”

“*Te Amo*,” Jake told her he loved her in Spanish.

“Yeah, right.”

He watched helplessly as she stormed away toward her first class.

Chapter 5

Since the last day of school was only a half day, the 3:30 bell rang at noon, announcing that school was out for the summer. Jake had spent most of the day worrying about how he would dig himself out of the mess with Teresa, but the more he thought about it, the more he remembered how hotheaded and insanely jealous she had been when they first started dating. He also reminded himself that she had forgiven him for far worse things over their twenty years together. She'd cool off. It might take her a couple of weeks, but eventually she'd take him back. She always had and she always would. Jake knew that because he knew the future and how she would act in the future.

Since it was the last day of school, Teresa would go to her locker and clean it out. Jake decided to meet her there and begin the time-tested groveling process. As he shuffled toward her locker through the papers that covered the hall floor like huge snowflakes, the halls reverberated with Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" and cries of

joy from liberated teens. He reached her locker, parked his Reebok paper plows, and waited, watching and absorbing the sights and sounds of his youth for what he was *pretty sure* would be the last time.

When the crowd had thinned, Jake looked up and there he was—Matt Anderson, the guy who had introduced Jake to Jesus and Teresa. Matt was stooping down in front of his locker, conscientiously cleaning out bits of paper and other trash that had accumulated at the bottom of the locker.

In the fall of 1985, Matt had invited Jake to a youth group party at his church. That was where he had introduced Jake to Teresa. It was also because of this youth group that, with Matt's guidance, Jake officially accepted Jesus into his heart and was born again. Without Matt, Jake would never have married Teresa, and he would not have had an angel offer to take him to heaven. He owed Matt—big time.

Then Matt stood up on perfectly strong legs and pulled a notebook off the top shelf of his locker. Matt was tall, but he couldn't have weighed more than 130 pounds wearing a wet goose-down coat. He had brown hair, which he wore in a short practical haircut, and his face was oblong and supported a nose that took a turn to the left. He wasn't much to look at, but at least he didn't have any zits.

Jake stepped over to Matt and stuck out his hand. "Matt! It's good to see you!"

Matt extended his vein-bulging arm and shook Jake's hand. "Hey, buddy, it's good to see you, too. How long has it been? Yesterday, wasn't it?"

Just as Jake had expected, Teresa came down the hall, wading through piles of classroom notes and homework.

“Hey, Matt, I’ll see you tomorrow at graduation. I got some making up to do,” Jake said, indicating Teresa with a tilt of his head.

“Uh-oh. I understand. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Matt closed his locker and *walked* away without the slightest limp.

As Teresa approached, Jake braced himself for a second assault.

“Hey, sweetie,” she said and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m sorry I had such a cow this morning. I guess I just wiggled out when I heard Melissa ask you to call her. It just drives me crazy whenever I think of you with her. You forgive me, don’t you?” She tickled him gently, prodding his ribs with her fingernails. “Well, don’t you?”

“*Hookay*, okay, I give,” he said, arresting her tickling fingers. “I forgive you.” She pressed against his chest, placing the black curls of her head just under his chin as if waiting for a forgiveness hug. He hugged her gently, the way a father would hug his daughter. “No, really, Teresa. I can see how it must have looked, but I was just trying to—”

She looked up at him and finished his sentence. “Settle matters with your adversary?”

“Huh?”

She laughed and tugged on his shirt. “Well, it’s like this. I was sitting in algebra and something Jesus said hit me. He says you should settle matters quickly with your adversary before he hands you over to the judge. I guess that’s all you were trying to do. You were trying to make things up with her before it’s too late. That’s the Christian thing to do, ya know. You did the right thing, and I repay you by wiggling out.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Mad? Actually, I’m like, proud of you. You’re really taking this born-again thing seriously. I think that’s great.”

A pang of guilt hit Jake when he looked into her trusting green eyes. She had come up with her own conclusion as to why he acted the way he did, and it wasn’t the truth. Little did she know that he was really trying to make up for years of being a lousy Christian. He wanted badly to tell her the true reason for his behavior. He knew that doing so would explain what had happened today as well as the many verbal mishaps he was bound to make in the future, but she’d never believe him. For Jake, the truth would not set him free. It would put him in a straight jacket. As much as he hated it, he’d have to carry his secret to the grave—again.

After Jake dropped Teresa off at her house, he went home and did some badly need housework. He couldn’t believe he’d been such a slob as a teenager.

That night, to celebrate the last day of school, Teresa and Jake splurged on a pizza and a movie before cutting expenses to save money for the stock market. But cutting corners wasn’t enough. If he wanted to provide his family with a prosperous future, he had to supplement his income at Food King, his current job. So while they were at Bruno’s Pizza Piazza, he saw a help-wanted sign and filled out a job application. After the pizza, they saw the full-priced version of the movie *Short Circuit*. From that point on, the matinee would have to do.

So after a strange, yet fascinating day of nostalgic exploration, Jake threw on a pair of gym shorts and a T-shirt, then climbed into bed—without Teresa. It was odd dropping Teresa off with her parents. Odd, yet appropriate. This Teresa was not his wife of nineteen years. She was just a kid who belonged at home with her parents. Although he'd spent much of the day with her, he missed her at the same time. He missed his wife, the thirty-nine-year old Teresa. He hadn't considered being a bachelor again. After nineteen years of marriage and feeling the warmth of her next to him, sleeping alone would be the hardest thing he would have to get used to. The angel was right. This wasn't going to be easy.

“Oh well,” he mumbled, “at least I've got you back, Peanut.” Jake pulled the edge of the covers back to expose the cold, black tip of Peanut's nose, making sure he had fresh air.

But easy or not, Jake was determined to make good use of every minute of his second chance. Everything he should have done the first time around, he *would* do this time. And one of his deepest regrets had been not finishing the Bible before he died. So he reached over to his nightstand and lifted the Bible Grandpa Simon had given him. Aside from reading the gospels just after being saved, Jake had never finished the Old Testament. He intended to—some day. In fact, he had finally started reading the Bible just before he died. He just never lived long enough to finish it.

Alright, Jake, stop daydreaming and get to it, he thought as he opened the Bible. He turned the thin, golden-edged pages to the chapter he was on just before he died, Proverbs. He scanned down the page with his finger. *Here we go, Seek Wisdom.*

After reading until his eyes grew heavy, he flipped off the reading lamp and settled in for sleep, wondering if his dreams would be half as strange as his reality.

Jake awoke to the smell of Dad's cooking bacon in the kitchen. He sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. By the sunlight leaking through the cracks between dented aluminum blinds, he surveyed his strange, old, new-again, environment. U2 and Duran Duran posters still blanketed the walls in a room now organized after the previous day's housework. The Bible on the nightstand was open, turned to Proverbs, where he'd stopped reading the night before. If yesterday was some deranged dream, if it was some kind of insane hallucination caused by drugs Ernestine had slipped into the coffee, he was still in it.

After eating breakfast with his dad and sister, Andrea, who had come to town for his graduation, Jake found himself staring in the mirror. A rented royal blue graduation gown topped his church going clothes, which consisted of some khaki slacks, a white button-down shirt, tie, and his brown docksiders, the kind with those annoying leather shoelaces that never stayed tied. He lifted that silly square graduation cap from the top of his dresser, and fitted it snugly on his head. A white tassel with a plastic gold "86" emblem hung from the top of the hat and dangled just beyond his cheek.

"Jacob Thomas Simon," he said, imagining his voice to be the voice of the principal announcing his name before the masses. He moved the tassel to the other side of

the hat, not remembering which way it was supposed to go. Was it left to right, or right to left? He would have to ask Teresa.

Since he had forgotten to get off work at Food King Thursday evening, he had missed the graduation rehearsal. Fortunately, Teresa filled him in on what to do.

But even though he didn't return in time for graduation rehearsal, he did return in time for the day that really counts, the day he'd been cheated out of by an accident involving a pot-smoking junior named Marty Tibbs. His peers received their diplomas before God and family, and Jake received five stitches to his lower lip. From what he later heard, most of these peers weren't surprised that Jake hadn't shown up for graduation. Given his scholastic reputation and because he wasn't at the rehearsal, they'd just assumed that he didn't graduate at all. This time would be different. This time, he would show his classmates he wasn't the idiot they thought he was.

The doorbell rang and Peanut went into a barking frenzy.

"They're here," Dad yelled from his bedroom. "Andrea, you'd better hurry. You don't want to be late for this day we thought we'd never see. Jake, get the door, will you? I don't have any pants on."

"Okay," Jake yelled back and walked out into the hall toward the front door. As Peanut barked and tap-danced on the hardwood floor, Jake looked into the peephole. He stood frozen with his eye pressed to the peephole as goose bumps sprouted on his forearms and scalp.

It was Grandpa Simon, and he was standing. Jake hadn't seen Grandpa since he died in 1999. Jake had seen his grandmother regularly, but he hadn't seen his grandfather since the funeral. What do you say to someone you last saw in a coffin?

Chapter 6

So what do you say to a dead man?

You talk to him like one of your own, you idiot, Jake thought. Remember, you're dead too.

Jake picked up Peanut so he wouldn't put a run in Grandma Simon's hose. He snapped the dead bolt and yanked the door open.

"My goodness. Don't you look handsome." Grandma said, appraising Jake through her bifocals.

"Thanks," Jake said. He leaned over and hugged her with his right arm while struggling to control a twisting wiener dog in his left.

Dad came to the door in his undershirt. "Come on, dog, I think I saw a cat in the backyard," he said and took Peanut toward the back door.

With both hands free, Jake leaned into his grandfather and gave him a firm hug, pressing against the camera that hung around Grandpa's neck. "It's good to see you again, Grandpa."

"Why, son, you act like it's been years," Grandpa said as he brushed dog hair off Jake's white shirt. "I just saw you last week."

Jake changed the subject, knowing he had overreacted. "Come on in out of the heat." They walked through the foyer and into the den. "Have a seat," Jake said, extending his hand to the couch he'd vacuumed dog hair from the day before. "Andrea should be ready soon."

Grandpa and Grandma walked into the den. "My goodness. Did your dad hire a maid?" Grandma said. She sat on the sofa and pulled her cream-colored dress down over her pudgy knees. "I haven't seen this place so clean in years."

Grandma Simon, Sophie to her friends, had a full face with rose-colored blush covering the fine wrinkles on her pleasantly plump cheeks. The only jewelry she wore was her wedding band. Before Jake was old enough to take care of himself, Grandma had taken care of him when Dad was at work or Andrea and Eddie weren't around to babysit. Although Jake had grown up without a real mom, Grandma was always there for him. She didn't talk much. When she did, she was soft spoken and to the point, and if she didn't have anything nice to say about someone, she wouldn't say anything at all. She advised Jake to do the same.

Grandpa, on the other hand, was the talker. He had a humble, yet confident raspy voice that commanded the attention of everyone in the room. When he spoke, he always spoke the truth and spoke from experience. A white, bushy mustache sprouted beneath a

long, curved nose separating two wise, sympathetic eyes. Three deep wrinkle trenches ran across his forehead, eroded into existence by the river of time. Wrinkles branched from the outer corners of his eyes like the delta of that river of time. His hair was gray, unkempt, and it stood on end, making him look like Albert Einstein.

And also like Albert Einstein, Grandpa was Jewish, born Sirach Isaac Simon. However, after reading the New Testament, he'd become convinced that Jesus was the Messiah the Jews had long expected. He went on to teach Sunday school and become a leading member in his church. And like Albert Einstein, Grandpa was smart. Although he'd dropped out of school after the eighth grade to help his father run a general store, Grandpa was wise—the wisest man Jake knew.

Being a devout Christian, Grandpa had never pressured Jake about Jesus. He said that God was calling and when Jake was ready, by his own free will, he'd answer that call. He said that forced obedience and worship make one no better than a slave or a programmed robot. God's army was an all-volunteer army.

"Now you start boot camp," Grandpa had told Jake upon hearing the news of his salvation. And according to Grandpa, boot camp lasted as long as it took. He said that life on earth was God's boot camp.

Pock, pock, pock, pock. High heels clogged against hardwood floors as Jake's sister, Andrea, came into the den wearing a floral-pattern dress. At this time, Andrea was twenty-eight years old and currently doing her medical school residency at UT Hospital back in Knoxville. Her black hair was heavily laden with hurricane-proof hairspray, and a half-inch coat of skin-tone base filled in the pimple potholes of her pubescence. Her nose

exposed a disturbing amount of nostril, and her eyes had so much heavy turquoise blue eye shadow that even “Dynasty’s” Joan Collins would cringe.

“Well, what are you all waiting for?” Andrea asked, standing with her hands on her hips, acting as if she wasn’t the reason they were running late. “Doesn’t Jake need to get there early?”

Jake let Peanut back into the house and got his graduation robe and cap while Dad locked up. Dad wanted to show off his new car, so he insisted on his driving them all to graduation. And since Jake was no longer an insecure teen who was ashamed to be seen with his family, he decided he’d go along with them rather than drive himself. Besides, Dad never took Red Mill Road, and Jake knew he’d get to graduation safely, even if he was a little late.

“Andrea, make sure you bring that video camera,” Dad said. “This is an historic event. I want plenty of footage.”

Andrea picked up the gigantic camcorder, the kind that took those big VCR cassettes, and they each walked out into the garage toward Dad’s new car.

Behold: the 1986 Plymouth Reliant K, dark navy blue and brand spanking new. This intimidating, testosterone-inspired K-Car was powered by a spirited, three-speed automatic, ninety-six-horsepower engine capable of zero to sixty in under fifteen seconds—as long as there were no passengers. The pride is back.

Dad hit the garage door opener switch on the wall by the back door. “What do you think, Dad?” he asked proudly as the garage door rumbled and whined open, allowing sunlight to glitter off of this technological feat of efficiency.

Grandpa walked over to the car, rapped on the thin metal hood with his knuckle, and grunted. “They makin’ cars out of tinfoil these days?”

“I hope it can get us there in ten minutes,” Jake said and pointed at his watch.

They all climbed into the boxy K-Car. Jake straddled the hump in the back, between his two grandparents. This was precisely what the insecure teen in Jake had been avoiding the first time around.

They made their way to the interstate accident free when Grandpa broke the silence. “Well, son, you did it,” he said, squeezing Jake’s knee. “You graduated high school. So how does it feel?”

“He ought to feel real lucky,” Dad answered for Jake. “Lucky and ashamed, that is. Have you seen his grades? He’s lucky to be graduating at all.”

Here we go again, Jake thought.

“At least he’s graduating,” Grandpa said. “That’s more than I ever did. Why don’t you just concentrate on drivin’ this fine new machine of yours and keep your comments to yourself?” Grandpa gave Jake a reassuring wink. “Good grades are just fine for getting a job, but the really important things in life, the only things that’ll matter in the next life, are the things you learn by livin’ this life. And the only textbook Jake needs to worry about is the Bible.”

“Can you spare us the sermon, Dad? It’s great if the kid wants to read the Bible, but he’ll still be makin’ minimum wage. Even preachers have to go to college, you know. With a 1.8 grade point average, I’m surprised they’re letting him graduate at all. No wonder there’s so many illiterate high school grads out there.” Dad looked over at

Andrea and frowned. "I don't know, Jake. I just don't know where I went wrong with you. Why couldn't you have been more like your brother or sister here?"

Jake would have defended himself, but Dad was right. His grades were only a reflection of his own laziness. The only reason he'd gotten into college was because he'd guessed remarkably well on the ACT. He should have done better. This time around, he *would* do better. This time he'd make Dad proud.

"Edward, I told you to shut your trap and drive," Grandpa barked. "I don't know where we went wrong with *you*. Your brothers and sisters are good God-lovin' Christians, but you . . . all you do in life is work and worry. You just don't seem to have time for God, and He's the only reason you exist anyway."

"Can we just change the subject?" Dad said. "The subject is Jake and the way he's wastin' precious time fiddling with that blasted guitar of his."

Grandma wore a weary expression while watching the passing landscape. And true to her form, she was staying out of it.

"Would you two just pipe down?" Grandma finally snapped. "This is Jake's day, and here you are ruining it for him." She didn't stay out of it after all.

"Thank you, Grandma," Andrea said.

"All I'm sayin' is this." Grandpa did not give up easily. "He is not his brother or his sister. Just let him grow up at his own pace." Grandpa put his arm around Jake's shoulder and spoke softly into his ear. "Don't you pay attention to your dad. Just be glad you didn't have to raise him," he said and winked.

"I heard that," Dad said, scowling back at them through the rearview mirror.

The hostilities ceased, and they soon passed the “Welcome to Livingston University” sign and onto campus. Graduation was being held at the basketball arena of the Livingston Cougars. After venturing onto the campus, they made a sweep by the arena looking for a parking space. Then Jake noticed Teresa standing on the sidewalk in her graduation gown and cap, waiting for him.

Jake leaned forward and said, “There’s Teresa. Just drop me off at the curb.”

Dad pulled the car up to where Teresa was standing. Jake climbed out to meet her, and Dad drove off to look for a parking space.

“We’ll talk later,” she said. “We gotta hurry.”

Her black panty-hosed legs kicked at her long blue robe as they walked swiftly down the sidewalk toward the arena entrance. They made their way into the arena and followed some stairs that took them to a space below the bleachers. The clamor of nearly five hundred graduates uniformed in blue robes and square caps reverberated against the concrete walls under the slanted, rising inverse of the bleachers above.

“Michelle Marshall . . . Clarence Mason,” Freemont High’s guidance counselor, Mrs. Bradley, was lining up the students alphabetically, calling their names over a megaphone in an annoyed, nasal voice. She checked off each student’s name as he got in line. If a student didn’t show for this roll call, she marked his name off the list so the principal would know not to announce the name of a student who hadn’t showed up. That was why people assumed that Jake didn’t graduate the first time around: his name wasn’t even called.

“She’s on the *M*’s,” Teresa said. “I need to hurry. Here, put your robe and hat on. I’ll help you.”

Teresa held the robe while Jake slid his arms into the sleeves. He zipped it up, and Teresa placed the cap on his head, turning the cap so that a corner pointed forward. She then moved the white, stringy tassel to the left side of his cap.

“You look great,” she said, adjusting his tie. “Don’t be nervous. You don’t have to say anything. Just walk across the stage. But if you don’t tie your shoes, you’re going to fall on your face.” She pointed at Jake’s brown docksiders. That irritating leather shoestring had come untied again.

“Teresa Morales,” Mrs. Bradley’s voice called over the megaphone.

“That’s me, gotta go.” She pecked Jake on the cheek and hurried toward the end of the growing line with her blue gown flowing out behind her like Supergirl’s cape.

Jake bent down to tie his shoes, but before he could make a knot, he felt a slap on his back and heard the words, “Well, Jake. I see you made it.”

Jake stood to see Todd Heller’s cold, Alaskan Husky blue eyes bearing down on him. “The school board must have relaxed its standards,” he said. “I didn’t think you’d make it this year.”

Jake forced an insincere smile. “Haven’t they already called the *H*’s, Todd? You’re supposed to be in line.”

“I just wanted to congratulate you. See you around, Jake,” Todd said. He started to leave, but stopped. “Hey, Jake, there’s a party at Misty Cooper’s tonight. You should come.” He strutted up to the front of the growing line, giving one of his henchmen a high five on the way.

Todd Heller did not want to congratulate Jake. He was up to something. Or maybe he was just being the jerk he’d always been. Jake shrugged it off and refocused on

graduation. After a few more minutes, they finally got to his name. He took his place in line, enduring twisted smiles and a few sarcastic congratulations and way-to-go's. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to get this thing over with and put graduation back in his past again—where it belonged.

After Charles Zimmerman's name was called for the lineup, the graduating seniors made a single-file line at the entrance to the arena floor. "Pomp and Circumstance" echoed throughout the arena, and the line began to inch forward. Jake walked slowly as the graduates ahead of him took their seats, with the occasional camera flash catching his eye as he scanned the scene. Relatives of graduates were randomly scattered in packs, mostly toward the front of the arena.

The graduates ahead of Jake took their seats on hard metal folding chairs that were placed in about twenty rows, making a big rectangle down the length of the basketball court. Jake followed the line up and took his seat with the rest of the S's on the third-to-the-last row.

An aggregation of several thousand voices made a steady roar with the occasional honk of one of those little hand-held gas horns. Hundreds of white graduation programs fluttered, providing relief from the heat. It had to be at least 85 degrees inside the arena. Inside Jake's graduation gown, with his constricting necktie and long-sleeved shirt, it was a lot hotter, putting his Speed Stick to the test.

Jake scanned the arena for his family. Finally, he found them sandwiched among other families in the front of the arena, to the left of the stage. They were in perfect position to take a close-up picture of Jake's proud, smiling face when he received his diploma. Jake half stood, crouching on bent knees, and motioned to get his family's

attention. They didn't seem to notice him though. There were too many faces for him to get lost in. Hearing the giggling teens behind him, he figured he'd better sit back down and stop making such a spectacle of himself.

A stage was erected where the basketball hoop normally stood. To the left of the stage were the non-graduating members of the Freemont High choir, and to the right of the stage were the remnants of the band, which was just wrapping up the rest of "Pomp and Circumstance." On the right side of the stage stood a podium with an attached microphone. In the center of the stage was a table with the diplomas, which were housed in protective blue cases, set on top. Three men stood on the stage. One was the hefty, grey-suited school superintendent. Another was Freemont High's principal, Frank Bell, nicknamed Papa Smurf because of his full head of gray hair that appeared blue when the light hit it just right. The other man was the grizzly bearded assistant principal, Mr. Campbell.

The ceremony got under way when none other than Matt Anderson said the opening prayer. After Matt's prayer, Jake heard a heart-warming song from the non-senior members of the high school choir. Then the valedictorian, none other than Todd Heller, Mr. Most Likely to Succeed himself, took the stage. Todd's phony, insincere speech stressed the importance of kindness to your fellow man as this generation worked together to build a bright future for our children and their children's children. Jake thought he would be ill.

Sweating and squirming in his seat, Jake impatiently endured the ceremony, waiting as rows and rows of students went to the stage to receive their diplomas. Finally, Jake's row stood, and they walked around to the right side of the stage. As Jake inched

forward, he'd heard some whispering and snickering behind him. The students had obviously caught wind of what Zimmerman was going to do. Zimmerman, since his was the last name to be called, was traditionally obligated to make some sort of humorous sendoff. Jake heard about what he'd done, but unfortunately he'd missed it the first time around. Jake looked forward to seeing it this time.

"Lisa Anne Scarborough," the principal announced, and Jake moved to the steps.

Whatever you do, he warned himself, don't trip over the stairs!

"Sheri Kay Sexton," the principal said and prompted him to the first step. This was it. The moment of truth. His name would echo throughout the arena, proving to everyone that, yes, he did graduate. He wasn't the moron everyone thought he was.

Kathleen Alice Shaffer's name moved him up a step.

"Scott Patrick Sharp," the principal announced, sending him up to the third step.

How many people would clap for him? Would Teresa or Grandpa yell? Jake knew what Dad would do—sigh in relief.

"Suzanne Dawn Shields," the principal's now-hoarse voice announced, prompting Jake to the fourth step. "Cindy Shoemaker." He moved up another step.

Now remember, he silently rehearsed, shake with your right hand, then take the diploma with your left. Then move the tassel from the left to the right side, the way Teresa showed you.

"Paula Ruth Shoun" sent him to the sixth step, and he could hear the noise level behind him begin to rise, especially from those cackling teens directly behind him.

"Jason Wallace Siler," the guy in front of Jake was announced, and Jake stood on the stage.

“Jacob Thomas Simon,” his name echoed through the arena.

Jake carefully crossed the stage. Immediately, the steady hum of noise from the audience broke into a roar. He had no idea he was so popular. Jake shook the superintendent’s hand with his right hand, and then took the diploma with his left, emotionally lifted by the applause.

Jake loosened his grip on the superintendent’s hand, but the man did not let go. Instead, the superintendent raised an eyebrow in a questioning slant and glanced around the arena. Jake felt a sudden tug on the back of his graduation gown. He turned around to see the bearded Mr. Campbell holding a sign made of white cloth with duct tape stuck to the top. In large black letters, the cloth read: LEAST LIKELY TO SUCCEED.

They weren’t cheering for Jake. They were laughing at him!

Mr. Campbell handed Principal Bell the sign. The principal leaned into the microphone and said, “I wasn’t aware we had an award for *least likely to succeed*.” He stretched out the sign and joined in the laughter.

Jake looked out into the graduating class, his face blazing hot. Todd Heller high-fived those around him.

“Very funny!” Jake shouted and hurried for the steps. Gravity slung his body down, and the stage rushed toward his face. His elbow stung as it caught the brunt of the fall. His cap toppled off. The diploma case skidded down the stage. Laughter boomed so loudly that he couldn’t hear what Mr. Campbell said as he crouched down beside Jake.

Stunned, Jake looked for the cause of his fall. There it was, taunting him as if to say “I told you so.” He never did tie his shoes like Teresa had warned him to do. Mr.

Campbell helped Jake to his feet. He, too, was laughing—laughing so hard that a tear streamed from the corner of his eye.

Jake yanked his arm free of Mr. Campbell, stooped over to pick up his cap and diploma case, and hurried off the stage. As he descended the steps, he looked up and saw Grandpa raking his fingers through his disheveled gray hair. His dad plodded up the bleacher stairs toward the exit with the bulky camcorder at his side, shaking his head in disgust. No, Dad wasn't taking any footage of this *historic* event. He wasn't proud—he was clearly ashamed. Seeing his dad walk out like that hit Jake harder than his mouth hit the steering wheel of his van the first time around.

Jake made the long trek back to his seat, seeing only the ground, too ashamed to look up. He sat in his chair and rubbed the stinging elbow that had slammed against the stage floor. He couldn't force himself to look up at the balcony to see if his dad had ever returned. He couldn't look at his grandparents or his sister. He couldn't look anyone in the eye, or else they'd see his eyes watering. He just stared straight ahead watching the stage, ignoring the jeers of those seated around him.

The first time around, God had done him a favor by allowing him to miss graduation. Things could always be worse, so the saying goes. Well, things were worse, all right—a lot worse. And he'd asked for it. No, he'd begged for it.

But Jake's begging wasn't the only cause. Todd Heller was also to blame. When Todd had slapped Jake on the back, he wasn't congratulating Jake. Todd was putting that sign on his back. Those kids snickering behind Jake weren't laughing about what Zimmerman was up to. They were laughing at the sign hanging on Jake's back.

Why didn't any of them warn me? Jake wondered.

Jake thought they were his friends. He thought wrong. His only true friends—his family, Teresa, Matt, and the guys in the band—were in front of Jake so they couldn't see the sign until it was too late. The devil himself couldn't have planned it better.

After Jake had sat there a little longer, waiting for this thing finally to come to an end and imagining every utterance from the crowd to be utterances about that idiot Simon kid, the blood had finally drained from his sweat-slick cheeks, leaving him more numb than anything else. But then the principal announced the one name that managed to shake Jake from his grief: "Charles Zimmerman."

Jake sat up in his seat, craning his neck to witness this notorious expression of school spirit. The rotund Charles Zimmerman proudly waddled across the stage, stopped short of shaking the superintendent's hand, turned his back to the audience, lifted his robe, and dropped his pants. There it was, painted in bright green on the wide canvas of his bare buttocks, were the numbers 86.

Chapter 7

When graduation ended, Jake didn't bother throwing his cap up in the air with the rest of the class. He wanted out of there before more of his oily skinned peers had their turn at him. So he skipped the emotional farewells, write-me's, call-me's, and empty promises to keep in touch.

As Jake rode home, he partly listened, but mostly ignored—or tried to anyway. He received comfort and sympathy from his grandparents, he got a “How dumb, Jake” from his sister, but from Dad, he received a call to war. Jake had to hear all about a bully Dad had confronted when he was in high school and about how Dad had kicked this bully's “tail feathers.” Dad suggested that Jake do the same. After some prodding, Dad even got Jake to reveal the suspected culprit. Todd lived just down the street from Grandpa so he was not surprised. Grandpa had had trouble with Todd's father on several occasions. Like father like son, Grandpa said. Jake would have to find it in his heart to

forgive Todd because Todd was only doing what he was taught by his father. But Dad saw it differently. Paybacks, evening the score, and kicking tail feathers were the themes of Dad's argument.

"Why are you so spineless?" Dad asked. Jake asked himself the same question.

Jake soon found himself at home, lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling with Peanut faithfully by his side.

"Prioritize," he mumbled. "Get over it and get on with it."

Next Saturday was the infamous Battle of the Bands. If Jake's band managed to win the Battle of the Bands, they would not only get the \$2,000 prize but they would also have a shot at a record deal. Winning that contest would prove Jake victorious in front of his peers, and getting the record deal would prove *him* Most Likely to Succeed. Jake would be on MTV while Todd Heller felt the prostate glands of old men.

That thought tweaked a slight grin on Jake's face, and he figured that in a week or two, the sting of humiliation would subside, and life would go on as usual. But one question still plagued him. There was one question he knew would not go away, because in twenty years, it had not gone away. The question was *why*.

Todd Heller, from more than five hundred graduates, had for some reason singled out Jake to humiliate before the masses. From more than two thousand students at Fremont High, Todd had always singled out Jake. From more than six hundred employees at Livingston Memorial Hospital, it was the same story. But why? For some

reason, the hatred Todd felt for Jake was not random—it was personal. Jake had never done anything to Todd but cower from him. He certainly had done nothing to deserve such intense hatred. So why did Todd hate Jake? Why had Todd always singled out Jake from among the other dweebs?

One way to find out was to go to the graduation party. Jake knew Todd would be there. In fact, Todd had invited Jake to the party himself. That way Todd could humiliate Jake all over again. But was Jake going to the party to confront Todd, to kick his tail feathers? No, God hadn't sent Jake back here to "even the score", like Dad advised him to do. Clearly, violence was not the answer, but would a simple question be a sin? So why did Todd hate Jake so much? That's what Jake would find out—at the graduation party. It's true, Jake didn't relish facing all of those teens again, but he was taking Todd up on his invitation. He was going to that party, not for fun, but for answers. Besides, Rob was counting on Jake's wheels.

While Jake lay on his bed staring at the ceiling, Dad opened the door and said, "I've got to go. The fridge in the meat department's on the fritz. I need to make sure the meat doesn't spoil 'til we get it fixed." He started to close the door but stopped. "Listen, I know you're upset about today and all, but moping around the house won't solve anything. Why don't you do something constructive . . . like . . . mowing the yard? That'll help get your mind off of things," Dad suggested and closed the door.

Jake made no reply but just lay there following the sound of Dad's heavy steps on the hardwood floor, the keys to his K-car jingling, and the slam of the door behind him. That was Dad's solution to everything—drown your sorrows in work. Be constructive.

Stop wasting precious time. Don't think; just do. But this time Dad was right. Jake had to get on with his life, and he did need to mow the yard. It was already over Peanut's head.

After Jake finished mowing the yard, he pulled off his grass-stained yard-cutting shoes, left them by the garage door, and stepped into the kitchen. The wall phone rang and he instinctively looked for the caller ID, but remembering what year he was in, he picked up the receiver to find out the old fashioned way. "Hello?"

"It's about time. I've been calling for the last hour. Where have you been?" It was Teresa. She didn't sound angry, just concerned.

"Sorry about that, but my dad told me to mow the yard."

"Well, you could have at least said bye. I mean, I was like looking for you right after graduation, and you were gone."

"I know, I should have looked for you, but after what happened, I just wanted out of there."

She paused before answering. "Yeah . . . I guess you're right. I didn't think about that. Jake, I'm sooo sorry. I mean, when I saw you up there with that sign, it just broke his heart. I swear if I'd seen it, I would of pulled it off, but I was way on the other side and couldn't see over the hats—not until it was too late. I am sooo sorry. I bet you're really bummed, huh?"

"Yeah, well, I'm over it now. Let's just forget about it. Right now I just want to jump in the shower. So what time do you want me to pick you up?"

"You mean you still want to go to that party? After what happened today? You know those people who laughed at you are going to be there. Why don't we just see another movie, just the two of us?"

“That’s what we did last night.”

“I know, but I still want to see *Pretty in Pink* and *Legend*. And you still haven’t seen *F.X.* or *Poltergeist II*.”

She was wrong about that. Jake had seen all those movies before, and he had no desire to waste time re-watching old movies. “No, I think I need to go to that party. That way I can leave a good lasting impression, certainly a better one than I left this afternoon. At least they’ll think I’ve got guts. Maybe they’ll even think I’m a good sport. Besides, I promised Rob a ride.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Then do you mind picking up Janet? I mean you’ve got to pick up Rob, and she lives close to him anyway.”

Jake hesitated. “No, I don’t mind,” he lied. “So what time?”

“About 7:30.”

“I’ll see you then,” he said, leaning forward to hang up the phone.

“Love you,” she slipped in.

“Me, too,” he said and hung up.

Jake dressed in a pair of stone-washed jeans and a short-sleeved button-up shirt with black-and-white stripes that made him look like a football referee. He drove to Teresa’s

and pulled into her driveway at 8:15. He was late, but he'd known Teresa long enough to know that she'd be running at least thirty minutes behind in getting ready.

He stepped onto her driveway and went to her door. Teresa answered the door on the second ring.

"Hey, sweetie," she said and pecked him on the cheek. She was wearing a white one-piece jumpsuit that buttoned up the front. A wide red belt was tightened firmly around her tiny abdomen, reminding Jake of the thirty pounds she would gain in the years to come.

"You like my new earrings?" she said, pointing at the big red loops dangling from her ears. Those gaudy accessories were at least the diameter of a Coke can, but they did match her belt and socks. "Three dollars on sale at Penney's."

"Very nice," Jake said. "Sorry I'm late."

"It's a good thing. I just now finished getting ready."

Just like he thought. At this point, Jake knew Teresa better than she knew herself.

"Look, are you sure you want to do this?" she asked. "If you want, we can just drop Rob and Janet off and pick them up later."

"I'm sure," he said.

They got into Jake's van, and as they pattered away in the direction of Rob's house, Teresa gave him one last chance to back out. "You're absolutely, positively sure you want to do this?"

"I'll be fine, don't worry about it," he said.

But he *was* worried about it. It's easy to imagine yourself staring danger in the face, but actually doing it is something else. There was a real good chance that Todd

would not appreciate Jake's question. And Todd might decide to show his lack of appreciation on Jake's face. But a punch in the face was nothing compared to the pain of a brain aneurism. No, Jake would not back down this time. If he backed down from Todd, how could he possibly stand up to an armed madman when he tried to save Matt?

Jake picked up Rob and Janet, and then headed for the party. Misty Cooper's house was in an upper-class neighborhood called Fox Hollow. Apparently, Misty's parents were out of town for a funeral. Naturally, Misty threw a party.

It was about 9 o'clock when Jake pulled his beat-up van into the entrance of Fox Hollow and wound his way along the streets past the rolling green golf course with its sand traps and ponds. The houses were huge with wood shingles, high-pitched roofs, and manicured lawns with yard lights showing off the professional landscapes, even at night. Jake made a mental note to look for a house here when Windows 95 came out. He didn't like golf, but Teresa and their kids would love the pool.

Jake found his way to Misty's house and parked at the end of a long line of cars extending down the street from the house. Janet and Rob climbed out of the back of the van just as a moped buzzed by. They scampered ahead to the house, but Jake was in no hurry. He strolled hand in hand with Teresa past the string of expensive sport cars. When they reached the front yard of Misty's house, he could feel his pulse quicken as fear of the unknown arose. Unlike Rob, Janet, and Teresa, Jake's main objective in being there was not to have fun, but to confront and ascertain—and possibly get his nose broken in the process.

At least that *was* his objective. When Teresa and he stepped into the yard, he slowed his steps, tugging slightly against her grip.

She stopped walking and looked his way. "Jake, are you okay? Seriously, we don't have to go in there. I'll just tell Janet we'll pick them up at eleven." She took a step toward the house. "Hey, Janet, come here."

"No, I'm fine," Jake said, tightening his grip on her hand. "Really, I can do this."

"I don't get you," she said and narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You act like you're on some sort of mission or something. This is just a party, you know, a party where you know you're going to get laughed at."

"Teresa, I'll be fine. I just want to leave a good lasting impression."

She sighed, let go of his hand, and folded her arms across her chest, studying him. "I don't know, Jake. This isn't like you."

Maybe it wasn't like Jake, but he wasn't going to go another twenty years wondering why Todd hated him. "Look, we won't stay long. We'll just make an appearance, mingle a little, then leave. Okay? Maybe then we'll go get some ice cream or something."

"All right, but don't say I didn't warn you." She unfolded her arms and reapplied her grip on his hand.

As they approached the house, "Rock Me Amadeus" artfully orchestrated by the one-hit wonder, Falco, pulsed through the walls. When they stepped up to the front porch, the door swung open, and two girls came out, leaving the door wide open. Jake and Teresa stepped through the open door and stood while Falco blared from a stereo sitting on an entertainment center in the corner of the room. Stairs climbed from the hardwood entrance by the front door and led up to a balcony overlooking the large family room, reminding Jake of the house in "The Brady Bunch." Teenagers in their mid-

eighties attire, fluffed-up hair, and heavy makeup sat on the stairs and looked down over the railing while others milled around drinking beer and wine coolers. Cigarette smoke filled the air, pretzels and potato chip crumbs littered the carpet, and Jake thought he heard the sound of vomiting coming from the other side of what he *hoped* was a bathroom door. Watching this flagrant disregard for the drinking age and the total lack of respect for Misty's parents' house, Jake felt like a spy for them—the adults. If any of these kids had known that a forty-year-old was in the room, they would have run for cover.

Janet, who had already started milling about, came up to Teresa carrying a Seagram's wine cooler in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "Oh . . . my . . . gawd!" she said. "Misty's parents are going to freak." She took a swig of the wine cooler, dribbling some down her Wham! concert T-shirt and onto the carpet below.

"For sure," Teresa said.

"Come on, you've got to hear this," Janet said and pulled Teresa toward a group of girls congregating under the stairway.

Jake wished Janet wouldn't take the Lord's name in vain. She was a bad influence on Teresa, and this party was no place for a Christian. No wonder Teresa was reluctant to come here. And he was the peer pressure that twisted her arm.

Just get this over with and get out of here. Just do it, Jake!

Jake crimped his lips in determination and scanned the room for Todd. He spotted a couple of Todd's henchmen, but still no Todd. As Jake searched, he could see that he was being noticed. A girl on the balcony pointed at him and laughed.

"That's right. Laugh it up," he mumbled. "Mr. Least Likely to Succeed is here."

Just then, Todd walked out of the kitchen and into the family room wearing dark Risky Business Ray Ban glasses and carrying a can of beer. His hair was moussed up and spiked, and he wore a black button-down shirt with one of those skinny little leather ties, a purple one.

Jake's chance had arrived. He'd rehearsed it over and over in his mind. He would simply walk up to Todd and peacefully, yet forcefully, ask him why. Besides, Todd was just a bully. Deep down, most bullies are actually insecure, and as soon as you stand up to them, they back down.

Jake started toward Todd, but when he noticed more teens were pointing at him and laughing, he got stage fright, not to mention fear of pain. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Then he pictured himself thinking the same thing as he was attempting to save Matt. No, he had to do this. It would be like a barrier, a first hurdle. Get through this, and courage would come easier the second time. Besides, it's not like he was challenging Todd to a duel. It was just a simple question.

Jake breathed deep and took a step toward Todd. Then he took a second step, then a third. Fight-or-flight hormones churned through his veins, driven by a hard-beating heart. Suddenly, as if his legs had a mind of their own, he stopped. Maybe a smaller first hurdle was what he needed, one with less muscle.

Jake spun around and started toward Teresa.

"Well, if it isn't our class *vale-dork-torian*," Todd loudly announced. Jake had been spotted. His window of escape was gone. Todd had just forced Jake's hand. Reluctantly, Jake turned around.

