
RUSTIC KNOLL BIBLE CAMP SERIES

MARY L. HAMILTON

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CONTENTS

Untitled

Hear No Evil

Map of Rustic Knoll Bible Camp

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Discussion Questions

Resources

Acknowledgments

Speak No Evil

Chapter 1

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Resources](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[See No Evil](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Map of Rustic Knoll Bible Camp](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Resources](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

**The
Rustic Knoll Bible Camp
Series**

Hear No Evil
Speak No Evil
See No Evil

By

Mary L. Hamilton

OceanofPDF.com

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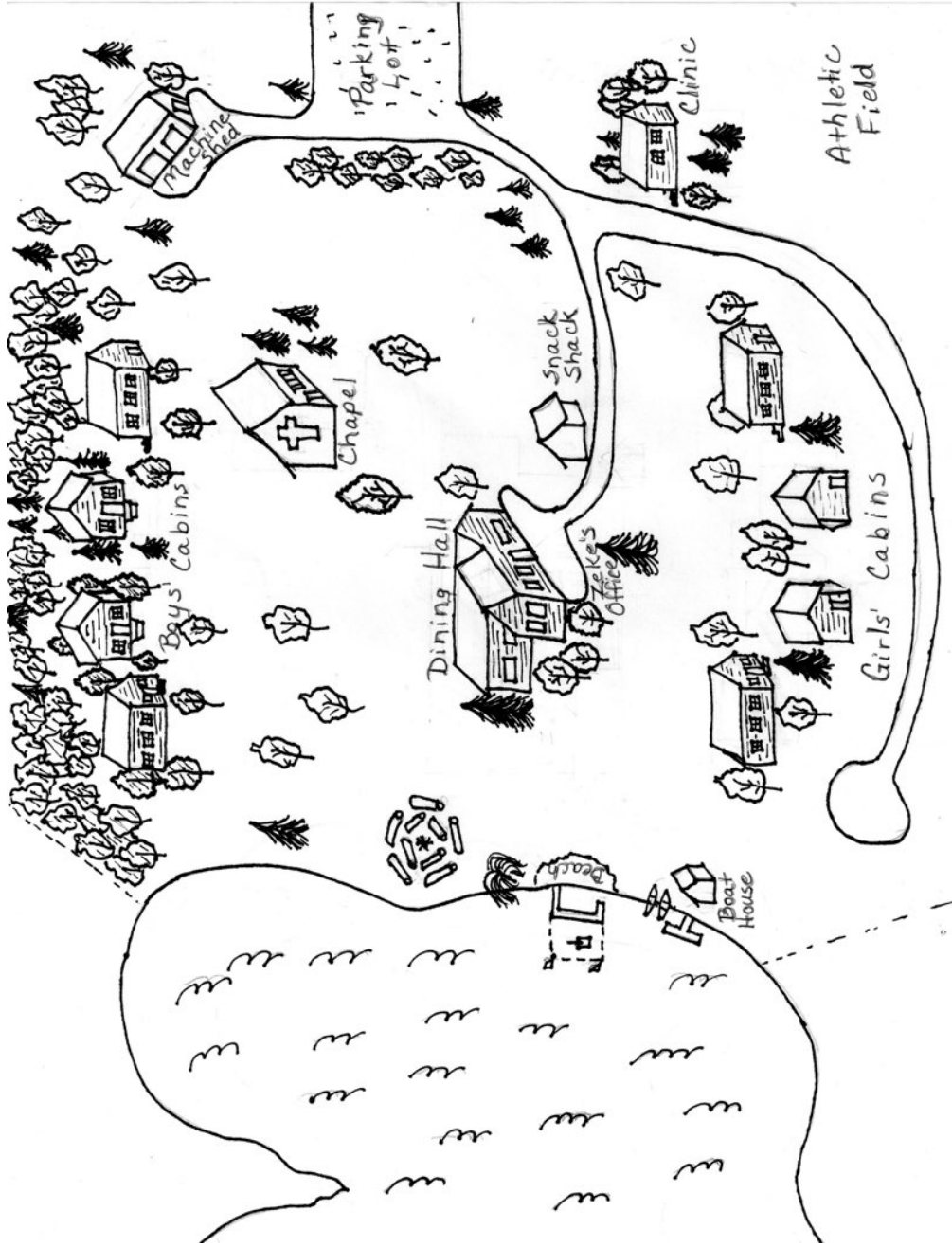
HEAR NO EVIL

RUSTIC KNOLL BIBLE CAMP
BOOK ONE

MARY L. HAMILTON

*To my LGH girls
and every kid who feels rejected*

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CHAPTER ONE

THE LAST TIME MOM CHEWED HER LIP LIKE THAT WAS AFTER DAD LEFT. Brady McCaul shuddered. His memory of that day when he was seven years old was so clear, it might have happened just last week rather than six years ago.

He stole a glance at his mom as she sat behind the wheel of their old Taurus. Flecks of dried blood dotted her bottom lip from constant gnawing, just like in the weeks and months after Dad walked out on them. She hadn't said more than eight words since they left home in Chicago two hours ago. Several times she started to say something, but never quite got the words out. Something was bothering her, but it never did any good to ask. She'd give him a weak smile and start talking about the weather or school. *What could possibly be as bad as Dad leaving?*

Maybe some music would take his mind off the twinge in the pit of his stomach. He sighed and sank further into the passenger's seat, propping his knees against the dashboard. He adjusted his earphones and bobbed his head to the beat of trumpet jazz by his one of his favorite artists. It didn't help, though. Even the music couldn't keep him from worrying about Mom. *Why would she chew her lip like that?*

After the first few dairy farms and cornfields, the scenery all looked the same and Brady became oblivious to it. They'd been following a pokey

pickup truck loaded with bales of hay, doing at least ten miles under the speed limit. Mom accelerated and zoomed around, only to stomp on the brake and make a screeching right turn. An arrow-shaped sign on the corner read “Rustic Knoll Bible Camp.”

Brady clutched the armrest with one hand and braced his other against the dashboard. The pickup’s horn blared as it continued past them on the road they’d just left. Mom ducked her head, but her lips moved as she peeked at the rear view mirror.

He pulled out one ear bud. “What’d you say?”

“I said I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cut him off, but I couldn’t see the sign until I got around him.”

Brady twirled the earphone by its cord. “Was this Richard’s idea? Me going to summer camp, I mean?” It still seemed weird, even after seven months, to call his stepdad by his first name. But calling him ‘Dad’ never felt right either.

Mom kept her focus on the road. “No, it was my decision.” She accelerated again and they flew over the crest of a hill.

Brady pinched the earphone between his thumb and forefinger. “Richard doesn’t like me any more than Dad did.”

Mom’s teeth pinched her lower lip. “Give it time, honey. It’s a big adjustment for all of us.” She gave him a sideways glance, her eyes moist.

What is bothering her? He played with the button that raised and lowered the window. The sweet fragrance of fresh-cut hay lying in neat rows in the fields they passed tickled his nostrils. Hopefully, this place wasn’t a boot camp or something. With a name like Rustic Knoll, he almost expected tents and outhouses.

A wooden sign with blue lettering and carved pine trees marked the camp’s entrance. Gravel crunched under the tires as they pulled into the parking lot. He sneezed at the dust cloud that caught up with them as the car came to a stop. Before he opened the door, Mom’s hand rested on his arm.

“I love you, Brady. I’m going to miss you.”

“It’s only for a week, Mom.” She opened her mouth as if she were going to say something, but then clamped her lips shut and nodded. He unplugged his other ear and stuffed the mp3 player into the glove compartment. They weren’t allowed to have electronic equipment at camp. Brady frowned as he got out of the car. Was there any chance Mom wouldn’t embarrass him by getting all mushy when they said good-bye? He gathered his backpack, duffle bag, pillow, sleeping bag and trumpet case from the trunk.

“Got everything?” Mom closed her car door. “Here, let me carry something.”

He handed over his pillow and sleeping bag then followed her past a welcome sign to a registration table shaded by a large oak. A few people waited in line ahead of them, so Brady dropped his duffle bag and set his trumpet case on the ground. He probably should have left the trumpet home, but if this place were as bad as he expected, he’d at least have one thing he could enjoy.

While the line inched forward, he checked out his surroundings. One low building sprawled in front of him, its wood siding stained deep reddish-brown. Another with a steep roof and cross-shaped window stood nearby. Beyond that, Brady glimpsed a cluster of smaller buildings, but nothing that looked like an outhouse. That seemed promising.

The woman behind them chatted with Mom, introducing herself as Mrs. Miller and the boy by her side as her son, Steven. He wore dark sunglasses and stood a few inches taller than Brady. One of his hands rested in the crook of his mom’s elbow. The other he thrust out in front of him.

“Nice to meet you.” He spoke the words but looked straight ahead.

Brady wasn’t sure the kid was speaking to him, but Mom was talking to Mrs. Miller and he was the only one left in their little group. He reached out and shook Steven’s hand.

“You, too.” As soon as he spoke, Steven turned in his direction. *He’s blind.*

“Where are you from?” Steven asked.

“Chicago.”

“Same here! What part?”

“The northwest side.” Brady didn’t want to give some strange kid his whole life story. He looked to Mom to help him out, but her gaze darted between the people in line, the ground, and the registration table. Everywhere but him. Was she angry? She didn’t exactly act as if she were mad at him. Why couldn’t she just come out and tell him what was wrong?

Thankfully, the woman at the check-in table motioned them forward, and Brady scooted his duffle bag and trumpet case ahead until he stood in front of her.

“Welcome to Rustic Knoll. I’m Nurse Willie.” She reached across the table. “Do you have your health form?” A light blue medical scrub top accented her dark skin. Wiry white curls puffed out from beneath the rim of her bucket hat, reminding Brady of small clouds. The fishing lures adorning her hat looked crazy, but cool at the same time, and they made faint tinkling sounds whenever her head moved.

Brady shrugged out of his backpack and dug around inside for his health form. “It’s in here somewhere.”

While he rifled through the compartments, Nurse Willie pointed out a spot on her hat to the younger man seated beside her.

“New lure?” he asked.

“Yep. Tried it out this weekend. Couldn’t even snag a clump of seaweed. Adds a nice touch of color though, don’t you think?”

“It’s you, Willie,” he chuckled. “Definitely you.”

Brady checked his pockets and dug through his backpack again. “I know I put it in here.”

Mom started to unzip his duffle bag. “You didn’t leave it at home, did you?”

“Nope. Found it.” Brady held up a wrinkled health form.

Nurse Willie took it from him and looked it over. The younger man beside her leaned close and squinted at the top of the paper, then checked a list in front of him. He looked older than a high schooler, but not really grown up yet. He drew a line with his yellow highlighter, then raised his head and smiled.

“Brady McCaul? All right! You’re in my cabin this week. I’m your counselor, Matt Carpenter.” He held up his hand for a high-five.

Brady met his hand and grinned back at Mom. His counselor seemed promising, at least.

Matt pointed off to his left. “We’re in Oaks Cabin, on the other side of the chapel. You’re free until supper. Meet me in the cabin a little before six and we’ll all go eat together.”

Brady gathered up his belongings and headed in the direction Matt had pointed. Mom followed, lagging behind. They hadn’t gone far when she called him to stop. He turned to find her hugging his pillow and sleeping bag the way his little cousin held her teddy bear when she was crying. “What’s wrong?”

She shook the hair from her face. “There’s something I need to tell you. I’ve been putting it off, trying to think of the best way to say it, but...” She pressed her lips together and her chin quivered.

“I know something’s wrong. What is it?” Brady stood waiting, but she remained silent, biting her lip. “Mom. Just say it.”

She inhaled deeply as if to push the words out. They rushed from her mouth. “You can’t come home at the end of the week. Your dad is picking you up. You’ll be living with him now.”

Brady’s jaw dropped. “What? Whose idea was that? Richard’s?”

Mom closed her eyes, swallowed hard and rolled her lips in. “No. It’s my decision.”

“Mom.” Brady stretched the word into two syllables. People turned to look at them, and he lowered his voice. “Why?”

“You’re growing up.” She tried to smile, but her lips trembled too much. “You’re almost fourteen...and...you need your dad.”

Brady’s legs threatened to give out on him. He shook his head. “I need a dad who cares about me more than his job. Dad doesn’t even bother to send me a birthday card unless you remind him.”

Mom straightened her back and shoulders, and she took on a firm tone. “Honey, I can’t explain it, but you need to be with your dad right now.”

His dropped his duffle bag and it thudded on the ground. “I don’t want to live with Dad. I’d never see my friends anymore. I’d have to change schools. Why can’t I stay with you?”

“I told you why...”

“But in the car you told me to give Richard time. You said it’s an adjustment.”

Mom sighed and shook her head. “Don’t argue with me. You’re only making this harder.”

“Me?” He brought his hands to his chest then flung his arms out to the side. “I’m not making it harder. You’re the one who came up with this dumb idea. You get to go back home. To Richard.” The last two words came out as a sneer.

“Stop it!” Mom’s eyes narrowed. “You may not talk that way to me.”

Brady wasn’t finished. “You’re just like Dad. You don’t care about me either.”

“That’s enough!” She threw the sleeping bag and pillow to the ground, then crossed her arms and hugged her shoulders. She looked like she was trying to warm herself. “I don’t want you living with me anymore, Brady. This is not up for discussion. Your father will pick you up on Saturday.”

She turned on her heel and marched to the parking lot where she slumped against the car. Her hand fumbled with the keys and brushed across her eyes more than once before she got the door open. She put one foot in the car, then stopped and looked his way.

Come back, Mom. Please, come back and tell me it was all a mistake.

She sat in the car. Did he hear the rumble of the engine coming to life, or was it his imagination? Either way, the scene was all too real. Gravel sprayed as Mom spun the car around and drove away without even a backhand wave. It was eerily familiar, except the last time, he was seven years old, hiding in his room with a pillow over his head to keep out the angry voices. A door slammed, and everything went silent. He threw back the pillow and heard Mom crying, then jumped off the bed and ran to the window to watch his dad drive away. Dad never returned Brady's wave. Never returned, period.

Breathe. His throat hurt from swallowing back tears, and he bit his tongue until he tasted blood. Dipping his head, he clamped his eyes shut against the curious stares. His cheeks and the tips of his ears burned. Opening his eyes to the duffle bag at his feet, he reared his foot back, then shot it forward to slam into the bag. The zipper split, and underwear, shorts and t-shirts belched from the overstuffed bag onto the ground. He let go a shaky breath then squatted to gather up his clothes.

Matt appeared beside him. "Here, let me help you with that." He grabbed a handful of underwear and stuffed it back in the bag.

Brady rubbed away a tear that dripped onto his hand before Matt could see it. "I'll do it."

Matt moved close and whispered, "I want to help. I figure you probably feel like this bag right now. Kicked in the gut, split open, all your insides falling out?"

Brady pressed his lips into a hard line. He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you outta here in a second.” Matt looked around. “Hey, Steven. Come here a minute.”

Steven and his mother were just leaving the check-in table. They came and stood beside Matt as he introduced the boys.

“Steven Miller, meet Brady McCaul. You’re both in my cabin.”

Steven nodded toward Matt. “We already met in line. I take it this is your first time at Rustic Knoll?”

Brady nodded.

“Speak up,” Matt said. “He can’t see you nod.”

“Yeah.” Brady cleared his throat. “Yeah, it is.” The pitying look in Mrs. Miller’s eyes told him she’d heard everything. He looked away, embarrassed.

Matt spoke to both Steven and his mom. “We need some help getting Brady to the cabin. The zipper on his duffle bag broke. Do you have an extra hand?”

Steven shifted his sleeping bag from his hand to underneath his arm and accepted the trumpet case from Matt. “Musical instrument?”

Brady nodded. *Oh yeah, say things out loud.* “It’s a trumpet.”

“You must be good.”

“How would you know that?” Brady scrunched his eyebrows together as he packed his sleeping bag and pillow under one arm.

“Just a guess. Sometimes kids bring guitars to camp but not horns. Bringing a horn to camp says you love playing it, and people who love playing something are usually good at it.”

Brady shrugged. “I guess.”

Mrs. Miller tugged at her son’s shirt collar to straighten it. “Steven, why don’t we say good-bye here so you can show Brady to the cabin?”

“What about my suitcase?” Steven asked.

“Here, let’s do this.” Matt wrapped the duffle bag’s strap around it to keep it closed then slid it down around the suitcase’s pull-out handle.

“There. Now one of you can pull it.”

Brady busied himself with his gear while Steven and his mom hugged and said their good-byes. His chest ached with envy at the way she rubbed Steven’s back while they embraced. Mom used to rub his back every night. The night Dad left, she’d found him crying in bed; she’d stayed and rubbed his back until he fell asleep. It grew into a routine that morphed into a back scratch as he got older.

A lot had changed lately. Mom rarely came to his room to say good night anymore. He was pretty certain Dad would never bother to scratch his back.

Mrs. Miller positioned Steven’s hand on Brady’s elbow, squeezed both boys’ shoulders and said, “You’re all set. Off to the cabin with you.”

Brady hesitated. “Isn’t it kind of hard to find your way around camp when you’re...”

“Blind? Trust me. I’ve been coming here since I was little. I prob’ly know this place better than most of the people who work here.”

Brady took a few cautious steps.

“Just walk normal,” Steven said, “but let me know if they’ve rearranged the furniture.”

“Furniture?”

