

JESUS FREAKS

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Chapter One

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LEVI

We were in the middle of mime team rehearsal when I realized I might be in love with my best friend. Or maybe I should say “in like” with my best friend, since Pastor Chris had taught the youth group it was wrong to tell someone you loved them unless you were ready to ask them to marry you with your next breath. Otherwise you were playing with their feelings, which could break someone’s heart. So yeah, I was in like with April. Intense like.

Fortunately when the realization hit me, we weren’t in full mime makeup, designed to draw attention to and magnify our eyes. Joy, surprise,

fear—the audience had to be able to pick it all up from just our peepers. If I'd been in makeup, it'd be blatantly obvious I was experiencing all three of those emotions in that moment at, like, an 11 out of 10 level.

Then April would look over at me and know. She'd just *feel* me looking at her differently, even though I was looking at her the same way I'd been looking at her since elementary school.

I wasn't ready for that yet.

I'd been living with the idea for just a week, ever since Wes, our assistant youth pastor, had pulled me aside after service and warned me to be careful of perceptions now that April had her own car and my mom wasn't chauffeuring us anymore. Wes trusted us to not actually give into temptation, but he said not everyone knew us as well, so they might get the wrong idea that we were an item and doing things teens do when alone in cars.

It was the first time I'd ever thought that April and I *could* be an item, that my sister in Christ could one day become actual family.

That chat awakened something in me. I started stumbling over my words, my palms sweated more than usual, an ache formed in the pit of my stomach... I thought it might've been my body battling my lunch, but as a Sophomore, I'd already had a whole year of Spring High School's salisbury steak marching its way through my intestines like Sherman to the sea. I

knew what that pain was like, and, while brutal in its own way, the feeling wasn't that. No, it was something else.

I'd shaken it off for a few days, but during rehearsal for the upcoming back-to-school rally, everything had changed.

We'd been working on our new human video or skit or whatever you wanted to call it. A song played, and we acted out a story without speaking.

It went like this: there was The Guy, and he was just ambling through life, and then he met Jesus and suddenly found happiness and purpose.

I was Jesus. To clarify that for everyone, I wore a purple sash with His name on it. Just like Jesus probably did.

After meeting Jesus, The Guy encountered three bad influences who each presented a temptation common to teens: drinking, drugs (preceded by smoking), and sex.

Every time he was offered something bad, he'd look back to see how Jesus would react. I'd shake my head and use sign language to tell him I loved him. Then he'd ignore me and do the thing anyway.

April played the bad influence who tempted him with lust, but things hadn't been going well during previous rehearsals. Since we couldn't actually show sex, we'd chosen to just have them hug and let the audience fill in the rest.

But for three weeks in a row, Brian (The Guy's real name) couldn't sell

the hug.

I wanted to leap out of my skin and shake him till he was dizzy. Not as Jesus, but as real life me, as Levi. Maybe very un-Jesus-like, but I'm sure our Lord and Savior wanted to shake some people till they were dizzy sometimes too.

I got why Brian was hesitant, of course—at youth group, we were always encouraged to side hug the opposite sex. Full-frontal hugs meant bumping chests and wrapping arms around backs, which could get the blood running where it shouldn't be (until marriage, of course.)

But that was the whole point! The Guy and The Girl in the skit were supposed to be doing things they weren't supposed to with each other, so a full-frontal hug was necessary. Brian was being gifted a free pass to front hug the prettiest girl in the youth group, but he wasn't embracing it—literally!

That was the moment I realized I'd do almost anything to be in his place hugging her. And not a side hug, which we'd shared hundreds of times as best friends.

I wanted to front hug April. Hard.

The rest of the skit found The Guy getting The Girl pregnant and then feeling scared and alone as the bad influences danced around him and waved their arms like demented trees celebrating the arrival of a Gulf Coast

hurricane.

The Guy finally turned back to Jesus, and I took his place before defeating the bad influences (by dying on the cross and rising again) and reconciling with The Guy, our relationship restored.

The end.

Tori called "Cut!" and told Jason to hit STOP on the boombox that had been playing the Carman cassette.

"Oh my gosh, that one was *great*, guys!" April said from the floor. "I got goosebumps when you signed that you loved him at the end," she told me as she dabbed her moist eyes.

"We've almost got it, y'all," Tori said, hopping up and clapping her hands together. "Brian, when you smoke the cigarette, can you do the choking thing, like when a smoker inhales too much?"

Off his blank look, Tori mimed taking a big drag, stumbling around, and choking.

"April? Brian? I'm not buying it," Tori continued. "This lightweight hug makes it seem like y'all are friends, not a couple. I know you're trying to limit contact so you don't tempt each other for real, but we need a little more. Brian, really get in there and hug her tight. We've gotta believe this baby came from somewhere. Ok, back to one, y'all. Let's run it again."

By the end of mime team practice, we had the human video in decent

shape.

April and Brian both still seemed hesitant to fully commit to the embrace. Tori had stepped in to show them what she wanted, but if anything, a full-frontal, almost sensual hug with a pretty, blonde, college-aged female left Brian in even more of a daze than his minimal contact with April. He'd never had a girlfriend (nor April a boyfriend), so that much contact was a shock to his system.

As everyone cleared out, I returned my Jesus sash to Tori.

"Hey, Tori..."

She packed the sash away and stood up straight to face me. Her undivided attention could be unnerving.

"Well, uh...I was thinking...if you ever wanted to switch things up, maybe Brian could play Jesus and I could play the bad boy."

"You want to give up on Jesus?" she asked, surprised.

"Oh no, it's not that. I just thought you might want to give *him* a chance to play Jesus, you know? I don't want to be a Jesus hog."

"Aw, that's sweet," she said. "I appreciate your servant heart."

She placed her hand on my upper arm, and I knew she only meant it to be comforting, but it sent the same shock through my body that Brian surely felt with the hug earlier.

"I'll keep that in mind," she continued, "but I really like you as Jesus."

"Really?"

"Yes! I *love* the way you die. You're my favorite Jesus ever. Plus, you just have this *presence*... Listen, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think you'd be a convincing bad boy."

"Oh."

"No, it's a good thing! It's not because of your drama skills. See, every actor has an essence about them, a feeling they give off. Your essence is good. Safe. You don't have a danger to you the way Brian does. Know what I mean?"

We looked over at Brian, who had taken out his yo-yo and was showing Jason how to "rock the baby."

Because I was never one to cause trouble, I smiled, nodded, and walked away. I thought she was wrong though. If she really knew what was going on inside of me—the way I was feeling and the thoughts I had to push out—she wouldn't think I was such a good guy.

APRIL

Levi was extra mopey as we left drama team rehearsal and headed towards the parking lot. I assumed he was bummed about Tori turning down his suggestion that he and Brian try switching roles, but it could've also been

that he was being extra cautious about being seen with me, given the talks Wes and Tori had had with us—separately—that week. The parking lot was full of teens waiting for youth group to start, though, so I figured we were ok there.

“So you think you’re a bad boy now, huh?” I asked. He blushed a bit.

“Shut up.”

“Um, rude.”

“Sorry,” he said, bashful.

“Apology accepted. And I’m sorry for teasing you about it. But she’s totally right. There’s just too much Jesus inside of you.”

He screwed up his face like he’d eaten a super-potent Sour Patch Kid. I laughed and he shook his head.

“Why would you even want to give up playing Jesus?” I asked. “It’s the Son of God, the best role ever.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “The bad boy has more fun. Jesus is kind of boring. He just stands there and hugs people.”

“You have a crucifixion scene! *And* a resurrection scene! How is that boring? No character in any other skit *ever* has that.”

“I just get kind of tired of always playing that part.”

“It’s called being pigeonholed. It’s probably ‘cause you’re a pastor’s kid. You know what they say about PKs—they’re either really good or really

bad. You should be happy you're one of the good ones."

"I'm not always good," he mumbled.

"Come on, you're a golden child. Name, like, one bad thing you've ever done."

"One time I gave my mom the finger."

Jason had been tagging along behind us.

"Holy crud!" I said, jumping at the sudden presence of the slightly bug-eyed face craning itself into our space.

"I know, right?" Jason asked, oblivious to the true reason for my reaction. That was just how Jason moved through life though—zero social awareness, especially when it came to girls. On the one hand, it made sense that he couldn't pick up on social cues—he'd been homeschooled his entire 15 years. But on the other hand, he had an older sister, so they weren't an entirely foreign species to him.

"I was playing *SimCity* on the computer because I'd finished the schoolwork my mom gave me for the day. And she made me stop playing and take out the trash. I was so mad I gave her the middle finger. She didn't actually see me since I was already outside at the trash can, but the Holy Spirit really convicted me about it, so I went to her later and confessed. She grounded me from computer games for a *week*. Never doing that again. I think about it every day. I'm not proud of it."

Other than the fact that he literally just butted into someone else's conversation to stumble brag about it.

"Maybe Jason should play the bad boy," I said, grinning at Levi, who rolled his eyes.

"Do y'all want a snack?" Jason asked. "I've got 10 bucks left from my birthday money. Fruit by the Foot? Snickers? Ring Pop?"

We declined, and he ran off towards the little snack booth set up inside the church's front doors, his gangly limbs banging against each other and causing him to nearly faceplant more than once, like it was the first time so much had ever been asked of them and they just weren't up to the challenge.

"I've got a solution for our car problem," I told Levi. "We need a third person. If someone else is in the car with us, they can vouch that we weren't up to anything bad. We just have to find the right person."

"What about Reese?" Levi asked.

I looked out across the teens in the parking lot, past the girls bumping a volleyball with the wannabe surfers in Billabong t-shirts and hemp necklaces, past our resident rappers "flowing" on the tailgate of an El Camino, and past the middle schoolers playing basketball.

Beyond them all, skaters were doing tricks on some small ramps. They constantly incurred the wrath of the one and only Robbie Roberson, a prickly

youth leader who worked as a security guard by night and went to community college by day. He was usually pretty jovial and meant well, but when it came to the church parking lot, any minor breach of the rules (that he created—and updated spontaneously, as needed) was enough to make him go postal.

And the person usually breaching those rules was Reese Carter. In fact, I spotted Reese right as Robbie blew the coach's whistle dangling around his neck.

"Boards out of the basketball court!" Robbie yelled at Reese, who'd just attempted to grind a rail and failed, his board careening into the crowd of sweaty guys playing hoops nearby.

"Don't make me tell you again, Reese," Robbie said.

Reese gave Robbie a Nazi salute and then rotated his hand around to give him the middle finger after Robbie looked back to the rappers to monitor their lyrics and ask if they ever listened to T-Bone.

Reese used to be friends with us, but then he bought a skateboard and started hanging out with the skaters, joining them as they snuck cigarettes behind the shed where the church van is parked.

"While I think we should definitely focus this year on trying to get Reese to stop hanging out with bad influences, I don't know if I could spend hours cooped up in Junebug with him."

Junebug was my car, a VW Bug.

“Plus, if you’re sick one day, it’s just Reese and me. Square one. No, let’s find a girl.”

And that’s when I spotted her.

Molly.

It was perfect. She lived across the street from me (and Levi, since he was my neighbor), so she’d be going to school and church at the same times as us. Plus, she recently joined the drama team, though she hated it and only went because her stepmom made her.

I’d been wanting to reconnect with her anyway. We used to be best friends, but like Reese, she’d drifted away in recent years, and Levi took her place. It wasn’t her mom dying in a car wreck that did it though—if anything, that brought us closer together for a while. It was when her dad married her stepmom, a woman Molly fought with constantly. She began hanging out with the skaters too and now gave off a worldliness that worried the youth leaders, her mom, and me. Maybe Molly riding with us would pull her back from the dark side and towards Jesus.

“She probably won’t want to, but it couldn’t hurt to ask,” I said out loud to myself.

“Wait, who won’t want to?” Levi asked. “What’s happening?”

I was already on my way across the parking lot where Molly sat

watching the boys skate.

"Hey, good job today," I said. She looked up, surprised to see me in her territory.

"Yeah, I was *amazing*," she replied, sarcasm flooding her voice. It had become her go-to reaction since befriending the skaters. I once reminded her of what Levi's dad, Pastor Steve, always said: "Sarcasm replaces intimacy." Meaning when you're sarcastic, you're not being real with the person, and it puts distance between the two of you. She responded by talking like Swedish Chef from *The Muppets* and saying something like "Sardi dardi doo, bork bork bork!" I didn't try again after that, proving Pastor Steve right.

"I really mean it! I think you're a good actor. I'm glad you're doing drama team with us."

She studied me to see if I was lying, so I offered a warm smile. I think she finally believed me.

"Oh," she mumbled. "Thanks."

"Hey, I got a car," I said. "If you wanted, I could give you a ride to and from school each day."

She mentally digested the idea, and the look on her face told me she could use some Tums for her brain. I brought up the one point I thought might win her over.

“Which means you wouldn’t have to rely on your stepmom anymore. And you could ride to and from church with me too, if you wanted. And drama team.”

I had her with the first part, but everything else made her suspicious.

“Why do you wanna give me a ride?” she asked.

I decided to be completely honest with her.

“Because Levi and I shouldn’t be riding together alone. The appearances aren’t good.”

“So, you’re using me.”

“I’m not using you. It just works out for everyone. It makes sense. And I like you. I wish we’d hang out more.”

She thought for a moment before replying.

“Sure, whatever.”

Not the level of enthusiasm I’d hoped for, but I’d take it.

I looked back at Levi and gave him a big thumbs up.

LEVI

Jason plopped down next to me in the church’s sanctuary, his arms full of 10 dollars worth of candy, chips, and a couple of sodas. He stuck a Sour Straw into the soda and took a sip. A jolt zipped through him, and his body

involuntarily shook as the first rush of sugar, which he was denied at home, flooded through.

I usually avoided sitting next to him, but April thought it'd be a good idea to let him join us—with me stuck in the middle, of course—so Wes and Tori didn't think we were ignoring their warnings.

I was willing to try anything, really, because I couldn't imagine my life without April. Making friends had never been the easiest thing for me, but her friendliness was infectious, and with her around, I was way less shy than when left on my own. That said, she was still my main friend.

Even before Wes had pulled me aside, though, I'd already decided that I was going to make more friends at school this year. With the potential of April spending less time with me, it had become a must.

At school, I was always "the church kid," so people tended to clam up when I came around and acted "good," watching what they said and did. I felt like God's hall monitor.

Wes said I just had to put myself out there and not care what they thought. We'd talked about it a lot, because he knew I wanted to eventually play in the worship band with him, but that would involve getting up on stage in front of everyone and playing guitar and singing. Sure, I already had to get up on stage to perform in the skits, but I had makeup on and everything—I was acting a part, which I could do. But playing music was

way more personal and vulnerable, the real me.

Back at the service, the lights dimmed and April scooted in to take the seat I'd saved. Wes kicked things off by playing the first chords to DC Talk's "Jesus Freak." He belted the opening "Oh, oh, ohhhh," and the full youth band tore into the song, distorted guitars howling and drums pounding.

The band used to start services with goofy tunes like "Pharaoh, Pharaoh", but when Pastor Chris took over as youth pastor last year, he challenged Wes to find opening songs that were modern and gritty (but still fun!).

Pastor Chris really latched on to the idea of being a Jesus Freak—someone who's so into Jesus and trying to live like Him that everyone around them thinks they're kind of out of their mind. That's how he described Jesus's 12 disciples, who gave up their homes and families to literally follow Jesus all over the countryside.

Though it didn't have any hand motions to it, "Jesus Freak" still got everyone on their feet and jumping around, in spite of (or maybe due to?) lyrics about the decapitation of John the Baptist, the original Jesus Freak.

I could hop up and down and throw my hands around without a problem. It was what came later that made me more uncomfortable. After Robbie tossed out some t-shirts and Pastor Chris quickly welcomed everyone back from summer vacation and promised we were kicking off "the most

radical, life-changing, mind-blowing, devil-stomping” school year any of us had ever seen, things were turned back over to Wes.

It was time for me to do my best acting yet. It was time for praise and worship.

Roughly 20 minutes long, it followed a pattern each week, starting with an upbeat song that was a little more serious and meant to ease us into a different mindset, turning our focus away from the fun and games and more towards connecting with the Lord. Then the first of two slow songs, meant to create a gentle atmosphere in the room.

It was sort of like a love scene in a movie. For example, in *Top Gun* when Tom Cruise and Kelly McGillis are kissing in the dark, one of my all-time favorite songs, “Take My Breath Away,” starts to play, and it all just *feels* romantic.

I know it sounds like I’m saying worship songs make it seem like we’re in a love scene with the Lord, but that’s not what I mean at all. And I’m trying to not think about that comparison any more than necessary. But yeah...it *is* sort of like getting intimate with God, just not in a physical way.

At least it was like that for other people. Like April.

As Wes led the band into the first slow song, I looked over at her. We were only 30 seconds deep and she already had her hands in the air and her eyes closed, the two key praise and worship signs of surrendering to God

and entering His presence. (A phrase that had always confused me—if God was omnipotent, wouldn't we always be in His presence?)

Another 30 seconds and she started crying. What I'd give to be able to feel what she felt. Sometimes it frustrated me that she'd only been a Christian for five or six years and had such a good relationship with God; meanwhile I'd been a Christian since forever yet felt so disconnected from God.

It didn't make sense. I read my Bible the same amount as her, prayed the same amount (roughly), and went to church the same amount, but I couldn't feel the same things she did. I lifted my arms and closed my eyes like everyone else, but all I felt was my arms grow heavy and my nose twitching—probably not the presence of God and likely nothing to make me cry.

How was I going to become a worship leader, ushering others into the presence of God with my music, if I couldn't find my way there myself? I once wondered if maybe those leading worship didn't feel God the same way those in the audience did because they had to stay focused on getting the music right, so I asked Wes if he felt God when he played. He said yeah, so there you have it. It was just me. When I'd first felt called to be a worship leader, I assumed God had put the desire in my heart—but recently I wondered if maybe He wasn't involved in it at all and it was just me wanting

to be seen on stage, me wanting to be God's rock star or something.

I wished I could just ask God, but I couldn't hear Him talking to me like April did.

Yeah, she literally heard the voice of Jesus and had conversations with Him. He told her how to handle tough situations and reassured her about things, like that her mom and brother would one day get saved.

In my 15 years of praying, I'd asked thousands of questions but had never once gotten a reply or felt "led" in a certain direction.

I didn't know what I was doing wrong. Or if it wasn't something I was *doing* that was wrong, but instead there was just something wrong with me.

APRIL

Worship was *incredible*. There's nowhere I'd rather be than in the presence of God. My Father. My *real* Father. The one who reminds me over and over that He'll never abandon me, no matter how tough things get.

Standing there during worship, I felt all my anxieties lift away. It was as if Jesus Himself put His arms around me and gave me a big hug and just *held* me close.

I didn't want it to end.

Unfortunately, it lasted only two songs. Then we were back to the

normal youth service.

At least Pastor Chris was preaching. One thing I loved about him was that he was real with us—sort of like this mix of a great coach and a tough drill sergeant, inspiring us while also challenging us to push ourselves past our comfort zones.

“Summer was great, right?” he asked. “You went to camp, had an encounter with God, and got all fired up for Him. Some of you went on our mission trip to Reynosa and were given a chance to tell the orphans and the prisoners how God changed your life. And it was *awesome!* Right?”

Everyone cheered. The trip *was* unbelievable. I didn’t think I was going to do both camp and the trip at first because I was trying to save money to buy a car for when I turned 16, but as summer got closer, I knew I absolutely *had* to go to Mexico too. The car could wait—there were souls on the line. Even still, I fell short of having enough money, but God put it on the hearts of a family in the church to pay my way, so I ended up being able to go. It was truly a miracle.

And God wasn’t finished working. When I got back, Pastor Chris pulled me aside and said one of the church’s deacons had heard about me choosing the mission trip over buying a car. He happened to own a used car lot, and God had put it on his heart to give me a car. I thought I was being pranked, but a couple of weeks later, Junebug was mine. My mom was certain the

man was up to no good and was trying to take advantage of me somehow, but I told her that not every man is like the guys she meets at the bar. And that this wasn't a man thing—it was a God thing.

Pastor Chris continued preaching, talking about how getting back into our school routines can resurrect bad, sinful habits. I knew from experience that we had to be on guard against letting our fire burn out, whether because of peer pressure or laziness or just busyness.

"What about your witness?" he asked. "After a summer full of sharing the Gospel with strangers, are you gonna go back to being quiet in your school hallway, your classrooms, your cafeteria? Because this world doesn't want to hear the truth that you possess. Some principal is gonna tell you not to pray in school, some Biology teacher's gonna say you evolved from an ape, and some people you think are your friends are gonna try and make you give in to peer pressure, to compromise what you know to be *true*. It's a battle. That's why our youth group is called Frontline. We've gotta be prepared at all times for the enemy to attack. They'll call you a freak, but the Bible says in Revelation 3:16 that God would rather you be ice cold about Him than lukewarm. If you say you're a Christian, everything you do reflects God in one way or another."

I shivered as I thought about the things I'd done that weren't Christlike and how they might've affected how my friends or mom or brother

thought about Jesus.

“It’s time for us to take the fight to the world!” he continued. “You don’t have to go down to Mexico to be a missionary. Like the Audio Adrenaline song says, ‘You can take a stand...in your public school.’ It’s time to spark *revival* where you study this year! And it starts with *you!*”

Everyone whooped and hollered. Some more than others. I turned around and glared at Reese and some of his skater buddies, who’d all parked themselves on the back row where they could whisper and cut up and hold hands with girls and stuff without Pastor Chris calling them out from the stage. Reese glared back at me and then pretended to crank his middle finger up and flip me the bird. Molly was sitting next to him, and she quickly grabbed his hand and tried to pull it down.

“Next week is our annual back-to-school rally,” Pastor Chris continued. “We’re gonna give you tickets to hand out for free, and you’ve got a choice to make—are you gonna stay silent? Or are you gonna be sold out, on fire, completely and radically unashamed for God?”

I felt the tears sneaking out again. Something had been welling up inside of me over the previous couple of weeks as school had restarted. I’d never been ashamed of God at school, but I also didn’t think I’d ever really made a difference for Him there either. As I walked around the halls and saw all the party kids and freaks and loners, I knew this year *had* to be different.

For all of us and for our friends and for every person we went to school with. This *had* to be the year they met Jesus.

I was impatient for a revival to break out at our school. Until that moment, I just didn't know how to make it happen, how to get from A to B.

But as Pastor Chris closed out the service in prayer, it finally hit me—I knew how we were gonna do it.

When the service ended, we picked up our tickets, and then Molly hopped in with us and we drove over to Bennigan's, where Levi and I always went following youth group. Jason had asked if he could come, but I knew that'd mean I'd have to give him a ride home since he didn't have his license yet. So I told him my car was already full, which was sort of half true. The backseat was so small that Levi took up most of it on his own.

As Levi and I split a Monte Cristo and Molly munched on our fries, I explained that the Lord had put something on my heart during the service, and that it was so intense it was burning inside my chest.

"Might be indigestion," Molly said. She held up a piece of the Monte Cristo, which was absolutely doused in grease.

"No, it's a burden He's laid on my heart—the burden to see us make a *real* difference at school this year."

I expected them to be as jazzed about it as I was, but instead they looked unsure.

"Molly could be right—might just be gas," Levi said, teasing me. He and Molly shared a grin.

"I don't have gas!" I blurted. A couple at the next table looked over. "He told me how we're gonna do it."

They both stopped eating. And talking. And smiling. They were dumbfounded.

"Really?" Levi asked.

"What do you mean He 'told' you?" Molly asked. "Like, you heard a voice?"

"Yes!" I said. "Actually, no, but...I felt this...ugh, it's hard to explain. Anyway, that's not the point. The point is He gave me a plan, and...I really think it's gonna work."

"What's the plan?" Levi asked.

"Reverse peer pressure," I said, a big grin on my face.

"Say more, please," Molly said, suspicion in her voice.

"We're gonna focus on the popular kids and get them saved," I explained. "Then nature will take its course and everyone will follow them. We're gonna make it cool to be a Christian."

Chapter Two

LEVI

If I thought April's proposition was terrifying—and I absolutely did—the next step she suggested made me question if I needed to be friends with these people anymore. Or if I really even needed friends at all. I could steal a car and disappear into the wilderness like Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild*, changing my name and everything.

Except he froze to death in an abandoned bus in Alaska. Which still might've been the better option.

"We should all go home and pray," April said as we walked out of Bennigan's, "and ask the Lord to tell us which popular kids He wants each of us to invite."

So...she expected God to speak to us. And why wouldn't she? It was perfectly natural for her. Just April and God having some pillow talk before bed, checking in about the day, getting the scoop on the next one.

I couldn't be the only one who wasn't able to hear God. Right? But what if I was? I wanted to know everything about how April got God to speak to her, but if she thought I couldn't do something as basic as hear God when praying, would she think we were unequally yoked and write me off as a potential husband?

In fact, I couldn't really talk to anyone about it. I was the pastor's son, after all—being a prayer warrior was supposed to be in my genes. If anyone knew the truth that I was a fraud, it wouldn't just reflect poorly on me—it'd also mean my parents were bad parents. So I kept it all to myself, not even telling Wes or my small group.

That night, I laid in bed and tried my best.

Lord God...hi. Um...thank you for this day. It was...ok? I guess.

At camp, Pastor Chris had taught us about the ACTS approach: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. You started off telling God how awesome He was. (Because He needed to be reminded? He's omnipotent but also forgetful? Or was He just insecure?) Then you confessed your sins and asked Him to forgive you for them. While I can't remember if it was ever clearly stated, it was kind of implied that He won't listen if you

haven't confessed and repented of your sins.

That's usually where it fell apart for me—as I tried to remember all my sins from the day, I tended to drift off to sleep. Even on the rare occasions I made it to the Thanksgiving and Supplication (asking for help) parts, it was still a one-way conversation.

That night was no different, so I sat at the breakfast table the next morning in a daze as I thought about what I'd tell April in 20 minutes when I got in her car. Or, to be precise, what names of popular kids I'd give her.

"Honey, are you feeling ok?" I heard Mom ask. Until I felt her hand on my shoulder, I didn't realize she was talking to me and not to my little brother, Joseph, who'd been chattering nonstop ever since we sat down to eat.

"Huh?" I asked.

"You've barely touched your Cream of Wheat."

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine—just thinking."

"About what?"

I should've known that unanswerable question would come next. I walked right into a classic mom trap.

"Just...school."

"Oh yeah? How's school?"

"It sucks," I absentmindedly mumbled.

"Excuse me?" she replied. "Language!"

"Ugh, sorry. I know they're pricey, but wouldn't it be worth it if I went to a Christian school? You know, so I wouldn't be so susceptible to bad influences."

Dad laughed so hard he started coughing and had to put the paper down to take a sip of coffee and clear his throat.

"Susceptible to bad influences," he muttered, chuckling to himself.

"Well don't blame me when I come home from a night of partying all drunk and high on drugs," I replied, an edge to my voice. "Or when I get a girl pregnant because we had a bunch of sex and stuff."

"Levi, don't talk like that at the table," Mom said.

Dad glanced over at me, looked me up and down, and picked up his paper again.

"I think we can take our chances," he said.

"Maybe God has you in public school to help each other be good witnesses for Jesus," Mom said.

"Sure," I replied. I left it at that.

While I moped, Joseph recaptured their attention and started badgering them again to let him read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, a kids book that was apparently all the rage in his sixth grade class. The book literally had the word "sorcerer" in the title, so he was wasting his time

—our parents would assume it was demonic and probably promoted witchcraft and the occult.

Mom and Dad kept us on a pretty tight leash when it came to the secular culture we got to watch, read, or listen to. If it wasn't from the Christian bookstore, there was already a 99% chance we wouldn't be allowed to buy it.

A car honk and kiss on Mom's cheek later, and I was out the door. When I climbed into Junebug, April was already quizzing Molly about who she was gonna invite to the rally. I sat in the back and kept quiet.

"You know, I prayed about it...like, really hard...and I don't know that I'm supposed to be involved in this," Molly said.

"I think you should invite Kandace Klay," April said.

"Whoa," I instinctively blurted. Molly's jaw hung slack. She was equally dumbfounded.

I assumed when April said "popular kids," she meant the guys on the fringes of the football team who had a crush on her and would be low-hanging fruit, but apparently she wasn't messing around.

Kandace Klay played no sports and participated in no clubs—she simply hosted or organized basically every house party the coolest of cool kids went to each weekend. If teens were raging, she was at the center of it.

We, of course, were never invited.

Holy moly. I was glad Molly got assigned Kandace, because I would pee my pants if I had to talk to her. In fact, since it wasn't set in stone yet, I realized I should speak up.

"I agree—you should definitely ask Kandace Klay."

Molly slow-turned around in her seat and looked me dead in the eyes.

"Oh, you do, huh?"

"If she got saved, all the party kids would have to find someone else to buy their beer, for one thing. Plus, she'd make a lot of people want to come to church because...you know..."

"Because she has huge boobs?" Molly asked.

"Ok, so it's settled," April interjected before Molly could get any more explicit. "You'll ask Kandace. And don't worry—since we both have Biology with her, I'll be there cheering you on. Now, I feel like the Lord put Jen Franklin on my heart. And if we get her to come, she'll probably bring Tim with her. Sort of a two-for-one."

Good Lord. Jen Franklin and Tim King? The most popular cheerleader and the starting quarterback? Probable homecoming duchess and duke, and likely queen and king in a couple of years?

What were we doing? If this went badly, it could be social suicide. Not that these people knew or cared who we were anyway—they probably vaguely remembered us from middle school, but for the most part we were

ignored. That said, I also didn't want to cause them to know us for the wrong reason either. People already called April "The church girl," but that didn't bother her. Unlike at youth group, people at school didn't really know me. While I wished I had a higher profile, I definitely didn't want that if it meant I was "The church guy."

April looked at me in the rearview mirror.

"So who are you gonna ask?"

After April raised the stakes through the roof, there was no way I could skate by with Johnnie, the school's mascot, or David Dillon, who wasn't popular but was kinda known for being the best diver in our region.

At a red light, I looked to our left. A guy with a bucket hat and silver hoop earrings drove a Jeep Cherokee that was blaring Garbage's "#1 Crush." He was in my class, and there was no way on Earth I'd mention him to April.

"Oh my gosh, it's Alex Richards," she said, spotting him. "Wait, he's in your Radio/TV class, right? That's perfect! You should totally ask Alex!"

I guess Alex felt someone watching, because he turned my way. But it didn't seem like he actually *saw* me, though we basically locked eyes. Or at least I thought we did. He wore sunglasses, which seemed odd because the sun was only just rising. Regardless, he didn't nod or smile or wave or give any indication that he realized he was looking at a human being. As his head drifted back towards the road in front of him, I wondered if he was high.

It was possible. Alex and Kandace had a lot in common in that their popularity was built solely on being party royalty. He had it all—*everyone* loved him, he only dated hot girls (and he had sex with them, which I knew because he talked about it in our class with his best friend, Julio), he dressed cool...well, I mean, that was about it, but what else was there? If I was petrified of asking him—and I was—it wasn't simply because Alex might say no. It was because he might ridicule me and basically tell everyone else how uncool I was.

While April giddily yapped non-stop the rest of the way to school, both Molly and I rode along in almost total silence. I assumed dread was growing in her too.

I was gonna have to invite Alex Richards, of all people, to a church event.

APRIL

I couldn't wait to invite Jen Franklin to the rally. Just the thought of her encountering God the way I did when I was 10 and potentially having her life changed forever gave me goosebumps. So many good things were in store for her, and she had no idea. I just needed to be obedient to God, set aside my own insecurities about what people thought about me, and *invite*

her. I knew He would do the rest.

In Biology, I sat next to Molly and looked around for Jen. She arrived a few minutes later, dressed in her cheerleader tracksuit and wearing her hair in a ponytail tied with a forest green bow, our school's main color. She headed to the other side of the classroom and sat at the desk behind Greg Murphy.

"Be praying," I whispered to Molly as I rose. She nodded while also avoiding eye contact, and I walked quickly over to Jen. She was still talking with Greg, who was turned around in his desk to face her. Since I didn't want to be rude, I stood just behind Jen for a couple of moments, assuming she'd sense my presence.

When she didn't turn around, I finally spoke.

"Hey, Jen..."

After twisting in her seat and looking my way, she quickly shot Greg a look that seemed to ask, "Is this person talking to me? If so, why?" He shrugged.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"Hi. So, my church youth group is hosting a back-to-school rally on Wednesday, and I'd love it if you'd be my special guest."

I held the ticket out for her and continued talking as she read it.

"There'll be a band, food, drinks, prizes—kinda like a big party."

"Is there gonna be a keg?" Greg asked.

It hadn't occurred to me he might be interested too, but the more the merrier.

"No, *but!* It's still gonna be da bomb. And I can give you a ride if you need."

"You can give me a ride?" Greg asked, a devious grin on his face.

"I meant Jen," I clarified. "And maybe Tim, if he wants to come. But we can probably find a ride for you too if you need one."

"So you're trying to hang out with Tim," Jen said, looking up from the ticket.

"What? No, I just meant—"

Jen handed the ticket back to me.

"Tim won't come," she said. "And I have a car—I don't need a ride."

"Oh, good. Well—"

"But I can't come either. I have to cheer at a game on Wednesday."

"Well, we actually meet each Wednesday for—"

"I have games on Wednesdays. Like, every Wednesday. Plus, I have my own church already."

Jen Franklin goes to church?

Before I could dig into that mystery any more, which I definitely wanted to do, the bell rang and Mrs. Henderson made her way to the front

of the room.

“Ok, class, let’s take our seats.”

Jen spun back around to face the front. While I couldn’t see her face, I did see Greg share a look with her and grin. As he turned towards the front as well, he looked me up and down before winking at me.

“Miss Miller, please take your seat,” Mrs. Henderson said from the front. I trudged back to my desk and to Molly, who snuck in a quick, supportive smile as I sat. Then she went back to pretending like we didn’t know each other.

That obviously didn’t go the way I believed it would, but surely there was some reason for it. After all, God never promised it’d be easy to be obedient to Him. So maybe He was just trying to make me stronger and more resilient for bigger tasks that lay ahead. Yeah, that was probably it.

It wasn’t often that I wished I were more like my mom, but at that moment I did. She could make anyone in the world like her in under 60 seconds, a skill she typically used on guys. Unfortunately, the initial charm would wear off over time—sometimes years, other times months, days, or even hours—and eventually the guy would leave. Like my dad, my older brother’s dad, and countless guys in the years since. Occasionally a relative would say I reminded them of my mom, and it always sent a shiver down my spine. If it were true, though, bringing people to Jesus would be a piece

of cake for me. But it wasn't, so I had to improvise.

Which left me with a new question: Who could I invite that was more popular than Jen Franklin and Tim King?

Class was nearly over before Molly had a chance to invite Kandace Klay, who once again showed up about 10 minutes after the bell had rung. When Mrs. Henderson wrapped up her lesson and left us with a few minutes of free time before dismissal, I poked Molly in the back and nodded at the seat in front of her, where Kandace sat.

Molly sighed, and I could tell she was really hoping I'd forget, but I never do. Some people loved that about me, some people hated it. Molly reached into her bag and pulled out the ticket. For a moment, she held it in both hands close to her chest and hardly moved. I assumed she was praying. When the moment lasted slightly too long, I leaned forward and stuck my head out to the left to see if her eyes were still closed. They weren't. Instead, they were looking straight down in front of her at... Kandace's luminescent pink thong, which stuck out of her low-rise jeans, creating a neon whale tail only slightly brighter than her fresh weekend sunburn.

"Molly?" I whispered. She shook off her trance and took a big breath before leaning forward and tapping Kandace on the shoulder. Kandace whipped around in her seat so fast that Molly and I both instinctively sat as

far back in our desks as we could.

"You tap my shoulder?" she asked.

Molly couldn't even utter words—instead she just nodded furiously.

"What's up, hon?" Kandace asked, sounding like the Denny's waitress who always gives Tori and me a plate of bacon even though we don't ask for it and I don't even like bacon.

"Hi, um..." Molly muttered. I'd honestly never seen her so shy before.

"I...uh...like your blouse," Molly said.

"Aw, thanks," Kandace said, looking down at it and sticking her chest out to show it off. Surely she'd get a dress code citation at some point later that day for the amount of cleavage she was letting run wild.

Molly was still holding the ticket out in front of her. Before she could say anything, Kandace read the situation, snatched the ticket, and started inspecting it.

"Um, we're having this thing at my church..." Molly started.

"Oh, sweetie," Kandace said, pity in her voice, "I appreciate you thinkin' of me, but I don't go to teeny bopper things. Y'all have fun though! Say 'hi' to Jesus for me."

And with that, she returned the ticket and whipped back around in her desk. Their conversation was over. Molly sat dazed for a moment before looking over her shoulder at me. Even I couldn't find the upside to that

encounter. I just shrugged.

“Yeah, so...I’m never gonna do that again,” she said.

LEVI

I thought about getting to my Radio/TV Production class late so I’d have an excuse to not ask Alex before lunch, but since it was our lunchtime class, it was split up into a half hour study hall first, lunch second, and finally the class itself.

Plus, I was basically incapable of being tardy. Part of it was guilt over doing something “wrong,” but also I didn’t have many people to talk to at school anyway, so there was nothing for me to do between classes except go to class and sit quietly at my desk like a freakin’ dork.

Which is exactly what I was doing when Alex showed up. He usually didn’t arrive before the bell, and Julio was always tagged along, so for neither of those to be the case meant something odd was up.

He usually strode into class with a pep in his step and some groove in his move. Instead, he quickly slipped in and stood behind the doorframe. He scanned the hallway for something and seemed relieved that he didn’t see anything out there. He slid into the seat directly to my right and immediately laid his head down on top of his arms on the desktop, letting out a big sigh.

And he looked at me. Like, *right* at me.

Or, as it felt earlier in the car, right *through* me.

After a few awkward moments of me not knowing where to look or how to respond, we made eye contact. Or so I thought. But did we? Should I say anything or just pretend it didn't happen?

"Sup," I said, nodding at him.

He blinked and seemed to finally see me.

"Oh hey, 'sup?"

"Not much," I said.

And then, for reasons I'll never understand, I added...

"Straight chillin'."

"Word," he said, distracted.

I felt the rally ticket in my pocket and knew that the moment had come to invite him.

"So, uh—" was all I got out before a loud voice called out from the door.

"*Dawg!*"

Julio entered the room at full tilt, and he arrowed straight up the aisle to us, plopping down into the seat in front of Alex.

"You see him?" Alex asked as they executed one of those complicated handshakes. I always wondered if friends practiced those.

"Nope. I *did* see him by his locker earlier, though, and he didn't say shit about shit, so. I don't think he knows. I think you're in the clear, dawg."

"Or he's waiting to kick my ass when I least expect it."

"He ain't gonna do shit. Russell's a little bitch."

"Dude, keep it down!" Alex whispered, looking around.

"Who cares? Let him hear. Let him come try to kick your ass. I got your back."

Julio began to sing.

"He's a bitch, he's a bitch, he's a bitch! Russell's a little bitch!"

"For real, you gotta stop," Alex pleaded.

"Who's gonna say shit?"

I suddenly felt both sets of eyes staring at me. I'd been pretending I wasn't hearing anything, even though I was sitting two feet away, so there was no way I couldn't. I felt I had to acknowledge their staring.

"I, uh...I won't say anything about...well, anything. I don't even know what we're talking about."

"Right answer," Julio said. "My dawg."

At that moment, Shannon Cook—co-captain of the dance team, key member of the party crew, and one of the hottest girls I'd ever seen in my life—dropped her books on her desk behind Alex and plopped down.

"Did you fuck Trish Compton Saturday at Kandace's?" she asked Alex.

“Shhhhhhhhhhh!”

I honestly can't emphasize enough how long Alex dragged out the plea for silence. Fortunately, Shannon obliged and whispered going forward.

“Oh. My. God. You totally did. Does Russell know?”

“Man, fuck Russell,” Julio said.

“You've *got* to stop using his name,” Alex said. “People are gonna hear.”

“I don't think anyone knows,” Shannon said. “I just happened to see you and Trish disappear into the bathroom together. You were *wasted*.”

Alex slumped in his chair and pulled his hat farther down over his eyes.

“I'm such a fucking dipshit. Why did I get myself into this? I just gotta lay low and let it blow over. I think I need to take a break for a bit. I've been going too hard. If I hadn't been rolling, I'd never have messed with Trish. So stupid.”

“You're obviously still trying to get over Amy,” Shannon said.

“They say the best way to get over a girl is to get under another one,” Julio mused.

“That's what got me into this shit in the first place.”

“Let's smoke out and chill,” Julio said.

“I don't know if I want to.”

"Fuck, man, I do. I bet this guy knows what I mean."

After an awkward silence, I realized they were all looking my way again.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you smoke out, little homie?" Julio asked. "He's all quiet, but I bet he gets wild with a little help. You should come to Kandace's party Friday. A keg, some weed, some hoes..."

Had I just gotten invited to a party? With popular kids? Was he messing with me? Maybe he'd never seen me with April and hadn't yet clocked me as "the Christian guy." To him, I had a clean slate—I was a generic lump of boy with the potential to become anyone and do anything. It felt nice, which of course made me feel guilty.

"Leave him alone," Alex said. "Levi's a good kid."

So many feelings coursed through me in that moment—irritation at being called "good" again and fury at Alex referring to me as a "kid." BUT! Alex Richards knew my name!

I touched the ticket in my pocket again.

"I bet he doesn't get mixed up in stupid shit like this," Alex said.

"Probably dates good girls and all that. Maybe I need a good girl for a bit."

"Fuck *that!*" Julio said. "Give me the baddest bitches."

"You two are dumbasses," Shannon said.

+++

Though I'd brought a sack lunch, I tossed it in the trash and found the longest cafeteria line I could to delay the inevitable. The lunch period was nearly half over by the time I finally got to our table with my nuggets.

"Where've you been?" April asked. "I'm starving, man!"

She hadn't even touched her food yet.

"Ok, let's pray," April said. I sighed and bowed my head. As April blessed the food, I opened my eyes back up and unbowed my head, looking around for anyone who might spot what was happening. No one seemed to care though. Right before April finished, I re-bowed my head and closed my eyes. We said "Amen" together and dove into our food.

"So, how'd it go?"

"How'd yours go?" I asked, a last-ditch attempt at avoidance, hoping to get her on a roll recounting her own experiences long enough for the lunch bell to ring.

She quickly filled me in on their failed efforts. I knew it shouldn't have, but the fact that they bombed so badly made me feel better and took some pressure off. Obviously I'd never admit that to her. Instead, I formulated a perfectly elegant response that would also annoy my mom if she were there.

"That sucks."

"How'd it go with Alex?" April asked.

I told her I hadn't asked him yet because he was distracted with some other drama.

"*Levi*, you can't be scared that people will find out you're a Christian."

"I'm not!"

"You are! You heard what Pastor Chris said—if we deny knowing God here on earth, He'll deny knowing *us* in heaven. Do you want that?"

"Of course not."

"Then you have to be bold. Jesus said we'd be persecuted for our faith. It comes with the territory. But if you put yourself out on a limb for God, He'll honor that. Don't worry, you'll get another chance, and you'll do it this time."

Her faith in me occupied my thoughts all through the rest of our Radio/TV class. After the video announcements were shot and editing started, our class was basically left to do whatever we wanted for the rest of the period. Which meant I had plenty of time to invite Alex to the rally.

But he was deep in conversation with Shannon about his dad, who was apparently not a great guy. Alex seemed really bummed about it. Trying to invite him while he was in such a vulnerable state just felt wrong. So I didn't.

When the bell rang, I had another opportunity, but the words just

wouldn't come. I followed him and Julio out the door and watched as they walked away.

I don't know how she made it to my class so fast, but April was suddenly in the hallway too, Molly in tow. Once again, I thought about what April had said and all the trust she had that I'd find the courage to invite Alex. Her face was full of anticipation.

All I wanted at that moment was to make her proud of me.

"Hey, Alex!" I called out down the hall. He and Julio stopped and turned around. I walked over to them.

"We're doing this back-to-school rally at my youth group on Wednesday, and I thought you might want to come."

I handed him the ticket. Julio made a sound like a wet fart.

Alex looked at the ticket and back up at me.

"You're inviting me to church?"

"Yeah, but it's a cool church. With lots of good girls. You know, if you're still trying to meet one."

Both claims seemed highly dubious to him, but something in his reaction made me think he might be open to the idea.

"I dunno, man. I've got some things going on, so—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I quickly said, almost apologetically. "I understand."

He saw April and Molly waiting for me. I looked back at April, and she smiled my way.

"That your girl?" Alex asked.

"Look at you, big dawg," Julio said.

"No, that's my best friend, April. She goes to the same youth group."

"Oh, word," Alex said.

He processed that information and held up the ticket—but didn't give it back.

"Tight," he said. "Thanks for the invite."

As they walked off, Julio whispered and laughed, so I assumed he was already making fun of us. Alex seemed to have tuned him out though.

April ran up, Molly trudging behind her.

"You did it!" April said, hugging me. "Jesus would be so proud!"

I almost melted in her arms.

In the chaos of the moment, the hug was full-frontal, full-strength, full everything. She held nothing back. Her head turned to the side and landed snugly against my chest as she squeezed me. I closed my eyes and breathed in. April's scent flooded my olfactory system.

It was the most thrilling moment of my life to that point.

When I finally opened my eyes, it wasn't April I saw though. She was still hugging me, so I looked past her and locked eyes with Molly just in time

to witness her confused face break into a sly smile. Her eyes lit up.

She knew.

April eventually let go of me and held me at arm's length.

"We're *so proud* of you," she said. "Right, Mols?"

"Absolutely," Molly said. She looked me dead in the eyes again. "In fact, I've never been more proud of you, Levi."

As we headed to our next class, I caught April looking down the hallway after Alex and Julio. Right as they reached the doors to the next hallway, Alex looked back.

But he wasn't looking at me.

Chapter Three

APRIL

Alex Richards was coming to the back-to-school rally.

God was orchestrating things in ways I could've never imagined. That's why He is *so good*—He knows what's best and is already putting His plan into motion even while we're still bummed about things we thought would work out but didn't. It's just the coolest.

Tuesday morning was our Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) meeting, which met on the stage in the school auditorium before classes and was attended by hardly any actual athletes. Levi, Molly, and I were the only teens from our church who went.

I was Vice President, though I'd decided to run for President the next

year so I could steer the group away from the dumb games Mary Crowder had us playing and towards in-depth Bible study and worship. In the meantime, I was trying to convince Mary to include Levi in the worship leader rotation, which meant he'd get one of the weekly meetings a month. She wasn't sold yet.

I hoped the back-to-school rally might shift some hearts and minds my way though, so I invited everyone to the rally. I thought it was a great chance to show the kids from Mary's Baptist church what a *real* experience with God looked like and what an on-fire youth group felt like. But when I stood up and invited everyone during the announcements portion of the meeting, Mary immediately shot it down.

"We'll all be at our own churches," she said. Then a smarmy smile formed. "Good luck though. We'll be praying for you."

The. Nerve.

"She's gonna pray for *me*?" I said to Tori the next morning at our weekly breakfast accountability hang. "Oh, it's on. I'm gonna be praying for *her*. We'll see whose prayers get answered."

I then added under my breath, "Gonna be mine."