Todd strutted across the room and put his hand on Jake's shoulder in mock sincerity. "Look, everyone," he announced in a drunken slur. The music stopped and all eyes focused on Jake. "Look, it's Mr. Least Likely to Succeed."

Once again, laughter erupted around Jake, just as it had at graduation, just as it had the day before in school. And it was because of Todd!

Sharp anger swelled from Jake's core and rage replaced all fear. Jake pried Todd's hand from his shoulder and threw it back at him. "I'm sick of this, Todd!"

Todd looked in disbelief at the hand Jake had touched without permission. He then shaped that hand into a pointing index finger and shoved it into Jake's face.

"Go ahead," Todd said, "Make my day."

Jake swatted Todd's finger from his face and thrust his own finger back at Todd.

"I'm sick and tired of you picking on me!" Jake yelled, his voice quivering. "I want to know, Todd. Why me? Why do you hate me so much?"

Todd slowly removed his Ray Bans, folded them, and slid them into his shirt pocket. He focused his dilated blue eyes on Jake and said, "Excuse me? Surely you don't speak to *me* in that tone."

"I just want to know why, Todd. Why are you always picking on me? What have I ever done to you?"

"Jake!" Teresa yelled. "Are you crazy? Stop it!"

Jake held up a hand to silence her. "No, Teresa, I'm not leaving until I get an answer."

Todd put the can of beer to his lips, threw his head back to finish it off, then wiped beer from his lips with the back of his hand. He then held the can up to Jake's ear

and crushed it. Jake imagined that crushing sound to be the bones in his own body. Todd bent down, and with his face just inches from Jake's own face. "You really want to know?" Todd uttered.

Jake winced from the smell of beer and tobacco on Todd's breath, but stood his ground. "Yes," Jake said, and then backed off an inch or two, but only because of Todd's breath.

Todd came closer again and moved his lips to Jake's ear. In a hateful, hushed voice, Todd said, "Because you're a Jew." He then straightened into an arrogant posture and looked down his nose at Jake. "That's why."

Jake looked stunned. Because he was a Jew? Who told Todd Jake was a Jew? Jake wasn't Jewish, he was Christian.

"A Jew?" Jake shouted for all to hear. "You hate me because I'm a Jew?"

Todd's eyes darted around the room at wide-eyed faces as he discovered his error in judgment. Todd wasn't stupid, but he was drunk, and nothing clouds good judgment more than alcohol.

"I'm not a Jew," Jake said. "I'm a Christian."

"Your name's *Simon*, isn't it?" Todd said with a vein now pulsing on his temple. "Simon's a Jewish name. You're a Jew!"

"Look, my grandfather *was* a Jew, but I'm not." Jake counted out the generations on his fingers. "That makes me only one-quarter Jewish."

"Oh, my dad told me all about your grandfather, and he says you're still a Jew."

Of course! That was why Todd hated him. He was a racist, and apparently his dad had taught him to be that way.

Jake should have been satisfied with Todd's answer and left the party while he was still in one piece, but he'd gathered too much momentum to stop.

"You're right, I am part Jewish. A Christian Jew and proud of it. And Jesus was a Jew, you know. You ever think of that?"

"Jake!" Teresa shouted. "That's enough. Let's go! Now!"

Jake turned to face her. "Just hold on, Teresa," he said. "Just a second."

"Let's see how good a Christian you are," he heard Todd growl.

At the sound of Todd's voice, Jake turned to see the blur of a clenched fist.

Chapter 8

The force of the blow sent Jake tumbling backwards. Big hands caught him before he hit the floor.

“I got you, buddy. You all right?” It was Joe Thompson, the three hundred-pound star lineman Jake had plowed into the day before at school. And once again, Joe caught Jake’s fall.

Jake cupped his hand over his lip, lowered it, and checked for blood—only a little. “Yeah, I think so.”

Todd stepped forward and cocked his fist again. “Now let’s see if you can turn the other cheek, *Christian!*”

Joe pulled Jake aside and blocked Todd’s advance.

Todd pushed against the statue of muscle standing in his way. “Step aside, Joe. Let me finish him off.”

“I don’t think so, Todd,” Joe said. Then he pulled the Ray Bans from Todd’s shirt pocket and crumbled them like a pack of cheese crackers. “Heller, you know what my mom’s maiden name is?”

Todd, staring in horror at his mutilated glasses, didn’t answer.

“Goldberg. Her maiden name’s Goldberg, and she’s *all* Jew. That makes me half Jewish.”

Todd stepped back, and the blood fell from his face. “I . . . I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t think it mattered.” Joe lifted Todd by that purple leather tie and tossed him against the wall like a Cabbage Patch doll.

Teresa grabbed Jake by the wrist. “We’re leaving. *Now*, Jake,” she demanded and pulled him toward the front door. She stopped and turned to Rob and Janet, who stood gaping by the stairway. “Can you two find a ride home?”

“No problem,” Rob said. Janet shook her head in agreement.

Teresa opened the door and pulled Jake along like a mother does a misbehaving child in a shopping mall. Jake resisted her and stopped in the doorway to get a last glimpse of the scene unfolding around Todd. A circle of unimpressed faces had formed around him.

“My brother-in-law’s Jewish,” somebody said.

Another voice shouted, “I’m black, Todd. Do you hate me, too?”

“Let’s step outside. I don’t want blood on Misty’s carpet,” the no-longer-gentle giant said.

Teresa yanked Jake onto the porch. “Now, Jake!”

“No wonder Joe’s always been so nice to me,” Jake said. “I guess he thought we had some kind of bond or something.”

Not interested in his observations, Teresa kept pulling Jake through the front yard in the direction of his van. “I can’t believe you just did that. Have you lost your mind? Todd would of wasted you.”

It’s true. Todd could have done some serious damage, but Jake was strangely exhilarated, despite his throbbing lip. He had faced the enemy, looked evil straight in the eye, and did not back down. And he won without throwing a punch. He stood his ground, and Todd hung himself. Jake winced from the pain, but he couldn’t help curving his busted lip into a smile.

They reached the van, got in, and Teresa turned on the overhead light to look at Jake’s lip. “Oh man!” she said with wide eyes. “We’re going to the hospital. You’re going to have to have stitches.”

Jake looked down. Deep crimson droplets of blood speckled his black-and-white striped shirt. He pulled his hand away from his lip, studied the blood on his fingers, and then his eyes were drawn to the steering wheel. Déjà vu. The steering wheel had busted his lip the first time around. This time it was Todd Heller. Either way, his lip was still busted. He wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“There’s some Kleenex in the glove box,” he said and pointed, “next to the tape player.”

Teresa reached into the open glove box and pulled out a folded stack of tissue. Under the dim overhead interior light, she blotted blood from his lip. “Lean closer to the light so I can get a better look,” the future nurse instructed her patient.

He did as told, and Teresa continued to inspect his lip. “Ouuuch!”

“Yep, you’re going to need stitches all right. You got a half-inch cut right under your lip. Way to go, Jake. You’re going to the hospital. I’d drive you, but I can’t drive a stick.” She shook her head in disbelief. “You think you know someone, and now this.”

“Yeah, well, I got him back . . . sort of.”

Ignoring his comment, Teresa gave Jake instructions. “You’ll have to drive while I hold pressure on your lip.”

As Teresa held the tissue to his lip, Jake drove the well-known way to the hospital where he’d spent the past seventeen years as an employee. After he parked the van, they walked into the pre-renovation ER waiting room, where he took in the scene with amusement. People sitting in three rows of chairs read magazines, slept, or watched “The Love Boat” on an overhead TV in a room that was decked out with an olive green décor left over from the ’70s. The ER had been expanded and remodeled just before Jake started working there—and now he could see why.

Jake registered with the admitting clerk and got hold of Dad so he could come by with the insurance information. Then the clerk took Jake back into the quaint little ER. It was about half the size of the ER he was used to, it lacked surveillance cameras, and wasn’t nearly as busy.

Is that Cynthia?

Jake tried not to gawk at this young kid of a nurse who walked up to him wearing a white uniform and one of those silly white hats you used to see on soap operas. It *was* Cynthia, his favorite ER nurse. Her skin was smoother, she was a little thinner, and she

actually looked like she enjoyed her job. The last time Jake saw her, she was doing chest compressions on his corpse. This was just too weird.

“Are you . . .” Cynthia looked down at a chart, “Jacob Simon?”

“Uhh...yeah, that’s me,” he said.

“Here.” She handed him some gauze. “Hold this on your lip. You can have a seat in this room.” She opened the door to a treatment room and pointed to the examination bed.

“Thanks, Cynthia.”

“The doctor will be with you . . . how did you know my name?” she said, looking down at her name badge. It said C. Barnes, not Cynthia.

“I, uh . . . the admitting clerk . . . um . . . she said Cynthia would take me to a room,” Jake said, feeling guilty about the lie.

“Oh, okay,” she said. “The doctor will be with you shortly.” She closed the door, and he heard her putting the chart into the rack on the exam room door.

Jake walked over to the middle of the room and took a seat on the exam bed. Against the far wall were cabinets containing an assortment of medical supplies, a counter top with a rack of syringes, and drawers with other supplies. He’d never been in this particular room as an employee of Livingston Memorial because it had been torn out during the ER expansion, but still, it looked oddly familiar. Then it hit him. This was the same room where he sat the first time around, getting his lip stitched while his peers graduated, and the stitches went in exactly the same place, just under his lower lip. After all of his efforts to change the past, he’d still gotten a busted lip. It was almost as if some scars were simply meant to be.

As he sat there pondering the metaphysical implications of the scar God was determined to see on his lip, the door opened and he turned to see Dad with his head sticking through a crack in the door. “Jake?”

“Yeah, Dad. Come on in,” he said. “Have a seat.” Jake pointed to a chair in the corner.

“I can’t stay long. I got a guy working on the meat cooler right now. The meat’s spread out all over the store in any fridge that’s got room. I need to make sure he gets it fixed before he leaves, then get all the meat back where it belongs. I saw your girl though. She said she’d make sure you got home okay.”

“That’s fine. Did you, uh . . .?” Jake pointed in the direction of the registration desk.

“Yeah, got it all taken care of. When they’re done, you can just leave.”

“Thanks, Dad, and I’m sorry about all this.”

“Sorry? Teresa told me what happened. You know, when I told you to kick that fella’s tail feathers, I never figured you’d try and do it. This was more my fault than yours.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“No, son, I’m not mad. I think it’s good you stood up for yourself. Actually, I’m kind of proud of you.”

In her retelling of the story, Teresa obviously had omitted a few details.

Dad motioned at Jake’s lip with his head. “So let’s see it.”

Jake lowered the gauze and raised his chin so Dad could see what Todd’s knuckle had done.

He cringed at the sight. “So, uh, what kind of damage you do the other guy?”

“Let’s just say he’s probably hurting a lot worse than I am,” Jake said, alluding to the beating Todd had probably gotten from Joe.

“That’s my boy,” he said and slapped Jake on the back.

The door opened, and Dad turned to see who was entering.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Blake,” a young doctor with a touch of graying hair over his ears said. “You must be . . .” He looked down at his chart, “Jacob’s father, I presume.”

“That’s me, Doc, but I’ve got to run. I’ve already taken care of the paperwork though. I’ll see you at home, son,” Dad said. Then he walked out the door.

After sticking a needle into Jake’s lip to numb it, Dr. Blake began putting in stitches. As Dr. Blake carefully stitched Jake’s lip, something that Dad said occurred to Jake. It had slipped right by him when he first said it, but as the doctor started the second stitch, what Dad said suddenly registered. Dad said he was proud. Jake’s dad was actually proud of him. Those words Jake had longed to hear all of his life finally came. Hearing him say that made Jake kind of tingle inside. His eyes watered and he sniffed.

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” Dr. Blake asked.

“No, I’m fine.” He was better than fine. Dad was actually proud.

When someone dies and sees an angel, it has a way of giving the Word of God more credence. They no longer just believe in God, they *know* in God, and they know the

eternal consequences of a life poorly lived. With this truth in mind, Jake had no intention of beginning his mission by skipping his first Sunday at church.

Jake awoke early the next morning and attended the early service with Teresa. He sat through the service, diligently focusing on Reverend Burch's every word. Okay, he did daydream a little. With everything that had happened, his dying and coming back to 1986 and then the trouble with Todd Heller, Jake found it difficult to concentrate on the sermon. But once he'd settled back into his past, his mind would clear up and he'd do better next week.

When the service had ended, Jake left Teresa with her parents and got to his house to find Dad reclining in his La-Z-Boy, wearing striped pajamas and corduroy house shoes. He read the Sunday paper while a TV preacher from the barely audible television competed for his attention.

Dad believed in God even though he didn't show it. And to hear Grandpa Simon talk, Dad used to be a good Christian. But after Mom died, he'd just seemed to give up on God. Maybe he blamed God for what happened to Mom more than he blamed Jake. Regardless of Dad's reason, Jake was determined to mend the rift between his dad and God.

"Morning, Dad," Jake said and bent over to rub Peanut's belly.

Dad lowered the paper a notch and looked at Jake over the top of the sports page. "Morning, son. How's the lip?"

"It's better. Still sore, but it's okay as long as I don't smile too much. Listen . . ."

Jake stood upright and hesitated, not knowing exactly how or if he should say what he wanted to say. "Why, um, why don't you go to church with me and Teresa next Sunday?"

I think it'd do you some good. They've got a singles class, you know. Maybe you can meet a nice . . . I don't know. I just think you should go, that's all."

Dad lowered the paper to his lap and cleared his throat. "I appreciate the concern for my soul, son. And don't get me wrong, I think its great you're going to church now and all, but I think I'll pass. Maybe next Easter," he said and lifted the paper from his lap, shielding his face, signifying an end to the discussion.

Jake went to his room and got out of his church duds and pulled out his Food King uniform. Dad worked as the head manager of the Merchants Road Food King just east of the river. When Jake turned sixteen, he got a job in the deli at the Cedar Springs Food King. Fortunately for Jake, because of company regulations, family members could not work at the same store. A teenager does not want his dad for a boss.

Jake donned his durable khaki Duckhead pants, a white button-down shirt, and slipped the Food King-issued navy blue tie over his head and tightened it snugly around his neck. He went to the dresser mirror and watched himself as he fitted the navy blue cap with the Food King logo onto his head.

How demeaning. A forty-year-old lab technician with seventeen years of hospital experience working side by side with high school kids for a fraction of the money he'd been making at the hospital.

And I begged that angel for this? Oh well, he thought as he headed for the door, *at least I don't have to do urinalysis.*

When Jake got to work he passed busy check-out clerks and grocery baggers and headed toward the deli. He walked behind the deli counter, went into the back, and

clocked in, reentering the world of corned beef, potato salad, and customer service with a smile.

As if he'd never left, he trudged into his daily routine with all of the skill and know-how implanted in his eighteen-year-old brain. He was amazed at how well he could still estimate what was one pound of meat before he actually put it on the scale. As he worked, he wisely said little to his fellow employees for fear of giving away his secret. When they asked why he was so quiet, he used his swollen lip as the excuse.

So there he stood behind the deli counter, sweeping up scraps of Cajun roast beef and three-bean salad, when a man coughed for his attention. Jake looked up to find a middle-aged man with a bushy brown mustache that merged with the hair sprouting from his nose.

"May he help you?" Jake asked. His eyes were drawn to a forest of chest hair bulging from the unbuttoned "V" of his pink Polo knit shirt.

"I'll take a pound of that there boiled ham," the pink gorilla said.

"Yes, sir." Jake tipped his hat, set the broom aside, put on a pair of transparent disposable gloves, and slid the deli case door open.

"No, I don't want that dried-out stuff. Give me some cut fresh off the block." He pointed to the mirrored case displaying an assortment of yet-to-be-sliced meats.

Now that meat was not dried out. Jake had just finished slicing it up fresh. But, being a good employee and needing every dime of his near-minimum wage, Jake put on his best customer service face and did as he instructed. "Yes, sir," he sighed and walked over to the uncut meat case. He reached in and pulled down a pink block of pig muscle

and carried it to the stainless steel meat-slicing table. He peeled the plastic wrap from the slimy pink flesh and hoisted the ham onto the cutter.

“I want it cut so thin I can read a newspaper through it,” the man said.

“Yes, sir.” Despite his irritation, Jake obediently set the thickness dial of the meat-cutter, shaved off a piece of boiled ham, and held it up for the man’s approval.

“How’s that?”

“Little thinner.”

Jake readjusted the dial and shaved off another slice that was so thin it fell apart when he tried to hold it up.

“That’s perfect. Give me a pound of that. No, make it a pound and a half.”

“Yes, sir,” Jake said and went to work. The cutter hummed as he manually sliced the ham, applying just the right amount of pressure to the cutter arm to shave the boiled ham to the man’s standards. His shoulder and arm muscles burned as he approached what he knew instinctively to be the first pound. And with every shred of meat, reality sank in a little deeper. Any thoughts about the last two days being a bad dream had faded. Like it or not, Jake was stuck there in 1986 slicing boiled ham paper thin for \$3.50 an hour—just like he’d requested.

“Hey, I know you,” the man said. “I seen you yesterday at my nephew’s graduation. You’re that Least Likely to Succeed fella. Hey, Margaret, come ‘ere and look who’s slicin’ our meat. It’s that kid from graduation.”

“Very funny,” Jake mumbled, pretending he didn’t hear the man. He just kept facing the cutter so they wouldn’t see the embarrassment coloring his pimpled face.

“Very, very funny,” he said again as he pressed down harder on the meat to make the slices thicker.

Try reading a newspaper through that!

Jake’s shift ended at seven o’clock. When he got home, he was greeted by Peanut’s usual ecstatic frenzy, but other than the dog, the house was empty. His dad was no doubt where he usually was—at work. Certainly the duties of a grocery store head manager are extensive, but Jake had never understood why the man had to work at least seventy hours a week. After all, he was on salary and got paid for only forty hours. Yet, for as long as Jake could remember, Dad had always worked an extra thirty hours just for fun. After working a ten-hour day, he’d come home, eat a TV dinner or frozen pizza, tell Jake to do his homework, and go back to work. Maybe that was another reason Jake dropped out of college, got a full-time job at the hospital, and got married at such a young age. His own home never felt much like a home anyway.

Jake showered, went to his room, and put on a pair of gym shorts and a faded Def Leppard concert T-shirt. Peanut rustled under the bed covers. Jake was obviously disturbing him.

“Sorry, Peanut, but I’ve got work to do.”

Dad may be a workaholic, but Jake did admire his work ethic. And if Jake was going to provide well for his future family, he’d have to work just as hard. So he sat at his desk, slid open the top drawer, and pulled out a sheet of notebook paper, a pencil, and a

calculator. It was time to formulate a game plan. Now, since a record executive would be at the Battle of the Bands, the best way to make some quick money would be to win the contest, impress the record executive, get a record deal, and sell millions of records. And now, who knows? Maybe it was a long shot, but it certainly wasn't any crazier than dying and reentering a younger body.

Then again, the rational adult in Jake knew it was a long shot for a group of mere teenagers to land a record deal. But even if they didn't manage to land a record deal, there was still the \$2,000 dollar first-place prize. Winning that money was a reasonable, practical goal. Jake's share of the prize money would be five hundred bucks. But five hundred bucks wasn't nearly enough to provide for his family, even if he did put all of the money in Microsoft. So while he was at work earlier that day, he had talked to Shirley, his deli manager, about changing his work schedule. Since he was out of school and could work during the day, she gave Jake an open day-shift position working from 8:00 to 4:00. That would give him the entire evening to work another part-time job.

"Let's do the math," he told himself. He tapped away at the calculator, writing the numbers on notebook paper as they came. Assuming they won the Battle of the Bands he would have \$500 for his share of the winnings. Then assuming that he had another part time job working 25 hours a week, after subtracting living expenses, he could scrape together \$2300 for stocks by the end of summer. With the exponential rate at which Microsoft stock prices would grow over the years, that should be more than enough to ensure a decent nest egg for his family. If he kept on buying stock over the next few years, they'd be millionaires!

Jake knew that sounded greedy, but was it really un-Christian to provide a good, prosperous home for his family? All he wanted was enough money to buy his kids the designer clothes they deserved, put them up in a nice neighborhood with a swimming pool, and definitely send his kids to a private Christian school. Besides, he'd always felt guilty about not giving more money to church and charities. This was his chance to make up for it.

So that was the plan for the summer. But unless he wanted to keep working at Food King until 2008, he'd have to quit his day job at Food King in the fall. To the rest of the world, this Jake was a mere high school graduate. If he ever hoped to make much more than minimum wage, he'd have to go back to college all over again. That meant he needed to decide on a major. One thing was for sure, he'd pick something a little more glamorous than being a lab technician—something that paid better and wasn't so gross.

He looked at the calculations scrawled on the notebook paper. By the end of the summer, he'd have \$2,300 dollars, *if* they won the Battle of the Bands. If not, he'd have only \$1,800. That \$500 equaled almost an entire month of working two demeaning jobs.

And if they were going to win that contest, Jake had to make sure that he could still play the bass, which he hadn't played in more than seventeen years. And his singing—he *really* needed to work on that.

Jake sang back-up vocals for Two Left Feet, although he really wanted to sing lead. When he was a little kid, he used to stand in front of the mirror with a flashlight in his hand pretending it was microphone, pretending to sing along with his records. He'd pictured himself on "Solid Gold" being introduced by Andy Gibb or Dionne Warwick, strutting his stuff in front of the Solid Gold Dancers who gyrated their scantily clad

bodies in the background. That's what he would like to have done with his life—not testing body fluids in the middle of the night. However, after getting kicked out of the school choir and witnessing the cringed faces of anyone who heard him sing, he'd accepted the painful realization: he just didn't have it. He couldn't sing.

So he took up the bass guitar instead. He learned quickly, practicing long hours, picturing himself in front of thousands of screaming, hormone-crazed girls, imitating the styles of U2 and Duran Duran.

And he was really good, too. *Was* good. But did he still have it?

He walked over to the corner of the room and stood in front of the bass guitar that leaned against its amplifier. His shiny black finish bass had gold-colored tuning pegs, a twenty-four-fret three-octave neck, and two battery-powered active pickups. He'd mowed many a yard to pay for this beauty.

He carefully lifted the bass and pulled the guitar strap over his shoulder. He flipped the amp on and stood listening to the electric hum of the amplifier, inspecting his fingers. On these eighteen-year-old hands, his calluses were still intact, and he assumed his hands were still just as strong. But could he remember all of the songs? Could he still play with the same youthful vigor and disregard for ear damage or parental complaints?

He released his grip on the strings, cocked his right thumb, struck the open E-string, and tore into a song he'd written on bass. His fingers glided across the strings almost effortlessly, snapping and popping in between chord changes, floating over rehearsed bass fills that are supposed to look completely improvised on stage.

Oh yes! I've still got it!

Chapter 9

For the next four days, Jake had spent most of his time working at Food King, practicing his bass, reading the Bible, and most importantly, looking for a second job. He'd filled out job applications at K-Mart, McDonald's, Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken (before they disassociated themselves with the word *fried* and became KFC), and Peg Leg Joe's. There was also the application he'd put in at Bruno's Pizza Piazza.

However, since Friday was the day before the Battle of the Bands, they had planned a long practice to ensure their victory the next day.

Band practice was held in Luke's basement, mostly because Luke was the drummer and drums are a pain to move and set up. So at a quarter past noon that Friday, Jake pulled his van down Luke's driveway and parked next to Melvin's green Triumph TR7. Jake unloaded his bass and amplifier from the van and lugged them into Luke's

open garage. Jake could already hear Luke practicing drum rolls as Rob tuned his guitar, and Melvin, the keyboard player, warmed up with Van Halen's "Jump."

Jake opened the garage door and tugged his gear through the doorway and into the basement. The unfinished basement had gray cinderblock walls, a sliding-glass door opening to the backyard, and a ceiling composed of exposed wooden floor trusses. Scraps of maroon carpet hung down over the concrete walls to absorb sound and improve acoustics. Two Left Feet was set up under naked light bulbs. Oscillating electric fans kept them cool.

Luke, the drummer, had blond hair parted on the side with long bangs hanging over his left eye, which caused him frequently to throw back his head to sling the hair out of his eyes. His bass drum had "Two Left Feet" painted on the side facing the audience. Melvin, the band's African-American keyboard player, stood behind his keyboards in the corner of the basement to Luke's left, wearing a backward New York Yankees baseball cap.

Rob stood in front of Luke's drums, with his wavy, black, shoulder length hair covering the collar of his turquoise button-up shirt that was left unbuttoned to show off the Hard Rock Café T-shirt underneath. When Rob was sober, he was no slouch on guitar. And even though Jake preferred to be the lead singer, Rob had a much better voice and was pretty decent at writing songs. If Jake hadn't quit the band after being humiliated at the Battle of the Bands, with enough time, they really had a shot at the big time. Jake was sure of it. Maybe this time around would be different.

Jake parked his bass and amp against the wall to the right of Luke's drums. "Sorry I'm late," he yelled over the haphazard clamor of instruments.

They silenced their instruments to acknowledge Jake's arrival.

Rob looked at his watch. "It's early for you."

"Yeah, well, tomorrow's our big day," Jake said. "If we're going to win this thing, we need to get a good practice in."

"2000 buck-a-roos," Melvin broke in. "I've already spent my part. I got a new sequencer on order for my keys. It'll be like having three hands."

"Yeah, man, we're gonna blow those metal heads away," Luke said and gave a drum roll complete with cymbal crash. "They don't stand a chance."

"It's the record execs I want to impress," Melvin said.

"That, too," Jake said.

"Yeah, right," Rob said. "You don't believe that, do you? Why would a record company waste its time in Livingston, North Carolina?"

Luke threw back his head to flip the blond bangs from his eyes. "Seriously, Rob, I heard it, too. The guy used to go to Freemont."

"This is our big chance," Melvin said. "The least we can do is try."

Luke contorted his voice for his Yoda imitation. "No! Try not. Do or do not. There is no try." Even as a senior in high school, three years after "Return of the Jedi," Luke was still a "Star Wars" nut. His first name was actually James, but when "Star Wars" came out, he'd started going by his middle name, Luke—as in Luke Skywalker. It was also rumored that he still slept in "Star Wars" pajamas.

"Thank you, Luke," Jake said, "and may the force be with you. Now let's stop messing around and get to work."

“Still waiting for Adam,” Luke informed Jake. “I called him, though. He’ll be here in a sec.” Adam was the band’s sound engineer, Adam’s self-imposed title. He’s the guy who worked the PA system, ensuring that they sounded okay.

“Hey, Jake,” Melvin said. “I’ve been listening to that song you wrote on bass. Here, I’ll play the tape you made and play along with it.” It’s not easy writing songs on a bass guitar, but whenever Jake came up with a good bass riff, he’d make a tape, sometimes with vocals, and give the tape to Melvin to see if he could do anything with it. Jake knew better than to give it to Rob.

Melvin walked over to the boom box resting on a wooden table next to the PA system control board. He popped the tape into the boom box and pushed Play. Jake’s bass sounded first. Rob puckered his lips in an unimpressed, disrespectful pout. Melvin played along with the tape, showing Jake the keyboard line he’d come up with. When Jake’s vocals started, Rob winced as if Jake had scraped a chalkboard with his fingernails.

When the short version of the song had finished, Melvin asked, “What do you think?”

“It sounds contrived,” Rob said.

Luke laughed and said, “Rob, you don’t even know what contrived means.”

“Duh,” Rob said. “It means . . . well . . . it means contrived.” Rob didn’t have a clue what it meant.

“Rob, you just don’t like it because you didn’t write it,” Jake said.

“It’s the singing that kills it. Let’s face it, Jake, you couldn’t carry a tune in a dump truck. When God was passing out vocal chords, He uh . . .” Rob struggled to finish

making up the joke. “Look, you just can’t sing. Give it up. I tried to tell you that before you spent eighty bucks on that microphone.”

“Hey, Jake, what did you do with the money?” Luke asked. “The money your mother . . . I mean your dad gave you for singing lessons.” He gave one of those quick drum rolls and cymbal crashed that followed a punch line. Jake pretended not to hear his slip about his mother.

Fortunately, at that moment their sound engineer stepped in by the sliding glass door and diverted the harassment. Adam was a curly headed fifteen-year-old kid who lived down the street from Luke. He walked in dressed in his usual summer attire, wearing nothing more than a pair of nylon gym shorts and a pair of dirty, grass-stained Converse high tops with no socks underneath. When Adam sat behind the soundboard, the table obscured his shorts, making him look naked. Therefore, his name, Adam, was strangely appropriate.

Jake plugged in his amplifier, took his bass out of its case, plugged the bass into the amp, took his usual place to Luke’s right, and tuned his bass to Rob’s guitar. Adam took his place behind the controls of the Yamaha PA system that Rob, Melvin, and Luke had pitched in \$400 dollars to buy. Jake, on the other hand, owned a \$500 share of the PA. For this reason, they were forced to let Jake sing back-up vocals whether they liked it or not.

Rob started hammering out power chords, saying, “Testing . . . one, two, three” into the microphone as Adam fiddled with the controls of the sound board, trying to get the vocals loud enough for Rob to hear himself sing while minimizing the squeal of feedback. Once Rob and Adam were satisfied, they motioned for Two Left Feet to begin.

“Hold on a second,” Jake yelled while he could still be heard. “Look, if Luke wouldn’t play so hard and we all just turn down a little, I think we could hear the vocals better. I mean, have some respect for the neighbors, before they call the police—again.”

“Since when did you become the voice of parental concern?” Rob asked. “If it’s too loud, you’re too old.” He turned the volume of his guitar to the “11” mark he had written with a black marker, kicked on his distortion pedal, and tore into an eardrum-shattering guitar solo.

“Rob! I’m serious, man. Have some respect. Some people work night shift, you know.”

“All right, Jake. Chill out,” Rob said, turning his volume level back down a notch.

Realizing that he was showing his true age again, Jake heeded Rob’s admonishment and chilled out before arousing any more suspicion. Besides, it was a lost cause anyway. “Look, I’m sorry. I’ve just . . . I’ve got a headache, that’s all.” Rob *was* giving him a headache. “Let’s just get to work, okay?”

“Fine,” Rob said. He sulked as he untangled his guitar chord.

“All right. Let’s take ‘2 After Midnight’ from the top,” Luke said. “Ready?”

Luke clicked his drumsticks together four times to establish the tempo. Where the fifth click should have been, they simultaneously burst into an original song that sounded a little too much like “What You Need” from INXS. Rob sang the words to the first verse. When they got to the first chorus, Jake leaned into his microphone and squelched his background vocals, barely able to hear whether he was singing on key or not. “Two after midnight,” he squawked.

Suddenly Rob stopped playing. “Hold it! Hold it!” he yelled into the microphone, waving his arms. They all silenced their instruments, and Rob turned to Jake. “Look, Jake, if you really want to win this thing tomorrow, why don’t you just concentrate on your *lead* bass lines and leave the singing to me? No back-up vocals are better than *your* back-up vocals.”

Jake looked to Luke and Melvin for a little support in this on-going argument. Jake could find none, and the logical adult in him knew they were right. He couldn’t sing. With twenty years to get used to that fact, Jake did something the young Jake was too proud to even consider. “Mel, you think you can handle backups? You can use my microphone.”

Melvin looked puzzled. Jake had taken him off guard. Melvin looked at Rob and Luke as if asking for permission. “You serious? You’re just going to give in? Just like that?”

“Yeah, Jake, that’s a good idea,” Adam said. “That way I can turn the volume up on your microphone and stop wasting the channel.”

Rob, Luke, and Melvin broke into a fit of laughter.

“No wonder I couldn’t hear myself sing,” Jake said, scowling at Adam. “You had me turned off!”

Adam grinned at Jake, holding back a chuckle through pursed lips. “It was for the good of the band, Jake, for the good of the band.”

Jake glared at him a moment longer, then gave in. “I guess you’re right.” Jake picked up the microphone stand, carried it across the room, and set it up beside Melvin’s keyboard. He adjusted the boom arm of the microphone stand to a comfortable position

in front of Melvin. "It's all yours, Mel. I've heard you sing, you'll do fine. For the good of the band," Jake said and patted Melvin on the back for encouragement.

"Well, if you guys think so," Melvin said. "I'll do my best." Melvin tapped the microphone to make sure it was hot, making a loud *clug*. Now Adam had turned up the volume.

Jake turned and looked at Rob. "Happy?"

"That was most noble of you, Jake, most noble." Rob walked up to Jake and squeezed his shoulder. "I'm proud of you, dude." He cracked his voice, sniffed, and rubbed his knuckle under his eye to blot away a nonexistent tear.

"Very funny, Rob." Jake pushed his hand off his shoulder.

"Hey, Jake," Melvin said. "Listen, before we get back to work, there's something you should know. I heard what happened with you and Heller, and I just . . ." Melvin formed a sober expression on his face. "I've never told anyone this before, but, under the circumstances, I thought you might find some comfort in knowing that . . ." Melvin moved the microphone close to his lips. In a deep, sincere, amplified voice, he said, "I, too, am a Jew."

Luke laughed so hard he fell off his drum stool.

Rob threw his guitar pick at Melvin. "Yeah, right."

"What?" Melvin curved his face into a hurt expression. "You guys don't believe me? Ain't you never heard of Sammy Davis Jr.? You believe me, don't you, Jake?"

"Of course, I do," Jake said, playing along.

Melvin nodded, consoled by the Jewish fellowship he now enjoyed, but then he opened his eyes wide and yelled, "Psyche!"

Luke fell off his stool again, laughing so hard his face flushed pink.

“No, seriously, Jake,” Melvin said and bit his lower lip to keep from laughing. “I may not be Jewish, but I do know how you feel.” He pointed at his arm, indicating the color of his skin. “To hate the art is to hate the Artist. Todd’s the sick one, not us.”

“Thanks, Mel. I appreciate your twisted effort to comfort me, but as far as I’m concerned, Todd gave me a compliment.” Jake hammered the E-string with his thumb, testing for volume. “What are you guys staring at? I don’t know about you, but I need that prize money. Now stop goofing off and let’s get to work!”

“All right,” Rob said, then pulled some Tic-Tacs out of his pocket and handed them to Jake. “Here, take a chill pill. Ever since that thing at graduation, you’ve been such a spaz. I know you’re miffed about Heller and all, but don’t take it out on us. I mean, Heller got what was coming to him. After you left, Joe trashed him. You should see *his* lip.”

“Yeah, man,” Luke said, having regained his composure. “I heard Joe gave Todd a huge wedgie, carried him out of the house by his underwear, and hung him up on one of those utility pole ladder steps—by his underwear. He stayed there until the phone company took him down the next morning.”

Finding that hard to believe, Jake gave Luke a doubtful stare.

“Yeah, really, Jake.” Luke flung his hair back and grinned. “Psyche!” He nearly fell off his drum stool again, pointing at Jake with his drumstick, laughing.

“Hardy-har-har,” went Melvin. “You know, Luke, I think you’ve been seduced by the dark side.”

“All right, you guys!” Jake yelled. “That’s very funny. Rob, I’ll take your chill pill if we can just get to work, okay?”

Finally, they settled into a full hour of practice. But as they played, Jake reflected on the antics he’d just witnessed. This was not the Two Left Feet he had remembered. From what Jake saw, they were not the ambitious, creative, hard-working young musicians he had imagined. When he was young, he really believed they were good enough and professional enough to hit the big time. He’d thought they just needed the proper exposure—like a record executive at the Battle of the Bands. Over the years, he’d continued to believe that and had spent the last twenty years blaming Rob for blowing their chances in front of that record executive. But now, after reliving band practice with a mature outlook, Jake could see that they were never the hardworking professionals he had imagined. Apparently, over the years, his imagination had built the band into something that it had never been. The mature, rational adult in Jake could now see that they were just four kids who liked to goof off more than they liked to work, just as the name of the band suggested. They were just four kids doing what they were supposed to be doing—having fun. And there was nothing the spoilsport adult in Jake could do about that.

Besides, Jake had seen enough episodes of VH1’s “Behind the Music” to know that the rock-and-roll lifestyle was far too dangerous for him. God knew that, and now the rational adult in Jake could accept God’s wisdom. His not making the “big time” was for the best.

That's when Jake made this decision: after he won the \$500 from the Battle of the Bands, he'd hock his bass and amplifier for another \$500. He'd be richer and his soul would be a lot safer.

Before long, two of their groupies—Christy with her pink hair sprayed hair, and Jennifer with her hair buzz cut on the side, wearing her Cory Hart concert T-shirt—strolled in through the sliding glass door. Of course, Rob, Melvin, and Luke started goofing off again. Jake tried to rally the band to another hour of practice, but after Christy called Jake a total dweeb, he knew it was hopeless. Besides, he doubted an extra hour would make a real difference anyway. As long as he kept his eye on Rob, they'd do just fine. And keep his eye on Rob he would, if he had to die again trying.

Watching Rob finger-comb his long wavy hair, Jake felt his face fill with blood as he recalled the reason he had to keep his eye on Rob. There they were the *first* time around at the Battle of the Bands . . .

They had been scheduled to play at one o'clock. They—that is, everyone except Rob—had showed up at the Fremont High auditorium at noon and moved their equipment back stage. At 12:40, a local heavy metal band named Reek Havoc had just finished their thunderous, disturbing set. Two Left Feet was on next.

A local music store had provided the PA system, so all they had to do in the twenty minutes they were given between acts was to set up instruments, take their positions, and do the sound check. After Reek Havoc had lugged their gear off the stage, Two Left Feet was given the cue to set up.

“Where's Rob?!” Jake asked Luke in a panic. “He was supposed to meet us here an hour ago.”

“Beats me,” Luke said, throwing his head back to flip the blond bangs out of his eyes. “He was riding in with Eric. I figured he’d be here by now.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know we’re going on next,” Jake said.

A voice came from the PA system. “You guys gonna play or what?”

“He’ll be here,” Luke said, picking up his bass drum to carry it onto the stage.

Reluctantly, Jake followed Luke’s cue of optimism and took his gear out onto the stage. Luke’s drums, Jake’s amp, and Melvin’s keyboards were all in position at 12:55, but still no Rob. The sound guys were ready to do the sound check, so they started with Luke’s drums. Luke tested each drum, waiting for the thumbs up from the sound guys. Then came Melvin’s keys—thumbs up. Then it was Jake’s turn. He played U2’s “New Year’s Day” on his bass until he got the thumbs up.

It was one o’clock, time for them to play, and Rob still had not showed up. Everyone seemed to be looking at Jake for answers. Since he was the guy who sang back-up vocals, he figured he should say something. Feeling the hostility of nearly five hundred paying ticket holders, Jake swallowed hard and leaned into the microphone. “I uh . . . I think we have a problem,” he said, his voice reverberating throughout the auditorium. “We can’t seem to find our . . . has anyone seen Rob?”

But just as Jake said that, Rob stumbled onto the stage carrying his guitar case. Eric trailed behind Rob, pushing Rob’s black and gold Marshall amplifier, grinning with that ridiculous, underdeveloped teenage mustache he thought made him look old enough to drink. Rob’s eyes were bloodshot and the stench of marijuana wafted from his clothes like he’d just come from a Grateful Dead concert. “You guys weren’t going on without me, were you?” Rob said, then broke into an unwarranted chuckle.

Jake put his hand over the microphone to shield the audience from hearing him.

“Rob! Where have you been, man?!”

“Chill out,” Rob said. “You know how nervous I get. I was just . . . just relaxing.”

“Yeah, that’s it, man,” Eric said. “We were just . . . *relaxing*.”

“Nobody asked you, Eric! Now unless you plan on holding Rob up, get off the stage!” Rob had been out back getting stoned! “Since when did you start smoking pot, Rob?”

“Are you guys gonna argue or play?” came a voice from the speakers.

“Just set up,” Jake told him. “We’ll talk later.” Jake grabbed Rob’s amplifier from Eric and set it up while Rob fiddled with his guitar.