“Warn me if I need to step up, over, around, or down.”

Brady nodded, then remembered to say okay. He started toward the cabin that would be his new home, at least for the next six days. After that? If he wanted to live with Mom, he’d have to figure out why she’d kicked him out. Maybe then, he’d be able to change her mind. But one thing was certain; he would not be living with Dad.

CHAPTER TWO

STEVEN CHATTERED ALL THE WAY TO THE CABIN. SOMETHING ABOUT BOAT races and a girl named Claire. Mom's words played over and over in Brady's head. What had he done that was so awful she didn't want him living with her anymore?

Four squat buildings nestled among trees at the edge of some woods. Brady guessed which one was Oaks Cabin from the trees surrounding it. Two concrete steps led up to a screen door that screeched when he opened it. He stopped inside to let his eyes adjust to the dark interior.

"What's wrong?" Steven's fingers tightened slightly on Brady's arm.

"Nothing. I just can't see anything until my eyes adjust."

Steven laughed. "I don't have that problem. Follow me." He let go of Brady's arm and took measured steps across the room.

Brady followed. The outlines of several couches took shape against the walls of the common room.

"The bathroom and showers are over there." Steven pointed to the left, then rapped his knuckles on a closed door as they passed it. "Counselor's room, where Matt sleeps." He moved through a wide doorway, his arm stretched out ahead of him until his hand touched a bunk bed. "Is this one taken?"

Three boys looked up from their huddle over a car magazine on the lower bed. The boy in the middle tossed the hair from his eyes and grimaced.

“Pull your shades off and maybe you could see us sitting here,” he said.

“Is that all it takes?” Steven whipped his glasses off, revealing milky-looking eyes as he turned his head in one direction, then another. He clicked his tongue. “Nope, not that easy.” The other two boys elbowed the one who spoke, and whispers hissed between them.

“Come on.” Brady pulled Steven down the row past three other bunk beds to two empty ones on the end. “You want top or bottom?”

“I’m better off on the bottom. Where do you want your trumpet?”

One of the three teens looked up. “You brought a trumpet?”

The first kid blew through his lips and muttered loud enough for everyone to hear. “Loser.”

Steven felt for the bottom bunk and sat on it. “He’s not a loser. Wait ’til you hear him. Play something, Brady.”

“I–I don’t really feel like playing right now.” He tried to take the trumpet case, but Steven pulled it onto his lap and opened the clasps.

“Come on,” Steven begged. “Just a little? Play something. Anything.”

A half-frown tugged at Brady’s mouth.

One boy turned away from the magazine. “Go ahead. Play something.”

With a sigh, Brady picked up the horn, slid the mouthpiece into place and licked his lips. After running through some basic scales, he began to improvise. Soon, the joy of the music took over. Inhaling a deep breath, he launched into a tune the boys recognized. Finally, he ended his performance by playing “Amazing Grace” in three different musical styles. By the time he finished, two of the three boys had turned away from the magazine and joined Steven’s applause.

The first kid flipped a page with an exaggerated yawn. “I’ve heard better.”

“Jealous, Taylor?” His friend gave the boy called Taylor a knowing grin.

“Shut up, Chris.” Taylor scowled and pointed to the magazine. “Nick, look at this.”

Chris moved over to Steven’s bunk and nodded toward Taylor. “Don’t let him get to you. That was really good. Play some more?”

“Maybe later.” Brady put the horn away and closed the case. The open cabinets for hanging clothing offered nothing in the way of safekeeping. He slid it under Steven’s bed then shoved his backpack and duffle bag along the sides to hide it from casual view. Later, he’d ask Matt about locking it up.

Brady nudged Steven’s shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

They stopped on the front steps, and Steven drew a verbal map of the camp’s grounds. “The lake is downhill from here. Swimming and boating are over that way.” He pointed ahead and to the left. “Zeke’s office and the dining hall are back where we came from. The girls’ cabins are on the other side of the dining hall. Rec is over in that area too.”

“Who is Zeke? And what’s wreck? It sounds like a car wreck.”

Steven grinned. “Zeke is the camp director. You’ll meet him tonight. His real name is David Zacharias. Reverend Zacharias. Rec is short for recreation: baseball, tennis, basketball. I don’t usually hang around the Rec area, for obvious reasons. But if you want to see it...”

“No, let’s go see the lake.” Brady winced. Steven couldn’t see the lake or anything else. He’d have to be more careful about the words he used.

The trees soon thinned out, giving way to a grassy hillside that descended to the beach. A light breeze carried the unique scent of sand and water. Sunlight glittered on the lake like the little white Christmas lights Mom put on their shrubs at home. Speedboats zoomed in every direction, some pulling water-skiers.

A silvery aluminum pier enclosed three sides of a swimming area where a game of water tag was going on. The swimmers’ shouts and laughter

carried up to where Brady stood. Beyond the pier, a pontoon raft with a diving board floated in place. Ropes and buoys marked the boundaries of the deep-water area.

“Do you swim, Brady?”

“I know how, but that’s about it.” A contest out on the raft caught Brady’s attention. A group of boys competed for the biggest splash off the diving board. He recalled launching himself from the edge of the pool when he was three or four, his body drawn into a ball. The splashes he made couldn’t have been anything like the ones these boys were making, but Mom always acted as if they were gigantic.

Steven interrupted his daydream. “I bet Claire’s down there somewhere. She loves the water.”

“There’s a bunch of girls sunbathing. What does she look like?” Brady winced again. “Um...I mean...sorry.”

Steven laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s cool when people forget I’m different. Anyway, Claire wouldn’t be lying around on the beach. She’d be out in the water.”

Just then, a distant voice called, “Steven!”

“That’s her.” Steven nodded once. “Do you see her? Where is she?”

Brady’s gaze swept the beach and swimming area then moved over to the boat dock. The voice rang out again, and he spotted two girls in a canoe nearing the dock. One waved an arm in the air, as if Steven could see her.

“She’s down by the boats. You want to go see...I mean, go down there?”

Steven was already pulling in that direction. Brady warned him when they reached the steps leading down to the boat dock.

Steven smiled. “I know. There’s seven, and they’re kind of wide from front to back.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve done these steps every year since I was five. That’s ten years in a row.”

The wooden boat dock jutted into the water like a T, with a small ski boat tethered to one side. To the right, six canoes lay beached on the sand. Claire met them at the bottom step, giving Steven an awkward hug in her life vest. She stood slightly taller than him with an athletic build and blonde hair in a boyish cut. She pulled off her life jacket and tossed it to her friend who was returning their gear to the boathouse.

“Dillon’s back this year,” Claire said, “but his leg’s in a cast.”

Steven laughed. “Really? Mighty Dillon, the super jock, with a cast on his leg?”

“No kidding. Of course, he’s bragging about how he broke it.” Claire looked from Steven to Brady. “Hi. I’m Claire. That’s Hayley.”

Brady stuttered. “Uh, hi. I’m Brady.” Girls as cute as Claire usually acted like he was invisible. He blamed it on his red hair and freckles.

“Did you come to camp with Steven?” Claire asked. Brady shook his head.

“We’re in the same cabin,” Steven explained. “What are you up to?”

“We were just going to swim. Want to come?”

“Not unless Brady wants to. We’d have to go back to the cabin and change.”

Claire’s smile drooped and the dimples in her cheeks disappeared. “You’ll be sorry.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Brady offered. He might actually start to like swimming.

Her smile perked up again. “All right then. Come on, Hayley. Let’s go.” The girls ran off to the beach, and Steven made a suggestion.

“Since we’re here, let’s take out a canoe.”

“I’ve never been in one before.”

“It’s not hard. I’ll steer. You just paddle and tell me if we need to go right or left. Go get us some life jackets and paddles.”

The boat manager provided the necessary equipment and introduced himself as Ryan, the counselor in Spruce cabin next door to Oaks. Brady handed a life jacket to Steven and pulled the other orange vest over his head. He tied the top lashes and buckled the strap around his waist, then led Steven to a canoe. Ryan joined them, eyeing Steven.

“You sure you’re okay taking one of these out?”

Brady would’ve readily agreed to stay on shore, but Steven spoke up.

“We’re fine. Zeke can tell you I’ve done this many times.” He snapped the buckle on his vest. “Blow your whistle if you don’t like what you see and we’ll come back.”

“All right.” Ryan sounded unconvinced. “Wait. How’d you know I have a whistle?”

Steven sighed. “I told you I’ve done this before. Lifeguards and boat guys all have whistles. Now, would you mind showing Brady how to paddle?”

Minutes later, in the nose of the canoe, Brady held tight to the sides while Steven’s paddle swished through the water behind him. The canoe skimmed along so smoothly, he gradually loosened his grip on the gunwales. He took up his paddle, gripping it the way Ryan had showed him, and dipped it into the water. It dragged as the canoe moved forward. He pulled the paddle up to try again, but the canoe tipped to the right. He yelped, grabbed for the gunwales and nearly dropped the paddle in the lake.

“What happened? You okay?” Steven’s voice held concern.

Brady swallowed. “I thought we were tipping over.”

“Sorry, I just shifted positions. The boat won’t sink, even if we do go over, but it’s really not as tippy as it feels. Hang on. I’ll show you.”

Brady clung to the sides while Steven rocked the boat, gently at first, gradually building up to a point where Brady held his breath in case he landed in the water.

Ryan’s whistle blast ended the experiment. “What are you doing?”

Steven called back. “Just getting him used to the motion. That’s all. We’re done.” He dropped his voice to talk to Brady. “See? It tips pretty far without going over.”

Brady’s pulse returned to normal, and he stuck his paddle in the water again, pulling back hard. The paddle hit the side of the canoe, so he switched to the other side and tried again. That was even more awkward than the other way.

Steven coached him. “It’s okay to switch sides whenever your arms get tired, but it’s better if we work together. Try paddling when I say stroke. Ready? Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.”

They glided into deeper water. It looked like it might be a mile or more to the other side of the lake. The shore swept around them in the wide arc of a natural bay. Ryan had warned them not to go past an imaginary line across the bay’s opening. But it was tempting to go farther. A blue and white sailboat slid across the open lake as if pulled along on an unseen string.

Houses occupied the shoreline on both sides of Rustic Knoll, some newer and more elaborate than others. Here and there, a dilapidated boathouse sat next to a newer aluminum dock where motorboats, pontoons, jet skis, and even a paddleboat were tied up.

The canoe rocked over several speedboat wakes, and Brady enjoyed the feel of rolling with the waves. Before long, though, his arms grew heavy, like they were dragging fifty-pound weights.

“I need to stop a minute. My arms are about to fall off.”

Steven stopped paddling. “Want to have some fun?”

“Not if it means you’ll tip us over.”

Steven laughed. “I wouldn’t do that to you. My dad tipped me over on purpose one of the first times he took me out here.”

Brady half turned and spoke over his shoulder. “Why’d he do that?”

“Dad didn’t believe in making things easy for me. He made me do lots of stuff that seemed pointless at the time.”

“Like what?”

“Counting steps, for one thing. Every time we came up here, Dad had me count how many steps from the bunk to the bathroom, cabin to the dining hall, cabin to the beach. Everywhere we went, he had me memorizing how to orient myself at one place to get somewhere else. He said it would teach me confidence.”

Brady straddled his seat so he could see Steven.

“I hated it.” Steven fiddled with the paddle lying across his knees. “All that counting and planning and thinking. It seemed so stupid at the time. But since Dad died last year, I appreciate what he did for me. He forced me to be independent.” Steven paused, then inhaled deeply and sat up straight. “That’s why he tipped the canoe over. He always tried to prepare me for the worst thing that could possibly happen so I’d know how to handle unexpected trouble.”

Brady pulled his other leg around and faced Steven. “How did you handle it?”

“Not very well.” Steven laughed. “One minute I’m sitting in the canoe and the next I’m in the lake, trying to breathe. I wanted to scream or cry, but all I could do was gulp water.”

“He didn’t even warn you?”

“Nope. You should’ve heard my mom when she found out about it. But when we got back, Dad said he did it that way because I can’t see what’s coming and he wanted me to be able to manage surprises.” Steven shrugged. “I survived, and I know what to do if it happens again.”

Brady played with the strap on his vest. “Sounds like he was pretty tough on you.”

“Sometimes he was, but we had fun too.” Steven sat quietly for several moments. “I sure miss him.” He picked up his paddle and dragged it through the water.

Brady couldn't say he missed his dad. Broken promises and neglect had a way of killing any warm memories. Besides, seeing his mom cry had scared him worse than his dad leaving. The ache in his chest deepened.

In silence, Brady swung around to face the front and dug his paddle into the water. Again. And again.

"Everything okay, Brady?"

"Yeah." *I hate my dad. And I hate Mom, too, for leaving me.*

"You sure?"

"I'm fine."

Hate my life.

"If I said something wrong..."

"I said I'm fine. Can we go back now?"

The canoe began to swing around.

"Remember, you're the navigator," Steven said. "Tell me where you want to go."

Home. I want to go home.

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CHAPTER THREE

HOURS LATER, BRADY STEPPED SIDEWAYS INTO THE BACK ROW OF THE chapel for evening worship. Steven followed, grasping his elbow, but Claire hung back in the aisle.

“I don’t want to sit way back here. Come on, let’s go up front.” She grabbed Steven’s hand and led him up the center aisle to the third row on the left.

Brady followed. *What am I? A little brother tagging along on a date?* Not that Steven or Claire ever made him feel unwelcome. In fact, having Claire around relieved him of guide dog status. What he didn’t like was when she got a little bossy. Like now. She and Steven had such an easy way with each other. Did their friendship go deeper than summer camp buddies? Probably not after the way she pulled away from Steven’s grasp even before they sat down.

A damp, musty odor tickled Brady’s nose and he sneezed. Fans hung from the vaulted ceiling, their swirling blades mixing the day’s accumulated heat with cooler evening air sucked in through the open windows. Fading sunlight filtered through the blue cross-shaped window at the front, bathing a low stage in soft colored shadows.

Ryan tinkered with a drum set on the stage while other counselors tuned guitars and checked microphones. At the start of the first song, all the kids

got to their feet. Matt slipped in beside Brady and started clapping and singing along with the music. The song was unfamiliar to Brady, but before long his fingers were following the beat, tapping on the pew in front of him. Several lively songs followed before the band turned the stage over to Zeke, and everyone sat down.

Steven had introduced him to Zeke at supper, but now Brady studied the man setting an oversized pad of drawing paper up on an easel. His squat stature, white hair and matching mustache made him look more like one of Santa's elves than a camp director.

Zeke removed the lid from a thin box and selected a piece of artist's chalk, the kind Brady's art teacher called pastels. He sketched several black streaks on the paper then held his hand in the air. "Raise your hand if you know me." Steven and Claire raised their hands, along with most of the other campers.

Zeke cocked an eyebrow, then drew a few more black streaks. "Does anyone here know Abraham Lincoln?" This time, Brady raised his hand with the others.

"You do?" Both of Zeke's eyebrows shot up this time. "What about George Washington?" He stepped back at the enthusiastic response and covered his heart with his hand. His head moved back and forth and his white brows knit together in a puzzled expression. He added a few more black strokes before choosing a new color.

Steven leaned over and whispered to Brady. "What's he drawing?"

"I can't tell yet. Just some black streaks."

Zeke colored in a few areas while he spoke. "You know, it's one thing to know who someone is. When I finish this drawing, every one of you will recognize him." He waved his hand over the audience, a piece of bright red chalk clenched in his fingers. "You'll know his name. You'll know what he does, where he lives. But will you really know him?"

He drew in more details. “Think about your best friend. Do you know what makes her laugh? Or cry? What makes him angry? Do you know her favorite color or food? Does he root for the Cubs or the Brewers? Can you recognize her voice? If he called your name in the school cafeteria, would you know who it was without looking?”

“It’s the President!” Brady tried to keep his voice down. “Wow! It looks just like him.”

Zeke put the finishing touches on his drawing and dropped the chalk back in the box. He rubbed his fingers on a towel. “Now, do you know this man?”

Several campers shouted out his name.

Zeke spoke to a girl on the front row. “Do you know what makes him laugh?” He pointed to other campers and asked, “What TV shows does he like to watch? What’s his favorite ice cream flavor? Without looking, would you know his voice if he called your name?”

Zeke picked up a Bible and strolled down the aisle. “You see, there’s a difference between knowing who someone is and knowing them personally. People make that mistake with God. They may know a lot about Him, but they haven’t spent time getting to know Him. They can’t recognize His voice. He could scream in their ear and they’d never hear it.”

Brady studied the chalk portrait. He’d always thought you got to know God by going to church. His family went when he was little, but it hadn’t done much good. His dad still left; his parents still divorced. He and his mom quit going to church after the divorce. Maybe he only knew *about* God, like Zeke said. He sure wouldn’t recognize God’s voice. But then, God would never call his name anyway.

Darkness pressed in on Brady when he left the chapel. Nighttime never looked this black at home. Matt flicked on his flashlight and let it play over the ground in front of them.

Brady fell into step beside Matt. “Thanks. I left my flashlight in the cabin.”

“Yeah, so did I.” Steven’s fingers held Brady’s elbow with a light touch.

Why would Steven have a flashlight? Brady caught Matt’s puzzled look and shrugged.

Steven squeezed his arm. “That’s a joke. You’re supposed to laugh.”