Tori shared a look across the table with Molly, who sat next to me. They both burst out laughing. I couldn't help but smile too. I knew how ridiculous I sounded.

"Listen, I'm not saying God won't listen to her prayers," I continued. "Obviously He will. But I *am* saying that, like, God and I are pretty close, and I know He's gonna listen to mine. That's why my husband's gonna be super hot one day."

That sent them over the edge. Molly snorted as she laughed.

At first, she didn't want to join Tori and me since we met at Denny's at 6 a.m., but her desire to avoid her stepmom outweighed her desire to sleep in.

The breakfast gave us a chance to tell Tori how things were going at school, at home, and in our love lives. The last one was sort of a joke since I'd been reading *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and decided I was going to spend this next year focusing entirely on how I could serve Jesus and not get distracted by boys.

That didn't stop us from talking about them though.

"I'm serious, y'all," I continued, "God wants to give us good things. And a hot husband is a good thing."

"Oh, I totally agree," Tori said as she wiped tears from the corner of her eyes.

"Right? He already did it for you."

"*April!*" Molly said, shocked.

"What? Tori knows Wes is hot!"

"Amen," Tori added.

"And you prayed for him, right? And then he showed up!"

"Well, sort of," Tori said. "More like he showed up and then I prayed for him."

After a couple more minutes of laughter, Tori did that thing she always managed to do where she beautifully segued from a light moment to a deeper moment.

"What else do you pray for about your future?" she asked me.

"About my future husband?"

"Sure, but, you know, just your future in general."

"Well, in addition to being hot, I obviously pray that he waits for me and stays pure."

"So you can have that hot wedding night sex," Molly added.

"*Molly!*" Tori said, her turn to be a little shocked.

"We're all thinking it," Molly said as we laughed some more.

I was glad to see Molly loosening up around Tori. They used to be close—our youth leaders stayed with the same group of kids from middle school through high school graduation, so Tori had been with us since 7th grade—but Molly had drifted away from her as well in recent years.

"I also pray that he loves the Bible and is strong in his walk with the Lord," I continued. "And that he's in ministry somehow. A youth pastor or a

pastor or something. Maybe even a missionary! Wouldn't that be the bomb? We could travel the world and, like, work side by side helping orphans in Kenya and showing *The Jesus Film* and preaching and stuff."

"That's really specific," Tori said.

"You think I'm specific?" I asked. "You should hear what Levi wants in a wife. Someone who plays guitar and sings, so they can travel in a van playing coffee shops and leading worship and ministering through music like *Out of the Grey*."

On a wall in his room, Levi had a large poster of *Out of the Grey*, a Christian husband and wife music duo. The husband, Scott, played guitar while the wife, Christine, sang. They were both absurdly gorgeous.

"You like singing," Molly said to me. She wasn't wrong—when we had sleepovers back in the day, we'd stay up late singing along to her mom's Amy Grant tapes (before Amy got divorced and went secular) using hairbrushes, toothbrushes, or really any kind of brush as microphones. I was touched that Molly remembered those times, but I didn't know why she was randomly mentioning it.

Tori was watching me closely. I knew what she was thinking.

"Molly..." I said, leaving the rest unsaid.

"What's wrong with Levi?"

"Nothing. He's kind, generous, loyal, very Christ-like...and nobody

makes me laugh like he does.”

“And he’s cute?”

I glanced over my shoulder. Across the restaurant, Levi and Wes were having their own accountability breakfast, far enough away that they couldn’t hear us. I studied Levi’s face for a moment. Did I really think he was cute?

“Sure,” I finally answered. “I guess he’s cute.”

“Well, there you go,” Molly said.

“Levi’s my best friend.”

“Great couples start off as friends first. Sometimes best friends. That’s literally the plot of like a thousand romantic comedies.”

Tori smiled, and I knew I’d said the right thing.

“Oh, I meant to ask...” she started, “Ben got sick and can’t make it to the rally tonight, so...do you want to share your testimony?”

I was floored.

I’d always known one day God would use my story to minister to people, but I never in a million years would’ve dreamt that it’d happen so soon.

“Yes,” I answered. “Heck yes.”

LEVI

My first accountability breakfast of the year with Wes got off to a good start, but then he had to go *there*. It was as if every youth leader had read the same *How to Make a Teen Uncomfortable* leadership book. I hoped he'd think "Maybe not today" or "It's too early to be talking about this" and we'd just discuss our favorite parts of *Con Air*, which we'd both seen that weekend.

"I'm surprised your parents let you watch it since it was Rated R," he'd said.

"Well, they got on AOL and checked the Focus on the Family movie review website and saw that it was only Rated R for language and violence, not sex or anything."

"That makes sense. Speaking of, how are you doing with...you know?"

I totally set him up and didn't even realize it. I lobbed a big, fat softball right into the strike zone, and he cranked it (no pun intended). There was no way I was going to get through that pre-dawn breakfast without being asked if I'd struggled with masturbation that week.

"It's been ok, I guess."

"Did you, uh...? Were you online when you...?"

Across the Denny's, April, Molly, and Tori cracked up with laughter. It felt like they were laughing at me, though there was no way they could've

heard Wes's question. I still lowered my voice.

"Yeah, I stumbled a bit."

"Don't beat yourself up about it. As long as we confess our sins, the Bible says God is faithful and just to forgive them. We just gotta truly repent and try to change, you know?"

I nodded.

"I still struggle too," he added. "I'm there with you."

I thought about my failure all the way to school and even through the rest of the day. I'd have to really focus that week so I had nothing to report next time, so I could say I'd stayed pure and all was well.

April encouraged (pestered) me on Tuesday and Wednesday to ask Alex if he was coming to the rally, but when I didn't, she took care of things herself.

"Hey, Alex!" she yelled out as he and Julio walked by in the hall. He turned around.

"See you tonight!" she said as she waved.

He grinned, bemused. Then he nodded a "What's up," turned back around, and kept walking.

"Does that mean he's coming?" Molly asked.

I shrugged, but my gut said he'd never speak another word to us—especially *me*.

+++

April was so nervous about giving her testimony later that when we were applying each other's mime makeup in the church nursery before the rally, she dabbed the same spots on my face over and over with the application sponge.

While I wasn't mad about it, because it meant she was touching my cheeks longer than she probably should've, I did feel bad that she was so anxious.

I took things into my own hands when it came time to paint the straight black line from above each eyebrow down to below my lower eyelid. Otherwise who knew which direction she'd send that thing or if I'd end up with a brush in my eye socket.

"I got this one," I said, taking the bottle and brush from her. "You ok?"

"Yeah, I just..." she trailed off.

"You're great at public speaking," I reassured her. She truly was. Pastor Chris often recruited her to go through all the upcoming announcements at youth services. She always brought great energy to the job and never seemed flustered.

"It's not that," she said. "What if I, like, leave out an important part of my story or don't tie it together well? What if someone is ready to get saved

but they don't because I didn't say the right thing?"

"Just do your best. Say what comes to mind. Go with your gut."

"You're right—The Holy Spirit will put the perfect words in my mouth."

Not exactly what I meant, but sure, we'll go with that.

After applying the rest of my makeup in the bathroom next to a couple of junior highers who were spraying CK One all over themselves to cover up the smell of parking lot basketball, I headed back to the nursery. Something caught my eye through the glass doors that led outside.

A Jeep Cherokee had just pulled into a space. The driver's side door opened, and out stepped Alex.

He actually came.

I swiftly moved towards the doors, pushed them open, and beelined straight for him.

He was looking around, taking it all in.

The parking lot was packed. Every group was operating at full capacity—the rappers on their tailgate, the skaters (including extras who'd shown up for some new ramps Robbie had built), the volleyball kids (who actually had enough people for a full game on our court), and the hoopers.

I was almost to Alex when Reese beat me to him.

"Whoa!" he said. "Alex? What the...?"

Reese looked around, but Robbie was busy lowering the basketball

hoop so some kids could dunk.

"...fuck, bro?" Reese continued, lowering his voice.

"Reese? Dude, what are you doing here?"

"My mom makes me go here. What are *you* doing here?"

"I invited him," I said from behind them.

Both turned and, when they saw me, jumped.

"Holy shit!" Reese said.

"Reese! Language!" Robbie cried out.

I'd totally forgotten I was wearing my mime makeup.

"Bro, are you a clown?" Alex asked. "You look like you're a Juggalo."

"No, it's not clown makeup," I said. "It's mime makeup."

"Like..." Alex did the mime moves everyone does when they think of miming—hands up feeling an invisible box.

"Yeah, kind of," I said. "But we do it to music. It's called a human video. We're doing one tonight. I know, it's kinda weird."

"You act?" he asked. "You're always so quiet in class though."

"Well, I'm a mime, so I'm still quiet. But yeah."

"Bro, you don't even know," Reese said to Alex, slapping him in the chest, "He's hot shit here. He's the fuckin' Christian Nicholas Cage."

"Reese!" Robbie yelled, fully exasperated.

"I mean, I'm not Nicholas Cage," I told Alex, trying to lower his

expectations.

"Huh. That's cool," he said. "I think."

"Well, I've gotta get back inside and finish getting ready," I said. "But I'm glad you're here. Save me a seat."

I didn't know why I said the last part. It was implied that we were gonna sit together since I invited him, right?

"Uh, yeah, sure," Alex said.

I booked it out of there before he could change his mind. As I left, I heard Reese talking to him and began to get worried.

"We're gonna go smoke behind the building. Wanna come? Shit. Never mind. Parking lot Nazi."

Robbie walked up to them and aggressively stuck his hand out to Alex.

"Yo, what's up, my brother?" he said, sliding out of parking lot Nazi mode and into youth leader mode. "I'm Robbie. Lots of people call me the Robbmeister General. You new here?"

"Fascist!" Reese said, hiding it under a fake cough.

APRIL

It might seem easy to condense the way God miraculously transformed your life into a five-minute monologue, but I'd been practicing

all afternoon, and I couldn't get my story under 15 minutes.

Testimonies seemed to have a structure to them: tell how things were before, including as many terrible details as possible (drug addicts had the best testimonies); talk about your rock bottom moment; explain what event or person led you to Jesus; and wrap up with how everything has been great since.

While those things happened for me, they just didn't feel that dramatic. There was drugs and alcohol, but I wasn't the one doing them. I was just an observer. The only thing that involved me was cleaning up after my mom.

Yet it still felt life-changing when I gave my heart to Jesus.

All the dark stuff for me seemed to have taken place inside my heart and my head rather than at crazy parties. The transformation for me was just about...inner peace. I could talk about that, but would anyone really care?

"Alex came."

Levi had appeared out of nowhere.

I let out a squeal of glee and grabbed his hands.

"We have to pray."

"We do?"

I bowed my head, closed my eyes, and began to pray.

“Father God... *Thank You* that Alex is here. You’re gonna do something special tonight in his life. Send Your Holy Spirit to soften his heart to what You want to tell him. Make him receptive to the Gospel. Give him ears to hear and eyes to see Your goodness. Speak to him through us in a way that only You can. After all, You’re the only one who truly knows what’s going on in his life and what he needs. Prepare him to receive Your love tonight. In Jesus’ name we pray...amen.”

Everything suddenly felt realer than ever. The plan God had given me was actually unfolding that very night. We just had to keep from screwing it up.

To stay out of sight until it was human video time, the drama team watched everything from inside the nursing room, which had a one-way window that allowed breastfeeding mothers to look into the sanctuary. Since it was a youth service, there were no nursing moms, although there had been two years before when Lisa Burgess got pregnant with James Dalton’s baby their Junior year, even though they both had taken True Love Waits pledges and swore they weren’t using their tongues when they kissed. They eventually split, and Lisa stopped coming to our church. She never mentioned why when I’d see her at school from time to time, though it probably had to do with her having a baby and no one else in the youth group having one.

Anyway, at the rally, the leaders opened the main doors, and a hundred teens poured in and filled the space like an hourglass that had just been turned upside down.

A video projected on our big screen counted down from 10, and when it hit 0, Wes started playing the opening guitar line to Audio Adrenaline's "Big House."

Alex eventually filed in with Reese and the rest of the skaters and made their way to the very back row, which was less than ideal. I began to pray that Alex wouldn't be distracted by them cutting up.

Any worries were quickly dashed as Robbie took to the stage in all black, including wraparound sunglasses and a beanie, looking like a burglar. Except that he also had a giant...something...strapped to his back.

"Is that a leaf blower?" I asked Levi.

"No, it's a potato gun," he said, in awe.

As Robbie went to aim the long barrel, which reached around from the backpack like a vacuum cleaner hose attachment, the potato gun went off. A huge batch of tiny candy shot out of the barrel, over everyone's heads, and hit the ceiling in the back of the sanctuary. It flew out with such force that much of it broke into pieces and rained down on the leaders in the back while the rest embedded itself into the actual ceiling tiles.

The crowd went *wild*.

Wes and Robbie shared a “whoops” look onstage.

I looked for Alex, and he was wide-eyed with a giant, bewildered smile on his face. So far so good.

Robbie frantically made some adjustments to the gun and shifted the barrel to the other side of the sanctuary. He intentionally aimed at the ceiling so that no teens would accidentally get sent home bloodied by Jolly Rancher shards.

Once all the candy had been given out, Robbie loaded rolled-up t-shirts into the gun, one by one, and bazooka’d them off the ceiling and into the crowd. Then he left the stage.

Wes’s worship set was more upbeat than usual. While one song was kind of slow, they breezed through it quickly rather than really being patient and letting the Spirit move like usual. I understood that they wanted to keep any visitor’s attention, but I wish they’d just done our normal thing, because I thought the way we took our time to really enter into worship and listen to God was what set our youth group apart.

The drama team was up next. While Pastor Chris welcomed everyone, we took our places on stage, and then the skit began. Since I was frozen in place for the first part of the skit, I made sure I was looking out in Alex’s direction so I could watch his reactions. He was paying attention, which was more than I could say for Reese and the rest of his crew, but Alex looked

confused more than anything. During the second temptation, Alex laughed when Molly smoked the cigarette before offering it to Brian. That wasn't good. I could understand a laugh when Brian choked on the smoke, but to laugh earlier meant Molly messed something up in how she smoked the cigarette.

When she pretended to stick the needle in her vein and let the drugs course through her, I heard more giggles from the direction of the skaters.

"Who does heroin?" one of them said in a loud whisper. "Are these kids hanging out in the movie *Platoon*?" They were promptly shushed by Robbie.

As Molly stumbled back over to her spot, I knew the skit was a disaster. We got the cigarettes wrong, we got the *drugs* wrong...

I could hardly bear to look Alex's way, but when I did, I saw that while the rest of his row was laughing, he was watching me closely. I thought he'd look away after a moment, but he didn't—he just kept staring right at me, like he was studying me. Though I was supposed to be frozen, I couldn't hold his gaze anymore.

I had to look away.

LEVI

After the skit, I raced to the bathroom to wash all my makeup off. There was no way I was gonna go sit next to Alex while still looking like the dude from the VHS cover of *Hellraiser* that I always hurried past in Blockbuster.

When I went back into the sanctuary, Pastor Chris had already begun his main message. Fortunately, Alex had actually saved me a seat.

"Good job," he whispered as I sat.

"What?"

"The skit."

"Oh, right. Thanks. What do you think?" I whispered, waving my hand at, well, everything.

"It's wild, man," he said. "I told Reese it's kind of like if the WWE did a church service."

Reese stuck his head into our convo.

"We even got our own Stone Cold Steve Austin over there," he added.

Reese nodded at Robbie, who stood at the back, beanie and sunglasses still on, arms crossed over his puffed-out chest. As if on cue, he looked over and raised his index finger to his lips.

Pastor Chris was getting to the heart of his message by that point. In spite of Reese and his buddies playing random games that usually included thigh punching or pinching, Alex's focus mainly stayed up front, and he

seemed to be genuinely listening to what was being said.

For big rallies like that one, Pastor Chris usually didn't spend too much time reading long portions of Scripture the way he did during our weekly Bible studies. Instead he stuck to more general ideas like humans being terrible and needing Jesus to die for our sins so we don't go to hell. Basically the Romans Road type stuff but in sermon form.

He'd hit on that some already, and Alex was definitely listening, but there was a single moment that things seemed to really change.

"Maybe you're here tonight, and you're saying, 'Pastor Chris, there's this hole in my life,'" he said. "Know what? We've all got it. You got it, you got it..."

As he said this, he pointed at random people in the crowd. Then he looked around and spotted us on the back row. He zeroed in on Alex and looked at him for a long moment. The pause was so lengthy that even I was uncomfortable on Alex's behalf. Pastor Chris raised his arm one more time and pointed directly at Alex.

"...you got it."

Alex stopped slouching and sat up straight in his seat, totally focused on Pastor Chris now.

"And I've got it," Pastor Chris continued. "And we keep trying to fill it with things the world tells us are cool—drinking, drugs, boyfriends,

girlfriends, sex...but nothing works.”

Alex leaned forward in his chair.

“Let me tell you this...” Pastor Chris said. “I know what's missing. Jesus Christ will fill your God-shaped hole.”

Oh no.

I'd been in public school long enough to know a phrase like that wouldn't escape ridicule. Reese was the one. Of course he was the one.

“Did he just say Jesus will fill your hole?”

All his buddies around him burst into laughter, though they tried their best to stifle it.

Within seconds, a big paw clamped down on Reese's shoulder. He looked up to see Robbie, who only had to nod towards the sanctuary door.

“Oh come on...” Reese said as he got up. Since he was sitting in the middle of the row, he had to squeeze past everyone's legs to get out. At the very end of the row, one of his buddies stuck a leg in his path and caught Reese's foot right as he was raising it to step out into the aisle. He tripped and face-planted into the carpet.

When he rolled onto his back, it was plain to see he was furious.

“You motherf—”

Before he could finish the word, Robbie had covered his mouth and wrapped his arm under Reese's armpits and around his ribcage. He hoisted

him off the ground and carried him out the sanctuary doors.

Stupid Reese. I thought for sure the moment was gone, but Alex's attention quickly shifted from Reese back to the stage. I realized it was because Pastor Chris had invited April up to give her testimony.

She'd cleaned all her mime makeup off, and it even looked like she might've reapplied her normal makeup.

She took the microphone from Pastor Chris and thanked him. I thought I could see her hands trembling a little. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a breath, and I was sure she was saying one last prayer. Then she opened her eyes and began to talk.

April introduced herself and said she wanted to share how Jesus had changed her life. She said it was a long story, but the important thing to know was that she grew up with a mom who was an alcoholic and who dabbled in drugs.

"Nothing crazy like heroin," she said, "but bad enough that...she just wasn't herself. She did things she wasn't proud of. And it left me on my own most of the time."

I looked over, and Alex wasn't just leaning forward anymore—he was sitting on the very edge of his chair, his back straight as he tried to peer through the heads in front of him to get a clear view of April as she spoke.

"My dad was long gone," she continued. "He was out of my life

completely. He didn't care. So I was just...alone...so often. Trying to fall asleep in an old, creaky house while my mom was out who knows where. And the next morning I'd have to clean up wherever she'd passed out. That's assuming she came home at all, which sometimes wasn't the case for a few days. Anyway... Pastor Steve and Miss Karen, his wife, they were my next door neighbors. They told me to call whenever she didn't come home. They'd come get me and let me spend the night at their family's house. And on Sundays, I'd go to church with them."

She took a deep breath and then smiled.

"And that's where I met Jesus and everything changed. For the first time, I felt...peace. I wasn't scared anymore. I mean, I was, but then I'd pray and just feel...safe. That He was with me, even if my mom wasn't, even if my dad wasn't. I felt like I finally had a father. My Heavenly Father. And now He's with me every hour of every day, watching over me, protecting me, helping me make good decisions... He even gave me the courage to tell my mom how I felt about her drinking. She cleaned up her act some and is a lot better mom now. She still hasn't accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior, but I know that's coming one day..."

April began to cry. Pastor Chris walked over and put his arm around her and took the mic. She was obviously unable to continue. Tori appeared next to them and put her arm around April as she led her off the stage.

Alex's mouth hung open in shock as he watched April and Tori disappear. He turned his attention back to Pastor Chris.

"When you encounter Jesus," Pastor Chris said, "you'll never be the same again. If you're here tonight and you're hurting, or you're scared, or you feel like you just can't do the right thing when you want to...I want you to meet my Jesus. He saved me. He saved April. And He can save you. Right here, right now. All you gotta do is invite Him into your life, to surrender all your troubles to Him. I want everyone to bow your heads and close your eyes."

Across the sanctuary, heads bowed in unison. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alex look around and then follow everyone's lead. I closed my eyes at first, but I cracked them open slightly. I knew what was coming, and I wanted to see how he'd respond.

"If you're ready for a clean slate tonight," Pastor Chris continued, "I want you to raise your hand right now. Nobody's looking. Just you and God. Tell Him. Slip that hand up. I see that hand. And that one."

With my eyes half open, I saw a few hands rise and fall around the sanctuary. But the one I really cared about, the one next to me, stayed down. Disappointed, I closed my eyes.

"Anyone else?" Pastor Chris asked.

I felt movement by my side and cracked my eyes open a bit again.

Alex's arm was in the air!

"I see that hand," Pastor Chris said. I lifted my head just enough to see that he was looking right at Alex.

"All right, everyone put your arms down," Pastor Chris continued. "Now lift your heads and open your eyes."

Everyone did so. This development confused me, because Pastor Chris would normally lead everyone in The Sinner's Prayer while all the heads were still bowed.

"It's easy to be a Christian in secret," Pastor Chris said, "but Christianity isn't meant to be lived in the dark. It's not for sissies. How much do you really want to change? If you just raised your hand, I want you to stand up and come down to this altar. Make a public pronouncement of faith. Tell the whole world that from this moment on, you're following Jesus. Come on, let's go."

My heart sank. We were so close. Praying a prayer when nobody was looking was one thing, but to stand up and walk down the aisle? Surely it was a step too far for any teen. Why would Pastor Chris decide to make things harder tonight all of a sudden?

No one got up at first.

Then Alex stood.

"Yes, brother, I see you," Pastor Chris told him. "Come on down."

Alex exited the row and walked down to the front. Others began to rise and follow his lead.

"Come on, y'all," Pastor Chris told the teens as they came down front and stood at the altar. "Lay it all down. All the anger, all the pain, all the betrayal you've experienced. Give it to Jesus. Can we get some leaders to come pray with these bold teens?"

I wasn't a leader, but something in my gut told me to go. Maybe the Holy Spirit? Was that what it felt like? I found myself rising from my seat and beelining for Alex. As I got closer, I slowed, unsure what I was going to do. I just wanted to *be* there, to support him. I stood behind him, placed my hand on his back, and started praying.

Alex didn't look back to see who was behind him. He just buried his face in his hands and began sobbing, his body shaking.

I felt a hand on my own back and turned to see that Wes had come down off the stage. He patted my back and then moved around in front of Alex.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Alex."

"I'm Wes. Can I pray with you?"

Alex nodded.

APRIL

None of us had said a word for 20 minutes. The sanctuary was empty except for a handful of teens who'd come forward for salvation and been taken off to the side by leaders for prayer. Everyone else was outside skating or playing basketball or whatever.

Molly waited with Levi and me. It made sense because we were her ride, but she'd usually be outside with the skaters by that point. I think she was just as curious about what had happened as we were.

We sat in the back row as Alex talked with Wes at the other end of the sanctuary. No one had said it out loud, but we all understood they needed some space. So we'd just sat there, praying silently and watching and waiting.

They finally stood up, and Alex wiped tears from his eyes. Wes gave him a big hug. After saying one last thing to him, Wes went to pack up his gear while Alex walked our way. He stuck his hands in his pockets and pulled his arms tight against his body, holding himself as if he might fall apart otherwise, something it seemed like he was trying hard to avoid after half an hour of pouring his heart out.

He sat in the row in front of us, his hands still in his pockets.

No one knew what to say. I think we were all afraid to break the

silence out of fear of saying the wrong thing and killing the mood.

"Thanks for inviting me," Alex finally said to Levi.

"Of course," Levi said.

After another quiet moment, Levi spoke again.

"So...did you get saved?"

Alex appeared confused by the question.

"I don't know. Did I?"

Right—he didn't know what that meant.

"If you decided to become a Christian, then yeah," Levi said.

"Huh. I guess I got saved."

He said it like he hadn't really thought about everything that just happened—he'd just experienced it.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

It was the first time I'd ever spoken directly to Alex other than yelling at him in the hallway, but when he looked at me, I felt a connection that I couldn't really explain.

"Like I had a big weight on my shoulders, and now it's gone."

A tear formed in the corner of my eye, but I flicked it away before it caused me to completely start bawling again.

"I remember that feeling," I said. "A new start."

Alex nodded and held my gaze. There it was again. That connection. I

couldn't describe it even if I wanted to, which I didn't think I did yet. I just wanted to feel it. There'd be time to analyze it later.

"So, what happens now?" Alex asked.

"What do you mean?" Levi replied.

"Like, how do I be a Christian? What are the rules and stuff? What do I do?"

I hopped up and grabbed a *Teen Study Bible* from a table at the back of the room. The church kept a stack for teens to use during the service if they forgot theirs. I knew they wouldn't mind if Alex took one home.

"First of all, you read this," I said, handing it to him.

"The whole thing?" he asked, shocked.

"Yeah, the whole thing," Molly said. "Have it memorized by next week—there'll be a test."

He stared at her, mouth agape. I laughed—probably too loudly—to show him Molly was being sarcastic.

"Molly's joking," I said. "You don't need to memorize anything. I mean, you *can* if you want—I do sometimes—but there's no test or anything. Well, there are in children's church—we called them Sword Drills, and...you know what, never mind. Forget I said that. Anyway, I'd start with the Gospels."

"What are those?" he asked.

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The story of Jesus."

“Ok. Then what?”

“Then you just be a Christian,” Levi said.

Alex suddenly turned in his seat to fully face us, a sort of desperate passion in his voice.

“But I don’t know how to do that!” he said. “I don’t know how to be good like y’all. I feel like if someone doesn’t show me, I’m just gonna f—”

He stopped himself.

“I’m just gonna mess it up,” he said. “Will y’all show me how to be good?”

Surprised at the request, Levi looked at me. I smiled and nodded.

“What are you doing tomorrow after school?” I asked.

Alex brightened up.

“I’m April, by the way.”

Chapter Four

LEVI

It was so bizarre to think that Alex Richards had become one of us. A Christian.

Not only could we approach him at school without it being weird, we actually *shared* something with him that his party friends didn't. He was on our team from that point forward. And April, Molly, and I were all there for that super important moment in his life when he asked Jesus into his heart. None of those other kids were.

Over Bennigan's Monte Cristos, Alex quizzed us about being a Christian and church and God and stuff.

Reese tried to tag along, but his mom wouldn't let him. Jason did too,

but since his jabbering about computer games, NASA, and the genius of Carman would've caused Alex to immediately de-convert, April took evasive maneuvers. When asked if we were going to Bennigan's, she told him "maybe," but that we were probably just gonna go home.

"What's up with that dude you lied to?" Alex asked her at Bennigan's.

"Who did I lie to?"

"The guy in the parking lot."

"Jason? I didn't *lie* to him. I told him 'maybe.' So, like, we *were* going home, but then we changed our minds once we got in the car."

"Oh, ok," he said, laughing. "I mean, it's still a lie, but whatever. Why didn't you want to hang with him? Is he a creep?"

"What? No! Nothing like that. Jason is sweet and means well. He's just..."

"Kind of annoying," Molly said, laying it out there. "He's homeschooled, and his social skills are poor. Really poor. Like, he has zero."

"But he won't improve his social skills without being around normal people, you know?" Alex countered.

I could tell April was feeling a little guilty, because she quickly changed the subject, but not without dropping in a line to wrap up the previous convo.

"You're right. Maybe we'll invite him next time." She turned to me.

"Levi, do you have any tips for Alex about how to be a good Christian?"

Whoa, man. Way to swing that spotlight over to me. Thanks, April.

I mentioned that he needed to pray, which I worried might be too obvious, but then it turned out Alex had never prayed before.

"Not even The Lord's Prayer?" Molly asked. "You know, 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.' That whole spiel."

Alex slapped the table.

"I know that one!" he exclaimed. "At least, I've definitely heard it before. I think in a movie."

April explained that prayer is just like talking to a friend, but God is the friend.

"I cuss a lot when I talk to my friends," Alex said. "I feel like I shouldn't cuss when I talk to God. Is that right?"

The rest of us laughed, and even he laughed a little, but I could tell he still wanted an answer.

"I probably wouldn't," April said.

"I cuss at God when I'm mad," Molly added.

"Molly!" April exclaimed.

"Really?" Alex asked.

"Yeah. I kinda feel bad about it afterward and ask Him to forgive me, just to, like, clear the slate, but...He's God, right? Surely He understands

that we get mad sometimes and need to let off steam.”

While April kept a smile on her face, she frowned with her eyes as Molly talked. Yelling and cussing at God probably wasn't how she wanted Alex to approach his first prayers, but I thought Molly was right—prayer was actually good for venting frustrations. I also knew April would be happy that at least Molly was still praying at all. It was something she'd wondered about a few days before.

“Alex, everything just changed for you,” April said later. “Like, you have no idea how amazing life just got.”

He matched her grin with his own.

April said his next big step was to make sure he stayed on the right path by throwing out anything from his old life that might lead him back into bad habits. She thought it was best to start in the place Alex spent the most time, so we planned to go to his house after school the next day to help him identify things in his room that might cause him to stumble.

On the way home, it all felt surreal. Did Alex Richards really get saved hours earlier? And...why? What prompted him to make such a big change?

“Maybe he did it just to get close to you,” Molly said to April.

“That's nonsense.”

“I've seen him checking you out.”

“No, you haven't.”

"I say go for it."

"He's a baby Christian."

"But if he dates you, he'll become a better one. Levi, didn't you say Alex talked about wanting to date a good girl to help him change his ways?"

Molly saw my face while April hugged me. Surely she knew I was into April, so why was she encouraging her to date Alex? It was like she was rubbing it in my face. Or was she challenging me to act on my feelings?

"That's called missionary dating, and it's a terrible idea," April said. "It only ever leads to the Christian being pulled further into sin."

Molly looked over to see how I was taking the conversation. I didn't say anything or indicate how scared I was that she might be right.

Was it all just a ruse? Would he walk down the center aisle at an altar call and cry on his knees just to get with April?

I believed April when she said she was dating only Jesus, though, even if it reinforced that I didn't have a shot with her either at the moment. But I already knew that—I was playing the long game, after all.

Julio was absent the next day, so Alex spent our entire study hall asking me questions about anything and everything related to youth group, church, God, April and Molly, and my own experiences.

When he learned I was a pastor's kid, he said, "It must've been great growing up like that, just having all the answers around you all the time."

I supposed he was right, but it never felt that way for me. There was no extra insight or clarity or whatever that came with being a pastor's kid. All it really meant was getting dragged to more church services than anyone else my age. Plus, while Dad was great and all, being a pastor meant he was always gone, whether preaching, counseling a family, attending a board meeting, or any number of other pastoral responsibilities.

While I was considering things, Shannon broke into our conversation.

"So, Friday night. Shane's lake house. We racing WaveRunners or what?"

Alex sat straight up.

"Wait, for real?"

"You didn't hear? His grandparents are going to Waco for the Baylor game."

I could see the gears turning in Alex's mind.

"Shane's been trying to throw a kegger at their lake house for like a year," he explained to me, "but they keep canceling their vacation plans. I can't believe it's finally happening."

There were so many things I felt I needed to say. "Hey, isn't a kegger a party? With beer? Which gets people drunk? And didn't you just pledge to give all that up? Like, isn't that the exact situation that led to you making bad decisions and eventually crying in a church and hugging strangers?"

But instead I stayed quiet. Because...

What if Alex could figure out a way to go to a party and not drink? He could be a Godly example and show everyone that it's possible to have fun without getting trashed. Maybe that was our mission field.

I mean *his* mission field.

APRIL

Wednesday night was big for Alex, but he wasn't the only one who had a momentous experience. On stage, I glimpsed a vision of my future—I felt God calling me to preach. Whether that meant as an evangelist, a missionary, a women's ministry director, or a pastor, I didn't know. But I felt certain that teaching and preaching and, more than anything, sharing my story were the things I was born to do.

Obviously Alex's experience was the more important one because, you know, it kept him from spending an eternity in hell. But still.

Speaking in front of a crowd and knowing I had the potential to lead souls to Jesus with my words was such a rush. But that was all on the horizon. For the moment, I had to focus on leading Alex to solid ground and making sure he didn't backslide.

I was excited to check in on him at lunch, but when I got to the

cafeteria table, he wasn't there. Just Levi, though Molly and Reese eventually joined us for the first time. Alex sat with his normal friends eating his normal food as if nothing had changed, as if he hadn't just decided to turn his life over to the Savior of the Universe the night before.

"Yeah, he was just trying to get into your pants," Molly said.

"No he wasn't."

"Guess we'll find out after school if he doesn't let you come over to his house to rummage through his stuff. Five bucks says he bails."

We'd made plans to meet in the parking lot after school and follow Alex home. Like, with his knowledge.

"He'll be there," I said. I looked over at Alex. "I thought he wanted to change. How's he gonna do that if he hangs out with the same people?"

"Does he actually need to stop hanging with them though?" Levi asked. "I thought the whole idea was to use reverse peer pressure to get the popular kids saved. If he stops hanging with them, how's he supposed to be a good influence on them?"

"Levi's got a point," Molly said.

"Y'all are trying to get the popular kids saved?" Reese asked, trying to keep up.

"But he's not strong enough in his faith to resist the temptation to fall back into his old ways," I said. "He needs a Christian boot camp type of

thing to get him into shape before he's ready to go back to them. Like Disciple Now weekend, at the very least. And even then, he can't just *hang out* with them!"

"How else is he supposed to witness to them?" Levi said. "What if we get him trained and in shape, and then he goes back to parties, but as a Christian?"

"*What?*" Molly and I said in unison.

"Jinx!" she exclaimed.

"That's insane!" I said to Levi.

Molly reared back and punched my bicep, dead-arming me.

"Owwwww! What the frick?"

Her smile immediately dropped as she realized how perturbed I was.

"I said 'jinx,'" she mumbled, appealing to Reese.

"She *did* say jinx," he confirmed.

"I know it sounds crazy," Levi continued as I rubbed my arm, "but maybe he won't backslide if he has backup. If someone goes with him and keeps him accountable."

Reese burst out laughing.

"Bro, you just want to go to a party!" he said.

"What? No, I don't. It doesn't have to be me. It could be any of us. Or, well, most of us."

He looked at Reese.

"I don't want to go to a party like that," I said. "And Molly and Reese shouldn't either."

"Well, I don't want to either," Levi said, "but if it helps Alex *and* spreads the Gospel, I'd do what I had to. Maybe this is his mission field. Jesus did it. Ate and drank with sinners at parties."

"Jesus didn't *drink* with sinners," I said. "Everyone knows that wine back then had hardly any alcohol in it. Plus, he was *Jesus!*"

The day dragged on, but finally Molly and I were walking out towards the parking lot. Was I gonna owe her five bucks?

Alex was already waiting at his Jeep.

"Aight, follow me," he said, hopping off his hood.

"I'm gonna ride with Alex," Levi announced to Molly and me. A split second later, he apparently realized he hadn't actually run that idea by Alex himself.

"Uh, if that's cool with you," he said.

Alex shrugged.

"You want me to drop you off at home first?" I asked Molly.

"Yeah, I need to get back ASAP to help my stepmom wax her toe hair."

As she hopped in the car, I grinned—a bit too smugly, if I'm being

honest. It was so satisfying to have been right about Alex though.

After stopping at Sonic for some Cherry Limeades, we followed Alex home. He led us in through the garage, which contained an old, rusted sports car his dad had been slowly repairing. Alex said it was just an excuse to sit in the garage and drink, so he didn't know if his dad would ever actually finish it.

The walls were covered with car posters and beer posters—sometimes car-slash-beer posters—all featuring topless women, sometimes with strategically placed towels.

I looked back at Levi, but he just stared back at me blankly, as if he didn't even notice any posters. In the kitchen, Alex pulled up short.

"Um, anybody want anything? Snack? Drink?"

It felt like he was trying to postpone whatever was to come next.

Molly, Levi, and I all traded glances, mostly because each of us still held fresh Cherry Limeades.

"I think we're ok," I said, answering for everyone.

Alex shut the fridge and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"I like your house," Molly offered.

"My house? Oh yeah," he said, taking it in as if for the first time. "It's uh...thanks."

"Is this your family?" I asked, moving towards a framed Olan Mills

photo from the '80s featuring a brown-skinned man with a bushy black mustache, a white woman, and three boys with the cutest buck teeth.

"Yeah, that's us. My parents. Me. My brothers."

"I didn't know you have brothers," I said.

"Yeah, Brandon is a Freshman at UT, while Chris, the oldest one, graduated while I was in eighth grade. I'm the baby."

"Were y'all close?" I asked. "I have an older brother who graduated last year, but we're not that close, even though he still lives with us."

"I dunno. I'm kinda close with Brandon since we're only a few years apart. Chris was always just...older. Maybe we were closer when we were younger. Not so much once he got to high school. But they were always cool to me, showing me music, teaching me stuff and all that."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Uh. Well, to use condoms for one thing."

Nobody said anything.

"Chris got his girlfriend pregnant their senior year. They got married and all. Shotgun wedding. Now they live up in Conroe in an apartment."

"That's so sad," I said.

"Why is that sad?"

"He didn't get to go to college and stuff. You know, it just isn't the way God planned for it to go."

“God planned for him to go to college?” he asked. “Sounds like God wasn’t paying close attention. I love Chris, but that dude’s dumb as hell. Honestly, her getting pregnant was probably the best thing that could’ve happened to him. Instead of wasting a bunch of years doing nothing, now he’s gotta work and take care of a baby. Plus, my nephew’s super cute.”

“Maybe ‘sad’ wasn’t the right word. I just know it would’ve been better if they’d gotten married before having a baby. Or, you know, having sex.”

Alex didn’t seem convinced.

“If you say so. Anyway, my bedroom’s this way.”

LEVI

When I was a kid, there was one store at the mall my mom forbid me from entering, which of course made me want to check it out: Spencer Gifts.

“There’s Satanic stuff going on in there,” she said.

I didn’t want to get involved with Satanic stuff, but I guess I was morbidly curious, like a child who’s been told the iron is hot and now they have to find out for themselves.

One day, I waited until she was trying on clothes in the Sears’ changing room before telling her I had to use the restroom *that instant*. She reluctantly told me to hurry back.

I sprinted to Spencer's and screeched to a halt at its entrance. I took a deep breath, pleaded the blood of Jesus over me so angels would protect against demonic assault, and then stepped inside.

I wandered around the store, wide-eyed and wary, keeping my distance from everything. There were evil-looking toys from *Child's Play*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Halloween*. Deeper in the store were racks of t-shirts about farting, sex, and penis sizes, as well as lots of boob-related memorabilia.

But the most fascinating items were these lamps that seemed to be filled with spongy, colorful balls that floated around in some sort of liquid. Lava Lamps. I couldn't tell precisely how the devil was involved in them—maybe because hell is hot like the inside of a volcano—but they were the one thing I absolutely wanted to own. Of course, I'd never be allowed to have one.

When I stepped into Alex's room, the first thing I noticed was the Lava Lamp sitting beside his bed.

After Molly, April, and I filed inside, he leaned against the doorway, hands in his pockets, and watched us fan out and take things in. In many ways, it was like any of our own rooms—clothes strewn everywhere, empty bags of chips sticking out of an overflowing trash can, a modest-sized TV, a stack of VHS tapes, a *huge* collection of CDs, a computer on a desk by a

window, and an electric guitar leaning against the wall next to a small amplifier and some guitar pedals.

But where I had posters of DC Talk, the Newsboys, and Rebecca St. James—the closest thing I had to a pin-up simply because she was female, even though she was fully dressed and sang about chastity—Alex had posters of bands I'd heard of but never actually heard. *Real* rock bands. Nirvana, Blink-182, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, whom I mainly knew because a kid got sent home from church camp in shame when he brought one of their tapes. Its cover featured a naked woman with strategically placed band members and flowers. Alex had a poster of that album cover up in his room like it was no big deal.

I touched the headstock of Alex's guitar but didn't pick it up.

"You can play it if you want," he said.

"Where was this taken?" April asked him. She held up a picture of his family in front of a waterfall. He looked around 10 in the picture.

"Fall Creek Falls in Tennessee," he said.

"Oh," she said, "I thought it was somewhere overseas, like Africa or South America. But Tennessee is cool too."

He laughed.

"I can't imagine my family surviving a trip to Africa or South America. I'd love to go to there one day though. I watched a ton of *Where in the*

World Is Carmen Sandiego? when I was younger, and that made me wanna go see the world, you know?"

"YES," April said, her eyes wide in excitement. "I know *exactly* what you mean. I read a lot of missionary biographies, and they make me want to travel all over the place and preach about Jesus to people who've never heard of Him. There's this book called *Through the Gates of Splendor*, and this woman, Elisabeth Elliot, wrote about how she and her husband tried to tell this native tribe in Ecuador about Jesus, but they *killed* him! Ever since reading that, I've always wanted to go to Ecuador and other places in Central and South America."

"They killed him, and that made you want to go there?"

"They eventually all got saved, so it's safe now. But yeah, I just want to tell the world about Jesus. And see all the beautiful waterfalls and beaches and rivers and stuff."

"Ah, yeah. That actually sounds awesome."

She's dating Jesus right now, I reminded myself.

As I listened to them chat, I sat on the side of Alex's bed, strumming the guitar and absentmindedly watching the TV, which was showing MTV, a channel I wasn't allowed to watch at home. I wondered if maybe I should bleach my hair like the Sugar Ray singer on screen. Start shopping at Gadzooks more. Or get hoop earrings and a bucket hat. Maybe just the hat—

no way my parents would let me pierce my ears.

The music video ended and another started. The song was pretty, and the girl in the video reminded me of April.

I know

That you love me

And soon you will see

You were meant for me

And I was meant for you

The line hit me like a sucker-punch. What if April was meant for me and I was meant for her? And because I never asked her out, I was going to lose her to Alex?

I looked over my shoulder. Alex watched April pore over his things. I glanced over at Molly to see if she was watching them too, but she was as enamored with the music video as I'd been. She sensed me watching and our eyes met. Neither of us knew what to say at first.

"Good song," I finally said.

She nodded.

"Ok!" April announced, clapping her hands. "So, we've gotta figure out what in here could make you stumble. For example, music and movies with

bad words in them could desensitize you to foul language and make you more likely to cuss.”

“So I just stop listening to music?” he asked.

“No, silly. You just listen to Christian music, which doesn’t have cussing. Plus, those songs tend to be about God and Jesus and heaven, not all the depressing and angry stuff in a lot of secular music. You don’t want to be depressed anymore, right? Is this all your music?”

April picked up a worn-out Case Logic binder that had room for 200 CDs but was still overflowing.

“Most of it,” he said. “I’ve got another one in my car.”

“Ok then. It’s gotta go.”

“Go where?”

“Well, I have a plan for it. But for now, we can give it all to Levi to hold onto. We’ve just gotta get it out of the house so it’s not a temptation anymore. Believe me, the Devil will try and attack you any way he can.”

“You think the devil is real?” Alex asked.

“Oh for sure. The Bible says he goes around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. He was already trying to destroy your life, and now that you turned it over to Jesus, he’s ticked off. He doesn’t want Jesus to win. Ever. They’re locked in an eternal wrestling match.”

“So Jesus isn’t stronger than the devil?” Molly asked, a smirk on her

face.

"You obviously know He is," April said. "The Bible tells us He'll win in the end. Anyway..."

She tossed me the case, the weight of which made me fall back a bit on the bed. I struggled to grab onto it with my free hand while trying to not drop the guitar with my other. With Alex's eyes on me, I carefully set the guitar back on its stand. I opened the CD case up and browsed the collection. Was I about to be trusted with all of Alex's CDs? Would he allow that?

Alex's mouth hung open, a protest formed on his tongue and ready to roll, but instead he swallowed it.

"All right, if you say so," he said, pouting a little.

"I don't think he has to get rid of *all* his music," Molly said as she looked over my shoulder at the CDs. "There's some good stuff in here. Beck, Oasis, No Doubt..."

"If he wants to be sold out for Jesus, he does," April said. "Oh, these movies gotta go too."

"You're gonna take all of my movies?"

"Not *all* of them—just the ones that are rated R. Or if they're PG-13 and have nudity. We wanna get rid of anything that might make you lust and turn women into sex objects. Levi, you wanna go through all these and

pull out the R ones? Alex, do you have a trash bag that we can put these in?"

Alex was borderline devastated by that point and didn't respond. April paused her rummaging.

"Hey," she said, stepping over and putting a hand on his arm. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to. Lots of people keep listening to secular music and watching R-rated movies after they get saved."

Alex's mood lifted slightly.

"Really?"

"Yeah, but here's the deal—those things get between them and God. They always have one foot in the Kingdom and another foot in the world. The only way for God to truly take over is that you can't compromise. Remember how free and alive you felt last night when you turned everything over to God?"

Alex nodded.

"To not follow through on this would be like taking back some of that junk you handed over. It'd make it harder for you to feel that way again. Is that what you want?"

If Alex really was only in it to hook up with April, we were about to find out how committed he was to that plan, because April was asking him to sacrifice all of his favorite things. Would he really throw out hundreds of

dollars in stuff just to make out with her? Surely he'd just move on to some other, easier, girl, right? Unless he really did have a life-changing experience.

Alex pondered her question a moment, and finally he shook his head.

"I want to keep feeling the way I felt last night."

"I know this seems radical, but...that's what Jesus wants—radically saved followers."

Alex started handing VHS tapes to me.

"If I'm gonna do this, I wanna do it right."

He stacked the tapes up in my lap. When he put *Airplane!* in the stack, I stopped him.

"This one's PG," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but it's got boobs in it. Big ones. Here, I'll get the trash bag."

Alex retrieved a black bag and dumped them all in.

He then tore down the Red Hot Chili Peppers poster and stuck it in the bag. I guess I was taking that home too?

When he emptied a dresser drawer on the bed and began tossing bongos and baggies of marijuana and Lord knows what else into the bag, I shot April a look that said, "I'm super not comfortable with keeping this bag anymore." She motioned for me to go with it and that we'd figure it out later.

Alex was on a roll, fully purging his room of his past.

Flasks of liquor, hotel-sized bottles of whiskey, cartons of cigarettes, and a plastic pill bottle that rattled when he shook it and was filled with stuff I probably didn't even want to know about.

Then the magazines. All the *Maxim* and *High Times* issues next to his bed. He lifted his mattress and pulled out another stack, tossing a handful of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines my way. I looked at April and Molly. They made grossed out faces and motioned for me to get the magazines into the bag as quickly as possible. I did so, but honestly, it was difficult to not peek down into the bag at their covers when I felt no one was looking. I'd have to get right with God about that later.

"So, if God isn't cool with boobs and nudity and lust and stuff...I'm guessing He doesn't want me having sex either, right? Don't y'all do the whole True Love Waits stuff or whatever?"

We all exchanged glances again.

"Right..." Molly said.

Alex opened another drawer on his dresser and pulled out a strip of condoms.

"Here," he said, tossing them to me.