At 1:05, they took their positions. The plan was to start with their second best song, then slow it down a little with the next song, “Curse the Rain,” and then they’d save the best song, “Two after Midnight,” for a good final impression.

With four clicks of Luke’s drumsticks, Two Left Feet broke into their set with their second best song, “Take the Time.” Jake cringed when he heard Rob’s guitar. It was badly out of tune, but Rob didn’t seem to notice. The audience did notice. As Rob sang the words to the first song, Jake looked out on the array of friends, metal heads, a handful of parents, and a guy dressed in an expensive suit, holding a notepad and a pen—the record executive. The suited standout grimaced and scrawled something on his notepad.

They limped their way to the end of the first song. Before starting the next song, Jake tried to get Rob to tune his guitar, but before Jake could say a word, Rob had already started to strum the opening chords. Jake looked to Melvin and Luke for a solution. They just shrugged back at Jake.

After Rob's guitar intro to the song, the rest of the band joined in. Then Rob leaned into his microphone and garbled the first words of the first verse. When he finished the lyrics to the first verse, instead of singing the second round of verse lyrics, he went straight into the chorus while the rest of the band played the chord changes for second verse. Luke looked at Jake with the one eye his blond bangs didn't cover. Jake looked to Melvin. Again, Melvin and Luke shrugged. Jake tried to jump ahead with his bass line and catch up with Rob at the chorus, but before he could, Rob had stopped playing altogether, and signaled for the rest of them to stop. They silenced their instruments and stared at Rob as if expecting him to say something profound. Instead, Rob simply leaned into the microphone, opened his mouth, and said, "Thank you. We're Two Left Feet." He unplugged his guitar, tossed the hot guitar chord to the stage floor with a loud *clug*, and hobbled off the stage without even attempting their best song.

Boos and cackles ensued from the crowd. Jake spotted Teresa with her jaw dropped open, her hand to her mouth. And there, in the back, chuckling and shaking his head as he scrawled on his notepad, was the record executive. . . .

So that's what happened the *last* time around. But this time around, things would be different, because Jake had a plan.

To Jake's knowledge, Rob had never smoked pot or done any other drugs before that day. Rob was the closest thing Jake had to a best friend, and Jake didn't hang out with druggies. But shortly before the contest, Rob had started to hang out with Eric. According to Rob, Eric had convinced him that a little pot would help him relax and enhance his performance. And Eric was right. It did help him relax, that's for sure. So

Rob was coaxed into sampling the weed before the show. And that sampling was what Jake had to prevent.

What Jake needed to do was quite simple. Since Rob knew how Jake felt about drugs and alcohol, he wouldn't dare try smoking pot in front of Jake. All Jake needed to do was stick by Rob every second, shielding him from the influence of Eric. Thus Jake's plan: cling to Rob like lint on a sweater.

Before leaving practice, Jake rallied the attention of the band. "All right, you guys, we need to talk about tomorrow. Rob, I'll pick you up at your house, and then we'll swing by here around 11:00 to pick up Luke's drums. And, Mel, since my van will be full, I was thinking maybe you can swing by here to give Luke a lift. Rob, you're riding with me."

A confused expression dented Rob's face. "No Teresa?" he said. "I figured she'd be riding with you. Eric said he'd give me a lift."

"Eric?" Luke said. "Man, I wouldn't ride with *that* fuzzy-lipped waistoid."

"That's right," Jake said. "You need to stay away from that guy. Janet's driving Teresa tomorrow. You're coming with me."

"So you're actually going somewhere without Teresa?" Rob had to hear it again, just to make sure.

"That's right. Tomorrow my full focus is on the contest. I'll pick you up at your house at a little before 11:00," Jake said, putting a vice grip on Rob's shoulder. And he wasn't letting go.

The next day, wearing a red short-sleeved shirt with black suspenders supporting a black pair of pants, Jake picked Rob up and they arrived at Luke's house at eleven o'clock, just as planned. Rob's and Jake's gear were already in the van, so they crammed Luke's drums into the remaining space. Melvin showed up with his keyboards already in his TR7. After Jake gave the band a brief pep talk, they left for Fremont High with Melvin leading the way.

As they drove down Providence Pike, Rob cracked open Jake's cassette case and scanned the titles. "A-ha! So you've got my tape."

"What tape?" Jake asked.

"You know, A-ha. 'Take on Me?' The cartoon video? Where have you been, Jake?"

"If you only knew," Jake muttered.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. You must have left that tape in here or something."

"Likely story," Rob said. "And see if you can get my Til Tuesday tape back from Janet. She's had it since spring break." He pulled the A-ha cassette from its case, popped it into Jake's tape deck, and cranked up the volume.

Jake turned the volume back down a notch.

"Oh, I forgot. The neighbors," Rob said. He pulled the sun visor down and inspected his face in the mirror.

Jake had been biting his tongue, but now he had to ask. “Is that mascara? Don’t tell me you’re wearing makeup.” Jake never understood this particular transsexual behavior of the ’80s. He certainly didn’t participate in it. Dad would have a stroke.

“Fear not, dude,” Rob said and pulled some mascara out of the breast pocket of his checkered flannel shirt. “I brought some for you, too.”

“No thanks,” Jake said emphatically. “If you want to look like Boy George, that’s your business.”

They arrived at Fremont High and pulled into the long entrance drive that passed the baseball and football fields. They needed to park the van as close as possible to the auditorium and then meet Melvin and Luke in the lobby.

Driving around the circular drive that passed in front of the school and the auditorium, Jake looked for a parking space along the bus-loading zone. The last time, he’d parked down in the junior lot and hauled his stuff all the way to the auditorium, but not this time. With age comes patience. If he just waited a little longer, he’d find a closer space. Besides, if Rob broke a sweat hauling his gear, his makeup would run.

Jake made a second pass around the circular drive. When he approached the auditorium again, he spotted a girl getting into a Mustang that was parked along the curb just a few spaces down from the auditorium. Jake stopped the van and waited for her to leave. While he idled, he watched metal heads in Spandex pants and headbands as they unloaded their equipment from a black Trans Am parked in front of the girl’s Mustang. He glanced into his side rearview mirror and eyed a cigarette-smoking, long-haired dude in a Ratt concert T-shirt. The guy appeared to be studying Jake’s van. When their eyes met in the mirror, the guy flipped his cigarette away and turned his back.

Checking out the competition, Jake figured.

Finally, the girl pulled her car out, and drove away.

But just as Jake started to mash the clutch, Rob cracked open the door. “There’s Eric,” he said. “I’ll meet you inside.” Rob bounded out the door and ran toward the back corner of the auditorium, where Jake saw Eric waiting for Rob, smoking *something*.

“Wait!” Jake yelled.

Jake shoved the van into first gear and lurched it forward into the space. He stomped the emergency brake, jumped out of the van, and circled around to the sidewalk. Rob and Eric disappeared around the corner of the building. Jake tore into a full sprint across the school lawn, running toward the back corner of the building. He reached the back corner, rounded it, and stopped, panting, catching his breath.

“Rob?” Jake called out between gasps of air. He didn’t see him. He darted down the sidewalk, passed the back exit, and ran to the other end of the auditorium. He looked down the brick side of the auditorium, along the sidewalk lining the back of the gym, and up to the school. No Rob—he’d obviously gone inside. Jake tore back down the sidewalk to the back exit. He reached for the door handle and pulled. The door didn’t give. It was locked from the inside. Jake pressed his head to the glass, cupped his hands around his face to block the sun’s glare, and peered down into the hallway. He spotted Rob and Eric just before they disappeared into the men’s restroom.

Jake frantically pounded on the window. “Let me in! Please!” Teens gawked at him, but nobody would open the door. “Come on, people, please!” Someone had obviously let Eric and Rob in, but no one made the slightest effort for Jake.

“Thanks a lot!”

Jake shot back down the sidewalk, around the corner, and raced to the front entrance. He yanked the door open, stepped in, and got his bearings as heavy metal boomed from within the auditorium. Before the entrance to the hallway, behind the ticket desk, stood an obese police officer. To get to Rob, Jake had to get past both the desk and the cop. But he'd have to pay the registration fee before he entered, and he counted eight people in line ahead of him. Rob was no doubt taking his first drag.

Then the officer turned around and began strolling down the hall . . . toward the bathroom!

Oh great! That cop's going to smell the pot!

Jake knew what he had to do, and it wasn't pretty. He cut to the front of the line, leaned over the ticket table, and cupped his hand over his mouth like he was going to puke. "I've got to get to bathroom—now!" He puffed out his cheeks and clasped his puckered lips between his fingers.

The ticket lady gasped. "Down the hall, to your left. Please, go!"

Jake sprinted down the hall, dodging teens in his path. He brushed by the officer, reached the bathroom, cut left, and bolted in. There they were. Eric took a drag and passed the joint to Rob. Jake lunged forward, clutched Rob's arm by the wrist, and plucked the burning joint from his fingers.

"Hey, man, don't get greedy," Eric said. "There's enough to share."

"Shut up, Eric," Jake said. He stepped over to a toilet stall and flushed the joint.

"What are you doing?" Eric whimpered. He stepped into the stall, and stared helplessly into the toilet, watching his joint swirl down the drain.

"Way to go, Jake," Rob said. "I needed that to unwind."

“Ahh, man!” Eric went on.

“Eric,” Jake said, “there’s a cop outside. I think you better leave.”

Eric stepped out of the stall. “Yeah, right. If there is, it’s because you narc’d.”

“If I’m a narc, then why am I warning you?”

Just then, the police officer strolled into the bathroom with his thumbs tucked under his gun belt. The officer looked at Jake and said, “You okay there, partner?” He turned his nose up and gave three quick sniffs of the air.

“Yeah, I feel better now,” Jake said, resuming his act, rubbing his stomach.

“We’re supposed to play in an hour. I guess I’m just really nervous.” Jake pointed at the sink. “I’m just going to rinse my mouth out.”

The officer sniffed again. “I see.”

While pretending to rinse his mouth, Eric slipped out the door as the officer paced the bathroom, looking into the stalls.

“Smells more like pot than vomit,” the officer said suspiciously. “You guys didn’t see anyone smoking marijuana, did you?”

Jake looked up from the sink and stood with water dribbling down his chin onto his shirt.

“I believe you’re right, officer,” Rob said, sniffing the air. “I thought I smelled something funny. If I find out anything, I’ll be sure to let you know.” Rob spoke like a true Boy Scout.

“All right, then. You fellas have a good show. And uh . . .,” the officer turned to look at Jake, “try not to get so worked up. You’re going to have a stroke someday.” The

officer smiled, tipped his hat, and strolled out of the bathroom with his thumbs still tucked under his belt.

“That was close,” Rob whispered. “I owe you one.” Rob went to the mirror, combed his wavy black hair, and turned back to face Jake again. “But how did you know I was in here?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Jake said. He also wanted to chew him out, but that would only fuel Rob’s anxiety before the show. “Come on, Rob,” he said, trying to keep his voice soothing and reassuring to put Rob at ease. “You don’t need that stuff to relax. You just need to keep your mind clear. You’ll do fine. Come on, let’s find the guys and get set up.”

“That’s cool,” Rob said and followed Jake out of the restroom.

If Rob had managed to take a drag on that joint, it didn’t show. Thanks to Jake’s knowledge of the future, Rob was safely by Jake’s side—and sober. “Oh, and Rob,” Jake said, “don’t forget to tune your guitar.”

They walked by the ticket desk and into the lobby. Heavy metal from the auditorium reverberated off the painted cinderblock walls. Searching the lobby for Melvin and Luke, Jake spotted them outside, approaching the lobby door. Rob and Jake went outside to meet them.

Melvin carried his keyboard case in one hand and his keyboard stand in the other.

Luke set down Melvin’s keyboard amplifier, puffed, wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, and then flung his hair back away from my eyes. “So where’d you park, Jake? I want to get my drums out of the heat.”

“Just up the street,” Jake said, pointing the way.

Melvin propped his keyboard case on one end, then leaned on the other end.
“Man, you lucked out. We had to lug this stuff up from the junior parking lot.”

“I grabbed a spot when this girl left,” Jake said. “Listen, Mel, you stay with your keyboard. We’ll go unload the van.”

Rob, Luke, and Jake headed up the sidewalk toward the van.

“So where’s it at again?” Luke asked. “I don’t see it.”

Jake looked up the sidewalk. He *thought* it was just up the street. “No, really, it was right behind some black Trans Am.”

“You mean this black Trans Am,” Luke said, pointing at the car right in front of them. “In that space?” He pointed at the empty space behind it.

Squealing tires sounded in the distant. Jake snapped his head around to see his beloved VW Bus tearing away from a stop sign, speeding toward the front entrance of the high school.

Frantically, Jake patted his pockets. “My keys?!” He’d been in such a hurry to catch Rob, he left his keys in the van . . . with the door unlocked!

Rob pointed at the speeding van and cried, “You think maybe you left them in the van, DUDE!”

Jake watched helplessly as hope in his once-again future sped away, no doubt driven by a guy in a Ratt concert T-shirt. The future of Two Left Feet faded into the distance, turning left onto Providence Pike.

Rob cursed and paced the sidewalk. Oddly, Luke remained silent and gazed into the horizon thoughtfully. Finally, he cleared his throat, whipped his blond hair away from

his eyes, and spoke the following word with all of the self-control and grace of a true Jedi Knight: “Bummer.”

Chapter 10

The police found Jake's van that next day at an interstate rest stop. It was undamaged but quite empty. Even Jake's tape deck, speakers, and tapes were gone. According to the police, Luke's drums, Rob's guitar and amplifier, as well as Jake's own bass and amplifier would probably end up in an out-of-town pawnshop. There was little hope of getting anything back. On the bright side, the thief was kind enough to leave the keys in the ignition. Then again, that was probably just his way of mocking Jake.

Of course, Two Left Feet missed their chance to win the Battle of the Bands, but thanks to Jake, not only would Two Left Feet never play again but also Rob and Luke would probably never speak to him again. They were miffed, to say the least.

But Dad wasn't mad. In fact, he was delighted. Maybe he figured the thief had finally succeeded in ending Jake's music career. Now Dad figured Jake would concentrate on his schoolwork instead of on music. Since the insurance Jake had on the

van didn't cover stolen items, Dad even loaned Jake the money to buy Rob and Luke new instruments.

For Rob to replace his guitar, amplifier, and two sound-effects foot pedals, \$950 seemed sufficient. Luke's drums would cost a bit more. To replace his set with a new one of equal value would run about \$1,500 dollars. Jake was just glad Luke hadn't left his light saber in the van. No telling how much that would cost.

Since Jake owned a \$500 share of their P.A. system, he was able to talk Rob and Luke into dividing his share of the system between them minus \$100 depreciation. So Jake owed \$750 to Rob, and \$1,300 to Luke, a total of \$2,050. Jake had \$54 and some change, so Dad loaned him an even \$2,000, which was ironically how much they should have won at the Battle of the Bands. Dad said that he was in no hurry to be repaid, but Jake hated being in debt, even to his dad. Jake was determined to pay Dad back before the summer was over. Bill Gates would just have to nurture his fledgling new company without Jake—for now, anyway.

Wednesday, June 4, 1986

After working all day at the deli, Jake arrived at Bruno's at 5:08 wearing the khaki pants and white short-sleeved shirt they had instructed him to wear, which just so happened to be the same thing he wore at Food King. To ease his financial and emotional despair, like a beacon of hope, Bruno's had called and offered him a dishwashing job working

evenings. Teresa wasn't overly pleased about losing her evenings with Jake to Bruno, but because of his dire financial circumstances, she understood.

Jake stood next to shelves lined with bags of flour, cans of tomato sauce, and black olives. He stared at a stainless steel sink with two partitions. To the left of the sink sat a pile of dirty plates, forks, knives, and cups. A yellow plastic drying rack sat to the right. Jake cringed at the sight.

My sister, the brain surgeon—me, the dishwasher. For Teresa and the baby, he reminded himself.

Sandwiched between two supply racks stood this short kid in his early twenties sporting a mustache and feather-cut hair, talking on the phone. He noticed Jake, looked at his watch, and signaled for Jake to wait till he got off the phone. Moments later, the kid hung up the phone and strutted toward Jake carrying a green apron and a baseball cap with the Bruno's logo printed on the front.

"You must be Jake," he said. "I'm Ron, your boss. You're late." He tapped his watch. "That's not the best way to start your career here at Bruno's."

"Sorry," Jake lied.

"Well, since it's your first day, I suppose I'll let it slide." The compassionate little twerp shot Jake a quick, sarcastic smile.

"Yes, sir, I'm sorry," Jake said. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't. Anyway, like I said, my name's Ron. I'm Bruno's assistant manager. Sort of his right hand man, you might say." He handed Jake the apron and hat. "I'll have you a name tag before the shift's over, but right now we need to knock out

these dishes. Once the buffet gets going, dishes start rolling in fast, so we better get started. You ready?"

"Just show me what I need to do."

Ron stepped over to the sink and pointed as he gave instructions. "It's not brain surgery. You take these dirty dishes, you take this sponge, you wash in this sink, you rinse in that one, and you set 'em in that rack to dry. You got all that?"

Jake was a skilled laboratory technician. He didn't need this guy explaining to him how to clean plates. "I think I can manage," Jake said.

"All right, son. Let's see how you manage these dishes. I need them washed before the next load comes."

"Yes, *sir*." Jake said, striving to be respectful to this peon pizza-pusher who was fifteen years his junior.

Did he just call me "son"?

Jake put on the apron and hat and walked over to the sink to examine the pile of plates, cups, and metalware. Some dishwater was already in the sink, but it was cold and murky. Jake looked at his clean hands and the filthy water. He scanned the shelves, looking for some dishwashing gloves. He could find none. Reluctantly, for Teresa and the baby, he plunged his hand into the murky water and fished around for the drain plug. Finding his mark, he pulled the plug and let the water drain. When the water had finished draining, he scooped soggy food debris out of the sink with his bare hands, threw the goop into the overflowing garbage can, rinsed out the sink, replaced the drain plug, and started to refill the sink with hot, clean water.

And Jake thought working in the lab was gross. At least there he got to wear gloves.

“What are you doing, son?”

Jake turned to see Ron peering at the sink, looking appalled.

“You can’t make clean dishes with dirty water, can you?” Jake replied.

“Of course, you can,” Ron explained. “That’s why you rinse the dishes in the *other* sink.”

“Yeah, well, that water was nearly as dirty.”

“Look, we don’t have time for this. The health code requires that upon returning to the buffet table, the customer get a clean plate.” Just as Ron said this, a bus boy slammed a tub of dirty dishes onto the counter next to the existing pile of dishes. “See what I mean? Chop-chop, son. We need to get more dishes to the buffet table. Chop-chop, let’s go,” he barked at Jake, turned, and walked up front.

If that kid calls me son one more time!

Jake wanted to put Ron in his place, but knowing his future family depended on him, he humbled himself to Ron’s misguided authority and did as he was told. As the sink filled with steaming hot water, Jake added some dishwashing detergent to the stream coming from the faucet, causing a cloud of lather to form on the surface of the water.

Jake washed furiously for what seemed like hours, but according to the clock he was watching, it had been only fifty minutes. His apron, his underlying shirt, his pants, and underwear were soaking wet and his fingertips were shriveled like raisins.

Before long, the water had once again become clouded to a brownish-red from pizza sauce and soft drinks, not to mention the customers’ saliva. Pieces of onion,

sausage, spaghetti noodles, soggy pizza crust, and other food debris brushed against Jake's fingers as he furiously tried to keep up, wishing he were back in the lab doing urinalysis. Suddenly, working in the lab didn't seem so bad after all. He'd worked in the lab for so long, he'd taken the job for granted, not realizing that things could be much, much worse. Actually, he kind of missed the lab. He never thought he'd find himself thinking that.

Jake looked down at the cold, filthy water. "I can't do this anymore," he muttered. He picked up one of the plates he'd just washed and inspected it, finding that it was coated with a greasy film. He was pretty sure the Health Department expected clean plates at the buffet table. His job as a lab technician was to help people get well. No way did he come back to 1986 to make people sick. He was changing the water, no matter what Ron said. He reached down, pulled the sink plug, and then reached over and pulled the plug on the rinse water sink.

The water had drained and he was scooping out food debris when Ron rounded the corner and caught him in the act. "What are you doing!?"

"I'm cleaning out the sink. You can't clean dishes in dirty dishwater," Jake snapped back at him, asserting some backbone.

"We don't have time for that. We need more plates. Now!"

Jake had never stood up to his boss before, but minimum-wage jobs were easy to come by, and he wasn't about to make people sick for \$3.35 an hour—not after having a job that paid three times as much making people well. So Jake said, "That's because you don't have enough plates to begin with. Now, I'm sorry . . . *sir*, but I'm not going to let

people eat off these plates or drink out of those nasty, greasy cups. You ever heard of hepatitis A?”

Ron stuttered for words, “You . . . but . . . you’re fired!”

“You can’t fire me because I quit!” Jake had always wanted to say that.

Jake stripped off his hat and apron, tossed the hat into the sink, and threw the apron at Ron, which landed on his head and draped over his face.

As Jake made his way toward the door, Ron yelled, “You’ll never work pizza in this town again!”

Chapter 11

The next morning, thanks to one of Jake's frequent bouts of insomnia, he awoke earlier than he'd planned. Since he had a busy day ahead of him, it was just as well. Although he was off from Food King, he'd planned to hit the mall just as soon as it opened to look for a new job. After that, he needed to get his stitches removed, and then Teresa had him booked for the rest of the day.

Jake's insomnia was no doubt brought about by worry, as it had always been. He was worried about finding another job, paying off his dad, and of course he still had to figure out a plan to stop the abortion clinic shooting. But he wasn't bothered in the least over quitting Bruno's. In fact, he felt strangely exhilarated by his justified defiance. Maybe he wasn't such a wimp after all. All in all, his Bruno's experience was quite therapeutic. Besides, there were plenty of minimum-wage jobs out there. He'd find another job soon enough.

The mall didn't open until 10:00 o'clock, so Jake figured he'd use his time wisely and do some early morning Bible reading before his four hours of sleep wore off. After a blueberry waffle and coffee, he sat in Dad's recliner with his Bible resting on top of Peanut, who was curled up like a cinnamon bun between Jake's legs. He had finished Ecclesiastes, which, to be honest, was kind of depressing, but the Song of Solomon was neat—kind of romantic, actually. Now he was on the third chapter of the book of Isaiah. But as he read, he couldn't help noticing how his mind kept wandering. Each time he caught himself daydreaming, he scolded himself, reminding himself of the importance of the Word of God. He even resorted to taking a folded piece of paper to help guide him along the lines.

So he read that way, using the folded paper, until he got down to chapter seven: Sign of Immanuel. Then, just like a sign from God, something occurred to him. He remembered a time back in the mid nineties when his neurosurgeon sister, Andrea, was eating dinner with him and Dad. The conversation had turned, as it inevitably did, to the subject of when Jake was going to go back to college. Andrea had suggested that, when Jake was a kid, he had displayed all of the signs and symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder. She even said that people with ADD tend to be more creative and that Jake's playing in a band only reinforced her theory. She said that people often outgrew ADD and suggested that Jake go back to college and see if his grades improved. Of course, Dad said it was hogwash and that Jake was just lazy. Until now, Jake always agreed with Dad.

But was he just lazy? At work, he'd always picked up as much overtime as he could, and now he was looking for another job, on top of his full-time job at Food King. No, Jake wasn't lazy. Maybe his sister was right. When he went back to school at twenty-

eight, he did concentrate a lot better. He actually carried a B average while working full time. When he'd read the Bible in his forty-year-old body, he'd had no problem concentrating, but this eighteen-year-old brain couldn't seem to hack it.

It might have been an easy excuse for his bad grades, but it looked like it was true. Apparently Jake's academic failure wasn't entirely his fault. He simply suffered from ADD.

Somehow, however, Jake didn't feel all that relieved by his discovery. Sure, he could stop being so hard on himself, but what did that mean for his *new* future? He had planned on starting college in the fall, making really good grades and majoring in something that paid better than working in a lab. How did he expect to ace his classes and make Dad proud when he had a learning deficiency? They didn't start publicizing ADD until the '90s, which was when his sister had suggested it. Did they even have Ritalin yet? Maybe they did, but Jake wasn't sure he could convince a 1986 doctor that he needed to be on it.

Then the obvious answer occurred to Jake's handicapped brain. After working at Bruno's, hadn't he decided that working in the lab wasn't so bad after all? Hadn't he decided that he actually liked working in the lab, in fact, actually missed it? Why not enter Livingston U's two-year lab program in the fall? That way, since he'd already taken the classes, he wouldn't have to study much and therefore free up a lot of time to work outside of class. Then, in just two years, he'd be making a lot more money. Maybe Teresa and he could go ahead and have a baby. It was perfect!

Not only that, but the minimum age to work as a lab assistant was eighteen, and for that job, he didn't need a degree. This body was eighteen, and Jake had the driver's

license to prove it. Instead of applying for minimum-wage jobs at the mall, why not just work as a lab assistant in a job he did well—for better money and better benefits? He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before, but then he eased up on himself. After all, he did have ADD.

Jake set the Bible aside, and pried himself out of the chair while trying to leave a sleeping Peanut undisturbed. He went to the phone in the kitchen, flipped open the phonebook and called Livingston Memorial Hospital's personnel department. Unfortunately, the lab did not have any positions open. He then called the areas two other hospitals and got the same story. He'd fill out applications anyway, because the turnover was pretty high in the lab. But in the meantime, he had to get to the mall and start searching.

Just as he turned toward his bedroom to change into some job-hunting attire, the phone rang.

"Hello," Jake answered.

"May I speak to Jacob Simon, please?"

"This is he."

"Yes, this is Bob Hatcher, the manager of Peg Leg Joe's. I've got your job application in front of me. We're looking for a fish cook to work evening shift. Are you still interested?"

"When can I start," Jake replied.

"How about coming in today and we'll discuss the schedule."

"I'll be there in an hour," Jake said and hung up the phone.

“Guess I better get used to smelling like fish,” he mumbled as he headed for his room.

Chapter 12

Peg Leg Joe's was a blatant rip-off of Long John Silvers. When Livingston Center mall expanded, the owner of this once-Long John's franchise had relocated his staff to the newly renovated food court and sold the building to Joe, the owner of Peg Leg's. The place looked pretty much the same as Long John Silvers, except for where there was blue paint before, there was now red, and Peg Leg Joe covered the walls with fishnets that had plastic shrimp and crabs attached to them.

Compared with Bruno's, working at Peg Leg Joe's wasn't so bad. They were hurting for help, so Jake started work there the next night. Of course, since he'd agreed to start the next night, he had to cancel a date with Teresa, but she didn't put up too much of a fight. She knew he was still down over the Battle of the Bands thing and that he was serious about paying his dad off ASAP. Besides, Jake assured her it was only for the summer.

Aside from a couple of minor grease burns, by the end of his first day on the job, Jake's Peg Leg experience went much smoother than his night at Bruno's had. His only concern was that the frying oil clinging to his skin would add still more pepperoni to his pubescent pizza face.

Jake's boss, Bob, was also a lot better than Ron at Bruno's. Bob not only obeyed the health codes but also seemed to respect Jake's unusual teenage maturity. Bob was so impressed that he even promised Jake a whole, entire nickel raise after a six-week probation period.

For the most part, Jake would be working from 5:00 p.m. till close, five nights a week. So that was at least twenty-five hours a week, which translated to about three-hundred bucks a month, and if he worked a little extra, an even thousand by the end of the summer.

Under a gray, overcast sky, smoke stung Jake's eyes as he stood on the back patio, poking at steaks and chicken breasts sizzling on a gas grill. Inside the house, Grandpa Simon sat on the couch visiting with Jake's brother and sister while Grandma helped prepare the rest of lunch in the kitchen. It was Sunday, June 8, Grandpa Simon's seventieth birthday, the day Jake had both looked forward to and dreaded at the same time. He looked forward to seeing his grandparents, but he dreaded this unavoidable reunion with his brother, Eddie. That's why Jake was outside on the porch, sweating and swatting flies—Eddie was inside.

To celebrate Grandpa's birthday, Eddie and Andrea had come home. The plan was to have a pleasant Sunday lunch after church, enjoying the company of close family. Meanwhile, with Jake's grandparents out of their house, Jake's aunt, uncle, and cousins were setting up Grandpa Simon's house for a big surprise party. So this little cookout basically served as a diversion for the big party that night. Unfortunately, since Jake had to work at Peg Leg's, he'd have to skip the party.

Jake waved a fly away, jabbed a two-pronged fork into a fatty slab of steak, and flipped it over. Steak grease fueled the fire, causing orange flame to jump from the grill, licking the sizzling meat, spitting and popping, and slinging a drop of hot grease onto Jake's forearm. He casually wiped his arm on his T-shirt to ease the familiar sting he'd grown used to after a couple of days at Peg Leg Joe's. Maybe Jake shouldn't have dreaded seeing his brother as much as he did, for Eddie, too, was a sting Jake was well used to by now.

When Eddie graduated high school—unlike Mr. *Least Likely to Succeed*—he'd graduated with honors and got an award from his high school ROTC program. Eddie had then—and this was one of the best days of Jake's life—joined the Marines and moved out of the house. Now Eddie was a drill instructor at Parris Island, South Carolina. Fortunately, Eddie had to leave at 3:00 to make it back to Parris Island, where the next morning he would be up at the crack of dawn, making his new recruits as miserable as he liked to make Jake. Eddie was well suited for his job. Eddie *enjoyed* his job.

And Jake was sure Eddie wasn't thrilled to see Jake either. Maybe it was because as a teenager, Eddie was forced to share a bedroom with his much-younger brother, but more likely it was because Eddie blamed Jake for the loss of his mother. When Eddie was

seven years old, not only did he lose a mother he'd loved, a mother who had taken care of his every need, but also he inherited a great burden in the form of a six-pound, diaper-wetting baby brother, a brother who just so happened to be the cause of his beloved mother's death.

The odd thing was that Jake knew next to nothing about the medical cause of his mother's death. Did her uterus rupture, causing her to bleed to death? Was that it? Jake didn't have a clue, only that she died while giving birth. It's amazing how one can live their whole life and not know any details about something as important as their own mother's death. But, sometimes the best way to deal with pain is to avoid it.

By the time Jake was old enough to understand the nature of death, a decade had passed since his mom had died. After all that time, Jake figured that nobody wanted to dredge up painful memories just so they could fill him in. Or maybe everyone just assumed that Jake knew how she died. Well, Jake didn't know. And knowing that he was the initial cause of her death, he wasn't about to bring up the subject. Just don't talk about it. Avoid the subject. That was the easy way. That was the Simon way.

But no matter how she died, was it really Jake's fault? Did he ask to be born? How, at eight months in the womb, could he know enough not to kill his mother? *It just happened*, he'd tell himself. *It was just God's will*. That kind of thought seemed to ease the guilt a little but not always.

Jake glanced up to see his reflection in the French door glass of their back door. Then, focusing beyond his own reflection, he could see Eddie inside, scrutinizing Jake's cooking, certain that Jake was screwing up his steak. When Jake's eyes met Eddie's, even though it was a good ninety-five degrees over the grill, Jake could almost feel the cold

sting of that snowball smashing against his young, tender face. He could almost feel the sting of the words that followed.

It happened just a few feet from that patio. Jake was five and Eddie was twelve when Livingston had gotten a blanket of snow. This being before Jake had started school, Dad would normally drop Jake off at Grandpa Simon's on his way to work, but since school had been called off because of the snow, Andrea and Eddie were home to watch Jake.

Jake remembered looking out the front window, gazing across the snow-hidden street at their neighbor's snowman with black sticks for arms and a carrot for the nose. Bottle caps formed the eyes and mouth. Jake was in awe of the silent beauty, the clean innocence enveloping the only world he knew.

Jake ran through the house and stopped at the back window. There was Eddie and his friend, Jason. They were fashioning basketball-sized snowballs, stacking them like bricks, and building an igloo just like the ones on TV—building what Jake hoped was Eddie's new bedroom.

Jake pestered his fifteen-year-old sister, Andrea, to let him go out and play. He couldn't wait to get out there in that blissful, powdered-sugary stuff from the sky, and help his big brother build his new quarters. Finally, she got off the phone and dressed Jake in his coat, gloves, and some of Eddie's hand-me-down rubber boots that were so big Jake had to wear his shoes in them so they would fit. In those oversized green rubber boots, Jake trudged out onto the back porch. "Eddie, Eddie, I wanna help. Let me help," Jake pleaded.

Eddie watched Jake step off the patio. Eddie whispered something to his friend Jason, then grinned at Jake under his brown ski mask. “Sure, Jake,” he said. “I could use some help. Come on over.”

With the blind faith of a child, Jake leaped into the snow and trudged forward as quickly as he could in those big boots, eager to serve.

Eddie bent down behind the wall of his igloo and stood up grinning with one arm behind his back.

“Yeah, Jake, I could use some help,” he said. “I need some target practice!” He cocked his arm and pulled the trigger.

Smashing into Jake’s tender little nose, the snowball toppled him over. That was no igloo—it was a snow *fort*. And packed tightly in the core of Eddie’s snowball ammunition was a rock.

Jake sat up squealing, bawling like any five-year-old would, clutching his bleeding nose. Eddie emerged from behind the walls of his fortress and came toward Jake with another snowball in his hand. Jake kicked with those oversized boots and pushed away with his bloody glove, fearing Eddie was about to finish him off.

“What’s wrong, Jake? Why are you crying?” Eddie asked, standing over his slain enemy, taunting his fallen prey. Eddie stooped down into Jake’s face. His words came from the mouth-hole of his ski mask, which was caked in frozen spit. “You little crybaby. What is it? You want your mommy? Is that it?” Eddie leaned a little closer, breathing heavy and throwing fog from his mouth. “Well, if you want your mommy, then maybe you shouldn’t have killed her, huh? It’s your fault she’s dead, you know. You killed her!”

Eddie slammed another rock-laden snowball into Jake's chest, disappeared behind the walls of his snow fortress, and then stood and pelted Jake again.

Jake's nose wasn't broken, but those words Eddie had proclaimed, and the way he said them, left not a permanent scar but rather a permanent open wound. Before that day, Jake had simply been told that his mother was in heaven. It was Eddie who informed Jake who'd put her there, and Eddie reminded Jake of that fact several times later. It's hard to say what those words had done to the five-year-old Jake, what underlying psychological, subconscious effect they'd had on him the rest of his life. But one thing Jake knew for certain is that Eddie's words, cruel in their delivery or not, were true. It was a reality that Jake had come to accept, a reality that tainted everything Jake said or did from that day forward. Yes, Jake had been a screw-up from the day he was born, the day he killed his own loving mother.

Knowing that Jake would soon have to face his family, wanting to put on a cheery expression for his Grandpa's birthday, he buried the thought deep in his subconscious where it belonged. Then Jake thought of the one thing that eased his pain—the spanking that Eddie got when Dad came home.

Again, grease popped from the grill, stinging Jake's arm and pulling him from his trance. He poked the meat and turned it. It was burned all right. At least Jake, defender of the public health, had prevented a possible *Salmonella* or *E. Coli* infection.

With the meat blackened to a noninfectious crisp, the overcast sky gave way to the first sprinkles of what looked like a coming storm. Jake pulled the charred, greasy steak and chicken onto a platter, waved away the flies, and braced himself to enter the house.

“They’re done,” Jake announced when he walked in the back door.

“It’s about time, sport. I was thinking maybe you had to slaughter the cow first,” Eddie said and shifted his eyes to the charred meat. “You think it’s dead yet? Maybe you should cook it a little longer, just to make sure.”

Eddie stood five feet ten inches and had a standard-issue military buzz cut that made his balding scalp less obvious. He wore navy blue pants and a beige short-sleeved shirt with a line of those colorful plastic things above the shirt pocket, no doubt symbolizing some feat of bravery or kissing up. On his sleeves were sergeant stripes like those worn by Sergeant Carter on “Gomer Pyle.” Starting next year, Eddie was due to continue his military education, and by the time Jake died, he will have been promoted to Major Edward Simon. He would remain single by 2008, and rightly so—no woman in her right mind would have him. And surely no woman deserved him.

Since Dad had his new Macintosh computer on the dining room table, lunch was served in the kitchen. Jake set the meat on the table, and Grandma added baked beans and corn on the cob. Two candles—a big seven and a big zero—were stuck into a chocolate birthday cake that sat on the counter top beside the refrigerator. Dad took his traditional position at the chair facing the TV. Jake took his spot next to Dad with his back to the kitchen, and the rest of the family filled the other seats, Grandpa to Jake’s right, Eddie directly across from Jake, and Peanut in his traditional position beneath Jake.

“Sorry about burning the meat,” Jake said.

“You can never be too careful nowadays, Eddie . . . Andrea . . . Jake,” Grandma said. “Better over-done than under.” Sometimes Grandma had to cycle through the names until she hit on the right one.

“Let’s see how it tastes,” Eddie said. He lifted his fork, jabbed it into the thickest piece of steak, and plopped it onto his plate. “Maybe there’s still some pink left in it.”

Grandpa shook his finger at Eddie. “Not so fast. Not until we say grace.” Grandpa clasped his hands together, set them on the edge of the table, bowed his head, and waited for everyone else to follow his example.

“Father in heaven, we thank You for this food and all the daily blessings we too often take for granted. And, Father, on this special day, I want to thank You for seventy wonderful years You’ve given me upon this earth, and I thank You for this wonderful family You’ve blessed me with. And most of all, Father, I thank You for the common sense enough to know Who to thank. In Jesus name, Amen.”

“Amen,” the all mumbled and raised their heads.

“Very funny,” Dad said. “I suppose that last comment was aimed at me?”

Grandpa tucked his napkin behind his shirt collar. “Now why would you think a thing like that, son?”

“‘Cause every time you come over, it’s the same thing: you always preachin’ to me, tryin’ to stop my supposed backslide.”

“I agree. Let’s not start the religion thing again,” Eddie said. He threw a piece of well-done steak into his big mouth and chewed, his jaw muscles and temples flexing with every chomp.

“So tell me, Jake,” Andrea said, skillfully changing the subject, “are you still dating that Mexican girl? You don’t think she stays with you so she can get her green card, do you?”

“She’s Puerto Rican, Andrea,” Jake said to his geographically ignorant sister, feeling the not-so-gentle brush of Peanut’s teeth as he slipped his little canine ally a piece of chicken. “Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, so all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens. She doesn’t need a green card. I’m not sure what she sees in me, but it’s not a green card.”

“Oh, okay. So tell me, then. Are you still seeing her, or has she dumped you for someone who speaks her own language?”

She was obviously trying to get Jake back for making her feel stupid, so he refused to dignify that question with an answer.

“Oh my!” Grandma said and brought her hand to her mouth. “I forgot the rolls.” She stepped over to the stove, put on an oven mitt, and pulled the browned, steaming rolls from the oven. She dumped the rolls into a basket and set them on the table. “I hope they’re not burned too bad.”

“Just the way I like them,” Jake said. He reached over, grabbed two nicely browned rolls, and quickly plopped them onto his plate before they burned his fingers. He jabbed his knife into the tub of Parkay and spread it onto the hot rolls.

“So what about this rock band of yours,” Eddie said. “You know, the one with that black keyboard player?”

“That’s African-American, Eddie. Black is politically incorrect,” Jake said, forgetting what year he was in.

“Look, I’m a soldier, not a politician,” Eddie said. “And I don’t like the way you’re talking to me, you little twerp.” Like it was a bayonet, Eddie pointed his fork at Jake and gripped the steak knife tightly with his other hand. “You need to learn some respect for your elders.”

Don't forget to say, "At Parris Island, I eat grunts like you for breakfast," Jake thought.

"Don't forget, at Parris Island, I eat grunts like you for breakfast."

"Well, I'm not one of your grunts, Eddie, and if you want some respect, then try . . ." Jake shook his head, took a long gulp of cold Pepsi, and refocused his efforts to hide years of resentment in the tone of his voice. "Why should . . . never mind, just forget it." Jake avoided Eddie's eyes by looking down at Peanut, slipping the dog a piece of his roll.