“Oh!” Matt chuckled. “I thought maybe you had some fancy new flashlight that beeped when something was in your way.” They all laughed as they walked toward the cabin. Brady kept a close watch on the ground for anything that might trip Steven.

“So how’s camp going for you guys so far?” Matt asked.

Brady nudged Steven sideways, skirting an old stump. “It’s okay.”

“Just wait ’til tomorrow.” Steven smacked his lips. “It gets better, starting with Janie’s pancakes and sausage for breakfast.”

Matt laughed. “You’ve been coming here way too long if you know the menu that well. Either that or Janie’s in a serious rut.”

“Who’s Janie?” Brady asked.

Matt flicked the flashlight beam back and forth. “Janie Rodriguez is Rustic Knoll’s head cook and substitute mom. You’ll see her around the buffet lines at meals. She even takes special requests if you compliment her cooking.”

They reached the cabin where raucous voices erupted from within. At the top of the steps, Matt held the door open, motioning Brady and Steven inside. Something whizzed past Brady’s head.

“Ouch!” Steven rubbed his cheek. “What was that?”

A yellow peanut M&M fell at their feet. Another one smacked against the doorframe. Matt pushed past them and stalked through the common

room, stopping in the doorway to the bunkroom.

“Whoever threw those better get rid of them now! If I see ’em, they’re mine.”

A hurried rustling sounded, and a voice apologized. “I didn’t mean to hit you. Honest.”

“You hit Steven, not me. Make sure you pick up every piece of candy that’s on the floor if you don’t want ants crawling on you in your sleep.”

Matt waved Brady and Steven in. Damp swim trunks lay in a puddle of water on the floor. T-shirts and beach towels were flung over the ends of beds. Sleeping bags, once positioned neatly on the bunks, now dangled over the sides. Open suitcases with contents in disarray littered the aisle.

“Get these out of the way so no one trips over them.” Matt kicked one of the suitcases under a bed and waited until the rest were cleared from the path. Brady led Steven to their bunks.

“You have fifteen minutes to get ready for bed. Then I want everyone out here.” Matt pointed to the common room. “Fifteen minutes.”

Brady dragged his duffle bag from under the bed, relieved to see his trumpet case where he’d left it. He and Steven got ready for bed and brushed their teeth before finding seats on a couch in the common room. Taylor wandered in with Nick and Chris, and claimed an entire couch for himself. He stretched his legs the length of it, kicking Nick off when he tried to squeeze in on the end. Chris grabbed a cushion from another chair, threw it on the floor, and sat on it.

When everyone had assembled, Matt made his way around the room, reviewing the boys’ names and asking each one a few questions. He stopped in front of Brady, held the tip of his thumb to his lips and wiggled his fingers up and down. “I hear you brought a trumpet. Can you play?”

Brady gulped. “Now?”

Matt grinned. “No, I mean, are you any good?”

Brady shrugged, hoping it would discourage any further attention.

Steven didn't let it pass. "You should hear him."

"He is pretty awesome." Nick nodded, but said no more when Taylor slapped his shoulder.

Chris paid no attention to Taylor's scowl. "Have him play something."

"A fan club already." Matt looked impressed. "Know any lullabies that'll put these animals to sleep?"

"Amazing Grace," Steven blurted out. "Seriously, you should hear the way he plays it."

Would he never shut up?

Chris agreed with Steven, and Matt looked at Brady.

"Will you play it for us tonight when we turn the lights out?"

Brady drew air through his nostrils before agreeing. He should have left the trumpet at home. No, better to have it with him, since he may not have a home anymore. *Was Mom really as serious as she sounded?*

She's changed. Frozen pizzas and popcorn used to mark Friday nights after Dad left. He and Mom would camp out in the living room and watch a rented movie, sometimes falling asleep right there on the floor. If only he could still talk to her like he did during their Friday night specials. *When did we stop doing that? And why? Was it because I got older? Or because she met Richard?*

Matt's voice cut into his thoughts. "Be out here with your trumpet in about ten minutes, okay?"

Brady nodded. Not one word Matt said had gone into his ears after he agreed to play. He guided Steven back to their bunks and waited while his friend unzipped his sleeping bag and pulled back the top. Inside was a folded bed sheet. Smart idea. The cabin held in the day's heat like a dry sauna. A cool sheet sounded so much better than a heavy sleeping bag. As soon as Steven got into bed, Brady reached underneath and pulled out his trumpet case.

"Are you going to play it the way you did this afternoon?"

Brady lifted his trumpet and shut the case. “No. I think I’ll just play it straight.”

“You should play it for the talent show at the end of the week.”

Brady ignored that suggestion. “I need to see about locking this up.” With the horn in one hand and the case in the other, he went to Matt’s open door.

“Can I lock this up somewhere?”

Matt pointed to an empty corner. “You can leave it here if you want. I lock the room whenever I leave. But if you want to play it when I’m not here, you’ll have to find me to get the key.”

Brady pressed his lips together. “Let’s try it.” He set the case just inside the door and went out to the common room to wait.

Matt herded stragglers out of the bathroom and into their bunks. Finally, amid much chatter and noise, Matt cut the lights off in the bunkroom. He leaned against the door jam, framed by the light from his room, and gave the signal to begin playing.

Brady licked his lips and raised the trumpet. The soothing notes of the familiar song flowed out in long, restful tones. When the last one died away, the silence in the bunkroom surprised him, as did the sudden applause from Spruce cabin next door.

“I think your fan club just exploded.” Matt pushed away from the doorframe, placed his hands on Brady’s shoulders and looked him in the eye. “That was really good. You’ve got talent. A real gift. You are awesome.” Matt squeezed his shoulders and gave him a pat on the back.

Brady laid his horn in the case and headed back to his bunk.

“Loser.” The whisper followed him, but other voices answered back.

“Shut up, Taylor.”

He climbed onto his bunk, laid his head on the pillow and stared at the dark ceiling. Was his talent really that unusual?

You. Are. Awesome. The words echoed inside his head, each one emphasized as if Matt really meant it.

If I'm so awesome, why doesn't Mom want me anymore? Why did Dad leave?

Loser.

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CHAPTER FOUR

BRADY STRUGGLED TO OPEN ONE EYE WHEN SOMEONE PRODDED HIM.

“Wake up. It’s time for breakfast.” Steven joggled his shoulder. “If you want a shower, you better get in there now before everyone else gets up.” He pulled a towel from around his neck and rubbed it over his wet hair.

Brady yawned and stretched. He’d lain awake last night long after the light in Matt’s room went out and the other boys’ whispers turned to soft snores. Mom’s parting words kept echoing in his head. “I don’t want you living with me anymore.” *I don’t want you.* He’d pulled the pillow over his ears, hoping to shut out the ugly words. It worked for a time, but during the night, he awoke and listened to their echoes for hours before finally falling asleep again. He couldn’t have slept more than thirty minutes before Steven woke him.

He climbed down from his bunk. He wouldn’t bother changing from the shorts and t-shirt he’d slept in. They were wrinkled, but he wasn’t awake enough to think about finding his shower stuff. He’d have time to shower and change after breakfast.

“I guess I’m ready.” He yawned once again, ran his fingers through his hair and took a good look at Steven.

His friend’s dark blond hair lay in place across his head, parted smartly on the left. Steven’s striped pullover shirt looked crisp, as if he’d just pulled

it from an ironing board. It was tucked into his shorts, which were also unwrinkled and belted at the waist. Somehow, he managed to avoid the geeky look that plagued other kids who dressed that way.

How does he do that when he can't even see himself in a mirror?

Other boys were stirring by the time they left the cabin. The sun was high enough to peek through the trees, dappling the ground with light as they headed for the dining hall. Yesterday's heat still clung to the air.

Steven inhaled. "Mmmm. Smell those pancakes? Trust me. They're worth getting up for." He slowed as they neared the Snack Shack. "Take a look at the activities board and tell me what Rec team I'm on."

Brady moved around to the Shack's side where a glass-covered announcement board was mounted on the outer wall. He skimmed over the lists of Rec teams. "You're on the red team. Hey, so am I!"

"Yes! Anyone else on our team? What are we playing today?"

Brady scanned the list again, relieved at not seeing Taylor's name. "Looks like Claire and Chris are with us. I hope they're good at softball 'cause that's what we're doing. I hate softball."

Steven shook his head. "I'm not crazy about it either. Not since I got hit by a ball."

In the dining hall, Brady slid a tray along the buffet line. He loaded Steven's plate then piled a stack of pancakes on his own, along with a generous helping of sausages.

"Here's some hot syrup for you boys." A plump, older woman slid a pan of steaming pancake syrup into the buffet. Her eyes lit when she saw Steven. "How come you didn't let me know you were here?" She waddled around the end of the buffet, pulling off her sanitary serving gloves, and gave him a hug.

A wide smile creased Steven's face. "Hi, Janie. I missed you at supper last night. I've been bragging to Brady here about your pancakes."

She reached to shake his hand. "Hello, Brady. It's nice to meet you. I'm Janie Rodriguez."

"You too, Mrs. Rodriguez." It came out as a mumble. He still wasn't totally awake.

"Call me Janie." She tilted her head sideways to look at him. "Such pretty red hair. I think I'm jealous." She winked and returned to her side of the buffet.

Pretty?

"Well, Steven, what can I cook for you this week?" She pulled her serving gloves back on and waited for an answer.

Steven struck a pose that looked like he was deep in thought. "How about some sloppy joes, with brownies for dessert? And can we make it a picnic?"

"Anything for you, Steven. Which night would you like that?"

"Tomorrow night?"

"Done."

Steven laughed. "Thanks, Janie. See you later."

Brady led the way to a table. "Was she serious? Did you really just decide what we're having for supper tomorrow?"

Steven laughed again. "No, it's a joke. We do this every year. Tuesday night is always picnic night with sloppy joes and brownies." He sat down and arranged his plate, utensils and glass just so, then bowed his head.

Brady stared at his plate. Steven had done the same thing at supper last night. Was he expected to pray too or was it okay to go ahead and eat? Fifteen minutes ago, food was the last thing on his mind, but now that his stomach was awake, it was demanding breakfast. Still, it seemed rude to start eating while someone next to him was praying. He waited for Steven's head to come up, then stabbed a sausage and devoured it.

By the time he licked the last drop of syrup from his fork, the dining hall had filled up. Some of the boys from the cabin joined them at the table.

Matt claimed the last empty spot.

“G’morning, men.”

Only Steven answered with any enthusiasm. Brady pushed his tray back, crossed his arms on the table and laid his head down on top. He needed sleep. But a string of curse words from the table behind him brought his head up with a jerk.

Matt jumped to his feet. All eyes turned to the offending table where Taylor sat. The boys around him looked wide-eyed at Matt, lips clamped tight. Taylor turned around and clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Oops, I’m sorry. Really, I am. I know I’m not supposed to cuss here. I didn’t mean to. Honest. I’m sorry.”

A tight smile formed on Matt’s lips, but his voice sounded casual. “No, no. Go right ahead. You can curse all you want.”

Taylor’s eyes narrowed, his brows forming a V. He looked at his friends around the table and then back at Matt. “Really?”

“Yeah, you can curse all you want. But you have to use your own name. The other one’s already taken and the owner doesn’t appreciate it being used like that.” He held Taylor’s gaze until the boy turned away, bright pink creeping up his neck and face.

Brady snickered as Matt took his seat again. Uneasy laughter rippled from Taylor’s table, while several boys at his own table quietly applauded. Steven raised his hand for a high five, and Matt reached over to slap it. Brady grinned and laid his head back down on the table.

“So, is everyone up for a full day today? Get enough sleep last night?” Matt’s fork sliced through his pancakes.

“I did.” Steven’s cheerfulness contrasted with a variety of complaints from the other boys.

Brady moaned. “If we didn’t have to get up at dawn for breakfast.”

“Dawn?” Matt swallowed a large bite. “Around here, the sun’s up a good two hours before you rolled out of bed.” He stuffed a couple sausages

in his mouth and tried to talk around them. “Did you guys check your Rec team? You know what you’re doing today?”

Steven answered first. “Playing softball.”

Matt stopped chewing and dropped his fork. It clattered against his plate. “Don’t tell me you play ball, too.”

“No way.” Steven shook his head. “I used to cheer my team from the sidelines until I got hit by a foul ball. Now Zeke finds something else for me. I need to let him know and find out what he wants me to do.”

“I’ll take care of that for you. Are you both on the same team?” Matt picked up his fork and pointed it at Steven and Brady.

Brady nodded without lifting his head. He stifled a yawn.

Matt nudged him. “Would you mind playing your trumpet outside tonight?”

Outside? Brady raised his head. “Why?”

“Ryan texted me last night. His cabin is jealous.”

Chris protested. “You get to have your cell phone? That’s not fair.”

“I have it for emergencies.”

“Oh, and that was an emergency?”

Matt ignored him. “He asked if you’d play for his cabin tonight. I figure if you play outside, all the guys’ cabins can hear you.”

Brady agreed and laid his head down again. Right now, he just wanted to go back to sleep.

“Is everyone finished?” Matt’s chair scraped as he stood up. “Okay, men, head back to the cabin and straighten it up.” He raised his voice over the moaning. “It doesn’t have to be spotless, but if we get the messiest cabin award, I promise to make you regret it. Better hustle. Morning worship starts in 20 minutes. Don’t forget your Bibles.”

Brady's head popped up. Twenty minutes? *I still have to shower and change.*

All morning, one thought kept repeating itself. *What did I do to make Mom send me away?* Throughout morning worship, Brady's mind refused to follow the music. In the small group Bible study that followed, he paid little attention to the lesson about God calling Samuel's name. What terrible thing had he done to make Mom want to get rid of him?

By lunchtime, he still hadn't come up with any ideas. He led Steven through the buffet line then stopped to scan the crowded dining hall for table space.

Claire waved her arm in the air, beckoning him and Steven to her table. She cleared a couple of empty trays. "I grabbed these and set them here to save you some places."

Steven set his tray next to hers and both boys sat down to plates of roast beef and mashed potatoes.

Claire nudged Steven's arm. "I can't believe we're on the same Rec team. First time in all the years we've been coming here."

Steven laughed. "It's about time, but you know I'm not playing ball today. Is Matt around? He was going to find out what Zeke wants me to do instead."

Brady spotted him in the buffet line. "I see him." He stood and waved Matt over to a spot someone else had just left.

Matt put his tray on the table and sat down. "Steven, I've been looking for you. Zeke said Nurse Willie will take you fishing."

"Seriously?" Steven clapped his hands together. "Yesss! Can Brady and Claire come, too?"

“Only if they start having trouble with their eyesight in the next couple of hours. The team needs them. I predict Claire will make a crucial play against the other team and Brady’ll hit a game-winning home run. Right?”

Claire pumped her fist. “Yeah.”

“Fat chance,” Brady muttered. He licked the last of the peach cobbler from his spoon and pushed his tray back. “I’ve never hit a ball in my life.”

Matt pointed his knife at Claire. “I bet she can show you how to do it.”

“Nothing to it, Brady.” She reached across Steven and tapped Brady’s wrist. “Just swing the bat, right?”

“Yeah, right.”

Claire looked at him with arched brows. “Okay, that did not sound enthusiastic or confident. We’ll work on that first. Are you finished?” She stood and pointed at his tray. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“To get some batting practice before the game.”

Brady clutched his tray and searched for an excuse.

“But what about Steven? I can’t just leave him here.”

“I’ll take him to meet Willie,” Matt said.

Brady held up clasped hands to Matt. “Can’t I go fishing instead? Pleeese?”

Matt shook his head. “Sorry. You’re not in Zeke’s orders.”

“Are you coming to the game, Matt?” Claire asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be there as soon as I deliver Steven.”

“Okay, see ya there. Come on, Brady, let’s go.” Claire took his arm and tugged him out of his chair.

“Later, Brady,” Steven called.

“Yeah,” Brady muttered as Claire towed him from the dining hall. Given a choice, he’d rather swim in frigid, shark-infested waters than endure this summer version of gym class.

Claire called to him from center field. “Dillon’s up to bat. Back up. Be ready.”

Brady moved deeper into right field, though it was as useless as batting practice. So far, he’d struck out twice. He was unlikely to get on base, but it would be nice to at least hit the ball.

His fielding was just as bad. The one ball that someone hit to right field slipped past his glove and kept rolling. Before he could retrieve it and throw it back to the infield, two runners scored. Now, with Dillon “The Super Jock” up to bat, any hope of Brady stopping the ball was laughable. This guy scored home runs with one leg virtually tied behind his back.

Despite the walking cast on his left leg, Dillon stepped into the batter’s box. His substitute runner stood next to the catcher, poised for take-off. Dillon tapped the bat lightly against his cast.

Brady crossed his fingers. *Don’t hit it out here. Please, don’t hit it to me.*

The ball left the pitcher’s hand, but dropped and bounced before crossing the plate. Dillon lowered his bat while the catcher retrieved the ball and tossed it back to the pitcher.

Brady held his breath as the next pitch flew toward the plate. Dillon let it go by, but when the umpire called it a strike, he wiggled his stance, touched his bat to the corners of home plate and stood ready for the ball. The pitcher released it. Dillon swung.

A split second later, a metallic *tink* sounded across the field. The ball soared over Claire’s head to a shallow gully that marked the outfield boundary. Dillon limped along behind his pinch runner for a few steps, then

greeted him with a double-handed high-five when the runner crossed home plate. The two exchanged fist bumps with Matt on the sideline. Taylor announced the score.