I caught them and immediately froze. Not only had I never seen a condom before in real life, I'd definitely never held one. Yet there I was

holding Alex's personal stash. With what I held in my hands, someone could theoretically have sex six times!

It had never been so real before, and I think that went for April too. We were stunned by how casually Alex pulled out the condoms, as if everyone in the world was a sex machine and of course he kept some on hand.

What if it was true? What if everyone in the world, with the exception of April, Molly, and me, *were* sex machines? What if we were the freaks?

April had gone into the mission full-blast, but even she was getting progressively flustered by the stuff Alex was producing. And the condoms turned her into a stuttering mess.

"Um, wow, yeah...uh...well, sure...those should go too."

Alex had run the full gamut from sulky to stoked in a few minutes. He rubbed his hands together.

"All right! I feel great. This is gonna be *good!*"

I stood there holding the bag of iniquity, which was starting to rip in places from the weight of Alex's discarded life.

How the heck was I gonna explain it to my parents?

Chapter Five

APRIL

To half the girls at school, Alex was perfect. He was funny, charming, smart (though he rarely seemed to apply his mind to his schoolwork), and fashionable—plus he had the cutest smile, a sly grin that would melt the defenses of any female.

But it only took a few minutes in his room to shatter that immaculate image of him for me. Not because I discovered anything terrible, but simply because I realized how normal he was. I wasn't sure what I expected, but everything just felt...ordinary. It could've been any of our rooms.

Well, minus the porn and condoms. I guess I just assume everyone's a virgin until proven otherwise, so it never even occurred to me that he was

having sex. But without God in his life, why wouldn't he? He's hot, he dates hot girls, so why not? I probably would if I didn't have the Holy Spirit convicting me about what was right and wrong.

Until he busted out the condoms, sex had always been this abstract thing we talked about in youth group that other people were doing. Out *there*. Then suddenly it was real and immediate, and this person standing right in front of me—someone my age and not married—had done it. Probably more than once.

While Alex quickly turned the condoms over to Levi and moved on with finding stuff to put in the bag, I had trouble shaking the thought of them. Or, to be totally honest, the thought of him...and the girls at school... If sex was as great as everyone said it was, Alex was giving up way more than we could ever understand to follow Jesus. (Well, hopefully one day we'd understand.)

I was so proud of him for going all-in on surrendering to God.

Letting go of his music seemed the toughest for him. Maybe even more than giving up sex. I'd only known him for a few days, but I could already tell playing and listening to music were two of his favorite things. While we didn't ask him to give up his instruments or anything—he could use those to praise God—handing all his CDs over to Levi left him bummed out.

And being bummed out was no way to start a brand new journey with

Jesus. I knew he needed something to fill that void in particular. More generally, though, he needed *hope* that he wasn't making a huge mistake. So we drove straight from his house to the Christian bookstore I worked at part-time. I didn't make a ton of money there, but I knew I could buy him a couple of CDs with my employee discount. That would at least get him started and take his mind off all the ones he'd lost.

I also needed to talk to him about how hanging out with his old friends would be just as bad as keeping all the porn in his room, but he was so distraught about the music and movies that I couldn't just take more stuff away right then. Hopefully approaching the subject with gifts in hand was the way to go.

I'd been working at the bookstore since I turned 16 and could drive myself. I'd gone in there one day to buy a copy of Loren Cunningham's book about founding YWAM (Youth With a Mission), and a kind man in his 50s named Gary approached me and said he had a word from the Lord for me. The Lord was telling him this would be the year my family got saved and that I'd be instrumental in it. I started crying right there in the store. Gary had no idea I'd been praying for my mom to come to know Jesus for years because while she said she believed in God, "the whole Jesus thing" wasn't for her. Gary asked if he could pray over me, so we held hands right there in the aisle while he did.

I wasn't excited about getting a job, but if I was gonna work, it was going to be in a place like that, a place where I could talk about Jesus all day without anyone complaining.

Plus they had a little coffee shop where they let local Christian musicians play. The owner, a former Hippie, said he used to go to similar Christian coffee shops back in the '60s and '70s, during the days of the Jesus People movement, the original Jesus Freaks. He wanted to recreate those shops to provide a safe alternative to bars so Christians could go out on the weekends and enjoy some entertainment without having to deal with all the drunks. Sometimes Kurt Winky, a local Christian radio station DJ, would broadcast live from the shop on Friday nights, or he'd bring his cameras and interview touring artists for JFTV (Jesus Freaks TV), the station's half-hour TV show that played Christian music videos, like an alternative to MTV.

When we got out of Alex's Jeep and walked in, I scanned the shop to see who was working. I hoped Gary was there so Alex could meet one of the most Godly men I knew and maybe get prayed over.

At first, I didn't see anyone and wondered if it'd been left unmanned.

"Hello?" I called out.

A sigh and a grunt floated over from the Precious Moments figurine section, and a lanky frame rose from the floor.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

Oh no. It was Donnie. I sighed.

“Well, hey to you too.”

Donnie was...challenging for me. The same age as my brother Judd, he carried himself with a similar Gen X apathy and cynicism. He always wore dirty Chuck Taylors and grungy t-shirts of bands nobody knew.

Most of the time, I wondered why he even stuck around, because he seemed to hate everything we sold.

I knew why he stayed though—the music. He had encyclopedic knowledge of alternative Christian music, and the owner trusted him to do the buying for the rock section. In exchange, Donnie got to keep the promo CDs. The store was known for being the place to find obscure Christian bands, and Donnie clones came from far and wide to browse his curated selection.

“You been playing with your porcelain babies?” I asked him.

“Ugh,” he replied. While he harbored a ton of spite for most of the items in the store, it was Precious Moments figurines that could really get him worked up. They were easily breakable, so he spent half of every shift yelling “No!” at the kids of strangers and then vacuuming up the inevitable shards.

“What is this place?” Alex asked.

“This is where I work,” I said. “We’ve got music, videos, t-shirts, toys,

and books. But they're all Christian."

"It's like a Christian Sam Goody," Molly said. "Sam God-y."

"But that's not Christian," Alex said, pointing at a t-shirt that looked like it had the big red and blue Tommy Hilfiger logo on the front.

"Look closer," I said, a wry smile on my face. It took him a moment to digest, but once he saw it...

"Does that say Tommy Hellfighter?"

Alex began reading out other shirts. There was a GAP t-shirt that said "God Answers Prayers," a No Fear copy that said "Fear Not," and an Abercrombie and Fitch lookalike that said "A Breadcrumb and Fish."

"That one's about Matthew 15:36-38, when Jesus fed the 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two fishes," I explained.

"Fed the 5,000 what?"

"People."

"Wait, for real? Like...how?"

I was sort of jealous at Alex getting to discover the miracles of Jesus for the first time. They were gonna blow his mind.

"Whoa," he said as he checked out the place. "I didn't know Christians had their own stores."

"Christians have their own everything," Donnie said, giving up on the Precious Moments display and joining us.

"What do you mean?" Alex asked.

"Donnie, this is our friend, Alex," I interjected. "He just got saved last night at our youth group."

I laced my voice with undertones of "If you scare him off, I will kill you."

While I fully expected some cynical reply, it never came.

"Huh," he said instead. "That's great, dude. Congratulations. Welcome to the family. So, take a look over there."

Donnie pointed to a cardboard cutout of a superhero-looking man in purple and yellow armor with a cross on the side of his arm.

"That's Bibleman. Unlike Superman or the Incredible Hulk or Spider Man, he doesn't have any actual super powers. Instead, he uses Scripture to defeat his enemies."

"How does that work?"

"It has to do with spiritual warfare and—"

"Spiritual what? Warfare?"

"It doesn't matter," Donnie said. "Speaking of spiritual warfare, there's this dude."

Donnie held up a Frank Peretti book called *This Present Darkness*.

"He's our own Stephen King. All the scares with none of the cussing."

"Or child orgies," Molly added.

"Or *what?*" Levi asked.

Donnie cackled.

"Yeah, no child orgies either."

Donnie moved into the music section. The visit was becoming a disaster. He held up a Michael W. Smith CD.

"The Christian Richard Marx. Steven Curtis Chapman? The Christian Bryan Adams. DC Talk? The Christian Beastie Boys. Although I guess now they're the Christian Nirvana because they went all grunge on *Jesus Freak*. I dunno. Rebecca St. James? Anyone want to guess?"

"The Christian Alanis," Molly said.

"Bingo."

"Except without the Uncle Joey premarital sex," she added.

Donnie whistled, clapped, and pointed at Molly.

"Oh man, I like you."

Molly grinned. I just shook my head to let her know I was baffled at why she'd ever want Donnie's approval. She rolled her eyes.

"So it's sort of like those cheap knockoff colognes you see in Walgreens, huh?" Alex asked.

"Yes, *exactly!* And they *know* it, too! Heck, they even sent us a poster so people can find safe alternatives to their favorite bands. Check this out."

He led Alex to the end of the aisle where we had one of the posters up.

It was just two columns—on the left was the name of a secular band and on the right were the names of a couple of Christian bands that were supposed to sound like them.

The chart was one of Donnie's pet peeves, and he loved to make fun of it. Though it usually worked better when the other person actually knew what the Christian bands sounded like so they could laugh together about how off the comparisons were.

"Like it says in Ecclesiastes, there's nothing new under the sun," Donnie said. "Especially in Christian music. Except Amy Grant—she's one of one."

"So all Christian bands suck?" Alex asked.

"No, of course not!" I said, shooting a desperate glare at Donnie that said, "Hey dummy, he's gonna go to hell because of you." As a person with a history of truly pointed looks, it was quite a glare.

He didn't need my encouragement (or discouragement?) though. If there was one thing that got Donnie excited, it was introducing kindred spirits to new bands. He began holding up CDs and telling Alex all about them—Starflyer 59, Poor Old Lu, Dear Ephesus, and on and on. The CDs stacked up in Alex's arms as Donnie added more. He started giving them to Molly too after she mentioned liking The Cranberries. Suddenly she had a Sixpence None the Richer CD in her hands.

For as much as Donnie got on my nerves, it seemed like he and Alex were really hitting it off. In fact, it was the first time since we'd entered the store that Alex looked comfortable and engaged, as opposed to being awkward or on-guard.

"Hey, man," Alex finally said, "I appreciate the help...but this is like a hundred bucks' worth of CDs. I can't afford that, even with April's employee discount."

"How much you got?" Donnie asked.

"Like twenty bucks."

"I was gonna pay for one too," I chimed in.

"What? You don't have to do that."

"Yeah, I do—we just went through your room and encouraged you to get rid of like a thousand dollars' worth of CDs. This is the least I can do."

Donnie scratched his chin as he formulated a plan.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll be right back."

He jogged out of the shop, which was probably the first time I'd ever seen him move faster than a sloth in our time together. I watched through the window as he went out to his beat-up little pickup truck and retrieved his personal CaseLogic CD case.

"Ok, here's the deal," he said when he returned. He placed the case on the counter and opened it up. "I'll let you take my own copies home with

you to burn CDs, but you've gotta *promise* to bring them back."

"Whoa," Alex said. "That's crazy, man. Yeah, of course. I'll bring them back—or give them to April to bring back or whatever."

"No," Donnie said, eyeing me suspiciously and then returning his gaze to Alex. "I want *you* to bring them back."

"Oh, ok," Alex said. He sneakily shot me a grin that said "This guy's a bit intense."

"Oh wait—I don't have a burner," Alex said.

"Ok, what about a boombox? Can you record a CD to a tape?"

"Yeah, sure."

"My dad has a burner you can use," Molly offered. "I can also burn you some of my own CDs to have as well."

"Yeah, I can too," Levi offered.

"Me too," I added, though I wasn't sure if anyone actually respected my music taste enough to see that as helpful at all.

LEVI

I'd been to the Christian bookstore a bunch of times, both before and after April started working there, and I'd even heard tons of Donnie's monologues about how lame all the stuff they sold there was, though I'd

learned to take April's lead and tune him out.

But being there with Alex, someone who had zero exposure to Christian culture, made me see every single thing with new, more critical eyes.

Sure there was the music, but at least there were cool bands we could point to. Alex loved ska, so we got to introduce him to The O.C. Supertones and Five Iron Frenzy.

So many other things in the shop suddenly seemed phenomenally dorky. The t-shirts for one. But also the bumper stickers. One said, "Warning: In case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned." Even the Bible itself didn't escape unscathed thanks to the hundred different versions the shop stocked. We had to explain the existence of The Ebonics Bible, for instance. There's truly no explanation that didn't conjure an exchange of awkward glances.

When we were finally checking out, we were theoretically almost out the door, but there was still plenty of time to make me reconsider every innocuous aspect of the culture in which I'd lived, well, my entire life.

Like Testamints. Did we really expect someone with bad breath to see the embedded cross on the mint we gave them and ask us to tell them about Jesus? Given their need for a mint, was that a conversation we even *wanted* to have?

We put our haul on the counter: two CDs Alex picked out (at Donnie's suggestion) and two April picked out for him. As April went to pay—she only let Alex contribute 10 bucks—she added a W.W.J.D. bracelet from the little display on the counter.

"This stands for 'What Would Jesus Do,'" she explained to Alex.

"Wearing it will remind you to always ask that question in life. That way, no matter where you are—whether in school, at work, hanging out with friends...if someone tries to get you to do something, and you aren't sure if it's right or wrong, you can just ask yourself what Jesus would do. Then you'll know whether you're making the right decision or not."

"How do I know what Jesus would do?" Alex asked.

"Well, that's why we read the Bible. To learn about Him and how He lived—and how He told *us* to live. Imitating Him. That's what being a Christian is all about."

As April dug in her purse for her wallet to pay, Donnie picked up a shipping box from behind the counter and took out a piece of cardboard.

"Hey," he said to April, "this came in today. Thought you might wanna see it."

He unfolded the cardboard and turned it around for us to check out. It was an image of a white man in his 40s looking at the moon. And in big gold letters, it said NICOLAE. In smaller white letters right above that, it said

"The Rise of the Antichrist."

April nearly shrieked.

"Is it here?" she demanded of Donnie. "Did we get them in already?"

"No, just the promo display. The book'll be here in a few weeks."

Alex had jumped when April shrieked, and he looked beyond confused at the scene playing out in front of him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Oh my goodness, Alex—it's the best book series ever," April exclaimed, her hand to her chest. "It's these novels about what happens to a bunch of people after The Rapture."

Which, of course, begged a question poor Alex would surely come to regret.

"What's The Rapture?"

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If we'd had any sense, the answer would've been, "You know what? Don't worry about it right now. We'll get around to it later."

Because let's face it—the idea that anyone who'd prayed The Sinner's Prayer (and hadn't backslidden) would just *disappear* one day in "the twinkling of an eye" and go to Heaven while everyone else was left to endure world wars, famine, plagues, a *little bit* of peace for fun, more war,

famine, and plagues, and then the bloodbath that was the battle of Armageddon... Well, it was a lot to bite off.

And to toss it all in as an afterthought mere hours after telling this dude that he couldn't listen to his favorite bands, look at nudie mags, or, you know, have sex anymore (until marriage)—I was shocked he didn't walk away right then and there.

He didn't though. Not that it all went smoothly.

"So..." he said as we got back into his Jeep to head out, "...all that's in the Bible?"

"Yep," April answered. "Last book of the Bible. Revelation."

"And you believe it?" he asked.

"Which part?"

"Um...any of it."

"Well...yeah. I mean, it's in the Bible."

He didn't say anything for a few moments as he steered the Jeep out of the parking lot and onto the road.

"So...like...Heaven and Hell..."

"Yeah?"

"They're real?"

"Oh yeah."

"And, is it like how they say it is? In movies and stuff? Golden streets

up there, lots of fire and stuff down there?"

"Yes and no," April said. "Heaven is so much better and Hell is so much worse than you could possibly imagine. The Bible talks about there being constant wailing and gnashing of teeth in Hell. For eternity. But then Heaven is...just...amazing. It'll be beautiful, and yes there'll be golden streets, but also we'll all have mansions, and we'll worship Jesus forever."

"That's so weird to me," Molly mumbled.

"What?" April asked.

"Just, like, the idea of worshipping Jesus forever. I think I'd get tired of that pretty quick."

"It's not gonna be like here," April replied. "We won't want to do anything else."

"I would," Molly said. "I hope there's other stuff to do."

Alex processed all of this.

"You could play with the dogs," he said. "Cause they'll all be there."

"What?" April asked.

"Yeah—all dogs go to Heaven. Like the movie."

"Oh," she said, pity in her voice. "No, that's not true. None of our pets will be there."

"What?" he asked, sort of shocked. "Why wouldn't God let you see your dead pets again? That'd be, like, one of my main reasons for wanting to

be there!”

“Yeah, that’s just something they tell people in fast-food Christianity.”

Obviously his next question should’ve been, “Wait, what is our Christianity if not fast-food?”, but April didn’t give him time.

“But Heaven and Hell are *very* real. People have even been there and come back to tell us about them.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, this guy got into a car wreck and died on the operating table, and he was taken on a tour of both Hell and Heaven, and then Jesus brought him back to life, and the guy said it was all exactly how the Bible describes. There are other people who that’s happened to also.”

Alex just blinked at her, stunned.

“Whoa,” he finally said.

April loosened her seat belt and sat forward, which meant she had just shifted into “I’m about to say something deadly serious” mode.

“Alex, this is why it’s so important we accept Jesus into our hearts and follow how He tells us to live. I mean, can you even imagine spending eternity in Hell? Day after day and year after year of fire burning you but never killing you? People screaming? You never see your family or friends again? I just...I can’t even think about it too long or else I...”

Tears formed at the corners of her eyes, and she wiped them away.

“And it’s why it’s so important that we tell as many people as possible about Jesus and try to get them to accept Him into their hearts too. Because *no one* should have to spend eternity in a place like that when they could be in Heaven with Jesus. That’s why Levi invited you to church in the first place. He wanted you to come to Heaven with us.”

Alex looked back at me. I nearly froze at suddenly being yanked into a conversation of such eternal significance. All I could do was nod that what April said was true.

“So, I’m not going to Hell anymore?” he asked.

“No, because you accepted Jesus into your heart last night at youth group! Isn’t it great?”

“But you said something about sliding...”

“Right—backsliding. It means you stop following Jesus and go back to living the way you used to. Before, you know, yesterday. That’s why what we’re doing today is so important. It’ll help you keep from backsliding.”

April paused before what she said next, and I could tell she was debating whether or not to go there.

“But it’s not just about the things you surround yourself with—it’s also about the *people*. Just as much as any CD or movie or...other things...who you hang out with can cause you to stumble.”

He looked at her, which I wished he wouldn’t have because he was

driving and all, but I cut him a little slack (just a little) given that it was finally hitting him what she was saying.

“My friends...” he started before letting the words hang there, floating like your breath on a freezing day. No one spoke for what seemed like an eternity, and if Hell was anywhere in the ballpark of how painful that silence was, I’d never ever turn on MTV again.

“I shouldn’t hang out with them anymore?” he asked.

“Well...sort of,” April said. “I mean, think about it—the things in your life that made you go down to the altar last night...who were you with when you did them? And do you think those people are going to still be doing them? And do you think you’ll be strong enough to not give in and do those things if you’re all hanging out?”

Alex considered all of this and shook his head.

“No, I guess not.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t talk to them or even that you shouldn’t ever hang out with them again,” April said, the words sputtering out. I couldn’t tell if she was about to backtrack on everything or if she even knew where she was going with it. “I’m just saying that...you’re new in the faith—a baby Christian—so you should maybe keep your distance for a while until you’re strong enough in your walk to be able to hang out with them without compromising your morals.”

"How long will that take?"

April looked at Molly and me, but we just shrugged because there was obviously no answer.

"I don't know," April admitted. "A few months? Six months? A year?"

"How long did it take you?" he asked. "Back when you got saved."

"I don't remember," April said, which I knew to be both true and false at the same time. She couldn't remember how long it took because it didn't take any time at all. What she would've remembered, as I did about her, was that after she got saved, she never went back to hang with her unsaved friends again.

"Are my friends going to Hell?" Alex asked. He looked back at me.

"Julio? Is he going to Hell?"

"Unfortunately, he probably is," April said. "They probably all are. I mean, no one knows what's going on in the heart of anyone, but a person's actions are the fruit of what's inside. Does his fruit show that he's saved? If not..."

"I've gotta tell them about Jesus then!" Alex exclaimed. "They need to get saved too!"

"Yes! Exactly!" April agreed. The breakthrough excited her so much that she clapped her hands, a move no one else in the car appreciated. Molly and I each reached to cover our ears—our own, not each other's—and

shared a cringe-y look.

“But how do I do that without hanging out with them?” he asked.

Exactly what I’d been trying to convey to April at lunch!

“Well, you find a place to hang with them where you won’t be tempted to join them in doing bad things,” she said.

“Like where? I mean, Julio smokes weed at Sonic after school every day, so I can’t even hang with him there.”

“You should invite them to youth group,” April said.

And there it was.

Chapter Six

APRIL

Honestly, I couldn't believe how well the plan was working. I knew I shouldn't be so surprised given that it came straight from God—if He could move mountains like the Bible said, then He was always going to be able to handle something as simple as convincing a teenager that He is real—but I was still kind of shocked when it all happened so easily.

Well, I guess it wasn't *super* easy—Molly and I both got shot down by the people we asked. And even after that, it took Levi a lot of guts to invite Alex. In the end, we still had to do our parts.

But then God showed up in such a big way and transformed Alex's life! And now Alex felt like he had to share that experience with his own friends.

Everything was falling into place just the way God said it would.

Giddy, I told Mom the whole story while I prepared spaghetti that evening. I explained who Alex was, why he was bummed out, and how his life had changed after hearing my testimony. Not that I did anything, obviously—it was all the Holy Spirit.

She hadn't gotten a word in since I'd begun the story. I knew she'd be headed to the bar soon for trivia night, and I had so much I wanted to tell her that I had to steamroll through the whole story as quickly as possible to leave time for discussion.

I hoped she'd hear Alex's story and see parts of her own in it. In her wildest days—when I was a child and she was bartending, back before she'd gotten her stuff together at least a little bit and attended nursing school—basically every night of the week held the potential for poor decisions. It wasn't that she couldn't spot bad guys—she just didn't care that they were bad. Most were gonna be flings anyway. The only thing she ran through quicker than men was her packs of cigarettes. She'd quickly get bored though, and she'd be back to square one, trying to find a man to make her feel complete, something they could never do. But I knew Jesus could.

I hoped she'd think about Alex's story and say to me, "Hun, maybe it's time I took you up on that offer and joined you at church this Sunday. Save me a seat."

But that wasn't what she said. Perched on the formica countertop with her legs crossed and a beer bottle dangling between her slender fingers, she took a drag on a cigarette, blew the smoke back out, and spoke.

"So, you like a boy, huh?"

"What? No. That's not what I was saying."

"I bet he's cute."

"Who's cute?" my brother Judd asked as he entered from the living room, the smell of marijuana floating in after him. He beelined for the sauce I was stirring and tried to stick a finger in the pan to taste it.

I tried to slap his hand away but was too late.

"Needs more salt," he said, licking his finger.

"Want it to have more salt? Why don't you make it yourself for once in your life."

No one got me worked up as quickly as Judd did. I tried to give people the benefit of the doubt in life since you never knew what their situation was, but because I knew so much about Judd, it was a hundred times harder to do that for him. So much intelligence with so little application. Just a total space cadet most of the time. The number of times I had to ask him if he needed his medicine refilled...the guy would be dead if it weren't for me.

"So, who's cute?" he asked. "Other than me."

"Your sister's new boyfriend," mom said, a grin on her face. "Alex

Richmond.”

“Richards!” I said.

“Apparently he’s this party king, but April’s trying to change him into a choir boy. Which is a terrible idea, because you always end up being the one who changes. Trust me.”

“I’m not trying to change him,” I protested. “Jesus is changing him.”

“Oh snap, I know that dude’s older brother,” Judd said. “Kind of a loser.”

“What, does he still live at home even though he graduated high school, and he spends his days smoking marijuana and eating whole loaves of bread?” I asked.

At some point, I’d try to get him back into church too, but I didn’t think it’d be anytime soon. He went a couple times when Pastor Steve and Miss Karen first started taking me while they babysat us, but he hated it and begged mom to leave him at home to his own devices while she was out.

“What about Little Levi?” he asked. “I always assumed y’all were swapping spit when no one was looking.”

“Ew, no! Don’t be gross. He’s just a friend. They both are! I told y’all I’m dating Jesus right now.”

Judd stared at me with that dumb, slack look of his for a few moments.

"Yeah, it's weird every time you say it," he finally said.

Mom hopped off the counter, came up behind me, and pulled me into a hug.

"I didn't think you had it in you, but here you are, juggling boys like your dear, sweet mama."

"Ugh! I'm nothing like you."

I didn't really even say it out loud. I just kind of mumbled it as I broke free of her hug and tried to catch the stir spoon from falling into the sauce.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded. Her tone had changed from teasing to accusatory.

I'd messed up and, frustrated, let it slip.

"Nothing. I just...we're different. When it comes to guys, you know?"

She didn't answer right away. We'd performed this dance many times before, so I knew all the moves and where we'd land.

I could see her about to form the words that would ignite our next argument, but she happened to glance at the clock. Instead, she collected her coat and purse and grabbed her keys.

"Mom, where are you going? Dinner isn't even ready yet."

"I know you'll probably ignore this because you think I'm a terrible mom and a terrible person and I don't know shit about shit, but can I give you one bit of advice about juggling multiple men? Just don't string them

along. Be clear from the beginning where they stand with you. Otherwise you're asking for trouble."

With that, she was out the door.

Yet another conversation with her that went nowhere.

God had promised me that one day she'd accept Jesus into her heart, but I didn't know it'd be such a slow burn. It was hard being patient, especially since The Rapture could happen at any moment!

As much as she pushed my buttons, I couldn't imagine spending eternity without her. Even with as amazing as Heaven was sure to be, spending forever with Jesus and worshiping Him, I knew I would still feel like part of me was missing if she wasn't there. And the alternative was unthinkable. I literally got nauseous imagining even for a second that she might spend forever burning in a lake of fire. I had to keep pressing her, even when she found it annoying. She just didn't understand the stakes.

While I hadn't invited her to church in a bit, figuring I'd give her a break, I had invited her to hear me give my testimony at the rally. Unfortunately, she had to pick up a shift at work. I tried to guilt her into coming.

"Couldn't you get someone to cover for you? How often do I get to stand in front of everyone and give my testimony?"

But she'd pulled out a masterful response.

“If you’re as great of a speaker as I know you’ll be, it won’t be the last chance I’ll have to hear it.” I didn’t know it was possible to feel so encouraged and so let down at the same time.

I guess that was a unique mom skill.

LEVI

I couldn’t get the Jewel song out of my head. Those two lines played on repeat in my mind.

You were meant for me

And I was meant for you

So simple and plain, but they made me *feel* something in a way I’d never experienced before. Was it the same sensation April and everyone else felt when singing during worship? And what did it say about me that I didn’t feel those things while singing about God, but I felt them while singing about romance? That didn’t seem ideal for someone who wanted to lead others in worship.

Was I backsliding?

But if we believed God knew us since birth (and before!) and had a

plan where He'd connect us with the perfect spouse, then maybe it was actually a Christian song? God meant you for me and me for you. Or at least it wasn't *unChristian*. Was that even possible, that a secular song could actually be unintentionally Christian? Or maybe Jewel actually *was* a Christian but just had to hide it and play it cool so she could get popular in the music world and then eventually share the Gospel? Like U2.

One thing was for certain—it was forever tied in my mind with April.

I needed to hear it again. Unfortunately, after searching Alex's CDs in the trash bag, I had to conclude he didn't own it.

Then I realized I could probably record it off the radio, so I grabbed a blank cassette tape, plugged my headphones into the boombox so my parents couldn't hear, and started switching from one station to another, trying to find the song.

It took an hour, including one near miss where I came in right as the song ended, but I finally got it onto tape. Well, half of it anyway. I didn't realize it until later, but I'd hit RECORD as the second verse started. It would have to do.

Along the way, I ended up recording a few other songs I'd heard and liked. I realized that was the safest way for me to listen to secular music. I got to hear songs I liked, but since artists couldn't cuss on the radio, I wouldn't get exposed to bad stuff that might be in some of their other songs.

(It also meant my nosy parents wouldn't ask me about any new CDs I brought home.)

Why had I never thought of that plan before?

I listened to my new songs on repeat, stopping and rewinding the tape each time it came to the end of the playlist. I especially loved anything with acoustic guitars—Sarah McLachlan, the Counting Crows, the Dave Matthews Band, Sister Hazel, Shawn Colvin—they all made me think of Wes up on stage leading worship. I knew he listened to some secular stuff too and liked a few of those bands, though he obviously couldn't talk about it much at church. I'd seen their tapes in his car though.

I spent the rest of the day listening to the songs I'd recorded and learning to play them on guitar.

Even after Mom told me to turn out my light and go to sleep around 11:30 p.m., I stayed up in the dark listening over and over to the tape I'd made.

When my alarm went off the next morning, I was definitely feeling the effects of staying up until 2 a.m. on a school night, and all I wanted to do was hit snooze. But if I did, I'd miss riding to school with Molly and April and would have to get Mom to drive me.

I stumbled out of bed and found the only unwrinkled shirt I had, a button-up long-sleeve Tommy Hilfiger (from the outlet, of course—after all,

Dad's a pastor) with big red, white, and blue panels. In the bathroom, I took my time with my hair, even using the hair dryer to give it some oomph. I felt the need to look nicer than usual that morning.

Since my parents were already at the breakfast table, I snuck into their bathroom and rummaged around through the stuff under Dad's side of the sink, looking for cologne. I found a bottle of Old Spice and put a little dab on each side of my neck, the way I'd seen him do it.

When I got to April's house, Molly was already leaning against the car, waiting for us. She took one look at me, and her face broke out into a wide grin. I'd never been more annoyed with her in my life.

"Any particular person you're wanting to look and smell good for?"

"Yeah, your stepmom."

She cackled.

April's front door slammed and she came bobbing down the path to the car.

"Well, you look nice today," April said to me as she unlocked the car for us.

"Oh, really? This old thing? I guess. Thanks, though."

Molly rolled her eyes. April sniffed the air.

"Something smells like my grandpa."

A few minutes into our commute to school, Molly broke the silence.

"Do you think you're making Alex move too fast? You're basically asking him to change his life overnight. It's a lot."

"No way," April said, "following Jesus is a radical thing."

"Yeah, but he doesn't really even know Jesus yet. He doesn't totally understand what he's getting himself into. Levi, what do you think?"

She turned around in her seat and looked back at me. I really wish she hadn't put me on the spot like that.

"I think if we were doing something wrong, someone would've said something," I replied. "Wes and Tori, Pastor Chris and my dad...someone."

"Exactly," April agreed.

"You think they can do no wrong, huh?" Molly asked me.

"Well, I don't mean that. They're just...older, you know? More mature. They know things we don't."

She stared off into the distance, unspoken thoughts on her mind.

At school, the Jewel song was still on repeat in my head, so at first I didn't hear my name being called while I was walking towards my first period class. My name had never been called at school, so I was perplexed as I looked around to see who suddenly had use for me.

Alex strolled my way, a big smile on his face.

"Dude, you deaf?" he joked as he caught up to me. "I've been saying your name for like five minutes and you just ignored me."

"Sorry, I was just...yeah."

He kept walking, and I joined him. I was walking down the hall with Alex Richards. And not just *near* him as I'd done in the past—I was *with* him. When people turned from their lockers and looked at him—which they did—they saw me too. Now, most of them seemed puzzled to see me with him—probably puzzled at, you know, who I was just in general—but nonetheless, they saw me. It was a new sensation.

We chatted for a few minutes about the CDs Donnie gave him.

"I gotta run," he said. "Bell's about to ring."

As he checked his watch, I saw the W.W.J.D. bracelet on his wrist. I'd honestly wondered if anything we said to him the day before was going to stick, and indeed, he still seemed all in.

"See you in fourth period," he said as he jogged away.

"Yeah, see you in fourth!" I called out down the hallway. I saw a few people look at me, look at him, and then look back at me. I nodded "What's up?" to them. They stared back blankly before shutting their lockers and sprinting off to their classes.

They might not have known my name yet, but my face was at least on their radar.

With pep in my step, I spun around and walked back the way we'd just come, because walking with Alex meant I'd passed a right turn I was

supposed to take 50 feet before. The bell rang, alerting me to the fact our little stroll meant I was about to get my first tardy ever.

But I didn't care one bit—I'd become a guy who was sometimes late to class.

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If I'd known what was coming in fourth period, I would've been late again. Or even skipped it altogether. But no, I was so stoked to hang with Alex that I was in my seat way before the bell and a couple of minutes before he and Julio walked through the door in mid-argument.

"Bro, what are you *talking* about?" Julio asked him, exasperated, as they headed to their seats. When he saw me, Julio redirected his frustration.

"What the *fuck*, Levi?"

I froze, unsure what the eff indeed. But also...he remembered my name.

"Don't get mad at him," Alex said as they plopped down. "He didn't do anything."

"You just told me he went through your room and told you all your shit was bad and that you had to throw it out."

Oh.

"They did what?" Shannon asked, looking up from her geometry

homework.

“Right? That’s *fucked up*,” Julio said, staring me straight in the eye. “For one, that’s like hundreds—maybe thousands—of dollars worth of stuff. And two, who gave you the right to decide what’s good and what’s bad?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“The Bible did,” Alex interjected. “They read it and know all about it, so they know what’s good and bad.”

“And you just believe whatever they say?” Julio asked.

“Well...for now, yeah. Until I get to read it for myself. Listen, man, I’m serious about this. I’m trying to change my life here. I don’t want to be tempted by all that secular stuff.”

“Tempted by what?” Shannon asked.

“Secular stuff. Means it isn’t Christian. Secular stuff is stuff that can cause me to sin.”

As the class filled in, I sensed that even more people were listening to our conversation, and, in a shocking turn of events, I wished people *wouldn’t* pay attention to Alex and me.

“I don’t want to burn in hell forever,” he said. “And you shouldn’t either.”

“Bro, what the fuck are you talking about?” Julio asked. “You’re not gonna burn in Hell. And neither am I.”

"Are you sure about that? If you died right now, do you know that you'd go to Heaven?" Alex asked.

"Oh my *God*, you sound like my Tia!"

"All you have to do is ask Jesus to come into your heart like I did the other night. And then get rid of stuff that'll cause you to get tempted."

"I can't believe this is happening."

"Have you ever heard about The Rapture?" Alex asked him.

"Can we talk about something else? *Anything* else."

"Yeah, maybe we *should* talk about something else," I said, scanning the room and catching people whispering to each other.

Alex appeared surprised when I said that. He almost seemed hurt that I'd call for an end to the conversation.

"Yeah, all right," he muttered. "What do you want to talk about then?"

"I don't know," Julio said. "How 'bout we figure out a plan for the weekend, son?"

Poor Julio didn't know he'd just brought up the one topic that would cause him even more agony, because Alex proceeded to try and explain to him why they couldn't go party together that weekend or any other weekend.

Obviously Julio did not like that. Alex did say that Julio could come hang out with us and do things we did, which was news to me—not because

Julio wasn't invited, but more so because I didn't realize Alex was going to hang out with us that weekend. Or that we were hanging out at all.

On our way to lunch, Alex asked me why I killed the conversation earlier.

"Because everyone was listening," I said.

"So?"

"And Julio was getting mad."

"Yeah, but if he doesn't hear about Jesus, he could go to Hell. And he's my friend—I don't want him to go to Hell. I don't want *anyone* to go to Hell. So why was it a bad thing that everyone was listening? I mean, if people are going to Hell, what are we even doing here, wasting time with school? We should be telling them all about Jesus. How can we just go about doing our normal stuff, listening to teachers, voting for Homecoming King and Queen, and playing dodgeball or whatever? We should be spending every minute trying to get them saved, right?"

I was dumbfounded. Mostly because...he was right? If we really believed the stakes were as high as Heaven and Hell, why were we wasting time with anything else? People could die at any moment, and we're just eating Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes like it was no big deal.

Did I not care?

I did care, but...I also didn't feel the same urge he seemed to feel,

which scared me even more because of what it might mean.

Did I not really believe in Heaven and Hell? Because if I did, why wasn't I telling everyone?

Alex was staring at me, so I knew I had to say something, and I definitely wasn't going to say any of the things I was actually thinking.

"You just...you have to go slowly. It's like getting into a cold pool on a hot day, right? You have to ease yourself in. It's gonna be freezing for a few moments, but you'll adjust, and then you can ease in even further. Eventually it's gonna feel great!"

"I've never done that in my life. I always just cannonball in."

I believed him.

"Well, not everyone's like that. With people like Julio, you've gotta give them time and go slow. Otherwise you risk turning them off for good. You don't want that, do you?"

"No, of course not. Ok, I'll go slow."

I also worried that if he kept up his manic classroom preaching, Julio might not be the only one he alienated. He might turn off all the popular kids April was targeting. She and I needed to have a little conversation about Alex.

APRIL

Levi was definitely overreacting about Alex's conversation with Julio. He kept trying to explain that he was worried about Alex messing up my plan, but I was sure it wasn't as bad as he was making it out to be. Levi would probably freeze up if anyone mentioned Jesus at all in class. I loved the guy, but as his hesitation to invite Alex to church in the first place showed, he cared too much about what other people thought. If anything, the classroom incident was proof that our discipling of Alex was having an effect on our new addition. I was proud of him for standing up for Jesus in front of his old friends.

I even told him that when we all met up at the movie theater that night. It could've been the fluorescent glow of the Tinseltown marquee, but I was pretty sure he blushed when I said it.

There was still a lot of room for growth, though, as we found out when we tried to pick an appropriate movie to watch. Alex wanted to see *Wes Craven's Wishmaster*, which was some sort of Freddy Kreuger thing that looked demonic. No way was I gonna be opening the door to the devil on a random September Friday night.

"What about *Event Horizon*?" he asked. "My buddy said it was wild."

"What's that one rated?" I asked.

"It's rated R," Levi piped up. "And it's got nudity."

"Did you already see it?" Alex asked.

"No, there's this website for Christian parents that tells you what's in movies—how much violence, language, sex, blasphemy, etc. And *Event Horizon* is pretty bad. Lots of nudity. And not just..." he said, motioning to his chest. "It's also go, you know..." he nodded down below his waist.

"It shows *bush*?" Alex exclaimed. "Whoa, full frontal!"

It was my turn to blush. Meanwhile, Molly got hit with a full-on giggle fit. I couldn't believe she found it that funny. It must've been Reese's influence—he was such a perv sometimes. Fortunately, since he'd been grounded for who knows what, Molly had decided to hang with us. I hoped it would be the beginning of eventually pulling her away from Reese and his bad influence.

"What's this website called?" Alex asked, teasing Levi, who turned red.

We decided on *In & Out*, a movie no one knew anything about, but which was PG-13 and had a fun-looking poster.

It ended up being about a guy who decides he's gay and leaves his wife for Magnum P.I.

We discussed it afterward over bottomless chips and salsa at Chili's, which we'd gone to because nobody had much money.

"I thought the movie was sweet," Molly said.

"Celebrating sin is 'sweet'?" I asked.

“Ugh! Why are you always like this? It’s just a movie! Not everything is some life and death, heaven and hell thing.”

“But that’s how the devil works! He takes seemingly innocent things—like PG-13 movies—and uses it as a way to brainwash us into normalizing the Gay Agenda.”

“What’s the Gay Agenda?” Alex asked.

“I can’t believe you’ve never heard of the Gay Agenda,” I said. “It’s basically, like, all these big gay people—politicians and celebrities and stuff—getting together and trying to pass pro-gay laws and smuggle gay messages into movies and music.”

“What kind of messages?”

“That being gay is ok and that Christians are mean to gay people and stuff.”

“Are Christians mean to gay people?”

“What? No! We just stand up for what we know is right, and they get mad at us for it.”

“My uncle’s gay, and he doesn’t seem to have an agenda,” Alex said. “Or hate Christians. In fact, he’s the only one in our family who likes going to church. He sings in the choir.”

“Aw,” Molly said, as if Alex had just said something sweet and not something heartbreaking.

“Well, that’s just sad,” I said. “He’s hearing the Gospel every week but still living in sin. Following Jesus requires true repentance.”

“So you’re saying he can’t be a Christian and be gay?”

“Exactly.”

“But it’s not like he’s *choosing* to be gay—he just is.”

“That’s a lie that’s part of the Gay Agenda.”

“Huh. All I know is he’s one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. He’s actually the reason I came to your church. Well, one of them. But yeah, because of him, I assumed anyone who went to church was nice and good.”

“Are you saying we’re not nice?” I asked, smiling but inwardly terrified that we’d scared him off.

“Well, no. I just thought Christians were all about loving people.”

“We do love people, but that doesn’t mean we approve of everything they do. We love the sinner but hate the sin.”

“Love the sinner but hate the sin...” Alex repeated. “Hm.”

He didn’t say anything for a few moments. He just sat there and thought, his brows narrowing and his mouth puckering a bit as he concentrated on whatever was going through his head. It was kind of cute.

Even if he’d been duped by the Gay Agenda, he obviously cared about his uncle, which made me like him even more.

We eventually moved on to other topics—Alex and Molly chatted so

long about their new CDs that Levi and I traded bored eye rolls—and by 10:30, we'd kind of run out of things to talk about.

"What do y'all normally do now?" Alex asked.

I glanced at Molly and Levi, unsure if we should admit to the truth, which was that we usually just went home around that time. Or at least Levi and I did—I wasn't sure what Molly normally did on weekends.

"We kind of just..." Levi started. Was he going to say it?

"...go home?" he said, looking to me for confirmation.

"At 10:30?" Alex asked, kind of shocked.

Levi shrugged.

"Man. Normally my night would be just getting started."

He stared blankly into space, and I couldn't help but wonder once again if he was debating whether or not he made the right choice by becoming a Christian, if maybe he really liked Jesus but thought His followers were too boring and that Hell might actually not be that bad.

As we waited to pay for our chips and salsa, the restaurant front door opened, and four teenage girls entered. It took me a moment to realize it was Shannon Cook and her little dance squad crew.

She looked our direction and did a double take when she saw who was sitting with us.

"Alex!" she called out.

He looked up and smiled when he saw her.

“Hey!”

Alex stood and hugged her and the other three girls. They were getting some food before driving out to the lake house for Shane’s kegger.

“I can’t believe you’re not gonna go,” Shannon told him.

“WaveRunners, dude! Plus, Julio’s cousin in College Station hooked him up with some good shit. We’re gonna get blazed as fuck.”

Shannon was such a strange, but interesting, person to me. Top 10 in our class, grades-wise; gorgeous; talented; and seemingly genuinely friendly. Yet she partied just as hard as the burnouts.

“Plus, Kandace might bring her new puppy.”

“Kandace got a puppy?” Alex asked.

“Well, I don’t know. She was gonna go look at some today, so if she saw one she liked, we might have a little buddy to hang out with.”

“Aw, man,” Alex said. “A party puppy.” I could tell he really wanted to go. He looked down at us, and I forced a warm smile. He matched it, but not with as much enthusiasm as I’d have liked.

“Nah, think I’m gonna miss this one,” he said.

“What are y’all gonna do?” Shannon asked.

“Oh, we haven’t decided yet,” he replied. “We just saw a movie, and now...I dunno. Maybe go play some music somewhere or something? Drive

around for a bit? Who knows. The night's still young."

Shannon looked us over, and I could tell she knew none of that was gonna happen.

"Well, y'all enjoy yourselves."

They followed the hostess to their table, and Alex plopped back down into our booth, a little glum.

"She seems nice," I said.

"Yeah, she's a good one," he replied.

"I think she'd really like our youth group. You should invite her when you invite Julio."

That seemed to cheer him up some. He smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

Chapter Seven

LEVI

We told Alex we'd save him a seat, but he showed up for his first Sunday morning service a half hour early and was there waiting when the rest of us arrived. The poor guy sat alone on the very end of the very back row in the fairly empty sanctuary, the only teen in the place wearing a suit and tie. It reminded me of Forrest Gump sitting on the bus bench, unsure exactly what time his ride was coming and quietly desperate for someone to talk to him.

The relief on his face when he saw us made me realize that for as cool as Alex was at school, being in church made him feel the same awkwardness we felt on a daily basis as we walked from class to class.

Once he'd taken off his suit jacket and tie to fit in with everyone else, he filled us in on how his weekend had gone. In short, he was bored as heck. He even had trouble watching TV, saying it felt like stuff he shouldn't be watching, so he'd turned it off. April used the moment to explain to him about how the Holy Spirit convicts us when we're not doing things that are right, but that only led to us needing to explain what the Holy Spirit was, and since church was about to start and explaining a new supernatural entity might take longer than five minutes, we said we'd come back to that later.

The band kicked in, which was everyone's signal to stand. I wasn't sure what Alex would make of a Sunday morning service, which was way less rock and roll than a youth service. For one thing, all the lights were on. Nothing cool happens with the lights on. Even worse, Dad was in the middle of his yearly sermon series on tithing—how Christians were commanded to give the first 10% of our paychecks to the church. Fortunately, Alex wasn't too fazed by it, though I wouldn't be surprised if he just hadn't done the math yet.

After the service, I introduced him to Dad.

"So you're the owner of that big black bag of secular music Levi brought home, huh?" Dad asked him.

"Yes, sir. The music, the movies, the porn—that was all mine."

I tensed.

"I'm sorry, the what?" Dad asked.

"We immediately threw the rest away," I quickly told him. He was totally gonna sneak into my room later and poke through the bag to make sure. Probably the rest of my things too, just in case I was dumb enough to hide it somewhere.

Alex couldn't grab lunch at Bennigan's with us, but he promised Wes and I that he'd be at our guys' small group meeting later that afternoon at Reese's house.

When I showed up, most of the guys were already there, and a buzz was in the air—at least among the dudes who went to our school—about Alex supposedly joining us.

Jared Campbell was a sort of popular baseball player who ran in the party circles and, according to April, was the epitome of the type of person who thinks they're going to heaven because their parents are Christians (his parents helped start the church, but Jared only seemed to show up at youth group and small group when there was free pizza). Anyway, as he took a third slice of pepperoni, he proclaimed that he didn't think Alex would show, that he was probably playing *GoldenEye* and smoking out with Julio, recovering from Shane's party.

"He didn't go to Shane's party," I said, a little smug that I had some inside info.

“Oh yeah? How do you know?”

Jared stuffed almost the entire slice into his big mouth.

“Because I was with him Friday night. April and Molly too. We all went to see a movie and then went to Chili’s. And then we went home—nobody went to Shane’s.”

Finally, the doorbell rang and I ran to it to find Alex waiting on the other side, his *Teen Study Bible* in hand. In the kitchen, I introduced him to all the guys he didn’t know yet.

“I heard we have a Homecoming King in our presence,” Robbie said. “I bow to you, m’lord.”

Though Wes was the small group leader, Robbie was sort of his assistant. The truth was he just kind of showed up at our first meeting—unexpectedly, if the look on Wes’s face was any indication—and continued to turn up each week.

“No, I was just a Duke,” Alex said, a little embarrassed. “Only a senior can be King.”

“I was Homecoming King at my school,” Jason blurted. I’d hoped he’d be chill and not immediately be weird, but I suppose Jason was always gonna be Jason.