"Spit it out, little brother. You got something to say, say it," Eddie said. He bobbed his head up and down, looking more amused than angry.

"All right now, you two cut it out," Dad said. "This is your grandfather's birthday, you know."

Jake sat back in his chair, and out of respect for Grandpa, heeded Dad's orders and disengaged from his now *little* brother. Then Jake remembered the snowball. "Look, Eddie," Jake snapped, "all you've done is cut me down since the day I was born, and I'm sick of it! I'm a man now, and if you want some respect, try showing me a little."

Eddie tightened the grip on his knife until his fist quivered. A vein pulsated on his temple, his face filled with blood, and his jaw muscles rippled as they contracted and relaxed. Maybe Jake had taken this now- being-the-older-brother-thing a bit too far. After all, Eddie was trained to kill with his bare hands.

Fortunately, Dad stepped into the line of fire again. "Jake!" Dad gave Jake an odd look, questioning the reality of what he'd just heard Jake say. "Look, if you two wanna argue, take it outside!"

Eddie loosened the grip on his knife and settled back into his seat, studying Jake. He then sat up and grinned. "You stood your ground, little brother. I like that. First you stand up to that guy that humiliated you in front of your entire class and everyone dear to you, now you stand up to me. I'd just about given you up to be a sissy. Maybe I was wrong. You got guts, little brother. Stupid, but you got guts." Eddie bobbed his head in approval and tossed another piece of steak into his trap. "So what's eatin' you, anyway?"

"You mentioned the band," Dad said. "Right now, that's a sore subject."

"Did I miss something?" Eddie asked. "What happened with the band?"

Oh great. Here it comes.

Dad smiled and recounted the painful incident. "Well, I didn't want to mention it, but since you asked, Jake here was busy playing rock star at some contest at the high school. Anyhow, Elvis here left his keys in his van, and some guy stole it with all their stuff in it. The next day, the cops found his empty van at an I-40 rest stop."

Eddie smirked at Jake, smacking his food, savoring the moment. "No way. Smooth move, Ex-Lax."

"Oh, Jake, I'm sorry. I didn't know," Andrea said while crimping her lips, blotting them with a napkin, and trying not to laugh because when she did laugh, she sounded like a snorting pig.

"They didn't take *everything*," Jake informed them. "Melvin's still got his keyboards."

"Oh . . . but still, Eddie . . . Andrea . . . Peanut . . . uh . . . Jake," Grandma said. "I'm so sorry, dear."

“Hang in there, son,” Grandpa said with a wink. “Maybe music wasn’t your calling in this life. Maybe it will be in the next. And besides, sometimes eating a little crow is good for the soul.”

Jake looked down at his plate, wondering if crow tasted anything like burned chicken.

Jake hoped this might be the end of it, but Dad wouldn’t let it go. “Anyway, I hope now he’ll find time to study. You should see his report card. I’m surprised they let him into college.” He gave Jake a classic father-knows-best look. “You’ll need college know-how to play the stock market you know,”

“The stock market?” Andrea said, sounding surprised.

“Yeah, Sis,” Dad said. “Last month his biggest worry was the pimple on the end of his nose and finding a shirt to match his guitar strap. Now he’s talking about buying stock in Dill computers, America In Line, and lets see, what was it? Microshaft?”

“That’s Microsoft, Dad,” Jake said. “Remember that name. It’s gonna make me millions.” Jake gulped down a swig of Pepsi and watched his family’s reaction as he chewed on a piece of ice.

Andrea snorted twice and said, “Well, Jake, when you get ready to throw away—I mean invest—your money, let me know. I know a stockbroker who will be glad to take—I mean *invest*—your money. So how much you got saved?” She snorted again.

“Ha!” Dad laughed. “He’s \$2,000 in the hole with me.” Dad wadded his napkin and threw it on the table. “Seriously, Jake. You need to forget about those pipe dreams of yours—being a rock star, getting lucky in the stock market. What you need is to buckle

down and concentrate on your studies. I just don't know where I went wrong with you, son. You've always been so hardheaded."

"He gets that from his dad," Grandpa said.

Ignoring his father's comment, Dad continued the same old line. "Why can't you be more like your brother and sister here?" Profound disappointment draped his eyes.

Jake's lip began to quiver and his eyes burned, threatening to erupt, venting years of grief. He breathed deeply, put a cork in his tear ducts, and toughed it out. He wasn't five-years-old anymore. He wasn't about to give Eddie the satisfaction of seeing his little brother cry again.

Grandpa held up a hand. "Edward, I know you're just concerned about the boy, but give him some slack. He may be a little slower to mature than most, but he needs to make his own mistakes and figure things out for himself." Grandpa turned to Jake. "And, Jacob, your father's right for a change. You should worry more about learning than making money. After all, how often do you see a hearse pulling a U-Haul?"

Dad let out a deep sigh and held a solemn gaze on the baked beans. "I don't know, Dad. Maybe you're right. Maybe I oughtta lighten up on the kid. I mean, for a good part of their childhood, Eddie and Andrea had their mom. It's just a shame she wasn't around for Jake."

Jake looked up and saw Eddie's eyes boring into him.

Resentment rang in his voice when Eddie uttered, "And whose fault is that, little brother?"

Dad slammed his fork against the table. "EDDIE! What did I tell you?"

Eddie should have taken his steak knife and driven it into Jake's heart—it would have hurt less.

Jake lifted the uneaten buttered roll, slung it across the table, and pelted Eddie in the face. Jake pushed away from the table and stomped out of the kitchen. He went out into the driveway, and stood under a cool, steady rain. Getting soaked, Jake dashed for the shelter of his van, yanked open the door, and climbed into the driver's seat. He slammed the door and pounded the steering wheel with the heel of his wet fist, taking deep, controlled breaths, rapidly blinking his eyes to coax away the tears. He didn't cry when he was eighteen. He wasn't going to now. Grown men do not cry.

Dizzy from hyperventilation, Jake slowed his breaths and held out his hand to watch his fingers tremble.

Jolted by a tap on the passenger-side window, Jake looked over to see Grandpa pressed up against the window, cupping his age-spotted hands over his head to shield himself from the rain. Jake didn't want Grandpa to see him like that, but he couldn't let Grandpa get soaked either. Sniffing and blinking to regain his composure, Jake leaned over and opened the door.

"Mind if I join you?" Grandpa asked.

"Yeah, come on in." Jake extended his hand and helped tug Grandpa over the wheel beneath the doorway and up into the van.

Grandpa puffed, settled into the seat, and brushed at his clothes to knock away excess water. "It was getting a little hot in there for me. I think your dad's about to give that Marine brother of yours a spanking." Grandpa chuckled. "You got him pretty good with that roll. When I left, he was still wiping butter out of that stubby hair of his."

Payback for the snowball, Jake thought. He looked out the driver's-side door window, still not sure if his eyes had dried enough for him to face his grandfather.

“You know, Jacob, no matter what that loudmouth brother of yours says, your mother's dying was not your fault. It was her time, and God took her to heaven. It's as simple as that.”

“I guess,” Jake said with a shrug.

“And I figure Eddie must have taken your mother's death hard. But the strange thing is, even though he was just seven when she died, I don't believe I ever saw him cry—not even at the funeral. I think he just keeps all his emotion bound up inside, and every once in a while he lashes out. You just so happen to be an easy target. But deep inside, I don't think he blames you at all. He's smart enough to know you couldn't have helped what happened, but it still doesn't stop him from taking his own grief out on you. It's not right, but that's just the way some people are.”

Jake made no response, but only listened to his grandfather and the rain drumming on the metal roof of the van and stared at the water drops beading on the cracked windshield.

“Look, Jacob, I don't know much about how your mother died. All I know is that your mother's parents were throwing a baby shower over in Knoxville. Your dad drove your mom to Knoxville, but unfortunately, only you and him came back. Apparently, your mother died in a Knoxville hospital while giving birth to you. I tried to ask him details, but he's tightlipped about it. And growing up in the dark ages the way I did, mothers died all the time giving birth, so I never put much thought into *how* she died. To me, it just happened, and that's the way it was. Knowing the exact cause of her death

wouldn't bring her back. I figured it was just too painful to talk about, so I saw no need to push the subject with your dad. Since then he hardly ever mentions her at all."

"I've noticed that," Jake said, finally looking Grandpa's way. "He never talks about her. Most of what I know about Mom, is what I know from you. I haven't a clue how she died, only that Eddie says I'm to blame."

"Then you shouldn't believe that piece of information. I mean, look at the source."

"I guess. So what happened, then?" Jake asked. "Why do you think Dad's so quiet about it?"

"I don't know, son, but I get the feeling he blames himself. Maybe he thinks he didn't drive her to the hospital fast enough. Who knows? Never been able to figure it out," Grandpa said as he stroked his mustache. "All I can do is pray for him. But the thing is, I can pray all I want, but your dad's not getting any better until he starts praying for himself. He needs to go back to God."

"So you think he lost his faith because of what happened?"

"Could be. Maybe he blames God for letting your mom die. All I know is, ever since she died, all he seems to do is bury himself in work. Maybe he feels like work gives him purpose. Maybe it makes him feel needed or something. I just hope someday something happens to bring him back to his senses."

"Yeah," Jake said, "maybe someday."

"Well, anyhow," Grandpa said and patted Jake on the knee, "as you can see, your dad's got a lot on his mind, so don't get upset when he nags you the way he does. I know

it's not the best approach, but it's the only way he knows how. And I'm sure he never tells you this, but he loves you very much. He only wants what he thinks is best for you."

"Oh, I know, Grandpa, and he's right. I don't blame him for being disappointed. If I'd really put my mind to it, I could've done better."

"Well, son, it's good you see his point, but don't be too hard on yourself." He leaned closer to Jake and shielded his mouth with his hand the way people do when they don't want anyone else to hear. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure."

Grandpa glanced back over toward the house and leaned a little closer. "Don't tell anybody this, 'cause I ain't exactly proud of it. But you know how I quit school in the eighth grade to help my father at the store?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the thing is, I sort of left out part of the story. It's true my father did need me at the store. I didn't lie about that one, but what I didn't tell you, or anyone else for that matter, except your grandmother, of course, was that I failed eighth grade. I was too humiliated to repeat the year, so I just quit altogether and never went back."

Jake wasn't sure he heard Grandpa correctly. "What? You failed? But you've always seemed so smart. How could you fail out of school?"

"I just couldn't seem to keep my mind focused. I kept daydreaming in class, thinking about what I wanted to be doing instead of what I was doing. Just couldn't concentrate. Not till I got older. By that time, it was too late to go back to school."

“That’s me! I’ve got the same problem you did.” Jake’s wise old grandfather must have had ADD, too. Jake must have inherited it from him. And look how smart Grandpa turned out to be. Maybe there was hope for Jake yet.

Grandpa squeezed Jake’s knee. “You’d be surprised how much the two of us are alike. All this wisdom you think I have didn’t come from schoolin’, it came from life. Life and the Bible, that is. So are you reading the Bible yet?”

“Every night. I hope to be done by September. Then, once I get the big picture, I plan on studying it.”

“That-a-boy, I’m proud of you. Your grandmother helped me with the New Testament, but I was about thirty-five before I’d matured enough to read the whole thing through myself. You hang in there, Jacob. At this rate, by the time you’re my age, you’ll be a lot wiser than me.”

Grandpa suddenly wrinkled his already wrinkled face and rubbed the left side of his abdomen. “Mmm . . . something down there doesn’t like your cooking. Been having these pains lately.”

That pain was his gallbladder. If Jake remembered correctly, Grandpa was due to have his gallbladder removed sometime around the beginning of Jake’s fall semester at Livingston U. Jake had always felt guilty about being so busy with school that he’d never visited his poor old grandfather in the hospital. This time would be different. This time around, Jake would make more time for his grandfather—before it’s too late. “It could be your gallbladder,” Jake said, playing innocent. “All that fat from the steak’s probably to blame.”

Grandpa eyed Jake suspiciously. “You think so, doctor?”

“That’s my diagnosis. We better go back inside so you can lie down.”

The rain had slowed to a sprinkle, so they both climbed out of the van and went back into the house. Jake walked by the table where his family was still eating. Dad coughed, there was a thud, and Eddie yelped.

“Hey, uh, Jake,” Eddie said. He cleared his throat as he rubbed his leg under the table.

Jake stopped his advance into the den and turned to face Eddie. “What?”

“Listen.” Eddie cleared his throat again and actually blushed. That was a first. “I know we never talk about this, but uh . . . I just want you to know, I don’t really blame you for what happened to Mom. What I said to you just then slipped out before I could catch it. Anyway, I just wanted you to know I’m sorry. I stepped over the line,” he said and rubbed his forehead with a napkin. “I had that roll coming. You got a good arm, little brother. Nailed me right between the eyes.”

“At least it didn’t have a rock in it,” Jake said.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that one, too.”

“You were after I got finished with you,” Dad said.

“That’s one whoppin’ I’ll never forget,” Eddie said.

Jake eyed Eddie for a moment, pondering what to do next. Jesus said to forgive those who trespassed against you. Eddie had definitely trespassed, but Jake could understand the way Eddie felt. As Grandpa said, it must have really hurt Eddie when Mom died. The guilt that Jake felt was nothing compared with the pain that Eddie must have felt. After all, Mom was a complete stranger to Jake. To Eddie, she meant much more than Jake could imagine. If Jake had been in Eddie’s shoes, he might have acted the

same way. Maybe the young Jake wasn't man enough to forgive his brother and sit back down to dinner, but the forty-year old Jake was. Besides, he was still hungry, and he had a long shift at Peg Leg's ahead of him. So Jake microwaved his cold dinner and sat back down to eat while Grandpa leaned back in Dad's recliner, rubbing his stomach.

Thankfully, this time, Eddie's boot camp and Andrea's medical school became the topic, allowing Peanut and Jake to share their dinner in peace.

Later that day, Jake was pulling on his pants, dressing for his job at Peg Leg's, when a knock came at the door. It was his dad. "Jake, you decent?"

Jake pulled his pants the rest of the way up. "Yeah, Dad. It's not locked."

Dad sheepishly stepped into the door wearing a worried, almost tormented look on his face. "Listen, before you leave, there's something I wanna talk to you about."

"Okay," Jake said and sat on his bed.

"Listen, about what Eddie said. There's something you should know about the night your mother died."

This was it. Dad was finally opening up. After years of silence, Eddie's big mouth had finally loosened Dad's mouth enough for him to tell Jake what happened the night Jake's mom died. "I'm listening," Jake said.

"Look, you gotta get to work," Dad said and backed out of the room. "We can talk about this another time. I just . . . I'm sorry about what Eddie said. Have a good night, son."

The door closed, and footsteps proceeded down the hall. Jake just sat there staring at the door, feeling the way he did when watching the end of a television cliffhanger and the words “To be continued” came across the screen.

Chapter 13

Wednesday, July 2, 1986

Being careful not to cut his finger, Jake stood in the Food King deli cleaning off pink liverwurst goo that was clinging to the meat cutter blade. For the last month, he'd swallowed his forty-year-old pride and worked his two low-paying jobs religiously, obeying all of the rules and volunteering for any extra hours he could manage.

During the few hours of free time he had during the week, he'd also started delivery meals to little old ladies for Meals on Wheels and donating platelets, those tiny cells that formed clots to keep people from bleeding to death. To donate platelets back in 1986 they had to stick a needle in each arm. From one needle they drew the blood. The blood then went into a machine that filtered the platelets out, and then they pumped the blood back into the vein in the other arm. Sure it hurt a bit, but it was nothing compared to the pain Jesus had suffered on the cross. And now that Jake knew just how real heaven

was, he was determined to not only store up riches for his future family on earth, but also riches in heaven by doing good deeds.

Of course the drawback was that because Teresa had her job at the Gap, on the rare occasions when she and Jake did have some time off, half of those times she had to work her job. Needless to say, she wasn't pleased. But at least Jake had managed to repay \$500 of the \$2,000 that he owed his dad.

So here Jake was, six weeks after dying and returning to 1986. One would think that returning to their youth would be an exciting, intriguing experience. It was—at first. Returning to his past was definitely a wild ride. But just as new experiences soon become old experiences, reliving his old experiences made those old experiences seem twice as old. While he watched reruns of “The A-Team,” “Knotts Landing,” and “Cheers,” he kept thinking where he really belonged was on the “Highway to Heaven.” After all, days of deli meat and nights of fish and chips wasn't exactly reliving his glory days.

Then something happened, adding a plot twist to the rerun Jake was stuck in. Just as he finished cleaning the goo off of the slicing blade, an all too familiar face stared back at him from the other side of the counter. Only this face had a pink, healing scar over his eye and the nose was slightly misshapen like it had recently been broken. It was Todd Heller.

“Well, well, look who we have here,” Todd said with a sneer. “Did you enjoy the rest of the party, Jake? I know I had a blast.” Todd's tone wasn't overtly hostile. It was sarcastic, yet at the same time sad and defeated.

“Uhhh, if you call getting you face stitched fun, I guess so,” Jake said. The moment was just too awkward to think of anything else.

“Yeah, that’s great fun,” Todd said pointing to the scar above his eye. “And chicks really dig guys with splints on their nose.”

“Yeah, look Todd. I never meant for that to happen.”

“Just drop it, alright. I didn’t come here to get even. I came here for ham. Give me a pound of Virginia Baked cut thin. And Jake,” Todd said with a smirk. “Is that pig meat kosher?”

Jake reached into the deli case, pulled out the block of meat, and inspected the label. “I don’t know, Todd. It doesn’t say anything about being kosher.”

“What kind of Jew are you, Jake? It’s a joke, okay? Jews don’t eat pigs. Get it?”

Jake turned his back and went to the meat slicer. “I told you, Todd. I’m not Jewish. I’m Christian.”

“It’s all the same to me,” Todd said. “You’re all just a bunch of dreamers. When you’re dead you’re dead. Get over it.”

Jake set the slicer dial to thin and started cutting the ham, mulling over his next response. “You’re wrong,” he finally said. “I know that for a fact.”

“Prove it. Then I’ll believe.”

There was no arguing with people like Todd. Jake just sliced faster. The sooner he finished, the sooner Todd stopped pestering him.

“Hey, Jake, you better not spit in my ham,” Todd said. “No, wait. That wouldn’t be the Christian thing to do.”

Jake finished and set the bag of ham on the deli counter.

“So is this it for you, Jake? You look real spiffy in that hat. It’s a good look for you. This fall I’ll be at Chapel Hill. You know, where the medical school is.” Todd

snatched the ham from the counter. “You should come out there with me. They could use a good man like you in the cafeteria. See you around, Jake,” Todd said and strutted off towards the produce section.

“Not if I can help it,” Jake said once Todd was out of earshot. *Not in this life or the next* he thought. *At least not the next life.*

For the next few minutes, Jake couldn't shake the thought of Todd. Was it true? Would he never see Todd in the next life? Would Todd ever come to faith? The thought of Todd Heller dancing on hot coals, dodging jabs from the devil's pitchfork should have pleased Jake, but it didn't. For some reason he pitied the guy. Todd clearly was not a happy person and his feeling showed in his actions. Shouldn't someone like that be pitied rather than despised? Wasn't it the Christian thing to minister to poor souls like Todd Heller? But how could Jake ever convince someone like Todd of the truth?

The answer hit Jake like a ten-pound carton of mustard potato salad. What could be more supernatural than time travel? Only an almighty master of space and time could perform such a task. If Jake could convince Todd that God had sent him back in time, Todd would have no choice but to believe in that God.

Jake went over the plan for the rest of the day. After getting off work from Peg Leg's, he went home and put the plan into action. He knew where Todd lived. It was on the same street as Grandpa Simon. What he planned to do was send Todd a letter that proved the existence of God the way only a time traveler could do it.

Jake sat at his desk and pulled out a stay-sharp pencil and a sheet of notebook paper. Weary from a long day at work, he did his best to forge a convincing letter.

Dear Todd,

My name is not important. What is important is that you don't show this letter to anybody else, okay? I know this is strange, but please keep reading. The reason I am writing you this letter is because in the future, 2008 to be exact, we will be working together and I know for a fact that you will still be an atheist. I write this letter only out of concern for your eternal soul.

You once told me that you needed proof that God existed. Well here is the proof. Keep this letter in a safe place and don't show it to anyone. I'm going to list a few things that will happen in the future. When they do happen, look at this letter and you will know that I am telling the truth and that God is real. Only an Almighty God could send me back in time and this letter is the proof of it.

The next president of the United States will be George Bush. We will go to war with Iraq because Saddam Hussein will invade Kuwait. Of course we will win that war.

President Clinton will be president after Bush. During his second term he will get in trouble with a girl named Monica Lewinski. It wouldn't be Christian to fill you in on the details.

The cold war with Russia will end. The USSR will break up and the wall in Berlin will come down.

Princess Diana will die in a car crash in Paris, riding with some rich guy named Dodie.

O.J. Simpson will be accused of killing his wife and a guy named Ron Goldberg. O.J. will be found innocent and let go after a long publicized trial. O.J. will then go on a nationwide search for the real killers, concentrating his search on golf courses.

Two guys with funny looking hair in a group called Milli Vanilli will get in trouble for not only lip syncing on stage, but for not even singing on the album.

Make sure you vote in the 2000 presidential election. It's going to be close and it will be a while before they get it figured out. I'd tell you who finally won, but I don't want to ruin it for you. In 2008 a black man named Obama will face off with the wife of President Clinton for the Democratic nomination. I don't know who will be president yet.

And you may not hear about this if I can help it, but terrorist may fly airplanes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. We will then go to war in Iraq because we think they have weapons of mass destruction but they really don't.

I don't think this is the exact order things are going to happen, but this is enough to prove to you that what I say is true. Some of the things I mentioned are too weird for me to have made up, even if I was psychic. But if you're still not convinced, then remember this name and you will know I tell the truth: Joey Budafooco.

Please, Todd, I know this letter is weird, but keep it a secret, and don't show it to your dad. Keep watching the news and as the events I

mentioned above come true, you will know there is a God. Then, start going to a good Christian church, do what they say, and become a Christian. Then we can laugh about this letter in heaven.

Sincerely,

Someone who cares.

P.S. Don't get bent out of shape over this Y2K thing and store bottled water and canned food in your basement. Nothing's going to happen.

After finishing the letter, Jake got an envelope and the last twenty-two cent stamp from Dad's dining room table-turned-computer-desk. He stuffed the letter into the envelope, licked the old non-self-adhesive stamp, and stuck the stamp on the envelope. He then addressed the envelope using the address in the phone book, getting the zip code from a section in the front. Unless Jake wanted men in white coats to show up at his front door, he couldn't put his own name on the return address. Instead, he filled in the following return address:

Joseph A. Blow

1234 Main Street

Anytown, N. C. 12345

The next morning Jake arose refreshed, his thinking more rational. He stared at the addressed letter on his desk. Should he really go through with this thing? After the conversation he'd had with Todd at Food King, Todd might suspect Jake was behind the letter. And what if Todd's dad saw that letter? What if after the first couple of events in the letter took place, Todd tried to change the future? What if he used the letter to make

predictions for his own gain? And even worse, what if the letter fell into the hands of the *National Inquirer*?

Jake didn't have time to worry about that. He was running late for work. He jumped into the shower and rushed through his morning routine, throwing the dirty clothes on the floor. He'd have the whole day to think over this letter issue. He decided to leave the letter on his desk while he sorted out the possible ramifications.

At work, after long bouts of mental deliberation between customers, Jake finally decided that God had let him come back to take care of Teresa and to save Matt from being shot, not to change world history. If that letter fell into the wrong hands, the results would be hard to imagine. What if Saddam Hussein, upon hearing that he would lose the war, decided not to invade Kuwait? In the absence of the following arms inspections, he could develop nuclear weapons and start World War III. No, God had allowed Jake to travel back up the river of time on the condition that he not make any big waves.

When Jake got home from work, he went to his bedroom intent on destroying that letter.

It was gone!

Jake frantically checked under his desk and under the bed, hoping it had somehow gotten knocked off. When Jake searched the floor, something struck him as odd. Where were his dirty clothes? Dad must have picked them up.

Just then, Dad cracked the door open. "Hey, Jake, I hope you don't mind, but that letter on your desk looked like it was all set to go. Since I was going to the post office to buy more stamps anyway, I dropped it in the mail with the bills. Say, you look pale. You feeling okay?"

“I’m fine, Dad. Thanks,” Jake said. *Thanks a lot!*

There was nothing he could do. What was done was done. But was Dad’s mailing Jake’s letter a mere coincidence? Since Jake had trouble deciding whether to send it, maybe God decided for Jake. Maybe God did want Jake to mail the letter. At any rate, it was in His hands now.

The Livingston Hispanic community was a tight-knit bunch. Living in a culture alien to their upbringing, they enjoyed getting together for a momentary lapse into their own culture and the ease of their own tongue. And as a whole, Puerto Ricans are quite patriotic. So, naturally, there would be a party on the Fourth of July. Since Teresa’s eighteenth birthday was on July fifth, and her parents were already having a Fourth of July party, Teresa had insisted they celebrate her birthday a day early.

Fashionably late, the first guest arrived at a little after three and rattled off indecipherable Spanish while Teresa and Jake mingled. At a little after four, Jake found himself sitting with Teresa among potted ferns in her upstairs living room on the tropical flower-patterned cushions of a wicker framed couch. Salsa music blaring from a stereo downstairs pulsed with a vital rhythm, drumming its way through the off-white carpeted floor. Hispanics representing at least half the countries in South America milled about, carrying red plastic plates loaded with rice and beans, fried plantains, and some pork from an entire pig that Teresa’s dad was roasting in the back yard. Teresa sat on the

couch facing Jake with her shoes off, her legs tucked under her in a position that couldn't possibly be comfortable.

“So what happens when you cross a snowman with a vampire?” she asked over the sound of Latin music and laughter. Before Jake had time to respond, she snapped out, “Frostbite,” and fell back against the couch in a fit of giggles.

Of course, Jake had heard all of her jokes before. “*Muy gracioso*,” he said, which means very funny.

Teresa stopped giggling and looked at Jake, her face beaming with delight. “Hey, I didn't teach you that one either. You're learning really good. And you still haven't showed me this Spanish book of yours.”

That's because Jake never bought it. He quickly changed the subject with a joke of his own. “How do prisoners call each other?”

Teresa shrugged.

“Cell phones,” he said.

Teresa didn't blink. She just sat there staring at him. Finally, she said, “You mean prisoners get to have phones in their cells?”

Jake had forgotten that cell phones were still rare in 1986. “Well . . . it's a white-collar prison” was all he could think to say.

She patted Jake on the knee. “Maybe you should just stick with music.”

A sudden *POP!* exploded outside. Jake flinched violently and instinctively looked for cover. But there was no big oak tree to cower behind, only Mrs. Morales' potted fern plants.

Teresa squeezed Jake's wrist. "It's okay, Jake. It's just my little brother shooting firecrackers. Man, you're jumpy today."

"You know I hate firecrackers."

"You do? But you bought some for New Year's."

That was another thing he'd forgotten. When Teresa and he had first started dating, he didn't mind fireworks. But since that day at the abortion clinic, the sound of gunfire or any similar sound made him jump like a shell-shocked war vet. But *this* Teresa didn't know that.

Thankfully, the doorbell rang and gave Jake an escape.

"Be right back," Teresa said, pushing herself up from the couch using Jake's knee. She crossed the living room with her bare feet skipping across the carpet, then slapping against the parquet floor by the front door.

She opened the door and rattled off something in Spanish. "*Hola. Blaka blaka blaka blaka,*" she said and gave the guests one of those fake air kisses, the way foreigners do a lot. She then led them into the living room. Jake stood, retucked his shirt into his pants, and prepared to meet the newly arriving guests.

"Jake, this is Mr. and Mrs. Mercado. They're from Panama." Teresa introduced them to Jake for what she assumed was the first time. However, Jake was quite familiar with the Mercado's. Mr. Mercado was some wealthy businessman who owned two automotive parts factories. Their son, Miguel, who stood next to his parents, was a junior

at Livingston University majoring in business administration and was being groomed to inherit his father's empire.

Jake bowed slightly. "*Mucho gusto*," he said.

"Ahh . . . you have taught your friend Spanish already, no?" Mrs. Mercado seemed pleased.

"He's learning. He's doing really good," Teresa said, tickling Jake's belly.

Jake's cheeks warmed from the unwanted attention. He caught Teresa's fingers and held them firm as his eyes rested on their son, Miguel. And Jake knew it was rude, but he couldn't help staring at that one long eyebrow planted over Miguel's dark eyes. Why didn't he shave the middle of that thing? Or at least pluck a few hairs out.

"Oh, and uh . . . this is their son, Miguel," Teresa said with a hint of reluctance.

Miguel tilted his head back, peered at Jake down the bridge of his nose, and shook Jake's hand hard, the gold rings on Miguel's fingers mashing painfully against Jake's knuckles. "*Blaka blaka blaka blaka. No?*"

"*Si*," Jake agreed, not having a clue what Miguel had just said. And Miguel knew good and well Jake wouldn't understand him. That was just Miguel's arrogant way of proving his superiority.

Miguel let go of Jake's hand and spoke to Teresa in Spanish while his parents advanced into the dining room. "*Blakity blaka blaka blaka*," he said, adjusting his tie and smoothing his expensive, over-starched, white button-up shirt, no doubt ironed by his own personal maid.

Without any regard for Jake's feelings, the two drove into a torrent of undecipherable Spanish, leaving Jake standing with his hands in his pockets, ignored.

Jake tried to translate the conversation, but as soon as he recognized a word, they were on to the next sentence. Sometimes, just by watching their body language, he could figure out Spanish in the same way that Peanut knew when he was about to get a bath. But this conversation wasn't so simple. All Jake could gather from the word *universidad* was that they were talking about college. Other than that, he was clueless.

Combating the urge to butt in, Jake sat back down on the couch next to Teresa's shoes, cracking his knuckles, telling himself that it was good for her to socialize in her native tongue. As Miguel spoke, he couldn't utter a sentence without waving his hands wildly as if speaking sign language to a deaf person. As Teresa spoke, Miguel's hands switched to stroking his slick black hair while his eyes wandered down the horizontal red stripes of Teresa's dress, which highlighted the soft curves of her body. Then his eyes drifted down to the smooth tan calf of her leg, finally resting upon her delicate feet, her toes playfully curling in the carpet.

Miguel's looking at her bare feet was all Jake could take. Jake plucked up Teresa's red canvas loafers, stepped over to her, and set the shoes on the floor. Jake grabbed her hand so Miguel would know his boundaries, pointed at the loafers, and cleared his throat, hoping she would take the hint.

Teresa cupped her hand over her lips. "I'm sorry, Miguel. Where are my manners."

Miguel eyed Teresa from top to bottom—again—and spoke in formal, accented English. "Actually, I find your manner quite refreshing."

I bet you do!

“Hey, Jake.” Teresa finally remembered he was in the room. “Miguel goes to Livingston U.”

Jake forced a not entirely pleasant smile. “Oh really? How nice.”

“Yeah, Miguel’s on the student committee that runs . . . what was it?”

“It is the campus International House. It is, how should I say, a kind of fraternity for foreign students.” Miguel glanced at Jake and resumed ogling Teresa.

“Yeah, Jake. They’re having a big party the Saturday before classes start. You know, the day you’re helping me move into my dorm. He wants us to come.”

Miguel looked startled. “Yes, well, it is mostly for non-American students. However,” he reluctantly confessed, “I suppose you may bring a friend.”

“It sounds like fun,” Jake lied, forcing another smile. He didn’t really want to go, but he knew that Teresa would insist on it. Besides, he didn’t want Teresa around this guy unsupervised.

Teresa’s mom came out of the kitchen and stood with her hands on her apron-draped hips. “Teresa, why don’t you offer your friends something to eat?”

Jake looked at his watch and saw that it was already 4:38. “Actually . . . uh . . . I’ve got to be at work at five.”

“Work?” Teresa twisted her head, and Jake saw a little too much white in her eyes. “You said you’d take today off.”

“I know, I’m sorry. One of the cooks called in sick. Bob called me to see if I could come in.”

“Why couldn’t you tell him you had plans? I can’t believe this. It’s my eighteenth birthday party. We haven’t even cut the cake.”

“I’m sorry, Teresa, but I promised I’d be flexible.”

“Let him go,” Miguel butted in. “I admire his dedication. My father could use more workers like him in his factories. Let him go. He is needed elsewhere.”

“Stay out of this, Miguel!” Jake said.

Miguel straightened his posture and hiked one half of his unibrow, but he said nothing.

“How rude!” Teresa snapped. “Just leave if you’re going be that way.”

“Look, Teresa, I’m really sorry. I’ll come by for some cake after work, okay?”

Teresa folded her arms over her chest. “If there’s any left.” She then took Miguel by the wrist and pulled him toward the kitchen. “Come on, Miguel. Let’s have some cake. It’s chocolate, Jake’s favorite.”

“Just great,” Jake muttered as he watched his wife disappear into her parents’ kitchen with another man—a good-looking, intelligent, rich man who spoke Spanish.

People were staring at Jake, so he figured he’d better cut his losses. He tucked his tail between his legs and limped his way out of her house. He definitely had some making up to do, but this wasn’t the worst of their spats. She’d get over it soon enough. He crossed her front yard and climbed into his van, which was parked along the curb. As he cranked the ignition, he noticed Teresa walking toward him. He turned the ignition off and helped her up into the van.

She sat there for a moment not saying a word, studying him.

“Teresa,” Jake said. “I’m sorry, but Bob was really in a bind.”

“It’s okay, Jake. I’m sorry I snapped at you like that, but you weren’t exactly nice either.”

“I don’t like the way that Miguel guy looks at you.”

Her eyes came alive. “I knew it! You’re jealous.”

“I am not. I’m just. . . .”

“You’re not?” Her eyes lost some life.

“Okay, maybe a little.”

She ran her fingers into his hair. “I think that’s sweet. And I was starting to think you didn’t care.”

Jake pulled her hand away from his hair and held it tight. “Teresa, if you only knew how much I cared. I’d give up heaven for you.” Obviously, he meant it.

Her face softened like she was watching puppies play. “That’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me. “She hugged him hard, then backed away. “Crazy, but sweet. And just for that, I’ll save you some cake. See you after work? Around ten?”

“I’ll be here.”

She pecked Jake on the cheek, climbed out of the van, and waved at him as he drove away.

Chapter 14

On Monday night, after three more days of food service purgatory, Jake stepped into his house with dried fish batter splattered over his navy blue work pants. Peanut met him at the back door, dancing around and whimpering, greeting Jake with his usual ecstatic fervor, but then quickly refocusing his attention, sniffing and licking the dried batter.

With Peanut trailing behind, Jake walked into the den, but stopped when he noticed Dad sitting out on the back patio, alone in the dark. Jake cracked open the back door and stuck his head out. “Dad, I’m home,” he said and glanced down at two beer cans. Something was definitely wrong. Dad drank occasionally but never more than one beer at a time. “Dad?”

“Yeah, son, I heard you,” Dad said, but he didn’t turn around. He just sat there in the dark, staring out into the backyard. Dad tilted his head back and drank in a long swig of yet another beer he had in his hand.

Dad was definitely upset about something, but Jake didn't remember anything that traumatic happening the first time around in 1986. Then again, the first time around Jake would have been over at Teresa's house till late and would have missed his dad out on the porch. "Okay," Jake said, "just wanted you to know I was home." Jake began to close the door, but he stopped when Peanut squeezed out and started to lick the top of one of the beer cans.

Jake stepped out onto the porch and stooped over to pick up the two cans. "No, no, Peanut."

Despite the commotion behind him, Dad just sat there, saying nothing. Something was definitely eating at Dad, and Jake just didn't feel right leaving him out there all by himself. Maybe he should take away the beer and spare Dad a hangover in the morning, or maybe preach about the evils of alcohol—something. Of course, the eighteen-year-old Jake would have disappeared into his bedroom, turned the music up loud, and hoped for the best. He certainly wouldn't pull up a chair next to his much-older father and have a heart-to-heart talk, but that's what the forty-year-old in Jake thought he should do. A whole generation had vanished between their ages. Jake wasn't a timid teenager confronting a drunken old man who just happened to be his father. Jake was a grown man with problems of his own, talking to another grown man with his own problems. Dad looked like he needed a friend, and right now, Jake was the closest thing to a friend that Dad had.

Jake put Peanut back inside and pulled up a chair next to Dad. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, listening to the tree-frogs croak and the hum of the air

conditioning unit. Dad never acknowledged Jake's presence. He just sat there. Dad obviously wasn't going to say anything, so Jake had to ask. "Dad, are you okay?"

Dad took another swig of beer. "Don't uh . . . don't trouble yourself over me, son. I'll be fine."

Dad looked down and fiddled with something in his left hand, something small and shiny. When it reflected light from the neighbor's floodlights, Jake recognized it to be Mom's wedding band, which normally sat on the end table by the couch in front of Mom's framed picture. "That's Mom's ring, isn't it?" Jake asked.

"Thirty years, Jake. Thirty years ago today, I put this ring on your mother's finger."

Dad's words took a second to sink in. When they did, they sank hard. It was Mom and Dad's anniversary—their thirtieth anniversary at that. And the reason Dad was depressed, getting drunk out on the patio, was because eighteen years ago his wife had died giving birth to Jake.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I wish things were different," Jake said. He stood and walked to the door, pausing awkwardly before going back inside. "If I could go back and not be born, I'd do it. I'd give anything to bring Mom back, but I can't."

"Please tell me you don't believe that brother of yours," Dad said. "Tell me you don't think I blame you for your mother's death."

Jake drew in a deep breath and used his lower lip to divert the exhaling air to his burning eyes, attempting to dry them. "It's true, isn't it? She died giving birth to me, didn't she?"

"Sit down, son. There's something you need to know."

“No, it’s okay, Dad. You don’t have to—,”

“I said sit down.” Dad’s voice was sharp and commanding. Then he softened his tone. “Please, son, don’t make this any harder than it is. Just hear what I have to say. You need to hear this and I need to tell it.”

Dad’s tone startled Jake out of his self-pity. He turned to see Dad standing, pointing at the chair. “Please. Just listen to what I have to say.”

Jake returned to Dad’s side and hesitantly lowered himself into the chair.

Dad tossed the beer can into the yard and sat back down beside Jake. “I should have told you this a long time ago,” Dad said, “but I didn’t think you’d understand.”

“What is it, Dad?” Jake tried to read his father’s expression through the dark. “You can tell me.”

“You’re going to hate me when you hear this. I don’t blame you if you don’t forgive me. Heck, I can’t even forgive myself.”

“Whatever it is, I promise I won’t hate you.”

“You have to understand how much this has been eating at me. I’ve wanted to tell you for so long, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not even your grandfather knows what I’m about to tell you.”

“Really, Dad. If you don’t want to tell me, I’ll—”

“Your mom was eight months pregnant with you. Her parents were throwing a baby shower out in Knoxville, so we left your brother and sister with your Grandpa Simon and headed out. Anyhow, your mom had a real bad case of high blood pressure, only I didn’t know just how bad at the time.”

“High blood pressure?”

So that's where I got my high blood pressure, Jake thought. I inherited it from my mom.

“That’s right,” Dad said. “It runs in her side of the family. Anyhow, like I said, she had high blood pressure, but the doctor had her on this medicine to control it. The thing is, she had to take a diuretic along with the blood pressure medicine. In case you don’t know, a diuretic is something that makes you . . . well . . . it makes you have to go to the bathroom a lot. And you know how when a woman gets pregnant, the bladder has to make room for the baby. So not only was her bladder being squashed by you, but she was on this drug that made her go all the time.”

“Dad, I know you’re trying, but you’ve lost me.”