“Nine. To. One.” Heavy emphasis on the nine.

And it’s only the third inning. Brady kicked at a dandelion gone to seed, chopping the stem in half. Losing wouldn’t be so bad if Taylor didn’t rub it in every time his team scored.

The next batter hit a pop fly to the infield, and a swinging strikeout after that brought Brady’s team in to bat. He walked to the sideline, calculating his place in the batting order. If everyone ahead of him got out, he could avoid batting this inning.

The first batter cooperated with his plan and struck out. But then it was Claire’s turn to bat. It didn’t seem right to hope she’d strike out.

“C’mon, Claire. Home run.” Two more batters after her meant there was still hope.

Claire swung at the first pitch and missed. The second one came at her and she swung again, connecting this time. She dropped the bat and raced toward first base while the ball rolled past second.

“You made it!” Brady crossed his fingers that the next two batters would strike out. But the pitcher threw four balls, sending the batter to first and Claire to second. After that, a fly ball to right field brought the second out. Claire tagged up and made it safely to third.

Two outs and a possible run on third. Brady’s stomach churned as he picked up a bat and dragged it to the batter’s box. Dillon knelt behind him, punching a fist into his catcher’s glove. With a sigh, Brady raised the bat and let it rest on his shoulder.

“Easy out.” Taylor yawned from his position at shortstop. “Hey, Brady, don’t bother. You and your team just come on out to the field. Save yourself the embarrassment.”

“Shut up, Taylor.” Claire kept one toe on third base, her other leg outstretched in a lunge, ready to run.

“He’s an idiot. Don’t let him get to you.” Dillon’s voice was barely above a whisper, and Brady wasn’t sure whether he’d heard it or imagined it.

He peered back at Dillon, but the catcher simply pounded his glove and nestled his knees into the sandy dirt. Brady shuffled his feet and waited for the first pitch. He swung hard. Missed.

Taylor sat down on the ground and leaned back on his hands. “See, I told you. Easy out.”

Brady’s face grew hot, a sure sign his ears were turning red.

Dillon whispered as he threw the ball back. “Relax. Take your time.”

“Come on, Brady. Hit me home.” Claire pumped her fist. “You can do it.”

The next pitch came in and he swung the bat around in a lazy arc.

“Aw, c’mon, we’re playing softball here, not badminton.”

“Taylor, knock it off.” Matt called a time out, crooked a finger at Brady, and met him on the sideline. “You don’t look like you’re having fun.”

Brady frowned and narrowed his eyes. “I’d rather be fishing.”

“Let me see if I can help.” Matt took the bat and swapped it for a lighter one. He demonstrated a proper batting stance and moved Brady’s feet and arms into position. “Don’t let your bat rest on your shoulder. You want it up slightly, ready to swing.”

What I really want is to be done with this.

Matt held his hand out in front of Brady. “Okay, slowly swing the bat straight to my hand.”

Brady swung several times, meeting Matt’s palm squarely.

“That’s good.” Matt backed up. “Now, imagine my hand still there but swing hard.”

Brady frowned, but swung the bat around.

“Hard,” Matt said. “Harder, like you’ll break every bone in my body if I make you stay out here any longer.”

Brady swung, the force of his anger spinning him around.

“Good! That’s what I want to see.” Matt patted him on the back. “Now, do the same thing when you see the ball coming. But don’t swing unless it comes in about where my hand was.”

Brady returned to the batter’s box, eyed Matt, and took his stance. The ball came in low, tempting him to swing and take the out. But the ball fell short of the plate, as did the next pitch.

Throw it, will ya? I want to get out of here. He’d swing at the next pitch no matter what it looked like.

The ball flew toward the plate. Brady set his jaw and swung, putting every ounce of his anger into it. TING! His hands stung and he dropped the bat.

“Yesssss!” Matt threw his arms in the air.

Claire screamed. “Run, Brady, run!”

The ball skidded across the infield to Taylor who scooped it up and threw it to first base.

“Out!” The first baseman held it up, then tossed it back to the pitcher.

Still at home plate, Brady turned to Matt, his jaw hanging open.

“I hit it!”

“You sure did.” Matt laughed. “Next time, remember to run.”

“I really hit it!”

Matt reached out and tousled his hair. “Yeah, you’re awesome. But the game’s not over yet. Grab a glove now and get out to the field.”

Dazed, Brady picked up a glove lying on the ground and jogged toward right field, punching his fist into the glove. “I hit it. I really, really hit it.”

Taylor detoured past Brady on his way to the sideline. “You’re supposed to run when you hit it. Loser!”

Brady's steps slowed. Who forgets to run when they hit the ball? He gave his glove a half-hearted slap before turning to face the infield. He kicked another dandelion, then ground it into the dirt with his toe.

Claire tapped his shoulder as she ran to center field. "Great hit, Brady. I knew you could do it."

"Yeah. Sure." He couldn't wait for this stupid game to be over.

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CHAPTER FIVE

STANDING OUT IN RIGHT FIELD FOR THE BETTER PART OF AN HOUR ALMOST seemed worth it for the cool refreshing swim afterward. Camp didn't seem as bad with the rest of the afternoon spent swimming with Steven, Claire, and Hayley. The moment Steven stepped onto the diving board, Brady sucked in his breath and held it, expecting his friend to go tumbling off the edge. Instead, Steven measured his steps to the end, bounced once, twice, three times and leaped off in a perfect cannonball, making a humongous splash.

Then it was his turn. The diving board wasn't much higher than Brady's top bunk, but it moved and swayed with the motion of the raft. He nearly lost his balance, and looking down made him dizzy. But if Steven could launch himself with such abandon, Brady wasn't about to let fear keep him from jumping. Especially with the girls watching. After that first terrifying plunge, he was hooked.

But free time ended way too soon with the lifeguards sending everyone to their cabins to get ready for supper.

Now Brady's stomach growled as he slid his dinner tray along the buffet line.

Steven laughed. "Hungry?"

“Starved. Feels like I haven’t eaten for a week.” Brady lifted a spoonful of casserole to his nose and sniffed. “What’s this?”

“Monday’s supper is always goulash.” Steven took a good long whiff. “Yum. And get used to being hungry. Camp does that to you.”

Brady sampled a forkful of the casserole on his plate. It tasted better than it looked, and he scooped another spoonful onto his plate. Had he ever felt this hungry before? Must be from all the swimming they’d done after losing the ball game 16-1.

Brady led Steven to an open table, and neither spoke while they filled their stomachs. Brady finished the goulash and carrot sticks and reached for his chocolate cake. His chair juddered backward and he turned to find Taylor using it for support, leaning back on the legs of his own chair.

“Do you mind? I’m trying to eat.” Brady pried one of Taylor’s fingers off.

“Trying? You must eat about as good as you hit,” Taylor sneered.

“I hit the ball. Hit it right to you.”

“Yeah, but you forgot to run. How stupid is that?” He yanked Brady’s chair again.

“Shut up.” Brady glared and jabbed the air near Taylor’s fingers with his fork.

Taylor laughed. “Ooh, am I supposed to be scared?”

“Ignore him, Brady,” Steven said. “Don’t listen to him.”

“Yeah, pretend you’re deaf. The two of you’d make a great team. He’s blind, you’re deaf, and you’re both dumb.” Taylor dropped his chair back onto four legs, cackling and pounding his palms on the table. The boys at his table laughed along with him.

Steven leaned toward Brady. “Seriously, he wants to see you get ticked off. Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

Brady shoved his dessert plate forward and planted his elbows on the table. “It’s not that easy.” He clenched his teeth.

“You think I don’t know that?” Steven hissed. “You think nobody makes fun of the blind kid?”

“But you just laugh it off.”

Steven swallowed his food and laid his fork down. “I do now, but I used to hate it when kids said stuff. It made me so mad I wanted to punch somebody. My dad always told me, ‘Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you.’ And then I wanted to punch him. One day, Dad told me I have a choice. I can listen when people say stupid things and let them ruin my life, or I can realize they’re stupid, ignore it and get on with life.”

Brady sucked in a heavy breath. He’d always avoided fights, but right now there was nothing more satisfying than the idea of smashing that nasty grin right to the back of Taylor’s head. A tap on his shoulder brought his fist up.

“Whoa! What’s that for?” Matt set down his tray and pulled out a chair.

“Sorry,” Brady mumbled. “I thought you were someone else.”

“Glad I’m not.” Matt bowed his head briefly before digging in to his food. “Did you tell Steven you almost hit a home run?”

Steven slapped his palms on the table. “No way! A home run? You never told me.”

Brady rolled his eyes. “Not even close.”

“Aw, it wasn’t that bad,” Matt said. “You hit like that next time, you’ll get on base.”

“Won’t be a next time.” Brady reached for his cake again and stuffed half of it into his mouth. He didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

Matt turned his attention to Steven. “How was the fishing?”

“I only caught one. Nurse Willie said it was a little blue gill. She didn’t catch anything.” He tipped his head to one side. “We swam so long this afternoon, I’m waterlogged. I can’t get the water out of my ear.” He tapped the side of his head with his palm.

“Careful. Your brains might fall out.” Taylor picked up his dinner tray and shoved his chair in to squeeze by. His friends followed.

“Taylor, stuff it,” Matt warned.

Brady glared at the boys on their way out of the dining hall. Bad enough they teased him; it really irked him when they made Steven the butt of their cruel jokes.

Matt bounced his spoon against Brady’s fist. “Is Taylor the reason you were ready to punch me when I sat down? You’re not alone. He annoys everybody. Before he pushes your final button, you come tell me about it, y’hear? You vent with me, not him.”

Yeah, right. Brady nodded anyway. He gulped the last of his milk and asked Steven if he was ready to go. Matt held up his index finger to stall them.

“Before you guys leave, auditions for Friday night’s talent show are right after Rec tomorrow. You think you’d want to try out?”

Brady stiffened. “No thanks.”

Steven protested. “What? You’d be the star of the show.”

“I’m not here to play a concert. I didn’t even bring any music.” Brady shook his head.

“So?” Steven shrugged. “I didn’t hear any rustling of sheet music when you played ‘Amazing Grace’ in the cabin yesterday.”

Brady frowned, as if Steven could see him.

Matt stuffed a buttered roll in his mouth and mumbled, “Look...you don’t have to do this...but you really are talented on that trumpet.” He swallowed. “Steven’s right. You’d rock this place. Think about it, okay?”

Brady rolled his eyes and exhaled loudly. “Okay.”

“Great!” Steven said. “You have until the end of Rec tomorrow to think about it. And think yes. Got it? Yes. Yes.”

This was a mistake. No doubt about it.

Brady, Steven, and Claire claimed their seats early for the evening worship session. Kids swarmed the front rows like gnats around a porch light, squeezing shoulder to shoulder into the wooden pews. Even the air clung close. No breeze sifted through the screened windows or drifted down from the ceiling fans turning in sluggish circles. Sweat trickled down Brady's back as he sang and clapped along with the band's music. A certain odor wafting among the close-packed bodies suggested someone needed deodorant.

He'd been so busy today that the memory of what happened with Mom had retreated to the shadowy corners of his mind. Was it really only yesterday? It seemed longer, until her angry words slashed through him again. *I don't want you...* She'd threatened to send him to his dad once or twice in recent months. Both times, he'd thought it odd, knowing how she felt about his dad. He never believed she was serious, but now he was curious. *Had she planned this all along? Is that why she insisted I go to camp?*

He backed away from that thought and returned his attention to the front where the band had finished. Everyone sat down, and the room grew quiet when Zeke hopped onto the stage.

"Last night, we learned the difference between knowing about God and knowing him personally." The director moved the easel to center stage and drew a red heart that filled the page. In the upper left lobe, he wrote 'God.'

"Raise your hand if you believe God loves us."

Steven, Claire, and most of the other campers raised their hands high. Brady raised his no higher than his head.

“We may believe God loves *us*,” he spread his arms out as if to hug everyone at once, “but we don’t know it as a personal love. For example, do you believe he loves you, Michelle?” Zeke pointed to a girl on the front row. She nodded, and he added + *Michelle* under God’s name inside the heart.

“Casey, do you believe your name is in there?” The boy answered yes and Zeke wrote + *Casey* under Michelle’s name.

Brady wiggled in the seat, unable to get comfortable. He couldn’t picture his name inside that heart. His dad didn’t love him enough to stick around, and now his mom didn’t want him either. Why would God love him?

Zeke added several more names to the heart, and then asked, “Hannah, how do you know God loves you?”

“Because...” The girl’s gaze roamed about the walls and ceiling, as if the answer were written there. “Because the Bible says so.” It sounded more like a question than a statement.

“That’s one way. How do you know someone loves you? Let’s say, your parents. How do you know they love you?” Zeke repeated answers from other campers. “They buy you clothes, video games, cell phones. They provide a home, make sure you have a place to live.”

Brady’s stomach twisted. He slouched down into the seat, wishing he could disappear.

“They feed you too.” Zeke called on one of the counselors. “Nate, did your mother ever forget to feed you?”

Nate patted his hefty stomach and shook his head from side to side, a satisfied grin across his face.

Zeke opened his Bible. “In Isaiah chapter 49, God asks if a mother could forget to feed her baby or have no compassion on her child.”

Brady crossed his arms; if he didn’t hold himself together, he might fall apart.

Zeke continued reading. “Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See,’ he says, ‘I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.’” Zeke closed the Bible and laid it on the stage. “When I was dating my wife, I used to write her name on my hand with a pen. Anybody still do that?”

Whistles and laughter rose from the back. Steven turned toward the sound. “What’s going on?”

Brady pushed himself up to look for the cause of the disturbance. “Some kid wrote a girl’s name on his hand. They’re holding his hand in the air for Zeke to see.” He scrunched back down in his seat.

Zeke grinned and held up his own hand. “I wrote my wife’s name on my hand to make it feel like she was always close by. Whenever we were apart, I’d look at her name, curl my fingers around it, and pretend I was holding her hand. But I had a problem. Every time I washed my hands, her name disappeared.”

Zeke pointed to his drawing. “Your name isn’t written in chalk that washes away. It’s engraved permanently on God’s hands.” He moved his finger about his palm like an engraving needle. Then he tore off the sheet of paper with the heart, letting it fall to the side, and began scribbling dark outlines on a fresh sheet of paper.

The room buzzed with hushed voices as campers tried to guess what he was drawing. Brady described the emerging picture to Steven: facial features, a colorful sports jersey, and finally, a basketball in the figure’s hand.

“Who recognizes this superstar?” Zeke asked. Several boys shouted a name.

“Who’s that?” Steven asked.

Brady shrugged. “Don’t ask me.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Seriously? You guys don’t know the star of the Chicago Bulls?” She shook her head.

“What do you see on his arms when he plays?” Zeke asked.

Claire joined the chorus of voices. “Tattoos!”

Using a black permanent marker, Zeke scribbled up and down the figure’s arms. Then he rubbed his hands together and faced the campers.

“Even tattoos fade when they get old. God didn’t use chalk or a permanent marker. He didn’t tattoo your name on his hands. He engraved your name.”

He pointed to individual campers. “Your name, and yours, and yours is engraved on the palm of his hand. Now that’s what I call a personal love.”

The light outside the cabin door cast a yellow glow around the steps. Brady stumbled over a tree root as he moved beyond the circle’s glow. What was it about this bedtime ritual that appealed to Matt and the other counselors? At least it gave him a chance to get out of the cabin alone, if only for a few minutes. He found a spot beneath the nearest oak tree and faced the cabins with his trumpet in hand. Open windows allowed every inside noise to carry through the night air, whether voices or body functions.

Brady put the trumpet to his lips and played the familiar song. The noise from the cabins dimmed and the lights flickered out. The last notes lingered until they evaporated into the stillness. Even the crickets remained silent afterward.

Brady drank in the solitude. Sharing quarters with eleven other boys made him thankful he was an only child. Camp activities left him no time to play his trumpet, except for now. He missed experimenting with notes and rhythms and sounds. It calmed him, helped him think, brought his jumbled thoughts into order the way arranging notes on a staff made a melody. He held the trumpet close to his chest.

If only he didn’t have to go back into the cabin. He could just walk away. Head for home and never come back. Except he didn’t have a home

anymore. He threw his head back and whispered to the heavens, “Doesn’t anyone care?”

A single star blinked back at him. Only one? But he was standing under the tree’s canopy. A small gap among the branches must have allowed this one star to peek through. One lonely star. *Just like me.*

“Brady?” Matt called from the cabin’s doorway. “You planning to spend the night out there?”

“I’m coming,” he answered, with little enthusiasm.

Brady dragged the squeaky screen door open. The only light burning in the cabin spilled from Matt’s room. Brady laid his trumpet in its case and made his way along the aisle to his bunk. Thankfully, Taylor remained quiet while Matt stood in the bunkroom’s doorway.

“Good night, men. Remember, there will be ugly consequences for anyone making noise after lights out.” Matt went into his room, but left his door slightly ajar.

Brady climbed to his top bunk, ignoring the whispers and snickering that began almost immediately. He lay on his back and stared into the darkness, thinking about Zeke’s story of writing his wife’s name on his hand to make her seem closer. Would it work? Taking care to move in silence, he climbed down to the floor again and dug through his stuff until his fingers closed around a pen.

Steven whispered to him. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Just forgot something.” He scrambled back up to sit on his bunk. Straining to see in the scant light from Matt’s room, he wrote the letters M-o-m on his left palm. He shoved the pen under his pillow and lay back, curling his fingers over what he’d written.