“Oh, that’s cool,” Alex said.

“He wasn’t Homecoming King,” I said while shooting daggers with my

eyes at Jason.

“Well, I’m the only guy in my school, so who else is gonna be Homecoming King?” he asked, a big dumb grin on his face. Everyone except Alex groaned.

“How are you the only guy in your school?” Alex asked.

“I’m homeschooled. My school is just me. Used to be my sister too, but she graduated already.”

“That means your sister was your Homecoming Queen by default last year,” Reese said.

The entire room burst out laughing. Except Jason, of course.

“Are you really homeschooled?” Alex asked. “That’s so tight. I wish I was homeschooled. I’d sleep in every day, watch TV, go skating...”

“If I do all my work by 10, I just play *SimCity* the rest of the day,” Jason said.

Computer games. Just adding to all the cool points Jason was accruing.

“Or I’d do that,” Alex said. “I love *SimCity*.”

That was all Alex needed to say. While we all finished eating the pizza, Jason peppered Alex with *SimCity*-related questions. To be fair, Alex asked Jason a bunch of questions too once he realized Jason was kind of a whiz at the game. They geeked out together until Wes said the word and ushered us

all into the living room.

"All right, who wants to pray to start us off?" Wes asked.

Dead silence in the room.

Prayer. We'd all done it at some point, yet when it came to doing it out loud in front of other people—even if those people were theoretically your closest friends with whom you'd shared dark secrets and struggles—everyone suddenly forgot how words worked. And it wasn't just because Alex was there—we went through the same routine every single week.

"Come on, guys," Wes said, slightly miffed. He feigned his usual shock. Alex shared the same surprised look, but his was actually genuine.

"Levi?" Wes asked.

Everyone else got away with pretending like they've never heard the name Jesus before, but not me. I didn't know if it was because I was a preacher's kid and was somehow seen as more spiritual or if it was something else. Regardless, Wes knew I would pray because...well, because I always did. Not that I didn't want to talk to God, I just didn't like the expectation.

I nodded.

"Any prayer requests?" Wes asked the group.

More silence. Then Jason raised his hand. "Unspoken."

"Sure, sure," Wes said, acknowledging the secret word for when

something was too sensitive to share with everyone.

After a couple more “unspoken”s from others, Wes caught on.

“All right, guys, how about we’ll just say a general prayer for help with not looking at porn and masturbating this week, huh?”

“Oh yeah, I’m gonna need *big* help with that,” Alex said. He smiled at everyone else—he wasn’t making fun at all, but he was definitely being lighthearted about it, as though it was no big deal. He didn’t know that guys in the group only admitted to those things during our most serious small group meeting, which happened probably a couple of times a year. Not that they were planned—it was always spontaneous when we went that deep—but teenaged dudes just rarely went *there*.

The terror on everyone’s faces clued Alex in pretty quickly, so he stopped smiling.

“Hats off, guys,” Robbie instructed.

We bowed our heads, and I led everyone in prayer.

“Ok, now who wants to read our scripture for the week?” Wes asked.

Once again, silence. It was gonna be me again. I opened my Bible and reluctantly started flipping to the verse, but then something new happened.

“I’ll do it,” Alex said.

Everyone was shocked—Reese even shut his gab for once. Alex opened his *Teen Study Bible*.

"What are we reading?"

"Galatians 6," Wes said.

Alex started flipping through his Bible before sheepishly easing to a stop.

"Where's that?"

Every eye in the room was staring at him, and almost every jaw had fallen open. Most of our group had been together since elementary school, and basically everyone had grown up in church, so to encounter a rookie Christian in person was shocking.

"You know what, we'll come back to that," Wes said, closing his own Bible. "Alex, I think everyone here would be super interested in hearing what happened to you on Wednesday night. If you feel comfortable sharing it."

"Um...sure, I guess. Like, what do you wanna know?"

"What made you come to the rally?"

"Levi invited me at school."

Wes laughed.

"Sorry, that's my bad. I should've clarified that I meant why did you decide to accept his invitation? What made you want to spend a night with us instead of, I don't know..."

"Getting trashed?"

"Sure. Is that what you would've done if you didn't come to church?"

"Probably. My buddy Julio wanted to smoke out, so..."

"So, why didn't you smoke with him? Why'd you come to church?"

"I was tired of smoking, man. Tired of getting fucked up."

Ten teens and Robbie gasped at once, like a courtroom of old, small-town ladies when Matlock tricks the real killer into confessing on the witness stand. Wes just smiled.

"Sorry, I mean I was tired of getting effed up. I don't know, man...I just didn't like who I was when I was high or drunk or whatever. It got me in trouble. But I couldn't stop, you know? It was just what we did all the time. I didn't know there was any other way, but it all felt so... Like Pastor Chris said, I had this emptiness in me, and I guess I kept trying to fill it with all that other stuff."

"So, walk us through everything you were feeling on Wednesday. I know it might seem dumb, but I promise if anyone's gonna understand, it's us."

"Yeah, sure. At first, I was like 'Where the hell am I?'"

A few of us glanced at each other, but no one gasped at the much tamer cuss word. Alex probably didn't even know it was a bad one.

"I mean, this guy came skipping up to me with clown paint on his face," he said, sticking his thumb out my direction. He was grinning, though,

so I knew he was just giving me a hard time.

“And then that guy over there came out looking like a WWE superstar and shooting candy from a potato gun, so, you know, kind of a wild start. But the music rocked, so that was cool. Then April started talking about her dad abandoning her and how she felt so alone...I guess I really understood that. My dad’s still around, but it kind of feels like a technicality. My brothers already graduated and moved out, and my mom...I don’t know. So I feel alone a lot of the time. I know that seems dumb because I’m Mr. Popular or whatever, but just because people are around you doesn’t mean that they really know you, right? I felt like a fraud—like if they knew the real me, they wouldn’t want to be around me so much. My ex-girlfriend saw the real me, which was probably why she dumped my ass. That’s kind of what sent me spiraling and making more bad decisions. But then April started talking about how she became a Christian and followed Jesus and stuff, which made everything better. That God was like her new dad. And Pastor Chris said that accepting Jesus into my heart would bring me peace and give me a new start, and... That’s what I wanted more than anything—a chance to fix things, to change my life. To stop doing stuff that made me ashamed.”

Alex rubbed his eyes, fighting back tears.

“That’s why I went down front that night. I didn’t want to stand up in front of everyone—believe me. But I was worried that might be my only

chance to change things, and I knew I'd hate myself if I didn't take it. Almost the whole way down the aisle, I kept saying, 'This is stupid.' But when I got down front and closed my eyes and lifted my arms...I knew I'd done the right thing. Then I felt this hand on my shoulder, and...it was really warm. Like crazy warm. I didn't know if it was God Himself or what. Turns out it was just Levi, but it may as well have been Jesus. In fact, it felt like God was sending this power or something through him. Like this supernatural hug or something. The warmth went all through me, all over me, and it steadied me. I felt like I wasn't at sea anymore—like I finally had something to hold onto. I felt *connected* to something for the first time. I didn't know what I was actually feeling, but I knew it could help me change, and I knew I wanted more of it."

"Alex, I appreciate you sharing your story," Wes said. "That took guts. Right, guys?"

Off of Wes's look, everyone murmured their agreement.

"What you experienced, that was shame leaving your spirit," Wes said. "The Bible says if we acknowledge Jesus here on Earth, He'll acknowledge us in Heaven on Judgment Day. When you walked down that aisle and acknowledged Him, you gave him permission to come in and clean you up on the inside, like gutting a house for renovation. Now we're gonna help you rebuild things even stronger and better than ever before."

Alex smiled.

“Cool.”

As Wes continued with the Bible study, my mind kept wandering back to Alex telling his story about accepting Jesus into his heart and becoming a Christian. I was most surprised at how unfamiliar it all felt to me. It was an act I'd done first when I was seven in children's church and then multiple times since at summer camps, revivals, concerts, and conferences. And no, you're not supposed to do it multiple times—once should be enough. But I kept having this feeling that I wasn't actually saved, this fear that my earlier decisions might not have gone through correctly, like a letter with the wrong address. I wondered if what I felt was God's way of stamping “return to sender” on what I'd sent out into the universe.

I'd never felt the warm hug, the connection to anything supernatural, or even the “blessed assurance” we'd sing about from time to time when Dad felt moved by the spirit mid-service and would start humming the old hymn.

I'd been a Christian nearly my entire life, yet there I was listening to Alex's testimony and desperately wanting to experience what he'd experienced. Why hadn't I before? Had I said the wrong prayer? Was there unconfessed sin in my life when I'd prayed it? Did I not have enough faith? Was God uninterested in me? Surely not that last one, right? That line of

thinking went against everything I'd ever been taught.

Yet what I knew was that what I felt—or *didn't* feel, to be more precise—was very real.

Later, when I told April about Alex sharing his story—but not about the prayer for porn and masturbation—and how everyone had reacted to it, she gasped. At first I was worried I'd revealed too much, but it wasn't that. She'd suddenly gotten an idea.

APRIL

I could tell Levi wasn't totally on board when I said we needed to convince Alex to give his testimony to the whole youth group. But after Levi described the reaction to Alex's story just among the few guys, I knew it was the perfect way to both get Alex's friends to come to youth group and, more importantly, to get them to really listen to the Gospel. While they might not care what Pastor Chris preached, they'd definitely care what their old party buddy had to say.

"They might think we're weird," I told Levi, "but they'll listen to him."

"Isn't it too soon for him to get up in front of everyone and speak?"

"You said when he told his story in small group, it was moving, right?"

"Yeah..."

“Then no, I don’t think it’s too soon. Sure, he’s not the finished product yet, but who is? Plus, it’s the start that’s important right now—him experiencing God and getting saved.”

Levi appeared only slightly more convinced than a few minutes earlier, but I suspected his hesitation with the plan had more to do with inviting a bunch of cool kids to youth group and the risk that they might think we weren’t cool.

What I didn’t tell him was he was probably right about it being too soon, but I didn’t know how much time we had. Because while Levi was worried about Alex not having a firm enough understanding of the faith to be able to share it, I was worried that Alex might quickly lose interest, backslide, and give up altogether. Especially seeing how bummed he was to not be hanging with his old friends over the weekend. He was our best bet for getting any of those other kids to darken the door of a church, and we had to act fast if we wanted to be sure we got the chance to invite them.

After discussing it with Pastor Chris, we picked a Wednesday night a couple of weeks out. Unfortunately there were no rallies or concerts or anything planned until our Disciple Now weekend a month away, so we just had to use a boring old youth group meeting. But Alex was the real draw for the other kids anyway, so who needed t-shirt cannons?

Levi worried that convincing Alex to do it would be tough, but I knew

there was a way to talk him into it. I just told him that if he wanted to hang out with his old friends again, inviting them to church was the best and quickest way to do that. Plus he wanted them to encounter God the same way he did, right? While he wasn't sure about getting up in front of everyone and speaking, he was definitely excited about the opportunity to pull his old friends over to our side.

"I think they still kind of don't believe that I'm serious about this," he told me. "They think I'm just trying to hook up with you or something."

At his mention of hooking up with me, my mind short circuited. I moved my mouth, but no words came out.

"Which I'm not," he reassured me once he looked up and saw my reaction. "They just think that because that's who I've been for a while now."

"Sure, that makes sense," I said. "Maybe we need to show them how serious you really are."

"How do we do that?"

"I've got an idea. Just trust me."

We sat down and made a list of who to invite. All the big ones were there—Julio and Shannon, of course; Jen and Tim; Kandace; and some others.

Most people he invited agreed to attend. Which, duh, of course they

did. Even Jen—who'd claimed to have games she had to cheer at until kingdom come—suddenly had a free week. She and Tim were in. Shannon and Kandace were out though. And Julio put up a fight, but he eventually agreed to come as a personal favor to Alex. Some other people were apparently in as well, but I didn't know them. Levi had heard their names before.

The night Alex was supposed to speak felt surprisingly ordinary, in spite of it being anything but—at least as far as our school was concerned. I tried to get the importance of the situation across to Pastor Chris, but even he kind of seemed to be going through the motions of a normal youth group Wednesday night.

Pretty much everyone who said they were going to come showed, though none appeared really excited to be there. Alex welcomed everyone in the church lobby and tried to make them feel at home, but no one really did.

Well, except maybe for the guys I mentioned earlier that I didn't know. They may as well have been clones of Alex—the same earrings, bucket hat he sometimes wore, and Billabong shirts—and they spent most of their time checking out the girls in the youth group. Unfortunately, some of the girls—especially the ones who hung out with the skaters—were just as into checking them out, though they tried to be coy about it. Before the service had even started, the guys had already made their way over to the

girls and started chatting them up, and by the time we all filed into the sanctuary to kick things off, they'd already partnered up and sat next to each other near the back, everyone else on the row in front of them.

The visitors mostly stuck together. Jared Campbell tried to infiltrate the clique, but when they mostly ignored him, he just played it cool and hung around the outskirts of their group. Levi had already taken up residence there. He'd greeted Julio—who told everyone in the group he was gonna get Levi high someday—and then just kind of hovered without actually saying anything else. I watched him nod as people talked, and if you looked at them from a distance, you'd assume he was with them and not a poser. But I knew him, and he *was* being a bit of a poser.

I expected Reese to be on his worst behavior, trying to impress all the popular kids, but surprisingly, he stuck with the skaters and did his normal shenanigans.

Alex was nervous about getting up in front of the rest of the youth group to tell his story. I tried to assure him that there was nobody in the crowd he should be worried about impressing, but he still had to take a few trips to the restroom leading up to the service starting.

I couldn't believe those people were really in our church. I'd dreamt about it for so long, so to see it all play out was like a real-life miracle, a testimony to God's faithfulness.

Nevertheless, them showing up didn't directly translate into them participating or being overwhelmed by it all. They snickered and chatted and flirted through worship, just like the skaters a few rows back were doing. I'd have been worried if I didn't know what was coming, that Alex was about to take the stage and command their attention.

Knowing Alex's friends might be watching, I made a point to close my eyes and lift my hands and sing louder than ever. I wanted them to see what a relationship with God looked like. Levi might've been playing it cool, but I wasn't ashamed to be seen loving Jesus.

After spending 20 minutes speaking about how God wanted us to be holy like He was holy, Pastor Chris transitioned into the testimony.

"Now, there's an awesome young man here tonight who recently made the decision to follow Christ, and he's been learning what it means to really *experience* God and pursue holiness in his life. Alex, come on up."

Alex sheepishly made his way to the stage. Though people were whooping and hollering his name as he walked—not just Levi and I, but also the visitors—Alex didn't make eye contact with anyone. Pastor Chris handed him the microphone.

It wouldn't be fair to say he completely bombed, but between him mumbling and taking long pauses and generally being super low energy, everything landed with a thud. None of the enthusiasm we'd seen from him

over the previous week shone through. For whatever reason, public speaking definitely wasn't his thing.

"Do you think that deciding to follow Jesus was the best decision you've ever made?" Pastor Chris asked him.

"Uh, sure, I guess. I mean, yeah. It's up there."

Not quite a ringing endorsement. Fortunately, I knew he was about to have to opportunity to *show* his friends how much he'd changed.

Pastor Chris kept him onstage during the altar call. As he asked who wanted to give their life to Jesus, I opened my eyes a bit and peeked over at all of Alex's friends. No one raised their hands. Half of them didn't even have their eyes closed, which, neither did I, but I was sort of on duty, you know?

Pastor Chris gave everyone a bit longer to raise their hands, but no one suddenly changed their minds. He prayed and the moment was over.

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. Or, worse, I felt like God hadn't answered my prayers, that He hadn't delivered on His promise to spark revival. Did I do something wrong? Was there unconfessed sin in my life that kept Him from honoring His promise?

I'd have to mull over those questions later, because it was time for Alex to prove to his friends he was serious about his new faith. As he started to return to his seat, Pastor Chris asked him to stay onstage a minute.

"Levi? April? Y'all ready?" Pastor Chris asked.

Off my look, Levi ran to the side of the stage and retrieved the black garbage bag, which I'd asked him to bring from home. On the other side of the stage, Robbie grabbed a giant trash can and hauled it to the middle by Pastor Chris and Alex. I joined them and Levi onstage. I could tell Alex still wasn't quite sure what was about to happen.

"Alex, you've professed faith in Jesus as your savior and a desire to leave your old ways behind," Pastor Chris said. "Jesus was a pretty radical dude, so if we're really to follow Him, that means we've gotta be radical too. I mean, when He told some people to follow Him and they said they needed to say goodbye to their families or finish burying someone, He said, 'Let the dead bury the dead.' Lots of people have been rejected by their families for following Jesus. It's not for the faint of heart. And when the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he had to do to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus told him to go and sell everything he owned and give it to the poor and then follow Him. Because He knew the ruler loved his money more than anything. Basically, Jesus was saying 'I'm the only one you should be worshiping now.' So I ask you this: are you ready to take some radical steps to follow Jesus?"

Alex eyed the bag nervously, unsure where things were going. He glanced over at me for some hint. All I did was nod and smile to offer encouragement. It seemed to work.

"Yes, I am," Alex said.

Pastor Chris opened the bag and took out a CD. He looked at the artwork and then held the CD up for everyone to see.

"These are all of Alex's secular CDs," Pastor Chris said. "Looks like this one is called 'About Time' and is by some band called Pennywise."

"Great album!" Reese yelled from the skater's row.

"Alex, did you like this CD?" Pastor Chris asked.

Alex nodded.

"Well, it's time to kill our idols. I want you to break that CD in half and throw that garbage in the trash where it belongs."

Pastor Chris handed him the CD. There were more murmurs and whispers out in the crowd, including a "What the...?" from the skater's row.

Alex didn't break it right away. He held it at his waist and studied it for a moment, a puzzled expression on his face.

"We can't do this alone!" Pastor Chris said to the crowd. "Help him out! Alex! Alex! Alex!"

The crowd picked up the cheer and began clapping. Some of the visitors half-heartedly joined in, while Julio whispered furiously to the guy next to him. He seemed mad.

"Don't do it, bro!" he eventually yelled at the stage.

Alex looked up at him when he heard his voice.

"Alex! Alex! Alex!" Pastor Chris continued to chant into the

microphone, trying to overcome Julio's objections.

Alex finally looked over at me for guidance. I flexed my arm at him: "Be strong." He looked out at his old friends.

Whatever he saw appeared to make up his mind. He set a determined look on his face, held the CD higher, and cracked it in half.

The crowd went crazy! Alex tossed the broken CD into the giant trash can, and Pastor Chris grabbed another CD out of the bag.

"Let's see what's next," he said, looking at the cover. "The album 'Tragic Kingdom' by No Doubt!"

"Give it to me!" Reese yelled from the back of the crowd. Pastor Chris ignored him and handed it to Alex.

After a few broken CDs, it became obvious things were going to take awhile if Alex went one by one, so Pastor Chris asked Alex if it was ok if his friends helped. Levi and I stepped forward and began breaking CDs with him. Even then, it was slow going, so Pastor Chris opened things up for anyone to come onstage and break CDs.

For the next 20 minutes, the stage was chaos as CDs snapped in half and shards of plastic flew all over the place. Eventually there were no CDs left—just a stage filled with teens with sore hands and minor cuts, everyone out of breath from all the action.

Chapter Eight

LEVI

April predicted that everything would change after Alex gave his testimony at youth group, and in a lot of ways, it did—just maybe not how she'd hoped.

Word of his conversion spread like mono throughout the school. While rumors had been going around before he got up on stage that Alex had “found Jesus” or something, no one really believed the party king had abdicated his throne. But there was no room for doubt anymore.

Rather than spark intrigue and draw inquiring minds to church like April had hoped, Alex's decision was mostly met with surprise and then apathy, a general “Well, that sucks—oh well.”

It didn't mean there were no strong emotional responses to Alex's new born-again status. When Julio walked in with Alex the next day, they were in the middle of an increasingly heated discussion about what had happened the night before. Seeing me further fueled Julio's frustration.

"It's fucked up that y'all made him break all his CDs, bro. That's, like, thousands of dollars of music! It took him *years* to put that collection together, and y'all ripped it up in 15 minutes."

"You broke all your CDs?" Shannon asked. She'd missed Alex's testimony due to dance team practice.

Before Alex could answer, Julio filled her in on what happened.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Shannon asked, staring at me. I tried to get a read on what positions Alex was taking up in the conversation.

"Don't blame him," Alex said. "It was my choice."

"Bro, they sprung that on you out of nowhere! On stage in front of a hundred people! Of course you were gonna do what they wanted."

Julio pointed his finger at me like he was scolding a naughty dog.

"You're a *bad* influence on him. All y'all are."

Me, a bad influence? Pot calling the kettle black and all. It boggled my mind to think that I could have *any* influence on *anyone*, much less Alex, and much less a *bad* influence! I felt...guilty? Yet also...significant?

"Julio, *cálmate, güey...*" Alex said.

“Don’t tell me to calm down! You should be pissed about what they did to you. It’s fuckin’ manipulative, man. They’re like a cult! But without all the sex and drugs, so way less cool. Who wants to be part of an uncool cult?”

“I do,” Alex replied. That seemed to finally get Julio to take a breath and focus his thoughts.

“Listen, I know you don’t wanna get fucked up anymore and shit, and that’s, well, whatever,” Julio said. “I think it’s unfortunate, but you do you. *This* though? It’s messed up. It’s like they’re trying to change you—”

“I *want* to change,” Alex interrupted.

“Yeah, but they’re trying to change you in a bad way. They’re trying to strip away everything that makes you you. The music you like, the movies you watch, the magazines you read—these are your interests, and there’s nothing wrong with them. It’s like they want to get rid of anything that makes you unique and turn you into this bland clone.”

“You’re right,” I piped up. Both of them looked at me, surprised. “We’re all trying to turn into clones—of Jesus.”

Shannon let out a big groan and rolled her eyes. She may as well have run me over with that brand new Mustang her parents bought her, because having a gorgeous, cool girl looking at you that way was absolutely crushing.

“No, if you were a clone of Jesus, that’d be rad!” Julio said. “He hung out at parties and flipped over tables and called people out on their bullshit.”

But you're just a clone of *them*," Julio said, waving dismissively in my general direction as he looked Alex in the eyes. "And for what? So Jesus will accept you? I thought the whole point of Jesus was that he accepts *everyone* and was friends with 'bad' people. Like, wasn't it the pharisees—the people Jesus called out the most—who tried to get everyone to change?"

Alex looked over at me for help. He obviously hadn't read far enough into the Gospels to learn about the pharisees.

"How do you know about the pharisees?" I asked Julio.

"Bro, you're not the only one who's read the Bible. My mom's super Christian. She's been going to this Spanish-speaking Assembly of God church since I was in elementary school."

"You go to church?" I asked, still shocked.

"Nah, man. She stopped making me go in middle school. I did my time and I was done, son."

He turned his attention back to Alex.

"Listen, I love you like a brother, bro, so I'm always gonna support you. I just want you to be careful with all this stuff. I've seen people get super uncool when they got real into church. You know? Like, be into Jesus or whatever, but just don't be annoying about it. Don't always be trying to get us to keep going to church with you and shit. And don't be judging us if we go to parties and shit. Live and let live and shit. Don't make me have to

stop hanging out with you, 'cuz I don't wanna do that."

Even the suggestion of possibly losing Julio as a friend seemed to overwhelm Alex. I half wondered if he was about to cry right there in class.

"I don't want that either," Alex told Julio. "I'm not gonna let that happen."

"All right then," Julio said. "Cool."

They dropped the subject, but I could tell Julio's "cool" wasn't setting Alex's mind at ease. At lunch, when April asked Alex why he seemed bummed, he told her what had happened.

"Most people aren't gonna understand why we give up our old lives," she told him. "But we shouldn't worry about being accepted by those people. Jesus accepts us, and that's all that matters. He said when we're persecuted, we're just storing up treasures in heaven."

"Yeah, but everyone's gonna hate me on Earth," Alex said.

We assured him not everyone hated him—even Julio didn't *hate* him, he just disapproved. I did secretly worry that Alex might actually lose all his old friends, which would totally kill April's original plan while also, you know, sucking for Alex. When I mentioned it to her, she rolled her eyes and said I worried too much. She said Alex was Alex, and that meant people would always be drawn to him, even if they thought he's crazy.

And she was right. While Julio never came back to church, a random

collection of his old friends cycled through. The Billabong Boys even returned on a regular basis, but we could tell their hearts weren't in the right place. They were more focused on getting face time with Alex, skating, and cruising the flirtier girls in the youth group than they were on the things of God.

They joined us at Bennigan's a couple of times, which usually ended with them being super obnoxious to our regular waitress and asking "Are you gonna finish that?" within minutes of anyone's food arriving. If you looked up "mooch" in a dictionary, you'd probably have 10 seconds before one of them asked if they could use your dictionary. I said we should stop inviting them, but April insisted we needed to keep our group open to newbies, even if we didn't enjoy the people, just in case that's how the Lord wanted to work. Plus it was probably a test or something.

Alex asked why we never invited Jason to Bennigan's then.

"Well, he's already a Christian," April replied. "He doesn't need good influences like The Billabong Boys do."

APRIL

Levi wasn't the only one questioning the effectiveness of the plan. If Molly was concerned early on about us going too fast for Alex, she was

basically fully on Team Julio in the wake of the CD breaking. I'd noticed she stood off to the side of the stage while everyone was cracking discs in half, so I knew something was up.

"I think it's kind of like the bends," she said as we walked into the FCA meeting in the school auditorium. "You know, when you're scuba diving and you rise to the surface too quickly? And your lungs try to burst or something? We're pushing him too hard. We need to be gentler."

"He *wants* to be radical," I said. "Plus, Jesus calls us to this."

"I just think he's gonna pull away."

"Let's see how he's feeling after Disciple Now. I think a weekend spent around nothing but Christians will show him that he's gaining more than he's giving up. I think he'll finally realize he has a new family."

We left it at that, because Alex was walking up.

Everyone at FCA was quieter than normal, whispering instead of jabbering away, all shocked to see Alex there.

Alex was just as perplexed to see all of them.

"None of these people are athletes," he whispered to me. "I mean, those two are on the golf team, but come on." I'd already explained that you didn't have to be an athlete to attend, but it apparently hadn't sunk in until that moment.

Most of the whispering came from the girls, and it hit me that while I

was aware and respectful of Alex's baby Christian status—and kept any creeping feelings of attraction, as well as my expectations, in check—others might not be as patient.

Even Mary Crowder did a double take when she arrived. Unfortunately, Alex's arrival was the only fresh thing that morning—under Mary's leadership, FCA was as bland as usual.

When we dismissed, Mary beelined over to us and introduced herself to Alex, who was messing around on Craig Brumley's guitar. However shocked Mary was to learn Alex remembered her from their Freshman World History class, the color drained from her face when I told her Alex's conversion (which she'd heard rumors of) had come at our rally—the one she'd dismissed.

"Well, praise the Lord," she said, forcing a smile. "Do you play guitar too?"

"A little bit," he said.

"And I know you sing. We were in choir together in middle school."

"Oh yeah, that's right!"

"Well we should get you on the worship rotation then," Mary said.

I glanced at Levi just in time to see nuclear bombs go off in his eyes, though he somehow stayed chill. He'd been pestering Mary for so long to work him into the worship leader rotation, but Mary kept blowing him off.

"I'd love to have you," Mary said to Alex. She quickly corrected herself. "We'd love to have you. The group. A group thing."

"Sounds hot," Alex teased.

All the color that had drained from her face earlier rushed back in an instant as she turned bright red. While I felt I had to shoot Alex a half-disapproving glance, I also had to bite my lip to keep from smiling. He totally caught me, ignoring the look and unleashing a big grin.

"I don't know any of the songs though," he said.

"Levi can teach you," I said. "In fact, y'all should play together."

I intentionally didn't look at Mary.

"That'd be cool!" Alex said. "I'd love to play music for people again."

"Levi, does that work for you?" I asked, still not inviting Mary into the decision.

"Um, yeah. Totally."

"Then it's settled," I said, finally facing Mary. Her mouth hung open, but no words formed. She'd been fully outmaneuvered and knew it. In order to get Alex, she'd have to take Levi too. There was no way she could turn it down.

"Sounds great," she said, overly cheery.

I'd eventually try and split Levi and Alex up so they each had their own weeks to lead. That'd be half the month led by our youth group. The more

everyone grew to like and trust them, the more they'd see us as leaders at FCA, which meant we could slowly loosen Mary's grip on the meeting and hopefully start to ditch Baptist playtime and replace it with more in-depth Bible study, more intense prayer, and longer worship. We could revolutionize FCA at the school!

As Mary left the auditorium, I found Molly watching me.

"Well played," she said.

I grinned, but when she didn't return it, I realized I wasn't actually sure if she was praising me or calling me out. My grin faded a bit.

On our way to our lockers, I told Alex, Molly, and Levi of my plan to use music to infuse our Tuesday morning meetings with a little more of our church's DNA.

"Yeah, it totally felt different than our youth group," Alex said. "I thought maybe it was just me."

I assured him it wasn't just him, that since most of the kids in FCA went to a Baptist church, and since Baptists didn't believe in the Holy Spirit, their worship was kind of dead. Levi claimed they did actually believe in the Holy Spirit.

"If they do, they're definitely not filled with it," I said. "I've never seen any of them speaking in tongues."

"I speak in tongues," Alex said, breaking into a grin. "I'm just kidding."

I don't know what that means, but it sounds sexy."

"When the the Holy Spirit lives within a person, you can tell because they start speaking in tongues, which is kinda like..."

"A made-up language," Molly said.

"That doesn't sound sexy anymore," Alex said.

"When she says it like that, it sounds ridiculous," I said. "And it's definitely not ridiculous—it's incredible. Just because we can't understand it doesn't mean it's made-up. Anyway, when the Holy Spirit is living in you, things are just different, you know? You feel *alive* in a way you never have before. And it'll lead you according to God's will. It'll tell you to do things and stuff."

"So the Holy Spirit is a voice in your head telling you to do stuff?" Alex asked. "Like what serial killers have?"

"No, obviously that's Satan. The Holy Spirit would never tell you to do something like that."

"What does He tell you to do then?"

"He told us to invite you to church, for one thing. And we did, and now look at everything that's happened."

"Why don't Baptists have the Holy Spirit?" he asked. "Aren't they Christians?"

"Sure...technically," I said. "But whereas we're totally sold out to

Jesus, they kind of keep one foot in the world and one foot in the church. They just go through the motions.”

“So we’re like the *real* Christians, huh?” he asked.

“I’d say so.”

“What about Catholics?”

“*Ugh*, don’t get me started on them! Praying to Mary? Asking priests for forgiveness instead of asking Jesus directly? Worshiping idols? *Purgatory*? They’re so far off the right path that we don’t even consider them Christians. And they know it, so they don’t bother coming to FCA. They’ve got their own group here at school.”

“Man, I didn’t know all of this was so complicated,” Alex said. “I just thought being a Christian meant being super into Jesus and into doing good things and stuff. I didn’t know there were so many rules.”

LEVI

When Disciple Now weekend finally arrived, it kicked off with Jason volunteering to chug a 2-liter bottle of Dr. K and only getting halfway through before vomiting everything back up all over the church’s stage. He also managed to cover the part of Robbie’s big, hairy leg that his jorts couldn’t protect. The entire challenge was Robbie’s idea in the first place,

and he was presiding as game host, so he wasn't entirely an innocent bystander.

It was an ominous beginning to the next couple of days, because DNow worked like this: everyone divided up by grade level, and then you traveled as a group back and forth between the church for services and a host home for small group discussions. And sleep. Well, technically two host homes—one for boys and one for girls, because obviously it wouldn't be smart to tempt teens with raging hormones by letting them stay in the same house. Regardless, everyone usually ended up hanging out at one of the homes more than the others until the group leaders insisted it was time for bed.

The reason I say it was an ominous beginning is because not only was Jason part of our group, but our main host home—the one where the boys would be sleeping—belonged to his family. So we were gonna spend the next couple of days constantly in the care of the people who produced Jason and oversaw his...um...evolution.

Jason's dad, Abe—who let us call him by his first name because he volunteered as a youth leader and wanted the teens to feel like they could trust him—greeted us all at their front stoop by blowing into a giant shofar, the sound ringing through the neighborhood and causing the dogs down the street to whimper and howl.

"What *is* that?" Alex asked, amazed.

I'd been to enough Christian summer camps to tell him that it was basically a Jewish bugle, but beyond that, I couldn't explain why a white man in the suburbs of Houston, Texas would own one. Especially since he wasn't, you know, Jewish, in spite of his first name.

"Blowin' the shofar tells the Enemy you're ready for battle!" Abe bellowed as we filed inside. As we'd quickly learn, the shofar was just the beginning when it came to Abe's obsession with Israel and Jewish culture. Beneath an old painting of Jesus in the hallway, there was an altar of sorts with a prayer shawl, a piece of wood with a Hebrew word carved into it, and anointing oil, all flanked by small American and Israeli flags. Actually, as Abe pointed out, the piece of wood wasn't a Hebrew word. Instead it was an optical illusion that said "Jesus" when you looked at the uncarved part.

"I carved it myself," Abe said. "The real ones at the Christian bookstore were like 10 bucks. It reminds me that Jesus is always there, even when things don't seem to make sense. Sometimes He's just hiding, waiting for us to notice Him."

Throughout the rest of the house, paintings of Jesus filled the walls—Him on the cross, His face superimposed over a lion's head, Him holding the literal Earth in His hands, Him with an American flag flying behind Him. My dad was a pastor, and even our house wasn't as tricked out with Jesus stuff

as Jason's.

Jesus wasn't their family's only obsession though. Their wood-paneled walls were also covered with paintings, photos, and carvings of dachshunds. Their own weiner dogs, Jimmy and Dean, were locked away and yapping in the house's master bedroom, which was most definitely not soundproof.

"Dachshunds were bred to hunt badgers," Abe told us. "But we don't got any badgers around here, so I trained 'em to hunt liberals instead." He squinted and looked over each of us. "We got any liberals here?" Nobody answered. "Nobody wants to fess up, huh? Well, I'll let the dogs out, and we'll know soon enough."

"Oh Honey, leave the poor kids alone," Jason's mom, Barbara, yelled from the kitchen, where she was busy baking a batch of desserts that smelled amazing. She was responsible for the other big collection in the living room: Precious Moments figurines, those weird, chubby-cheeked, pasty little glass kids in overalls and pigtails that Donnie hated selling at the Christian bookstore. Jason's mom must've been Donnie's nightmare customer.

"Girls," she called to them, including April, Molly, and a few others, "why don't y'all come help me in the kitchen. Jason, take the boys upstairs and show them where they'll be sleeping."

The girls dropped their stuff in the entranceway—they'd be taken to

their host home later—and trudged off towards the kitchen as Jason excitedly led the guys upstairs.

We were set to stay in rooms belonging to Jason and his sister, a freshman at Pensacola Christian College in Florida, so it was fortunate there were only four of us—Jason, Alex, Reese, and me. That meant it'd be two guys to a room—one on the bed and one on a sleeping bag on the floor in each. Though Jason *did* try and talk us all into squeezing into his room. It wasn't his first DNow weekend, so he knew everyone would stay up late talking. He obviously didn't want to miss out on any convos. I wouldn't have been surprised if that was why he talked his parents into hosting our grade in the first place. If everything was taking place in his own house, surely he wouldn't be left out. Right?

Stepping into Jason's room felt like passing through a portal to middle school. Where a guy might normally have sports or music posters on the walls and trophies on shelves, Jason had posters of cartoon characters from *Adventures in Odyssey*, a Christian radio show we listened to as kids. I also wasn't prepared for all the Lego boats, cars, and spaceships he'd built and displayed in his room.

Considering how crammed with junk his room was, there was a suspiciously empty desk in the corner that surely contained a story I'd regret asking about. So I didn't.

"What used to be there?" Alex asked, pointing at the desk.

"My *computer*," Jason said, more disgust in his voice than I'd ever thought him capable of conjuring. "My parents say I was spending too much time on it, so they took it downstairs and set it up in the living room so they could monitor how long I'm on it each day. *So annoying.*"

"Were you, like, looking at a bunch of porn all the time or something?" Alex asked.

"Porn?" Jason practically shrieked. "Gross! No, I was just playing *SimCity* all night."

If there was ever an interaction that summed up Jason entirely, that was it.

APRIL

Jason's mom zeroed in on me the moment I stepped into her kitchen. She had everyone say their names—it was Molly, Christina and Claire (twins), Vanessa, and me—and then turned right back to me at the end.

"You're April?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked me up and down and just said "Ok then" before opening herself back up to everyone else again. It seemed like she'd heard about me

before from somewhere, but since she didn't volunteer as a youth leader, that meant it had to have been from either her husband or Jason. I wasn't sure which was better.

Though all I wanted to do at that moment was disappear from under her eye, my stupid instinct to be liked by adults in the church kicked in and I tried to make myself useful in the kitchen. In spite of all my experience cooking meals for my family, we never did dessert, so baking wasn't really my thing and I ended up getting in the other girls' ways.

Molly had apparently done tons of baking with her mom before she passed, so she proved an instant hit with Mrs. Barbara, as we'd been told to call her.

When it finally came time to eat the goodies, we did so spilling out of a couple of long, brownish couches that would've fit perfectly in my grandma's den. In fact, a lot about Mrs. Barbara—hair pinned up, white turtleneck under her ankle-length and embroidered denim dress—reminded me of my grandma. I could imagine them sitting around the breakfast table after all the guys had eaten, methodically working their way through the coupon section of the paper as they shared their concerns about some church member's daughter and how she was no good for the boys in the congregation.

Wait, was that *me*? Was I the one they'd be discussing? Was that why

Mrs. Barbara looked at me like that?

Wes and Tori sat like a young king and queen in his and hers wooden rocking chairs by the fireplace at the end of the room as they laid out what we were gonna be talking about the rest of the weekend: dating.

And everything that went with it, including, yes, sex. Because we were all either 15 or 16 and would be driving soon if we weren't already, they felt it was important to clarify what Jesus expected of us so our convictions would already be in place before we ended up in a tough spot—like together in a car in front of someone's house. That way we'd be more likely to make Godly decisions.

While Wes and Tori had trouble getting us to talk about dating that first night, that hesitation didn't linger once we got to our host home, Christina and Claire's house in The Woodlands, a wealthy suburb north of the church.

It was too late for a dip in their pool, so we all went up to the second floor living room and watched all the ABC TGIF shows they'd recorded on their VCR while we were at the DNow opening service.

But it wasn't too long until *Step by Step* was over and lights were shut off, and we all lay on our sides in our sleeping bags, facing each other and deep in a conversation started by one simple question: "So, who do you like?"

Claire had asked it, and it felt like she'd posed the question because she was so desperate to answer it herself and share a secret with us.

"I think Reese is really cute," she said.

I gasped.

"Reese?"

"What's wrong with Reese?" Vanessa challenged, which, of course she would. Like Reese, she never really seemed sold on youth group and usually sat with the skaters and burnouts. While Molly seemed like she still had a foot in two worlds—the good kids and the bad kids—Vanessa was all-in with the troublemakers. I'd smelled cigarettes on her in the women's bathroom before, and I'd even caught her out beyond the volleyball court making out with some of the skater boys.

"I mean, he's sweet—or he used to be—but..." I said, giving her a look she absolutely should understand to mean "Come on."

I was treading on dangerous ground, because I knew Molly and Reese had something going on as well, whether or not it was official. By talking down about him, I risked turning her against me, but I thought it was worth it to tell her in an indirect way that I thought Reese wasn't a good choice for her. Or anyone, really.

"He's *still* sweet," Vanessa said, a little sharpness in her voice. Why was everyone crushing on Reese? *Reese!*

“Ok, who else?” Claire asked, but no one answered. “Well, I know Christina likes Wes.”

“*Claire!*” Christina yelled.

Before Christina could follow up, Claire moved on.

“But he’s a leader, so there’s no point in talking about that. What about you, Molly?”

Molly froze for a moment, put on the spot, but she quickly regrouped.

“My crush goes to a different school. His name starts with a J.”

She paused for dramatic effect.

“E-S-U-S.”

Everyone groaned, which I thought was a little disrespectful to Jesus.

“She obviously likes Reese,” Vanessa said. “Anyone with two eyes can see that.”

Despite being in the same skater circle, Molly and Vanessa weren’t really friends—there was definitely some tension, and I assumed it was mostly boy-related. Just another reason we shouldn’t have been thinking about any of that stuff in the first place. All it did was drive us apart when we should’ve been bonding.

“What about April?” Molly asked, diverting everyone’s attention. “Is there anyone special in your life?”

“Who, me? No, nope, nada. Nobody.”

The words just kept tumbling out of my mouth.

“Well, I know someone who might be interested,” Molly said. “And I think he’d fit you like your favorite pair of jeans.”

It couldn’t be anyone else besides Levi.

“Is it Alex?” Claire asked. “Is that why you’re hanging out with him so much?”

“Alex?” I asked, acting shocked. “What? No. Why would you think...? Just no. You know what? It doesn’t matter. None of us should be thinking about dating yet anyway.”

The other girls were silent, knowing I’d just gone full youth pastor on them.

“No, we shouldn’t be thinking about dating yet, which is why we’re gonna spend an entire weekend talking about dating,” Molly said.

“They’re gonna explain why we shouldn’t be dating, which is that most people in high school aren’t ready to get married,” I said. “We’re just getting our emotions all worked up and developing feelings for these boys, but we still can’t do anything about it for a couple of years. So then the relationships fall apart, and people just get hurt. Which they could’ve avoided altogether if they’d just, you know, not dated in the first place. If they’d just stayed friends.”

“So no relationships—only hookups?” Molly asked, teasing. Vanessa

laughed. They were starting to get under my skin.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I just think maybe it’s not as big of a deal as everyone is telling us,” Molly said.

“I completely disagree,” I said. “It’s all so incredibly special. Even something as simple as kissing. I don’t want my future husband to think I’ve been swapping spit with every guy on the block. That’s why I’m not kissing anyone until my wedding day.”

A stunned silence filled the room.

Eventually, Vanessa broke it.

“What the fuck?”

Chapter Nine

LEVI

After the girls had left that first night, Jason showed us some *SimCity* stuff on his computer, and then I watched Alex and Reese do kick flips in the driveway until Abe told us it was time for bed.

Alex and Reese had quickly claimed Jason's sister's room, so I was stuck sharing with Jason. We mainly hung out in the other guys' room since Jason's smelled like stale farts. Jason kept warning us to stop horsing around and be quieter so his dad wouldn't come up the stairs to yell at us again. The first time, he'd been stern with those of us he hadn't spawned, but he'd saved his coldest look for Jason, who shrunk back under his crusty-eyed gaze.

As Jason was trying to fight off sleep, Reese picked up a picture of Jason's sister and her friends.

"Jason, your sister is kinda hot," Reese said.

"*Gross!*" Jason said. "No way!"

"Dude, I'm just as surprised as you are," Reese said. "But I've come to realize the females in your family have been blessed by the Lord with fantastic jugs, and for that, I give thanks to Him."

"Guys, come on, this isn't cool," Jason said as we all laughed. "And I don't think Jesus would want us talking about women like this."

"Well, *you* can't," Reese continued, "because they're related to you. And that's wrong. Even though it's not totally unprecedented in the Bible."

"Wait, what?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, man, the Old Testament is *wild*. There's this one story where the daughter of this guy named Lot gets him drunk and has sex with him."

"Dude..."

"And there's this other one where David wants to marry this chick, but her dad doesn't really want him to, so the dad tells David that if he wants to marry her, he has to go out and collect a hundred foreskins from the enemy army. But here's the thing—David goes out, and he kills *two* hundred dudes and brings back their foreskins. Then just chunks them all on the floor like, 'Here's all the dickheads you wanted.'"

"Language," Jason said, scolding Reese.

"That really is wild," Alex said.

"Except David was actually in love with this other guy, Jonathan, his best friend."

"They were gay?" Alex asked.

"No they weren't," Jason said. "They were just close friends."

"Yeah, right," Reese replied. "They were totally into each other."

"Gross," Jason said.

I thought about how Alex's uncle was gay and wondered if he'd push back against Jason the way he did to us after watching *In & Out*.

"Dude, you and Molly got a thing going on or what?" Alex asked Reese. "I think y'all would make a badass couple."

Reese smiled big.

"I'm goo goo gaga over her. She's playing hard to get, but I think I've almost convinced her I'm not a total loser."

We all laughed.

"What about you and April?" Reese asked me. "Y'all official yet? You steaming up the windows in her new car or what?"

"What? No, we're...just...like...friends."

"Don't spaz out. I was just psyched for you to get to touch them boobies. Props where props are due—she's got a pair. Otherwise, she never

did much for me. She's like an annoying cousin. But to each their own."

She did indeed have a pair. I won't lie and say I'd never noticed. But we weren't supposed to treat women like sex objects, so I had to pretend otherwise.

"Ok, I'm going to bed," Jason announced. We'd finally crossed the line for him, and with that, he was off.

I thought about what Reese said. I always assumed he'd be the first person to mock me for liking April. Never in a million years would I have imagined I could safely share my secret with him.

"I get it," Alex said. "April's super cute. She can be a bit bossy, but I'm kind of into that sometimes. It's cool that she knows so much about the Bible and being a Christian and stuff."

"Maybe *you* should date her," Reese told him.

My blood ran cold. What chance would I stand if Alex threw his hat in the ring?

"Me? Nah, no way. She's, like, so perfect and pure. If she knew half the stuff I did, I wouldn't stand a chance."

"What'd you do?" Reese asked.

"Man, I messed up pretty bad. I was doing Molly—"

"You had sex with Molly?" Reese interrupted, suddenly on edge.

"What? No. The drug. MDMA. X. Ecstasy. I was rolling, and I started

having fun with this girl. We had sex. But she already had a boyfriend, so... yeah, she basically cheated with me."

"With Trish Compton?" Reese asked. It was Alex's turn to suddenly be on edge.

"How'd you know that?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't. It was just a rumor I heard."

Alex buried his head into his palms, distraught.

"Shit shit shit. If people are talking, it's only a matter of time before Russell finds out and wants to kick my ass. This is what I'm saying! I keep getting myself into these bad situations. This is the kind of stuff I've gotta stop doing."

"Well, that's why we're here to help," I offered. "That was the old you. Think about how far you've come."

Alex considered the thought.

"Yeah, I *do* feel like a different person. Getting saved was transformative. Just that overwhelming peace and trust and, like, connection with something bigger than myself, you know?"

"I guess, man," Reese said. "I've never felt that stuff, so I'll take your word for it."

"But didn't you say you've been going to church your whole life or something?"

"Yeah, but I've never felt God like that or anything. It's not that I don't believe in God. I think he *could* exist...that he probably does...but all this crying at the altar, fuzzy feelings inside stuff? Never felt it."

"I haven't either."

I almost immediately regretted saying it. But also...I was relieved at finally knowing someone else who felt the way I did.

For the longest time, it was like we were all swimming under the sea somewhere beautiful, like the Great Barrier Reef. Everyone from church—April, Molly, Wes, Tori, Pastor Chris, my parents, and lately even Alex—had scuba gear and could basically live underwater, able to constantly appreciate and explore an undersea heaven. But I didn't have scuba gear and was having to hold my breath, which meant every time my lungs felt like they were about to burst, I needed to rise to the surface and gulp fresh air before I could go back down again.