“You see, the thing is, even though they didn’t have this dang 55 mph speed limit back then, with that road winding up through the mountains, it takes nearly four hours to drive to Knoxville—if you don’t make any stops. So I told her, just this once, to please leave the medicine behind. Like a fool, I told her the doctors were full of it, and it wouldn’t hurt her to lay off the drugs for a couple of days. I didn’t want to have to stop at every gas station and then some along the way. And just like your mother, she obeyed me.”

Dad stood up and walked to the edge of the patio.

Jake joined him at the patio’s edge, putting his hand on Dad’s shoulder. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

“You didn’t kill your mother, son. I killed her,” Dad said. “On the way back from the shower, about thirty miles out of Knoxville, me and your mom get into a fight. I started yelling at her about how late it was and about how I wished she would hurry

up. Anyhow, I made your mom really mad and she starts having this real bad headache and got sick to her stomach. Being pregnant and all, I knew that was nothing to mess with. So I turned the car around and headed back to the nearest hospital.” He shuddered as if reliving a nightmare. “By the time I got her there, it was . . . it was too late.”

Dad didn’t have to go on. The headache, the sick stomach. Jake knew all too well how that felt. It was the same reason he was standing there talking to his dad in 1986. “She had a brain aneurysm, didn’t she?” Jake asked. He already knew the answer.

Dad looked Jake’s way. “That’s right. You’ve heard of it?”

“They’re a lot more common than you’d think.”

“Apparently so. Anyhow, by the time I got her to the ER, they tell me she was pretty much. . . .” He paused and started again. “She was dead. They thought they’d lost you, too, but they did a C-section right there in the emergency room. They didn’t expect it, but you lived. So you see, son, I killed your mom when I told her not to take the medicine. I killed her by making her mad over something stupid. But you, you were a miracle. I tell you, son, if I’d have lost you, too, I don’t know if I would of made it. You’re the only thing that kept me going.”

Jake let his hand slide off Dad’s back and slowly slid back down as the news sank in. His mom’s death wasn’t his fault, and he was a living miracle. Somehow his whole life took on a brand new meaning. His first moments on earth hadn’t been a disaster but a miracle instead. If his life started out as a miracle, maybe the rest of it wasn’t as bad as he made it out to be. And if he was a miracle, then maybe God actually had a reason for letting him live—if not the first time around, maybe this time around. Maybe God had plans for Jake after all.

“Can you ever forgive me?” Dad said, still looking out into the backyard.

“Huh?” Jake barely caught what Dad had said. “Of course . . . of course I forgive you. I’m just sorry, that’s all. I’m just sorry you’ve had to deal with this the last for—I mean, eighteen years.”

“It’s only what I deserve. Maybe my hell on earth will save me from true hell later.” Dad sat back down. “I wonder if God can forgive me.”

“Of course He can. Besides, you didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I was selfish. I put you both at risk just to save a few measly minutes on the road. I should of known better, but I was just too arrogant to admit that maybe doctors knew more than me. Any way you look at it, it was my fault.” He looked into the star-filled sky. “Even if God forgives me, even if your mom forgives me, I can’t seem to forgive myself.”

Jake could definitely relate to his father on that on—not being able to forgive himself. If he could, maybe he would have taken that angel’s hand.

“I can’t help you forgive yourself,” Jake finally said. “Only God can help you with that. That’s why I think it’s time you got right with God.”

“I don’t know,” Dad said. “Maybe I will. Someday.”

“Someday? Why not now?”

“You know, Jake, the older you get, the more you sound like your Grandpa.”

“I take that as a compliment.”

“You might find this hard to believe, but that’s the way I mean it. You take a lot of things after your grandfather. Maybe I should tell you this more, but you’re a good kid.

You got a good heart. I knew that from the time you tried to nurse that bird back to health. You know, that bird your brother shot with the BB gun.”

“You remember that?” Jake could barely remember it himself.

“Of course I do. Your brother shot it, and you tried to save it. I knew then you had something over your brother and sister—you had a good heart. I think that’s more important than anything. I think your grandpa would agree. And I also know about you mowing old Mrs. White’s yard next door for a dollar. You and me both know the going rate was ten dollars.”

“Well, she’s kind of out of it. She still thinks World War II hasn’t ended.”

“Yeah, well, your brother would have brought her back to reality real fast and charged her twenty.”

“I guess so,” Jake said with a laugh.

“You may not be the brains of the family, but at least you got the heart, and that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Jake’s insides tingled at the sound of those words. Maybe Dad was prouder of Jake than he was of Andrea or Eddie? Andrea was the brain, Eddie was the muscle, but Jake was the heart. After all, in the scope of eternity, wasn’t compassion was more important than brains or muscle?

Then something popped into Jake’s handicapped brain. He knew it was probably nothing, but he had to ask. “Dad, you said mom was dead when they took me out of her, right?”

“That’s the way it happened.”

“So if her heart wasn’t beating, then my brain wasn’t getting any oxygen, was it?”

“Well, now that you mention it, the doctors said that could cause some problems, but you were fine when they checked you later. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just a thought.”

Tuesday, August 5, 1986

Jake had just finished delivering for Meals on Wheels and was now sitting in the waiting room of the Red Cross blood donation building. A month had passed since that night on the back patio with Dad. After that night, Jake’s relationship with his father had noticeably improved. He just wished he could say the same about Teresa.

Again, one of the main problems with Teresa was that since they both had jobs with conflicting schedules, they didn’t see each other very often. But when he did see her, he was still having trouble connecting with her. At this point, they had been dating for less than a year. They just didn’t have that closeness and open honesty that had developed between them over twenty years together. Not only that, but Jake was constantly afraid of divulging information that he wasn’t supposed to know about her yet, or even things that she didn’t know about herself yet. When he was around her, it was a constant mental struggle for him to pick his words carefully so he wouldn’t arouse suspicion.

Jake’s maturity level was another problem. Teresa had always been the dominant personality in their relationship. Since he had originally been only a couple of months older and because she had originally been more mature than he was, she had always worn the pants in the family. But now he was much older. Literally overnight, he’d become the

dominant personality. Maybe he could have acted like a rag doll and let this mere child tug him along through life, but he doubted he could pull off such an acting job effectively without arousing even more suspicion. And since all she wanted to do was have fun, that approach would also be counterproductive. That summer was his last chance to rake in some cash before school started. Every dollar he saved in 1986 was a water bill in 2008—thanks to his future knowledge of the stock market. Jake had priorities to consider. Why couldn't Teresa understand that?

But Jake reminded himself of the transformation she would undergo once college started. He remembered how hard she had studied and how much she had lectured Jake about taking life more seriously. Although they didn't seem to be on the same mental plane yet, he was sure that once she had gotten serious about college, her attitude would change. And once Jake paid off his dad, once he had his stock, and somehow prevented the abortion clinic tragedy involving Matt, he would have a lot less on his mind. If he could just survive the summer, it would be much easier for him to conform to the teenage whims of his young wife-to-be. Then everything would be fine.

But where Jake's relationship with Teresa seemed a little shaky, at least he was achieving one of his goals. He was managing to store up more riches in heaven, and doing that without bragging about it to anyone, not even to Teresa. And for the rest of the summer, he planned to donate platelets every Tuesday after Meals on Wheels. However, when school started in the fall, he'd have to work around his class schedule.

Of course, Teresa would eventually catch on to Jake's good deeds, especially if she happened to see the scars on his arm. And when she did, he'd tell her the truth, but he wasn't about to volunteer the information. That would sound too much like boasting.

And, frankly, he was a little concerned that his new charitable behavior would only make her more suspicious. She was already suspicious enough.

Chapter 15

Later that Friday afternoon, Jake was at Food King standing in front of the deli case, cleaning fingerprints off the glass with Windex and paper towels. Since it was payday Friday and Food King paid in cash, Jake had nearly \$250 in his wallet. He would use most of it to reduce the \$1,400 he still owed Dad.

Rob had just come by to try to get Jake to spend some of this cash by taking him to a bar that never carded minors. Jake declined Rob's invitation and preached to him about the evils of underage drinking. Naturally, Rob got peeved, told Jake he wasn't fun anymore, and left pouting.

"When you're done with the deli, why don't you work your way around to the bakery?" Shirley, Jake's deli manager asked just as a voice called over the intercom, "Clean up on aisle five."

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said.

He finished shining the deli glass and was working on the bakery when Teresa walked up wearing her flip-flops flapping under her bare feet. She wore pink nylon gym shorts and a T-shirt, wet from the swimsuit underneath.

She stepped up to Jake, tugged on his blue apron, and pressed her cold nose to his cheek and kissed him. “Hey, sweetie. What’s with Rob? He walked right past me in the parking lot and didn’t even say hi.”

“Oh, he’s just mad because I wouldn’t go to the strip tonight.”

“That’s right. You’ve got plans,” she said, smiling. “So can you go on break?”

“No, I wish I could. Kevin just clocked out for lunch. He won’t be back for at least twenty more minutes.”

The smile left her face. “Bummer.”

She was really going to be bummed when he told her that he had to work at Peg Leg’s that night. He wanted to tell her and get it over with, but the timing didn’t feel right. He figured he’d ease into the subject. “Soooo . . . did you and Janet have fun at the pool?”

“It would have been better with you there.”

“I’m sorry, I just couldn’t get off.”

“Miguel was there,” she had to add.

“Oh really? How nice.” He assumed she was just trying to make him jealous again. If there were actually anything going on between her and Miguel, she wouldn’t mention it—would she?

“It was nice. Too bad you missed it,” she said. “So what time you picking me up tonight?”

Jake pulled his eyes away from her and started spraying the glass again. “Listen, about tonight. I sort of promised Bob I’d work at Peg Leg’s.”

“You what!?”

“I’m sorry, Teresa. But Bob needs me to clean the grease trap. It’s starting to stink.”

“GREASE TRAP!”

“Hey, keep it down. I’m on the clock, you know.”

“But today’s the eighth. This is the third month-o-versary you’ve forgotten. No card, no date, no nothing. I can’t believe this. You’d rather spend our month-o-versary with a *grease trap* than with me?”

“Trust me, Teresa. I’d rather be with you, but Bob’s my boss. What was I supposed to say?”

“How long will this grease trap thing take? Can’t we go out after?”

“Well . . . he kind of asked me to work my regular shift and then clean it after they close. You can’t clean that thing with customers there. It stinks up the whole place.”

“This is just great! What about *Ferris Bueller*? You promised you would take me.”

“And I will. Tuesday. I’m off Tuesday. I’ll take you then, I promise.”

She stood defiantly with her arms folded across her chest. “You promised me tonight.”

“I know, I’m sorry. But things will be better this fall. You’ll see.”

Teresa said nothing. She just stood there staring at Jake, thinking.

“Just three more weeks. You’ll see.”

“You better take me somewhere nice Tuesday,” she said with glazed-over eyes, “somewhere with real plates and a waiter.” Jake started to protest, but Teresa cut him off. “Don’t worry, Jake, I’ll pay. I work, too, you know. You can keep your money. All I ask is a little of your time.” She walked away, then stopped and turned back around. “Call me later, if you can fit me into your schedule.”

Watching her leave, guilt clobbered him like a big stick of salami. What was he doing to this poor girl? Their first summer together had been the best summer of their lives. It was so easy, so spontaneous—just two kids swimming in the euphoria of young love. Then he realized that he was depriving her of ever obtaining the memories they had cherished. This couldn’t go on much longer. He would have to do something or risk losing her. If she dumped him, the baby would never be born. If that happened, then what was the point of working? Of course, he cared about her far more than he cared about money. It was for Teresa and their unborn baby that he was working. If only she knew that.

Still, Jake knew what he had to do. That night, at Peg Leg’s, he would tell Bob that he’d have to cut back a shift a week. Then he would agree to go with Teresa on the church’s Six Flags trip in September, the one he’d told her they couldn’t afford. That should appease her until the fall. Then she’d be so preoccupied with college that she wouldn’t even notice his odd behavior.

“Excuse me. You do work here, don’t you?” Startled from his thoughts, Jake found a lady pointing a loaf of French bread at him, a lady he’d apparently been ignoring. “You need to get your priorities straight, young man.”

Jake was in the middle of the dinner rush later that evening at Peg Leg Joe's. He wiped fish batter from his hands on his apron and grabbed the fryer basket by the handle. He lifted the sizzling, golden fried fish from the oil and gave it five forceful jolts to shake off the excess grease. The vat of oil popped, sending tiny droplets of grease to his bare arms, stinging him as he threw the basket of fish into the stainless steel bin that kept seafood warm under the red glow of heat lamps. He set the basket aside and started to pluck the old, dried-out pieces of fish from the warming bin. He noticed a man standing in front of the counter, mumbling to himself with his glazed, bulging eyes directed at the overhead menu. Jake nearly fell into the garbage can. It was Roland Denny—the guy who shot Matt!

With that hair-sprouting mole on his cheek and that rounded nose with a dent in the middle making it look like, well, like someone's rear end, Jake recognized Roland's face instantly. Roland had been in the newspapers for only a few days, but that ugly face was engraved into Jake's memory.

But seeing Roland again, the guy looked different this time. For some reason, Jake had remembered him as being taller with more muscles. It must have been Jake's melodramatic imagination, because this skinny little psycho wasn't any bigger than Jake was. Seeing Roland again only fueled the shame Jake felt for not stopping this rump-nosed lunatic. And it made him only more determined to stop him this time around. But how? He had only two and a half more weeks to come up with a plan. And it had better be a good plan. Somehow, he doubted if God would give him a third chance.

“Hello? Earth to Jake,” the cashier broke his spell. “I said we need a Fish-and-Chip special.”

“Sorry,” Jake said and picked up the tongs to serve up Roland’s dinner. He reached for the fresh fish but stopped. Instead, he plucked out the three smallest pieces of the old, dried-out fish that he was about to throw away. He was also stingy with the fries, and he gave Roland only two little chips.

After Peg Leg’s closed and all of the staff but Bob and Jake had evacuated, Jake found himself on his hands and knees under the sink, cleaning out the dreaded grease trap. Using a large paper soft drink cup, he scooped out gunk that had the look, consistency, and smell of rotting vomit. He poured it into empty plastic tartar sauce containers.

For Teresa and the baby, he thought. For Teresa and the baby.

After Bob had thanked Jake for the fine job he’d done on the grease trap, Jake pushed on the fake sword handle of the front door and stepped out of Peg Leg’s at 11:15. He walked down the ramp, into the dark, and toward the rear of the building where his van was parked next to the garbage Dumpster. When he reached the back corner of the building, over the sound of the humming walk-in freezer unit, he could hear a car idling on the other side of the freezer. He heard footsteps from behind. He turned, expecting to see Bob. A large figure wearing a Ronald Reagan mask pointed a gun in Jake’s face.

“Give me your wallet!” Reagan demanded.

High-octane adrenaline fueled Jake’s pounding heart as he stood there in denial, frozen in fear.

“I said give me your wallet!”

“Okay, okay,” Jake managed to speak. “Just don’t shoot.” The guy wouldn’t be wearing a mask if he planned on shooting. If Jake just handed over the wallet, the guy would let him go. But it was payday! This couldn’t be happening. Not on payday!

“Give me your wallet or you’re a dead man!” Reagan demanded again, this time cocking the hammer of the gun.

“All right!” Jake shouted. He reached for his wallet. “Take it! There’s \$250 in there, my entire paycheck!” Jake held the wallet out in a trembling hand.

The robber snatched the wallet from Jake’s hand, flipped it open, pulled the cash out, and tossed the wallet to the ground. “You won’t need that money anyway,” Reagan said. “Not where you’re going.”

Reagan pointed the gun to Jake’s head. Jake grabbed a deep breath as he stared down the barrel of the revolver. Reagan’s finger tightened on the trigger. The hammer fell.

Chapter 16

Survival instinct kicked in. Jake started to duck, then—

“BANG!” Reagan shouted. *Click click ckick*, he pulled the trigger of the unloaded gun three more times and heaved maniacal laughter. Reagan then ran around the corner of the walk-in freezer. A moment later, Jake heard a car spinning its wheels, speeding away.

“Very funny!” Jake wadded his Peg Leg’s cap and hurled it against the pavement, next to his empty wallet. He stared in disbelief at his poor wallet. It lay empty on the pavement next to a coleslaw lid.

“Great! Just great! What now?”

The obvious answer was to call the police, but Jake was exhausted. No, he was numb. After all that had happened with Teresa, and now this, all he wanted to do was take a long hot shower, crawl in bed with Peanut, and cry himself to sleep. He definitely

didn't feel like going to the police station and making a statement, freaking Dad out in the process. Besides, the odds were slim to none of ever getting his money back. And what could he tell the police anyway? The *president* robbed him? They'd never catch the guy, and Jake knew it.

He bent down and picked up his hat and wallet. At least he still had his driver's license. He walked to his van, climbed in, and plopped down behind the steering wheel. He slammed the door shut and put the key into the ignition. He turned the key. A small whine came from the rear engine, but it wouldn't start. He tried again. Same thing. The battery was dead.

Jake hammered the steering wheel with the heel of his fist. "Just great! This is all I need!" He went forward and thumped his head against the steering wheel. "Oh, God, why didn't you just let that guy shoot me and put me out of my misery?" He looked up at the ceiling of his van, looking to God. "I know, I know. The heaven of my heart."

Sitting out there in the dark wasn't going to solve anything. He knew what he had to do. He had to do what he'd always done when he needed help. He went back inside and called Dad.

Traveling down Providence Pike, Jake sat in Dad's K-car while Pat Boone crooned on the radio.

“It’s probably your alternator,” Dad said. “We’ll bring some jumper cables in the morning. We can jump it off, and then I’ll follow you to the shop. Probably run you about two-hundred bucks. You uhh . . . you want me to put that on your tab?”

“If you don’t mind,” Jake said. “But I’ll pay you back, I promise.”

“No hurry, son. I don’t plan on retiring anytime soon. Say, you ever think about trading in that van of yours? I hear you can get a Yugo for under four thousand bucks. Brand new.”

“I don’t think so, Dad.”

Dad and Jake got home around midnight. Jake needed to call Teresa and try to patch things up, but it was too late—assuming that she even wanted to talk. And then thinking of Teresa reminded him that he’d forgotten to tell Bob to cut back his hours.

Dad settled back into his recliner, picked up the remote control, pointed it at the VCR, and hit Play. “I got ‘Dallas’ on tape. You want me to rewind?”

“Thanks anyway, Dad, but I need a shower. And, Dad, about the money I owe you, I think I’ll take fall semester off and keep working. By this winter, I should be able to pay you back. I’ll start college then.”

Dad kicked the footrest down and quickly sat up in the chair. “Well, now hold on, son. Don’t do that.” He pointed at the couch. “Sit back down. There’s something I want to tell you. I was going to tell you this when college started, but maybe I should tell you now.”

Where did this come from? Jake sat back down and listened.

“Look,” Dad said, “I thought you needed to learn responsibility. That’s why I let you work two jobs to pay me back. I figured it’d be good for you to see how hard it is in the real world, with real debts to pay. I was hoping it would make you study harder in school, and I think it’s worked. You’ve been acting real mature lately. I give that girl of yours half the credit. She’s always been a good influence on you. Now why don’t you quit one of those jobs of yours and spend some more time with her before she gets fed up?”

“I can’t quit, Dad. I still owe you.”

“Not anymore. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Your debt’s forgiven. You don’t have to pay me back. Now stop all this talk about not going to college. You’ll need all the education you can get out there.”

“Dad, I can’t let you do that.”

“Sure you can, I’m your father. I’m supposed to do that. In fact, I was going to give you back all the money you paid me so far. Use it for spending money so you won’t have to work so much. And if you don’t live in the dorm and stay here at home, I think I can handle your tuition, too. That way you won’t have to get a student loan. The last thing you need when you graduate is a huge debt.”

Jake should have jumped at Dad’s offer, but he just didn’t feel right about taking something that neither of his siblings had had. If Andrea and Eddie could make it without any help, then so could he. After all, if he could make it on his own at eighteen, he certainly didn’t need his dad’s help at forty. No, he appreciated Dad’s offer, but he wasn’t

ready for charity—not yet, anyway. He’d rather start college a semester late than go the rest of his life knowing he’d taken a handout that his brother and sister didn’t need.

“No, Dad. You didn’t help Andrea or Eddie. It’s not right that you help me.”

“Andrea had her scholarship, and Eddie joined the Marines. They didn’t need any help.”

“And neither do I.”

Dad sank back down into his recliner, staring at his own black-socked feet. “Suit yourself. But I just don’t get it. You’re so stubborn. Why do you insist on making it so hard on yourself?”

“Me?” Jake tried to keep a respectful tone in his voice, but Dad had no right lecturing him about being hard on himself. “Dad, Mom died over eighteen years ago. Why are *you* so hard on *yourself*?”

Dad kicked back in the recliner and stared at Jake. “Maybe you take after me more than I like to admit.” Dad picked up the remote control and pushed Play—conversation over.

Chapter 17

On Tuesday morning, Jake's van was ready to be picked up. Just as Dad had said, it was the alternator. On Dad's way to work, he took Jake by the shop to pick up my van. Dad took care of the bill and wouldn't even tell Jake how much it cost. He didn't want to know anyway.

Jake had managed to smooth things over a bit with Teresa, so after delivering the meals and donating platelets, he made good on his promised date, using \$8.72 in change that he'd saved in a pickle jar. To save money, he reasoned that they see the matinee at 5:00 o'clock for \$2.75 rather than pay the full \$4.75 evening admission price.

Jake showed up at Teresa's at 4:30. She came to the door wearing a paisley blouse with the short sleeves folded up, a too mini miniskirt, and white earrings that looked like sand dollars dangling from her earlobes. As they walked to the van, she grabbed him by

the hand and wove her fingers within his and squeezed tightly. If she was still mad, it didn't show.

“Finally, we've got a real date together,” she said. “So where were you this morning? I tried to call, but nobody answered.”

Still not wanting to boast of his good deeds, he said, “I had to pick up the van with my dad, remember?” It was true—for part of the morning anyway.

“That's right, I forgot.” She seemed satisfied with the answer. So far so good.

They got into the van, and Jake reached down to the floorboard and turned on the boom box he'd been using ever since his stereo had been stolen. Cyndi Lauper sang “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” while Jake carefully pulled out of the driveway, heading toward the movie theater.

“Jake, you know what I've noticed about you lately?”

“What's that?” he asked and braced himself for yet something else he'd have to work on.

“You drive like an old man. Did you get a ticket or something?”

Apparently, the responsibility of Jake's forty years was evident in his driving. As much as he tried to act young, there was always something he did that revealed his true age. Acting young was like being drunk and trying to act sober. Even if you were acting sober, you were too drunk to recognize whether you were really acting sober. So again, he was forced to come up with another lame excuse for his odd behavior.

Fortunately, she changed the subject. “That's an old one.” She reached down and turned off the music. “We're on a date, and I want your undivided attention.”

“All right,” Jake said. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Anything. Work, family, school, whatever you want.”

“Okay. Anything happen at the Gap lately?”

They worked their way along the streets of Livingston, and she proceeded to talk about a girl who’d brought back some jeans because she’d gained weight and couldn’t wear them anymore. Then she talked about a dress she’d seen at the mall and about Janet’s friend’s boyfriend while Jake half-paid attention to her and half paid attention to driving like an old man.

But she was right. They didn’t talk much anymore. When two kids fall in love, they want to find out everything there is to know about each other. Every detail is a treasure. Three-hour talks on the phone and long strolls in the park were all a part of falling in love, but Jake had done all that before, and now he wanted to talk about their lives in 2008. He wanted to complain about his job at the lab. He wanted to talk about their 2008 friends, talk about movies he hadn’t seen already, and talk about breaking news that wasn’t already history to him. Most of all, he wanted to talk about the baby. Would it be a boy or a girl? What would they name it? What color would they paint the baby’s room? Those were things he could talk about to only the 39-year-old Teresa. So naturally, when they did talk, the conversation was lopsided. Teresa talked while Jake listened.

“You’re not listening to me, are you?”

“Huh? I’m sorry. I was, uh . . . I was just trying to concentrate on driving.”

“Like an old man,” she teased again.

“Listen,” Jake changed the subject. “I’m going to tell Bob I’m cutting back a shift a week.”

“A whole day a week, huh?” She stared out the window and her expression grew sullen. Then, from nowhere, she leaned over and pressed her forehead to Jake’s cheek. “I’m just being selfish. I guess I should be happy. Just make sure you spend that extra night off with me, okay?”

“It’s a deal.”

Jake pulled into the Providence Five Cineplex and into the nearest parking space. They climbed out of the van and started toward the theater. Then, remembering that he needed to be more affectionate, he mechanically put his arm around her waist, and they strolled down the chewing gum-spotted parking lot and proceeded to the box office, taking their place in line behind other teenagers and mothers with their kids. Jake looked up at the movie billboard to see what else was playing. *Karate Kid part 2*, *Howard the Duck*, *Friday the 13th part VI*, and Prince’s classic, *Under the Cherry Moon*. Teresa wanted to see *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*—a movie Jake had already seen twice. Since she was paying this time Jake gladly agreed. Beggars can’t be choosers.

After Teresa bought two Cokes and a popcorn, they went into the theater and settled into a couple of cozy seats in the rear with Teresa at her traditional place to Jake’s right. She was cold, so she made him put his arm around her, and he endured the obnoxious, yapping teens behind him as they waited for the movie to start. Once the movie got under way, the yapping turned to hushed whispers and the sound of crunching popcorn.

As Jake watched the movie for the third time, he remembered it being much funnier than it was now. Where as Ferris used to be Jake’s hero, now he thought this cocky, truancy-prone kid who spoke into the camera as if he were dishing out solid moral

instruction could use a good kick in the pants. Jake did not approve of the way Ferris lied to his parents or Mr. Rooney, nor did he approve of Ferris's use of profanity.

Teresa laughed her way through the movie while Jake struggled to control his parental disdain. They had just finished off the last of the popcorn and Cokes when the movie came to the scene where they returned the Ferrari to Cameron's dad's all-glass showroom of a garage. The red 1961 Ferrari 250 GT was jacked up in the rear with the engine running in reverse. Ferris hoped to roll back the miles that the parking attendant had put on Cameron's dad's pride and joy. It wasn't working.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," Teresa whispered into Jake's ear. "I'll be right back."

"Wait," Jake said and pointed to the screen, "you've got to see this part."

Teresa sat back and watched as Cameron kicked the front of the car in, then leaned his foot on the hood, causing the jack to fall. The wheels spinning in reverse sent the car crashing through the glass, careening down into the woods below.

Teresa laughed, slapping her knee with her hand. Suddenly, she stopped laughing and her expression grew curious, then angry. She turned to Jake and in a much too-loud whisper, said, "Jake, how did you know that was going to happen? How did you know I shouldn't go to the bathroom? Huh? You've seen this movie before, haven't you? And if you've seen it before, then you saw it with someone else."

"Shhh, keep you're voice down. People are trying to watch the movie," Jake pleaded in an attempt to make *her* look like the villain so she'd forget her train of thought.

Teresa stood, wadded the empty popcorn bag, pelted Jake in the chest, and stormed out of the theater.

Chapter 18

Jake caught up with Teresa in the lobby. Just as she passed a quarter-chomping Ms. Pac-man, he snagged her by the arm to stop her advance. “Teresa, where are you going?”

She jerked her wrists from his grasp. “It’s that ‘call me sometime’ Melissa, isn’t it? You saw this movie with her, didn’t you?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Melissa, your ex-girlfriend. Remember? ‘Call me sometime?’” Teresa never forgot anything.

“Look, Teresa, I swear I haven’t talked to her since that day in school.”

“Then who did you see the movie with? Huh? No wonder you didn’t laugh. You’ve seen it already.”

Jake shook his head and tried to lie without lying. “I’ve seen the previews. That’s how I knew. I recognized the scene from the previews.” It’s true, he did see some previews on TV.

“Well, if you’re not seeing someone else, then why are you acting so strange lately? You never leave sweetie notes anymore, and you’ve totally stopped saying ‘I love you.’ All you ever say is ‘*me, too.*’”

Jake just stood there, racking his brain for an answer, trying to ignore those snickering kids at the concession stand.

“And you act like you’re afraid to touch me,” she said. “Like you think innocent affection is a sin or something. If you’re not dating someone else, then why are you so cold?”

Jake couldn’t honestly answer that question, so again, he tried to make her look like the villain. “Teresa, everyone’s staring. You’re acting like a child!”

Hurt crept into her face, and her eyes filled with moisture until a tear leaked onto her cheek. She smeared her mascara with the palm of her hand. “That’s just the point, Jake. I know I turned eighteen last month, but I’m not like you. I can’t just be a child one minute and a grownup the next. This is my last summer before college starts.” She sniffed and rubbed her cheek with her shirtsleeve. “I was hoping to enjoy my last summer as a kid. Next year, I’ll probably take summer classes *and* have a job. You’re only a kid once, and my time’s almost up.”

Jake stammered for something to say, but all he could manage was, “I’m sorry.”

“Jake, we may all be dead this time next year. You can’t spend all your time and money worrying about the future. What about now? You’ve got to live for now. Jesus

said not to worry about tomorrow, just worry about today. If you won't listen to me, listen to Him."

She had him there. There was no point in continuing this argument. His back was to the wall, and if he planned on keeping her, he'd have to make some changes—even if it did cost him money.

"Look, you're right," he said. "I'll cut back *two* days at Peg Leg's if you want. My dad's not going to lose the house if I don't pay him back. And you know you're more important to me than any stock market. I tell you what. You know that youth group trip to Six Flags in September?"

She sniffed. "The one you can't afford?"

"I think I'll go, too. You're right. You're only young once," he said, and then added to himself, *if you're lucky*.

Teresa softened a bit and tugged at his shirt. "Do you mean it? Are you really going to cut back at work and go to Six Flags?"

"For you, anything. I guess I'm just letting this being an adult thing go to my head. I mean adults can have fun, too, can't they?"

"I hope so."

"Well, let's have some and go finish the rest of the movie. We're going to miss the end of it." He put his arm around her shoulder and led her back into the theater.

Two nights later, Jake sat in his van heading toward Teresa's house. With two fresh grease burns on the pale underside of his right arm, he'd had a rough night at Peg Leg Joe's. He'd spilled batter all over his shoes, and a garbage bag broke, sending coleslaw and other refuse all over the floor he'd just mopped. The good news was that Bob had just hired another cook so he let Jake cut back two shifts a week, just like he'd promised Teresa. That should smooth things a little with her. Now all he had to do was stop the abortion clinic shooting, and then his mind would be clear to focus all of his energies on Teresa—and on his acting skills. Maybe he should take some classes or something.

Jake was heading for Teresa's because she wanted to talk. She'd insisted that he come to her house right after work, even before he took a shower, so they could talk about the fall. She said Jake needed to hurry up and register for classes so he'd have a better chance of getting into some of the same classes she was in.

Teresa was right. They did need to talk. He still hadn't informed her of his decision to take fall semester off. Of course, she'd be concerned about his not going to college right away, but she'd love it when he told her about the two extra days off.

After a thirteen-hour day of food service, Jake arrived at Teresa's and rang the doorbell. Teresa hopped out onto the porch wearing a Panama Jack T-shirt and some pink sweat pants that were stuffed into her tube socks, causing the socks to bulge at the ankles. "It's about time," she said as she leaned over to kiss Jake lightly on the cheek. "Yuk! You taste like fish grease."

"I told you. You should have let me shower first."

"I'm just kidding. At least you're here. Come on in."

“Why don’t we just sit out on the porch? I don’t want your parents seeing me like this.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Jake.” She closed the door and sat down on the concrete step, drawing her legs to her chest and hugging them.

Jake sat down beside her and dove into what he had to say. “I’ve got good news,” he said. “I talked to Bob. He said I could cut back my hours, but I still have to finish out this month.”

“That’s good. I guess if I put up with it all summer, a couple more weeks won’t hurt. But he is letting you off next Saturday, isn’t he? Remember, you said you’d go to that party, the one Miguel invited us to.” She narrowed her eyes and gave him her usual playful glare. Yet, somehow, she didn’t seem quite as playful as usual.

“I’ve got to work Food King, but I promise,” he quickly added, “I’ll be off that night.” He wasn’t about to let her go to the party by herself—not with Miguel lurking about.

“You’re what? You said you’d help me move into my dorm that day.”

Jake made a stunned face. “Was that Saturday? I’m sorry, Teresa. It just slipped my mind.” It was no lie. He’d forgotten about it until he was already on the schedule. He could have tried to get the day off, but he figured she’d be pleased enough that he was going to the party with her. Besides, he said he’d cut back his hours at one of his jobs, not both.

“Fine, Jake. I sort of expected that,” she said, picking at nonexistent lint on her sweatpants. “I’m sure there’s other strong, good-looking guys who’ll be glad to help me with the heavy stuff.” She hugged her legs tighter and followed a firefly with her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Teresa. At least I’m going to the party.”

“I guess,” she said and rolled her eyes in frustration. “Well, listen, that party’s the weekend before classes start. Did you ever enroll? I think they have some sort of deadline, you know.” She looked toward the driveway, listening to the whoops and hollers of her little brothers playing basketball under the floodlights.

Stalling time was over. “Yeah, I’ve, uh . . . I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

She whipped her head back around. “What now, Jake?”

“Well, it’s just that if I quit Food King and only work three nights at Peg Leg’s, I’ll be lucky if I have enough cash to put gas in the van. And if I go to school and keep working at Food King, I’ll have to work in the evening. Then I’ll never see you. You said you wanted to see me more, didn’t you? I was thinking maybe I would just take fall semester off and work instead. Then I’ll start college this winter.”

“Are you serious? I don’t believe this! I thought you were going to college.”

“I am. This winter. I’m going to sign up for Livingston U’s associate program. I’ll be out in two years. Then we can get married,” he slipped.

“Married! Where did that come from? We can’t get married, Jake. We’re just kids.”

“Not in two and a half years,” he said. “We won’t be then.”

Teresa gave a frustrated laugh. “I don’t know, Jake. One minute you don’t want to touch me, the next minute you want to get married. I just don’t know what to make of you anymore.”

Like God's static cling, lightning flashed in the horizon as Jake tried to figure a way out of this one. His big mouth had done it again. The best strategy was to change the subject with another up-note. "Well, listen, I'm not done yet. I've chosen a major." He figured that would impress her. "I've decided to become a medical lab technician. I'll start this winter. In two years, I'll be working in a hospital lab, making real money, with benefits. Medicine. That's where the jobs are."

She didn't look impressed. "A *lab technician*? Where did *that* come from? What about your music? I figured that once you saved enough money, you'd buy another bass and start playing again. I figured you would major in music or something. How can you just give up your dreams—just like that? Now you're saying you'd rather work in a *lab*?"

"I don't know, I think it would be neat. I'd be helping people, and I'd actually have steady hours with good benefits. You can't get that being a musician."

"That's great, I guess. At least you've decided on a major, but what about this fall? When am I going to see you this fall?"

"That's why I'm cutting back at Peg Leg's, remember? I'll be off four nights a week. I'll come see you then. I'll see you four out of seven nights."

"And what? Just *hang out* while I'm trying to study? Jake, you know I'm going to be a doctor."

No you're not, he thought. He knew for a fact she'd never get into medical school, and he knew that once she'd gotten a little older and after three wasted years in college paid for by student loans, she'd decide she didn't want to be a doctor anyway. But that was one tidbit Jake couldn't divulge, so he just said, "But I thought you wanted to see me more. I thought you'd be happy."

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to get into medical school?”

“Trust me, I do. But—”

“I can’t have my boyfriend just hanging around, distracting me,” she said. “I figured we could take a couple of classes together, then go to the library and study. I thought maybe I could help you with your homework and pinch you when I see you daydreaming.”

“Look, Teresa, why do you want to be a doctor so bad anyway? You know the odds of getting into med school are slim, you said it yourself. I mean, Livingston U isn’t Harvard, you know. The fact that they’d let *me* in should prove that. You’ll have to get straight A’s to even be considered.”

“What? Now you don’t think I can do it?” she said, clearly offended. “You used to think I was a brain. Now you think I’m not smart enough?”

“No, that’s not it,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “Look, you said you wanted to help people, help relieve suffering, right? Then why don’t you be a nurse? They spend a lot more time with the patient anyway. That way, you could be out in four years, and we could settle down and have a baby.”

“A BABY! First you’re talking marriage, and now a *baby*?” Teresa scooted away from Jake as if he were contagious. “We’re just kids, remember?”

“Don’t remind me,” he murmured.

“It’s going to take me at least ten years to finish school. I can’t even think about a baby until then. I’ve got dreams, Jake.”

“I’m sorry, Teresa. I just wish—” *I just wish you’d cut me some slack*, he thought, rubbing his forehead in frustrations. *Just until next spring. Then I’ll be in school, I’ll have money, and everything will be fine.*

“You wish what?” she said in a softer tone. “Tell me, what *do* you wish? What about *your* dreams? Ever since your stuff got stolen, you’ve just given up. I know that was hard, but you’ve got the rest of your life. Why don’t you put some money away and buy another bass? Maybe you could start a Christian rock band or something. Maybe that’s what God wants you to do.”

“That was a silly dream. I need health insurance, *life* insurance, 401-K retirement plans, job security. You don’t get that being in a band.”

“That’s your dad talking. What does he know anyway?”

“He knows more than you think,” he said and looked her way.

She sniffed, and he noticed that her eyes were wet. She rotated his class ring on her knuckle, studying it, perhaps wondering if it belonged on her finger at all. As frustrated as Jake was, she had to be even more frustrated. He had told himself that he was doing all of this for her own good, for her and the baby, but was this really good for her? No, it wasn’t. He couldn’t force her to be a practical, boring adult any more than he could force himself to be a carefree kid. What he was trying to do was not only useless, it was wrong. If he was going to hold onto her, he’d better just keep his mouth shut and simply hold onto her. He put his arms around her, massaging her young shoulders.

“Don’t give up on your dreams, Teresa. If you want to be a doctor, go for it. I don’t want you to regret not trying. Believe me, I’ve got enough regrets for the both of us.”

Chapter 19

After donating platelets again on the following Tuesday, Jake sat in his van with tape wrapped around the crimps of his arms to hold folded white gauze firmly in place, applying pressure to his veins. He was parked at a parking meter in front of Ayres Hall at Livingston University watching the abortion clinic across the street, haunted by the *memories* of *next* week, memories that made his silly problems with Teresa seem trivial. He had plenty of time to patch things up with her, but for Matt, time was running out.

He'd relived this event over and over in his mind, imagining what he'd do if he could do it all over again. Now, by the grace of God, he had that chance. It was a pleasure going over it in his mind one more time and going over what he'd do to stop it.

It happened on Tuesday, August 26, Jake's second day of college. After daydreaming through his Western Civilization class, he had joined Matt and the other protesters at the abortion clinic. The abortion clinic was just outside the campus

boundary, on the other side of Clinch Avenue. To the left, separated from the clinic by an alley leading to a parking lot in the rear, was the Campus Bookstore. To the left of the bookstore was the Livingston U library, and just across Clinch Avenue was the rest of the campus. The clinic's close proximity to campus made it an easy solution for the mistakes of young student mothers who feared the wrath of parents and the heavy responsibility of raising a child.

The Campus Crusade for Christ and several of the local churches, including Jake's own church, made a semiannual event of hitting the abortion clinic hard at the beginning of the fall and winter semesters. Protests continued for the rest of each semester, but with fewer protesters.

Jake sighed deeply as he recalled that dreadful day. There they were in front of the clinic. Protestants and Catholics picketed with signs and chants. Jake took his place holding a white poster-board sign attached to a sawed-off broomstick. It read, "**ADOPTION BEFORE ABORTION**" in big, bold letters and "YOUR BABY WILL GO TO A GOOD HOME" written underneath in smaller letters. Jake had been protesting for a good hour and a half under a hot summer sun when he decided to take a break. Standing under the shade of that huge oak tree that was planted in the grass island separating the sidewalk and Clinch Avenue, Jake relaxed with a cold Mountain Dew. Since Teresa was supposed to join them at noon, he leaned against the tree as he looked across the street and onto the campus to see if he could spot her coming his way.