His eyes closed, but the rest of Zeke’s message swirled through his brain. *Does God really love me? Enough to engrave my name on his hands?* He reached for the pen again and leaned on his right elbow, taking the pen

in his left hand. With some difficulty, he drew three awkward letters on his right palm. G-o-d.

Drowsiness settled over him and he nestled his head back onto the pillow. His eyes closed and he fell asleep, one hand holding the other over his heart.

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CHAPTER SIX

BRADY LIFTED ONE EYELID HALFWAY WHEN STEVEN'S RUSTLINGS AWAKENED him. Dust particles drifted and sparkled in a shaft of morning light. Yawning, he stretched one arm up and spread his fingers wide. A glimpse of his palm snapped him awake. He shoved his hand under his pillow and jerked his head around to make sure no one else had seen it. But the other boys were still asleep and Steven couldn't see anything.

Brady dropped his head back onto his pillow. Plenty of time to get to the bathroom and wash the lettering off before anyone noticed. He moved both hands into his sleeping bag to hide them, but held the bag open, using his right index finger to trace the letters on his left hand. *Does Mom miss me at all?* She'd still be asleep at this hour. She used to get up early to enjoy a quiet cup of coffee and watch the sun come up. He missed her morning smile and the quiet talks they'd have while he ate breakfast. He frowned, trying to remember when she started sleeping late. Sometime after Christmas, after she had married Richard. By the end of the school year, Brady had almost gotten used to eating breakfast alone and letting himself out the door. Almost.

He closed his eyes, wishing he could go back to sleep, back to being unaware of the emptiness in the pit of his stomach. He hated waking up,

especially those first moments when the fact that he didn't have a home anymore slammed into his brain.

"Your dad will pick you up on Saturday." *Seriously? Dad doesn't even drive across town to see me.*

Steven mumbled to himself as he got dressed, and Brady tried to imagine what it was like having a dad around to watch out for you or teach you to paddle a canoe. No memories came to mind of his own Dad ever spending time with him.

"You awake?" Steven's hand sought Brady's shoulder. "Let's go. I'm starved."

His eyes flew open. Steven stood by his bunk, showered and dressed, hair combed, dark glasses in place. Not only that, but he'd made enough noise getting dressed to wake up everyone else. Brady kicked off his sleeping bag and hustled into the shower. Minutes later, he'd thrown on shorts and a wrinkled t-shirt, finger-combed his hair so it wasn't sticking up, and checked his hands one more time.

Steven waited at the door, his fingers tapping an impatient rhythm on the wood frame. Brady led him outside and down the steps where he caught a whiff of bacon. Its mouthwatering aroma hung in the muggy air, the way it did at the pancake restaurant near his house.

"I think my stomach just woke up. Let's move it." Brady quickened their pace. Soon their trays held plates loaded with scrambled eggs, toast, jelly and bacon.

Janie brought out a fresh pan of eggs and greeted them across the buffet. "That's what I like to see, boys with an appetite." She squinted at Brady. "You look half asleep. Is Steven keeping you up at night?"

Brady grinned at her. "No, but he does get me up way too early."

"Hey, isn't Janie's cooking worth it?"

She winked at Brady. "He's buttering me up for something."

Steven laughed. "Extra brownies tonight? Please?"

Janie pointed a large metal serving spoon at Steven, but looked at Brady. “What did I tell you?”

Brady laughed, picked up his tray and led Steven toward the tables. Claire waved them over to where she sat with Hayley. She didn’t even wait for them to sit down before blurting out her news.

“I found out we’re doing the water carnival for Rec today.”

Steven’s head jerked up. “Today? But it’s only Tuesday.”

“Our counselor told us another group is renting some of the canoes tomorrow for a river trip the rest of the week. So they switched the carnival to today. You guys want to do the canoe race with me?”

“Sure.” Steven bit into a piece of bacon.

Brady spread some jelly on his toast. “Three of us?”

“Yeah, we’ll represent the whole Rec team.”

Steven nodded. “It’s fun. We’ve both done it before so you’ll be with pros. No worries.”

The water carnival kicked off after lunch with a tug-o-war competition in the shallow part of the swimming area. Jason, the head lifeguard, supervised from the pier. His teeth clenched a whistle poised to signal a team’s victory. He paced the pier, staying even with the bandana tied to the rope’s middle. It inched close to one goal then shifted the other way.

Steven and Claire held the first two positions on the red team’s side of the rope. They bellowed instructions and encouragement to the rest of the team.

“Pull! Harder! Keep it strong.”

Farther back, Brady pulled behind Chris in waist- high water. The wet rope skidded through his hands. He dug his heels into the sandy bottom, but

lost his footing. His feet slid forward, taking out Chris as well and dunking them both underwater.

He stood and wiped the water from his face. “This is impossible.”

Chris righted himself, and wound his arm over and under the rope for a better grip. “Just keep pulling.”

Brady grimaced, braced himself again, and followed Chris’s example for gripping the rope. They’d lost a little ground, but soon recovered, only to lose it again. Moments later, Jason’s whistle blasted.

Amid the other team’s wild cheers, Claire consoled them. “Hey, second place is not bad.”

If they had to lose, he’d much rather do it this way than by chasing a ball around a field. His arms and legs were tired, but it was a good tired as he slogged through the water with Steven, Claire and Chris. Other teams were already lining up on the beach for the wet sweatshirt relay, and they threaded their way through the tangle of campers. As they looked for their assembly spot, a familiar voice called out, “Hey, the losers are back.”

Claire stopped in front of Taylor and planted her hands on her hips. “Not this time. We lasted longer in the tug-o-war than you. Know what that makes you? Loo-ser.” She formed an L with her thumb and forefinger and held it against her forehead.

Brady couldn’t help grinning at her singsong taunt. If only he had Claire’s confidence and boldness.

They found their team’s spot on the beach, and Brady took a position behind Claire as they lined up on the sand. Unable to participate in this event, Steven stood to the side, giving the team a pep talk. Ahead of Claire, Chris stood first in line, his toes nudging the rope that marked the starting point. A counselor handed a sweatshirt to each team.

“Is everybody ready?” Jason paced the pier, waiting for a response, his voice ragged through the bullhorn. “I said, are you ready?”

This time, whoops and cheers answered him.

“Each team should have a sweatshirt. If you’re the first one in line, put it on now.”

Chris held up the navy sweatshirt. “It’s 200 degrees out here. And this thing is huge.”

“Just put it on,” Claire ordered.

Brady didn’t envy Chris. Even when a cloud blocked the sun, the air pressed in heavy and sticky. Across the lake, clouds gathered as if preparing for their own relay.

Chris’s knees peeked out from beneath the hem band of the sweatshirt. He spread his arms and twirled the sleeve ends that fell several inches beyond the tips of his fingers.

“All right. Listen up!” Jason barked instructions. “When I give the signal, the first person in line will make their way out here, slap the pier and return. Failure to touch the pier will disqualify you.”

“He’s not joking,” Claire warned. “Slap it hard so he hears it.”

Jason continued. “When you return, your feet must cross the rope before you transfer the sweatshirt to the next person on your team. Make sure your head is through the neck, and both arms are through the sleeves before you start into the water or you’ll be called back. When everyone on your team has finished, sit down.

You will not be counted until your whole team is sitting. All right? On your mark. Get set.”

He paused and two teams jumped to a false start. When they returned to position, he yelled, “Go!”

Chris raced into the water, holding the hem up and high-stepping through the shallows. When his knees no longer cleared the surface, he plunged in. The water roiled with six contestants beating their way through to slap the pier and return. Shouts filled the air as teams urged their respective players to Swim! Run! Hurry!

“Go, Chris!” Claire screamed, jumping up and down.

Brady cheered as Chris slapped the pier then pushed himself backward into the water for his return.

“How’s he doing?” Steven shouted.

Brady barely heard him over the noise and commotion. “He’s ahead.”

Moments later, Chris rose from the shallow water and hurried for the beach. As soon as his feet touched the rope, he pulled the waterlogged garment over his head and dropped it onto the sand.

“Don’t just drop it.” Claire grabbed the sweatshirt and shook it, splattering her teammates with wet sand. She struggled to pull it over her head and shove her arms through the inside-out wet sleeves. “There’s a trick to this. I’ll show you when I get back.” Spitting sand, she raced into the churning water.

“Is she ahead?” Steven sounded as breathless as if he were participating.

“Yeah, but not by much.” Brady called out encouragement as Claire slapped the pier, turned and swam hard toward shore. “Here she comes.”

Claire reached out to him as she crossed the rope. “Brady, grab my hands. Bend over like this.” She bent at the waist, pulling Brady toward her until their heads knocked together.

“Ouch!” The softness of her hands in his erased the pain in his head.

The rest of the team followed Claire’s instructions, grabbing the hem of the sweatshirt and peeling it from her body directly onto Brady. The wet garment clung to him like some sort of thick plastic wrap. Claire pushed him forward and he stumbled into the water, waiting until it reached his thighs before diving under.

His arms strained against the waterlogged sleeves, reminding him of bad dreams where something scary is chasing him, but his feet only move in slow motion. He came up for air and got a mouthful of turbulent water. Choking and spitting, Brady pushed ahead the last few yards. He pounded his fist on the pier and turned back toward shore, alternately plunging into the water, standing up to take a few steps, then plunging in again.

Claire and Chris waited for him just across the rope. They transferred the sweatshirt to the next teammate and sent her off. Brady picked up his towel, wiped his face and the grit from his mouth and tried to catch his breath. He spit a couple times to get rid of the lake taste.

“How are we doing?” Steven asked.

Brady studied the other teams. “We’re still ahead, but now others are using Claire’s trick too. It’ll be close.” His stomach began to clench with dread that Taylor’s team might catch up.

Soon, the last of their team members crossed the rope. Brady, Claire and the rest dropped to the sand and raised their arms in victory. Claire pulled Steven to the ground. “You’re part of the team. Sit.”

Jason blew his whistle, pointed at them and held up his index finger. Immediately his whistle sounded again and he pointed two fingers at another team.

“We did it!” Claire cheered. “We won! Where’s Taylor?” She stood and called his name, holding up one finger and doing a little victory dance in the sand.

Taylor scowled and turned away.

Brady laughed. If only he could make Taylor glower the way Claire did.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN ALL THE TEAMS FINISHED THE RACE, THE THREE FRIENDS GATHERED up their towels and joined the crowd exiting the beach. As the next event was announced, they moved up to the grassy hill where Dillon watched the competition by himself. Claire threw her towel on the ground and dropped down beside him. Brady shook the sand from his soggy towel before he and Steven sat on it.

Dillon shifted his leg with the cast on it and congratulated them. “Nice win.”

Claire hugged her knees. “Thanks. Is this torture for you, watching all this and not being part of it?”

“Just about.” Dillon gave her a half-smile. “Now I know how you must feel, Steven.”

Steven shrugged. “Yeah, but I get to do some of the events. I heard about your cast. What happened?”

“Broke my ankle in a soccer game. I’m supposed to get it off next week, but I didn’t want to miss camp.”

“Aw, so close. Too bad you couldn’t get it off earlier.” Steven lifted his face to the breeze. “Rain’s coming.”

Brady squinted up at the sun. “How can you tell?”

“The air is changing.” Steven sniffed. “Smells like rain. Hope it holds off ’til we’re finished.”

Claire shielded her eyes with her hand. “I think you’re right. It looks kinda dark across the lake.”

“What’s going on down there?” Brady drew their attention to Ryan who was wading from the boat dock to the swimming pier. He approached Jason, pointing at the clouds across the lake.

Steven cocked his head to the side. “Tell me what’s happening.”

Claire explained. “Looks like those clouds have Ryan and Jason worried.”

Moments later, Ryan returned to his boats, and Jason spoke into the bullhorn.

“All right, we need to speed things up a little. Any teams not currently participating in the relay here need to head to the boat dock. The canoe race will start in five minutes.”

“That’s us.” Claire hopped up and grabbed her towel. “Let’s go, guys.”

Dillon wished them luck, and the three started for the boat dock. Claire ran ahead to claim a canoe.

Brady took three lifejackets from Ryan and handed one to Steven. “What about paddles?”

“No paddles.” Steven buckled the strap on his lifejacket and adjusted the length.

Brady frowned. “How are we supposed to...”

Steven held his hands in the air and wiggled his fingers.

Claire called. “Steven, come get in front.” She’d already maneuvered a canoe into knee-deep water and was holding on to keep it from drifting. As they approached, she asked Brady, “You want middle or back?”

“Middle.” Surely Claire knew how to steer, even without paddles. He handed her a life jacket and pulled his own orange vest over his head. As soon as Steven settled into the bow, Brady climbed into position.

“There’s a trick to this, too.” Claire spoke into his ear, startling him. But he kind of liked being so close to her.

“Steven already knows this, but you don’t,” she said. “Everyone gets jammed up trying to get around the buoy. We’ll go farther out where there’ll be room to turn. Then once we turn, we’ll shoot straight back here. Got it?”

Brady nodded. The starting line-up had five other teams. Did they strategize their race, too? At the far end, Taylor climbed into the bow of his canoe. Their eyes met and a slow grin spread across Taylor’s face. He turned and said something to his teammates, and they all aimed sly grins his way.

They’re planning something. But his team had a plan too. He liked Claire’s idea, liked the way she took on challenges, facing them head-on rather than letting things happen to her. If only he could be more like her. *Maybe I can.* He waited for Taylor to look his way and returned the smirk.

Ryan’s whistle brought everyone to attention. “Listen up! I think we can finish this before that storm closes in, but just in case, I want every canoe to carry paddles. If you see lightning or hear any thunder or a long blast on my whistle, forget the race, grab those paddles and hustle back here. Understand?”

He distributed paddles to each team, explaining the rules as he went along. Sit or kneel only. No standing. Life jackets always on and secured. No holding onto or ramming another canoe. First team out around the buoy and back wins.

“Ready? Set?”

The whistle blasted and Claire shoved the canoe forward. It bobbed a little when she hopped in. Brady got up on his knees, his hands reaching into the water, pulling back hard and fast, first on one side then the other. The momentum from Claire’s push only carried them quickly for several yards before they slowed almost to a stop.

“We’re not getting anywhere,” Brady yelled. One or two of the other canoes appeared to be moving. Another had turned sideways, and the team was working hard to point it back toward the buoy.

Steven called over his shoulder. “Pull together. Claire, call the strokes.”

Claire took charge. “Brady, on your right. Steven, stay left. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.”

At last, the canoe began to move forward. The lake breeze had already picked up strength, mustering waves that slapped the canoe and splattered drops on his face. The aluminum hull was wet from his feet when he climbed in, and it gave him no traction. His knees slipped and slid forward, back, sideways. He lifted one knee and— Ouch! —landed on the buckle from the strap of his life vest. No time now to secure the straps. He tossed the buckle out of his way, grabbed his towel from the crossbar thwart and threw it down to kneel on. He still slid a bit, but at least it was a soft slide.

All six canoes meandered like turtles toward the buoy. Two teams nosed ahead, but with the slow pace it would be a tight race. Brady’s team would have to power it up to win. He dug his right hand deep into the water, wincing as the edge of the canoe bit into the soft underside of his upper arm.

Teams shouted instructions to each other, their voices competing with those from the event in the swimming area. Claire dropped back to calling every other stroke and finally called only an occasional correction when they lost their common rhythm. Two lead canoes reached the buoy and began turning just as a third team approached from the buoy’s opposite side. There was the beginning of the traffic jam Claire talked about.

“Keep going. Don’t let up yet.” Claire urged them past the congestion then directed their turn.

“Steven, keep pulling forward. Brady, paddle backward.”

Ever so slowly, the canoe swung in a wide arc and straightened out for the return trip.

“Okay, forward all. Move it.” Claire resumed calling the strokes.

Brady’s arm and shoulder ached, but he couldn’t slow down now. They needed to get past the buoy before any of the other teams broke free of the jam. Closer to shore, Taylor was lying atop the bow deck of his canoe. They hadn’t even reached the buoy yet. *So much for their plans of sabotage.* Brady smiled to himself.

The buoy drew nearer, coming up on his left. Just a few more yards and they’d be in the clear, heading for the dock and another victory.

Just then, a canoe broke free of the jam and moved straight into their path. “Noo-o-o!” he cried. “Hard left!” Why couldn’t they use the paddles instead of this useless hand rowing that took forever to get anywhere?

“Switch sides,” Claire yelled. “Steven, push out. Brady, fast forward.”

He leaned over the left side and dug both hands into the water, tipping the canoe and nearly pitching himself into the lake.

Steven cried out and grabbed hold of the sides. “Whoa! Hang on.”

“Watch it,” Claire scolded.

“Sorry!” Chastised, Brady settled lower, bracing one hand on the thwart in front of him while scooping water back with the other. The canoe inched to the left at a snail’s speed. As they closed in on the other canoe, Brady leaned away from it as if that would help. With little more than a foot to spare, they slipped past and Claire pressed them forward again.

“Let’s go! Stroke. Stroke.”

They passed the buoy and Brady chuckled at the sight of Taylor’s canoe sitting parallel to shore. They’d never make it to the buoy if they couldn’t even head in the right direction.