It was lonely on the surface. Beautiful in its own way—the sea stretching out for miles in every direction, no land in sight. But also no people in sight. I was by myself, wondering what was wrong with me.

When I broke through the surface this time, though, I looked around and saw Reese.

"Huh," Alex said. "Well, y'all know more about this stuff than I do. Maybe not everybody feels the same thing when they get saved? I don't

know. But yeah, if April knew all of that, I don't think she'd ever want to talk to me again, much less date me. She needs, like, a super Christian dude."

I'd been kind of afraid to admit liking April—or anyone, really—but if Alex was openly talking her up, I suddenly realized I had no reason to be embarrassed. And it'd be such a relief to finally share the secret I'd been hiding for so long.

"I mean...I'm not saying I wouldn't be interested in her," I said. "You know—someday."

"Wait, so you *are* into her?" Reese asked. "I *knew* it!"

"Dude, are you gonna ask her out?" Alex asked.

For so much of my life, dating had been discouraged, so it felt like something that wasn't even a possibility. To hear someone talk about it with me as if it was something I could just go do if I wanted felt new and exciting.

"Well, she's dating Jesus right now, so it's not gonna happen anytime soon, but...maybe one day? Like, next year or something?"

"Jesus is cockblocking you," Reese declared.

"All right, we gotta figure out how to get you two together," Alex said, ignoring Reese.

"Well...ok," I replied. It doesn't sound enthusiastic, but things were bubbling up inside me I'd never felt before—I just didn't know how to put

them into words.

“Like, ways you can spend time together without it being a real date, you know? Doesn’t she sing? Maybe you can get her to play a song with you at the spring talent show—that way you’ll have to spend a lot of time rehearsing. I think that could work. You know, the more I think about y’all together, it makes total sense—you’d be the perfect couple.”

I smiled. I had no idea what he meant, but sure.

APRIL

Any doubts that had crept in after the night before about waiting until marriage for my first kiss were completely cast out after our first session of the day. Wes and Tori introduced everyone to the book and idea behind *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and they shared how they had felt convicted to take a step back in their own relationship.

They been spending too much one-on-one time together and were getting too close to lines they knew they shouldn’t cross. They didn’t go into details, instead leaving it to our imaginations. So rather than spend most of their time together, they were spending more time separately, reading the Bible, praying, and hanging out with their own accountability partners. And Wes had sat down with Tori’s dad and discussed his intentions and where he

saw both their relationship going (marriage, duh) and where he saw his own career going (full-time worship leader or youth pastor).

They said the new boundaries they'd put in place resulted in them feeling closer to God than ever before, and they also appreciated each other even more.

When they opened the floor for questions, Molly raised her hand.

"What if you don't have a dad?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Wes asked.

I was pretty sure Molly quickly glanced my direction before continuing.

"Like, the guy is supposed to talk to the girl's dad about his intentions or whatever before they can start dating, but what if you don't have a dad for him to talk to? Or what if your dad just sucks?"

"Language," Jason's mom chimed in from the back of the room, where she was knitting.

"I guess you could seek out a father figure in your life," Wes said.

"Maybe you could approach a pastor, youth pastor, youth leader..."

"Wes, will you be my new daddy?" Vanessa asked.

"Ha, well, uh..." he stammered.

She was obviously teasing, but I didn't like that she made Wes uncomfortable.

He quickly changed the subject, but the question lingered with me. If

my future husband wanted to court me, there was no way I'd want him to sit down with a guy who hardly knew me anymore. A guy who'd call, like, once a year—usually a day or two after Christmas (he'd never remember to call *on* Christmas...or on my actual birthday). Even then, we'd only chat for about 10 minutes before he'd make up an excuse to hang up.

That technically left Judd to be the head of our house, but the guy couldn't even be bothered to bake his own garlic bread—if he thought he was gonna have a say in who was able to court me, he'd better think again. I bet Pastor Chris would stand in for my dad whenever my future husband felt it was time to ask permission to court me. And he'd probably do a great job of looking out for me and my heart. I made a mental note to ask him about it soon. Not that there was any rush—I was nowhere near ready to be courted.

Or was I? If we were all basically waiting for high school graduation in order to get married, I could totally be courted by someone starting my Junior year. That'd give us a whole year to make sure we were doing the right thing and weren't rushing into marriage—and to pray and make sure the Lord was the One behind us getting together in the first place. So... maybe I was closer to being ready than I thought. I really did need to talk with Pastor Chris.

Before taking our first break of the morning, Wes and Tori gave us all

a challenge and 15 minutes to complete it. They wanted us to make a list of what we wanted in our future spouse. They wanted us to picture him or her and to identify the things we hoped they'd possess, whether related to their character, their personality, or, yes, their looks.

"Obviously really big..." Reese started to say, holding his hands out in front of him at chest height. But before any of the leaders could put sound behind the word "REESE" that formed on each of their mouths simultaneously, he finished the thought. "...*ideas* about how to win my friends to Jesus."

He looked right at me, knowing it'd get under my skin. I frowned as forcefully as I could, and when Molly giggled at him, I redirected my frown from her way.

"Ok, we don't need to say anything out loud," Wes said. "This is between you and God. The Bible says He'll give us the desires of our heart, so make a list. I guarantee you He's gonna tick every one of those boxes."

My list reiterated what I'd told Tori and Molly—a guy who was a dedicated Christian, musician, good father, good husband, had a passion for travel (and maybe missions work), came from a big healthy family, wanted lots of kids, and...looked like Leonardo DiCaprio in that Romeo and Juliet movie.

If God would check off everything on the list, did that mean these

feelings I'd started having a little bit for Alex were wrong? Because he definitely didn't fit with my list. Some he could grow into, but with others—like, you know, waiting until marriage to have sex—there was no coming back. Even if he became a born-again virgin, it wasn't quite the same thing, was it?

Was I being tempted to compromise my standards just because he was right there in front of me in that moment? And because he was popular?

Or did I need to adjust my list? Marrying someone who'd already slept with another girl wasn't ideal, but...was it the worst thing in the world? Would he compare me to her forever? Like, in bed. Would he always feel something for whoever was his first? And then I'd never quite have all of him? Or would Jesus wash all those feelings away? Would it be best if I just squashed all those feelings and focused on being friends with him?

I didn't know. Maybe I'd ask Tori what she thought.

LEVI

The next day, I wanted to ask Reese more about what he'd said about having never felt God, but all he wanted to talk about was how hot he thought Molly was and how kissing dating goodbye was stupid and how he hoped she didn't buy into it because he wanted to ask her to go see *Alien 3*

when it opened.

“Even if she does buy in, we can all go as a group,” I offered.

He twisted his face up.

“I don’t *want* to go as a group. I want to go with her. Alone. So we can make out. Unless you wanna watch us make out.”

I told him I actually didn’t want that. Reese was so focused on girls and kissing and sex and stuff, and I hoped spending more time with him wouldn’t turn me into a super lustful guy too. If it meant I learned to skate, though, that’d be cool. I could finally buy Etnies without feeling like a poser.

Meanwhile, us guys were going to war. With water balloons.

The idea was to train us to tap into the wild, warrior side of being a man so we could one day fulfill our duty as Christian men to protect women. And not just the ones we thought were hot, but relatives and friends too. We were to treat every girl in the youth group how we’d treat our own sisters—with respect and looking out for their best interest, even if it meant denying our own feelings and desires. Wes said they’d love us for it even more if we did. That’s why they read *Pride and Prejudice* and romance novels—they yearned for how it used to be, back when courtship was big and people weren’t sleeping around and guys wrote girls long letters full of poetry.

Robbie said guys back then were able to easily shift between fighting for their woman to defend her honor and holding her at night to care for her

emotionally. Like Mel Gibson's character in *Braveheart*.

Reese pushed back, reminding Robbie that when Peter took out his sword to defend Jesus and cut the guy's ear off ("His *ear*?" Alex asked. "How do you even do that?"), Jesus made him put the sword up.

Robbie brushed away any notion that Jesus was a pacifist.

When we split into teams—two students and one leader each. I ended up with Reese and Wes, an ideal combo I thought. I was wrong.

Every time Reese threw a water balloon, his pasty arm trembled like a wet pasta noodle, and the balloon arced slowly through the air, giving the target enough time to not just avoid it but to vacate the splash zone entirely. Meanwhile, Jason pretended like he was in an actual war, ducking, dodging, rolling, and launching with vigor, fueled by the three packs of Fun Dip he'd downed.

It was a massacre. By the time we headed back to the house, three of us were soaked to the bone. It was another half hour before we'd dried off and taken our seats in the living room for our next session. April was jealous we got to go have a water balloon fight. Apparently all the girls had been forced by Jason's mom to do macramé as their activity, and April felt she was terrible at it.

In the afternoon session, Wes and Tori got more into the *why* of courtship and kissing dating goodbye. As he started to talk, Wes took out a

piece of Bubbalicious gum and gave it to April to chew. A couple minutes later, he asked her to pass it on to Claire next to her. The same piece, not a new one. As it made its way around the room, some people refused entirely. I figured Vanessa would chew it since I remembered her saying a while back that she didn't have a gag reflex—to which Reese had murmured "Oh my Lord" for some reason—but even she was grossed out when the gum came her way.

Fortunately, Wes ended the experiment right before it got to me. He told us about some friends of his who'd had sex before marriage and then broken up.

"Think about that piece of gum. At first it was great and flavorful. But the more it got passed around, it lost its flavor. And you didn't want gum someone had already chewed. You'd prefer a nice new piece. Well, imagine that piece of gum is your sexual purity. Your virtue. Your reputation."

I scanned the faces of the others to see how everyone was processing the idea. Most stared silently into space or at the floor. Not Molly though. Her eyes were focused across the room, glued to Alex. He looked crushed, his hands folded in his lap and his eyes staring at his feet.

Molly's eyes narrowed and her mouth tensed.

"So anyone who's had sex is like a gross piece of chewed-up gum?" she asked.

“Well, no,” Tori said, shifting forward in her seat, “it’s not just the having sex part. Sex is beautiful inside a marriage. After all, the gum tasted great for April, right? But by the time it got around the group, it was flavorless. That’s why it’s important to follow God’s plan for your life: waiting until you get married to have sex. Then that one person will get to enjoy you—and you them—forever.”

“But what if you didn’t wait? I’m sure some people in the room have *had* sex. Are they a flavorless blob that should just be thrown away?”

Alex’s head lifted. He waited for Tori’s answer.

“No, of course not,” Tori said. “The great thing is that no matter how far we walk away from God, He’s always following behind us. It only takes one step in the other direction to find our way back to him and to be restored to wholeness.”

“That’s so vague,” Molly said. “Like, what does that even mean?”

“It means He can restore our virginity,” April said.

“He can *WHAT?*” Vanessa asked, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Not literally,” Tori replied.

“Though I *have* heard about cases in Africa where God put their you-know-what back into place,” Mrs. Barbara said.

“Their *hymen?*” Molly asked, baffled.

Jason’s mom shuddered at the word. The other girls traded awkward

glances.

“What’s a hymen?” I whispered to Robbie.

He shrugged his shoulders and shushed me.

“The point *is*,” Wes said, “God can still redeem what was lost, what’s broken. He can take away that shame, that guilt. I’m not saying it’s gonna be easy though. While God forgiving us is instant, fully healing requires some work on our part. Restoration will involve people who’ve been promiscuous going to the people they’ve, you know, been with and asking for their forgiveness for chewing them up and using them for immediate gratification. Apologizing for not protecting their virtue and for leading them into temptation and crossing that line with them.”

“Ok, but, what if they weren’t using the other person?” Molly asked. “I have friends who both wanted to have sex and they both had fun, and no one got hurt.”

Wes began to reply, but once again he was cut off.

“Sure, it’s fun, but they stole a piece of that person that belongs to their future spouse,” April said. “So you’re hurting them—their future husband or wife. Also, you’re playing with fire. What if your friend had gotten pregnant and the guy didn’t want to help out? What if he’d disappeared and she had to raise the kid all alone? Then your friend might get sad, and things might be so overwhelming that your friend turns to

alcohol and drugs to feel better. And then their daughter..." April caught herself. "Or son—they might grow up struggling, and your friend would be too high all the time to be there for the kid when they really needed it. Why take the chance? Wouldn't it be safer to just wait and not even risk all of that pain? Both for your friend and her child."

She was basically arguing against her own existence. If her mom had actually played it safe, April would have never been born. I wondered if she was actually ok with that tradeoff, if she'd give up her own life in exchange for her mom not having to experience all that pain and addiction and those failed relationships with all those guys.

"So do you think your mom is a worthless, chewed-up piece of gum?" Molly asked, not even pretending to be talking about some theoretical person anymore.

"Obviously not! But she could've avoided a lot a hurt."

"Sure, but she *learned* from that hurt," Molly said. "She's smarter because of it. We can't hide from life just because we might get hurt. Like this scar on my hand. I'll never try to pull a pan out of the oven without a mitt again, but it doesn't stop me from eating cookies! I'll just be more careful going forward."

"Be more careful, huh?" April asked, almost mocking. The conversation had become a verbal duel.

"Yeah, be more careful. Use a condom!"

"Condoms don't always work!"

"That's right," Jason's mom added.

"They do most of the time!" Molly said, laughing in disbelief.

"And what if they don't?" April challenged.

"Then she can just get an abortion!" Molly blurted.

Everyone except Molly and Alex gasped in unison so hard that it was unlikely there was any air left in the room to breathe.

APRIL

Nobody could believe Molly went there.

Her outburst about abortion almost derailed our whole courtship talk that afternoon. Jason's mom exclaimed "Young LADY!", and I knew she'd suddenly turned on her baking buddy. Mrs. Barbara prayed outside of abortion clinics twice a week, marched in pro-life protests, and made herself a general nuisance to politicians via letter-writing and phone calls, so Molly had unknowingly hit a nerve.

Before things could get completely out of hand, Tori managed to shut everyone up and push past the moment so she and Wes could rush through some more of the lesson they had planned. At the break, though, she pulled

Molly and me aside and took us out on the front patio while everyone else spread out to enjoy their free time.

“Girls, what’s going on?” she asked. “Where did that come from?”

I looked at Molly, expecting her to answer, but after a quick glance my way, she just stared at the ground. Did she really have nothing to say for herself?

“April?” Tori asked when Molly offered nothing.

“Why are you asking me? Ask Molly. She’s the one who wants to kill babies.”

“April, that’s not fair—you know Molly doesn’t want to kill babies. In fact, it feels like all of this tension is coming from something else. What is it?”

“I just...” Molly started before catching herself and going quiet again.

“You just what?” Tori asked. “Talk to me, Mols. You know this stays between the three of us.”

“Alex has had sex,” Molly said. “And we’re sitting there talking about people who’ve had sex being flavorless and useless. I didn’t want him to feel bad or ashamed or anything.”

“But he can’t feel ok about what he did either,” I said. “Otherwise he’ll think it’s fine to keep doing it. We’re trying to disciple him so he doesn’t backslide.”

"I think you can encourage him to not keep having sex with a bunch of girls without making him feel like trash for what he's already done," she said.

"It's not us," I said, "it's the Holy Spirit convicting him."

"I was watching his face!" she said. "He wasn't feeling the Holy Spirit convicting him. He was feeling two leaders and his super Christian friend telling him that he's damaged goods."

"Girls! Chill!" Tori pleaded. Molly and I both quieted. "Let's close our eyes and take a deep breath. Ok, now open them and look at each other. You see your friend? Remember, you like this person. And for a good reason—I think both of your hearts are in the right place. You both want the best for Alex, but you have different opinions on how to get him there. How about this? How about we all take a step back and give Alex some breathing room as he figures things out? I'll talk to Wes and have him check in on Alex to make sure he isn't feeling defeated or anything. Ok? But in the meantime? Just be his friend."

Molly and I each nodded our reluctant approval of the plan.

"Come here, let's hug," Tori said, pulling us into a three-way embrace.

"He's gonna be ok," she assured us.

It seemed like she was right. We didn't bring the subject up again the rest of the weekend, and Alex appeared to cheer up and have fun with the

group. He did get confused when we went swimming after the Saturday night service and there was some big drama around Vanessa's swimsuit. When she'd emerged in the two-piece bikini, Jason had run inside to tell his mom that Vanessa was causing him to stumble, and a furious Mrs. Barbara and a more understanding Tori had to pull Vanessa aside and make her go put a t-shirt on over the swimsuit so the boys wouldn't get tempted by all the flesh on display. Vanessa had re-emerged in a white t-shirt, but she was immediately sent back inside to put on something darker so it wouldn't cling, transparent, to her body.

At first, Alex didn't understand why it was up to Vanessa to dress appropriately, as opposed to Jason just not looking if he didn't want to lust after her. But we explained that we all had to look out for each other and help each other not to stumble, whether it's what we wore, the music we played, the movies we chose, etc.

He didn't respond right away, and I was worried he wasn't buying in to the idea. Eventually, though, he said "Huh...ok" and left it at that. So... progress?

I wondered if the whole weekend had been a wash from a discipleship point of view when it came to Alex, but two things happened that reassured me.

First, Levi told me he'd been thinking about entering the school talent

show to sing a song he'd written, but since it was a duet, he asked if I wanted to sing with him. He said it'd be a huge ministry opportunity. Obviously, that sounded amazing, but I wasn't sure how we'd practice without running into the same issue we ran into with the car—being alone together. He said he'd already thought about that and that Alex wanted to play with us too. So it'd be Levi singing and playing rhythm guitar on his acoustic, Alex playing lead guitar, and me singing. Levi claimed it'd be kind of like when we went to see Caedmon's Call, one of our favorite bands, play in a coffee shop down in town—there were two guys singing and playing acoustic guitars, as well as a girl singing backup.

I was in. Especially since it meant Alex was committing to doing something with us that was still months away.

Levi was practically glowing after I said "yes." Next to him, Alex was all smiles too, just from watching how excited Levi was. I already loved our little trio.

The second thing was what Alex revealed to us a bit later, as talk turned more spiritual. He said he'd spoken with Wes and felt convicted by the Holy Spirit that he should go to each of the girls he'd had sex with and apologize for using them like chewed-up gum.

Levi wasn't so sure it was a great idea, but I could tell he was falling back into his old fears of worrying what people thought of us churchgoers.

"Alex," I said, "I think it's an amazing idea. And I'm proud of you for being bold enough to take it on."

Progress.

Chapter Ten

LEVI

It took Alex a full week to apologize to all the girls he'd had sex with. I mean, he wasn't working on it day and night, so it's not like he was up into triple digits or anything. Still, it was a surprising amount for a 16-year-old. Or maybe it wasn't? I didn't really know how many people non-Christians had sex with. Alex wouldn't even give me a number, and I wasn't sure if that was out of humility or shame.

Other than Amy—his ex-girlfriend—and Trish Compton, I didn't know who was on the list he'd made. Every time I saw him talking to a girl, I wondered if she was on it. His body language usually told me if it was a casual conversation or something serious.

"How's it going?" I asked him on Thursday in our Radio/TV class.

"Most of them don't really get it," he said, shaking his head. "They don't understand why I'm apologizing. I mean, I was kind of crappy to a few of them and totally took advantage of them—like, even before I became a Christian, I knew I'd done them wrong—so they thought I was just apologizing for never calling them afterward or something. But when I explain the God part of it and the chewing gum and all, I kind of lose them. Anyway, I've got a big one today."

"Oh yeah?"

"Totally. Be praying."

"Sure, of course."

"I'm gonna talk to her after we film the announcements, so if you wanna maybe give us some space once we get the take..."

Oh.

As part of our duties in the class, we took turns working all the roles needed to create the video announcements that aired on Channel One for the school. Each Monday, we got assigned a job involved with the production, and we had to do that job all week. That particular week, it was my job to run the video camera and film the two anchors. Alex was one. The other?

Shannon.

I never knew he and she had...wow.

We chose to shoot in the school auditorium, so I dragged all the equipment there, and the three of us got started. Alex kept messing up his lines, and I could tell he was nervous about what was to come after.

Eventually we got the footage we needed, and it was time. We started packing up, but before Shannon could collect all her things, Alex walked over to her and spoke lowly. She nodded, and he looked my way.

Unfortunately, I couldn't just take the equipment back to the classroom. If I showed up without them, they'd get in trouble.

"I'll be in the back," I said, pointing the tripod at the back row.

I trudged up the aisle and got as far away as I could from them as they sat on the edge of the stage and half-turned toward each other. Even still, the place was so quiet that I could almost make out what they were saying. I laid my head against the back of the seat pretended to be asleep.

After a few minutes, Shannon's voice grew louder and frustrated. It was as if she forgot I was there at all.

"Alex, you didn't 'steal' anything. I *wanted* to have sex with you. And I'm glad I did. I can't believe you think I'm *ruined*."

"Well, no, of course not," he said, his volume matching hers. I was part of the conversation at that point, whether or not I wanted to be.

"Listen, forget I said 'ruined.' It's not what I meant."

“Why are you listening to those people? They don’t know shit. You don’t even know what you’re talking about. You’re just regurgitating their Jesus-speak.”

“Why are you so hostile towards Jesus?”

“I’m not hostile towards Jesus! If you’d just started to believe in God on your own or picked up a Bible and gotten really into Jesus, that’d be fine. ‘Cause you’d still be you, but really into Jesus. It may have been kinda odd, but whatever. But that’s not what happened. Instead you got sucked into this bizarre culture where they’re just offering cheesy, safe alternatives to the real world, and like Julio said, they’re *changing* you!”

“I *want* to change! I wasn’t a good person before. You know that. I was terrible to you. So selfish. I was even still selfish when I went to church. I mean, I was feeling bad and wanting to be good, but I was also trying to get with April. But then I got there and...I had this experience. With God. I think. I’d never felt anything like it before. I was on my knees crying. I felt so sorry for every bad thing I’d ever done, and then I felt like...it was all ok. That I’d been forgiven and had a chance at a new start. And now I just want that for you.”

“Maybe you really felt God—I don’t know. I’m happy that you’ve turned some things around. I really am. I can tell that you’re different, that you genuinely care about others. You always did—no, no, don’t protest—you

really did. You just had moments where you'd disappear into yourself. Mostly when you were fucked up. But I liked who you were whenever you weren't trashed. And to see them strip that away, all the things that made you special, and replace it with this neutered version of you...it's just sad."

"I'm not going back to who I was before. I can't."

"Alex, you can be good without having to buy into this bullshit. I totally believe you have an internal moral compass. We all do! You don't need church to be 'good.' It's all fake anyway! These people aren't *good*. They pretend to be good, pretend to follow Jesus, pretend that everyone's welcome or whatever, but they're hypocrites. It's no different than any of the stupid cliques at school. If anything, it's worse 'cause they say they've got God on their side, but then they still treat people like shit. So no, I'm not gonna start coming to this church. I can't. I know you look at it and see, like, redemption and another shot at being good or whatever, but I look at it and see shame. And fear. And I can't imagine being *scared* of so many things. Of missing out on so many amazing things in life because I was afraid one of them might bruise me, that it might leave a mark. Alex, you're not the first boy to hurt me. You won't be the last. But I learn from each one. I'm not gonna run away from all the fun things in the world and hide in a closet just to stay pure or to avoid blemishes or whatever. And that's what they want people to do. So no, I just...I can't join you there."

No one said anything for a moment, and Shannon looked out into the auditorium so she wouldn't have to look at Alex. But I was out in the auditorium, and I think she was almost surprised to see me still there. I sunk down further into the seat. I'd have sunk all the way to the floor if it had made sense, but at some point they'd walk my way, and then I'd have to explain why I was lying on the nasty floor.

"Just be careful, ok?" Shannon eventually said to him. "Don't assume everything is true just because they said it. Ask questions. Look up the answers yourself. You're a smart guy—trust your instincts. Promise me that."

"I promise," Alex said.

APRIL

After DNow, I'd encouraged Alex to resist distractions and focus on Jesus. But by the time of the church's harvest festival—our October 31st alternative to trick or treating—it seemed he was looking for a little company again. Even if he wasn't, it was definitely looking for him.

Alex and I had volunteered to work the inflatable joust booth, and a steady stream of youth group girls who'd most definitely not kissed dating goodbye lined up to duke it out. I thought it was odd until I caught Christina

and Claire arguing over who got to be on the podium near Alex.

When Levi and Molly relieved us later, Alex and I decided to take a lap around the other booths.

"That was fun," he said. "I'm glad I let you talk me into it."

"Yeah, it definitely looked like you were having fun. It was just so weird how the people on *my* podium kept winning and the people on *your* podium kept losing and needing help up. At least the girls did."

"I think my podium was on uneven ground."

The big grin on his face told me he knew what I was implying, but he was playing dumb.

"Then why did you beat me four times in a row when we were testing it?" I asked.

"Probably because you're a terrible jouster."

"False! I'm known worldwide for being one of the toughest jousters out there."

He laughed.

"Ok, maybe not worldwide, but at least at the Ren Faire. Stop any dork with a giant turkey leg and ask them. They'll tell you April Miller is one of the best. Top 10 for sure. In North Houston. But North Houston is, like, the center of the world as far as modern jousting goes."

Was I flirting? Alex had been laughing the whole time, and the *feeling*

that came over me... It was intoxicating. Or at least what I assumed intoxication felt like.

I'd never really flirted before, but it felt natural to me. I'd have to be careful to avoid leading him into temptation or even falling into temptation myself. The most sobering thought was how much I sounded like Mom. Had I picked up her skills without realizing it?

He studied me for a moment as we walked. I pretended to not notice, but I was sweating big time in places he couldn't see and likely would never see until our wedding night. Why was I thinking about him and a wedding night? I was already slipping.

"Are you really waiting until you get married to kiss someone?" he asked.

How did he know that? One of the girls at the sleepover must've let it slip.

"I've kissed someone before. My mom, my grandma, my--"

"Shut the f...front door! You know I mean romantically."

Even with all of eternity at my disposal, I'd never be able to think of something to say that'd save me from what I was feeling at that moment. It wasn't embarrassment, but definitely in the general vicinity. I was almost... ashamed.

I gave up. All I could do was tell the truth.

"No, I've never kissed anyone."

"Not even in elementary school? On the playground or something?"

"Nope."

"Wow. That's cool, I guess. I mean, I could never do that."

Usually when he said something like that, I'd sense admiration in his voice, but not that time. Instead, I sensed pity.

"What's the point of waiting though? Does the Bible say not to kiss someone you're not married to?"

"It doesn't really say anything about romantic kissing. For me, I just... want my first kiss to be the most special it can be. I want my future husband to know that I'm completely his alone. That no other guy had ever gotten to, like, experience me. That sounds gross, but you know what I mean."

"Huh..."

Lost in thought, he stared off at the tiny petting zoo set up near the volleyball court. Toddlers waddled after scared goats, which scurried just a few steps faster than them, keeping just out of reach.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"I guess I've 'experienced' a lot of girls over the years."

He swiveled his head my way.

"But I don't feel guilty about it. Like, for sex, sure. But they seemed happy to be kissing me. And I feel like I got better as a kisser because of it."

Which I think they also liked. Hm. What if you end up falling in love with someone who didn't wait for you?"

I wondered if he had anyone in particular in mind.

"That's fine, I guess. If it's the man God has chosen for me. I'd love for him to have waited too, for us to be equally yoked, but I suppose—"

"Equally yoked? Like his muscles have to be the same size as yours?"

"What? Ha! No, 'yoked'—like an ox. It's just a way to say that we shouldn't be in romantic relationships with or married to unbelievers or anyone not on the same spiritual level as us. Because we believe different things and have different values. And most of the time, when people are unequally yoked, it's the Christian who compromises and ends up doing what the unbeliever wants."

"Why is that?"

To be honest, I'd never really thought about it, so I was stumped.

"I think maybe it's because it's easier to sin than it is to follow Jesus' teachings. So, yeah, we could try and get really strong as a Christian and resist, but it's kind of easier to just not put yourself in that situation in the first place."

He mulled over that.

"So not about muscles then?"

I smiled.

“Be glad that’s not the case,” he said, “because otherwise you’d probably have to go look for this guy in the library.”

Alex squeezed my bicep right below where my shirt sleeve stopped. His hand was warm on my arm, which was prickly with goosebumps as winter had started to seep in early that October night. I instinctively snatched my arm away, then I had to play it off as if I was holding back from him rather than the reality, which was I’d never felt a flirty touch like that before. A shiver shot through my body, and I placed my own hand where his had just been.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No, it’s fine! Just caught me by surprise.”

I smiled as reassuring of a smile as I could muster.

“So what sort of guy would be equally yoked with you?” he asked. “I’m guessing someone who’s super Christian, someone who’s also waiting until marriage for stuff... Right? Someone who’s nice... I mean, it all kind of sounds like Levi. Is that the type of guy you’d be looking for?”

“I guess. I think at the end of the day, it’d just depend on whether or not God told me he was the one. Whoever he was, whether Levi or someone else.”

“So it could be someone who wasn’t all those things if you felt like God was saying he was the one?”

I smiled warmly.

"Yeah, for sure."

He looked over at Christina and Claire, who were feeding the goats.

"Are all the girls in the youth group saving their first kisses for their wedding day?"

My heart sank.

"No, some aren't."

"Which ones?"

I maybe wasn't totally honest with my answer, but it didn't matter—as weeks went by, it became obvious which girls had no interest in waiting and which ones definitely had interest in Alex.

When mid-January arrived and I heard that Claire was thinking of getting ahead of everyone else and asking Alex to the Sadie Hawkins dance, I had to take action.

It'd be a stretch to say it was my most well-thought-out plan, but we needed to act quickly if we wanted to protect him. So I called up Molly and got to work.

LEVI

Following Alex's conversation with Shannon, he'd started asking more

questions. Tough ones.

One day while we were trying to finish the song for the talent show, Alex turned to me out of nowhere and dropped this bomb:

“How do I get God to answer my prayers?”

“Well, you just...” I replied, trailing off as I shrugged. The shrug didn’t mean “I don’t know,” but more “Isn’t it obvious (how you convince a being who may or may not exist—but that you definitely can’t see—to do your bidding)?”

“You just what?” Alex pressed.

How could I not know what to say? It wasn’t some deep theological challenge—the type they’d prepped us for in that weeklong Christian apologetics camp Mom made me go to, the one with the six bedwetters even though we were all 12 or older. No, instead it was almost too simple. Like asking “How do you breathe?”. There wasn’t anything you had to do—it just happened.

Whether it was Molly pushing back on the DNow teaching or Shannon’s challenge, curiosity had been unlocked inside of him. Or was it uncertainty? He was asking those basic Christianity questions. “Did God really write the Bible?”, “Does hell really exist?”, “If God loves us, why does He let people go to hell?”

My apologetics training meant I could usually dig up the answers

pretty quickly. “Yes,” “Yes,” and “He doesn’t—we send ourselves there by not following Him.”

The fact-based questions were easy. But the questions that were basically “How does this work?” were way more difficult to explain. Especially if you didn’t actually know the answer.

So, how did you get God to answer prayers? I was stumped. Was it even possible? It seemed like you tossed them up and then He kind of did His God thing. But was there a way to, well, encourage Him, like how a detective might slip some cash to a tight-lipped stooge?

“You’ve had a prayer answered before, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure. Of course.”

“How’d you do it?”

“I don’t know—I just prayed and then it happened.”

“What happened?”

“What do you mean ‘What happened?’”

“What was ‘it’? What’d you pray for?”

The dumb silence that followed was only slightly less embarrassing than the even dumber look that crossed my face as I wracked my brain for an example.

“I dunno. I pray for a lot of things every day. Like, I ask God to protect my family and stuff.”

"And He does?"

"Usually nothing bad happens to them."

"Usually? That means sometimes it does."

"I guess..."

"Why didn't God answer your prayer on that day?"

"I don't know. Maybe I had unconfessed sins in my life."

"So since you did something bad, He took it out on your family? That doesn't seem fair."

No, it didn't seem fair. I supposed my family would appreciate it if I stayed up-to-date on confessing my sins.

I eventually learned that Alex had been praying that his brother would come home for Christmas from college in Austin.

"He and my parents don't really get along," he said. "But I miss him. I've visited him before, but we usually just get trashed. And since I don't do that anymore...I don't know when I'll see him again. I wish he'd make up with my parents so he could come home without it being weird. That's what I've been praying for, but I talked to him on the phone yesterday, and it doesn't seem like anything's changed. So I didn't know, like...how this all worked. How to get God to answer prayers."

At first I'd worried my lack of answers would undo all the work of getting Alex saved, but I think my lack of insight ultimately bothered me

more than him. While he just took it in stride—if anything he became *more* fascinated by the uncertainty and mystery of it all—it kept me up at night as I dug into the mud of my brain for clearer answers.

I wished I had a clear example of God answering a prayer.

Then, one sweet day in mid-January, it happened.

Out of nowhere, April asked me to the Sadie Hawkins dance.

Sort of.

She proposed that we all go in a group as friends and that I'd be her date while Alex would be Molly's date. She reiterated the "just as friends" part multiple times. I didn't know if that was directed at me or at Alex.

I didn't think he'd get the wrong idea, but Molly was single again, so who knew? She and Reese had dated briefly after DNow, even going to see *Alien 3* like Reese wanted, but the relationship went down in flames just as quickly as it had ignited. Apparently, once they started spending that much time together, she realized that he annoyed the heck out of her. Shocker.

As for me, while April's interest on its own would've been enough to pump me up, I also felt a new sensation at the idea of God intervening for me with her. I always *knew* God cared about me, but that was the first time in a long time that I *felt* it. The development gave my walk with God a boost when I needed it most. Whatever fire that burned in me after summer camp had been reduced to embers. I read my Bible only a couple days a week. I

still prayed daily, but I rushed things. I rarely prayed for more than five minutes, and even then, I often repeated things I'd prayed the day before and the day before that. It felt more like a ritual I sped through than a relationship.

I was being as bad as the Catholics. And since I didn't believe in purgatory, I knew I was on the path straight to hell. It was how the average backslide began—I'd watched it happen with many people.

My confidence had been close to an all-time low. You'd think being friends with one of the most popular kids in school would keep it up, but it didn't. Sure, Alex's old friends were saying hi to me in the hallway, but I was realizing that somehow it wasn't enough to just be noticed. I had an insatiable appetite to be *liked*. Loved even?

More than anything, I wanted April to love me.

Anyway, Alex and I both said yes to the proposal. In my opinion, it was the biggest no-brainer of all time.

APRIL

We'd ended 1997 with me making a mess of things, but it only took a few weeks of 1998 for God to make beauty from that mess.

Not only was Alex going to the dance with us, meaning we avoided

losing him to the holy hussies in youth group, but thanks to him and Levi, God had shown us how to get back on track with the revival plan He'd given us at the beginning of the year. In addition to our youth group slowly taking over control of FCA and pointing it in the right direction, we were now going to sing a Christian song in front of the whole school—with Alex Richards!

Alex wasn't totally convinced just singing a Christian song was that big of a deal, but I assured him it was. Ever since our New Year's Eve watchnight prayer service, he'd told us he felt God wanted him to be radical like Jesus in 1998. As Alex had gotten into the Gospels at my encouragement—the red letters in his Bible were almost all yellow by that point as he'd highlighted everything—he'd seemed completely blown away by them and by the stuff Jesus did and said.

Alex asked why we weren't hanging out at parties with tax collectors and prostitutes. I told him A) Jesus could be there without being tempted, and B) teenage parties aren't widely known for being attended by tax collectors and prostitutes.

He also liked the part where Jesus flipped the tables in the temple and called out all the Pharisees, but we didn't know of any tables we could flip. Alex was chomping at the bit for chances to be radical, but no situations had presented themselves.

As we discussed our talent show plans, though, he got an idea. A

radical one. He suggested we drive people to parties after the Sadie Hawkins dance. The rest of us looked at each other, unsure how to respond. Alex could see we needed more info.

“Like designated drivers,” he explained. “We drive them around and talk to them and stuff. Just do something nice for them. We’ll be hanging out with them without actually going into the parties. Like Jesus did!”

I told him it’d look like we were condoning partying and compromising our values. I emphasized that I appreciated where his heart was at though. And it was true—I loved that he was so ministry-minded. I just needed him to use some common sense. (I didn’t say that last part out loud.)

He didn’t seem to totally understand, but he eventually gave up on the idea after some time. In the meantime, we got back to planning for the talent show. While I started thinking about how to maximize the impact of the talent show performance (could we get away with an altar call?) and the witness it’d show the school, we continued perfecting the actual song. Apparently Alex knew Levi had written something and encouraged him to play it. I didn’t even know he was writing his own songs already. In fact, I don’t think he’d have brought it up if Alex hadn’t pushed him out of his shell.

Those weeks were some of the most beautiful times I’d experienced in my life. Hanging out in my room together, closing my eyes and singing along as Levi and Alex played guitar, coming up with melodies and harmonies and

lyrics, taking breaks to go for walks around the neighborhood together... It was heavenly.

Everything was looking up until the day Alex's mom's car broke down and he started catching rides with us. A few days into the new routine, we'd just left the school and were driving to my house when Alex yelled from the back seat of Junebug.

"Wait! Pull over! Quick!"

There was nothing around the road except forest, and no side roads or parking lots to pull over into. At that moment, to "pull over" was just to stop moving. In the middle of the road. Which was filled with the cars of hundreds of students who'd just gotten out of school for the day.

"What? Why? Where?" I asked, confused beyond belief.

"There! By Norman."

Alex pointed a hundred feet ahead. Norman Dicks was shuffling along in the grass on the side of the road, probably headed home. Norman had been relentlessly bullied since middle school for two reasons: 1) his last name was Dicks, and 2) his first name was Norman. Being named Norman wasn't that big of a deal until the movie *City Slickers* came out in 1993. In it, Billy Crystal adopts a calf and names it Norman. Since Norman Dicks was a husky boy, the kids on the bus began mooing at Norman every time he'd get on or off.

I'm not saying the mooing was what drove Norman to become a freak, always wearing hideous Marilyn Manson t-shirts, metal choker necklaces, black Jncos, and raggedy Airwalk sneakers—and usually painting his nails black—but the mooing definitely didn't help his popularity.

I slowed the car as we approached Norman. Levi reached forward and turned on my hazard lights. Meanwhile, Norman kept walking, so I was forced to creep along next to him. Alex had Molly roll down my passenger side window so he could stick his head out from the back seat.

"Norman, do you want a ride?"

Molly, Levi, and I all shared a quick, panicked look.

Norman stopped walking.

"Really?"

"Yeah!" Alex said.

"Um, I don't think we have enough room," I said to Alex, but loud enough for Norman to hear. He started walking again. The line of cars behind us stretched back the length of a football field, all honking and yelling cuss words out their windows at us.

"He can squeeze in with Levi and me," Alex protested. The look on Levi's face in my rearview mirror told me he wasn't so sure about that but was afraid to say so.

"Alex, that's ridiculous," I said. "Y'all barely fit back there as it is."

“Look at him, though—he’s freezing.”

It was one of those mid-January Texas days where it barely got above freezing, and though Norman had on a long-sleeved shirt, he wasn’t wearing a jacket. Plus, the wind was blowing pretty strong.

Alex looked at each person in the car, individually appealing to us one at a time, hoping to find someone to back him up. No one did though. Molly and Levi both looked down and away. Alex got the message.

“Ok then—get out,” he said to Molly.

“Excuse me?”

“Get out so I can get out.”

“Alex, are you serious?”

“Yeah, I am.”

He seemed determined, so I stopped the car, and Molly opened the door, climbed out, and pulled the seat forward to let Alex hop out.

“Y’all go ahead,” he told us. “I’ll meet you at April’s.”

And with that, he ran ahead to catch up with Norman. Molly stood outside the car for a moment, dazed by disbelief. Surely he’d return at any moment, right? But he didn’t—they walked on down the road.

An hour later, he finally rang the doorbell at my house. Judd let him in, and Alex came up to my room, where we’d just spent 45 minutes talking about what had happened.

We all waited for Alex to explain why he'd done that, but he didn't say anything about it. He just got out his guitar and said, "Ok, let's play."

As we practiced, I replayed the previous hour in my mind, but I didn't know what to make of it. Alex had done something extraordinarily kind. Something Jesus would've done. Should the rest of us have walked with them? Or maybe Levi and Molly should've joined them while I took the car? But, like...it was *Norman Dicks*. He hated us. We'd invited him to church before, and he'd just laughed.

Plus, everyone thought he was gay. There was a rumor he'd kissed a boy at a party in middle school. And given the nail polish he wore and how feminine his voice sounded, it made total sense. And now half the school had seen Alex walking home from school with him. What would they think? I really wished Alex had discussed his plan with us before he just decided to hop out and walk with him.

The next morning, it seemed like the whole thing had been a weird blip and that we'd never discuss it again. Then lunchtime came around.

Molly, Levi, and I were sitting at our normal table when Alex and Norman joined us.

I sensed eyeballs on us. Sure enough, a quick scan of the lunchroom told me half the tables were looking our way. Popular kids, freak kids, and—with the fiercest stares of all—Mary and the other FCA kids.

We, the Jesus Freaks, were sitting with a kid known (more or less) to be gay.

Chapter Eleven

APRIL

After lunch, Mary snuck up on me in the hallway as everyone made their way back to class.

“Why was Norman Dicks sitting with y’all?”

I didn’t like her tone at all, even if I’d been wondering the same thing for 20 minutes.

“Because he needed a place to eat, and we had a spot.”

It was kind of true. While we had to free up the spot, he *did* need a place to eat. We’d learned this when Norman went to the bathroom a couple minutes before the bell rang to go back to class.

“Alex, why is Norman Dicks sitting with us?” I’d asked the moment

Norman left the table. "Doesn't he have his own friends to sit with? The other freaks?"

"They don't like being called that. I mean, would you?"

"I literally call myself a Jesus Freak almost every day."

"Well, yeah...and that's kind of...never mind. Anyway, he's on the outs with the other...with his other friends."

It wasn't because he was gay—they didn't care about that. Apparently Norman had criticized Benedict, their tall, trench coat-wearing leader, for getting really into drugs lately. In response, Benedict had told Norman to go sit somewhere else and to find a different ride home.

Over lunch, Alex had carried most of the conversation with Norman while the rest of us either listened in or whispered to each other. The one time I did interact was when Alex was asked Norman if he actually liked Marilyn Manson's music or if he wore the t-shirts just to be shocking.

"Some of it sounds pretty good," Norman had said.

"It sounds demonic, if you ask me," I mumbled.

"I wish! That'd be cool if he was, like, really possessed by an evil entity and was channeling its power into the music. But I think it's all mostly just for show."

Of course he thought it was all an act—that's how the Devil gets you. He makes you think he doesn't exist. Meanwhile, he's speaking to you from

the spirit realm through the music, telling you to disobey your parents, do drugs, and hate Jesus. And maybe be gay?

I wondered if that was how Norman decided to be gay—listening to Marilyn Manson and the Devil speaking to him through the songs. It wouldn't surprise me. Then again, he'd only been really into Marilyn Manson for like a year or so, and the first rumors about him being gay started up a few years ago back in middle school. Maybe he was listening to something else that turned him gay. I know he used to wear a lot of Pearl Jam t-shirts.

After school, Alex wasn't waiting by Junebug. Instead, he stood a row over, deep in conversation with Norman, Benedict, and two girls named Sherri and Beverly.

"I'll meet you at your place," Alex called to us before returning to the conversation. Every eye was locked on Alex as he talked, as if he was sharing something important. Maybe his testimony?

He showed up at my house 30 minutes later. A beat-up Oldsmobile the size of a small yacht sailed away, Benedict behind the wheel and Norman in the passenger seat.

"Did they make up?" I asked when Alex arrived.

"Yeah! It's amazing. I talked with them and told Benedict that Norman was just worried about him, that he'd said what he'd said because he cared. And that I wished my friends had cared enough to say something. Then they

made up! It's so cool. I'd been praying for them all last night and then all day today at school. It's wild to see God answer prayers like that."

I thought that might be the end of things, like Alex would've felt that he'd done what God put him there to do, but the next day, their whole crew all sat with us at lunch.

Honestly, the migration of the freaks couldn't have come at a worse time. Mary had been up our butts for a couple of weeks about the talent show. Since Levi and Alex were leading worship pretty regularly for FCA by that point, she had pushed hard to convince us to not play a Christian song at all. She wanted to avoid any sign of God whatsoever. That way, people wouldn't associate the group with FCA as directly. Instead, she'd wanted us to play a super inoffensive secular song: Savage Garden's "Truly, Madly, Deeply."

Obviously we'd pushed back on that. Sort of. While Levi hadn't wanted to play Savage Garden, he'd mentioned that the song he'd written could very easily become a secular love song by simply not saying "Jesus" at some key moments. He'd thought it might be a good compromise, but I'd informed him that while it would definitely be a compromise, it would be the *bad* kind. As in the kind that makes God want to spit you out of His mouth for being lukewarm and for being afraid to say the name of Jesus in public. Levi had conceded I was right, so we were back to playing his song as originally

written.

Mary wanted us to skip the greatest chance of evangelism we'd have all year? No way. We'd literally be given a stage to share the Gospel in a *public school*, the place most closed to God in all of America.

"Well, at least don't, like, raise your hands and be all weird like that," she'd said.

With the arrival of the freaks at our table, though, I knew I was in for another lecture about perceptions. The thing was, I kind of agreed with her, though I'd never admit it in her presence. I decided to nip it in the bud before she even had the chance to butt her pelican-like nose into our business. I'd have a talk with Alex.

Not wanting to call him out in front of Levi and Molly, I waited until we got to my house after school. As we were all walking through the front door, I pulled him back onto the porch.

I told him that Norman and co. sitting with us made it look like they were friends with us.

"When we sit with them, it makes it look like we approve of the things they do, the music they listen to, how they live their life. And First Thessalonians says, 'Abstain from all appearance of evil.'"

"I think you're reading way too much into it. We're just sitting together."

“Well, we know that, but everybody else who might be watching? They don’t!”

“Who cares what they think? All that matters is what we’re actually *doing*, right?”

“What people think *does* matter! Especially with the talent show coming up. We have the chance to glorify God in front of everyone, but if they hear us talking about Jesus and about living a certain way, but then we hang out with people who *don’t* live that way, they’ll think we’re living that way too and being hypocrites!”

“Wait, living which way? You lost me.”

“Alex, what I’m saying is if they think we don’t walk the walk, it’ll make them less likely to believe us about how Jesus can change their lives. They’ll think we’re just like everyone else!”

Levi appeared at the front door.

“Hey, what’s up? We gonna practice or what?”

“We’re having a discussion,” I said.

“About what?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Alex said. “Discussion’s over.”

He moved past him, went inside, and jogged up the stairs, two at a time.

The abruptness caught me off-guard. He’d asked questions and

pushed back on my advice before, but he almost always came around and admitted I was right, even if he didn't seem totally convinced. He'd never outright dismissed me in the past, and it stung.

LEVI

During practice, something felt off with Alex. When he suggested we take a break, I asked if he was ok. He initially said yeah, but when April went downstairs, he told us she'd chewed him out about letting Norman and his friends sit with us at lunch, that she thought it was bad for appearances. He said he didn't think it was as big of a deal as she made it out to be.

"I guess I can see that," I said.

"You think people will say we're gay just because Norman is?"

"And Beverly and Sherri too," Molly added. "They're lesbians. Actually, Sherri is bisexual, so..."