POP! POP! Two shots rang out, followed by panicked screams from the protesters. Jake twisted to view the commotion. He heard another *POP!* followed by more screaming and fleeing protesters. Two protesters, a man and a woman, lay

squirming on the ground. Another ran by Jake clutching his arm. Jake spotted Roland Denny and the silver glint of the gun in his hand. Roland aimed at another fleeing protester. *POP!* Confused and terrified, Jake scurried to take cover behind the big oak.

POP! the gun fired again, and Jake heard another scream. Fearing that Roland was coming his way, Jake peeped around the rough bark. There was Roland, with his back to Jake, standing over Matt. All Jake had to do was tackle Roland from behind. Roland would never know what hit him. But like a deer frozen by headlights, Jake watched, gripped by fear, as Roland Denny stood over Matt and raised the gun. Matt clutched his bleeding left leg and pushed against the sidewalk with his good leg in a desperate attempt to scoot away. Roland uttered some unintelligible words. Matt shook his head and pleaded, “No! Please don’t!”

But Jake just stood there. All he had to do was pry his fingers away from that bark and tackle Roland, throw a rock at him, yell at him—anything.

Roland leveled the gun at Matt’s torso. Jake just stood there. Roland squeezed the trigger. A shot rang out. Matt cried a hair-raising scream as the bullet severed his spinal cord.

For months later, when it was completely quiet, Jake could still hear that haunting scream. That’s when he started sleeping with the radio on.

Fortunately, Roland had run out of bullets. With Matt and two other protesters bleeding on the sidewalk, Roland simply put the gun into his pocket and walked down the street to eat a Big Mac. He was arrested before he could place his order.

From what Jake had learned later, Roland Denny had been a nurse’s aide at the clinic. He was also a paranoid schizophrenic who had stopped taking his medication and

lied on his employment application, stating that he had no mental illness. And that nut actually claimed that he had shot in self-defense. He'd claimed that Matt had sent him a threatening letter saying to stop the abortions or else something terrible would happen. Roland was definitely paranoid.

Roland would spend some time in a mental hospital, but Matt would spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Jake blamed himself more than he blamed Roland. After all, Roland was mentally ill; he had an excuse. But Jake was just a coward; he had no excuse. Jake put Matt in that wheelchair. He might as well have pulled the trigger himself.

Jake's guilt, misplaced or not, must have been one of the reasons God had allowed him to come back—to make sure that this didn't happen. After all, he was perfect for the job. He certainly had the motivation to stop it, and this time God gave him future knowledge as an advantage. He knew exactly when and where Roland would strike. And over the last few days, he had come up with a plan to stop him.

It had seemed simple at first: just make an anonymous call to the police and tell them what would happen. But there were flaws with that plan. First, since Jake obviously couldn't identify himself, the police would probably think that the call was a prank. If he did identify himself, then the police would wonder how Jake knew what would happen. Even if the police did believe him, they would have no evidence to warrant an arrest. To prove Roland's intentions, the police would have to catch him in the act. And even if the police searched Roland's truck and found the gun, then they'd wonder how Jake knew about the gun. If Jake somehow convinced the police to show up at the time of the shooting, Roland would probably see the police and back out. Then he would simply do

the shooting another day, and Jake would lose his advantage of knowing the future. And even if Roland was crazy enough to try to shoot the protesters with the police present, what if he had a shootout with the police? What if the protesters were caught in the middle? No, telling the police was not an option.

Then Jake considered warning Matt and the other protesters. If he could manage to persuade Matt and the others to stay away that day, then Roland would simply wait till another day. Once again, Jake would lose his advantage of knowing the future.

So after going over his options, Jake knew what he'd have to do. He'd have to stop Roland himself—by force. Then not only would he save Matt and the protesters, but he'd also be a hero. That ought to win some points with Teresa. Jake's brother would be impressed, too.

But how? He thought he knew the answer. He hadn't come to the clinic to relive terrible memories. He'd come to stake out the scene, to go over his plan.

According to the newspapers, just before the shootings Roland had clocked out at noon for his lunch break. Before eating lunch, he went to the parking lot behind the clinic, got a revolver from his truck, walked back down the alley separating the bookstore and the clinic, and started shooting.

Jake's plan was simple. He'd buy some Mace and put it on his key chain so it would look as if he'd had it on him all along. He'd tell Matt he would meet him at the clinic at noon, instead of showing up at 11:00 as he had originally. Then, at 11:45, he'd park his van in the lot behind the clinic and watch the alley for Roland to appear. When Roland came to his truck to get the gun, Jake would get out of the van and follow him into the alley. Jake would sneak up behind Roland, knock him to the ground, and Mace

him. That way, if Jake didn't manage to take the gun away, at least Roland wouldn't be able to see to shoot straight.

Of course, the police would question Jake later. He'd simply tell them that he'd been walking down the alley to join the protesters when he saw Roland pulling the gun out of his pocket. That's why it was important that Matt have Jake down on the schedule at noon: to collaborate his story with the police. He'd be stretching the truth, and he hated that, but there was no other way around it. Saving Matt from a life in a wheelchair was worth a slight breach in Jake's moral character. God would understand.

Now if he could just muster the courage to pull this thing off.

Chapter 20

Jake pulled his van into an empty spot along the curb in front of Teresa's dormitory, Hess Hall. It was Saturday evening, time to make good on his promise to take Teresa to the international party. He climbed out of the van wearing his church-going khaki pants, a white shirt with his only knit tie, and a blue blazer that was a couple sizes too small. Dozens of fans hummed from the windows of the big brick dormitory as he walked along the tree-lined sidewalk toward the entrance to Hess Hall. Students—some with parents, some alone—were hauling suitcases, stereos, posters, TVs, cassette cases, reading lamps, and other necessities out of car trunks to move into their new home for the next two semesters. Jake climbed the steps leading to the entrance of the dormitory, opened the door, and strolled into the lobby. Kids milled about, taking in their new home-away-from-home, free of the tyranny of parental concern.

Jake walked up to the front desk and got Teresa's room number from a folder chained to the desk. He picked up the phone, dialed her number, and waited.

"Hello," answered an obviously annoyed Teresa. She was mad because Jake was thirty minutes late. But since Miguel would be there and Teresa would make Jake dance, the less time spent at that party the better.

"I'm here," he said.

"Finally," she said. "I'll be down in a minute."

He hung up the phone, stepped away from the desk, and stood next to hundreds of student mail slots built into the wall.

Before long, Teresa came down wearing a silky black dress and unusually heavy makeup. She walked right past Jake. She obviously didn't see him, so Jake started to speak up. Before he could utter a word, she stopped, turned, and looked straight at him. "Are you coming or not?" She saw him all right.

She whipped her head back around and persisted toward the front door. When Jake caught up with her, he reached for her hand, attempting to appease her with affection. She swiftly yanked her hand away and inspected her red-painted fingernails for a flaw she knew good and well did not exist.

"I'm sorry," he said, holding the door open for her. "I would have helped you move in, but Shirley wouldn't let me off. You know how busy we are on Saturdays."

She didn't answer. Instead, she just kept walking, clogging along in high-heel shoes. He followed her down the steps to the sidewalk and caught up with her as she headed toward his van.

"It's okay, Jake," she finally spoke. "I found someone else to help me."

“Oh really? Who?” Jake was afraid he knew the answer.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It was that Miguel guy, wasn’t it?”

“Why do you care? You don’t have time for me anyway.”

They stopped at Jake’s van, and he opened the door for her. “Look, Teresa, I told you I’m going to cut back at work.”

“Whatever.” She climbed into the van and slammed the door shut.

After getting his van under way, pattering along the streets of Livingston U toward fraternity row, she just sat there staring out the passenger window, distracted, mulling something over. Until now, Jake thought he’d patched things up with her—sort of. She’d seemed just fine when he’d talked to her the night before, but now she was definitely not fine. Surely she wasn’t this mad because he was thirty minutes late. He was always late. Or maybe it was the college thing. Maybe her moving into her dorm only reminded her that he wasn’t going to college. Not only that, but he didn’t even have time to help her move in for college. Or . . . or maybe in his absence that afternoon, something, or *somebody* had influenced her mood, and that somebody probably spent the day with her, helping her move into the dorm, speaking in her native tongue. And that somebody was waiting for her at the party.

Jake started to say something about his suspicions, but knowing it would only lead to an argument, he kept silent while he drove beyond the organized streets, parking lots, and buildings of the university and into an old neighborhood with stately, mature trees. But then big Greek symbols stuck onto the sides of these houses revealed that they were still on campus. This once charming old neighborhood was now fraternity row.

Jake passed the Phi Kappa Psi house and turned right into a gravel parking lot. He parked the van, and Teresa helped herself out. By the time he made it around the van, she was already teetering on the gravel, struggling to keep her balance in her high-heel shoes, heading toward the International House.

Jake caught up to her. "Let me help you, Teresa. You're going to fall."

"I can manage, thank you."

Ignoring her defiance, he cupped his hand under her arm, helping her across the gravel parking lot and onto the concrete sidewalk. They continued up the sidewalk, passing houses full of partying frat boys, sorority girls, and fraternity wannabes.

They reached the International House, which was painted a shade of tan and had a huge front porch with a big bay window protruding over it. As they walked up the wooden steps to the front porch, "99 Luft Balloons," sung by the German one-hit-wonder Nena, pulsed through the walls. Students of various nationalities leaned against the porch railing drinking fruit punch, moving ever so slightly to the music, having a subdued, pleasant time and enjoying a party that was designed to welcome all of the students from around the world. Somehow, Jake didn't feel very welcome.

They reached the front door and entered the party. A staircase with colored balloons lining the banister divided the house. The dining room was to the left of the staircase and led to the kitchen toward the rear of the house. To the right of the staircase was a large living room with couches and chairs along the walls.

Oriental, Indian, African, Arab, Latino, and Caucasian from an assortment of countries milled about in dim light. Some were dressed in their country's traditional attire, such as a Japanese girl wearing a kimono. Some students spoke in their native

tongues, but most of them spoke in the common language they all knew—or were learning—a heavily accented English.

And there stood Miguel, decked out in an expensive suit and tie with his black hair slicked back away from his unibrow-topped face and that toothy smile he wore so well. Miguel walked up to Jake and Teresa, and Teresa gave Miguel a slight embrace. Miguel embraced her back and gave her one of those foreign air kisses that . . . *aren't supposed to make cheek contact!* And she didn't even wipe off her cheek!

Struggling to suppress his jealousy, Jake stuck out his hand to greet Miguel, but Miguel had already pulled Teresa away and was introducing her to another couple. Jake watched his young not-yet-wife while Miguel introduced her as if she were *his* date. She stood there with her hand on her hip, with that silky black dress hugging her curvaceous form, accenting the effects of puberty all too well. She wore her hair back, exposing her thin, flawless neck to the gapes of anyone who cared to look. Two elegant but quite fake diamond earrings tugged slightly on her dainty earlobes. She was really decked out for the evening. And from the way she was ignoring Jake, it was painfully obvious that she wasn't decked out for him.

The music stopped, and Teresa spoke with Miguel and the other couple in rapid Spanish, leaving Jake by the front door to fend for himself.

“Hey, Jake. What are you doing here?” Jake turned to see that loudmouth, airhead blond who worked the bakery at Food King. She, unlike Jake, was now a freshman at Livingston U.

“Hey, Jenny. I'm here with Teresa,” Jake said. “What are you doing here?”

“Didn’t I tell you? My cousin’s from England.” She pointed to a guy chatting in the living room. “He came to the States for school. Brought me here as his date . . . sort of, but not really. Oh well, see ya,” she said and joined her cousin.

“Miguel. *Ven aca*,” a voice called from the kitchen. Miguel said something to Teresa and slithered through the crowd toward the kitchen.

Teresa kept gabbing in Spanish with the couple Miguel had introduced her to. She was laughing now, her mood no doubt transformed by the comfort of her own language. Encouraged by her smile, Jake made his move and returned to her side. Teresa gripped his arm—a good sign—and spoke in a flurry of Spanish. Jake understood only his name and the words “*mi amigo*” when she indicated him to the couple with her eyes.

Amigo! What about *novio*? That was the word for boyfriend in Spanish. He was her *novio*, not her *amigo!* Now he was worried.

Suddenly, Latin music pulsed the air with heavy, bone-vibrating bass and crisp, vital brass horns accented with lively, sharp clashes of percussion. Latinos sprang from couches and chairs and streamed from the kitchen and porch onto the hardwood floors of the den. The couple Teresa spoke to wasted no time breaking off their chat. They joined in the dance, gyrating effortlessly to the rhythm as if it were a natural reflex, like the swinging of arms when walking.

Before Jake could react, Teresa pulled him to the dance floor. Despite those high-heel shoes, she also flowed effortlessly across the floor as Jake tried to keep up. In an awkward attempt to keep time with the rhythm, he laboriously shuffled his feet with his elbows bent, his hands balled into fists, swinging stiffly just in front of his belly.

Teresa leaned into his ear. “Loosen up, Jake. You put too much starch in your pants?”

“Very funny,” he said. But even though he was clearly making a fool of himself, to appease Teresa, he applied more effort to his steps.

“Come on, Jake. What’s wrong? You did so good the last time. Pick up your feet,” Teresa urged him on as she pivoted and whirled easily along the floor.

Jake tried harder but managed only to bump into a guy behind him, making a bigger fool of himself. No longer the fun-loving bass player of one of Livingston’s best garage bands, in twenty years Jake had evolved into a socio-phobic lab nerd who saw no logic in contorting one’s appendages to the rhythm of song. As much as he wanted to obey Teresa and let his youthful body flow to the rhythm, his nearing middle-aged, introverted soul would not allow it. So as soon as the song ended, despite Teresa’s vain attempts to restrain him, he plowed through the crowd and escaped to a plush, unoccupied couch a comfortable distance from the dancing.

Teresa plopped onto the couch next to him and folded her arms across her chest.

He leaned into her ear and spoke over the music. “I’m sorry, Teresa, but you know I can’t dance. Wait till a slow song. I’ll dance then.”

Teresa rolled her eyes and sat up, perching herself on the edge of the sofa with her right leg crossed over her left knee, rolling her foot at the ankle in time with the music. She seemed to be scanning the crowd of happy dancers looking for something . . . or *someone*.

Her eyes lit up, and she waved someone over. Sure enough, the dark figure of Miguel emerged from the crowd of dancers. Teresa sprang from the couch, met Miguel

on the dance floor, and immediately joined him in dance, not even bothering to ask Jake's permission.

The nerve! Whose date was she anyway?

Jake sank back into the sofa, watching as their hips twisted and swayed in concert to the cadence of Latin rhythms, as if their DNA had predisposed them to do just that. It was as though they were living out some revelation that had somehow escaped Jake's conservative Caucasian American soul. As they gyrated and contorted their bodies to the rhythm, becoming one with the music, all Jake could do was watch helplessly, pondering the logic of dance while Teresa discovered just how much she had in common with Miguel.

Finally, the song ended. There was a long, awkward pause, and everyone stood around waiting for the next song. Some Oriental guy fiddled with the stereo in the opposite corner of the room.

Maybe he'll play some Chinese music, Jake thought. I'd like to see her dance to that!

Before Jake could continue the thought, another Latin song drummed from the stereo, sending Teresa and Miguel at it again, continuing their adulterous frolic, dancing even closer this time.

They were the ones dancing, but Jake was the one sweating. Was she just trying to make him jealous, or could she really be falling for this guy? It was hard to imagine her with anyone else, but the Teresa he was imagining was the Teresa who had grown to love him over the last twenty years. This Teresa was still a relative stranger. Jake hoped that once she buckled down and got serious about college, she would appreciate his

maturity and their relationship would improve. But it looked as if their relationship might not last that long. This Teresa wore no wedding band on her finger—only a class ring representing no legal contract. And she seemed so natural dancing with this guy. She seemed so fluid as she yapped in her native tongue. If she kept seeing Miguel, her dumping Jake wasn't just a possibility, it was a probability.

Then, as Jake sat there fearing the worst, something occurred to him. It was the song they danced to. Most couples have a certain song that means a lot to them, a song they call "their" song. It was in Spanish, so Jake didn't know the name of it, but he did know it was "their" song, and Miguel was dancing with her!

That does it!

Jake stood and waved his arms, getting Teresa's attention. He couldn't compete with Miguel on the dance floor, but he could compete with compassion. Teresa looked thirsty. Jake could fix that. Acting like he was holding a cup in his hand, Jake made a drinking motion and pointed toward the kitchen. She nodded in agreement, so Jake dodged his way through the dancing herd, passed the room-dividing stairway, and went into the kitchen.

A diverse allotment of foreign students formed a polite, quiet line at the back door of the kitchen. Against the far wall, the line ran alongside the kitchen sink, leading to a variety of international foods in bowls and platters along the counter tops. Jake made his way to the end of the line and waited impatiently as Teresa, without a chaperone, danced with Miguel, no doubt even closer together since Jake was out of the room.

When Jake finally reached the food, the music stopped, and a horde of people, including Miguel, came into the kitchen, getting in line behind him. Jake relaxed a bit, knowing that Miguel was in the kitchen with him and away from Teresa.

The line moved forward and Jake picked up two napkins, a paper plate, and slid two plastic forks into his coat breast pocket. Teresa loved international foods, and Jake figured she was just as hungry as she was thirsty. Since he couldn't carry two plates and two drinks, he figured he could load one plate down, and since it was mostly finger food, they could both eat from the same plate. They could always come back for seconds. So he passed by the platters and bowls, loading the plate down with food. He chose two egg rolls, two tacos, chips and salsa, sausages, and some Puerto Rican rice and beans. For dessert, some Greek baklava and another Puerto Rican favorite, the custard-like flan. He passed on the sushi.

After filling a red plastic cup to the rim with punch, he studied the plate, wondering if it would hold the food's weight during the journey back to Teresa. To remove a little weight, he set the punch back on the kitchen counter and put an egg roll between his teeth. He then bent the plate, almost certain the crease would give it enough strength to withstand the weight of the food. Carrying the punch in one hand and the food with the other, he cautiously waded back into the living room with punch spilling onto his fingers. He moved toward the stairway when . . . SPLAT!

"Great! Just great!" he yelled, dropping the egg roll from his mouth. The plate gave way to the laws of physics, spilling food onto the worn hardwood floor. The punch had also sloshed out and was dripping from the cuff of his blue blazer.

Surprised at the lack of snickering from this polite crowd, Jake bent down and carefully placed the cup of punch on the floor. He plucked up the large pieces of food from the floor, putting them back onto the plate. He then pulled a fork out of his pocket, and as he scraped the rice, beans, salsa, and flan back onto the plate, he heard two voices on the other side of the stairway.

“So, are you and Jake, like, serious or something?” It was that loudmouth blond, Jenny, from the bakery at Food King.

The next voice was clearly that of Jake’s beloved Teresa. “I thought we were. But right after graduation, he starts weirding out on me.”

Thought they were close? Weirding out? Did she actually say that? So Teresa would see that Jake was under the cover of the stairway and stop bad-mouthing him behind his back, Jake started to stand. But she kept talking, and Jake couldn’t help himself. He stayed low and kept listening.

“Yeah,” Teresa went on, “It’s, like, all he cares about is working fast food and playing the stock market.”

“The stock market?” Jenny asked. “Isn’t that the thing that, like, crashed, and people were, like, freaking out and jumping off buildings and all?”

“Yeah, can you believe it? Anyway, we were getting real close, but this summer, he changed on me. He acts like he’s afraid to touch me. He doesn’t talk much. Doesn’t even ask me anything anymore. It’s like he already knows all he wants to know.”

“Like he’s lost interest, huh? That’s what happened with me and my ex,” Jenny said.

“You know the weirdest thing?” Teresa said. “I’ve been watching him. The way he’s been treating me . . . is . . . well, like the way my dad treats my mom.”

“Grrrody to the max!” Jenny said, giggling. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I didn’t want to say anything, but everyone at Food King thinks he’s a total geek.”

“Oh, that’s good to know.”

“So why do you stay with him, anyway? I mean, he’s cute, but it’s not like he’s Rob Lowe or anything.”

“I’m beginning to wonder myself,” Teresa said.

“So why don’t you, like, go out with Miguel?” Jenny kept flapping her big mouth. “He’s cute.”

That did it! Jake sprang from the floor and rounded the stairway. “Teresa!” he yelled. He tried it again, this time with a little less emotion, a little more tact. “Teresa, would you mind stepping outside with me?”

Teresa sputtered, half surprised, half angry. “But why?” She looked at Jenny, and then to the other side of the stairway. She was catching on.

“Teresa, please,” he said with clenched teeth. “I’ve got . . . I need some fresh air. Please, just come with me.”

“All right. Chill out!” she snapped and started toward door.

Jake followed her out of the door and met her outside, scanning the porch for witnesses. Spotting a couple leaning against the porch rail, he tugged her toward the sidewalk, helping her and those ridiculous high-heel shoes down the steps. He pulled her over by the curb beside the International House sign and the parked cars. “Teresa, I want you to stay away from Miguel!”

It was dark, but Jake could still see—no, almost hear—the angry, defiant expression forming on that pretty little face of hers. “Excuse me?!” she shouted, as if *she* were the one who had a right to be angry.

“Look, that guy has the hots for you. Can’t you see that?”

“Well, at least he manages to find a little time for me, Jake Simon.”

“That’s because he’s rich. His daddy gives him money, so he doesn’t have to work like the rest of us. Or maybe that’s why you like him so much—because he’s rich.” Jake shouldn’t have said that, but he was too angry to care.

“Jake! You know I don’t care about money. You of all people should know that!”

“Well, then maybe it’s the Spanish. Is that it? Or maybe it’s because he’s an older guy. Now that you’re in college, maybe you don’t want to be seen with another freshman like me. Is that it?”

A long uncomfortable silence ensued. Even in the summer heat, her cold stare gave him chills. But the chills helped cool his anger, showing him that his jealousy, his own insecurity, had gotten the best of him. He reached out and took her hand. “Look, Teresa, I’m sorry. I know I’ve been acting weir—”

“First of all.” She yanked her hand away. “You’re not even a freshman, remember? Second, it’s not because Miguel’s *older*, Jacob Thomas Simon—it’s because he’s younger. At least he acts it, anyway.”

“Look,” Jake groveled, trying to recover. “I can explain. Just—”

“It’s been fun, Jake. Well, part of it anyway.” She twisted Jake’s class ring free of her index finger, held it out, and dropped it to the ground with an audible *thud*. “It’s over. Have a nice life. I never want to see you again.” She turned and clogged up the sidewalk

toward the house. She stopped abruptly and turned to face Jake. “Oh, and, Jake, tell Phil Gates I said hello.”

“That’s *Bill* Gates,” he uttered, watching her clog up the stairs and back into the house.

Blaring from the fraternity house across the street, Bananarama’s “Cruel Summer” mocked Jake as he stooped down and fished around in the grass with his punch-sticky hand, frantically searching for his \$80 class ring.

Chapter 21

After a near-sleepless night, Jake was actually early for the late church service that Teresa usually attended. He sat in his van, parked next the new youth center where Matt had introduced Jake to Teresa in the fall of 1985.

Of course, the forceful “me-man, you-woman” approach of ordering Teresa to stay away from Miguel had been a disaster. He should have weighed out the consequences of his behavior rather than letting his anger do the talking. Teresa was very strong willed, and she did not take orders or ultimatums. But he was just too angry to think.

Since Jake knew that Teresa was also angry and would be fuming for a while, there had been no point in going back into the party and continuing his forceful approach—not after she had clubbed him over the head and declared her independence. No, she needed time to cool off, and, knowing Teresa, she would do just that. She’d come

to her senses. She always had, so he knew she always would. He'd decided to let her get a restful night's sleep and approach her in the place she went to recharge her spiritual batteries, the one place he knew she wouldn't punch him in the nose—at church. With any luck, Reverend Burch would have a nice sermon on the virtues of forgiveness.

But Teresa wasn't the only thing on Jake's mind. As he stared at the gymnasium where he'd met Teresa, the thought of Matt nauseated him, and once again he realized that his little spat with Teresa was the least of his concerns. In two days, he'd be a hero—or he'd be dead.

And speaking of Matt, to back up his story with the police, Jake had to make sure Matt had him down on the protest schedule for Tuesday at noon—assuming he wasn't Roland's first victim and he lived long enough to talk to the police.

Torn between two crushing dilemmas, Jake momentarily forced the thought of Matt out of his head and refocused on Teresa. He'd been waiting for her to come out of Sunday school class. But she never came out of the building, so apparently she'd already made her way to the sanctuary, assuming that Miguel didn't have her out so late that she had overslept.

Jake stepped out of the van and joined his fellow worshipers as they streamed toward the sanctuary, faithfully toting their Bibles and dressed in their Sunday best with the occasional fashion rebel in blue jeans. Jake climbed the church's red brick steps and passed through the front double doors into the entranceway. Scanning the crowd, his senses were bombarded with the smell of perfume, cologne, and breath mints and the sound of crying babies and pleasant greetings and conversations. But there was no sign of Teresa.

A group of worshipers dispersed and cleared Jake's view. The next thing he saw was Matt, sitting behind a table in front of the coat racks. In a rush of dread and responsibility, again Jake's little spat with Teresa seemed almost insignificant. He had plenty of time to get back together with her, but time was running out for Matt.

Jake put his plan into action. He walked up to the table Matt was sitting behind. In front of him was a sheet of paper with the days of the week forming columns along the top. Times ran down the left margin, and names were randomly scattered on the page.

"Hey there, Jake," Matt said, his protruding Adam's apple moving slightly in his thin neck. "You want to sign up?"

"Actually, yes." Jake looked at his watch as if trying to decide what he already knew. "Umm, let's see. Why don't you put me down for twelve noon this Tuesday."

"Gotcha." Matt picked up the clipboard and penciled Jake in with his bony, vein-bulging hands. "We really appreciate this. We can use all the help we can get."

"Just doing my part," Jake said. "Well, okay then. I'll see you Tuesday at noon."

"See you then, Jake. And thanks again."

Jake started to step out of line but stopped. "Hey, Matt, you wouldn't happened to have seen Teresa anywhere, have you?"

Matt's jaw fell open to talk, but he hesitated. "Yeeeah. Actually I have," he slowly let it out. "She's already inside." He thumbed toward the sanctuary.

"Okay. Thanks, Matt," Jake said and stepped away from the table.

Jake walked into the sanctuary, which was illuminated by stained glass windows lining the walls. He scanned the parallel rows of wooden pews, his eyes sifting through sitting and standing worshipers, looking for Teresa. He climbed the stairs to the balcony

and scanned those seats as well. Still no Teresa. He walked to the center aisle of the balcony, down the steps, and looked over the rail down into the now-settling congregation. There she was—toward the front and to the right in the blue-flowered white dress she wore to church a lot. She was standing up, talking to some people who were seated behind her, standing next to her parents and . . . and Miguel!

Jake sank into the nearest pew, staring at the slick, mousse-covered hair on the back of Miguel's head. What was *he* doing there? Surely Miguel wasn't a Christian, too?

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. Maybe, just maybe, Miguel was just faking his faith. Or maybe Teresa was trying to convert him. Maybe Miguel would reject the truth . . . there was always hope. Jake sat up and looked at the crucifix hanging behind the pulpit, kicking himself for such an evil thought.

He fidgeted his way through the service, too worried and too busy spying on Teresa and Miguel to pay attention to the sermon. When the service ended, he stood outside on the steps of the church, waiting for her to come out. Teresa's parents came out first and walked right past Jake. He waited for at least five minutes and still no Teresa. Either she was still in there introducing her new boyfriend, or she had gone out the side door. Just when he was about to give up, she walked out gripping Miguel in the crease of his arm.

When they reached the bottom of the steps, Jake approached. "Teresa, please, I need to talk to you. Just for a minute," he pleaded, glancing over at Miguel.

"Jake? Is that you? Still going to *this* church?" Her reply was cold and sarcastic. "Don't you belong to the Church of Mammon now?"

“Church of Mammon?”

Her dad pulled the car to the foot of the steps. She tugged on Miguel’s arm. “Let’s go, Miguel. My parents want to take you out for lunch.”

Miguel didn’t speak but wore a smug smile as Teresa pulled him away and into the car. Jake watched helplessly as they disappeared into the traffic.

“Mammon?” Jake said. “What’s that supposed to. . .” He finally got it.

One time around 1995, Teresa and Jake had had a fight, and she wouldn’t talk to him for more than a week. The funny thing is that Jake couldn’t even remember what the fight was about. So he wasn’t overly surprised that Teresa wasn’t ready to take him back. But, again, this particular fight wasn’t with his wife. This Teresa wasn’t the woman who’d sworn to be with him for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. This time, he had to compete with Miguel. Jake had never competed with another man, and he wasn’t sure how to go about it. What he needed was advice, and he knew where to get it—Grandpa Simon.

Ironically, Jake had already planned to visit Grandpa that afternoon anyway. Just as Jake had warned Grandpa on his seventieth birthday, Grandpa was destined to have his gall bladder removed. Originally, Jake had been too busy starting his first semester in college to visit his poor old grandfather in the hospital, but not this time. And since Grandpa had more than fifty years experience with the opposite sex, he figured he could also pick Grandpa’s brain for some advice.

By the time Jake made it to the hospital, the sky had turned deep gray and a hard rain fell, beating hard on the metal top of the van. He climbed out and made a sprint to the entrance of the hospital. Once inside, he shook off the excess water and found his way to Grandpa's room.

Jake rapped on the door a couple of times, cracked the door open, and spoke over the sound of the TV. "Grandpa?"

Jake heard the TV channels change, the volume go up, then back down, some muttering, and then the TV went silent. "Jacob? Is that you out there?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Don't be shy, son. Come on in."

Jake stepped in to find Grandpa in bed, dressed in one of those hospital gowns that tied in the rear, leaving the backside exposed to the elements. He lay propped up in the adjustable bed with an I.V. running into a vein on the top of his hand. His other hand rested on top of a black leather-bound King James Bible. Jake leaned over the bed and gave Grandpa a warm embrace, feeling the scratch of rough gray whiskers from Grandpa's unshaven face. "Hey, Grandpa," Jake said and pulled away.

"Came to visit your frail old grandfather, I see. And without an umbrella from the looks of it. Sit down, sit down. Take a load off of those young feet of yours. You need a towel?"

"Nah, I won't melt." Jake pulled over a chair and perched on its edge with his elbows resting on his knees, rubbing his hands together and cracking his knuckles. "So how you feeling?"

“I suppose I’ll live—if the food doesn’t kill me,” he said, pointing to some half-eaten leftovers.

“Tell me about it,” Jake agreed. “This place isn’t known for its food. Are the nurses treating you okay?”

“Oh now, the service is great. All you got to do is push this here button, and presto, someone comes a callin’.”

“Uh, Grandpa, I think that’s for emergencies.”

“So they tell me,” Grandpa said, chuckling. “So they keep tellin’ me.”

Jake laughed with him, then sat in silence. He stared at the rain beading on the window. He pressed on knuckles that would no longer pop, wondering if dumping his problems on Grandpa would be medically sound.

Jake felt Grandpa studying him. He could almost feel his mind being read.

“But I tell you what,” Grandpa finally said, “this turning seventy thing, being in the hospital, them gutting me like a fish. It sure has set me to thinking.”

“About what?”

“You know, what it’s all about. The meaning of life. The same thing everybody wonders about. Only when you’re old like me, lying helpless in this bed, it reminds you of how frail you really are and that your days on this earth are numbered. Look at me, Jacob—an old man with a lifetime of experiences. Now it just doesn’t make any sense for an old man like me to die at the height of his wisdom, only to lose his wisdom to the grave. There’s just no point in gaining wisdom if you can’t practice it. That’s why I’m convinced my real purpose lies in the next world. The wisdom I’ve gained on earth is to be used later in heaven. And once in heaven, I’ll continue to learn and keep getting wiser

until the Lord deems me perfect. Then I'll be able to carry out God's true plan for my life. And He's got a plan for you, too—if not in this world, then in the next. Only in heaven will you find your true, everlasting purpose. Think of this world as college, and think of heaven as your career. Learn from this world, and apply what you learn in the next. That's what all this is about," Grandpa said and winked.

Jake sat there pondering Grandpa's words. He could see how a man Grandpa Simon's age, being in the hospital with people dying all around him, would be thinking about the afterlife and what this life was all about. But it was weird to hear Grandpa talking about heaven like that, when heaven's where Jake actually belonged.

"Something troubling you, son?" Grandpa asked. "Looks like something's on your mind."

"You could say that," Jake said. "But you're sick. I shouldn't dump this on you right now."

"Don't be silly, Jacob. You know I'm a tough old bird. Now what's troubling you?"

"Well, it's just that . . . you ever messed something up and then tried to make it better but only end up making things worse?"

"Sure I have," Grandpa said. "But sometimes it's better to just learn from mistakes rather than try to fix them. Don't regret those mistakes, Jacob. Cherish them."

Jake sat back in the chair. "*Cherish* them? Uh, Grandpa," Jake said and pointed to the I.V. in Grandpa's hand, "I think they're giving you too much morphine."

Grandpa chuckled and explained, "What I mean is, you can't always undo your mistakes, but you should always learn from them. So don't cherish the mistake, but

cherish what you learned from it. Besides, mistakes are good for the soul. Just think how cocky you'd be if you didn't run into a few *humbling* blocks. God wants you to know the truth. And the truth is, we are hopelessly flawed. So mistakes show us our flaws and humble us in the process. To be humble is to know the truth."

"That's deep, Grandpa," Jake said, still not knowing what Grandpa was getting at. Grandpa had always been on the poetic side, always speaking in parables the way Jesus did. But not wanting Grandpa to think that he was an idiot, Jake usually just nodded and acted as though he understood.

"Look at it this way then. A father can tell his young son not to touch fire. If the son ignores his father and touches the fire anyway, he'll get burned. Then, after getting burned, the son will learn the lesson well and never repeat his mistake. But the son's suffering from getting burned teaches him yet another lesson. It teaches him the consequences of not trusting his father. Suffering on earth also teaches us the consequences of not trusting God. Life on earth is like that fire, Jacob. Just as Adam disobeyed his Father, he was made to suffer the consequences of his own self-imposed separation from God. And after suffering the pain of separation in this life, man knows the consequences of not trusting in God, and is wiser for it, and much less likely to rebel against God the way the fallen angels did. And life on earth is only *partial* separation. God is with us more than we realize, even though we're not in heaven with Him. Can you imagine what *total* separation would be like?"

"It would be hell," Jake said.

"Exactly. You see, you're starting to catch on."

"If you say so, Grandpa."

“Look, son, I know all of this is a little hard to swallow. When I was your age, nothing made sense to me either, but the important thing to remember is this: you’re going to make mistakes in life and you’re going to suffer, but God has a purpose in suffering. You may not fully understand why in this lifetime, but one day, once in heaven, everything will make sense. I mean, look at Peanut. Do you think he understands why he has to get rabies shots? It hurts him, and he can’t understand why you’d do it to him, but you do it for his own good because you love him.”

“And he doesn’t like baths either,” Jake said, “but after he gets one, he sure smells better.”

“Great, son. Now you get it,” Grandpa said as a satisfied smile spread across his face. “In fire, gold is tested, and worthy men in the crucible of humiliation,” Grandpa went on.

“Okay, okay, I get it, Grandpa.”

“I missed teaching Sunday school this morning, you know. I’ve got to keep in practice.”

“It’s okay, Grandpa, I could use the sermon,” Jake said as he sat twisting his returned class ring around his finger. “You’d be surprised at how much what you just said means to me. Sometimes I think you can read my mind.”

“You think so, huh? Well try this one out. It’s that girl of yours, isn’t it? She broke it off, did she?”

Jake sat up in his chair and scooted forward. “How’d you know that?”

Grandpa chuckled, rubbing his mustache between his thumb and index finger. “It’s not your mind I’m reading—it’s your hand. Last time I saw you, Teresa was wearing that ring.”

Jake sank back into his seat. “Yeah, dumped me last night.”

“Well, why did she go and do that for?”

“Because I was being a jerk. I guess I’ve been too busy working, making money, trying to provide a decent future, but in the process I’ve distanced her. And you know what they say, ‘Distance makes the heart grow fonder—for someone else.’ Now she’s found some guy from Panama who’s rich and doesn’t have to work. He speaks Spanish, too. I’m not sure if I’ll ever win her back now.” Jake paused, staring at his class ring. “She was the one, Grandpa. I was supposed to marry her, and now I’ve blown it.”

“Maybe you’ve answered your own question,” Grandpa said. “Maybe you’ve been relying too much on money. Simply look upon what you seek, and you will find all you need.”

“Huh?” Jake said. Again, Grandpa’s poetics were over his head.

“Jacob, pull a bill out of your wallet. Any bill will do.”

Knowing Grandpa would have a clever reason for this demonstration, Jake pulled a one-dollar bill from his wallet and stretched it out in front of him.

“Now turn that dollar over and tell me what it says,” Grandpa said.

“United States of America,” Jake read.

“Below that.”

“One?”

“Above that.”

“In God we trust.”

“Now you see? Even the money you seek tells you not to put your faith in it but in God. God doesn’t mind you having money. He wants you to be comfortable. But He doesn’t want you to put your trust in it. Trust in God and God alone.”

Jake put the dollar back into his wallet and slid the wallet back into his rear pocket. Jake had never thought of a dollar bill as having instructions on how to use it, but Grandpa was right. He had been trusting in money too much, and now he was paying for that misguided trust. “I guess you’re right, Grandpa, but it’s a little late now. She’s already dumped me. You got any ideas on how I can get her back?”

“Well, have you tried talking to her?”

“I would, but she’s pretty man. She said she never wants to see me again. I was going to try and talk to her this morning in church, but she came with that Miguel guy.”

“Mmm . . . I see.” Grandpa rubbed his mustache, pondering Jake’s dilemma. “Could be she’s trying to make you jealous. Maybe she wants you to know that if you don’t have time for her, somebody else does. Why don’t you part with some of that precious stock money of yours and buy her a dozen roses? Roses always work on your grandmother. Could be the best investment you’ll ever make.”

“You think it’d work?”

“It seems to me you’ve got nothin’ to lose but the one thing that’s been keeping you apart—money. Don’t worry, Jacob. If God wants you two together, nothing will keep you apart. Do what your money says and trust in God. Then if you should fall, you’ll fall into His arms, and I can’t think of any better place to be.”

Sunlight leaked through the window blinds, telling Jake that he could make it to his van without getting soaked. So he stood up and said, “Well, Grandpa, I better go and let you rest before it starts raining again. So when do you get out of here?”

“Doc said he’d cut me loose in the morning.”

“That’s good,” Jake said and bent down to embrace Grandpa. “Thanks for listening . . . and for the advice.” Jake let go of Grandpa and straightened up. “I’ll try the rose thing. I’ll call you at home and let you know how it turns out. In the meantime, do you mind working on plan B? I think I’m going to need it.”

Chapter 22

That night Jake tossed and turned in bed so much that Peanut abandoned him and curled up in the dirty clothes on the floor.

Throughout the day, he had pondered Grandpa's sermon. He had been putting far too much faith in the power of money to care for Teresa. Now he was about to lose her altogether. Without Teresa and the baby, what was the point in all of that money?

So Jake decided to forget about buying stock—for the time being. Besides, Microsoft stock wouldn't soar until Windows came out anyway. And Dad was obviously not in a hurry to be repaid, so Jake figured he'd just wait until next summer, work two jobs again, and then pay Dad back.

For now, Jake needed to concentrate on getting Teresa back. Since he couldn't sleep anyway, he worked out yet another plan. Since Teresa had given him a copy of her

class schedule a couple of weeks earlier, he knew that she'd be coming out of her psychology class in Ayres Hall at 12:50. He'd wait for her to come out of class, soften her up with some roses, and then tell her that he was quitting Food King and starting college after all—if it wasn't already too late to register for classes. He'd even swallow his pride and let Dad pay for tuition and books. What else could he do? He was desperate.