Another canoe threatened to pull even with them. He took a deep breath and dug in for the sprint home. A drop of water hit his cheek, another on his back, his shoulder. *Rain.* The sky had grown overcast since they set out. The wind had picked up too, blowing against their backs now, helping them along.

Forget the weather. *Focus*. Brady fixed his attention on the shore, his mind on whatever it took to get there. Reach forward and down, pull back, lift. Repeat. Faster. From the corner of his eye, a movement distracted him again. Just a quick look. Taylor's canoe bore down on them.

"They're using paddles!"

A wicked smile played across Taylor's face, and the high-pitched whoops and cheers of his teammates carried above the shouts of the other teams. In perfect cadence, they plunged their paddles into the water and raked them back.

Brady's gut told him this would hurt. "They're ramming us. Watch out!"

"Hang on," Claire cried.

The impact knocked Brady to the side. Metal grated against metal. Before he could recover, the canoe rocked, throwing him to the other side. Taylor's hands gripped the edge of the canoe and he leaned on the gunwale, tipping it down toward the water. He let up then pushed down again, rocking the canoe from side to side.

"Cut it out!" Brady struggled to regain his balance.

Claire screamed. "You're such a loser, Taylor. Stop it!"

Steven clenched the sides of the canoe and yelled over his shoulder, "What are you doing?"

Taylor laughed. "Just making sure you don't win." He shoved hard on the gunwale again. It dipped dangerously close to the water's surface.

Brady struggled for traction on the hull while Claire landed a fist on Taylor's fingers then tried to pry them off. Steven braced himself against both gunwales and tried to climb back over his seat. But the next pitch of the canoe threw him into Brady.

Brady grunted and squirmed out from under Steven. "I'll get him. You try to balance us."

Taylor's grasp on the gunwale held firm despite Claire's efforts. Brady added his fist, pounding Taylor's fingers repeatedly. He tried to pull him

into a headlock, or grab hold of his shoulder, but his wet hands slipped from his tormentor's shirtless body. Finally, he caught Taylor's upper arm and yanked, pulled, anything to drag Taylor off the bow deck. The canoe rocked more violently. Taylor's hand gripped his neck, pulling him forward, pushing down. The canoe tilted. Brady reached for something to keep from falling and gripped nothing but air.

"Aaaah!" Water swallowed him, cutting short his cry. It gushed into his nose and mouth. He coughed, only to inhale more water as he tried to suck in air. Brady kicked and thrashed, unable to tell which direction was up, his life jacket useless. Where was his life jacket? It must have come off. He'd never fastened the strap.

Brady needed air now. His arms were like Jell-O after all the paddling. Still, he pushed through the water, diving deeper into an underwater jungle. Wrong way. The water looked lighter in the other direction.

The urge to cough, to breathe, was overwhelming. *Am I going to drown? Would Mom even miss me?* He fought against panic until his head hit something hard and he gasped, forcing more precious air from his lungs. Canoe! He shoved sideways and seconds later his head breached the surface.

Brady coughed, gagged, gulped air and coughed some more. A long whistle blast followed by several short ones echoed across the lake. With all the water in his ears, he couldn't tell what all the shouting was about. But the annoying laughter from somewhere close by was clear enough. His canoe – minus his teammates – sat upright, though very low in the water.

"Claire? Steven!" His voice was frantic.

"Right here." Steven spit out lake water. His dark glasses clung stubbornly to one ear.

"Are you..." Cough. "...okay?"

"Peachy." Steven's tone was flat. "You?"

"Lost my lifejacket. What about Claire?"

Just then, her voice screeched from the other side of Taylor's canoe.

"Taayyloor! Aauerggh! You are so. . . so. . . ."

"Enjoy your swim," Taylor taunted. He and his friends back-paddled, then turned toward shore.

"Everyone all right out there?" Ryan's voice squawked through a bullhorn. "Steven? Claire? Brady?" He waited to hear from each of them then called out instructions. "Your canoe won't sink, so hang on to it until I get there in the motorboat. The rest of you grab your paddles and get in here now. Pull your canoe up, put away your equipment and head to your cabins. Except Taylor's team. I expect you three to be sitting right here on this dock when I get back."

"Where exactly is the canoe?" Steven asked.

"You're facing it. Swim forward, just a couple strokes." Brady spotted his life jacket floating near the canoe and swam to it. He ducked his head into it then floated on his back to pull the strap around his body and snap the buckle.

"I'm going to kill him," Claire vowed as she swam up to take hold of the canoe.

A wave washed over Brady, setting off another bout of coughing and gagging.

"Are you okay?" Steven asked.

Brady coughed and nodded. "I'll live. I think." He turned his back to the wind and waves and clung to the side of the canoe. Another cough convulsed him.

"You sure you're all right?" Claire moved around the canoe, closer to him.

He took a deep breath and stifled another urge to cough. "Yeah, I'm okay."

Moments later, Ryan circled and cut the engine as he pulled up in the motorboat. He threw a towrope to Brady.

“Tie this to the front of the canoe. Make it tight.”

Brady grabbed the rope and moved around Steven. His fingers pressed the nylon rope through the eye and tied a knot.

Claire helped Steven find the motorboat ladder and they both climbed aboard. Her protests started even before her feet touched the top of the ladder. “Are we disqualified? We better not be. This was not our fault.”

“I know. Not much I can do about it now.” Ryan tugged on the rope to check Brady’s knot. “Tighter. Make a couple more knots.”

Claire persisted. “Can’t we try again in the second round?”

“Not gonna be a second round.”

“Why not?”

Ryan looked up as a rumble sounded overhead. “That’s why. Okay, Brady, get yourself up here. Let’s go.”

Startled by the thunder, Brady hurried to the ladder. Angry dark clouds were nearly on top of them as he joined the others.

Dripping and shivering in the wind, Claire positioned herself beside Ryan who knelt on the driver’s seat. “Did you see him tip us over?”

“I did. We’ll be having a not-so-friendly chat as soon as I get everything secured. I’m sure Zeke will want some words with them too. But right now, you need to sit so we can get out of here.” He eased the throttle forward and headed for the dock, keeping one eye on the canoe behind them.

Lightning brightened the clouds as Brady stepped off the boat. Moments later, thunder rolled. They’d be lucky to get back to the cabin before it all broke loose. The other canoes had been pulled up on shore and tipped over so they wouldn’t fill with rain. Taylor and his two friends sat by themselves on the dock, dangling their feet in the water. Brady glared at them.

The two teammates snickered and whispered between themselves. Taylor appeared to study the water dripping from his toes while whistling a soft, tuneless melody. The whistling stopped as Brady, Steven and Claire walked past.

“Loo-sers,” Taylor sing-songed under his breath.

Claire planted her foot on Taylor’s back and shoved him off the dock into waist-high water. “You’re the biggest loser around here.”

Taylor’s buddies guffawed and pointed. “You gonna let a girl do that to you?”

Taylor spun around, dousing everyone as he splashed and threw water with his cupped hands.

“Oh, like that’s going to do anything,” Claire retorted.

“We’re already wet, stupid. You’re such an idiot.” Brady wiped his face with his sopping wet towel.

Steven nudged him on ahead. “Come on, guys. Let’s go.”

Ryan interrupted the exchange by summoning Taylor and his buddies to empty out the canoe and pull it up on the shore.

Brady hung his and Steven’s wet life jackets alongside Claire’s in the boathouse. She continued complaining as the three of them climbed the steps.

“Taylor deserves to be sent home for that.” She slung her towel around her shoulders.

“Zeke won’t send him home,” Steven said. “He’ll just make him memorize a Bible verse and probably restrict him from the fun stuff for a day or two.”

“Is that all?” Brady jumped at a blinding flash of lightning, followed by a vibrating roll of thunder. Fat drops of rain beat against his body. “We need to go. You ready, Steven?”

“Yep. Later, Claire.”

She was already scurrying toward her cabin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BRADY SPRAWLED ON HIS BUNK, TRYING TO THINK OF SOMETHING TO DO. The thunder and lightning had passed, but rain still beat a steady rhythm on the roof. He stretched his aching arms. Some bluish bruising already showed where they'd scraped against the canoe. But he liked the way his tired muscles burned. Wouldn't it be cool if he looked buff by the time camp ended? He turned his back to the rest of the bunks and flexed his biceps. They looked bigger to him. Would anyone else notice?

The screen door creaked then slammed shut. Matt's voice called to him.

"Brady? Steven? Are you here?"

"Yeah." They both answered at once, and Brady rolled over to see what Matt wanted.

The counselor hurried in and stood beside their bunks, wet hair and t-shirt plastered to his body. A puddle formed at his feet. "I heard what happened. You guys okay?"

Steven answered first. "I'm good."

"Yeah, we're fine." Brady nodded. "Where's Taylor?"

"He's with Zeke right now. I'm just making sure you guys are all right. You don't need to see Nurse Willie or anything?"

Brady shook his head.

“Okay. Well then, I guess I’ll go find some dry clothes.” Matt gave his head a vigorous shake, sprinkling the boys with water.

“Hey!” Brady jerked back from the shower.

Matt ignored their protests and laughed all the way to his room.

Brady rubbed the moisture from his arms and lay back on his pillow. Two bunks over, Chris and Nick debated mid-season major league baseball standings. Across the room, a raucous card game was in session. It would be the perfect time to practice his trumpet, but he didn’t want to disturb the other guys. Besides, he’d rather play where others couldn’t hear him, in case he messed up.

Steven stood up next to the bunk. “I bought a postcard for my mom. If I tell you what to say, will you write it for me?”

“Sure.” Brady swung down and settled onto the foot of Steven’s bed. He took the postcard and used his teeth to pull the cap off a pen. Leaning back against the bunk frame, he crossed his legs. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Steven sat at the other end of the bed and dictated. “Hi, Mom. Having lots of fun this week.” He punched his pillow up and wiggled into a comfortable position before continuing. “The water carnival was today. We won the sweatshirt relay and almost won the canoe race, but another team rammed us and tipped us over. Reminded me of Dad. Love, Steven.” He paused until Brady finished writing. “Does that sound okay?”

“You think she’ll worry about you getting tipped over?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Better cross out the part about getting tipped over. How much room do I have left?”

Brady scribbled over the offending sentence to make it unreadable. “Maybe one more sentence.”

“P.S. Brady is writing this for me. See you on Saturday.” Steven sat up straight. “Sorry, that’s two. Does it fit?”

“Jus-s-st barely.” Brady put in the final period and held it up for inspection. “What’s your address?”

Steven recited his address. “Now, you want me to write one for you? Oh, wait. Your mom probably can’t read Braille.”

“Ha-ha.” Brady didn’t care to find the humor in Steven’s joke. As he climbed back up to his bed, Steven made another offer.

“I do have an extra postcard if you want it.”

“No, thanks.” He laid his head on his pillow and stared up at the roof beams, wondering what his mom was doing, or thinking, at that moment.

Steven popped up beside his bunk, postcard in hand. “How about sending it to your dad?”

“I don’t want your stupid postcard!” He tore it from Steven’s hand and tossed it to the floor.

“I just thought, since your dad’s picking you up...”

“Don’t believe it. It’s not gonna happen.”

Steven’s brows puckered. “What do you mean?”

Brady expelled his breath and spoke through clenched teeth. “He doesn’t care about me. He’s never wanted me around. All he cares about is his work.”

Steven’s head sank against the bed frame. “I thought having my dad die was bad. That stinks.” He raised his head again. “What are you going to do? You have to live somewhere.”

“I don’t know. I’ll think of something.” Brady swallowed hard, hating the idea that a blind kid whose dad died felt sorry for him. He sat up and changed the subject. “Since you know this place so well, where’s a good place to practice my horn?”

Steven jerked upright. “Wait, what time is it?”

“Not even close to suppertime.”

“Who cares about supper? I’m talking tryouts. You need to get over to the chapel.”

Brady’s shoulders dropped. “Steven, I don’t want...”

“Too bad. You can’t sit around feeling sorry for yourself.” Steven stuck his head around the end of the bunk. “Hey, Matt. Brady needs his trumpet.”

“But it’s raining,” Brady protested.

“So? You’ve been wet before. You just said you wanted to practice.” Steven moved out to the aisle. “Hey! How many of you guys think Brady should try out for the talent show?”

Cheers and whistles filled the cabin. Matt whistled too as he carried Brady’s trumpet into the bunkroom.

“You hear that? Your fans demand it.” Steven stood at attention, his right hand raised in a salute. “We poor fools, so lacking in talent, are counting on you to uphold the pride of Oaks Cabin. It’s a big job, but we’re confident you can do it. Go forth and conquer!”

Amid more whistles and applause, Brady couldn’t help smiling at his friend’s silly act. Maybe Steven was right. Anything was better than sitting here feeling sorry for himself. He climbed down from the bunk and took the trumpet case from Matt.

“Wait a minute.” Steven felt for his suitcase, opened it, and rummaged along the side. “You want this?” He held out a compact umbrella that was red with white polka dots.

Brady looked at Matt and rolled his eyes. “No. And if I were you, I’d lose that thing as soon as possible.”

Steven shrugged. “I didn’t want it anyway. Mom put it in.” He tossed the umbrella back and snapped the suitcase shut. “Okay, break a leg.”

“I think that’s for actors.”

“So? Act like you’re leaving. Knock ’em dead.”

Brady stopped at the screen door and peered outside. Heavy clouds made it look more like evening than mid- afternoon. The neighboring cabin was almost invisible in the downpour. Tree branches sagged with the weight of rain on their leaves. Everything smelled wet. He pushed the door open and rain pelted the concrete steps, splashing onto his ankles and legs. He

ducked his head, hugged the trumpet case to his chest, and bolted for the chapel.

Seconds later, he reached the door, but his clothes were drenched as if he'd worn them for the sweatshirt relay. He stamped his feet on the worn carpet in the entryway and rubbed a wet hand over his hair, squeezing out as much water as possible before moving onto the linoleum floor. Musical notes drifted out from the sanctuary. He peeked in. A boy from his morning small group Bible study was at the piano. About twenty other kids sat scattered around the first three pews.

Brady moved up the side aisle, his wet flip-flops squeaking against the hard floor. He stopped to kick them off and saw Claire waving him over to sit with her and Hayley. She eyed his trumpet case and whispered as he sat down.

“Was that you playing at lights out last night?”

“You heard it?”

Claire nodded. “It was faint, but sound travels really well here at night. We wondered who was playing.”

“Are you trying out, too?”

Claire scrunched her nose. “Yeah, Hayley talked me into singing with her.”

The boy at the piano finished, and after several more campers performed, Claire and Hayley were called to the stage. They looked nervous, standing close together, microphones in hand as they waited for the recorded music to begin.

Their selection was a popular “girl” song – not one he'd listen to by choice. But their voices blended well. He liked their choreography too. And he liked Claire. Hayley was prettier, but Claire's friendliness and confidence caught his interest. Though naturally athletic, she didn't act stuck-up like some of the girl jocks at school. She was probably a couple years older than him, like Steven, which meant he didn't stand a chance

with her. Still, his pulse quickened when Claire returned to sit with him after they finished their audition and Hayley left.

“I want to hear you play.” She smiled, and those cute dimples appeared on her cheeks.

He was the last camper to audition. Only Claire and the two counselor judges remained. He stood alone on the stage, licked his lips, opened the spit valve and blew through the horn to clear out any moisture inside. He wiped his sweaty hands on his wet shorts and took a deep relaxing breath. His fingers bobbed the valves as he brought the horn to his lips and began to play.

The notes rang out clear and sharp. A light echo bounced off the rafters and the floor. Brady glanced at Claire. She smiled at him. The corners of his mouth curled in response, and then his mind went blank. What had he just played?

Brady stopped and pulled his horn away from his lips. “Sorry. I got lost. Can I start over?” His ears grew hot. Hopefully no one would notice them turning red.

The counselors nodded and he began again. This time he kept his mind on the music, his gaze on the point at the back where wall, ceiling and rafters all met. He played a slow rendition of “Amazing Grace,” giving it an almost mournful quality. On the second time through, he slid into a jazzy version, followed by a march, then returned to a slow, reverent tone at the end. When he finished, Claire and the counselors stood and clapped. The counselors looked at each other and both nodded.

One explained, “You weren’t here at the beginning when we announced that these aren’t really tryouts. Everyone who wants to perform gets to do it, but we’d like to put you at the end as our grand finale.”

Claire squeezed Brady’s arm as he put his horn back in its case. “You were fantastic. How’d you learn to play so well?”

Brady shrugged. “Same as everyone else, I guess. Lessons. Band. Lots of practice. I just like playing.” His arm glowed warm and tingly where she touched it. He snapped the trumpet case shut and walked with her to the door. Rain still fell, but not as heavy as before.

“Guess we won’t be having the picnic tonight.”

She smiled. “You’re lucky your cabin is close. Mine’s clear across camp. Guess I’ll see you in the dining hall later.” She waved her fingers at him and took off for her cabin, jogging barefoot through the rain and splashing through every puddle in her path.

“Yeah, see you later,” Brady breathed.

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CHAPTER NINE

EVENING WORSHIP WOULD START IN JUST A FEW MINUTES, BUT NURSE Willie set a basin of water on the floor in front of Brady and another one in front of Steven. “Put your feet in there and use this soap to wash ’em good. Be sure you get between your toes and all the way up to your knees.”

“But I’m not itching.” Brady hated the thought of being late in case Claire was waiting for them.

Willie looked down her nose at him. “Not yet, but you’ll thank me later. Wash your sandals too. Get all that plant residue off.”