"I think y'all are being too uptight," Alex said.

I wanted to tell him he was wrong, that we weren't uptight and that I understood what he was doing, that I thought it was actually what Jesus would've done. But in the back of my mind, I imagined April calling me out again for compromising with The World, for excusing sin just to avoid conflict and look cool. I was caught between my gut and God.

"It's not about what we think," I said, "it's about what God thinks. The Bible is clear."

"I like them sitting with us," Molly said. "They're kind of funny."

I hoped the air would clear the next day, but that chance ended the moment four figures darkened the door of the auditorium as we gathered for FCA. Alex had invited Norman, Benedict, Beverly, and Sherri.

They seemed as wary of us as we were of them, Alex aside.

We sang a few songs, but they didn't join in. Norman clapped along a couple of times when Alex looked over at him, but it was obvious his heart wasn't in it, and he stopped once Alex looked away.

Mary led the devotional time, and at one point while she talked, Shirley whispered something to Beverly, causing Mary to stop and ask if Shirley had something to share with the group. While Shirley declined, Beverly spoke up.

"She told me she didn't realize y'all were so Goth."

Mary sighed dramatically.

"What do you mean?"

"You were talking about Jesus's blood. And y'all sang about it earlier too."

"Don't be weird."

"I'm not being weird. Y'all are the ones into blood stuff. I think it's

tight.”

“The lyrics to your songs *are* very bloody,” Benedict added. “Also kinda sexy. Like y’all wanna be God’s boyfriends and girlfriends or something.”

“Benny...” Norman pleaded.

Mary was fully thrown off her rhythm, so when she finally stopped bickering with them, she didn’t even know where to pick back up with her devotional. Instead, she said a prayer to close and almost everyone dispersed.

Alex and I had to pack up our guitars, so it took us longer, and April, Molly, and Reese hung back to wait for us. That was when Mary pounced.

“Why did you invite them?” she demanded of Alex.

“I thought they might like it.”

“Of course they wouldn’t like it! They’re *freaks!*”

“Stop calling them that!”

I’d never seen Alex so exasperated before.

“Nobody’s gonna wanna come to FCA if they think we’re a bunch of weirdos,” she said.

“Y’all are *so concerned* with appearances,” Alex yelled. “It’s awful!”

“He’s right,” April said, piping in. She crossed her arms in a power stance. “You’re very judgmental.”

“You are too!” he yelled at April. “You might be the worst of them all!”

She gasped.

"What'd I do?"

"Don't you *dare*," Mary said to her. "You told me he'd invite *popular* kids! That was the plan!"

Alex's lips formed words in reply, but no sound came out for a few moments as he processed what she'd said.

"What does she mean?" he asked April. Mary spoke up instead.

"*She* said letting you help lead worship would attract popular kids to FCA. That'd it make us cool, and then it'd be cool to be a Christian. But it didn't, because you brought *them* instead! And now people are gonna think FCA is a place for freaks!"

Alex's shoulders drooped as disappointment coursed through his body.

"I can't believe this," he said, almost in a whisper. "You used me." He looked my way. "Did you know about this plan too? And you, Molly? Did you know?"

We both nodded.

"Unreal," he said. "Y'all are supposed to be different from The World, but you're just as cliquish as everyone I used to hang out with. You talk so much about introducing people to Jesus, but apparently you only mean it if it's the 'right' people. You're just like them, but without the beer and weed, so you're not even *fun*! You're all a bunch of hypocrites!"

He clicked the latches on his guitar case into place and stormed off down the steps, up the aisle, and out of the auditorium.

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I tried to catch Alex and smooth things over, but I found him in the Freshman hallway talking with Julio and Trish Compton. I watched from a distance as whatever she was telling him upset him more.

When Trish left, Alex was almost crying. Julio put his hands on Alex's shoulders as he talked to him. Alex nodded, and they headed for the parking lot, even though school was about to start. Neither of them showed up to our Radio/TV class.

At lunch, I discussed with April and Molly whether we'd caused Alex to backslide. Also, you know, whether or not he was right. Were we total hypocrites? We'd always thought that about Mary and a lot of the other FCA Baptists, but *us*? We tried so hard to live what we believed.

April was taking things the hardest, burying her head in her arms on the table and groaning. The rest of lunch felt like a funeral. Needless to say, Norman and his friends didn't sit with us that day, instead sitting outside in their old place under the trees in the courtyard.

When Alex wasn't waiting to ride home with us after school, I didn't know if we'd ever see him again.

Then he walked through the door of Reese's house that night for our weekly small group meeting.

Reese and I sat speechless while everyone else greeted him. Alex seemed down, but he tried to hide it and talked with everyone.

Except me. He nodded "what's up?", but he didn't sit by me like usual. He took a spot on the couch by Jason and was quiet through most of the meeting.

It wasn't until we were wrapping up and Wes asked if anyone had any prayer requests that Alex finally spoke up. After a few typical "unspoken" requests, Alex raised his hand.

"Alex?" Wes asked.

"I can't stop jacking off."

Jason gasped while Reese cackled—everyone else fell somewhere in between those extremes.

"Why is that funny?" Alex asked, glaring at Reese. "I know you don't care about church and God and stuff, but I do."

Reese stopped laughing.

"I thought you were making a joke."

"It's not funny," Wes told Alex. "I'm sorry you're struggling with this. You should know that we all do—it's not just you. But together, and with God's help, we can beat it."

Reese's face instantly looked like a tomato about to burst, but somehow he held in the laugh.

"It's not just that," Alex said. "I can't seem to do anything right. I thought I was helping these Goth kids at school, but apparently I'm giving off the appearance of evil or something. And now this girl's boyfriend found out that she cheated on him with me, and he wants to kick my ass, but I'm trying to not fight anymore!"

Earlier, Trish must've told him Russell was out to get him.

"I just keep messing things up," Alex said. "If I'll never be able to be good like y'all, why even try?"

Before Wes could reply, Jason spoke up.

"I know what you mean."

Wes didn't immediately intervene, a move I definitely thought unwise.

"One time when I was at work at Sonic, Brittney Bass called in sick, so someone from the kitchen had to carhop. I hated working the fryer, and I'd been asking my boss, Jeff, for weeks if I could carhop, but he said carhops couldn't wear rollerblades—skates only—so he let Tina Bougher do it because she lived two blocks away and could run home to get her skates."

Everyone stared at Jason. We were all desperate to see how it tied in with absolutely anything we were talking about, much less Alex's predicament.

“When Jeff left, I grabbed a big bag of frozen fries and *threw* them as hard as I could into the fryer! One at a time. Even though nobody had ordered any fries! The hot oil splashed up on me, and it hurt so much I yelled out GD.” After a dramatic pause, he continued. “I didn’t know if God would ever forgive me. I thought maybe I’d even blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, the only unforgivable sin.”

“Wait, what is ‘GD’?” Alex asked.

“It’s the d-word, but with ‘God’ in front of it,” Jason said.

“Goddamn?” Alex asked.

The entire room, except Alex, flinched in unison at the word. Even Reese. We so rarely heard it spoken out loud.

“Oh shit, sorry,” Alex said after seeing our faces. “I didn’t know that was bad.”

“That’s ok, Alex,” Wes replied.

“Anyway,” Jason continued, “Like I said, I know exactly what you’re feeling.”

And that was it. We snuck awkward glances at each other as everyone—except Jason—realized he didn’t have a clue what Alex was feeling, that those things were nowhere near each other.

“Jason,” Alex said, “that’s exactly what I’m feeling. Thanks for sharing that.”

He wasn't being sarcastic at all—he obviously didn't want Jason to look dumb.

“Alex, I'm sorry you feel like you're struggling,” Wes said, “but know that everyone here is struggling too. And we all feel awful about it. That's the Holy Spirit at work—it's called ‘conviction.’ He reminds us of God's plan and how we're falling short. Not to make us feel like terrible people—after all, the Bible says God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world, but instead that through Him we'd all be saved. So don't get too down when you fail. Just ask Jesus to forgive you and to help you do better next time. You can't beat yourself up about it.”

Except that Alex was more worried about someone *e/se* beating him up about it.

“Yeah, you're right,” Alex said. He smiled and looked around the group. “Y'all, I'm so glad to have this group in my life. I've never had anyone I could really talk to about all of this stuff inside. None of my other friends really cared about what I felt. If they were feeling bad, they just got effed-up, you know?”

“That's why this group exists,” Wes said. “We're here for each other.”

APRIL

I'd misheard God. That was the only explanation.

There must be sin in my life. Why else would I be so disconnected from my Source? Why else would I get it so wrong? I needed to examine every crevice of my life for any unconfessed sin. Maybe I needed to fast from food and pray for a week too.

"Why do you think you misheard God?" Tori asked after I'd vomited all of these thoughts out on our Denny's breakfast table. Somehow, Molly munched on her pancakes. I didn't know how she could hold anything down at a time like that.

"I had to have," I responded. "Why else would this plan go so wrong? I thought we were about to spark revival, and not only is there no revival, Alex is the only popular kid coming to church, and he's bringing *gay* kids with him! It couldn't have gone off the rails any more than that."

Tori smiled one of those smiles she always busted out before dropping an insight bomb on me. For once, I was ready to be proven wrong.

"What's wrong with the gay kids coming to FCA?"

It seemed blatantly obvious to me, so I didn't even know why Tori asked it.

"Because the plan was to get the cool kids saved and make being a Christian cool so that people would want to come to youth group and FCA. But gay Goth kids aren't cool! So if they're around, no one else will want to

come either.”

“What if *this* was the plan?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe you didn’t get the *plan* wrong, but instead you just jumped to the wrong conclusions about what the *result* would be. What if this was what God intended all along? That He wanted Alex to get saved, and that through him, these gay kids would get a chance to know Him and change their ways and everything.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” I said. “The popular kids are like low-hanging fruit, so why wouldn’t God go for them first? The gay kids are like... high-hanging fruit? Is that a thing? Do they hang high? Doesn’t matter. What I’m saying is that they’re so much less likely to change. Like, they probably won’t ever change. They could go to church their entire lives and still not change.”

“I don’t even know if they *can* change,” Molly said.

“Well, obviously they can change, but I still think God is just wasting His time trying to reach them.”

“I think they can change too,” Tori said. “I’ve seen it.”

Molly had been slumped in her seat as she shoveled the syrup-soggy bites into her mouth, but she sat up and forward when Tori said that.

“Do tell.”

“Well, I was watching *The 700 Club*, and Sheila Walsh was interviewing a preacher who used to be gay but then got saved. And now he has a ministry that’s totally focused on reaching gay men. They stand outside gay clubs and talk to guys as they’re leaving. So yeah, it’s definitely possible. I mean, he said it wasn’t easy—he was possessed by a demon, so he had to have that thrown out of him, but...”

Molly’s eyes grew wide.

“He had a *demon* in him?”

“Well, yeah—that’s the only thing that could make someone do something as depraved as homosexuality.”

“So, Norman has a demon?”

“Probably. But hey, there’s hope for him.”

“Is there anyone at the church who could even cast out his demon?”

“Hm, yeah, I think so. I’m not sure if Pastor Chris has done it before, but surely Pastor Steve has.”

“Have you seen someone cast out a demon before?” Molly asked.

“I have—at summer camp once.”

While demons were fascinating—though we’d been taught it wasn’t good to be too fascinated by them because that would give them more credit than they deserved, and our focus should be on *God’s* power, not the Devil’s—I was kind of ready for demon talk to be over and for us to get back to the

subject at hand—what I should do next.

“I can’t believe Alex called me a hypocrite,” I said.

“He called us all hypocrites,” Molly said.

“Well, yeah, but he said I was the worst one.”

“He said you ‘might’ be the worst one. ‘Might.’”

I smiled at Molly.

“I’m sorry he said that,” Tori said.

“But maybe he’s right. Maybe I am a hypocrite. I *was* acting just like his party friends, focusing on popular kids and trying to avoid freaks and stuff. I’m always talking about how disappointing Mary is as, like, a representative of Jesus to the school, but I was just as bad as her.”

I stared at my silver dollar pancakes.

“Should I apologize?” I asked.

“I think only you’ll know the answer to that,” Tori said. “But think about *why* you’re apologizing. Is it because the Holy Spirit is convicting you that you did something wrong? Or is it because you’re scared Alex might not like you anymore? Because even if your plan to focus only on the popular kids might not have been ordained by God, I don’t necessarily think you were wrong to be worried about appearances. We have a tough line to walk—being in the world but not of it, avoiding any appearance of evil.”

It was all so complicated. I *thought* the plan was ordained by God, that

He gave it to me, but I supposed I might've misheard Him. How could anyone know for sure?

LEVI

Though Alex didn't ignore me for the rest of small group, he also didn't really talk to me either. Not like usual anyway. So I wasn't surprised when yet another morning came and he still wasn't riding to school with us.

April told me she wanted to talk to him, to try and explain things. She thought he was right about her being a hypocrite and that she thought she should apologize. She threw the idea out in a way that left plenty of room for me to agree with her and offer to pitch in on the apologizing. We decided to do it together at lunch, since being by each other's side would make the humiliating moment more tolerable.

In the classroom, though I sat in my normal seat next to Alex, Julio, and Shannon, I felt far away, like they were TV characters I was watching and couldn't interact with. When the bell rang for lunch, I caught Alex's shirt and tugged on it to slow him up.

"Alex," I said, "could you maybe stop by our table real quick? April wants to try and explain things. We all do. Please?"

Though he didn't seem thrilled about it, he agreed, and the three of us

walked to the cafeteria together.

"Save me a place in line," he told Julio.

Julio nodded, then shifted his gaze to me and let his eyes narrow.

Message received.

April and Molly already sat at the table. April's right leg bounced a thousand miles-per-minute as we approached. She forced a smile.

"Hey," she said as we arrived. It wasn't a casual greeting. Instead, her voice carried that tone that said, "We both know I'm a gigantic dummy and that I messed up and that I need to tell you how so very sorry I am."

"Hey," he replied, his own tone saying, "Yeah, you're a gigantic dummy who messed up, and I know you're going to tell me how sorry you are."

"HEY!"

The last one came from a voice I'd never heard before, but its tone was also unmistakable. It said, "We've got beef, bro!"

Alex and I whirled around to find Russell. Though shorter than both of us, each of Russell's biceps could fit both mine and Alex's combined. They were practically bursting out of his navy Tommy Hilfiger polo. Also practically bursting out of its home were the veins in his skull, visible under his nearly shaved head.

Over his shoulder were two of his crew.

"I heard you fucked my girl," Russell practically yelled at Alex, even as he moved to get within a few inches of his face. "I'm gonna kick your fucking ass, bro!"

He slapped his hands on Alex's chest and pushed him backwards. Alex stumbled back into me, and we both fell backward onto Cliff, the FFA president who'd made his way back over to his normal spot after Norman and his crew had vacated it. I threw my hand back to catch my fall, and I felt it sink into something cold and liquid-y. Ketchup. All over my right hand.

Alex got back to his feet. I expected him to leap at Russell in attack, and I think Russell did too, because he balled his fists up and raising his arms to deflect any flying limbs. But Alex didn't attack. When he raised his hands, both his palms were open, the universal sign of "Whoaaaaaa."

Almost the entire cafeteria was standing, trying to watch everything play out. Some farther away even climbed on their tables. A chant went around.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!"

"Russell, man, I don't wanna fight," Alex said.

"Did you fuck her?" Russell asked, fists still ready to go.

Alex hesitated. He knew saying the answer out loud would send Russell into action.

"Beat his ass, Alex!" a voice yelled from the crowd. I saw Julio trying

to force his way through.

"Listen," Alex said, "what I did to you was messed up, and I'm so sorry about it. I wish it had never happened. I was in a dark place then and was being super selfish, but I've been trying to change. I got saved, and because of Jesus, I don't do that stuff anymore."

"I don't care about your church shit, bitch—I'm gonna kick your fucking ass! Let's *go!*"

"I don't fight anymore either. Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek, so swing away and do what you want, I'm just gonna—"

Russell popped Alex in the jaw. He fell into me again. I should've pulled him back and out of the way, but my instincts kicked in and I pushed him off of me—and back towards the fight. Russell charged at Alex and tackled him into me once more. We lay sandwiched on top of the table—poor Cliff underneath, then Alex and I, and finally Russell on top. Like a BLT if the top piece of bread lost its marbles and decided to wail on the bacon, and the lettuce and tomato got caught in the action.

And we *were* indeed catching action, as many of Russell's furious swings missed Alex entirely and landed on me. My arm was taking the brunt of it, and it was starting to go numb.

While Alex blocked the blows, he refused to swing back, in spite of the crowd egging him on. Julio was scrapping with Russell's minions, so Alex

was left on his own. Somewhere, April and Molly were shrieking at Russell to stop.

I wrenched my way free and slipped out from under Alex. Cliff wasn't as lucky, and his face was planted firmly into his paper tray of tater tots, Alex and Russell on top of him.

Alex's lip and nose were already bleeding. If no one stopped Russell, things could get bad. While every instinct in my body told me to slink into the crowd and put as much distance as possible between myself and the fight, seeing Russell wail on my friend filled me with a rage I'd never known before. Alex was the best guy in the world—he didn't deserve that, no matter what he'd done with Trish.

Fuck Russell!

I scurried back over to the fight and reared back my arm. Before I could even start swinging, Russell jabbed me in jaw, sending me backwards into Cliff, who'd finally freed himself.

I'd never taken a punch before. While there was a stinging sensation somewhere in my mouth region, I couldn't have pinpointed it if you'd paid me \$500 because the jab had left me dizzy and bewildered as I laid on Cliff's back.

"Don't hit him!" I heard Alex say as I stared at the ceiling. Alex lunged forward and started pummeling Russell with punches.

Before I could make sense of it, one of the giant football coaches wrapped me in a bear hug and hauled me away from the scene. Other coaches and assistant principals arrived and broke up the fight.

I looked down at my hand and gasped when I saw it covered in red. For a moment, I thought I'd done something I'd already forgotten, but then I remembered having stuck it in Cliff's ketchup at the start of the fight. It wasn't just me—some of Russell's face and arms were covered in ketchup too, and poor Cliff, who was also being hauled away despite being an innocent bystander, had it dripping down all over his face. His crisp white dress shirt and bolo tie were drenched in it.

It looked like a massacre had taken place.

What would my parents say?

What would *Jesus* say?

Chapter Twelve

LEVI

Before my parents or Jesus said anything, the school had its say.

I was set for a suspension before Alex stepped in and pleaded on my behalf, telling them I hadn't been fighting and had just gotten caught in the crossfire of fists. He didn't mention that I'd planned to and had gotten halfway into the act before getting doinked.

Meanwhile, Alex, Julio, and Russell felt the full force of the school's law. Their history of troublemaking got them all week-long suspensions and a month of after-school detention.

Cliff got off scot-free—aside from the bruises all down his face and arms, sustained while being pinned under everyone against the lunch table.

Alex felt terrible when he saw Cliff's injuries. I reminded Alex that they were ultimately Russell's fault for attacking Alex, but he just responded that he never should've messed with Trish in the first place.

He seemed bummed about the whole situation and took full responsibility, even though I apologized for jumping into the fight when he was obviously trying to lower the temperature.

"I tried to be good, man," he said, staring off into the distance. "Tried to be like Jesus. I don't know how He did it."

I realized that I'd kinda been like Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, cutting off the ear of a Roman soldier while Jesus chose peace. Peter would later go on to become the founding father of The Church, in spite of acting against Jesus's wishes.

Personally, I didn't see any reason my parents should know about the fight, but a school secretary attended our church and decided otherwise, tipping them off about a situation she didn't fully understand.

I'd meant to remember the Peter comparison when I talked with my parents later, but I was distracted when—after laying out my case and explaining that I didn't technically punch anyone and that Alex was trying to turn the other cheek—they still clocked me with "We're not angry, we're just disappointed" and a quick jab of "We always trusted you to make good decisions, but I guess we were wrong." I felt so much shame that I just

accepted my punishment and didn't even try to convince them that their fallen son could perhaps go on to have churches across the world named after him. Plus, Peter was crucified upside-down, and I wasn't sure I wanted to set myself on that course. I decided to walk back my potential heroics and instead maybe aim for a lesser-known disciple or apostle who still did important things but had also died as normal of a death as you could back then. Like John the Revelator with his nice, easy island banishment.

"I get that you were trying to defend your buddy," Dad said, "but while that's a noble instinct, we can't always act on our instincts. We need to practice self-control."

"Especially when your dad is a pastor," Mom reminded me. "Think of how it'll reflect on his authority as the leader of a church—not to mention the leader of his home—if his son is going around hitting people."

"But I didn't hit anyone!"

"Ok, jumping into a fight and getting his noggin' knocked," Mom replied. "Where did this even come from, Levi? It's just not like you at all."

Was it not? It obviously wasn't the me they thought they knew, yet in the moment, when Russell was yelling at my friend...it felt totally natural to want to fight back. Like something I'd wanted to do for years but had always stuffed down deep inside when the feeling bubbled up. I wonder if Peter felt that way back in the day. After a couple years of hearing Jesus say "love

your enemies” and “turn the other cheek,” did he feel some sort of release at that moment? I know he felt ashamed after.

“Well, you’re grounded of course,” Mom said. “Two weeks. Straight to school and straight back home every day.”

“What about church?” I asked.

Mom and Dad shared a look. If there was one place a “troubled youth” needed to be, it was in the Lord’s house.

“Obviously you’re not grounded from church,” Dad said.

“But no sitting with the youth group during service,” Mom added. “You’ll sit with me. And no Sunday lunch with friends or Bennigan’s after youth group.”

I scanned my mental calendar to see what else might be affected. The dance was far enough out that I’d be able to go, assuming April still wanted to accompany a known brawler. The talent show was three weeks out, so it should be safe too.

“What about band practice?”

“No more band practice,” Mom said.

I suddenly shot upright in my seat. All the rest of it was whatever, but band practice? If we didn’t practice, our talent show performance might stink. And if that was the case, April would never forgive me. Or at least I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself for ruining what she had called “the

ministry opportunity of a lifetime.”

“But we have to practice for the talent show.”

“No talent show either,” Mom said. Whoa.

By that point, Mom’s disciplinary train was chugging along at full speed, with Dad fully conceding control to her, and it seemed she’d finally jumped the tracks.

“But that doesn’t fall within the next two weeks!”

“No talent show,” she said again, this time much firmer. “In fact, I don’t think you should be hanging out with this Alex boy anymore at all. He’s a bad influence on you.”

“No, he’s not—he’s, like, the best dude ever. He’s better than me! He tried so hard to stay out of that fight, but when Russell started attacking me, Alex defended me.”

“No Alex, no talent show,” she said again.

“But it’s gonna be a big ministry opportunity,” I said, some desperation starting to seep into my voice. “I wrote this song, and we’re gonna sing about Jesus in front of the whole school! People are gonna hear the Gospel and come to Christ!”

Neither of them spoke immediately. Dad gave her a look that pleaded on my behalf and told me I’d made a great point. There was no way they’d prevent unsaved people from hearing the Gospel. Mom let out a frustrated

sigh, picked up her towel, and started cleaning again, conceding the rest of the matter to Dad.

“Well, I guess there’s no reason someone should have to burn in eternal flames just because you were a bonehead, huh?” Dad asked. “Ok, but you have to go straight to practice after school and leave immediately when it’s over. No loitering. If you’re not home by five each day, one of us is heading over to bang on their door and drag you back. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you shouldn’t let Alex play with you at the talent show anymore,” Mom added.

“But that would leave just April and me. Practicing alone.”

“You said Molly has been coming to practices, right?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“There you go. Problem solved.”

Hardly.

APRIL

The day after the fight, Mary had accosted us at lunch and delivered their judgment. Alex was out. Not just as FCA worship co-leader—he was out of FCA entirely, something she’d been trying to do since the Goth kids

visited.

After a lot of pleading on my part, which she totally enjoyed, she spared Levi as long as he stopped hanging out with Alex, including at the talent show.

She also told me that if I played with Alex at the talent show, I'd be kicked out of FCA too. After all, a Christian organization couldn't have someone in a "leadership position" publicly associating with kids who fight and get suspended. That wasn't "the way of Jesus." When I said it was *exactly* the way of Jesus—something I'd just realized—Mary stomped off in a victory huff.

I begged the FCA sponsor, Mrs. Hubert, to reconsider our cases, but no luck. It was a long shot since the geometry teacher moonlighted as a Sunday school teacher at Mary's church and would always be on the side of the Baptist kids, but I had to try.

Obviously I was crushed, caught between my desire to finally get FCA on the right track and my dedication to Levi. I knew he'd be devastated too. All summer, he'd hoped to play a more important role in FCA worship, so for him to co-lead it with Alex was a dream come true. And he was so close to finally being part of the worship band at youth group—he just needed more experience at FCA, which he was finally getting.

After the fight, he risked losing it all if he stuck by Alex.

I poured all of this out to Molly as we sat on my bed, tears of anger and shame streaming down my face. I told her that while I understood that Alex had a past that was catching up to him, I was disappointed he ultimately fought back. Even more so, I was furious with Levi for jumping into the fight when he knew better. Mostly, though, I was furious with myself for hiding the plan from Alex, which eventually hurt his feelings when he found out.

All of which led to Mary getting the upper hand on us. It was all my fault for putting us in that position in the first place.

"No, no," Molly said as she rubbed my hands, "We all thought we were doing what God wanted us to do. We kind of used Alex, and we shouldn't have. And it's Mary's fault for being a dick."

"Molly!" I half gasped, half laughed.

"Honestly, I don't know why you care so much about FCA," she said. "Why do you want to be queen of all those posers?"

Before I could answer, someone knocked at the door downstairs.

"DOOR!" Judd shouted from downstairs, in spite of being 20 feet away in the living room just watching *The Jerry Springer Show*. What a punk.

Alex and Levi stood at the door, each holding their guitars, and both as surprised to see each other there as I was to see either of them.

Upstairs, Levi filled us in on his convo with his parents and the

conditions of his participation. Alex went next, and his story was somehow more surprising, but for completely different reasons.

"My dad said, 'If you wanna ruin your life, that's your business. Just don't ask me for bail money.' If anything, he was more annoyed when I told him I was trying to turn the other cheek. He said 'That's how you become the world's punching bag.' He did think it was funny that I spent so much time in church these days and tried to do good and all and somehow still ended up in the same place—suspended. He's kind of got a point."

"I mean, Jesus was better than everyone and still got crucified, so..." Levi offered.

It was my turn to fill them in.

"This is so dumb," Alex said. "Yeah, we messed up, but to totally kick us out? And to kick Levi off the team if we play? It was just one mistake! I thought the whole point was that Jesus *knows* we aren't perfect. If He doesn't expect that, then why does Mary get to?"

He stared right at me, and I felt a challenge in the look, the same question being asked about me.

I wouldn't want someone to expect perfection from me either, even though I basically lived my life as if someone were.

"What should we do?" Levi asked. He put it out to the whole group, but he was looking directly at me when he asked it.

“It’s obvious—I won’t play,” Alex said. “You can do it without me. There’s no reason you should get in trouble at FCA because I was being a dumbass.”

“What do you think?” Levi asked me.

“He’s right. If you want to play at FCA, we’re gonna have to play the show without him.”

I didn’t know if I’d ever seen Levi that disappointed. I thought it’d make sense to him, but his body language told me maybe I was wrong.

“Guess you don’t need me at practice then,” Alex said, standing and picking up his guitar.

“Wait,” Levi said. Alex stopped.

“I don’t care what Mary says—I want you to play with me. I want *us all* to play together, even if it means I can’t lead worship at FCA anymore. I never liked getting up early anyway.”

Molly laughed. Alex too.

It almost felt like they’d reached an unspoken agreement and were all moving on past this hiccup, but I couldn’t join them there.

I was surprised. I knew how hard Levi had worked to get the FCA gig, so to risk it all for a one-off talent show? Was it a bigger deal to him than playing at FCA each week? Maybe he was evolving, and while FCA gave him the confidence to sing and play in front of others, the talent show was the

next step. He was working towards his ultimate goal, and those were the milestones along the way that helped him grow into who he needed to be to accomplish those things.

So who was I to hold my best friend back? On the other hand, if FCA was part of God's plan—and we'd messed it up—would we be messing up His plan even more by me playing the show with Levi and Alex and getting everyone kicked out of FCA?

I'd already messed up what God was doing so much that year—I couldn't bear doing it again.

"I can't..." I mumbled.

"You can't what?" Alex asked.

"I...I can't play at the talent show. If God needs me to be FCA president next year, I can't get fired as vice president. So you'll have to play without me."

"Who cares about FCA?" Levi said. "They all suck. It's stupid."

"I care. It's the face of Jesus on our school's campus. And right now it's a bunch of fake Christians. If God is to be glorified, real Christians like us need to be in charge. Sometimes we've gotta think long-term. Just getting people at school saved isn't the only thing—they need a place to get disciplined too. That's what FCA can be."

Levi's mouth moved to shape words, but nothing coming out for the

longest time.

"But it's a duet," he said, his voice choking on his frustration. "I wrote it for us to sing together."

I wasn't sure what else to say.

"Fine," he said, annoyed. "We'll play without you."

"Levi, if you do this, you'll be out of FCA. You've worked so hard to get to lead worship there. Are you really gonna throw that away? Just sing the song alone!"

"I don't want to!" he blurted. "I want to sing it with *you!*"

I sunk my face into my hands as tears welled up. I shook my head in my hands, wiping the tears away with my palms. When I looked up again, I turned to Molly.

"Molly, please..." I pleaded, hoping she'd back me up. She looked at me with pity in her eyes, but then she leaned away from me as she spoke.

"I can't believe you won't play with them. This is way more important than FCA."

I didn't say anything else. My face fell, and I stared down at my tear-soaked hands.

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After practice, I followed Alex out to his car.

"Are you still mad at me?" I asked. Instead of answering, he wrenched his guitar case into the Cherokee's back floorboard. When he finally faced me, he seemed to still be making up his mind.

"Kind of."

"Even after I said I was sorry?"

"But you never did that."

I scanned through the events of the past couple of days. I thought I had, but I guess I was mistaken.

"Well, yes, I'm sorry for telling Mary you'd bring a bunch of popular kids to FCA."

"For using me."

"Yes, I'm sorry for using you. I just...I thought God was telling me *He* wanted to use you to bring popular kids to Him. And then it'd be cool to be a Christian, and other kids would come to Jesus because of peer pressure."

"You'd want them to say they believed in Jesus because it was cool to do? Is that even a good thing?"

"At the end of the day, they'd believe in Jesus. And not go to hell. And that's all that matters."

"I think I want people to believe in Jesus because...you know...they believe in Jesus. Because they encountered Him. Like you and I did."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said. "So...do you forgive me?"

He shifted uncomfortably.

"I guess so. Jesus would want me to, right?"

"Yes, He would," I said, a little bummed that Jesus telling him to do something was the only reason he was doing it.

"Ok, then. I forgive you."

"Thanks."

"Honestly, I'm still kind of mad at you though."

"I guess that's understandable. Forgiveness is something we choose to do, right? Even if we don't feel like it. At least that's what Pastor Steve says. Well...I hope you stop being mad at me soon."

"Me too. I don't like being mad at you. But it's just how I feel, you know?"

"Are you madder at me because I won't sing in the talent show?"

"Not really. I understand that more than the other thing."

"Ok. Hopefully you're done being mad at me by the time the dance comes around. 'Cause that would be an awkward night for everyone."

"Probably would. Guess we'll have to see how I'm feeling in a couple of weeks."

And with that, he opened his driver's side door and climbed in.

"See ya," he said through the cracked window. Then he drove off.

LEVI

Playing to 10 people at FCA was one thing, but playing to 100 or 200 or however many people the school auditorium held was very different, especially when you were confessing your love for a bearded Jewish man.

I'd begun to waver on that last point. Even before April bailed, I'd been dropping hints that maybe we should cut out all the explicit "Jesus" mentions and just leave it for the audience to figure out on their own.

Truthfully, neither way felt right to me anymore. When I sang the song the romantic version, I'd always imagined I was singing it to April. Since she'd betrayed me and chosen FCA over our duet, imagining her while singing just made me angry, giving the song a bitter edge. On the other hand, I wasn't too happy with Jesus and His version either. After April had invited me to the dance and said yes to the talent show, it seemed like God was "working everything for good," as the Bible said He would. But I wasn't so sure about that anymore.

When I proposed cutting Jesus out of the song, Alex sat quietly and thought for way longer than I was comfortable with. Molly and I had locked eyes during the silence, unsure if we should say something to him or just get up and walk home, turning the light out as we left his room.

"It's up to you," he eventually said. "Pray about it, think about it..."

you'll know what to do."

Completely unhelpful. But that was mostly how he'd been lately—there but not engaged. It felt like we were making him do a chore.

Three weeks later, I still wasn't sure about the Jesus thing. Fortunately, I could say it or leave it out at literally the very last moment, so I kept putting it off.

With me being madder at April than I'd ever been and Molly mad at her on my behalf, our car rides to school were mostly quiet and awkward. At school, I avoided her, except at lunch, because where else was I gonna go?

Sadie was gonna be fun. Me and April and Alex and Molly. One big happy group. That said, Molly told me Alex had never given her a definitive "yes" that he was still going with us as her date. Beyond just the issue of whether we were going as a quartet or a trio, what to wear was proving tricky since dates were supposed to dress the exact same and basically go as twins. Shopping for clothes together was one of the funnest parts of the whole experience. Or so I'd heard.

I told them there was no way Alex would bail on us. He was making me sweat my promise, but if the day of the dance got close and he hadn't made up his mind yet, I'd have strong words with him.

The night of the talent show, April found us backstage. She just wanted to make sure we were all right.

"We're fine," I snapped, even though it made me warm inside to know that she got there early just to talk to us. But she was officially still getting the cold shoulder from me, so I didn't tell her how absolutely nervous I was.

"Oh...ok," she said, looking down, which immediately made me feel like a jerk. She opened her mouth to say something else, but it fell shut again. As we listened to chamber choir star Mark Nolan rehearse R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly" from *Space Jam*, she filled us in on all the choir drama happening at that moment that we were oblivious to.

We got stuck playing fourth out of 20 acts, which meant people would still be showing up as we performed.

April and Alex wanted a full house to maximize God-glorification potential, but I would've been fine if it was just everyone's parents and no one else. Parents tended to be forgiving if you bombed onstage—high school students, not so much.

Add the whole "love song to a Jewish carpenter" thing on top of it, and that was why I'd pretty much decided to not sing "Jesus" in the song and to go with the secular version instead. I hadn't told anyone yet.

As showtime approached, April asked if she could pray over us.

Alex shrugged, so I did too. April took one of our hands in each of hers and closed her eyes. Alex put his hand out for mine. I glanced around, but nobody was paying attention to us, so I quickly grabbed it. I'd usually keep

my eyes open in a situation like that, but closing my eyes and praying sounded like something that might actually help my nerves.

“Lord Jesus,” April prayed out loud, “please be with Alex and Levi as they perform. They’re nervous, but we know you haven’t given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and a sound mind. Send your Holy Spirit to comfort them and give them the courage to proudly proclaim the Gospel to everyone in the room. And give the audience ears to hear and eyes to see Your goodness. Please work through this beautiful song Levi wrote, this song that You gave him. I pray that lives will be changed because of his...”

She paused, and I felt her let go of my hand. I opened my eye slightly and caught her wiping a tear away before taking my hand again.

“...because of his courage,” she said, her voice cracking a bit. “I’m so proud of him and Alex, and I know You’ll be glorified tonight because of their obedience to You. In Jesus’ name I pray...amen.”

As I watched her walk away, my heart hurt—all I wanted was for her to be singing with us. To be singing with *me*. It just wasn’t going to be the same without her onstage.

The night opened strong with a choir member singing Shania Twain to a backing track. Then eight members of the school’s dance squad did a choreographed routine to that Jock Jams’ song “Tootsee Roll.” I was relieved we didn’t have to follow them. I couldn’t imagine playing our song about

Jesus while everyone's still thinking about derrieres.

The person we *did* follow was Randy Meadows, who was doing a magic act he'd been perfecting at every talent show since elementary school. It was a safe place for us to land—if he bombed, the bar was low for us; if he killed, the crowd was warmed up, but not by another singer who might've been better than us.

While we waited our turn, I looked out at Molly in the front row, Tori and Wes beside her. April was turned around in her seat talking with someone behind her.

Mary.

As if sensing me watching, they both looked directly at me. I froze. And then grinned like a dummy. It was my natural instinct when thrust into an awkward situation.

Mary pointed at me and leaned in to say something else to April.

April whipped around in her seat, and while I couldn't see her mouth, I saw arms gesticulating and fingers pointing, so I knew she was furious about something. Mary leaned back, cowering under the barrage.

When April ran out of steam, she spun around in her seat and crossed her arms. We locked eyes, and even from 20 feet away, I could see the fury in them. She abruptly stood up and walked out the exit door closest to her.

As Randy was clapped off by the audience, Mrs. Potter introduced us.

We stepped forward to the microphones, and suddenly the spotlight shifted our way, blinding us. I heard the audience politely clapping, but I couldn't see anyone.

I sensed a presence at my side. Was I finally feeling the Holy Spirit?

"We'll have to share the mic," April said.

I stared at her, my mouth agape for slightly too long.

"You should start playing now," she prompted.

Oh. Right.

I glanced at Alex, who just smiled back.

I took a breath and played the first chord. It rang out loud and crisp. I started singing, my voice initially a little wobbly. Alex picked a lead guitar melody underneath my strumming.

The plan was for April to join me and harmonize on the chorus. The part that said "Jesus." The word I'd planned on cutting. She was going to sing it, whether or not I did.

Considering what she was risking by joining us, there was no way I could let her down.

So we harmonized about how much we loved Jesus and how He'd changed our lives, how everything good was because of Him. April and I locked eyes as we sang the lines, and when she smiled, toothy and wide, I couldn't help but bust out my big, dumb grin too.

As we hit the chorus for the second time, she went for it. She closed her eyes and raised her hands, visibly surrendering to God in front of the entire school. I wished the lights hadn't been so bright, because they kept me from getting a good look at Mary and what was surely a big Baptist scowl.

Then the song was over and people were clapping. I heard Wes and Tori whooping and hollering and yelling our names. Seeing April and Alex waving at the crowd, I followed their lead as the spotlight leapt away, leaving us in the dark to find our way off stage.

We'd done it! People had clapped! Maybe it hadn't sucked! Maybe God had been glorified? Who knew? It was over, and that was all that I cared about right then.

That and April, who was crying tears of joy (I hoped) and fanning her face to dry them.

"We did it, baby!" Alex proclaimed, clapping his hands and flexing like he'd just scored a touchdown.

"Did it go ok?" I asked.

Alex laughed.

"It was amazing, my dude! You played great, and April..." He faced her. "April, you sounded so flippin' good. Your *voice*! You nailed it!"

"You too!" she yelped as he gave her a big bear hug before setting her

down and giving me a bear hug of my own, lifting me off the ground too. I couldn't help but laugh as he held me in the air for a moment before plopping me back down.

Almost immediately, April ran up and gave me a hug.

Time stood still.

It was a full-frontal embrace. Her arms wrapped around me, and she buried her head in my chest. I stood frozen for a moment until I remembered that I had my own part to play in the hug. I reached my arms up and around her and let my hands rest on her back.

"You were great," she said.

When she pulled away, her chest grazed my chest, and a bolt of electricity shot through me. I felt warm all over, tingly.

"Thanks for being so bold," she said.

"Yyyyyeah, of ccccccourse," I muttered. She quickly hugged me again and turned away to receive congratulations from her fellow choir members.

I pulled the collar of my shirt up to my nose. It smelled like vanilla. It smelled like April. I inhaled deeply.

It was all intoxicating. In that moment, I became addicted. To the rush of having played well in front of an audience, to the compliments we received from everyone backstage, to the sense that April and I had done it together (plus Alex). And, of course, to her attention. I needed more of it.

I'd seen my future, and I couldn't wait another moment for it to arrive.

Every night from that point on could be just like earlier—playing music onstage together like *Out of the Grey*, ministering together, her hugging me after...that's what love was supposed to feel like, right?

Laying in bed that night, I kept my shirt from earlier next to me so I could pick it up and smell it again.

The next afternoon, I watched from my bedroom as April left her house with Molly. I knew they'd be at *Fantastic Sams* for a couple of hours, so I had a small window to do what I needed.

I pulled on my best Tommy Hilfiger polo and tucked it into my cleanest pair of Dockers. Then I walked next door, took a deep breath, and knocked on April's door.

Judd flung the front door open, already impatient to close it again. I knew their mom was at work, so there was no one for him to pawn me off onto. He'd have to listen.

"She's not here," he said.

"I know. I want to talk to you."

He screwed up his face, and I couldn't figure out if it was just out of confusion or if there was also annoyance mixed in. Suddenly, he broke into a smile.

"Oh shit, bro—I've been waiting for this day."

"You have?"

"Totally. I knew one day you'd come looking for weed. I'll load up a bowl."

"Oh no, that's not why I'm here. Wait, why did you think I'd come looking for weed one day?"

"Eh, you always seemed high-strung, like a dude who'd eventually need a way to chill."

"I'm not high-strung," I protested. "I...never mind. That's not why I'm here. It's about April. Can I come in?"

"What about April?" he asked, ignoring my request. I was gonna have to speak to him on his front porch. I knew it was gonna be difficult, but every time I'd rehearsed my pitch—my plea?—I'd been sitting down. I didn't have a choice. I had to dive in.

"Since you're the man of the house, I'm here to ask your permission—and blessing—to court April."

Chapter Thirteen

LEVI

I'd never before experienced such a rollercoaster of emotions when it came to my faith.

If April asking me to the dance had reinvigorated it and encouraged me that God really did have a plan and cared for us and was guiding us step by step, everything that had happened since only left me confused again. The fight and grounding, getting in trouble at FCA, Alex cutting back on hanging with us—it had seemed like April's plan was either falling apart or, maybe worse, had never been from God in the first place. And if God wasn't helping April of all people, why would He help me?

Yet Judd had said "yes!"

Well, it was more like a "Sure, whatever."

He couldn't grasp why I was asking him for permission to date April. First I corrected him that I was looking to court her, not date her (I had to explain the difference), then I said that since their father wasn't around, Judd was responsible for protecting April—physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

I don't think he'd ever considered that, because he just answered "Whoa" at first.

"I dunno, man," he'd said, "it seems like she can take care of herself. And me. And my mom. She takes care of all of us. So, yeah...this thing you're asking is all kinds of weird. But sure, whatever, I guess. Just ask her out, dude—she can do what she wants. I'll be surprised if she says 'yes.' She's never had a boyfriend. I always assumed she was a little lesbo or whatever—but I guess this makes sense too? Not sure what's worse—being a lesbo or being in a cult. Probably the cult."

"We're not in a cult," I assured him. "And she's not a lesbo. In fact, none of us have been dating."

"Yeah, that doesn't really surprise me."

"We've all been waiting until we were old enough to court. We were being cautious so we didn't play with anyone's feelings."

"Huh," was all he said at first. Then, eventually, "Yeah, bitches do be

playing with your feelings, I guess. Good for y'all."

Back in my room, I closed the door behind me and sat on my bed. I wanted to do 20 things at once, but I couldn't focus my mind long enough to actually complete a single one. I absentmindedly picked up my guitar and strummed the secular version of the talent show song while I thought about everything that had just happened and was about to happen.

With Judd's blessing in hand, all that was left was actually asking April if she wanted to let me court her. It had to be perfect. And it had to be while we were alone. Since Molly and Alex would be with us (assuming Alex still went), we'd probably all hang out together most of the night at the dance.

Except during the slow dances. That would have to be the moment.

I felt good about her saying "yes." The way things had gone so far, it really seemed like God was leading me every step of the way, opening doors for me to walk through. Because of that, I didn't think He'd bring me that far only to slam one shut in my face.

Guitar still in hand, I fell back on the bed. The scent of vanilla drifted my way, and I picked up my shirt from the talent show to bury my face in it again.

I'd never felt closer to anyone. I'd never felt more connected to God. I'd never been so excited about my future, about the life I could see stretching out before me, all at April's side.

God, thank You for making this happen, for giving me the desires of my heart. Thank You for...just for being real. For caring about me. Thank You, thank You, thank You!

APRIL

He said "no."

Actually, he said "I don't really feel like going to the dance anymore." Which was only partially true, because while Alex wouldn't be *attending* the dance, he'd resurrected his plan to taxi all his drunk friends around from party to party afterwards. He'd even printed a hundred flyers to advertise his service. He'd designed them to look like the concert flyers some of Reese's skater buddies passed out when they were playing a show at Greek Tony's. Except at the bottom, underneath "Don't drive drunk! Get a free ride!", Alex had included his name and cell phone number. Between classes, he passed them out in the hallways, where they'd started to litter the floor.

"Would y'all wanna help me drive people around?" he asked one last time. I was slightly encouraged, because it meant he wasn't so repulsed that he didn't want to even be in a car with us anymore. After the talent show, he'd warmed up to us again, so we were hopeful things were back to normal and that he'd forgiven us. When Molly finally checked in to see if he was still

gonna go with her to the dance, though, he shocked and disappointed us by opting to sit it out.

The invite felt like a test. If we joined him, would we finally be back on good terms again? We did seriously consider meeting up with him after to help out, but it was too risky. In the wake of the concert, Mary had banned Levi from leading worship anymore, but when she'd tried to get me to quit as FCA VP, it made me realize she didn't actually have the power to fire me—she needed me to resign. Since many FCA members had secretly told me they liked that I sang with Alex and Levi and that God was glorified, I realized I might still have a chance at being elected President the next year. Which would also mean I could bring Levi back. So I refused to resign and told Mary to stuff it. Well, not really—I just said, “No, I don't think I will.” Which was basically the same thing, given how red she turned.

While I felt like I'd made the right decision in joining Levi and Alex—and I was kind of proud of myself for that—singing on stage with a troublemaker was one thing; riding shotgun as we drove drunk kids to places to get more drunk was something else altogether. And that's what I told Alex.

“Well, it's not that we're against what you're doing,” I said, “it's how it looks from the outside, you know?”

“Oh, right—the `appearances.’”

He wasn't trying to mock me, but he also couldn't hide the annoyance in his voice.

"Right," was all I eventually said.

"Well...have fun," he replied. Then he walked away, and that was the end of it.

I couldn't believe he was still mad at me. Not that I could blame him, but come on, dude, cut me a break. I was trying. What would it take for him to finally forgive me and let me back into his world? What did I need to do? And would I be able to do it without also compromising my commitment to God?

I had no clue.

The uncertainty nagged at me every day, and though I tried to push it out of my mind and be present for Sadie Hawkins prep, I found myself distracted as Levi and I looked over the racks of clothes at the mall for our matching outfits. It was also probably what directly contributed to me paying more than I'd planned. I'd let my mind wander while we were in Structure, and when he held up a red sweater vest with a large white stripe across the middle, I nodded, which he took to mean I approved rather than "yes, I acknowledge that you're holding something up." He was so excited about it that I didn't have the heart to tell him it was about \$20 more than I'd budgeted. Oh well—hopefully I could pull a couple of extra shifts at the

bookstore.

For a brief moment, it looked like our Sadie crew was going to be a trio, but for some reason, Levi was absolutely not ok with that, so Molly eventually asked Reese to be her date.