If that didn't work, he could always resort to the one thing that was keeping them apart: the truth. He had been lying to her and everyone else by omission since he'd come back to 1986, and he hated it. But there was no way he could tell anyone the truth without ending up in a mental hospital—not unless he could prove it.

So if he did have to resort to the truth, how was he going to prove it? He thought he knew the answer. He would tell her that the next day he would be a hero at the abortion clinic protest but wouldn't give her any specific details. When she saw that he truly did save the day, it would prove to her that he knew the future. To Jake's sleep-deprived, ADD-afflicted brain, it sounded like a perfect plan.

With renewed confidence, Jake reopened the Bible and continued his reading. He was on Revelation now. He read all of the way to chapter 21 when, comforted in knowing that his name was indeed written in the Book of Life he'd just read about, he called it quits for the night. He'd save the part about the new heaven for the next day, saving the last chapter of the Bible for what might be, if Roland Denny had his way, his last night on earth.

After lying awake in bed, drifting in and out of sleep, Jake rose early and called in sick at Food King. It was dishonest, but he desperately needed the day off to grovel with Teresa. He then went to the Red Cross to donate platelets a day early, since Tuesday, his normal donating day, was the day of the clinic shooting. After donating the platelets, he stopped by the florist to get the dozen roses. But since a whole dozen would cost forty bucks, a whole day's pay working *both* jobs, he figured that he'd better stick with a half dozen. After forking over more than twenty bucks for the roses, he hid them under the seat of his van so he could surprise Teresa with them later.

When Jake got to Livingston U at 12:40, he pulled his van onto Clinch Avenue and up to a parking meter on the right side of the road between the abortion clinic and Ayres Hall. He cut the engine and rolled down the windows and sat there waiting for the flood of students to exit the building, signifying that class was over.

Livingston U was a sparsely treed campus with expanses of rolling green grass and parking lots separating an architectural timeline of buildings, beginning with the original old refurbished buildings dating back to the 1800s up to the newest, most modern building that housed the School of Engineering. College students dressed in their colorful '80's attire strolled up and down the sidewalk and in and out of these buildings, carrying books, some by hand, others in bulky backpacks.

Across the street, just beyond the steady flow of traffic that buzzed by, protesters were in full force at the infamous Livingston Center for Reproductive Health—the abortion clinic. They marched up and down the sidewalk, chanting and singing, beside dozens of little white crosses stabbed into the ground on the unusually wide grass island that separated the sidewalk and the street. Jake recognized a few of the protesters from

his church, but most, including a Catholic priest and a nun, were from other churches. Yet they all worked together with a common purpose, like different yet equally vital organs in the Body of Christ, carrying white poster-board signs touting pro-life slogans and Bible verses. One sign read, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you” (Jeremiah 1:4). Still another sign said, “WE WILL ADOPT YOUR BABY AND PAY ALL EXPENSES!” And they meant what the sign said. All of the involved churches agreed that frightening these young girls with hellfire was not helpful, since they were no doubt nervous enough. They had to offer them alternatives to abortion and several families had gladly agreed to adopt the babies while the church provided financial support.

Jake scanned the protesters for Matt, but didn't see him. Jake did see his church's minister, Reverend Burch, in a white shirt and tie with rings of perspiration around his armpits and sweat gleaming in beads, reflecting the hot sun from his shiny, half-bald head. Reverend Burch walked next to the Catholic priest, up and down the sidewalk, carrying in one hand a black Bible pressed up against his heart and in the other hand a sign that read, “For thou didst form my inward parts, Thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.”

Jake shifted his attention to Ayers Hall, an old brick building with a big bell tower in the center and a red tile roof.

It was 12:45, and Teresa should be out any time now. He glanced down at his arms just beyond the white short-sleeve cuffs of his OP T-shirt. The Red Cross had wrapped both of his arms with tape and gauze to apply pressure on his veins. If his charitable deeds were to remain a secret, he needed to get those things off. He peeled

away the bandages, leaving as many hairs on his arm as the tape would allow. Just as he had wadded them up and stuffed them in his pocket, a stream of students poured out of Ayres Hall.

Jake climbed out of the van, hurried to the sidewalk, and studied the crowd carefully, hoping to spot Teresa. There she was, carrying her purple Trapper Keeper and another textbook. He dodged students as he ran up to meet her before she could spot his van and walk the other way.

“What are you doing here, Jake?” she asked, hugging her books tighter to her chest. “This campus is for students only.”

“Look, Teresa, I know you’re mad, and I don’t blame you. I’ve been a real jerk. But please just talk to me. That’s all I ask.”

Teresa softened her glare and loosened the grip on her books “Well,” she looked up and down the sidewalk as though she were looking for someone. “I guess. I’d like to be friends, you know. I mean . . . in God’s way, I do still love you.”

God’s way was good. At least Jake was making progress. “Listen, I’ve got a surprise for you in the van.”

“What is it?” She perked up. She loved surprises.

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise. Come on, you’ll see.”

“I don’t know, Jake. I’m supposed to meet Miguel for lunch.”

“Just five minutes. That’s all I ask.”

She squinted, eyeing Jake suspiciously.

“Look, I promise I’m not going to kidnap you.”

“All right,” she said with a laugh. “But just for a minute.”

Laughter is good, he thought as they walked up to the van. He opened the door for her, helped her in for what he prayed wasn't the last time, and then walked around the front and climbed into the driver's side.

She wasted no time in asking. "Now where's this surprise?"

Jake reached under his seat and pulled out the bundle of long-stemmed red roses wrapped in green paper. "Teresa, I love you. Please take me back."

Her eyes lit up just the way he'd hoped they would. "Jake, why did you do that?"

"I wanted to show you how much I love you."

She shifted her eyes from the roses and focused a hard stare at him. "Then why don't you show me? If you *really* loved me, you would have bought me a dozen roses—like Miguel did last night."

"HE WHAT!?"

"If you're going to be like that, I'm leaving," she snapped and opened the door.

He caught her by the arm. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I'll behave, I promise."

She closed the door and looked him over. "Jake, I'd really like to be friends."

Friends? There was that word again. It was time to up the ante. Jake put the roses in her lap and took her by the hand. "Listen, Teresa, I've decided to quit Food King and start school this fall. Just like you wanted. In fact, you can go with me to the Admissions Office right now."

She pulled her hand free. "It's too late. The deadline was Friday. I was hoping you would change your mind, so I checked on it last week. And then, after our fight, I did a lot of thinking, and I decided I don't care what you do anymore. Just . . . you know I don't like to preach, but I know you just got saved last fall. I just want you to keep

growing as a Christian. Keep your mind on God and not on money, Jake. And I was thinking, you know, if we were still friends, I could help you.”

The word friend was like a punch to his stomach. Blinking away the water building in his eyes, he pleaded, “But, Teresa, I *am* growing as a Christian. I *have* changed. I told you I would quit Food King. What else can I do?”

“That’s just the point, Jake. You *have changed*. Look, it’s not the jobs anymore. It’s, like, we were really getting close until this summer. I mean I used to start a sentence, and you could finish it. But now, we just don’t seem to click. I guess we just grew apart.”

“But, Teresa, I can explain.”

“It’s okay, Jake. Look, it happens all the time. People get together; people grow apart. That’s just the way things are. I’m cool with that.”

“No, you don’t understand. There’s a reason I’m acting so weird, but I just don’t know if I can tell you or not.”

Teresa took him by the hand. “Jake, we’re just friends now. You can tell me the truth. I promise I won’t get mad.”

“I don’t know, Teresa. What I’ve got to tell you is . . . I’m afraid you’ll freak out on me.”

“Jake,” she said all too calmly. “You don’t have to say it. I know about your ex-girlfriend Melissa. Remember? The last day of school? I was there, I heard it. ‘Call me sometime?’”

“No, I promise I haven’t seen her since that day.”

“Jake, don’t lie to me,” she said sharply. “That’s not very Christian,” she said in a softer tone. “Now, I figure that this summer you started seeing Melissa again, and now she’s dumped you, so you want me back.”

“No, Teresa! I’d never do that to you. Please believe me.”

“Then tell me where you keep disappearing to every Tuesday, huh? Is that the day she’s off work? Don’t think I haven’t noticed. I’m very observant, you know.”

Jake sat back in his seat, wishing she wasn’t so observant. His good deeds had backfired. Since he’d kept his Tuesday charities a secret, she assumed that he was cheating on her. And considering his odd behavior toward her, he could see how she came to that conclusion. It was clearly time for the truth. All else had failed. Maybe God was making sure he would fail until he learned to be honest—to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So he drew a deep breath and let it out. “Look, every Tuesday I deliver meals to helpless old ladies for something called Meals on Wheels.”

Teresa laughed out loud. “Ohh, pleeease, Jake. I’m so sure.” Still laughing, she reached for the door. “I’ll see you around. Call me when you want to be honest.”

Jake caught her arm and pulled her back to her seat.

“Get your hands off me! I mean it!”

“Teresa, wait. I can prove everything if you’ll just listen to me. *Please.*”

“All right, then. Prove it.”

“Now just hear me out, okay?”

“Fine, let’s hear it.”

“Remember, I can prove this,” he said again and slowly spilled it out, emphasizing each word to be sure she understood correctly. “Teresa, you are looking at

the body of the eighteen-year-old me with the soul of the forty-year-old me who died and came back. You see, in 2008, we were married and—”

Teresa gasped. “Jake!?” She leaned closer, looking at the crimp of his arms. “Let me see your arms.” He stretched his right arm out and fingered the fresh red needle mark, along with the numerous other tiny needle scars around his vein.

“What?” he asked.

“I knew it!” she screamed. “You’re on drugs!”

“No! Wait, you don’t—”

“It all makes sense now. That’s why you’re acting so weird.” Her eyes grew even wider. “And that’s why you needed so much money. Not for stocks, for drugs! And Tuesday is when you see your dealer. Why didn’t I see this before?” She knocked the roses out of her lap, yanked open the door, and jumped out of the van, slamming the door behind her.

Jake leaned over and called out the open window, “Teresa wait! I’m not on drugs! Don’t leave before I tell you what’s going to happen tomorrow. I can prove it!”

Teresa skidded to a stop and spun around. “You stay away from me or I’m calling the police!”

As if taking a cue from the devil himself, Miguel strutted onto the scene. Teresa clutched his arm and hurried him away, protecting him from her drug-crazed ex-boyfriend.

Chapter 23

Jake watched Teresa disappear into the crowd and out of his life for good. He reached down and grabbed the roses she had thrown on the filthy, particle-cluttered floorboard of his van. “Ouch!” One of the thorns jabbed him in the finger—a fitting end to their unnatural reunion.

In desperation, he had resorted to the truth and only proved himself to be a junky. The one person he most wanted to share his secret with thought he was on drugs. The sad thing was that if he was in her place and she dumped that line on him, he’d think the same thing. He was sick of lying, but Teresa’s reaction only proved that lying was the only option. He felt like he would be sick. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against the steering wheel, taking slow, heavy breaths to ease the sour burn in his stomach.

The burn in his gut finally eased, and he lifted his head from the steering wheel to face his new reality. Teresa was gone for good, and there was nothing he could do about it. Even if he took her to the Red Cross and proved that he'd actually been giving platelets, even if he did manage to convince her he was telling the truth about dying and coming back to 1986, she still wouldn't take him back. And the reason was quite simple: she didn't love him anymore. She told him that herself. "People get together; people grow apart," and she was "cool with that."

Of course that's the way she saw things with Jake, the guy she'd dated for only ten months. That's the only way she could feel about it. He should have seen this coming. He should have taken that angel's hand.

It's over, he thought, looking at the clinic across the street. Now my baby will never be born. I might as well have aborted it myself.

He blinked his eyes to ward off the stream of tears that would surely come next. It worked. He didn't cry. The strange thing was that he didn't even come close to crying. Then he realized what he'd been denying since his return to 1986. He knew why he'd worked two jobs, unconsciously avoiding her. He knew why he was afraid to touch her, to show simple affection. It was because he didn't love *this* Teresa either. He felt obligated to her, obligated to provide a better future for her and their baby, but he didn't really love her, not *this* Teresa. He loved the mellowed, more mature, and, yes, plumper Teresa. She was the girl he had grown up with, whereas this Teresa hadn't grown up at all. Aside from the same DNA, the years had made them two different people, and embracing the young Teresa felt like a betrayal to his wife, like adultery. If he couldn't love her honestly, he shouldn't love her at all.

Clearly he didn't belong with this Teresa, and it was also becoming painfully clear he didn't belong in 1986 either. Come to think of it, even in 2008, he'd never felt a sense of belonging in his own house, his own school, or in Livingston. For some reason, he just never felt at home, even in his *hometown*. And now that he was living a lie, he felt more alone than ever. How could he ever feel at home this Livingston when his soul didn't even belong in this body? No, he didn't belong there. Where he belonged was in heaven. Like Grandpa Simon said, heaven was Jake's true home, his true purpose. As for that uneasy feeling of never feeling at home in his own hometown . . . well, apparently he was just homesick for heaven.

Maybe tomorrow, Jake told himself as he looked to the clinic across the street. Matt was the only thing left on his 1986 agenda. Since he'd lost Teresa, once he saved Matt, Jake had no reason to hang around down. Maybe he'd get to heaven by being Roland Denny's first victim. Matt could be saved by getting Roland to empty his gun on Jake instead.

He put the key into the ignition. He started to turn the key, but a disturbance at the clinic caught his attention. A crowd had gathered around the big oak tree. He couldn't see what was going on behind the wall of bodies, and curiosity wouldn't allow him to leave.

He climbed out of the van, and dodged traffic as he crossed the street. He stepped over the white crosses in the wide grass island, which was now mostly dirt because of the trampling feet of protesters. He stepped onto the sidewalk and walked up to the crowd so he could get a better view.

“What the . . .” Reverend Burch was pinned up against the oak tree by some big dude with a rat-tail stringing down the back of his head onto a black Hank Williams Jr. T-shirt.

Of course! Jake remembered hearing about this. Reverend Burch had gotten a beating at the clinic, but it was so overshadowed by the shooting the next day that not much was made of it.

To get a closer look, Jake quickly stepped around the crowd and into an opening among the bystanders. He stood at a front angle with a clear, appalling view of Reverend Burch’s assailant. Big white letters on his faded black T-shirt spelled out BOCEPHUS, with the letters arching around his rotund torso.

“You going to give me money to feed my girlfriend’s baby?” Bocephus spewed saliva as he bellowed. “You going to change its diapers? Why don’t you Bible-thumpers mind your own business!”

The other protesters clamored for Bocephus to let Reverend Burch go. A pudgy, gray-headed nun whacked him on the back with her protest sign, but he simply ripped the sign from the nun’s hands, tossed it aside, and kept ranting.

From the looks on these nonviolent people’s faces, they weren’t about to follow up the nun’s attack, but somebody had to do something. Christians had to look out for each other—like Jake should have looked out for Matt, like Jake should look out for Reverend Burch now. No, Jake wouldn’t go another twenty years regretting his inaction. He had to stop this, even if he did get beat up. He could take it. He was young, but the reverend was old. The reverend wouldn’t heal so easily. He couldn’t just stand there and watch this happen. Not this time!

“Now my girl’s afraid to cross this picket line of yours,” Bocephus said. “Now,” *SMACK!* He backhanded Reverend Burch across the face. “Pack up and move on outta here before I have to hurt you.”

“Someone must protect the unborn,” Reverend Burch said, stoically looking Bocephus in the eye. Then, he literally turned the other cheek.

Bocephus cocked his arm and tightened his fist. “You want some more, do you?”

Just do it, Jake!

Jake took a sprinter’s stance, harnessing every bit of strength he could muster. He sprang forward, head down and arms wide, and plowed into Bocephus’s meaty thigh. They tumbled to the dirt in a cloud of dust. Jake quickly pushed his nimble young body to its feet and squatted in a defensive position, fists clenched. The muscle-and-fat-laden giant slowly rose up on one knee. Like a bull scuffing the dirt with its hoof, huffing and snorting with flared nostrils, Bocephus poised to take revenge. With even louder shouts from the nonviolent audience, Jake braced himself since he didn’t seem to be getting any physical help, not even from the nun.

Blindsided, Jake smashed against the big oak. The sting of bark dug into his face. His arm wrenched behind his back and pain dug into his shoulder.

“That’s enough of that!” a man shouted as cold steel clamped around Jake’s wrists. A strong hand gripped him by the forearm and whirled him around. Jake stared into the sweaty, rump-nosed face of Wayne Brummitt, the cocky, pot-bellied campus cop Jake had grown all too familiar with during his years at the college.

“Are you out of your mind, kid!?” Wayne screamed just inches from Jake’s face, his breath reeking like a rotting skunk. “You got some kind of death wish or something?”

If I hadn't of seen what was going on, that guy would of killed you!" Wayne shouted, pointing to Jake's opponent, who was laid out, face to the ground, crushing several white crosses and yelling obscenities as another campus cop cuffed his hands behind him. "Now you just take it easy and *siddown* while I find out what's goin' on," Wayne said, pointing to a large root stemming from the big oak.

Jake sat on the massive root with his hands cuffed behind his back, blinking, his eyes stinging from sweat that he was unable to wipe away. Once he had blinked enough to clear his vision, he watched Wayne rally some of the witnesses to begin his investigation. Although the clinic was technically off campus, since many college students lived in the apartment buildings in the area, the entire block of the abortion clinic was considered campus police jurisdiction.

The pudgy little nun, apparently coming to Jake's defense, pointed at the lump of flesh sprawled on the ground, twisting and cursing, and then to Jake as she recited her version of what had happened. Nods of confirmation came from other bystanders as Wayne periodically thumbed in Jake's direction.

Jake heard a surprised gasp. He looked up to see Teresa, gaping in stunned silence with her jaw hanging open. Miguel held her back, a safe distance from her deranged, drug-crazed, violent, handcuffed ex-boyfriend. "You stay away from her!" Miguel demanded in his heavy accent. Without waiting for Jake to explain, Miguel quickly ushered Teresa down the sidewalk and out of harm's way.

"Just perfect," Jake muttered and let his head fall back against the tree. A squirrel was clinging to a branch hanging above Jake, grinning at him. "I suppose you think this is funny," he said to the mocking rodent.

As Jake watched the squirrel, a shadow overtook him. Reverend Burch bent down to one knee and said, “Jake, I don’t know what to say. I can’t say I agree with what you did, but I appreciate it all the same. And don’t worry, Mother Catherine’s giving you a powerful defense. I think they’re going to let you go.”

“Thanks, Reverend,” Jake said, blinking sweat out of his eyes again.

“And, Jake, I saw what happened with you and Teresa just now. I’ve been hearing some gossip around church about your breakup. I wish people wouldn’t do that. Anyway, I know you’re depressed, but just remember, if God wants you together, you will be.”

“Scuse me, Reverend,” Wayne said.

“Cheer up, son. Things will look different tomorrow,” Reverend Burch said as he rejoined the other protesters.

“All right, partner, stand up.” Wayne slid his hand under Jake’s arm and helped him to his feet. “Now turn around.”

Jake did as he was told, and Wayne removed the handcuffs from Jake’s wrists.

“Now let me see some ID,” Wayne said.

Jake reluctantly pulled out his wallet, flipped it open, and slid out his driver’s license. Wayne took Jake’s license and swaggered over to a parked blue Chevy Nova, put the license on the roof of the car, and began writing info onto a note pad. When Wayne finished, he walked back over to Jake and handed back the license.

“Well then, Jacob Thomas Simon, a legal adult as of last May. I don’t suppose you’re a student here, are you?”

“No,” Jake said. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Uh-huh. I didn’t think so. Well, Mr. Simon, this guy’s goin’ downtown with the city police,” he said, pointing to Bocephus, who was still lying face down on the ground and still cussing. “I’d arrest you, too, but I’m afraid your friends here’d start picketing my front yard.” Wayne scanned the protesters with contempt. “You Christian fanatics are always causin’ trouble around this clinic, but until now, I never seen a violent one. I’m not sure what to make of that. Maybe I *should* turn you over to city police.”

“I had to do something,” Jake pleaded. “I couldn’t just stand there and let my preacher get beat up.”

Wayne pulled a handkerchief out of his rear pocket and blotted sweat from his forehead, deep in thought. “I suppose . . . I could let you go this time. But,” he quickly added. “I don’t ever want to see you on, or around campus again. You understand? Not until you can show me some student ID. If I do see you and you don’t show any student ID, I’ll run you in. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Jake agreed, trying to sound respectful. “I’ll remember that, sir.”

“Now pick up your pro-life sign and git!” Wayne demanded. He then answered a call on his walkie-talkie and went over to taunt Bocephus.

Jake bowed his head in despair and slowly waded through the crowd. Not only did he have to stop Roland Denny, but now he’d have to sneak past the campus police to get to the clinic.

Rotating blue lights of a city police car startled Jake from his thoughts. He watched a city cop talking with the two campus cops, and all three of them were standing over Bocephus, who was still lying handcuffed on top of those little white crosses. This guy was the reason Jake had to sneak by Wayne. *Thanks a lot, Bocephus!*

Bocephus caught Jake staring at him and shouted, "I'll get you, you little twerp. I'll kill you! You hear me?"

"Don't bother. I'm already dead!" Jake heard himself scream, his mouth getting the better of him once again.

Surprised at his own outburst, Jake's eyes met the blond Dudley Do-Right-looking city cop's puzzled expression. Wayne pulled out his baton and shouted, "What did I tell you?"

"I'm leaving!" Jake spat and hurried away.

With his dirt-dusty clothes, Jake trudged up the sidewalk, past the bookstore and the library toward the river, with his skinned and bleeding elbow and his forehead stinging from where the bark of the tree had cut into his flesh. He stopped at the corner of Riverside and Clinch, wondering where he thought he was going when his van was across the street from the clinic. He started to cross Clinch so he could approach his van on the other side of the street, but he had second thoughts and stopped.

At this point, this was the first time Wayne had ever seen Jake, and Wayne didn't know what kind of car Jake drove. If he was going to sneak by the campus police the next day, he certainly didn't want Wayne to see him climb into his highly recognizable orange VW Bus. So he decided to wait until Wayne had left the scene.

With time to kill, Jake crossed Riverside Drive at the crosswalk and continued onto the Clinch Avenue Bridge that spanned over the French Broad River. From there, he could still clearly watch for Wayne, yet technically remain off campus.

He stood on the sidewalk of the two-lane concrete bridge and waited a few minutes, but Wayne still stood there among the protesters, blabbering on his walkie-

talkie, no doubt telling all of his buddy cops about the most excitement he'd seen in months.

“Hurry up, Wayne,” Jake uttered.

It was just as well. He had some thinking to do. Turning his attention away from the clinic, Jake focused on the French Broad River. He leaned over the bridge handrail and peered down into the muddy river, seething with deadly currents and countercurrents, swirling around the concrete bridge pillars below. All Jake would have to do was jump, and his angel would come back and take him to heaven where he belonged. Jake leaned a little farther over the rail, looking into the churning brown water that was his gateway to paradise.

Who was he kidding? Even if he did muster the courage to jump, he could never do that to his family. It would destroy them. Besides, he still had to save Matt, and suicide was a major sin.

Suddenly, the collar of Jake's shirt dug into his neck, tearing, pulling him away from the concrete rail. “Not on my shift you don't!”

“Hey! What the . . . what are you doing?” Jake squealed while being pushed against a Livingston City police car. “You tore my shirt. What's the big—”

“I'm saving your life, kid. That's what I'm doing,” the cop said, pinning Jake against the squad car with his baton. The next thing he felt, for the second time in the last hour, was cold steel clamping around his wrists.

“What? You thought I was going to jump?”

The cop turned Jake around to face him. It was that blond Dudley Do-Right-looking police officer Jake had seen at the clinic. “She's not worth it, kid. I heard those

church folks talking about what a rough time you were having, about how your girlfriend dumped you. But believe me, she's not worth it."

"Look, you've got it all wrong. I wasn't going to jump."

The officer shook his head in pity. "'Don't bother, I'm already dead?' Isn't that what I just heard you say? That's a cry for help if ever I heard one. Now don't you worry; it'll be okay. We're going to get you all the help you need."

"No! You can't!"

"It'll be okay, kid," Dudley assured in a soothing voice. He pushed Jake's head down under the doorframe of the squad car, forced Jake to sit, and slammed the door shut.

As Jake watched the officer walk around the front of the car, he heard heavy breathing next to him, whistling slightly through the nostrils. Jake slowly turned his head. Lips spread apart in a wide smile to reveal the yellow, plaque-covered teeth of Bocephus.

Chapter 24

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” Jake uttered. He gazed out into the serene, wooded grounds of Lakeside Psychiatric Hospital through an escape-proof Plexiglas window. He was dressed in a green sweat suit and sat in a small room that was painted a cheerful shade of yellow and, for his own safety, completely void of sharp objects.

The ride to the police station had undoubtedly been the most uncomfortable ten minutes of his life. Fortunately, Bocephus had been shackled to the frame of the squad car, so at least Jake had arrived physically unscathed. Once inside the hospital, after a myriad of embarrassing questions concerning his sexual activity, health, and mental status, they performed a far more embarrassing search procedure. They took all his belongings, including his clothes, keys, watch, and money. Then they made him dress in a green sweatshirt and sweatpants, letting him wear his own Reebok’s once they had

removed the shoestrings. Next, they did a quick physical assessment. After cleaning and bandaging his skinned elbow and scratched forehead, to their surprise, they determined that his blood pressure was unusually high for such a young man.

After they had finished processing Jake, they let him call his dad. He explained to Dad what a big misunderstanding this was and pleaded with Dad to get him out. Dad told Jake he'd do all he could, but Jake had to at least stay the night, maybe even a couple of days—just in time to visit Matt in the intensive care unit. No, two days would not do. Jake had to get out by the next morning. Somehow, some way, he had to get out.

After Jake got off the phone with Dad, they put him into a room next to the nursing station, in a section they called the special care unit. It was designed especially for attempted suicides. Then they fed him a dinner he could eat without using sharp utensils—a bad hamburger and potato chips. Although he had little appetite, he ate his meal down to the last crumb. He would need the energy to escape.

But how? How could he escape?

Jake moved away from the Plexiglas window and inspected the air vent. It was too small to squeeze into, even for his thin teenage body. Still, there had to be a way out. There just had to be!

“Jacob Simon?” a male voice came from the door.

Jake turned to see a stocky, blond guy dressed in white. “That’s what my armband says.”

“Hey there,” he said. “My name’s Chris. I’m one of the mental health assistants. I need you to come with me, please.”

Jake summed up his jailer. Chris would clobber Jake in a bout of fisticuffs, but Jake could outrun him. His shoes would fly off without the laces, but he could beat Chris barefoot if he had to. But it was still too early to do anything drastic. For now, he figured he'd better just play along and see if he could talk his way out of this.

With his laceless Reeboks clumping on the floor like flip-flops, Jake obediently followed Chris past the nursing station and down a hallway. Chris led Jake into a room where several people sat in a semicircle facing a lady in her forties with her hair up in a bun. The lady was sitting in front of a chalkboard, holding a clipboard and pencil.

"You must beee . . ." the lady said, scanning a page on her clipboard. "Jacob Simon. Everyone welcome Jacob."

Jake acknowledged a round of hellos with a series of nods, hoping he wouldn't be staying long enough to know them by name.

"My name is Judy. Why don't you have a seat and we'll begin," she said, pointing to an empty chair.

Jake took the seat at the end of the semicircle. There were three middle-aged women, two men about Jake's true age, a teenage boy about the age Jake looked, and, sitting to his right, a teenage girl who was maybe sixteen.

One by one, as Judy made her way around the semicircle heading in Jake's direction, each of these people told their miserable stories. Compared with the lives of these people, Jake's life had been a dream. When he heard how the split personality had hired a hit man to kill his other personality, Jake really felt like an ingrate.

But this wasn't the time to reevaluate his life, and he had no time to feel sorry for these people. He had to figure a way to get out. So while Judy offered comforting

suggestions amid comments from the other patients, Jake watched her carefully, thinking of how he might influence his release. He noticed her scribbling on her clipboard as each person spoke. A psychiatrist, the one person who could sign for Jake's release, would probably review whatever she was writing on her clipboard.

"Not suicidal. Misunderstanding. Recommend immediate release." That's what Jake needed to make her write, even if he had to lie. So as the therapist worked her way toward him, he came up with the story that he hoped would influence his release. It wasn't the truth, but it was a far greater sin to allow the abortion clinic shootings to happen. God would understand.

When Judy finished with the teenage girl sitting next to Jake, the one who had survived being molested by her father, beaten by her mother, and expelled from school for drug possession, it was finally Jake's turn to tell his comparatively lame story.

"So, Jacob." Judy looked to her clipboard. "It says you tried to jump off of the Clinch Avenue Bridge. Want to talk about it?"

Feeling the eyes of everyone in the room boring into him, he recited his lines, hoping his acting skills had improved over the last three months. "First of all, I was *not* trying to jump off of that bridge. I was just looking at the river. And yes, maybe I was depressed, but I promise I wasn't going to kill myself. I would never do that to my family. You've got to believe me." This part was absolutely true.

"I see." Judy scribbled on the clipboard. "So tell us. Why are you depressed?"

Jake began the untruthful part. "Two reasons, actually. First of all, I just found out I've got high blood pressure."

“Yes,” Judy said and looked down at her clipboard. “I see that. Your blood pressure is a little bit high for your age.”

“Anyway, I heard that made me a ticking bomb, and I could die at any minute. That’s why I said what I said about already being dead . . . you know, after the fight.”

“Oh, yes. The fight. It says you got into a fight with a much larger man at the abortion clinic. Do you think that was wise?” Judy said. She tapped the eraser of her pencil on the clipboard.

Jake had not counted on that question. Fortunately, the truth was sufficient. “He was beating up my preacher. What else could I do? Besides, I figured once I jumped in, the rest would jump in and help.”

She scribbled on her notepad again. “I admire your courage, even if you were taking a terrible risk.”

“And not only that,” Jake said, “but I figured that since I was about to drop dead anyway, I didn’t have much to lose by getting in a fight. What was he going to do? Kill me a few days early?”

“Kid, who told you that?” the split personality asked. “They got treatments for high blood pressure, you know.”

“That’s true,” Judy said. “With the proper treatment, you should live to see your grandchildren. Besides, your blood pressure is not dangerously high. It will get worse as you age but you shouldn’t be in any immediate danger.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m just gullible,” Jake humbly said. “Looks like I’ve got a lot to learn.”

“That’s what this session is all about,” Judy said. “We’ll make sure you see a doctor when you’re released. Now don’t worry about your blood pressure. Worry only makes it worse.”

“Great. Then can I leave now?” Jake asked. “I mean, since this was just a misunderstanding.”

“Not so fast. You said there were a couple of reasons. Tell us the other reason you’re depressed?”

Time for act two. “Oh, well, it’s my girlfriend. She dumped me for some rich Panamanian. But I’ve been thinking. If she’s the kind of girl to dump me for money, I don’t need her anyway. I’m better off without her,” he lied.

“I see. Yes, that can be very difficult for a young man,” Judy said, showing genuine pity.

“You got that right, Jacob,” one of the middle-aged women said. “You don’t need any girl like that anyhow. You’re a right handsome young man. Why, I bet there’s lots of girls who’d love to have you.”

“Say,” the lady next to her said. “I got a real pretty fifteen-year-old at home. You want her phone number?”

“Oh really?” Jake said and forced a pleasant smile. “Um, since I’m on the rebound, maybe I should wait. I guess you’re right. There’s plenty of girls out there. I feel much better now. Can I call my dad to come get me? I’ve got important plans tomorrow.”

“Only the psychiatrist can authorize your release,” Judy said and scribbled on her clipboard. “He’ll be in sometime tomorrow.”

“What time tomorrow?” he asked and leaned forward in anticipation.

“Usually around noon.”

Chapter 25

They had the place locked down like Alcatraz. Escape was impossible. After yet another restless lack of sleep and a bad breakfast, Jake found himself in another group therapy session with the same people as the night before. It was already 9:30, and if what Judy said was true about the psychiatrist coming in around noon, it looked like the only way Jake could save Matt, at least temporarily, would be to spill the beans and tell them to call the police. He didn't have a clue how he would explain his knowledge of the future, but at least it would buy the protesters a little time—if they believed him.

At a little after 10:00, Judy had made her way around the semicircle to Jake again. “So tell me, Jacob. How did a good night's sleep affect your feelings about your girlfriend?”

“Look, I feel fine,” Jake said as politely as he could manage. “I just need out of here. I’ve got to be somewhere at noon. *Please*, call this psychiatrist you told me about and let me go.”

“Now, Jacob, there’s no reason to take that tone of voice. Nothing you can do is more important than what we can do for you here.”

“Look, lady, something’s going to happen if . . .” Jake paused, considering the wisdom of what he was about to say.

“If what? Go on.”

“Excuse me,” a voice came from the door. “May I see Jacob Simon, please?”

Judy stood up and smoothed out her skirt. “Yes, doctor. He’s right here.”

A distinguished man in a white monogrammed coat stood in the doorway holding some papers. Jake quickly stepped to the doorway to meet him. “I’m Jacob Simon.”

“Yes, Jacob, I’m Dr. Howard. Could you come with me please?”

“Gladly,” Jake said and followed the doctor into the hallway. “I didn’t think you came in until noon.”

“Normally, I don’t, but somebody pulled some strings and had a judge call me. He instructed me to review your case immediately and release you if I saw fit. So I came in early and reviewed your chart. And from what I can see, you don’t appear to be a danger to yourself or anyone else. Says you’re even remarkably mature for your age.”

“Thank you. Can I leave now?” Jake pushed.

Dr. Howard chuckled. “I know what a frightening experience this must be for you. I’m afraid the arresting officer may have overreacted a bit.”

“That’s fine, I forgive him. Now, can I please get out of here?”

Dr. Howard chuckled again. "Of course. Come get your things. Once you sign a couple of papers, you're free to go. And again, I'm sorry about the misunderstanding."

Jake changed into his own dirty pocket pants and torn OP T-shirt. He then got back his wallet, watch, keys, and shoelaces, and signed the proper discharge forms. After that, a heavysset African-American led Jake down the hallway toward a sturdy metal door.

"I think your dad's waiting for you," the man said as they walked down the hall.

"Great," Jake said. "Thanks for calling him."

"Actually, from what I understand, he's been here all night. Hasn't slept a wink, they tell me."

"Seriously? All night?"

And then the man noted what Jake had only recently observed himself: "Your dad must really love you."

"Yeah," Jake said. "I guess he does."

When they reached the door, Jake's escort opened the door using a key fastened to his belt by a cable and led Jake into a waiting room with normal glass windows and plenty of sharp objects. Jake scanned the room and found Dad sitting on a couch, staring at a magazine-cluttered coffee table. As Jake stuffed the discharge papers and shoestrings into his pocket, Dad glanced up and saw Jake standing there. Dad immediately stood and stepped over to Jake, eyeing Jake's filthy clothes over with puffy, bloodshot eyes.

"Dad," Jake said. "I don't know how you did it, but thanks." He leaned into his father, and for the first time in his life, gave him a good firm hug.

Me, too, Dad, he thought. I love you, too.

Jake stood scowling at not one, but two parking tickets under the windshield wiper of his bug-eyed van. Dad had dropped Jake off in front of the clinic where Jake left his van the day before. On the drive from the hospital, as Jake laced his Reeboks, Dad revealed how he managed Jake's release. He said that after mulling it over, it occurred to him to call his good lawyer friend, Hank, to see if he could help. Apparently, Hank, who had been a childhood friend of Dad's, had gone to the judge who committed Jake and convinced the judge that Jake was perfectly sane and should be released immediately. It also helped that the judge was one of Hank's golfing buddies.

A free man, Jake yanked the two tickets from under his windshield wiper and stuffed them into his pocket. He stopped at the door of his van and watched the clinic protesters across the street. Sure enough, there was Matt, totally oblivious to what will no longer happen to him. Jake opened the door he'd left unlocked and stepped up into the van, which was hot enough to bake a cake. He put the key into the ignition, cranked the engine, and flipped the air conditioning on high. Lacking oven mitts for the steering wheel, he let the van cool before driving.

He looked back at the protesters and then at his watch. It was already 11:05. In less than an hour, he'd either be a hero or dead again. But either way, he would not chicken out. Earlier that summer, he'd stood up to Todd Heller, he'd stood up to his Bruno's boss, he'd stood up to his brother, and he'd even stood up for Reverend Burch. He was as ready as he would ever be. Without Teresa, he had nothing to lose anyway.

Even if he died, at least he would die a hero in the fight for the unborn. That would be his lasting legacy.

Of course, there was that stupid letter to Todd. Who knows, maybe that letter would lead Todd to Christ. Maybe it would even get out in the open and serve as absolute proof of God's existence, leading countless others to Christ. Maybe that was God's true reason for sending Jake back—because He knew that Jake was the only one in history to actually turn down heaven for earth. After all, wasn't it strange how Dad just *happened* to mail that letter just when Jake started to chicken out? Maybe it was all in God's plan.

"You need some sleep, Jake," he told himself for having such a silly idea. He hadn't slept much in days, and it was starting to show. Right now he just needed to worry about Matt. And if he was going to pull this thing off, he needed to get into position behind the clinic.

He cranked up his van and looked up the street to check for traffic. "Great!" he yelped. A campus police car was rounding the corner onto Clinch Avenue. Wayne had promised he'd arrest Jake if he saw him on campus again. Jake fell over into the passenger seat, hiding behind the dashboard, waiting for Wayne to pass. He peered through the driver-side door window and into the side rearview mirror, praying that he would see Wayne's car go on its merry way. He waited. Still, no cop car passed. He heard a door slam shut. Then he remembered the unpaid parking meter.

"Just perfect!" Jake fell into the floorboard with his elbow resting on the \$20 wilted roses he'd bought for Teresa. So he could hide his face, he pretended to be searching for something under the seat, hoping Wayne would just write another ticket and leave it under the wiper.

Peck, peck, peck. Jake looked up to find a campus cop cupping his hands over his eyes, pressing against the window, wondering what this kid was doing on the floor.

Jake's heart resumed beating once he saw that it wasn't Wayne. Jake sat up, rolled down the window, and put on an innocent face. "Yes, officer. Can I help you?"

"You okay in there?" the young officer asked.

"Yeah, I was just umm . . . I was just looking for some change for the parking meter."

"Well if you can't find any, you better move it before it gets towed. There's a free parking lot behind the library. I suggest you park there."

"Yes, sir. I'll move it right now."

Jake smiled pleasantly and popped the parking brake as the officer strolled back to his car. He drove the short distance past the library lawn and then went around the corner to the parking lot behind the library, bookstore, and clinic. He pulled his van into an open spot next to the handicapped slots, where he had a good view of the alley between the clinic and bookstore, the alley Roland would use to come to his truck.

Jake cut the ignition, kicked the parking brake, and rolled down the window, scanning the scene.

Okay, let's go over this again. When I see Roland get the gun from his truck, I follow him with Mace in hand...MACE!

He never did buy the mace. He'd planned on buying it the day before, but instead he got carted off to the psych hospital.

Jake looked at his watch. It was 11:07. He'd already called Wal-Mart to see if they carried Mace, and sure enough, they did. Wal-Mart wasn't far away. He needed to

be in the parking lot behind the clinic by 11:50. If he hurried, he had plenty of time. So he cranked the engine, popped the brake, and pulled his van back out of the parking lot, turning left onto Riverside drive. He went past Clinch Avenue and drove down Riverside Drive a couple of miles until he got to the interstate. He turned left onto the interstate and followed it to Walker Springs Road, where he exited and drove down one block to Wal-Mart.