Brady sat next to Steven in one of the clinic’s molded plastic chairs and grumbled to himself. What an idiot he was, taking Steven through the woods to search out the other team’s flag. He’d never seen poison ivy before. A poster on the wall showed pictures of venomous snakes and dangerous plants. Even after studying it, Brady wouldn’t have recognized the stuff among all the other leafy plants they’d stumbled through. Not long after the flag was finally captured, Steven’s ankle looked sunburned, and he complained that it itched like crazy.

Brady wrinkled his nose at the clinic’s antiseptic smell. It reminded him of the doctor’s office and shots. The clinic wasn’t much bigger than his bedroom at home. A cot with a thin vinyl mattress took up most of the opposite wall. An adjacent door opened onto a small bathroom. White

cupboards and drawers likely held bandages and medical supplies, and two other yellowed posters on the wall illustrated the inner workings of knees and ears.

“Okay, I’m finished.” He held his dripping hands over the tub.

Willie handed towels to him and Steven. “Dry your feet and hands with these. When you’re finished, Brady can take the tubs and dump the water into the toilet.”

While Brady cleaned up, she examined Steven’s ankle. “Most people don’t react this quickly, but it’s not unheard of. Try not to scratch it. I’d give you an antihistamine but you might fall asleep in the middle of Zeke’s talk. For now, let’s do this.” She sprayed his ankle and Steven let out a sigh of relief. “Come back after evening worship and I’ll give you the antihistamine. You’ll need it if you want to sleep tonight.”

Willie took the empty tubs from Brady, and clicked her tongue as he and Steven slipped their feet into flip-flops. The colorful lures on her hat swayed as she shook her head. “Better shoes would’ve protected you from the poison ivy. I’ll never understand why you kids wear those flimsy things.”

Brady made a mental note to remember that the next time he decided to run around in the woods.

Willie turned off the clinic light and followed them through the entryway. “I’m going out to keep the fish company, but I’ll be back by the time you need me.” She stopped at a closet and pulled out a life jacket, canoe paddle, fishing pole and tackle box.

Steven pushed open the outside door. “Can we go fishing too?”

Willie frowned at them as she slipped the life jacket on. “And miss evening worship? You know the answer to that question.”

Steven laughed. “Yeah I do, but it never hurts to ask.”

Willie ushered them out of the clinic and locked the door. “You boys hurry now, or you’ll be late.”

Brady led Steven along a shortcut to the chapel. They arrived with little time to spare. Campers swarmed the front rows, forcing them to sit farther back. Before he sat down, Brady searched the crowd for a glimpse of Claire. Instead, he spotted someone else and nudged Steven's knee.

"Guess who's sitting up front?"

A slow smile spread over Steven's face. "Taylor?"

"Yep."

"Ha-ha. Sweet punishment."

Brady's gaze swept across each row from one side to the other until he found Claire. She sat a couple rows up on the other side of the aisle, with Hayley next to her. She turned and caught him watching her, then stood and squeezed past the other girls to cross the aisle.

She tapped Steven's shoulder. "Did Brady tell you we're both in the talent show?"

"Yeah, you and Hayley. Since when do you dance?"

"I don't. It's just a few moves that Hayley talked me into." She smiled at Brady. "Will your parents be here for the show?"

Her question knocked the wind out of him. "No. Why?"

"It's sort of a tradition," Steven explained. "If you're in the talent show, your parents can come and watch. Zeke lets them stay over Friday night in the guesthouse, so they can take you home on Saturday. But you don't have to invite them."

Claire clucked. "Are you kidding? If I sang as well as you play, my mom would kill me if I didn't invite her." She glanced at the band as they started their opening song. "Uh-oh, I'd better get back. Talk to you later."

Brady stood to sing with the rest of the campers, but no words came out of his mouth. His mind raced from one thought to another, like a deflating balloon zooming crazily around the room. Did everyone invite their parents? How many of them came? Would he be the only one with no parents to clap for him? Should he try inviting Mom?

The talent show was Friday, the same day as his birthday. He hadn't told anyone yet and probably wouldn't. That way, if no one wished him happy birthday, he wouldn't be disappointed. He'd learned not to expect anything from his dad, but would Mom remember? A card, at least? How could he find out what he had done to make her so angry? Whatever it was, he'd fix it. He'd change.

The music stopped and Brady sat down, shoving the troubling thoughts from his mind as Zeke took the stage.

With Bible in hand, Zeke said, "Genesis tells us that every evening, God walked through the Garden with Adam and Eve." His bushy eyebrows shot up and his jaw dropped. "Can you imagine walking around the block with God? Every day? What would you talk about? Sports? Music? Gardening? Religion? The Bible doesn't tell us what they talked about, but it does say those evening walks came to an abrupt end when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command. They ate fruit from the forbidden tree."

Brady remembered that story from long ago when his family went to church. When he still had a family.

"All of you have disobeyed your parents at some time or other, right?" Zeke asked. "They told you not to hang around with so-and-so, or be home by a certain time. 'Do this. Don't do that.' But you went ahead and did it anyway. Then you felt a little guilty and didn't want them to find out, so you tried to hide it."

Zeke paced the stage. "Adam and Eve felt guilty too. Their disobedience ripped apart their relationship with God." He picked up a shirt and held it so everyone could see.

Brady leaned over and whispered to Steven. "He's holding up a torn blue shirt and sticking his fingers through the hole."

"When you tear your favorite shirt or pants," Zeke continued, "it creates a hole. Your mom might try patching it, but it's never the same. Why? Because those threads that were woven together are broken." He wadded

the shirt up and tossed it aside, then moved to his easel and drew some ragged marks on the paper. “What do you end up doing with those favorite jeans or shirt that gets torn?”

Someone in the audience shouted, “Wear ’em.”

Zeke’s sketching hand froze, and he knocked his head against the paper. His shoulders shook with laughter. “Okay. You’re right. With the jeans, you’d poke more holes in them and sell them for a bunch of money. But what about your favorite shirt?” He resumed sketching. “You’d probably quit wearing it. Eventually you’d throw it out. That’s what happened to Adam and Eve. When the fabric of their relationship with God was torn, God forced them out of the Garden, out of their home.”

Brady sat up straight. This was sounding familiar. God told Adam and Eve he didn’t want them living there anymore. But unlike him, Adam and Eve knew what they’d done wrong. He had no clue, except that Mom didn’t smile anymore, not like she used to.

Mom had been so excited marrying Richard. “You’ll finally have a dad,” she’d told him. “With both of us working, we’ll have enough money to watch movies at the theater and go out for pizza. Maybe we can even get you a car when you turn sixteen.”

But Richard didn’t have any more time for him than Dad did. Brady would rather make do without the movies and pizza, even the car, if it would bring back Mom’s smile.

Still, should he invite her to the talent show? It would give him an excuse to call her. *Maybe she’s changed her mind. Maybe I can still live with her and Richard.* The tone of her voice when she left on Sunday didn’t give him much hope. He dreaded hearing that again. Did she really mean what she’d said? Would he survive if she said yes, she really meant it?

Nope, calling wasn’t worth the risk.

Steven bumped his arm. “You haven’t told me what Zeke’s drawing.”

He'd been so caught up in his own thoughts he'd missed most of Zeke's talk. The drawing had taken shape without him really seeing it. "Looks like Jesus," he whispered. "Mainly his head with a piece of the cross sticking up in back."

Brady bowed his head with the rest of the campers as Zeke led the final prayer. Much of the message had escaped him, but the part he'd heard hit home.

What else changed for Adam and Eve? Did they miss talking with God, hearing His voice? Were they afraid of what He might say the next time he spoke? Did they ever wonder if God still loved them?

Brady finished his "lights-out lullaby," as Steven called it. Crickets chirruped in the woods and moths batted themselves against the light outside the door.

Matt came out of the cabin and sat down. "I'm glad you auditioned for the talent show."

Brady walked over and lifted a foot onto the step. "Are we supposed to invite our parents?"

"You can, but you don't have to. Are you thinking about your mom?"

Brady nodded. "She probably wouldn't come anyway."

Matt reached out and tapped Brady's knee. "Are you doing okay here?"

He nodded again, and blinked rapidly as his eyes stung with tears.

Matt jerked his head toward the cabin and whispered, "Has Taylor given you any more trouble?" Brady shook his head. "If he does, you need to tell me."

Brady stepped up and reached for the screen door but stopped short of opening it. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

“Did God still love Adam and Eve after he kicked them out of the Garden?”

“Absolutely. God never stopped loving them. Getting kicked out of the Garden sounds like punishment to us, but it might have been an act of love.”

Brady frowned. “Love? How?”

Matt leaned back and looked up at him. “They ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but Genesis tells of another tree in the Garden called the Tree of Life. Scholars think that eating from it kept you physically alive forever. In the perfect Garden of Eden, that was a good thing. But when Adam and Eve disobeyed, they suddenly knew what evil was. God never intended for them to live forever with such horrible knowledge. The Bible says God removed them from the Garden so they wouldn’t eat from the Tree of Life and live forever with the knowledge of sin and evil.”

Brady toyed with the trumpet’s mouthpiece, pulling it out, in, out, in. “So He kicked them out, but He did still love them. Right?”

Matt gazed at him, a look of pity on his face. Brady hated that. “You’re right. He never stopped loving them, just like He never stops loving us.”

Brady started to open the door, but Matt stopped him.

“Listen, I don’t know what made your mom say and do what she did. But I know for sure that God loves you more than you could ever imagine. Over and over in the Bible, He says, ‘I will never leave you or desert you.’ Do you trust Him?”

Brady shrugged. “I...I don’t know.”

“I like your honesty.” Matt stood and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m praying that by the end of the week, you’ll know beyond any doubt that you can trust His love for you, no matter what happens.” He pulled open the screen door. “G’night.”

Brady put his trumpet away and climbed to the top bunk. Steven was already asleep, probably from the medicine Willie gave him. Brady took a deep breath and let it out slowly, willing his body to relax. If he decided to invite his mom, he'd need to call her no later than Thursday. Making that decision would be easier if he had time to play his trumpet, time to think and sort things out. Tomorrow, he'd ask Matt where he could practice without being interrupted.

Brady closed his eyes. Did he trust God? How can you trust something you can't see, especially when the people and things you can see let you down? Would God answer Matt's prayer? *I hope so. It'd be nice to have someone in my life that would never leave.*

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CHAPTER TEN

MORNING SUNSHINE WARMED BRADY'S SHOULDERS AS HE SAT WITH HIS study group around the campfire pit. A hundred yards away, beyond the steep drop-off, the lake reflected a deeper shade of the blue sky above. Bird songs mixed with the gentle lapping of waves at the shore, and a light fishy smell mingled with the earthy scent of moist ground after yesterday's rain.

Bethany, the small group leader, recapped the story of Jonah and asked, "Who can tell me how this story demonstrates God's love and care for his people?"

Brady avoided eye contact with her and squirmed as dampness from the log he was sitting on seeped through his shorts. He tugged the cloth away from his skin, glancing around to make sure no one else noticed. A borrowed Bible balanced on his lap, and he tried to figure out how Mom decided on this camp. Did the fact that it was a church camp matter to her, or was it just the first one she found?

Bethany waved her hand. "Hello? Anybody awake this morning?"

One of the girls fluttered her hand in the air before she answered. He'd seen her with Claire in chapel last night so they were probably in the same cabin.

"Hey!" One of the boys pointed to his Bible. "It says here the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land."

“Eeuw!” The girls scrunched their noses.

Bethany rolled her eyes. “Yeah, it’s gross, but let’s think about situations we’ve been in that seemed hopeless. Did it feel like God was in control?”

Brady closed his eyes and tipped his head back, letting the sun bathe his face. If God was in control, He was doing a lousy job. He commanded a fish to swallow Jonah; was it that much harder to keep Mom and Dad together? And what about last night’s lesson? Couldn’t God have kept Adam and Eve from eating that fruit? Matt said God removed them from the Garden because He loved them. But getting kicked out of your home sure doesn’t feel like love.

Brady let his mind wander. Should he invite Mom to the talent show? Maybe she’d come if he asked it as a favor for his birthday. She’d always made a big deal over his birthday.

Bethany interrupted his thoughts. “Brady, don’t fall asleep on me.”

His eyes popped open. “I’m awake.”

“Good.” She smiled at him. “Have you ever felt hopeless, like God wasn’t in control?”

Now.

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Let’s all look at Jonah’s prayer in chapter two.” She waited until everyone found the right page. “He talks about waves and breakers covering him, sinking deep down to the roots of the mountains, seaweed wrapped around his head. Sounds like someone who’s drowning. He might have been minutes away from death. Maybe only seconds.”

Bethany leaned forward. “Sometimes, God allows things to get out of control in our lives to get our attention. If life is fine and nothing’s bothering us, why do we need God? We can handle life all by ourselves, right? But if you’re drowning, you can’t save yourself. You focus totally on whatever you need to survive. God is like a life preserver. He helps us

survive when we're drowning. But the time to put on the life preserver is before you get in the boat, right? You can't wait until you're drowning."

That's for sure. After yesterday, he'd always make sure his life jacket was fastened. In the distance, a motorboat chugged across the lake and pulled up beside an old boathouse that leaned to the side, as if tired of standing.

The girl from Claire's cabin giggled. She read a note from her friend sitting next to her, then scribbled an answer and passed it back. Her eyes met Brady's and she flashed him a guilty grin.

At last, Bethany dismissed them and Brady headed for the dining hall to meet Steven. Behind him, the girls chattered, and Claire's name drew his attention. He shortened his stride to better hear the conversation.

One of the girls giggled. "He likes her?"

"Can't you tell?"

"But she doesn't like him, does she?"

"Shhhh! Not so loud. No way. She says he acts like he's back in fourth grade." The girls veered off toward their cabin.

Were they talking about him? He thought he'd done a pretty good job of hiding his feelings for Claire. But if they weren't talking about him, why all the shushing? It had to be him. His stomach twisted at the idea that Claire thought he was immature, childish.

How stupid of him to think a girl like Claire might notice him. Still, she didn't seem like the kind of girl who'd say such things. Or was she? The image of her victory dance in the sand came to mind, along with the way she rubbed their win in Taylor's face. Brady's steps grew heavy and slow as he approached the corner of the dining hall where Steven waited for him.

"Brady? Is that you?" Steven cocked an ear in Brady's direction.

"Yeah." Brady forced an evenness to his voice.

"Everything okay?"

"Just great. You ready to go?"

“You don’t sound just great.”

“I’m fine. Okay?” This time, he couldn’t hide the irritation in his voice. He wanted to be alone, to vent his frustration and anger through his trumpet. Instead, he nudged Steven’s arm with his elbow. “Let’s go see what we’re doing for Rec today.”

They walked to the side of the Snack Shack, and Brady studied the announcement board. “Volleyball today. You can’t do that, can you?”

Steven shook his head, but spoke with excitement. “Nope. Maybe Willie can take me fishing again.”

Brady’s mood deteriorated even further. He’d counted on Steven’s presence the next time he faced Claire. Without Steven around as a distraction, he’d have to pretend friendship with her, and that wouldn’t be easy. “Let’s go back to the cabin and drop off our Bibles before lunch.”

“Okay. Maybe this time, I can talk Zeke into letting you come fishing too.” Steven took hold of Brady’s elbow and they started for the cabin.

At least Steven could be trusted. He always took Brady’s side, even if it meant suffering the same abuse. *And speaking of abuse...*

Taylor strolled toward them with two girls, one on each side. He said something, and the girls’ laughter sounded mocking.

Brady made an effort to follow Steven’s advice and ignore them. He moved to the side, giving them wide passage.

“Hey, losers,” Taylor taunted. “Is it true what I heard—that your mothers sent you to camp to get rid of you for a week?”

One of the girls gasped. “Taylor, that’s so mean.” The words were barely out of her mouth before she started to giggle. The other girl joined in.

Brady’s ears burned. His jaw hardened as the heat traveled from his ears to his neck, down into his shoulders and his arms.

“Ignore him,” Steven said, squeezing Brady’s elbow. He tugged sideways. “Just keep walking.”

Steven's voice sounded distant, as if he were a hundred yards away, while Taylor's voice replayed loud and clear in Brady's mind. He smacked his Bible against Steven's stomach.

"Hang onto this." Wrenching his elbow away, he darted toward Taylor and leaped onto his back, wrapping an arm around his neck. Anger coursed through his body. He tightened his hold.

The girls screamed. Taylor bent over, leaned to one side and spun around. Brady held on, even when Taylor dropped to the ground, pinning him beneath his back. Trapped, Brady clamped his legs around Taylor's hips. He clenched his jaw tight, barely noticing Steven's calls.

Taylor dug his fingernails into Brady's arm, raking the flesh and threatening to loosen his stranglehold. But resistance only fueled Brady's anger, and he squeezed even tighter around Taylor's throat.

His other fist pummeled Taylor's chest and ribs, the side of his head, and any other place he could reach.

Taylor slammed his head backward against Brady's forehead. Stars swirled against black, and he struggled to maintain his grip as Taylor rolled to the side, squirming first one way then another.

A gathering crowd shouted and screamed, but he paid no attention until his fist was halted in mid-punch. Someone wrenched his arm from Taylor's neck, allowing Taylor to scramble away. Yanked upright, Brady tried one last swing but found his wrist in a solid grip.