"As friends," she firmly told him.

"I wouldn't dream of any other way," he said.

We all knew he was still desperately in love with her. I think she was craving some of his attention again, so she indulged him, which I told her was a bad idea.

Later that night, I called up Tori to get her take on Alex's unwillingness to listen to reason about the dance night party chauffeur thing. I wondered if we'd ever be on the same page again.

"I know it's a bummer, but if he doesn't understand why this is important to you, then he isn't the one the Lord has set aside for you," she said.

"You're right, I know," I blubbered into the receiver of my phone. While I talked, I twisted its see-through, long, curly cord so tightly around my arm that it cut off the circulation, and for a few panicked moments, I thought I was gonna have to get my arm amputated.

"Honey, guys are cute, but the Lord's the Lord. When they all leave you crying, He'll still be there for you. Just like manna in the wilderness,

God'll provide the right guy. You just have to wait. He'll reward your faithfulness."

The truth in her statement didn't make things hurt any less in the moment. I thought maybe spending an hour or two in prayer and listening to the YWAM "Dreams of God" worship CD would, but if I'm being totally honest, it only helped a little bit. I don't know if I'd felt a hurt so deep since...well, since the last time my dad had forgotten to call on my birthday.

Was that feeling the pain our youth leaders were trying to protect us from?

LEVI

The night of the dance, we all met up at April's house. When I knocked and she answered the door, it was so weird to see a mirror of myself. Same sweater vest, white t-shirt underneath, khaki pants, and white tennis shoes. Like we were in the least intimidating gang anyone had ever had the misfortune of crossing.

"You...you look great," I nervously muttered.

"We look exactly alike," she said.

"So you're saying I look great too, huh? Well, thanks."

I somehow focused my chaotic brain enough to force a smirk, which

she laughed at.

Molly and Reese were already there, each wearing wide Levi's Silvertab jeans and a black Shorty's skater t-shirt.

April tried to rush us out the door to her car, but her mom intercepted us and made Judd get his camera so she could take pictures.

Olive Garden bubbled over with kids from our school eating fancy before the big dance. With so many couples twinning in their Sadie outfits, I wondered how many of the older clientele had to shake their heads and make sure they weren't seeing double and potentially having a stroke.

I could barely eat my half of the Tour of Italy I split with April. My stomach was increasingly twisted with anxiety as the night crept closer to the big moment of my dance floor confession.

"You ok?" April asked at one point.

"Yeah, yep, yes," I replied like a person who was totally normal and ok.

"All right..." she said, unsure. "You wanna take your chicken parm to go?"

I did indeed. There was no guarantee that anything else that went down my food pipe was going to stay down, so playing it safe was the best option.

The dance was in full swing when we arrived. Rap echoed from the

cafeteria, bouncing off lockers and down hallways to reach us at the main entrance. Dance sponsors had hung streamers from the ceiling, but that was the extent of the decorations on the way in. Unlike other dances, Sadie didn't have a theme like "Under the Sea" or "Las Vegas" or anything like that. It was a pretty standard, low-key event—just an excuse for girls to ask out guys, dress alike, and get down on the dance floor.

None of us were in a hurry to get into the darkened cafeteria and join the dancing—least of all me—so we waited in line to get our pictures taken. While photographers at homecoming and prom made everyone strike formal poses, the looseness of Sadie meant they were in a playful mood and encouraged us to be goofy. We took photos as a group at first. We made funny faces, and then we did one where the girls jumped on the boys' backs.

As we wrapped up and turned to head towards the cafeteria, I pulled up short.

"Hold on a sec," I told them. "April, let's do one that's just me and you."

"Sure," she said. The couple behind us groaned, as they'd already waited much longer than they thought they should've. I didn't care though. If things went as well as I expected, I wanted photographic evidence to remember the night we finally made it official.

The photographer posed us in the typical couple's pose of the night: us

sideways to the camera, April backed up against my front, my hands on her hips and her hands on top of mine.

“One, two, three...” CLICK. “Looks great,” the photographer said. “Real cute.”

April laughed and thanked him.

We looked cute together. A stranger had said so.

“Did y’all want one?” the photographer asked Reese and Molly. Before Reese could answer, Molly replied, “Nope.”

There was no putting it off any longer. It was time to cross the threshold and enter the darkness of the cafeteria. A song I recognized from the *Jock Jamz* CD boomed from the stage. I couldn’t tell if the vibrations in my chest were coming from the speaker’s bass or from my own heart thumping violently. Could other people hear it? I wasn’t sure.

Beyond the mass of gyrating couples, Mr. Anderson, a bald, plump history teacher in his late 50s, was on stage studying a massive CaseLogic CD carrier. He somehow had a side hustle as a DJ in the community, so he was the natural choice to spin tunes at every school dance. Surprisingly, he had better taste than many of the students and was revered for his contribution. He was also rumored to have flasks of hard liquor stashed throughout the school that he would sip on throughout the day.

We worked our way around the edge of the dance floor, lurking next to

the parents, teachers, and assistant principals who were chaperoning the dance. Some of them bopped along as Mr. Anderson played some rap songs I didn't recognize. Others stood with their arms crossed and stern looks on their faces, murmuring in disapproval to the parents next to them. They'd occasionally wade into the sea of bodies to tell couples who were practically having sex on the dance floor to tone it down or get thrown out.

I already knew many of the students had fake IDs and would sneak into clubs on the weekends, so it shouldn't have been a surprise to see them bumping-and-grinding out there. Even still, some of the moves were so explicit that I couldn't believe they weren't embarrassed to pull them out (no pun intended) in front of everyone.

We knew we should go dance—after all, that was why we were there, right?—but, well...none of us really knew how. The girls could sway from side to side in rhythm, but Reese and I may as well have been statues. We grabbed some punch and posted up near the entry so we could say hi to people as they entered and before they disappeared into the swarm.

Everyone was there: Jen and Tim, Kandace, Julio and his girlfriend of the week, the Billabong Boys, and even Mary with her boyfriend, who apparently was a Freshman at Houston Baptist University. Seemingly out of nowhere, Trish and Russell walked by, the latter just back from suspension. I tensed up, expecting him to want to pick up where we'd left off, but they

went straight to dancing.

Shirley and Beverly strolled in holding hands and dressed from head to toe in black, of course. I was honestly surprised they were there at all—they didn't strike me as school dance enthusiasts.

We'd finally settled into our roles as onlookers when a single word flipped everything on its head. And that word was "MMMBop". The moment the first notes rung out, April and Molly looked at each other and screamed.

"Let's dance!" Molly said, grabbing April's hands and yanking her out onto the dance floor. April allowed herself to be dragged out there. She was basically doubled over in laughter, giggling so hard she probably couldn't have resisted even if she wanted to, which it appeared she didn't.

After the first verse ended, we set out and found the girls. They weren't so much dancing as they were bouncing around, hands on each other's forearms, and singing at the top of their lungs in the general zip code of the notes. Molly traded April's forearms for Reese's, who reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled into the scene, but he offered nothing more than swaying back and forth. April did the same with me. The warmth of her palms on my forearms invigorated me, and I mimicked her bouncing. Her hands slid down to grab mine, and she held one of them over her head so she could twirl under it.

The song finished, but before we could discuss if we wanted to take a

break, the intro of the next song played, and a few quick upstrokes on an electric guitar sent a surge through me. It took Reese a moment to recognize the song, but when the horns blasted out of the speakers, he let out a yelp of his own.

“Hell yeah!” he shouted.

Molly clapped her hands in excitement, leaving April as the only one who hadn’t caught up yet. I don’t know if she ever pinned it down, but it didn’t matter. As the ska rhythms of The Mighty Mighty Bosstones’ “The Impression That I Get” played, Molly, Reese, and I began to skank. I swung my right arm forward while kicking my left leg the same direction; meanwhile, my left arm and right leg went backward. Then they all switched places. Over and over again, spastic but freeing. April eventually joined once she understood what was happening.

We didn’t know how to bump-and-grind, but thanks to The O.C. Supertones, a Christian ska band, we definitely knew how to skank. It was one of the few dances we could do at youth group.

Unfortunately, nobody else seemed to know how to skank, so the crowd began to thin out. Those that were left gawked at us, probably trying to figure out what on earth we were doing. A circle of people formed around us, sort of like when someone starts breakdancing. I didn’t know if I wanted the attention or not, but for those few minutes, we definitely had it. Some

people tried to join in, but most just stared and laughed and whispered to each other.

I was tempted to slow down and perhaps melt into the crowd, but April was going so hard in front of me, her eyes closed, her arms swinging higher and higher, and sporadic laughs popping up, that I couldn't leave her alone. So I just focused on her and skanked as hard as I could.

When the song finally ended, some people cheered for us. April high-fived everyone in our party, and we joked about how sweaty we'd gotten. Molly held up her arm and asked Reese to smell her armpit, which he did maybe a little too enthusiastically.

We definitely needed a break after all that. The next song began, though, and I froze. The acoustic guitar. The fingerpicking.

It was Jewel.

The moment had come. That song playing was the most divine intervention I'd ever experienced. It was perfect. I had to tell her right then. She'd already started to follow Reese and Molly off the dance floor though.

"April!" I called out. She didn't hear me. I scuttled forward and put my hand on her shoulder, slowing her down. April glanced back at me and stopped.

"I, uh... Let's dance. Do you want to? To dance? Another dance?"

I couldn't have slowed the fierce stream of words flowing out of my

mouth if I'd known where the faucet's handle was, which I didn't.

"Oh, we were gonna get a drink," she replied, nodding toward Reese and Molly, who'd already reached the refreshments table. "I need one after all that skanking."

"Sure," I said, then quickly added, "but I, uh...this song. It's one of my favorites. I really wanted to dance to it tonight. Could we get a drink after?"

"Aw," she cooed. "Yeah, of course. Let's do it."

I don't know what made me do it, but I instinctively put my hand out for her to take. It was something I'd never done in my life, but it felt right. Fortunately, she took it and let me lead her back into the thick of the dance floor.

April and I stopped and turned to each other, and in that moment, it hit me that I didn't actually know how to slow dance. Nobody had ever taught me. All I had to go off of was movies and TV shows. I thought about the beginning of *Con Air*, when Nicholas Cage was slow dancing with his wife to "How Could I Live Without You?", right before he killed that dude.

My only hope was that someone had taught April. Her mom loved to go dancing, so it was definitely possible. I stepped closer to April and put my arms in the general position I'd seen people do on screen—left arm up and stuck sort of out to my side, right arm stuck sort of forward. She stepped into my arms and put hers in the appropriate places, her left arm wrapped

around my side and hand placed on my back, her right hand clasping my left one. And we began to sway side to side. It seemed that's all dancing was, and suddenly I had a feeling I'd be good at it. Until I stepped on her foot.

"Oops, sorry," I said quickly.

"Yeah, you gotta shuffle your feet like this," she said, showing me how.

And then we were dancing. Like everyone around us. Like a real couple.

Even with as nervous as I was, I could've slow danced with her forever, just swaying back and forth, our bodies held closely to each other, nowhere really to look except in each other's faces.

The song was half over, and I knew I had to get into the speech I'd rehearsed before another tune started. Who knew what direction Mr. Anderson would take us next. I definitely wouldn't be able to tell her how I felt while "Tubthumping" was playing.

"I'm glad we got to come to this together," I started.

"So am I," she said. We were rarely so close, her face inches from mine, her breath sweet from the punch she'd been drinking.

"I always have a good time with you," I continued.

"I know, right? Same. I'm so glad you're my best friend."

"Me too. And you know they say the best relationships start off as

friends, so... I mean, like, romantic relationships. Marriages and stuff. Um... yeah. What I'm trying to say is that you mean a lot to me. You always have. I admire you so much, in so many ways. Your Godliness, your servant heart, your passion for the lost...you have everything I'd look for in a wife. Even though we're friends, you're the type of girl I could see myself marrying someday. And, well...I wanted to ask if you'd let me court you. Not in the future, but, like, starting now."

April stared at me for a moment, seemingly dazed and a bit confused. She didn't pull away, but her hands felt lighter pressed against my back and resting in my grasp.

"Oh," she said. "Ok."

But it wasn't "Ok" as in "Ok, yes, let's do this." It was "Ok" as in "You just said something out loud, and I'm acknowledging that fact."

Did she have doubts? Was she scared? Unsure? Maybe I hadn't been clear enough about my intentions or about my plan, so I dove into that.

"I know we're still young, but we're not *too* young. I mean, we're Sophomores. Next year, we'll be Juniors. If we started courting now, we could do that for a year, maybe all the way until the end of next summer. And then we'd be Seniors! And we could get engaged and be engaged for a year. Then, obviously, when we graduated, we could finally get married."

Her jaw had fallen open slightly, her eyes grown large.

“Wow,” she said, “you’ve really thought this through.”

“I have,” I replied. We stopped dancing, and I took both of her hands in mine, holding them out between us. “It’s all I’ve been thinking about for months. I wasn’t sure if I should ask, but it’s been driving me crazy, and... well, after the talent show, when you showed up for us like that, it made me...like you. Intensely. More intensely than I ever have before. I couldn’t wait any longer. So I went to your house and asked Judd for permission to court you, and—”

“What?” she asked, interrupting me, her voice flat and tense. “You asked Judd for permission to court me?”

“Well, I didn’t know how to contact your dad, so—”

“Judd?” she interrupted again. “That absolute idiot? Lord Jesus, I’m sorry to say something so mean, but it’s the truth.”

“Yeah, but with your dad out of the picture, Judd’s the man of your house.”

April dropped my hands and crossed her arms.

“That might be, but Judd will never have any say in who I court or marry or literally anything else in my life. He’s a giant child, not the head of our household. I can’t believe you talked about this with him before you talked with me.”

The song ended, and the next one began.

Oh no.

It was "Macarena."

Everyone around us lined up and began doing the dance, the two of us continuing our conversation in the midst of them.

"Ok, I'm sorry," I said. "I messed up. I shouldn't have asked Judd. I should've talked to you first. But all that aside...what do you think? Can I court you?"

She took a minute before saying anything, but I knew the answer in the split second after I'd asked the question. The hesitance, the look in her eyes... She was just trying to find a way to let me down easily.

"Levi, you really are my best friend, but...I don't like you in that way. I mean, I like you, obviously, but...I don't have feelings for you. Romantic feelings."

I knew it was over, but the words kept coming. As if talking my way through it all would cause things to make more sense.

"I just...you changed your mind and sang with us at the talent show..."

"Yeah, because y'all are my friends, and you mean a lot to me."

"I wrote that song about you."

"The worship song?"

"Yeah, it's not a worship song. It's about you. But I just changed it to be about Jesus."

"Well...thanks, but...I don't think you should've done that."

"Listen, April, I've been praying a lot, and I really feel like the Lord is blessing this, that He's brought us together, that this is part of His plan."

She sighed.

"Well...I don't."

"You don't what?"

"I don't think you're right. I think you misheard God."

"Why?"

"Because...I like someone else."

My turn to be dazed. The words landed like a blow to my chin, a fierce uppercut I never saw coming, had never considered.

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm sorry, but I don't want to be courted by you."

The verbal diarrhea finally stopped. I had nothing more to say. I was empty.

"Listen, can we just talk about this tomorrow?" she asked, looking around at everyone still dancing. Some were going through the motions while their eyes and ears were glued to us.

"We're all having so much fun tonight," she said, "and I...Levi? Levi!"

I don't know how many more times she called my name. I turned away from her and started walking toward the edge of the dance floor. I

didn't know where I was going, I just needed to be somewhere else.

Chapter Fourteen

APRIL

I wanted to hit “reset” and start the night over. Everything had been going so well until Levi confessed his feelings for me. Even slow dancing with him was nice. One conversation later, and everything had been dumped upside down. Levi and I needed to have a serious talk, but there was no way to pull that off with a hundred kids yelling “Heyyyy, Macarena!” around us.

He’d parted the sea of dancers and escaped so quickly that I got trapped in the wake of bodies and lost sight of him. All I could see were teens twirling their arms, thrusting their hips while yelling “Uhhh,” and hopping into their next position. I pushed my way to the edge and broke out of the crowd, but Levi had disappeared.

Spotting Reese and Molly talking with one of the Billabong Boys, I beelined for them and spoke immediately, interrupting them. Nothing was as important as finding Levi and making sure he was ok.

"Have you seen Levi?" I asked. "We had a...discussion...and he ran off. I need to find him. Like, right away."

"Is everything ok?" Molly asked. Which, of course she would—I couldn't control the tears that had started to wind down my cheeks. I started to answer, but Reese and the Billabong Boy staring at me shut me up.

"Come here," I said, pulling Molly into the restroom. It was almost as crowded as the dance floor and nearly as loud though. Cigarette smoke filled the air, and girls crowded around the mirrors, gossiping about their dates and what parties they were headed to later.

I dragged Molly into the handicap stall at the end.

"April, what's wrong?"

It all hit me at once, and the tears trickling down my face erupted into a steady stream. My hands went to my face. Molly pulled me into her chest, her arms wrapped around me. I flashed back to when I was 10 and my grandma had died, and Molly had held me like that on my bed for what felt like hours, even though it was probably only 10 minutes.

"Something bad just happened," I croaked.

"What? What was it?"

"Levi..."

"What about him? Is he ok?"

"He...he told me he liked me."

"Wait, really?" Molly didn't seem as shocked as I expected her to be.

"Oh my God, I can't believe he actually did it."

My eyes shot up to meet hers. They told me she was briefly considering trying to play it off, but instead she told the truth and filled me in on how she didn't know for sure, but she'd suspected he liked me. When I told her he asked Judd for permission to court me, her hand shot to her mouth in horror.

"Holy schnikes, April. I had no idea he'd do that."

I told her I'd gotten mad at him for that and then said I just wanted to be friends and that I didn't want him to court me.

"He just walked away, but he seemed really hurt. I could see it in his eyes. I also told him I liked someone else. He asked who it was, and I told him it didn't matter. Because it doesn't. Not as far as he and I are concerned. We need to make sure Levi is ok. After he walked away, I lost sight of him in the crowd."

"We'll find him," she assured me, holding my hands. "Let's grab Reese and go look for him."

We emerged from the stall and rushed past the new round of girls at

the mirrors. Outside, we found Reese, and Molly pulled him away from the Billabong Boy and filled him in on everything.

“Oh shit, that’s brutal,” he said. “Poor dude.”

“Poor dude?” I asked.

“Yeah, you basically kicked him in the nuts. You know, emotionally.”

“Wait a second, I—”

Molly interrupted my protest and spoke on my behalf.

“Um, excuse me, April did nothing wrong here. A boy liked her, and she didn’t reciprocate it, which is her right. She shouldn’t feel guilty for that.”

It was obvious Reese had touched a nerve with Molly, and their bickering had more to do with how things ended between them than anything related to Levi and me.

“Well, getting rejected by a girl sucks ass. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.”

“Guys, can we discuss this later?” I asked. “Let’s go find Levi.”

We split up and each took a different hallway, planning to meet back up in 15 minutes. I searched every open door in the Math wing and asked everyone who passed if they’d seen him. Fortunately, it was Sadie, so even if they didn’t know who he was by name, I’d just ask if they saw someone dressed exactly like me.

No luck.

When we met back up, it was the same story with Molly and Reese.

Levi had vanished.

"Maybe he went home," Molly said. "We should call and check."

"But if he didn't, his parents are gonna freak out that we can't find him," I said. "They'll call the police or something."

Reese had the idea to get the Billabong Boy to call and ask. That way, he could pretend he didn't know Levi was supposed to be at the dance with the three of us. Reese pulled out the cell phone his mom had given him for emergencies. Fortunately it was after 9pm already, so his parents wouldn't get charged for the extra cell phone minutes.

Once again, no luck. Levi wasn't at home.

We were about to start our search over again when one of Reese's friends approached.

"Hey, I heard y'all were looking for Levi. I saw him heading out to the parking lot earlier with Julio and his girlfriend and that crew."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, definitely. I don't know, man. Maybe they just dropped him off at home or something."

"We just called, and he wasn't there," Reese said.

"If he didn't go home, does that mean...?" I started to ask.

"He went to a party with them," Reese said, finishing the thought.

"Oh my God," Molly said. "He's been wanting to go to a party for forever. I can't believe he actually did it. What a big night of firsts for ol' Levi. What party was Julio going to?"

"I don't know," Reese answered.

"Well, where are all the big parties tonight?" I asked.

"I don't know!" he said again, this time more defensively. "Y'all think I go to all these parties, but I don't."

"Cause your mom doesn't let you," Molly tossed out.

"Shut up!"

"Guys, stay focused!" I said, clapping my hands at them.

"Who would know where all the parties are?" Molly asked.

And it hit me.

"Reese, give me your phone."

He reluctantly did, and I pulled a folded-up piece of paper out of my purse. I dialed the number at the bottom, and a few rings later, a voice answered.

"Yo, yo, yo! This is Alex."

"Hey, it's me. April. We need your help."

LEVI

Though the interior of Julio's ancient Oldsmobile felt vast—the bench seats stretching out like the wings of an albatross—we were so crammed in that I had a girl seated on each of my thighs.

They were late additions to our impromptu crew, climbing along the ladder of legs and settling half on mine and half on the legs on each side of me, four butt cheeks across four thighs on three bodies. Once settled, the girl on my left thigh finally looked down at me and realized I was out of place.

"Who the fuck is this?" she asked the rest of the car.

"That's my boy Levi," Julio said from the driver's seat. "He's gettin' fucked up with us tonight."

"Oh, word?" she asked. "You kinda cute, Levi."

"Nice to meet you t—"

Before I could finish, the car lurched forward, throwing her into my face, boobs-first. They smushed against my nose, and I suddenly felt lightheaded.

The massive car wound its way through neighborhood streets, and it felt like we were a yacht floating on the sea, the vehicle tilting with every turn, tossing us from side to side. The girls pressed their hands against the ceiling for stability. They screamed and giggled with each turn, the rap

blaring from Julio's stereo nearly drowning them out. Vibrations shot through the car as the bass rumbled.

If I didn't have two girls sitting in my lap, it would've been hell. I still worried I was gonna barf all over them before we made it to the party.

I also worried it was only a matter of time before we'd get pulled over by the police, which would be so very bad given the amount of alcohol in the car and the joint of marijuana being passed around.

When it first came my way, I'd panicked. I'd never been offered drugs before, though I'd been told nearly every day since I was 12 that I certainly would be if I went to public school. I'd made it almost two years without that happening, but the moment had finally arrived. What would they do if I said no? Kick me out? Leave me on the side of the road and make me walk home? To add insult to injury, every person in the backseat would have to climb out in order to eject me, so by the time I'd finally crawled out onto the street, they'd all be standing there, arms crossed, glaring at me. "Why didn't you just smoke the joint, loser?" they'd ask.

Or I could, you know, just smoke the joint.

Why not? Who was gonna care? Not the people in the car. They most definitely wanted me to partake. Would God care? I was almost certain God wasn't in that car. Maybe wasn't anywhere near me. In fact, I was pretty sure He'd abandoned me entirely. Which would make sense—in the wake of

April's rejection, I *had* cursed Him, after all.

Not verbally, of course—just in my mind. But if I believed God heard my silent prayers, I had to believe He also heard my silent curses. Anything I thought, anything I even *felt* without forming the words in my mind, He knew.

I'd immediately taken it back and apologized to Him in case, you know, the disco ball above April and me dropped on my head and ended my life in that split second after I'd cursed Him, but... I hadn't actually been able to shake the feeling. The resentment. The fury.

Before I'd even made it off the dance floor, I'd limped through a gamut of emotions.

Disbelief: How could things have gone so poorly? April was my best friend—I felt safe with her, certain that we were always on the same page. Then suddenly we weren't. What had gone wrong?

Embarrassment: What did she think of me now? What would Molly and Reese think of me? I'd put myself out there and fallen flat on my face. They all knew I liked April and that she didn't like me back. Who would they tell?

Shame: Why *didn't* April like me back? What was wrong with me? Had I been too hasty? Was I too immature for a relationship, too unprepared? Would she have said "yes" if I'd waited another six months or a year? Was there unconfessed sin in my life, and God had convinced her to say "no" for

reasons she might not even understand?

Anger: What was God's involvement in all of it? If He did keep her from me, was that fair? Things were looking up for me—prayers seemed to have been answered, and my faith was growing—but then April and God pulled the rug out from under me, and suddenly it was all gone. I felt abandoned. Or, worse, like a giant prank had been played on me and God was laughing. All of heaven was laughing. My great-grandparents were laughing at their loser great-grandchild.

I'd tried so hard to honor God in all areas of my life. I wasn't perfect, but after all the effort I'd put in, was that still not adequate to please Him? If so, would I ever be holy enough to be worthy of good things?

It was so difficult to be good, to toe all the lines, and it was so easy to be bad. If I ended up in the same place regardless which path I chose, then...I may as well choose the one that looks more fun. If there was no reward, no real point to being "Godly," I may as well stop trying.

I wanted to be bad for a night. But the thought of veering off the straight and narrow path paralyzed me with guilt. And fear. All those sermons echoed in my head, the ones where pastors asked, "If you died in a car crash tonight, where would you spend eternity?" They always emphasized how a life could end in the blink of an eye, so you had to be on guard to resist temptation at all times.

But I was tired. Of always being on guard, always keeping up appearances, always pretending to experience things that weren't actually happening to me.

When I'd left April earlier, a voice had called to me. Like, a real human voice, not the Holy Spirit or anything. Julio's voice. It definitely hadn't led me to the space I needed—the exact opposite, in fact—but it had led me to a freedom of a different sort.

I was going to an effing party.

Nay.

A fucking party.

Though I hadn't said it out loud, I still looked around the car as if I had. Because it wasn't about how the other passengers reacted anyway—it was about whether or not there'd be some sort of cosmic retribution for saying the word, for thinking the word. Would the car flip and go tumbling along the street like in *The Rock*? I waited, tense, but moments passed with nothing happening. I'd gotten away with it. What else could I get away with? It was time to find out.

I was about to enter my first real party.

APRIL

When Alex's Jeep Cherokee pulled into the school parking lot, we weren't the only ones waiting for him. Viet Nguyen and his girlfriend, Stacy Berg, had summoned him for a ride to a marching band party.

As they climbed in, we caught Alex up on everything.

"Wait, he finally told you he liked you?"

"How did everyone but me know this?" I asked.

"He told me at DNow," Alex said. "He wanted me to help him."

"Help him do what?"

"Like...win you over. Did you really reject him?"

I started to answer, but I couldn't find the right words to explain...well, anything. All I could do was nod.

"I just didn't feel the same way he did," I finally said.

As if Alex needed another reason to be mad at me. Not only had I used him, I'd embarrassed his buddy, someone he'd finally gotten back on good terms with.

But Alex didn't tear me a new one. Instead he sighed and nodded.

"I understand," he said. "Poor dude."

There were three main parties Levi could be at: Kandace's was where all the athletes and regular party kids will be; Brad Gilbert's would have a lot of those people too, but also harder drugs; and the marching band party, which Julio probably wouldn't take him to, but since Alex was already

dropping Viet and Stacy there, we decided to check out anyway.

Molly snagged my keys, which were dangling in my hand at my side.

"Reese and I will take your car to Brad's, and you go with Alex to the band party."

"Wait, what?" I asked.

She gave me a firm look that said, "I'm doing this for you." But I had to think for a moment to understand *what* she was doing and *why*.

"If you come with me, we might be alone at some point," Alex said.

"Just, like, FYI. If I drop them off and don't get another call to pick anyone up, we'll be riding by ourselves. So maybe Reese should come with me and you should go with Molly."

There it was. Molly was giving me a chance to be alone with Alex. If I wanted it.

"No, it's a good idea," I said. "They can take my car. I want to go with you."

"You sure?" he asked.

"I am."

We held each other's gaze for a moment, and it felt like he was seeing the real me for the first time, the part of myself that was so scared that he'd discover how much I thought about him, how much I wanted nothing more than to be alone with him in his car. Or anywhere, really.

It was too much, and I quickly added, "That way, we can split up when we get to the party. We'll cover more ground and find Levi faster."

"Good thinking," he said.

Reese started to protest, but Molly was already pulling him toward my car. She fiercely whispered something to him that shut him up. Before they disappeared, she looked back at me one more time and smiled.

Whatever was going to come next, she'd gifted me. It was good to have my friend back.

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In the Jeep, Alex tried Julio's cell phone again. No answer.

The sound of light smacking began to mix in with the Sixpence CD Alex had piping through the speakers. I glanced at Alex, confused. He quickly checked his rearview mirror, and while he didn't say anything, the hint of a grin spread across his mouth. I started to look over my shoulder at the back seat, but I only made half of the turn before realizing Viet and Stacy were sneaking kisses in the backseat.

I froze, immediately self-conscious about what to say next, where to look, what to think. I felt Alex's gaze hit me, and apparently he read my body language, because he broke the tension.

He asked them if they had fun at the dance, and to my surprise, they

weren't mad at him for breaking up their makeout session. Instead, they were surprised to find out that Alex Richards not only knew who they were but remembered all the way back to when they were in third grade together. After laughing about their third grade teacher's dachshund sweaters, Viet sat forward a bit.

"So, like...you don't get fucked up anymore?"

"Not really. I started going to church with April, and I just kind of lost the desire to do that, you know? I stopped liking the way I felt after it. And getting wasted made me do *really* dumb stuff. But I do miss hanging out with everyone at parties."

"I guess that makes sense. It's not the same without you, man. Not that we ever, like, partied together. But I'd see you at some of them. You were always so fun."

"Well, if I can find a way to be fun without getting wasted, maybe I'll come hang again at some point."

"Right on."

"Stacy, how's your mom doing after that car wreck?" he asked.

Alex continued to chat them up for the rest of the 15 minutes it took to get to the party. By the time we arrived, he'd promised to go to their next marching band competition.

When we reached the party, Alex dropped them off at the foot of the

driveway like a chauffeur, and then he and I drove off to find parking so we could follow them inside.

“I think I now get why you’re driving people around, even though you’re basically taking them to get drunk.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You’re building relationships.”

“I guess.”

“Is that so when you invite them to church, it won’t be out of the blue? That they’ll feel like you care more than just wanting them to come to church?”

He bristled at the idea.

“No, not really. I mean, I hope they come to church one day, but I just want them to get to places safely tonight. People do a lot of dumb stuff when they’re drunk. Not everyone has ulterior motives, April.”

I won’t lie—it stung. I think he quickly realized it too.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“No, you’re right. I definitely did have them with you. It’s, like...a way I’ve been trained to think. That it’s all about this end result—getting people to heaven. I know it’s the most important thing, so I want other people to realize that too. But sometimes I get ahead of myself, and think I forget that people won’t care what I say until they know that I care about them.

Genuinely. I forget to just be a friend. I've said it before, but I'm sorry about using you. I really am."

He considered me for a moment before nodding his head.

"I believe you."

"And I just want to say...you amaze me. You turned your whole life around, and, I'll be honest, I thought you would backslide super quickly. But you didn't. You dove into The Word and into church, and I've seen you become this incredible guy. Not that you weren't incredible before. I just mean that now you're so...Christlike. The most Christlike guy I know. Even if sometimes I'm not sure about some of the radical stuff you do...I know it comes from the right place. I know that you're really asking yourself 'What would Jesus do?' And that's..."

Attractive. That's what it was. I wanted to tell him that so badly, but instead I said...

"...admirable. Truly. I admire you so much. So very much. And I'm proud of you."

"That means a lot to me," he said. "I really...admire you too. You're, like, my North Star when it comes to following Jesus. I know you're not perfect, but who is?"

"Well, Jesus."

"Oh, right. Jesus. What I'm saying, though, is that I know Pastor Chris

told us we should only be concerned with pleasing Jesus, but...I want to please you too. So yeah, hearing you say that makes me feel good.”

We held each other’s gaze for a few moments. I smiled. He smiled. Eventually, we were grinning like idiots. I laughed at how awkward it was, but in the best way. It felt like there was more to be said, but it seemed like neither of us had the courage yet to say it. Instead, Alex said something else, though he never broke away from meeting my gaze.

“Hey, listen, if you want to hang out in the car, I can do a quick lap of the party and see if Levi is here. There’s no need to mess up your witness or anything.”

I pondered it a moment before unbuckling my seatbelt.

“Thanks for offering, but it’s fine—I’ll come in. What would Jesus do, right? He got criticized a lot for being at parties with the wrong kind of people, but He was just trying to help them. If He were here right now, I think He’d go into the party and look for His friend, and He wouldn’t care what anyone thought.”

Alex smiled.

“Ok, then. Let’s go find our friend.”

LEVI

Following Julio and his crew through the doorway and into the party house was as close as I'd ever come to stepping through the magical wardrobe and into Narnia. Inside, it looked like a normal house, but it may as well have been inhabited by chatty little beavers and a faun wearing a scarf, given how otherworldly it all felt.

Even through the low light and the thick haze of smoke, I could see that the house was packed with teens. In the living room, bodies filled the couches, girls lounging back against their guys as things to smoke were passed back and forth.

The TV was tuned to HBO, a channel we didn't have because 1. it was reportedly filthy, and 2. (more importantly) it cost extra. I stopped to watch it just long enough to completely lose sight of Julio or anyone else I'd arrived with. Every direction I looked, there were people, but none that I knew. I recognized a lot of them, but mostly as faces who passed me in the school hallways. Faces who ignored me.

Standing on the doorstep minutes earlier, I'd wondered how awkward it would be for me inside, if the moment I crossed the threshold, it'd be sort of like when a sheriff pushes through the swinging doors into the saloon, the beacon of righteousness in a den of iniquity.

But none of that happened. No one cared or even noticed that I was there. Much like at school, I was invisible, just another unmemorable face in

a crowd.

I didn't know where to go or what to do. Was there any sort of order to things? Were there events planned throughout the night? Or was I was seeing all of it—just people sitting around for hours smoking and drinking and kissing?

For the briefest moment, I considered leaving, but no—I was there to enjoy it, to cut loose, to indulge. I was there to party.

So what was great about parties? Why did everyone go to them?

The drinking. That's what everyone talked about. So if I was gonna party, I needed to drink alcohol, which I assumed was in the kitchen, the traditional home of consumable liquids.

There I found liquor bottles, and beside them were red cups. Everyone as far as the eye could see was sipping from them, so they seemed to be a solid starting point for the whole drinking thing. I picked one up and looked at the bottles again.

I supposed I needed to just fill one of the cups up with something from the bottles. Pretty simple, right? The only question seemed to be whether I wanted brown liquid or clear liquid.

Right as I reached for the bottle with the brown liquid, I looked out the kitchen window and saw a guy pouring something from a spout attached to a long, skinny black tube. He dumped out some foam and continued pouring

from the tube.

Beer.

The tube was attached to a large metal barrel that was perched in a tub of ice. A keg? I'd heard people talk about them, but I'd never actually seen one in real life. I decided to go the beer route.

The backyard was packed with people. Some guys wrestled on a trampoline while a small crowd cheered them on. Elsewhere, marijuana was being passed around a group who'd set up camp in rickety fold-out lawn chairs. Voices, smoke, and rap from a boombox filled the air—it was a wonder no one had called the police on the party yet.

When it was my turn in the keg line, I grabbed a red cup, picked up the black hose, and pushed down the lever to open up the spout at the end.

A trickle of foam came out, but it definitely wasn't beer and it definitely wasn't enough to fill my cup.

I tried again. Same result. I inspected the barrel to see if something had gotten turned off. When I stood back up, I realized the line had really filled in behind me.

With hot girls. Well, three, to be exact. The people in line behind them may or may not have been hot, but they also may or may not have been aliens or animated or woodland creatures or literally anything else, because I couldn't see past the hot girls.

They'd been chatting with each other, but suddenly their focus had turned entirely to me because I was holding up the line.

I tried the hose again, hoping it had just needed a minute to...I don't know, do *something*. Same result though. As I considered walking off and pretending I'd poured a full cup of beer, one of the girls spoke.

"You have to pump the keg to get the beer to come out."

I turned around to find I was face to face with Shannon. A look of familiarity flickered across her face, but I could tell she wasn't quite sure why she knew me.

"Like this..."

Shannon grabbed a black knob the size of a golf ball that stuck out the top of the keg like an antenna. She pulled it up and pushed it back down over and over a few times.

A trio of guys nearby cheered as she finished.

"Me next!" a guy named Craig said. Without even looking his way, she gave him the finger.

"Try it now," she said, handing me the tube.

I pressed the lever on the spout at the end of the tube, and beer rushed into my cup at full flow. It quickly began to fill, the foam rising toward the top.

"Hold it like this," she said, tipping the cup sideways. "That way, it

won't be all foam."

The beer and foam combo reached the top of the cup, so I stopped pouring it.

"Hey, thanks," I said.

"Yeah, no prob."

I stood there awkwardly for a moment, trying to think of something else to say, knowing full-well that I should just walk away and leave it at that. But for some reason, I couldn't. Three hot girls were all looking at me at once—it was the moment parties were made for, right?

"Y'all want me to fill you up?" I asked.

"Hell yeah, fill them up, bro!" Craig yelled over.

I felt my face flush, and I quickly clarified my question.

"Your cups—you want me to fill them with beer? It's the least I can do after you helped me figure this thing out."

I took her cup and began to fill it.

"I know you..." she said, something donning on her. "You're in my Radio/TV class."

Please don't say it.

"You're the church guy."

She said it loud enough that I knew everyone in line behind us had to have heard it. I glanced back, and yep, they were all watching us. They were

probably more than ready to get their beers as well. Since I'd finished pouring the drinks for the girls, I stepped away from the line and tried to pull them with me as I moved our conversation farther from the gathered crowd and in the opposite direction of Craig.

"I, uh..."

I, uh, what? I, uh, *am* the church guy? I, uh, have no idea what you're talking about?

For years, preachers had been telling us that we'd be tested by the devil, that we'd be challenged on our faith. That, like Peter after the arrest of Jesus, we'd be given the chance to either stand up and say "Yes, Jesus is my friend" or to deny that we'd ever known Him. In the Bible, Peter had denied Christ three times, swearing up and down that he didn't know who Jesus was.

My time had come. Would God forgive me if I messed it up?

"I, uh...yeah, I go to a church."

I'd done it. I'd passed the test. Suck it, Peter.

"But I usually just go by Levi."

"Alex's church, right? The youth group? Oh, *wait!* You were the one who convinced him to break all his CDs!"

"Well, that was mostly April's idea..."

"April? Ohhh, the girl that was on stage with y'all? Yeah, Alex told me

about her.”

“He did? Yeah, she, uh...”

She, uh, what? What did I possibly have to say about April to Shannon in that moment? That she’d ripped my heart out and was why I was at the party in the first place? Did April deserve that? Would I be spreading gossip if I ratted her out?

“Isn’t she your girlfriend?” Shannon asked.

“Her? Nope, she isn’t. Wasn’t. Never has been. Just a friend. Apparently.”

From the way Shannon’s demeanor softened, I realized I’d accidentally sold myself out by letting that last word slip out and in that tone. She understood. Whether she knew it had happened only a few hours earlier, I wasn’t sure.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, aside from the whole CD breaking thing, you always seemed cool in class, so her loss.”

I should’ve defended my friend, even in spite of her rejection of me, but I was too focused on that last part: Shannon thought I seemed cool.

We continued to talk, and eventually her friends lost interest and drifted away, leaving us alone. By that point, I’d finished my first cup of beer. When it had first hit my lips, I’d almost vomited, but I didn’t know if

that was because of how nervous I was or the flavor. Regardless, my nervousness overruled my taste buds, so I kept steadily drinking it while chatting with Shannon just to have something to occupy my trembling hands.

"I think I need some more beer," I told her.

"Sure. Hey, I think I'm gonna go inside and dance."

"Oh, ok."

"Come find me when you refill your drink if you wanna dance."

Come find me. Not only had she stood there and talked with me for a while in the first place, but she was wanting to spend even *more* time in my presence.

An unexpected thought hit me: while I didn't realistically think I could go through with sex that evening...I wondered if I might be able to kiss a girl for the first time before the night was through. I was never sold on the whole waiting until marriage for your first kiss thing—that was more April's goal than mine.

But I had wanted my first kiss to be special. I'd always assumed I'd be in love with whomever I shared it with. And for the previous few months, I'd hoped that would be April.

As I was closer than ever to it actually happening, though, I'd suddenly lost interest in trying to make it special. Or maybe it would be

special regardless simply because it was my first kiss.

I liked Shannon. She was fun. She was pretty. She was cool.

And it seemed like she might like me. You know, the way I wanted to be liked. The way April didn't.

The only question remaining then was how would one go about making it happen? In the movies, lots of kisses happened after—or while—dancing, so...yeah, I did want to dance, Shannon.

Chapter Fifteen

APRIL

The moment we walked through the door of the party, I immediately regretted my decision to follow Alex inside.

Not because we'd stumbled into a den of debauchery or anything—it was a band party, after all, so even though people were drinking, and even though someone was definitely smoking weed somewhere in the house, there were also people playing Magic: The Gathering at the dining room table. Elsewhere, the only openly homosexual boy in our grade sat at the family's upright piano playing a song from the musical *Rent* and harmonizing with two girls in my choir class.

It very easily could've been one of our youth group parties if not for

the liquor bottles in the kitchen and the stench of marijuana in the air.

The reason I regretted going inside was the reception I got. Nobody said anything directly to me at first, but almost everyone did a double-take and immediately began whispering to the person standing or sitting next to them. I thought maybe it had to do with Alex waltzing into a band party—though I'm sure that didn't calm the gossip mill—but it became pretty obvious I was the main topic. Little Miss Jesus Freak at a party.

"You ok?" Alex asked.

No, but I knew that didn't matter.

"Sure," I said. "Let them talk. I'm here to find Levi, not worry about what they think."

"Ok. You go that way. I'll go this way."

He set off for the heart of the party—the kitchen and backyard—leaving me to check down the hall toward the den, bedrooms, and bathrooms. I appreciated him taking the areas he knew would have the most people.

While a couple of the doors in the hallway were open, most were closed. I peeked into one of the open ones and saw three band guys sitting in what was obviously someone's dad's office. One of them played a video game on a computer while the other two looked over his shoulder, breathlessly directing him down animated hallways and screeching with glee

when he shot the creatures that kept emerging.

“Hey, have any of you seen Levi Larsen at this party?” I asked.

“Who?” one replied.

“Nope,” another answered.

And then I lost their attention as swiftly as I’d grabbed it. They returned to playing their game, so I moved on to the other open door, which was slightly ajar rather than fully open. The light was on inside, so I pushed it open and stepped in.

It was the bathroom. And someone was using it.

A guy I recognized from the marching band’s drum line stood at the toilet, his back to me. Hearing the door creak, he swung his head in my direction.

“Heyyyy,” he slurred, absolutely plastered. A split second later, the toilet started making noise. Urine hitting water noise. He continued to leer at me as he shot a violent stream of pee into the toilet bowl.

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry!” I said, hands to my mouth as I quickly backed out of the bathroom and shut the door behind me.

“Wait, come back!” he yelled, the closed door muffling his appeal. I hurried down the hallway. All the other doors were closed. Hot on the heels of interrupting someone’s bathroom time, I was hesitant to open any shut doors. Who knew what I’d find? If anyone was in those rooms, they’d have

to come out to me.

"Levi?" I called out at the doors at the end of the hallway, one on each side and the third staring me square in the face.

No response.

I almost left, but I knew I owed him a little more effort. I knocked loudly on each door, one after the other in quick succession.

"LEVI?" I yelled into the shallow corridor.

A voice. Was it him? I wasn't sure. It was definitely a guy. I thought he'd said "What?" It was followed by loud whispers, all of it seeping through the door on the left.

"Levi?" I called again. "Are you in there?"

As much as I didn't want to, I needed to know if it was him or not. I wrapped my hand around the door knob, turned it, and peeked in.

Two bodies were entwined on a small bed in a room decorated with *Star Wars* characters. It was the room of a young boy, but that definitely wasn't who was on the bed.

"Who are you?" the guy asked, looking up from under the girl, her dark hair cascading around her face, covering it. She flung it out of the way and looked my way.

Mary.

I gasped. The shirtless guy looked vaguely familiar, and I was almost

certain he went to our school. Regardless, he wasn't her college boyfriend.

"You!" she growled at me. Her shirt was unbuttoned and open, her bra exposed.

"I'm so sorry!" I yelped, zipping back out the door and shutting it behind me. Before I could run away or even remove my hand from the door handle, I knew there was something more I had to do. I opened it again, covered my eyes with my free hand, and stuck my head back inside the room.

"Real quick—have either of you seen Levi?"

"GET OUT!" I heard Mary scream at me.

Probably a no then.

I scurried down the hallway and toward the living room. I was boogieing so fast that I didn't have time to react when Alex appeared right as I reached the end of the hallway. My head bumped into his chest with a firm *thud*, and it sent me stumbling backward. Alex reached out and wrapped his arms around me, holding me up as I struggled to plant my feet again.

"Whoa there, Speedy Gonzalez!" he said.

I regained my balance, but he continued holding onto me anyway, support I wasn't in a hurry to reject. There was something I was supposed to be saying—I was quite sure—but it was like my brain was wading through a fog, and all I could see was Alex's beaming smile cutting through it and

drawing me in.

"You ok?"

I vaguely remembered what letters were, but putting them in order to make words was still beyond me at that moment. So I just nodded.

"Well, I didn't see Levi anywhere," he said. "Seems like you didn't either. You find out anything?"

The previous few minutes flooded back to mind, and suddenly my lips worked again.

"Oh, I most definitely did. And we should get out of here."

LEVI

There was only one hole in my plan to kiss Shannon, but I didn't discover it until I already had my new beer in hand and a foot on the makeshift dance floor in the living room.

I'd forgotten that I didn't know how to dance.

Not the way the girls were dancing, anyway. Big-band swing? Sure, a bit. (Thanks, *Swing Kids*.) Skanking? You bet. Slow and romantic? Sort of, though it hadn't ended well for me the last time I'd tried it.

But bumping and grinding to rap? I don't even think the Holy Spirit allowed my hips to move that way. Fortunately, for the purposes of kissing a

girl, I was pretty sure the Holy Spirit had washed its hands of me and told the Devil, "Take him—he's yours now. He's too far gone for me to pull him back from the brink."

Even though I knew in my mind that I couldn't dance, my body hadn't gotten the memo. Limbs were starting to sway to the beat, like Lucifer himself had shown up with a giant skeleton key and unlocked the holy padlock that had kept my body parts from trespassing.

That said, I couldn't tell for certain if I was swaying or if I was standing still and the room was moving around me, like being on a cruise ship. Whether drink or demon, something was pulling me toward the girls, filling me with a confidence I'd never felt before. I may not have known how to dance, but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was gonna figure it out.

Shannon clocked me approaching and raised her cup.

"Leeeeeeviiii!"

For reasons I couldn't have explained even when stone-cold sober, I dipped. As in, I bent at the knees and lowered my body a foot or so, all while keeping my top half up straight, drink raised above my head. Then I engaged my knees and thighs and whatever else was down there to push myself back up to full extension. I didn't know where it came from, but it all felt kind of familiar. I vaguely remembered seeing Snoop Doggy Dogg do a

similar move in a music video that was playing inside of Blockbuster Video one night. So, a hip-hop curtsy, if you will.

“Yessssss!” Shannon yelled. Even the other girls cheered. They waved me forward and opened up their circle so I could join.