From the clinic, it took him ten minutes to get to Wal-Mart. Fortunately, they had not yet converted this Wal-Mart into a Super Wal-Mart, but it still took him another seven minutes to find the spray. Including the wait in line at the register, it took eight minutes to pay for the spray. When he finally got out of Wal-Mart, knowing he was pushing his luck, he jogged to the van. Once in the van, he tossed the Mace onto the passenger seat and headed back to the clinic. By the time he got back to the interstate, it was 11:40. He pushed hard on the accelerator and shifted gears with purpose as he sped down the interstate on-ramp, praying that his van wouldn't break down under the strain.

Take it easy, he told himself. You still got time. The last thing he needed was to get pulled over for speeding. So he let up on the accelerator, confident he'd make it with time to spare. He motored down the busy not-yet-widened interstate, and rounded the top of the hill just past West Town Mall.

"What the . . . oh come on! Not now!" he screamed and stomped on the brakes. The traffic slowed to a crawl and then to a dead halt.

Jake swayed back and forth, craning his neck in a futile attempt to find the source of the delay. Brake lights blinked on and off like a string of Christmas lights fading into the summer haze, but he saw no cause for the delay.

Just as he was about to lean on the horn, the brown Duster in front of him lurched forward. “Thank you,” he said, as a wave of relief washed over him . . . until the traffic stopped again. “Oh come on!” he yelled and slammed his palm against the horn.

Jake looked at his watch—11:42. He waited. The traffic moved, then stopped. “Come on! Let’s move it! My grandmother can walk faster than this.”

At 11:45, the traffic nudged forward again and then stopped. Jake frantically searched for a solution. He would have gone to the emergency lane, but too many people had the same idea. It was also clogged with stationary cars. He would have driven in the grass, but he was hopelessly pinned into the slow lane.

For a languishing seven minutes, the infuriating pattern of stop-and-go dragged on, but at 11:52, the source of the traffic jam burned into his retinas. “I can’t believe this!” He pounded the steering wheel in denial. “Don’t you people have a life! Move it!”

At 11:54, he leaned forward with his head pressing against the steering wheel, to the point of tears. Denial turned to acceptance. He should have stayed at the clinic and taken his chances without the Mace. He should have relied on God for help, not the Mace. He’d blown it again, and Matt would pay the price.

A horn blaring from behind startled Jake’s attention back to the road. The cars were moving—slowly, but at least they were moving. *Maybe, just maybe*, he thought while inching forward, frowning at the reason Matt might be paralyzed again. To the left, flashing blue lights of squad cars surrounded an accident—in the opposite lane! The delay was caused by morbid curiosity as rubber-neckers slowed down to get a better look.

“Thanks a lot, people!” Jake said and craned his neck for a better look.

As soon as he passed the wreck, the traffic immediately sped to a normal stream. He stomped on the accelerator, shoving and yanking the gearshift toward its highest gear. He sped down the interstate as fast as the four-cylinder van would carry him, weaving in and out of lanes, dodging motorists. He reached Riverside Drive and sped up the off ramp. He veered into the right emergency lane, flying by stationary motorists, who patiently waited for the red light to turn green.

When he reached Riverside Drive, he downshifted and skidded to a stop. He glanced at his watch. 11:57! Just three minutes—if the watch wasn't slow. With the light still red, Jake saw a gap in the flow of traffic. He punched the clutch, shoved the stick into first, kicked the gas pedal, popped the clutch, and nearly tipped the van over when he rounded the curve. Riverside Drive had no emergency lane, so he passed cars in the turning lane, weaving back and forth, racing along the road that ran parallel to the French Broad River.

He sped by the *Welcome to Livingston University* sign and plowed ahead into campus. Making sure he could turn into the library parking lot when he got there, he veered over to the right lane and approached the intersection of Clinch and Riverside. He was almost there. The light at the intersection turned yellow. He had to get across Clinch and into that parking lot. He had to beat that light!

“Come on, come on, don't stop!” he yelled at the Pinto ahead of him. “It's still yellow, you can make it! NO!” The car stopped just as the light turned red. Jake slammed on his brakes and skidded to a stop behind the Pinto as traffic clogged the way across Clinch. He looked right, down Clinch Avenue. Maybe a football field away, he could clearly see the protesters still marching. He still had time.

He looked down at his watch—12:00! He looked back down to the clinic. Panic jabbed him hard when he saw Roland Denny walk down the steps of the clinic, turn right, and head toward the alley.

“Come on, let’s go!” he screamed at the red light.

It was no use. He was caught between the Pinto in front of his van and the campus cop with the flashing blue lights behind his van.

“Oh, please, no!” Jake shrieked. He spotted none other than Wayne Brummitt in his rearview mirror, moseying toward the van with his thumb tucked under his gun belt.

Frantic, Jake searched for a solution, but none came.

Wayne yanked open the door of Jake’s van. “Well, well. What have we here? If it isn’t our little Christian soldier. Now step out of that vehicle!”

“Look, Wayne, I don’t have time for this!”

“The way you was drivin’, I can see that. Now I told you I’d run you in if I saw you on campus. You think if you drove fast enough you could sneak by me? Is that it? Now out of that vehicle!”

Jake did as instructed. He vaulted out of the van, shoved Wayne backward, and dashed into the intersection, ignoring the flashing “no-walking” signal. In a series of stops and starts as horns blew, tires squealed, and Wayne hollered, Jake dodged cars and made it to the other side of Clinch, sprinting onto the library lawn.

“Stop!” Wayne cried. “Stop or I’ll shoot!”

Jake glanced back to see Wayne running across the crosswalk with his gun drawn.

Jake tore into the grass, scrambling toward the parking lot, hoping to find Roland still loading his gun and praying that Wayne wouldn’t shoot him in the back. Just then,

Jake spotted a girl coming out the side exit of the library, the kind of exit that was locked to the outside. Jake dove for the door and caught the handle just before it closed. He yanked the door open, jumped into the stairwell, and pulled the door shut behind him. He turned and stormed up the stairway, two steps at a time.

Wayne pounded on the door. "Let me in! In the name of the law, let me in!"

Jake reached the top of the first flight of stairs, jerked open the door, and sprinted across the study lounge, passing stunned faces of students on couches and cubicle desks. He rammed the study lounge door and burst into the main hallway, plowing straight into a man carrying a stack of books. Books fell in a quick series of thuds. "Hey! Are you crazy? Come back here," the man hollered after Jake.

"Sorry," Jake yelled and darted down the hall. His Reeboks echoed in the wide, high-ceilinged main corridor as he raced toward the back exit. He charged past the book theft detector, knocked aside the swinging metal bar with his thigh, and hammered through the back door. He ran a few more steps, gripped a steel handrail, and used it and his momentum to hurl his body down a short flight of concrete steps.

He hit the sidewalk running and sprinted out into the parking lot, eyes peeled for Roland Denny. He cut right and raced by rows of cars toward the alley between the clinic and the bookstore, hoping to cut off Roland's path. Jake's Reeboks made a succession of hard claps against the sidewalk when he ground to a halt just before the entrance to the alley. He bent over with his hands on his knees and caught his breath. He looked up and peered into the littered, brick-walled walkway.

He spotted a figure idling down the alley. It was Roland! The silver glint of a revolver swung by his side. He was halfway to his target. Jake patted his pockets for the Mace. It was still in the van!

“God, help me!” Jake prayed, then he tore into a full sprint down the alley. He sped past high, red brick walls, imagining Roland striving for the end zone to make the winning score for the opposing team. Closing fast, just yards away, Jake hunkered down, arms wide, eyes focused on the legs, ready for the game-saving tackle. Roland stopped and spun around. Jake saw the silver revolver streaking up as he dove for Roland’s waist.

BANG!

The gun exploded overhead just as Jake smashed into Roland’s waist, sending them both tumbling violently to the paved alley floor. Asphalt ground into Jake’s knuckles under the weight of both of their bodies as they skidded to a halt. Jake wrenched his hands from underneath his stunned, groaning adversary. He spotted the shiny revolver lying on the pavement next to a crushed Coke can. Jake shoved the heel of his palm into Roland’s chest, pushed himself to his feet, and scampered toward the gun. He snatched the gun up and pointed it at Roland, who was now climbing to his feet. “Stay . . . right there!” Jake shouted between gasps for air.

“Freeze or I’ll shoot!” cried a voice from behind. “Drop the gun!”

Jake slowly laid the gun to the ground, for once glad to hear Wayne’s voice. He raised his hands to the air and slowly turned to see Wayne pointing a gun with quivering hand. It was perfect timing. Jake didn’t even have to call the police.

In the background, a crowd of clinic protesters had gathered just a few yards away at the opening of the alley. And there was Matt—still walking. Jake had done it. Not only

had he managed to save Matt from a life of paralysis, but he'd also saved injuries to three other fellow Christians. He wasn't sure how he'd explain this to the cops, but Matt and the others were safe. That's all that mattered.

"Up against the wall," Wayne yelled and shoved Jake into the bricks. With Jake's cheek pressed against the cold, rough brick, he could see Roland Denny scratching his head, wearing a perplexed grin.

"Take it easy," Jake said. "I can explain."

"Roland, are you okay?" Wayne asked. "I heard the shot. Came as fast as I could. I swear, kid, if I'd a known you was packin' a gun, I'd of shot you in the back. Good job, Roland. You could of gotten yourself killed, but good job. Are you sure you're okay?" Wayne wrenched Jake's arm around and handcuffed his wrists behind his back.

"Whoa! Hold on a second," Jake said. "You got it all wrong."

Roland dusted his clothes off and responded. "Y-y-yeah, Wayne, I think so. Little shook up. I was uh . . . just on my lunch break when I seen this guy comin' down the alley with a gun. Like you said, he tried to shoot me. Said he's going to shoot up the clinic. I told you those fanatics are crazy."

"WHAT!?! No, he's lying!" Jake cried. "It was him! *He* was going to kill the *protesters!*"

"Shut up, kid. Tell it to the judge," Wayne said. The he said to Roland, "I'd say this makes you a hero. Way to go, cousin."

Chapter 26

“Attempted murder? This is a joke, right?”

Weary from three nights of insomnia, Jake’s fatigue-fogged brain could hardly believe what was happening. He found himself sitting at a table in a sound-proofed room, staring at this absurd confession statement before him. Detective Pete Cunningham sat in a chair across from Jake. The blond Dudley Do-Right officer who had carted Jake to Lakeside the day before and to jail this time was pacing the floor behind detective Cunningham. Jake figured they were putting on the good cop-bad cop routine. But once they put it together, he should be out of there by dinnertime. No need to bother Dad’s lawyer friend, Hank. After all, he was no criminal. He was a hero.

Detective Cunningham leaned forward. “This is no joke, kid. You’re in it deep. But if you’ll just sign that, we’ll go easy on you.”

Jake slid the confession statement away from him. “Look officer, I’m not going to sign that. I’m not going to lie just to get a lighter sentence when I don’t deserve a sentence at all. Now all you’ve got to do is see who that gun is registered to, then you’ll see I’m telling the truth.” Jake grinned and looked at his wrist, forgetting that they had taken his watch as well as his other valuables for the second time in two days. At least they let him keep his shoelaces.

Dudley walked over and put his hands on the tabletop, leaning on them. “That gun was stolen five years ago. We figure you bought it on the street.”

On second thought, calling Hank might not be a bad idea—but not yet. Jake still had a little ammo for his defense. “What about the prints? Aren’t Roland’s prints on the gun?”

Detective Cunningham smirked, lifting the corner of his brown mustache-topped upper lip. “Considering that Mr. Denny claims to have struggled with you over the gun, it wouldn’t surprise us to find a couple of his prints on it. But still, *you* were the one found holding the gun, pointing it at Mr. Denny. Even if what you say is true, your own hand would of messed up most his prints anyway.”

Jake leaned forward and rubbed the sweat-slick temples of his head. *Okay, Jake. Think. Think of something.*

Then it hit him. *Powder burns.* He’d watched enough TV to know that you couldn’t shoot a gun without leaving powder burns on your hands. “Powder burns,” Jake blurted. “If Roland says I tried to shoot him, then check my hands for powder burns. Then you’ll see I didn’t shoot the gun.”

Detective Cunningham sat back, stroking his brown mustache, drilling Jake with unrelenting eye contact. “That’s good. You been watchin’ ‘Murder She Wrote,’ I see. But according to Mr. Denny’s testimony, he knocked the gun out of your hand. He says the gun went off when it hit the ground, and there’s scratches on the gun to confirm his statement.”

“That’s because when I tackled him, he dropped the gun,” Jake said. “I told you that already.”

“Look, you might as well confess and we’ll go light on you. We know what you were planning. You were going to go in that clinic and blow everyone away, weren’t you? If Mr. Denny hadn’t of wrestled with you, you’d have pulled it off, too.”

“No, it was Roland. *He* was the one going postal. I was just trying to stop *him*.”

Detective Cunningham gave Jake a questioning look. “Postal?”

“Yeah, you know. Disgruntled workers going nuts and shooting everybody,” Jake explained. Then he realized his mouth had done it again. Postal was a term coined in the ’90’s.

Detective Cunningham sat up in his chair and frowned. “I don’t like what you’re implying. My father was a postal worker for 30 years, the kindest man you’ll ever meet.”

“Sorry. I’m sure he is. It’s just . . . just watch the news. You’ll see what I mean.”

Dudley walked up to the table shaking his head in disgust. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Being on the news. Thinking you were a hero. Sacrificing yourself in the name of God for the whole world to see. Is that what you thought you were doing? But who ever heard of murder in the name of Jesus? I’m a Christian, and I don’t agree with abortion either, but killing definitely ain’t the Christian way, under any circumstances.”

“I wasn’t going to shoot anybody,” Jake pleaded. “You’ve got to believe me.”

Mmm, mmm, mm,” Dudley said. “And so young, too.”

“You think *I’m* young,” he murmured, remembering Columbine High School.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Detective Cunningham leaned forward, no doubt thinking Jake was about to confess.

“Just consider home-schooling your kids,” Jake said. It was hard enough keeping his mouth shut when he was alert. He was just too tired to think clearly. If he could just take a nap, just a couple of hours. Then maybe he could reason with these guys.

Detective Cunningham leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. “You know, you got a lot of weird in you, kid. Acting like you know the future. Well, how do you know all this?”

Jake crimped his lips and pleaded the Fifth. He’d already done enough damage.

“And you say Mr. Denny was going to shoot the protesters.” Detective Cunningham unlaced his hands, sprang forward, and jabbed an accusing finger at Jake. “Then how did you know what he was planning? You think you’re some kind of prophet or something?”

Jake closed his eyes, forcing his weary brain to think of a loophole, some way he could tell the truth—without telling the truth—some way he could explain without ending up back at Lakeside.

Detective Cunningham pushed the confession statement back in front of Jake and placed a pen on top of it. “You might as well stop racking your brain and confess. There’s no way you’ll get out of this. I mean, in just one day, here’s what we got on you so far. Besides Mr. Denny’s testimony—”

“But Roland’s nuts,” Jake said. “Check him out. He’s got mental problems.”

“We know about Mr. Denny’s condition, but he’s on medication. He has no criminal record and no history of violence. You, on the other hand, besides Mr. Denny’s testimony, here’s what else we got on you. One,” Detective Cunningham bent back an index finger, keeping a tally, “we know you’re involved with those protesters. Two,” he pushed back his middle finger, “after the fight you got in yesterday, we know you got a violent personality. Three,” his ring finger went back, “you were stopped by campus police and fled directly to the clinic. Why did you flee? Why would you flee unless you were carrying a gun and didn’t want your plan foiled? Not to mention the fact that the campus cop found you with the gun in your hand, pointed at Mr. Denny.”

“That was after I knocked him down and took the gun from him!”

“Three.”

“That’s four,” Dudley corrected.

“That’s right. Four, ” Detective Cunningham bent back his pinky, “we know you’re nuts. We know you were taken to the mental hospital talking about already being dead. Somehow, you managed to convince them you were okay, and they let you out. Trust me, we’re going to have a talk with those folks about that one.”

“No, it was a misunderstanding. I’m not crazy!”

“No? You believe you’re dead, all right.” He opened a folder and pulled out an envelope with Jake’s handwriting addressing it. He pulled out a letter, also in Jake’s handwriting.

The blood drained from Jake's face, and it was all he could do to keep from passing out. It was that stupid letter to Todd. The letter that was supposed to save the world—anonously.

“And you believe you know the future, too,” Detective Cunningham added as he stretched out a plastic evidence bag containing a hand written letter. “This Todd guy's father sent us this letter thinking the writer was some kind of dangerous nut. And he was right. Once we got you in here, considering you said you were already dead, we checked and the handwriting matches the written statement you made about what happened today. I bet if we check it for prints, we'll find yours all over it. Before they carted you to the funny farm, you said you were already dead. And according to this letter, you really believe it. You may have lied your way out of Lakeside the first time, but just wait till they get a load of this.” He slid the letter in front of Jake.

Jake's first impulse was to eat the letter, destroying the evidence.

Officer Cunningham pulled the letter away and pulled out another evidence bag with yet another letter in it. “And that's not all. We also got this. You were smarter with this one. You typed it. But this is a letter threatening the clinic workers. Said something terrible would happen if they didn't stop the abortions. Mentions Roland Denny by name.”

Jake stared at the letter in dismay. So Roland Denny wasn't lying after all. In his own twisted way, he *was* acting in self-defense. That letter was just the thing to send a *paranoid* schizophrenic over the edge. But who would have sent such a letter? Could Matt have done that? Was that why Roland seemed to single out Matt? Because he thought Matt sent the letter? Matt would never do that . . . would he?

“That letter looks familiar, don’t it?” the detective said. “We know you sent this threat letter, cause we know you got a habit of sending crazy letters.” He held up Jake’s letter to Todd. “Milli Vannilli? Budafooco? If that don’t prove you’re nuts, I don’t know what does. You need help, kid. Now just sign that confession and we’ll see that you get it.”

“No, I’m not signing it! I’m not crazy!” Jake pounded the table. The skinned knuckles he got from tackling Roland made him regret it.

“Listen, you’re dirty, your shirt’s torn, and you look like you haven’t slept in days. Just sign it and we’ll get you some more clothes, let you shower up, and get a good nap. Then maybe you’ll be thinking more clearly and realize what you did was wrong.”

“No,” Jake muttered, shaking his head in disbelief.

The chair creaked as Detective Cunningham leaned back and propped his feet on the table. “Then you better get a good lawyer.”

Jake slumped down in his chair and said, “You got Johnny Cochran’s number?”

“I don’t know any lawyer by that name.”

“It’s O.J.’s lawyer,” Jake said, pointing at his letter to Todd.

“Yeah, well, whoever he is, don’t bother. You’d be wasting your money. Only God could get you out of this one.”

“You may be right,” Jake said. He knew he was right.

Just then, the door swung open, and Jake heard a commotion outside. Another officer put his head in the doorway and said, “Hey, Pete. We got trouble.”

Officer Cunningham pulled his feet off the table, stood, and walked briskly out of the room, closing the door so Jake couldn’t hear what the excitement was about. A

moment later, Officer Cunningham returned. "Listen, I got another case. Why don't you think about this while I'm gone? We'll finish this when I get back."

"Come on," Dudley said. "You can wait in one of the cells until then."

"A cell?" Jake didn't like the sound of that.

"Don't worry. Since you're nuts and so clearly a danger to the other inmates, I'll give you a private cell," Dudley said. "Solitary confinement."

Dudley took Jake down to the basement and led him past howling inmates. He put Jake into a cell in the back corner and slammed the door with a loud *CLANG*.

Jake stared at the solid steel door, lumpy from layers of paint, with a rectangular slit he assumed was for delivering the meals. The walk-in closet-sized cell was hot. The heat only made the remnant of body odor and alcohol worse. Then a roach stopped in the middle of the floor, regarded Jake for a moment, and went on its way.

Jake turned and inspected the bed he so badly wanted to sleep in. It was a filthy cot sitting against the cold, gray-painted, cinder block wall, with a stained pillowcase. Did they even change the sheets between inmates?

Jake moved to the corner of the cell next to a metal toilet and sink. He sank to the floor and slumped against the corner of the cinder block wall. Weary from lack of sleep and drained from worry, he couldn't begin to figure a way out of this one, lies or no lies. And he'd asked for this. No, he had begged for this. God shouldn't *have* to provide, Jake remembered telling the angel. Just send him back, and he'd take care of the rest. Jake took care of it all right, and now look what he'd done. He should have listened to that angel. He should have left things as they were. He should have been grateful for the life he'd lived instead of begging to relive it. Now look at him. In just three months, he had

gone from a respectable lab technician and loving husband to an accused homicidal maniac sitting on the floor of solitary confinement. And the detective was right. Jake might have gotten himself into this mess, but only God could get him out of it. With God, all things are possible.

Jake tilted his head to heaven and prayed out loud, and he didn't care if the other inmates heard him. "Oh, God . . ." he prayed, taking deep, controlled breaths to tame the emotion stirring inside of him. He blinked hard against burning eyes. Grown men do not cry. "God, I'm so sorry." His voice cracked, and he tried to recover by clearing his throat. He shut his eyelids tight, but that only squeezed out the first tear, sending it streaming down his hot cheek. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry," he pleaded over quivering lips. "I should have trusted You. I should have taken that angel's hand. I promise I'll trust You from now on. You're in charge. I'll let You handle things, I promise. Just please get me out of here. I'll do anything, just please . . . *please* get me out of this!"

And then he lost it. Broken, he wept bitterly in deep sobs, gasping for air, grasping for the love and forgiveness of his Father in heaven.

Chapter 27

A loud crash from down the hall startled Jake to consciousness. He'd apparently fallen asleep in the corner of the cell. He pushed himself up from the cold concrete floor, watching, listening. For a moment, he hoped it was his glorious ministering angel coming to rescue him. For a moment, he hoped that the nightmare of reliving his youth was over. But as the nasty cot against the wall came into focus, he knew that wasn't the case.

Yet, somehow, although he was still behind a steel door, he didn't feel so doomed anymore. After praying himself to sleep, he awoke to find that, in a way, God had answered his prayer, even if he was still locked up. God didn't answer with actual words, but He seemed to be answering with a simple touch of His hand.

Jake brushed his hand against the floor and felt the sharp jab of pain from his skinned knuckles. He lifted his hand and studied the raw, exposed nerves making it so

sensitive to touch. Maybe for the first time in his life, he could feel God's touch for the same reason—because the same thing had happened to Jake's soul. The pain of life had peeled away the thick spiritual skin of his own hardheaded reluctance. Jake's spiritual nerves had been exposed, and, for the first time, he could feel God's hand in his life. God's touch had come because Jake finally let it come. Before, by his own free will, he had been pushing God's hand away, asking for only a little nudge, and then trusting in himself to do the rest. His pride had told him that if only he had a second chance, he'd pave a bright new future. But now, because nobody but God could help, Jake was forced to put *all* of his trust in God. Now Jake realized that God was his only hope, and God had always been his only hope. He deluded himself to think otherwise.

Stiff from lying in the corner, Jake pried his young body away from the cell wall and stood, stretching his limbs to restore circulation. As the blood flowed freely into his legs, he felt a new power flowing through him. With the much-needed nap, he was definitely feeling better, and things would be okay. He trusted in God for that. Of course, there was a good chance that he'd end up back at Lakeside for a long-term stay, but that was okay. God would bring some good from it—maybe a mental hospital ministry or something.

Keys clanged against metal, and the door swung open. Detective Cunningham stepped into the cell. "You doin' all right in here, kid?" he said, sounding oddly sympathetic.

"Actually, I am," Jake replied, wiping at his cheeks with the heel of his hand. "I'm doing just fine."

“Well, I got some good news and some bad news. Come on upstairs and I’ll fill you in.”

Jake followed the detective upstairs. Instead of going to the interrogation room, this time he led Jake to an office. The detective stepped behind his desk and sat. “Have a seat,” he said, pointing to a chair across from his desk.

Jake sat down and asked, “So what’s the good news?” *Please, God. Make him say he’s letting me go.*

“The good news is, we’re uh . . .” he stacked papers and folders, tidying up his desk as if he were embarrassed by its condition, “we’re letting you go.”

Thank You, God, Jake prayed and felt a smile work onto his lips.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, but you were right,” the detective said. “You might still be crazy, but you were right.”

“What happened?” Jake asked, and the smile left his face.

“That’s the bad news. That Roland character, well, after we took his statement, he went back home and got another gun. He came back and gunned down three of the protesters. None of ‘em killed, but two critical. Should make it, though. That’s what the docs say, anyway.”

Jake leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. Now *two* were critical instead of one. Once again, Jake had only made matters worse.

I give up, God, Jake thought. *You’re in charge. Your will be done.*

“You want some water or something, kid?”

“No,” Jake lifted his face from his hands. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Well, anyway, like I was saying, they’re all expected to live but—”

“Let me guess. A guy named Matt was hit in the spine. He’ll be paralyzed from the waist down.”

“You mean the other kid about your age? The skinny one?”

“That’s the one.”

“Yeah, I just talked to him. Poor kid. He’s got a bullet lodged in his spine. Docs say he’ll probably never walk aga. . . .” the detective sat up quickly and eyed Jake in astonishment. “Say, how did you know that?”

“Lucky guess,” Jake said and reached up and felt the scar Todd Heller had put on his lip. The scar was in the exact same place it had been originally from the accident that kept him from graduation. And now Matt was in exactly the same condition he was in originally. It was beginning to look like some wounds were just meant to be.

“Lucky guess, huh?” The cop studied Jake for a moment. “You guess a lot of things right, I notice. Well, anyway, that Matt fella helped you get out. The doctors say he’ll live, but I reckon he thought he was dying or something, so he made a deathbed confession. He says he’s the one who sent the letter to the clinic. He says he’s real sorry and shouldn’t have done it, but what he said was true. Something bad would happen to them—eventually—if not in this world, then in the next. Of course, the way he worded it, he made it sound like he was going to personally make something happen. That’s why that Roland fella felt he had to take the protesters out, before they got to him.”

So Matt *was* the culprit. Jake’s Christian idol wasn’t so perfect after all. Matt had also made a mistake and paid dearly for it. In the same way that Jake learned the hard

way that summer, Matt had also learned the hard way. Matt should have done his legal part at the clinic. He should have trusted in God for the rest, just as Jake should have trusted in God for the care of Teresa. Apparently, total trust in God is a lesson that should be learned at any cost.

“And you’ll be pleased to know,” Officer Cunningham said, “we got this Roland Denny character to admit he was the one carrying the gun and that you had been the one who tried to stop *him*. Apparently, he hadn’t been taking his medication and went nuts. He’s a paranoid schizophrenic, you know. Anyway,” the detective said, lacing his hands behind his head and leaning back in his chair. “I don’t reckon we have any grounds to keep you. However,” he sat up and quickly interjected, “we still don’t get how you knew what Roland Denny was up to.” He sank back into his seat. “But I think you’ve been through enough today. Just don’t leave town. We’ll be in touch to talk about this later. In the meantime, about this letter you sent that Todd Heller kid, a judge wrote an order that says you’ve got to see a shrink once a week. If you don’t comply with that order, we’ll have you committed. I’m sorry it’s got to be that way, but I think it’s for your own good.”

“Whatever,” Jake said.

The detective opened one of the folders he had stacked on his desk. He pulled out Jake’s letter to Todd, pondered it for a moment, and then looked at Jake quizzically. “We’re going to give this to the shrink, too. But you know, it’s funny. I interrogate criminals every day. I can spot a lie a mile away, but you don’t act like you’re lying. I almost believe you. Roland says he’s never heard of you. How else could you have known?” He shook off the thought. “Well, here’s your possessions.” He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a box, placing it on top of the desk in front of Jake. “Check your

wallet. Make sure all your money's there. According to our records, it should be fifty bucks even."

Jake stood, fastened his belt around his waist, and snapped his watch into place on his wrist. He then plucked a pack of Big Red and seventy-three cents out of the box, stuffed them into his front pocket, and then slid his wallet into his back pocket.

"Aren't you going to check your wallet?" the surprised detective asked.

"I trust you."

"That's refreshing. Anyway, we got your van at the impound yard. Can't pick it up till tomorrow, though. Impound closed at six. You need a lift somewhere?"

"No, that's okay, I'll walk. Thanks anyway."

Chapter 28

Into the shade of a setting sun, Jake stepped out of the police station at a quarter past seven. His first impulse was to call Dad to pick him up, but after what Dad had already endured at Lakeside, Jake wasn't ready to spring this on him. Besides, he had some serious thinking to do.

He wandered up Hill Avenue, passing by the darkened, now-closed storefronts of downtown Livingston on the mostly deserted sidewalks of a town that went to bed after six o'clock on weekdays.

So what now, Jake? he asked himself. He'd lost Teresa, and Matt would still spend his life in a wheelchair. All in all, the summer had been a disaster. Well, maybe not a total disaster. At least he'd managed to do some good works and he certainly learned a lot about himself and other people in his life. And he certainly learned that things could

always be worse. He'd actually grown in ways that couldn't have been possible in 2008 and maybe not even in heaven.

But the greatest lesson he'd learned over the summer was to trust in God. As Jake watched the cracked sidewalk pass under his feet, he realized that God was the foundation upon which he walked. Instead of trusting in his own power, Jake had to trust in that Foundation, just as he had to trust in the firmness of the sidewalk. Without that trust, he couldn't walk at all.

He reached the top of Hill Avenue and stood gaping up at the huge bell tower of an old stacked-stone church. He started to move on, but he noticed that the door of the church stood wide open, and the lights were on inside. Since it was getting dark, he'd better find a way home. He still didn't feel like facing his dad, but Grandpa Simon seemed to be a pleasant alternative. He could use the phone in the church.

Jake climbed the steps of the old church and walked into the entryway. He found a padlocked wooden box that bore a sign reading, *POOR BOX*. He still didn't see a phone.

The door to the sanctuary was also open, so Jake stepped in. "Hello? Is anyone here?" he called out, his voice echoing against stone walls and stained glass. Nobody answered. Jake walked down the center aisle, continued past parallel rows of wooden pews, and stood before the altar in front of a big cross bearing a rendition of the crucified Jesus. "Well, Lord, I guess it's just You and me. Can You call Grandpa Simon for me?"

Jake slid into the nearest pew and sat, mulling over his next move. He glanced down and saw a Bible next to a hymnal. He reached for the Bible and flipped it open to the last chapter of Revelation, the chapter he was going to save for what he feared would

be his last night on earth. But unlike hotels, Lakeside hospital didn't provide Gideon Bibles.

Jake read the first verse out loud: "And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb." He silently read the rest of the incredible description of heaven. Then he came to the last line. After forty years of procrastination, he had just about finished reading the Bible. It seemed fitting to read the last line aloud: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all."

Jake clapped the Bible shut and smiled. And now that he'd finished reading the Bible, it was time he started living by it. He set the Bible down and walked back to the poor box in the entryway of the church. He pulled out his wallet. He had \$50 to his name. He riffled through his wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill. Five bucks was ten percent of fifty. He stretched it out, looked at it briefly, then folded it and started to stuff it into the narrow, wooden slit. But as he pushed it into the slit, something registered, and he pulled it back out. He slowly unfolded the five bucks, stretched it tight, and looked at the back. There it was, arching over the Lincoln Memorial: "In God we trust," he said, remembering the lesson that Grandpa Simon had taught him.

"You can't serve two masters," he recited what Jesus had taught in the Bible. "Am I going to trust this," he asked as he pulled the rest of the bills from his wallet, "or God?"

He folded up *all* of the bills from his wallet and stuffed them into the narrow slot. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out the seventy-three cents, all of the money he had left in the world, and dropped it into the slot as well. When the last penny fell, he closed his eyes, tilted his head toward heaven, and drew a deep breath. It was like he'd

been locked in a safe full of money, suffocating, and God had just opened the door, filling the lungs of his soul with cool, fresh air.

“That-a-boy!”

“Huh?” Jake turned to see Grandpa Simon in the doorway. “Grandpa? How did you know I was here?”

“Did you not ask Jesus to call me?”

Jake turned and gawked at the crucifix, not sure what to say next.

Grandpa stepped up to Jake, gave him a warm embrace, and pulled away. “You didn’t think God would send you down here all by yourself, did you? When I found out what you were up to, God let me pop into my old body, just like you did—but just when we were together, mind you. After living the glories of heaven in my perfected new body, I wasn’t about to hang out in this old, wrinkled shell any longer than I had to.”

Feeling the weight of what Grandpa had just laid on him, Jake took a seat at the nearest pew, letting Grandpa’s words sink in. It was just like Grandpa to come down there and lend a helping hand. That funny speech in the hospital . . . it all made sense now. “No wonder,” Jake said. “I thought you acted kind of weird.”

Grandpa chuckled and took the seat next to Jake. “Not as weird as you acted.”

“I guess not. But why didn’t you tell me?”

“Free will, son. You wanted to do this on your own, and I had to let you. If you had known the truth about me, it would have influenced your decisions. Until you had completely lost this notion of self-sufficiency, it was in your best interest not to tell you. But I’ve got to tell you, by the way I was preaching to you, I’m surprised you didn’t

figure it out by now. Didn't you notice my odd little speech Sunday about the meaning of life being to gain wisdom for the afterlife?"

"Well, now that you mention it, yes. That was kind of weird."

"I was just trying to help you see *why* God allowed you to do this. God knew you wouldn't succeed in any of your plans, but He did know you'd learn. He knew you'd learn truths about your life that would ease your regret. He also knew that after you hit rock bottom and finally realized that He was your only hope, you'd learn to trust Him. He knew that once you learned to trust Him, you'd become a more perfect resident of heaven. That day in the hospital, I was just trying to teach you that earth is more or less just a training ground for heaven. That way, you wouldn't feel so bad about your lack of accomplishment here on earth.

"I also wanted to make you feel better about dying so young. I know you feel like you were cheated. But I wanted you to know that since your true purpose lies in heaven, the age you leave this planet doesn't really matter."

"It does too matter, Grandpa. You've got almost ninety years' worth of good deeds under your belt, but look at me. Just when I started to take God seriously, just when I started to make up for being such a lousy Christian, I'm dead."

"Look, son, it's great that you got this second chance to do good works. But even though good works are rewarded in heaven, they cannot erase your guilt; you cannot redeem yourself. Jesus suffered a terrible price for your sins, and it is through Him that you are redeemed."

"I know, Grandpa. I've learned that now. And I know there's still a lot to learn, but can I work on that in heaven? I want to go home."

“Excellent!” Grandpa exclaimed and slapped Jake on the knee.

“But hold on, Grandpa, what about Dad? Is he ever going to get right with God? Maybe I shouldn’t leave until I’ve had more time to talk some sense into him.”

“Jacob, your father was devastated by your death. It pushed him over the edge. He went over the edge and fell right into God’s hands. Just as guilt from your mother’s death drove him *away from* God, the grief from your death drove him *back to* God.”

“So I did manage to lead him back—not here, but in 2008.”

“God used your death for that, yes, for His good purpose.”

“So my death meant something after all.”

“That’s right.”

“But what about Teresa and the baby?”

“If you hadn’t of daydreamed your way through your employee orientation, you would have known the hospital gave you free life insurance. If you died at work, it paid double. Teresa got \$100,000 when you died. She moved in with her parents and will give birth to a beautiful son.”

“Son? I have a son? I mean . . . I *will* have a son?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I guess there’s nothing left for me to do down here. But from what you’re telling me there’s plenty to do in heaven. So what’s the plan when I get there?”

“Let’s see.” A wide smile spread into Grandpa’s wrinkled face. “How would you like to sing in God’s choir?”

“Uh, Grandpa, have you ever heard me sing?”

“In heaven, you will sing like an angel.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right!” Jake said and bolted from the pew. “Let’s get out of here, Grandpa. I’ve outworn my welcome.”

“Then let’s go.” Grandpa stood with Jake and placed his hand on his shoulder. “We have prepared a banquet in your honor. In fact, your mother helped prepare the meal.”

“My mom?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, my mom! I can’t wait to meet her. But . . . before we go, I’m a little confused. What about the mess I made down here? You said Dad would go back to God, and Teresa would have the baby. From the sound of it, God’s going to fix things. But how? Haven’t I altered the future?”

“Ask Eleazar,” Grandpa said.

Just then, a point of light appeared in the church isle. It grew into a spectrum of dazzling colors that came together to form the shimmering figure of Jake’s ministering angel. “You have learned well, Jacob,” Eleazar’s music-like voice boomed throughout the church. “God is pleased with your progress. He has sent me to usher you into heaven.”

“Thank you,” Jake said, looking to heaven. “But, listen, before we go, I’ve got a question. What about the mess I made down here? If Teresa dumped me in 1986, how are we going to have a baby in 2008?”

“For God, it is simple. But first, we must return to the year 2008.” The angel looked at Grandpa.

“Jacob,” Grandpa said. “Go with Eleazar. I’ll meet you in heaven. I’ll tell them you’re on your way.”

The angel came forward. He put forth a radiant hand and touched Jake on the chest. In a great white flash, everything went blank.

Free of the confines of flesh, Jake emerged to find himself weightless, floating on air, with no *physical* sensation at all. In absolute tranquility, he experienced the familiar action below. Muffled voices came from coworkers in hospital scrubs and flesh-tone gloves. They worked in a frenzy to bring Jake’s lifeless body back to life while Ernestine stood frozen in the corner by the supply cabinets, eyes fixed in terror. Jake was back, in the ER trauma room, just after he’d died.

“I have returned you to the night of your death,” the angel said. “We now stand just before the point in time in which you made your choice to return to 1986. You returned to your past in an effort to undo mistakes. Now, you will have one last chance to undo a mistake, your mistake of not trusting in God and returning to 1986. If you now choose *not* to go back, the mistake will be completely undone. It will be as if you never went back at all. However, because your spirit is eternal and therefore outside of time, you will retain all knowledge gained. But just as before, the choice is yours. You must willingly take my hand.”

Jake started to reach out for Eleazar, but paused to take in his last glimpse of earth. He focused on the lifeless shell that had once housed his soul. It lay there on the

bed, blank eyes staring out into space. Then he noticed Todd Heller, who stood there bewildered, looking even a little sad. But Jake knew Todd wasn't sad over his death. Deep in the subconscious, Todd's sadness came the hopelessness of believing yourself to be without purpose. For the second time Jake felt pity for this miserable lost soul. Even stranger, Jake actually felt love for the guy.

Jake thought his words to Eleazar. *What about Todd? What'll happen to him now?*

A troubled look formed on Eleazar's face and the brilliant light beaming from him dimmed noticeably. "Take your last look at him, Jacob, for it appears that he shall not trouble you again. Where you now go, he may never follow."

So he's doomed? There's no hope for him?

"With God, all things are possible. However, by his own free will, he pushes God away."

Jake couldn't believe what he was about to ask. *Listen, what are you going to do now that I'm going to heaven. I mean, you were my ministering angel while I was on earth, but now that I'm going to heaven, what will you do?*

"God will assign me a new charge."

"Then why don't you take on Todd?"

Eleazar literally beamed with joy as his radiance intensified. "Would you have me minister to your enemy? Is it truly your prayer that I minister to Todd?"

Yes, that is my prayer, my last wish before I leave this planet. Is there any way, even though Todd isn't a Christian, that you could be his ministering angel? If there is anything you can do to save him, please do it.

“If it is the will of God,” Eleazar said. Just then, his eyes seemed to lose focus. He lifted his head as if listening to a voice. He nodded in agreement, then lowered his head to face Jake. “It is by your prayer, Jacob, that God will assign me to him. And God has the perfect lesson for Todd.” An almost mischievous smile crept into Eleazar’s lips. “If you believed that you had special treatment, wait until you see what is in store for Todd! Yes, he will require very special treatment indeed.”

What are you going to do?

“You shall see,” Eleazar said and extended a shimmering hand. “You can watch his progress from heaven. Now, Jacob, take my hand and on earth leave your regrets, for in heaven there is no regret. In heaven, there is only wisdom. Take my hand, Jacob, and let us go home.”

This time Jake did not hesitate. By his own free will, he took the angel’s hand.

THE END