The dip had already been used once, so there was no way I could bust it back out for another couple of minutes. Unsure what else to do, I mirrored how Shannon and the girls were dancing, simply swaying back and forth, occasionally raising my cup over my head.

“Mo Money, Mo Problems” blasted from the speaker, and a woman sang about not knowing what “they” wanted from her, and that the more money she got, the more problems she saw.

I’d never had money cause problems for me—other than just not having it—but I, too, didn’t know what “they” wanted from me. And it felt like an endless conveyor belt of problems was being dumped in my lap.

Maybe I was finally understanding why people liked rap so much—it came from a place of pain, a place of trouble. And they just wanted to be free of it.

In that living room, I was finally feeling free of my own troubles, free of my heartache. My eyes drifted shut, and my arms lifted high above my head as I surrendered to the beat.

As much as I hated to admit it, Judd had been right—I was a dude

who was wound tight, ready to snap. But the music, the beer, the girls?

They were loosening me up.

My eyes opened again just in time to see one of the girls whispering back and forth with Shannon as they glanced my way. I'd been made fun of in my life, and that wasn't what was happening. They were definitely talking about me, but I was pretty sure it wasn't bad.

The song changed to one I knew: "No Diggity" by...someone. When the chorus came around and the singer talked about bagging up the way a girl worked it, inspiration jolted through me. I'd thought of a dance move. Before I had the chance to second-guess myself, I was in the middle of our little circle, swooping one arm low and pulling it back up to the other as I pretended to bag something up. Leaves? Groceries? Who knew? I then held the "bag" out to each girl in turn, arm straight in front of me as I bobbed and weaved behind it as sexily as I could.

The woos and laughter came louder and louder as I continued. They were *delighted*. And so was I. The moment for the bagging was passing, so I exited out of it by giving in and laughing with them.

I decided it was time to make my other move. The big one. So I turned my back to Shannon and put my caboose in reverse until I gently bumped into her. She giggled and tossed her arms over my shoulders. The other girls whispered to each other before closing themselves off to us so

they could dance together.

To face Shannon, I danced myself around in a half-circle. With the way everything was swimming—my head, the room, the lights—it was no surprise when I danced a little too far and had to rotate back the way I'd come.

For the second time that night, a pretty girl stood inches away from me as we swayed in time to the music. Incredible, really—up till that day, I'd gotten that close to zero girls, yet there I was with two in a span of four hours.

Shannon danced with her eyes closed, feeling the music. I couldn't peel my own off her, though I *was* having some trouble keeping her in focus. She'd begun to blur as she bounced back and forth. She opened her eyes and found me watching, probably with a stupid grin on my face. She smiled wide, and I knew the moment had come.

I prepared my lips and leaned toward her face.

They did not find her lips.

Instead, they found her nose.

The tip of her schnoz nestled perfectly into the cavity my puckered lips created.

I knew something wasn't right, but I also didn't realize quite how wrong things had gone, so I let my lips rest there a moment before letting it

go with a small smack.

Shannon didn't recoil though. I think she might've been too bewildered to shrink back. Slightly stunned, she began to laugh.

"Did you just kiss my nose?" she asked through fits of giggles.

I should've been frozen with shame, but the alcohol had long since sent my inhibitions packing. So I did what I'd been doing earlier—I mirrored Shannon and laughed with her. First a giggle, but then it grew into a cackle for both of us. Finally, we were laughing so hard that we doubled over, conking each other on the head on our way down. That only made us laugh even more.

"You're drunk!" she said. "We need to get you some water. Let's go outside."

She planted her hands on my shoulders, spun me around so I was facing the door, and marched me out onto the back patio. I kept laughing the entire way. We passed the keg line, the dancers taking cigarette breaks on the back patio, and two jocks throwing a football, one of whom was Tim King.

"Hey, you're Tim King!" I informed him as I was pushed past. He stopped mid-throw and squinted at me, zero idea who I was.

"I'm open—hit me, Tim King!" I said, throwing my hands up like a wide receiver. What little was left in my cup spilled out over me.

"Whoops," I said, trying to wipe the liquid off my shirt.

"Ok, mister, let's put you in park," Shannon said, pulling me to a stop out in the middle of the yard. A few guys nearby sat around a fire pit. "Stay here while I get us some water. Don't move!"

"Shannon, come back!" I half-yelled after her as she reached the back door, headed for the kitchen. She smiled and shook her head but didn't heed my request. I wasn't sure why she'd brought me all the way out to the yard if the water was in the kitchen.

"My *dawg!*" someone said from between my legs. But when I looked down, no one was there. I leaned over more to get a better look back between them, which was when I realized the person wasn't actually between my legs but was instead directly behind me and low to the ground, sitting in a lawn chair. I twisted around and looked down to find Julio with his head tilted up at me.

"Julio!" I yelled. "My dawg! What's up, dawg?"

"Bro, where you been? You disappeared, and I thought you'd peaced out."

"No way, bro—I peaced *in!*"

The other guys sitting around the fire pit laughed.

"You're fuckin' trashed, bro," Julio said, chuckling. He was a good chuckler, that one. A top 10 chuckler in my life at that moment. Maybe top

5.

"How many drinks you had?" he asked

I counted on my fingers.

"Two."

The fire pit crew doubled over with laughter. I joined them, because who was I to spoil a party?

"I like this guy," one of them said.

"Dawg, I been trying to get fuckin' Levi fuckin' wasted for fuckin' forever!" Julio told him. "But he's a church boy. Choir boy and altar boy and all that shit."

I wanted to tell Julio that we didn't have choirs or altar boys at our church, but someone to my right was handing me something. As Julio continued to talk, I took the item and held it up close to my face for inspection. It was marijuana. A joint.

Yeah.

It felt so small and inoffensive between my fingers. How could something so tiny cause so much trouble in the world? Without another thought, I put it in my mouth and sucked hard on it. The end of the joint glowed orange like the flames of hell, which I was almost certainly on my way to see in person. When I felt like I couldn't suck anymore, I pulled the joint away from my lips. I kept the smoke in my mouth for a moment,

unsure what to do with it. I remembered seeing people in movies exhale the smoke after sucking in a cigarette, so I figured the idea was the same.

I blew all the smoke out and up into the air. A steady stream poured out of my mouth, like someone had just poured water on Puff the Magic Dragon's flames right as he spit them out. The smoke of the fire picked up the smoke from the joint and led it up and into the black night sky.

"WHOA!!!!!"

It wasn't a single person—it was basically a chorus of everyone sitting around the fire.

"Dawg, did you just hit that J?" Julio asked, amazement in his voice.

A large smile grew across my face.

"I think I did."

"Oh shit!" one of the guys said. "Hell yeah!"

"Nah, nah, nah, you don't understand," Julio told them. "Levi, dawg, you ever smoked before?"

He took the joint out of my fingers. He seemed kind of worried.

"Nooooope," I said. "First time's a charm."

"Oh, my dude," he said, pity in his voice. "Shit's about to get so weird for you. Just don't freak out. My suggestion is to lay back and enjoy the ride."

He was starting to worry me.

"Whwhwhwhy? What happened? What's happening?"

Julio stood up, put a hand on my shoulder, and looked me in the eyes.

"You're drunk, dawg. And you just took a *gigantic* hit of a joint. You're about to get 'the spins.'"

"What are 'the spins?'"

"It's like being strapped on a roller coaster that you can't stop. You're gonna get super dizzy, maybe a little nauseous... It's a wild ride. You're supposed to smoke before you drink! Weed before beer, never fear."

"Weed before beer, never fear..." I mumbled to myself. I'd broken the rule, and I most definitely did fear.

If it was going to be as bad as Julio claimed, I had to get out of there. There was no way I could get sick in front of everyone at the party.

"Here, just sit down," Julio said, ushering me toward the lawn chair he'd been in. "You'll be good. We'll take care of you. We ain't going nowhere."

I looked down at the chair. I knew it was only a foot or two away, but suddenly it felt like it we were miles apart. I reached an arm out for it, but all I grasped was air.

"I...I can't..."

I should've stayed focused on the chair, but as a cheer went up from the crowd behind me, I spun my head around to look at whatever was

causing the commotion. Everything became a blur, and my head felt like it had kept spinning and wouldn't stop.

Stability. I needed stability.

To the side of the house stood a wooden fence that led to the front yard. Fences were stable. I could lean against it.

The fire pit crew had all stood up to see what the cheer was about. Probably a fight. Maybe a keg stand? I'd heard about those. As they stood on their tip-toes to see, I moved too—straight for the fence. I assumed I was walking, but it felt like I was hovering and my upper body was being magnetically pulled to the slats of the fence.

"What is it?" I heard one of the fire pit guys ask behind me.

The fence, the fence, the fence.

I reached it. I stood against it. The spinning didn't stop.

"Where'd Levi go?" I heard Julio ask from somewhere in the vast galaxy behind me. "Yo, Levi!"

The fence wasn't helping. Standing wasn't helping. Lying down would help. My body was telling me so, pulling me toward the ground. What if it was The Devil? He lived under the ground, right? What if the spins were just demons trying to pull me through the ground to hell?

Don't lie down. Don't go to hell. Go home. Dad would know what to do, how to keep me from going to hell.

Home was on the other side of the fence. I had to get over it.

Focus, focus, focus.

I saw the top of the fence. I grabbed for it, hoping and praying for a better result than when I reached for the lawn chair.

Success! The top of the fence was in my hands. I bent as low as I could go without losing hold of the fence. Then I pushed with my legs and pulled with my arms, hoisting myself up.

The top of the fence dug into my chest. I was making it. I pushed more, dragging my body farther over the fence.

"Levi, what are you doing?" Julio yelled at me from somewhere.

I was on top of the fence, straddling it, the slats digging into my butt crack.

"Going home!" I yelled back at Julio. "I...I gotta...go home!"

"Bro, is that a puppy?" one of the fire pit guys said over in the void.

"Dawg, no wayyyyyy!" Julio answered. "Who brings a puppy to a party?"

"Kandace! She brought her puppy!" It was Shannon. Somewhere out in the void, Shannon had returned.

"A party puppy?" Julio asked. "That's fuckin' bomb, dawg. I gotta see this."

I wanted to see it too.

I knew it was probably a bad idea, but it was a puppy after all. My head swung in the direction of the earlier cheer.

But once again, it never stopped swinging. Around and around, darkness and light swirling, my body drifting then falling, falling, falling.

It never stopped falling. I fell and fell and fell, deeper and deeper into the dark mouth of the Earth. I plummeted toward the gates of hell.

Yet somehow I never arrived. Maybe that's what hell was—just endless plummeting. Vast, empty darkness, a void. Loneliness forever.

I was dying. I knew it.

I was dying and I hadn't yet repented. I was going to hell.

Jesus, help me. Please. I don't want to die. Forgive me. Don't let me go to hell. If You let me live, I promise I'll live for You. I'll believe. I'll tell everyone about You. Please save me.

The falling slowed. It didn't stop entirely, but it turned into more of a floating sensation.

"Levi."

A voice.

"Levi, are you ok?"

A female voice.

"Levi, wake up."

April's voice.

She was there, somewhere. I could reach her. I knew it.

I reached for the voice with my insides, with my spirit.

A dim light. A blurry shape moving in front of it. The voice was coming from that direction.

“Lord Jesus, please help him.”

The shape came into focus a little more.

April’s face hovering over me, a golden glow behind it, a halo.

God had sent me an angel.

Chapter Sixteen

APRIL

Twenty minutes after Shannon called Alex's cell phone, we arrived at Kandace's. It didn't take long to find Levi—he was lying on the ground in the front yard. Shannon, Julio, and Kandace stood nearby, Kandace holding a puppy in her arms.

Alex screeched to a halt in front of the house and double parked, flicking his hazard lights on. He and I were out of the car before Alex's taxi passengers in the backseat even got their fingers to the door handle.

I sprinted up the yard to Levi and dropped to my knees next to him.

"Levi?" I asked. "Levi, are you ok?"

No response.

I desperately mumbled a prayer under my breath.

Jesus, please save Levi. Forgive him for his mistake. And forgive me for causing this. Forgive us for veering from Your plan and bringing this pain on ourselves. Satan, I bind you in the name of Jesus. You have no place in Levi's life! Flee! I rebuke you in the name of Jesus and command you and all your little demons to leave my friend alone. He belongs to Jesus!

Alex appeared over my shoulder.

"Levi is gonna be fine," Alex told me, placing his hand on my back. "He just got the spins and needs to sleep it off."

"Poor Levi," I mumbled.

"Poor Levi?" Shannon asked, a challenge in her voice. "Poor Levi was having the time of his life until he hit the joint. I'd have told him not to, but I'd left to get him some water once I realized I'd be babysitting him."

I glared at her.

"Thanks for doing that," Alex said, no lack of sincerity.

"Sure, I guess," she said. "I mean, it didn't feel like babysitting—we were both having fun. He's a good dancer."

I shot her a baffled look. Levi? A good dancer?

"And a bad kisser."

Shannon and Kandace shared a look and began laughing. Before I could probe for more info, Alex turned my attention back to my passed out

best friend.

“Help me get him into the Jeep so we can take him home,” he said.

“We can’t take him home in this shape. In fact, his parents can never know about this.”

“Won’t they wonder where he is if he doesn’t come home tonight?”

With my mind set at ease that Levi wasn’t going to die in the next few moments, that demons weren’t dragging him to hell while we planned where to take him, we discussed the options for a few minutes, searching for the best solution.

Reese’s house didn’t work because his mom would tattle on Levi’s state. Alex’s house didn’t work because Levi’s parents didn’t want Levi hanging out with Alex anyway.

“What if he stayed at my house?” I proposed.

“April,” Alex said, “I don’t think he’s gonna want to see you when he wakes up. Plus, what about your mom?”

While Mom wouldn’t care, Alex was right. But if I stayed with Molly, Levi could recover and then head home when he felt better.

Alex offered to stay with him at my place.

“Plus,” I said, excited, “we could have my mom call and tell his parents that Levi fell asleep on the couch and ask if it’s ok if he just crashes there tonight. We could even put him on the couch while we’re on the

phone, and it wouldn't be a lie!"

Alex laughed. Since Levi wasn't in any shape to call, one of us had to tell his parents where he was, and I'd been worried about deceiving Pastor Steve and Miss Karen.

Alex and Julio carried Levi toward the Cherokee. His midsection sagged like a bag of sand, and they almost dropped him a couple of times.

"I'm floaaaaating..." Levi mumbled. "Am I in a space ship? Is this the mother ship?"

I opened the car door for them. Alex sat on the back seat and started shimmying his booty toward the other door, pulling Levi with him as he went.

"Watch his he--"

I couldn't finish getting the word out before Levi banged his head on the doorframe.

THUMP!

"Ughhhh," Levi muttered. "Did the space ship crash?"

"Oops," Alex said. "Sorry, duder."

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On the ride home, I used Alex's phone to update Reese and Molly and then to call Mom and prep her for our arrival. She'd found the whole thing

hilarious, but I was nearly in tears when we'd arrived.

"Baby, why are you crying?"

"Because if I hadn't rejected him, he never would've gotten hurt and gone to that party and gotten high."

"April, that's nonsense. Take it from me—sometimes boys like you and you don't like them. It's that simple. As long as you let him down easy when you told him no, you did the best you could. If a man isn't strong enough to accept rejection without self-destruction, that's their problem, not yours."

"But he's my best friend, and I hurt him. Are we gonna stop being friends now?"

"He'll probably need some time to heal, but what y'all got is too special. I think it'll come back around. I've had my share of getting involved with friends before, and while it almost always got messy, the good ones were able to move on from it and be my friends again. The other ones were little bitches. And I don't think Levi is a little bitch, in spite of what Judd says."

All my life, Mom's relationship history had looked like one failure after another to me, a series of mistakes that were nothing but trouble. I never thought there would be anything of value for me to learn from them, yet I believed what she was saying, and it brought me a little comfort.

"Is the boy in the driver's seat Alex?" she asked, looking out the

window at the Cherokee. “Cause he’s a cutie. If he’s on the table, no wonder you skipped the appetizer.”

“I’m going back outside.”

When Molly and Reese showed up, Alex and Reese pulled Levi out of the car. Fortunately, Levi had sobered *slightly*, so even though he had zero idea where he was or where he was going, he was aware enough to put his weight on his feet and put one foot in front of the other as the guys held him up.

Once they got him inside, they took him to the couch. Mom was supposed to keep it simple and sweet when she called Levi’s parents, but Mom was Mom.

“That’s right, he just crashed right there on the couch. I guess the poor guy danced his little tootsies off at the school first, and then they came here and put on some of their skraw music—”

“Ska music, Mom,” I whispered.

“April says they had *so much fun*—the time of their lives!—and he’s all tuckered out now. If you’re ok with him sleeping on our couch, I’ll feed him in the morning and send him back home. What? Oh, of course—April will be locked away in her room. They won’t even be in the same part of the house.”

I hated that she was lying and that she was involving me in it. But I

knew it was necessary. This must've been the type of scenario Pastor Chris warned about when he said that sin just pulls you deeper and deeper, asking you to either double down on your mistakes or confess them and repent.

Alex asked for a cheap pillow that we wouldn't mind Levi ruining if he threw up, so I grabbed one from my room. We also put an old towel under the pillow and a bucket on the floor next to him. Alex gently covered Levi with an old blanket and tucked him in like a child.

Then it was time for me to leave, just in case Levi woke up and saw me there. When Molly said she'd run Reese home real quick in my car, I could tell by the look on her face that she wanted to give Alex and me some alone time.

After gathering some things into a bag for staying over at Molly's, I returned to the living room.

"Ok, I guess I'm gonna head to Molly's," I said.

"Oh, right...ok," Alex said, straightening up. An awkward pause filled the space between us. "I'll walk you out. Uh...of your house."

He opened the front door for me, and we both stepped out onto the front porch.

"Actually, maybe I should wait for Molly to get back instead of just barging into her house. Her parents would probably be fine—I know them—but still..."

“Right, probably a good idea.”

Instead of going back in, though, I leaned against the pillar on the left side of the porch entry and stared quietly out into the night. He followed my lead and leaned against the one on the right side, opposite me. Nobody said a word for a couple of minutes.

“Thanks for helping with Levi,” I said, finally breaking the silence. “What you did tonight was very...honorable. Taking care of someone who made a dumb mistake. Showing grace to someone who’d hurt you. To a couple of us who’d hurt you.”

He struggled to meet my gaze.

“It just seemed like what Jesus would do. Y’all taught me that, and it stuck.”

“Well, I’m glad we managed to do something right in the last six months or whatever.”

A few moments of quiet passed. It felt like Alex was letting me lead whatever conversation we had.

“Do you think Levi and Shannon really kissed?” I asked.

Alex laughed. I guess it was kind of funny—she was probably the last person I’d ever expected to kiss Levi, but then again, the whole night had been an endless stream of unexpected moments. Ever since she’d said it, though, the thought had been on my mind. I’d been trying to imagine how it

happened. My feelings were mixed—on the one hand, I was kind of disappointed in him since it probably happened while he was drunk. Plus, we'd always talked about waiting until our wedding. I thought he was with me on that. On the other hand...I was a little jealous. He'd experienced something I hadn't, something I desperately wanted to experience. I felt kind of left behind.

"I dunno," Alex said. "Maybe."

"Do you think they like each other?"

"Hm. I don't know that either. Shannon doesn't really kiss random guys at parties. I'll get details in the morning. Assuming he remembers anything at all."

"That'd be terrible if he couldn't remember his first kiss. Even if you don't wait until your wedding day, it should still be memorable. Right?"

"I'm not sure I remember mine. First grade, maybe?"

"Do you regret that you had it so young?"

"It was just a kiss. Good to get it out of the way."

He seemed to quickly remember he was talking to me.

"Or wait, you know, until your wedding."

"Or a special moment."

"Sure, a special moment works too."

How did one know if a moment was special though? Often, moments

seem mundane while you're in them. Are they special because the situation is somehow more special than normal, or are they special because you choose to make them special?

Standing across from Alex, just he and I chatting, the street quiet around us, the moonlight spilling over us...the moment was starting to feel special. It felt like no one else existed in the world right then. And if no one else existed, no one would care if I waited until my wedding day for my first kiss. I was starting to suspect that no one cared about that anyway, that it was just me and God. Did He even care? Why was I holding out? Maybe Alex had been brought into my life for that very moment. Maybe it was pre-ordained.

Or maybe I just really wanted to kiss Alex right then, and that feeling was stronger than anything else I was feeling, was maybe stronger than anything I'd ever felt until that moment.

I tried to push the thought away, but it overwhelmed me. What if the moment passed, and I never had the chance again? Would I be able to live with myself?

How did a girl even go about getting a boy to kiss her if she wanted to? Alex knew about that stuff, and I had no clue. So maybe the thing to do was just...ask?

"Alex...?"

"Yeah?"

"If, um..."

I paused. Was I really gonna ask him?

"What's up?" he asked.

I lifted my eyes from the ground between us and met his. Wide, open, inviting.

Big mistake.

I dove in.

"If I told you I wanted you to kiss me right now...what would you say?"

He shifted in place a bit, his body language telling me I caught him off guard.

"Is, uh...is that something you want? Like, are you telling me that? Or is this a theoretical thing?"

"It's...not theoretical."

"But you wanted to wait until your wedding day."

"Right. Well...I don't think I want to do that anymore. Is that bad?"

"No, I don't think it's *bad*, but...you should be sure—*beyond* sure—before you take that step. You can't get it back, you know?"

"But you said it's no big deal."

"To some people. But to you? I know it's a big deal."

"So you wouldn't want to kiss me?"

"Well...I didn't say *that*."

"So...you'd maybe do it? You'd maybe kiss me? Right now?"

He held my gaze for what might've been seconds or hours—I wasn't sure. Studying, pondering, processing. Finally, he dropped his eyes to the ground and sighed. It seemed like he was resigned to something, but I didn't think I was about to get what I wanted.

"I can't," he said.

My stomach sank.

"Come here," he said. He stepped forward and beckoned me to him. My body buzzed, but I couldn't tell if it was from fear or excitement. Probably a mix of both.

He held his hand out for me. I placed mine on top of his. He gently closed around it and tugged toward himself, slowly reeling me in until my body was only a couple of inches from his. I desperately wanted to look up into his eyes, but I couldn't manage. I stayed fixed straight ahead, staring at the base of his neck. I felt his other hand graze the underside of my chin and lift my head up so I had no choice but to meet his eyes. With me looking where he wanted again, he let his arms fall to the side and nestle on my hips.

"I want to kiss you," he whispered, his face inches from mine. "More than anything. But I can't do that to Levi."

“But I don’t like Levi that way,” I countered.

“I know you don’t. But he’s my friend, and I know how he feels about you. If I kissed you—especially as your first kiss—and he found out about it? It’d destroy him. It’d destroy our friendship. And I’ve done too much of that these past couple of years. I don’t want to lose him. But I also don’t want to lose you. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but...let’s wait. Not until a wedding day, but just until he’s moved on some. And he will. Feelings come and go. He’ll fall for someone else soon. But to kiss you the same night you rejected him? We’d never get past it.”

He was right. I knew he was right, and I felt in my bones, my spirit, that he was right. But we were still standing there so close together. I wondered if I needed to step back, but he wasn’t making a move to step back either.

“Ok then,” I said, nodding. “We can wait.”

A gentle smile creased his lips. Instead of pulling away, though, his arms slipped from my hips to my back. He pulled me closer, pressing his chest against mine and holding me there. My arms draped around his neck, and my hands intertwined. I turned my head to the side and rested it on his chest.

We stood there, just holding each other until headlights lit up our street.

"Molly's back," he said.

I started to pull away from him, but he didn't let me go just yet. I looked up into his eyes again. He smiled, leaned forward, and kissed my forehead, letting his lips linger there a moment.

"Soon enough," he said.

LEVI

The absolute last thing I expected when I left the dance Friday night was to wake up under April's covers the next morning, yet when my eyes finally crept open and my blurry vision focused, I found myself buried under a soft pink blanket that smelled like the shirt of mine she wore, the one I'd slept with so many nights.

I suddenly needed to vomit.

"In the bucket, in the bucket!" a voice urged from somewhere around me. Then Alex was on his knees in front of me lifting a bucket to my face. A few dry heaves later, I spewed.

"I know it sucks, but I promise that hurling is gonna make you feel better," he said. He handed me a clean bucket and disappeared to rinse the first one.

I laid back down and tried to get my bearings. I was in April's living

room. Alex was there for some reason. And April?

"She's not here," Alex said as he returned. "She stayed with Molly last night so you wouldn't have to see her when you woke up. She won't be back until you're gone. But take your time. I've got goodies for you."

On the coffee table in front of me was orange juice, alka seltzer, Gatorade, Ibuprofen, and more—a smorgasbord of hangover treatments. We started with the Ibuprofen and orange juice, because every little move I made felt like someone was clobbering my head with a baseball bat. Which I probably deserved.

Alex said there was coffee and breakfast on the way whenever I was ready and that even though I probably wasn't hungry, eating would make me feel better. He then filled me in on the situation—what I was feeling physically, how long it'd last, what April's mom had told my parents, and how he and April had found me and brought me back.

I rubbed a knot that had appeared out of nowhere on my head.

"Did I hit my head on something last night?"

For the first time, Alex appeared unprepared.

"Hm, not sure about that. Could've. Try some of the Gatorade—let's get some electrolytes in you."

I obeyed and sipped from the bottle.

"You said Shannon called you?" I asked. "What all did she say?"

"That you were drunk and had the spins."

"Anything else?"

"Not that I can remember..."

Whew.

"I mean, as we were leaving, she said you were a good kisser, so..."

I froze.

"Oh."

"Did you kiss Shannon last night, dude?"

I hesitated, unsure how to answer. He seemed to read my mind.

"Oh, don't worry, man. I'm just happy you kissed a girl—I don't care that it was Shannon. I got over her a long time ago."

I relaxed. I couldn't take it if I'd done something stupid that made Alex hate me again.

"Well, I *technically* kissed Shannon. I tried to kiss her on the lips, but... I was really drunk...so I missed."

"Like, you air balled it and kissed empty space, or—"

"I kissed her on the nose. The tip of it, to be exact."

He simply stared, bewildered. Then he started laughing his butt off.

"I'm sorry," he uttered between wheezing laughter. "It's not funny, but..."

I chuckled.

"But it is. It's ridiculous."

"Well, congratulations—you survived your first high school party."

"Was that what parties are like?"

"Sort of. You learn how to avoid getting the spins, but...you get messed up in other ways. But yeah, that's what every weekend of my life was like until I met y'all."

"I feel like I ruined everything."

"Like what?"

"My witness, April's witness, my friendship with her, my parents' trust...basically my entire life."

"First of all, don't tell your parents anything about this. I know it feels wrong, but trust me. Second of all, you didn't ruin your life. You just did something dumb. Life goes on. And good things still happen. Even after all that dumb stuff I did, I met y'all. One of the best things to ever happen to me. Don't get me wrong—there were consequences of my dumb stuff, and I had to deal with them, but it didn't ruin my life. I learned a lot of lessons though, and there are a lot of mistakes I won't make again because I know they can result in bad things. Like what Molly said about how burning your hand leaves a scar. I have a feeling you won't do some of that dumb stuff again, huh?"

"Definitely not. Right now, I don't even want to think about drinking

alcohol or doing drugs again. Or trying to kiss girls.”

“One day you’ll be able to look back at this and remember the good things as well as the bad.”

“I don’t know if there were any good things. I kind of wish I’d never met April.”

“Of course there were. I can think of like five off the top of my head that I was there for. You and April have been best friends for years, so I’m sure there are way more that I don’t even know about. Your life would suck if you hadn’t met her.”

A few moments flashed in my mind’s eye: the thrill of April showing up onstage and singing with us, then hugging me after; April’s face after I invited Alex to youth group, then her hugging me after...ok, it seemed like most of the moments revolved around hugging, Alex was probably right—there were good times in the mix going all the way back to when I first saw her in her front yard after they moved in next door, and I went to say “hi” and play hopscotch on the sidewalk.

I’d have to think about that more to figure out if my life really was better for having met her, even if things hurt so much right then.

“I feel like I need to apologize to everyone.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Think about everyone you encountered last night, people you might’ve hurt. Reese? Didn’t do anything to him.

Molly? Nope.”

“They had to leave the dance to come find me.”

“Whatever, man. They had fun. I think they wanted some alone time together anyway. Seems like that might be back on. Who else? Julio? Def not. If anything, he needs to apologize to you for letting you hit that joint unsupervised. Shannon? The nose kiss was probably the funniest thing that’s happened to her in forever. She and her friends will laugh about it. They’ll probably make fun of you a little. But no need to apologize.”

“April.”

“It seems like you were the one who got hurt. But that wasn’t her fault either. She just didn’t feel the same way about you that you felt about her. It happens. It sucks, but life goes on. It’ll take a little time to get over her, but you’ll crush on someone new soon enough. Trust me.”

I doubted that, but something about it also felt true.

“I *did* ask her brother for permission to court her. Without mentioning it to her first.”

He sat back.

“Oof. Yeah, you might need to apologize for that one. Otherwise, I think you’re in the clear. You had a wild night. You live, you learn, you do better next time. If I can dust myself off and get up again, you definitely can. You’re Levi—the best dude I know.”

"Well, I don't know about that."

"I do."

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After April's mom made breakfast, which I struggled to keep down, I hung out in the living room until my parents left to take Joseph to his Saturday morning church league basketball game.

At home, I took a quick shower, went into my room, shut the door, and sat on my bed.

What was next? Where was I supposed to go from there? I tried to not think about the previous night and April and everything else, but my mind kept wandering back.

I tried to distract myself with activities, but I had trouble remembering something else I was even into. So much of my life had been wrapped up with April that I wasn't sure how I'd fill all the time that I usually spent hanging out with her.

I absentmindedly picked up my guitar and started strumming. A melody formed in my head, so I began humming it. Then the words came.

I thought we were close

But you feel far away

I did everything I was supposed to

But I couldn't make you stay

How could I have made you stay?

I knew I was supposed to be trying to forget April, to let her go, but there I was singing about trying to hold on to her. Maybe another verse could be about realizing I needed to let her go, and the song would be a journey from where I was in that moment to where I was supposed to end up.

I lay back on the bed and strummed the chords over and over until I drifted off to sleep.

Dad knocked on my door a couple of hours later and checked in on me. I kept my answers positive but short so he'd know all was well but that I also wasn't in the mood to talk. He took the hint, but as he was on his way out my bedroom door, I suddenly had the urge to ask him something.

As I formed the words, I realized I hadn't thought through what I was about to ask, and that if I wasn't careful, it could set off alarms for my parents and lead to conversations I absolutely didn't want to have.

I paused, mulling over the words, before finally asking.

"Did you always believe in God? And Jesus. Like, the whole thing—did it always make sense to you and seem true? Or did you ever doubt parts of

it?”

He leaned on the doorframe as he pondered an answer.

“Well...yes, I think I did always believe. Since your grandad was a pastor too, Jesus was always alive and real in our house growing up. But there were times things didn’t make sense—maybe a tragedy happened or the world just seemed...I dunno...dark?—and I wondered how God could let that thing happen. But God knows better than we do, so you gotta have faith that He’s got his reasons for things going the way they do.”

Faith. That was the answer. You had to believe because...you had to believe? I wondered if he believed just because it was what he’d done all his life. Did he know any other way? Had he ever considered any other option?

“Son, are having some doubts?”

“Who, me? No, I, uh...I have this friend... They used to be a really strong Christian—sold-out for God, on-fire, all that. Now...I don’t know. They said God feels far away, and they wonder if He even exists at all.”

“If God is as powerful and loving as we believe He is, I think He understands that we sometimes have doubts. He’s bigger than them. Even Jesus on the cross asked, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ If Jesus can have doubts, so can we. If your friend is feeling far from God, he just needs to ask God to show up. In James 4:8, the Bible says if we draw near to God, He’ll draw near to

us.”

“What if he’s prayed that before, but he didn’t feel any closer to God?”

“I’d tell him to keep trying. God is faithful. In fact, God is probably closer than your friend realizes. Just because we don’t feel God, it doesn’t mean He’s not there.”

“Ok, cool. Thanks, dad.”

“Anytime. You know, we’re supposed to work out our faith with fear and trembling, so it’s ok to think about these things. Tell your friend that.”

“I will.”

As he shut the door, he paused.

“Oh, and I wouldn’t mention any of this to your mother. She worries about you and your friends. But I don’t—y’all are good kids. I know you’ll figure it out.”

So I needed to ask God to come close to me again, huh? The question was, “Who left who?” Had I abandoned Him? Had He abandoned me?

It’d been awhile since He felt close, though I guess He’d shown up the night before when I’d asked Him for help and then April and Alex showed up. Was it all part of God’s plan, His will? The Bible said God worked all things together for good, yet there I sat in the middle of a bunch of bad. So what was the deal? I just asked, and He’d come close again?

Even still, surely there was some...what was it called? There was a

word for it that old school Christians used... Penitence. Putting repentance into action. I really only remembered the word because of the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

I knew we believed in grace and didn't put much emphasis on actions—unlike the Catholics who thought a person could earn their way to Heaven—but I still felt like I had some work to do before God would wanna hang out with me again, even if He'd already forgiven me. I just needed to figure out what that looked like.

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I managed to avoid April the rest of the day, but when Sunday rolled around, my parents didn't buy my excuse to miss church. The thing about having a pastor for a dad is that if you're sick, he lays hands on you and prays for your healing—and he believes it'll happen, so you have to go on with your life as if it will.

Rather than ride to church with April like normal, I told my mom I'd ride with her and Joseph. While dad always went in super early so he could pray over every seat with the other leaders, mom and Joseph usually arrived later for Sunday School. She asked if everything was ok, and instead of lying, I told her April and I were taking some time away from each other. All I had to do was make it sound like a purity thing, like we were being

tempted or something—mom wouldn't ask any more questions and would be fully supportive.

"I think that's a good idea," she said.

At church, I sat on the back row with Reese and the other skaters. Molly said she'd sit with April so she didn't feel abandoned.

April didn't appear until the second song. She hadn't been that late in years—almost as if she'd planned to show up after any opportunity to talk before service had passed. She eased into the sanctuary and made her way to her normal seat, occasionally rising on her tip-toes to scan for someone—surely me. As she sang and clapped her hands to the music, she continued to covertly look around at all the faces.

Eventually she saw me. She stopped clapping and just held her hands together. I hadn't been sure if I could look her in the eye, but we locked in on each other.

I thought about smiling to reassure her I was ok, even though I most definitely wasn't, but that felt like a lie. I needed to offer her some sign of life though. So I offered a subtle wave. Hi. It's me. The idiot.

She put on a smile and subtly waved back. Then I looked away. I watched her in my periphery, and she studied me a moment more before turning her own eyes toward the stage.

After service, we avoided chatting with the same group of friends,

switching to other groups when we saw the other person on the move. As everyone finally drifted toward the parking lot to load up and drive to Bennigan's, I branched off and went to join Mom and Joseph.

"Levi," I heard April call from behind me. I stopped. Mom and Joseph continued on, but she made sure we knew she was watching.

"Does she hate me?" April asked as she approached and waved to mom.

"Nah. I didn't tell them anything about last night. Listen, I, uh...I'm sorry for running off like that and that y'all had to leave the dance to go search for me."

"You were hurt. I get it."

"And I'm sorry for asking Judd if I could court you. Will you forgive me?"

"Sure, of course. I'm sorry—"

"You don't have anything to be sorry for," I quickly interrupted.

"Ok. I think I'm just sorry I don't feel the same way you do. I wish I did, because it makes sense, but...unfortunately, I don't."

"It's fine. I understand."

"Are you good?" she asked. "Molly said you mentioned you might need some time away from me. Which, that stinks, but I understand if you do."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good—" I started saying. It wasn't true though, and I

knew she knew it. Because she knew me better than anyone. I laughed a little, because there was no way I could lie to her like that.

“Um,” I started again, “I’m...ok. I’m not as bad as I was last night, but I’m not great. Molly’s right—I’m gonna take some time away. And then I’ll be great again. Or at least good again.”

She nodded.

“Ok. Take the time you need. I’ll be here whenever you’re ready to be friends again.”

“Sounds good.”

I half-turned to walk away.

“I’ll miss you,” she said.

I winced. I thought the conversation was over, and I’d somehow made it through without any wounds feeling spicy. But then she said that. I didn’t want to turn around and look her in the face again, but I forced myself to. I even worked up a grin.

“I’ll miss you too,” I said. “Bye.”

As we pulled out of the church parking lot, I felt wetness forming around my eyes. I quickly rubbed them dry again. Looking up, I saw mom watching me in the rearview mirror. I expected her to say something, but she didn’t. Instead, she simply offered a supportive smile.

Chapter Seventeen

LEVI

During my break from April, I wanted nothing more than to be around her, hoping she'd change her mind, while also feeling in my gut that she wouldn't and that being around her would be torture.

Wes coaxed everything out of me when we met for our weekly accountability breakfast at IHOP. He'd surely known something was up when I asked if we could meet at a different restaurant than the girls. After I told him everything that had happened, he surprised me by saying he and Tori had a similar story.

When they'd first met, he was really into her, but she wasn't into him.

"I took it tough," he told me. "We weren't friends for a long time. We

kept our distance. I dated someone else, but she wasn't Tori. Then one day, Tori and I were friends again. And then more than friends. People evolve—feelings change over time. I'm not saying that'll definitely happen, but...it might. She's definitely gonna want to be friends again, for things to go back to where they were. Do you want that?"

"I guess."

"It'll take time before you can be around her without having romantic feelings for her. You won't be able to help it. You'll start looking for signs in everything she says or does that her feelings have changed, but they probably won't have. I'm telling you this from experience. It'll suck."

"You don't think she'll ever change her mind?"

"Never say never, but...she has to be the one to bring it up, to push the subject. Otherwise you're better off assuming she still doesn't feel that way. But if you give it some time, your romantic feelings might fade and you might be able to save your friendship. So I suggest you take a break from each other. Go make some new friends. Let her make some new friends. And then when you realize those feelings are gone, you can check back in with her and hang out again. If you want."

And Wes was right. It took a while for my feelings about April to chill. Definitely longer than I'd hoped it would, though at first I didn't really want them to chill. I kept hoping she'd change her mind, but of course she didn't.

I basically had to overhaul my whole routine. I began riding to and from school with Alex while Molly continued riding with April. Same with to and from youth group and Sunday morning services.

I tried sitting at our normal lunch table, but on the other side next to Reese instead of right next to April, though even that little exposure proved to be too much. Seeing her laugh with Alex, seeing her whisper to Molly, seeing her start to say something to me and then decide against it... I lasted a few days before I packed up my chicken nuggets and went outside. Alex came looking for me, and when he found me and I explained what I was feeling, he offered to sit outside with me going forward. I couldn't do that to him though—he obviously liked sitting with the group inside. Surprisingly, Reese ended up being the one to join me. Some of his skater friends were already out there, so our duo gradually got absorbed into the bigger skater group.

In fact, I began hanging out with them more in general. Reese told me about how they'd go skate after school at a drainage ditch near Spring Creek, and after riding my bike over there to hang with them once, I found myself wandering over there during the week when I'd usually have been hanging out with April. While I didn't have the natural balance to be a good skater, they showed me the basics, and I was eventually able to do an ollie.

Most of the time, I just sat with the girls that followed them around

and talked about whatever—music, movies, boys they liked, etc. They'd pass around cigarettes and joints and whatever cans of beer they could sneak out of their dads' fridges, but I'd always decline when offered any of those things. Fortunately, they didn't make me feel weird or call me lame or anything.

One day, I brought my acoustic guitar, and it proved to be a hit with the girls. The guys too. They'd ask if I knew how to play their favorite songs, and though I usually didn't—and hadn't even heard of the songs—I'd ask them to make me a tape of the CD and then I'd go home and learn how to play it.

Molly joined us often, and we became better friends than ever. Talking with her was easy. Though April had been my best friend forever, in recent years, I was watching what I said around her because I was afraid she'd think I was being mean or crude or whatever. Not that I was a jerk or anything—she just seemed to find something wrong with so many things I said. Most of the time she wouldn't say anything; instead, she'd just glance at me, and I'd know I'd messed up.

I never felt that way around Molly though. Ironically, using sarcasm around her didn't seem to replace intimacy at all—if anything, it made us both laugh and brought us closer. We also liked the same music, which helped. We made each other mix tapes recorded off the radio or off CDs we

had or borrowed from friends. Things never felt overly spiritual with her. I didn't feel the pressure to maximize every waking moment for the Kingdom of God. We just...existed.

If she was with us, though, who was with April and what was she doing?

Molly claimed she didn't know, but I didn't totally believe her. Still, I knew it'd be better for me if I didn't dwell on the possibilities much further.

By May, I had a completely new group of friends and hardly thought about April anymore. I even washed the shirt that smelled like her. It had finally started to reek anyway.

Summer loomed on the horizon like an atomic bomb, though, and I worried about not having school to take up half of my time and force me into various classrooms away from April. How would I deal with both of us home all day right next door to each other? I'd have my driver's license by then, but I wouldn't have my own car, so my escape was at the mercy of my parents. Even more daunting was how I'd deal with seeing April all day for an entire week at church camp.

It wasn't like I hadn't seen her in all that time. My parents wouldn't let me quit the church drama team, no matter how hard I begged. I came to be grateful Tori had pigeonholed me as Jesus and wouldn't let me play The Guy in any of the skits. If Brian had been having trouble selling his hug with

April, I'd be 10 times worse, somehow even stiffer than when I had to stand up and give my weekly current event report in history class.

So yeah, April and I had learned to be polite around each other, still giving the illusion that we were close friends, but almost everyone knew the truth by that point. More than anyone, Tori had the full picture as both drama team teacher and April's small group leader. She must've realized something needed to change, both for the drama team and for April and me, because at breakfast one morning, Wes asked me out of the blue if I wanted to play in the summer camp worship band.

At first, I couldn't answer. I'd worked all year long at FCA to prepare myself for that very moment when I could move up to the big leagues, so my response should've been an instant "YES."

But it wasn't.

A couple of the skater kids were in the school's marching band, and we'd been joking around about starting a ska band of our own. Reese wanted in too, though he didn't know how to play any instruments. We told him he could play bass. Having the ska band as an option had sort of muted my desire to play in the youth group worship band. For one thing, I wouldn't have to pretend to be feeling God when I actually wasn't. I could get up on stage and just be my real, true self.

It made me wonder what I actually wanted out of the worship band.

So much of that goal used to be about making other people like me—April, Wes and Tori, my parents... If I didn't need that anymore, why would I want to get up and play pretend again?

Wes sensed my hesitation and asked me what was wrong.

Ever since I'd poured my heart out about the night of the dance, I'd felt like I could be truthful with him without holding anything (or at least most things) back.

So I told him about my inability to feel God and how I'd feel like a fraud up there.

"Levi, you think I feel God every time I get up there?" he asked. "I'm not getting up there just for me. Even if I don't feel anything, it's about creating an environment for those who can feel Him to have that experience. And honestly, more than anything, it's about rocking out with my buddies. So, you do what you feel you need to do, but I'd love to spend the summer playing music with you if you want to."

I'd never thought about that before—that the people on stage might be going through the motions just so other people could benefit. I supposed that if I couldn't feel God directly, maybe I could still try and make Him happy by playing music for others to feel Him. Perhaps that'd even make me more likely to feel Him? I wasn't sure, but it was worth a try.

I told Wes I was in.

When camp week rolled around in the middle of July, I was nervous. By that point, I was pretty sure my feelings for April had faded. At the very least, I wasn't thinking about her nonstop every day like a few months earlier. It was almost as if I had this other life now that she wasn't a part of at all—and I liked that. I worried that being stuck so close to her again for days on end would reignite a fire from embers that were almost fully extinguished.

In the church parking lot, I waded through the sea of teens who were dragging their luggage over to the uHaul trailer that would carry it, and then I made my way toward the school bus we were using to transport everyone out to the camp in Columbus, a small town an hour west of Houston.

So far, I hadn't seen any of my friends, but they were likely already on the bus since I was running late, having had to double back to my house to get the toothbrush I'd forgotten. The bus was literally rocking as I approached it. Teens were hanging out the open windows, yelling in all directions—at their parents in the parking lot, at their friends a few rows away, at the sky for Lord knows what reason...it was barely-controlled chaos all around.

Which was why it was surprising to climb the steps into the bus and find Robbie perched on the driver's seat. He screamed orders at some junior highers near the back of the bus who were making fun of how short his jorts

were, but even he couldn't lower the volume or rein in the energy amassing in that big tin can. Everyone was about to escape their parents and siblings and whatever else for an entire week—freedom had never tasted so sweet.

The only seats left open were in the back near the junior highers and a solitary aisle seat in the front directly across from April, who shared the bench seat with Alex. They hadn't noticed me yet because they were caught up in laughing about something else.

And that was when I realized, when everything came into focus in my mind... The way they held eye contact while laughing, their shoulders touching as they leaned against each other even though there was enough room on the seat to leave some space, the lingering smiles as they finally broke eye contact and April's gaze drifted toward the front and up, up, up until it landed on...me. And suddenly the smile faded. A panicked look before she remembered to put on a friendly face.

Alex shared none of her concern.

"Dude! We were wondering if you were gonna make it!"

Reese and Molly shared the seat behind them, and I could tell by Molly's sheepish look that she'd witnessed what had just happened, my connecting of the dots.

"Everyone, SIT!" Robbie yelled. "Levi, that means you too. Just 'cause you're the pastor's kid doesn't mean you get to stand in the aisle the whole

way out there.”

I looked down at the seat across from April and Alex and realized why it was empty: it was shared with Jason. I was doomed to an hour of listening to him tell me about his *SimCity* families. But I had no real choice, so I sat.

For a couple of moments, I didn't say anything to anyone. I simply stared straight ahead, lost in thought and assessing my feelings.

“Hey...you good?”

It was April. I looked over at her. Genuine concern on her face. Beyond her, Alex was up on his knees in his seat, leaning over the back of it and yapping with Reese. Only she and I were aware of the moment taking place.

I breathed in and breathed out before answering.

“Yeah, I'm good.”

It was the truth. While Alex and April being together definitely surprised me, it also made sense and felt natural. Had it happened months before, I would've felt like I'd lost my only friend, but things had changed. My world had expanded. Looking at April's face and seeing her concern, though, reminded me how much she still cared about me. And how much I still cared about her.

I'd missed my friend.

“Ok,” she said. “I just wanted to check.”

"It's gonna be a good week."

"Tori said you're playing in the camp band."

"Yeah, Wes asked me to join."

"That's great. I'm so excited for you."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. Me too."

Wes and Tori climbed into the bus and closed the door behind them.

"Are you ready for CAAAAAAAAMP!" Wes yelled at everyone in the bus.

They screamed in reply. "Let's get this freak show on the road then. Who wants to say a word of prayer for a safe trip and a great week?"

For the first time since I'd stepped foot on the bus, it was dead silent.

"Come on," Wes pleaded. "It's just talking to God."

He looked down at me. I smiled, but then I looked out the window, quiet as everyone else.

"I'll do it."

It was Alex.

"Everyone bow your heads and close your eyes," he continued. He waited a moment. "I see you peeking!" he said to someone.

When everyone had complied, he continued.

"Father God, I—"

THE END

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