"Stop it, now!" Matt jerked him backward, and planted one hand on Taylor's chest, gathering his shirt in a tight fist to keep him from lunging at Brady. "Both of you, take some deep breaths and calm down."

Brady's chest was already heaving. He wiped the corners of his mouth with his wrist. Blood oozed from his forearm where Taylor had scratched him.

"All right." Matt's grip barely relaxed. "Who wants to start explaining?"

“I didn’t do anything,” Taylor protested. “I was just walking along, minding my own business. He jumped me from behind and pulled me to the ground. I was trying to get away.”

“He’s right.” One of the girls spoke up. “All of a sudden, this kid jumped him from behind.”

Matt looked at Brady. “Is that true?”

“No, they’re lying.” Steven felt his way through the crowd. “He wasn’t just minding his business. You know the kind of things he says. That’s what started it.”

“Okay, all of you to Zeke’s office. Girls, you too. Let’s go.” Matt jerked his head toward the building, but warned Taylor, “You keep your mouth closed. Not one word.” Before he let go of Brady’s arm, he leaned in nose to nose. “You don’t touch Taylor. Understand? Don’t even breathe in his direction.” Matt guided Steven and spoke over his shoulder to the crowd. “The rest of you need to find something better to do.”

Brady kept his distance from Taylor as Matt ushered them into Zeke’s office and explained why they were there. Taylor slumped into an armchair positioned in front of the desk.

“On your feet, son.” Zeke’s voice was low and controlled. “No one sits until we sort this out.” His eyes held a stern look as he studied them over the top of his glasses.

Brady met Zeke’s gaze only briefly. If he wasn’t so angry, he might feel a tiny bit ashamed. Maybe.

Zeke began the investigation. “What started all this?”

Taylor jabbed a finger at Brady. “He started it. The girls and I were just walking along when this loser comes up behind and tries to strangle me. Isn’t that right?” He looked at the girls who exchanged glances, but remained silent.

“No, it’s not right,” Steven said. “Brady and I were walking to the cabin. I’m not sure exactly where Taylor was, but he’s the one who started

it. He's always talking trash, and he said our moms probably sent us here so they could be rid of us for the week. After that, Brady tore away from me, and I heard them fighting."

Zeke took off his glasses and peered at Brady. "I don't put up with fights here at Rustic Knoll. I could send you home."

Good luck. Mom'll probably send me back.

Hopefully Zeke wouldn't insist on an apology. He wasn't sorry. Adrenaline still coursed through his body, but he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as his breathing returned to normal.

Zeke shifted his attention to Taylor. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I was just teasing." Taylor slid his hands into his armpits and clamped his arms down tight. "The kid can't even take a joke. All of a sudden, he's choking me. Can't I defend myself?"

Zeke's lips pressed into a thin line as he put his glasses back on. "Matt, I'd like you to stay. Ladies and Steven, you three may go."

"Do I have to?" Steven asked.

Zeke glanced at him over his glasses. "You can wait outside if you like."

The girls hurried out. Matt took Steven into the hallway, then returned and closed the door behind him. He leaned against a wall as Zeke motioned Brady and Taylor to sit down. Brady took the closest armchair, shuffling it away from Taylor.

Zeke picked up a pen, toying with it as he leaned back in his chair. "Taylor, I didn't expect to see you back in my office so soon. First you tip over a canoe, and now a fight. Do you have something against Brady and Steven?"

Taylor's shoulders hunched together. "They're just easy to tease." He waited for Zeke's response, his knee bobbing up and down. In the silence, he added, "I'm here 'cuz my mom wanted me out of her hair. What's the big deal?"

Brady threw him a side-glance, then looked away and muttered, “I don’t blame her.”

Zeke frowned at him, and he clamped his lips tight to keep from saying anything else.

The director lifted his Bible from the desk and paged through it. “So, you think the things you say don’t matter.” He got up and handed the open Bible to Taylor. “Read James 3:6. Out loud, please.”

Taylor’s lips moved as his finger traced the lines on the page. ““The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.””

Brady stifled a grin at the scowl on Taylor’s face.

“It’s not that bad,” Taylor mumbled.

“No? Try Matthew 12:36.” Zeke settled back in his chair.

Taylor flipped the pages and ran his finger down until he found the verse. “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.”

“Those are Jesus’ very words, Taylor. God does care about the things we say, enough to hold us accountable.”

Taylor made a sour face and closed the Bible.

“Not so fast.” Zeke pointed to the closed book. “Ephesians 4:29.”

Taylor leaned an elbow on one knee and balanced the Bible on the other. He flipped pages back and forth until Matt helped him find the verse. “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

“‘That it may benefit those who listen.’ Think about that for a few minutes.” He pulled another Bible off the shelf behind his desk, and held it out to Brady. “First Peter, chapter three, verse nine.”

Brady took the Bible, and made several passes through the whole book. “Where is it?”

Matt leaned down and flipped pages until they came to First Peter. Brady turned another page to the third chapter and put his finger on verse nine. He glanced at Zeke and read out loud. “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Zeke nodded. “Now, turn back a few pages to Ephesians, chapter four. Read verse 32.”

With Matt’s help again, Brady found the spot. “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Fat chance.

Zeke leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. “Brady, look at that verse again. Tell me, does it say to bless people because they deserve it? Are we supposed to forgive others only when they apologize?”

It was obvious where this was going, but he shook his head anyway.

Zeke pressed his point. “Why does it say to forgive people?”

“Because God forgave us.”

“That’s right. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that the other person is right, or that what they said or did is okay. It’s still wrong. But when you forgive someone, you give up your right to revenge, and you leave the punishment in God’s hands. Does that make sense?”

Brady looked to Matt, then back at Zeke. “Are you saying I have to forgive him for all the evil stuff he’s said and for dumping us out of the canoe?”

A corner of Zeke’s mouth pulled up as he glanced at Matt. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. And your expression tells me you’re not quite ready for that. So I’m going to help you out. Turn to Luke 6:28 and read that for me.”

Brady found Luke quickly and read the verse to himself first, then out loud. “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

“I think that’s an appropriate verse to apply in this situation. So,” Zeke clapped his hands together, “Taylor, your assignment is to memorize Ephesians 4:29. You will stay here in my office until you can say it out loud, word for word. Brady, you will memorize Luke 6:28. Matt, you will accompany Brady back to the cabin where he’s to stay until I decide whether or not to send him home.” His gaze swept from Brady to Taylor and back again. “Both of you will be prepared to recite your verse for me every time I see you between now and the time you leave Rustic Knoll. Understood?”

“What about lunch?” Taylor rubbed his nose with his fist.

Zeke’s mustache twitched. “I suggest you start memorizing now so you’ll have time to get something to eat. Matt, you can get a tray for Brady since he’ll have to stay in the cabin.”

Brady laid the Bible on Zeke’s desk and tried to imagine his mom’s reaction if Zeke sent him home. He knew what she’d have done before, but now? He had no clue.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

BRADY STORMED OUT OF ZEKE'S OFFICE WITH MATT ON HIS HEELS.

Steven jumped to his feet. "What happened? I bet you have to memorize a Bible verse, don't you?"

Brady brushed past him. Even though Steven had defended him, he didn't want to talk about it.

Matt filled in the details. "He's on cabin detention. I have to make sure he gets there. You coming, or do you want to go to lunch?"

"I'm with Brady."

Brady didn't wait for them. He couldn't get to the cabin fast enough, especially when he spotted Claire, Hayley, and another girl coming toward them. He ducked his head, but Claire left the others and jogged over.

"Hey, where are you going? Lunch is that way." She pointed to the dining hall, but when no one responded her dimples disappeared with her smile, and her brows scrunched together. "You guys look serious. Did something happen?"

Brady kept his gaze trained on the ground.

Matt simply waved as they hurried past. "Have a good lunch."

"Wait! What's going on? Tell me."

Brady quickened his pace. She'd find out soon enough. At least he didn't have to worry about seeing her at volleyball. He squeezed his hands

into fists, then opened them and stretched his fingers—a trick he'd learned at music contests to release tension.

The screen door creaked when Matt pulled it open then slammed shut behind them.

Brady climbed up on his bunk and flipped onto his back. Matt stopped off at his room while Steven continued on, counting beds until he reached Brady's. He stood in the aisle, arms hanging limp at his sides and eyebrows furrowed over his dark glasses.

“What happened, Brady?”

“I don't want to talk about it.” He narrowed his eyes until all he could see was a knothole in the ceiling above his head.

Steven moved closer. “I heard what Taylor said, but why'd you go after him? I mean, was it worth fighting...”

“I said I don't want to talk. Just shut up about it, okay?” Brady threw himself onto his stomach, cradled the pillow in his arms and buried his face.

Why *did* he go after Taylor? He'd never been in a fight before, much less started one. Plenty of times, he'd imagined the satisfaction of smashing Taylor's face, but he never actually considered doing it. It wasn't something he'd planned. He couldn't even recall the thought that propelled him onto Taylor's back. He only remembered – clearly – what was said. Maybe if it hadn't been so close to the truth, he'd have let it pass.

The screen door screeched and slammed, and Dillon entered the bunkroom. “Where's Brady? I heard he smacked Taylor.”

Brady pushed his face deeper into the pillow, turning his head to the side to breathe. Something jarred the bunk, and he peeked under his arm to see what it was.

Steven blocked Dillon's path. “He doesn't want to talk about it. Leave him alone.”

“Did he really fight Taylor?” Dillon's walking cast clunked against the floor as he moved around Steven to the other side of the bunk. He was

breathing hard, as if he'd hurried to get there.

Steven moved in the direction of his voice. "Yeah, but..."

"Brady, you're a beast!" Dillon laughed and slapped Brady on the back. "Man, I never guessed you'd be the one to put him in his place." He pressed Brady's shoulder, trying to turn him over.

Brady shrugged his hand away.

"Come on, Brady, you're awesome. Let's see your battle scars."

"Leave me alone!" Brady swung his pillow sideways, catching Dillon on the side of his head and knocking him off-balance.

"Whoa! Nice swing." Dillon laughed as he steadied himself.

Brady hugged the pillow again, hiding as best he could.

"Do what he says, Dillon. Leave him alone." Matt spoke low and commanding.

"Okay, okay. But Brady, you can play on my team anytime, y'hear?"

In the sliver of space between the pillow and his arm, Brady glimpsed Dillon holding out his fists, thumbs pointing up. His laughter left the cabin with him, and Matt came to stand in Dillon's spot.

"I'm going to get some lunch. You want me to bring a tray back for you?"

"How long is he on cabin detention?" Steven asked.

"Until Zeke decides whether or not to send him home." Matt laid a hand on Brady's shoulder. "Are you hungry?"

Brady came out of hiding and raised himself up on one elbow. "I guess so."

"Steven, you want to come with me?"

"I'd rather stay here."

Brady sat up. "Go ahead. You don't have to babysit me."

Steven shook his head. "I want to stay. Can you bring a tray for me, too?"

“Your choice. I’ll be back in a little bit.” Matt left, the screen door slamming behind him.

As if on cue, Steven’s questions began. “Hey, Brady?”

How many times did he have to tell him? “I said I don’t want....”

“It’s not about the fight.” Steven leaned his shoulder against Brady’s bunk. “If Zeke sends you home, where will you go?”

Brady lay back down on his side, and hugged the pillow to his chest. “There’s no way I’m living with my dad. If Mom doesn’t want me...I don’t know. Maybe I’ll run away and live on my own somewhere.”

Steven felt for the bed behind him and sank onto it. “Aw, that’s not a good idea.” His brow puckered. “Your mom’s serious? I mean, she wasn’t just having a bad day? Could she change her mind?”

Brady frowned and pulled the pillow a little tighter. “Even if she did, I don’t think Richard wants me around.”

“Richard?”

“My stepdad. I think it was his idea for me to live with my dad.”

“Are you going to invite them to the talent show?”

Brady rolled onto his back. “Mom wouldn’t come.”

“How do you know?” Steven jumped up, hands reaching out until they found the bed frame. He stepped onto the bottom bunk and stood close to where Brady lay. “What if you call your mom and say you’re sorry for whatever, then invite her to the talent show because you’re playing the grand finale.”

Brady moved his head from side to side. “She’s heard me play before. Why would she come all the way up here to listen to something she’s heard at home?”

“Because she’s your mom. You gotta try. If she comes, it’s your chance to talk her out of sending you to your dad.”

Brady pushed up onto his elbow. “It won’t work. Besides, I may not be here for the talent show. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Steven stepped down to the floor and backed away. “Well, if Zeke doesn’t send you home, promise you’ll invite her.”

Brady lay back down and tucked his hands beneath his head. What did he have to lose?

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

Matt returned with a lunch tray and enough food for both Brady and Steven. His presence in the bunkroom squelched any talk of the fight as other boys trickled in from lunch.

Brady caught their curious glances, an occasional smirk, and a secret thumbs up. When Taylor walked in, an unnatural quiet descended on the room.

Matt prodded everyone to hurry to Rec activities, assigning Chris to help Steven. After everyone left, he hoisted himself onto the bunk next to Brady’s and sat with his legs hanging over the side.

Was he staying in the cabin? Didn’t he need to supervise Rec activities? Brady avoided eye contact, thumbing through pages of the Bible he’d thrust at Steven earlier. He found his assigned memory verse and mouthed the words.

“It helps if you say it out loud,” Matt said. “Try it.”

““Bless those who curse you.”” Brady peeked at his Bible. ““And pray for those who mistreat you.””

“Can you do that?”

Brady blew air through his lips. “Maybe, if I wanted to.”

Matt shook his head. “It doesn’t say to do it if you want to. Nobody wants to pray for people who act like jerks. Okay, rather than asking if you *can* do it, let me ask, *will* you do it?”

Brady hunched one shoulder.

One of Matt's flip-flops fell to the floor. He kicked off the other one, pulled his legs up and crossed them. "I bet you didn't feel like getting out of bed this morning. Would've been nice to sleep in, huh? But you got up, even though you didn't want to. We do a lot of things we don't want to. Which proves we can pray for someone we don't like, someone we don't want to pray for."

Brady's finger played with the pages of his Bible. "But if I don't really mean it, what good is it?"

"The good comes from our obedience. It's nice if the feelings come with it, but God cares more about our actions than our feelings. And it's okay to be honest. He knows how you feel anyway, so tell him you don't want to pray for Taylor, that you're only doing it because He told you to."

Matt's analogy made sense. But praying for Taylor simply didn't fit into his imagination. "What am I supposed to say? I mean, God probably wouldn't like it if I asked him to strike Taylor with lightning or something."

"No, probably not." Matt chuckled. "At least you'd be honest. How about if I say a prayer first?"

Matt folded his hands and bowed his head. "Jesus, you know exactly what Brady is going through with Taylor. You suffered insults and the horrible things people said about you when you walked this earth. Thank you for sharing in our problems and suffering. Lord, I ask you to bless Taylor. Whatever is going on in his life that makes him act the way he does, I pray that you would change him from the inside out. And I ask you to give Brady the strength and ability to deal with Taylor's irritating habits. Amen."

Brady couldn't bring himself to join Matt's prayer. He closed his eyes and opened them slowly, hoping Matt wouldn't know he'd been watching him rather than praying with him.

Matt opened his eyes and frowned. "That sounded more complicated than I wanted. Just ask God to bless Taylor in whatever way He chooses. I

know you can say those words, so I won't make you pray out loud. But work on it, okay? What's your verse?"

Brady checked his Bible again before reciting it. "Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you."

"Good job." Matt jumped down from the bunk and slid his feet into his sandals. "I probably should head out to Rec. You want your trumpet?"

"Yeah!" Brady scrambled down from his bunk and retrieved his horn from Matt's room.

Matt stopped him before he left. "Listen, I understand why you jumped Taylor. Not saying it's right, but I understand. I've been in your shoes and believe me, you don't have to fight anyone. I'm here for you, okay? Anytime you need me. And I'm praying that God heals every wound that people have left in your life so you can honestly pray for Taylor, and for your mom, too."

He delivered a light punch to Brady's shoulder. "Hey, I know it's not cool for guys to talk about stuff that's bothering them. Come punch me in the arm or something and I'll know you want to talk. Deal?"

Brady nodded and made a quick escape back to the bunkroom. Matt called a good-bye as he left, and the tension in Brady's shoulders dissolved. He'd have the cabin to himself with time to play his trumpet. Not what he considered punishment, but he'd never admit that to Zeke.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AN HOUR LATER, STEVEN HOBbled INTO THE CABIN AND SANK ONTO HIS bed.

Brady quit playing his horn long enough to ask, “What happened?”

“Tandem bike ride with Ryan.” He lifted his feet onto the bed and massaged his legs. “Are you bored yet?”

Brady laid his trumpet aside. “Not yet. Been playing my horn.”

Chris ran in, letting the screen door slam. “Lucky you guys didn’t have to play volleyball. We lost all three games. It was bad.” He grabbed a towel off the end of his bed and wiped the sweat from his face. “Steven, Claire said to meet her down at the beach.”

“Can’t. I’m staying here.”

Brady objected. “Go swim if you want. I don’t need a babysitter.” He blew the spit out of his trumpet, wiped off the fingerprints and laid it in the case.

Steven dropped his feet to the floor. “I’m not babysitting you. Just figured I’d keep you company. I’d hate being here all afternoon by myself.”

“I’m fine.” Brady slid the trumpet under Steven’s bed and climbed up to his top bunk. Which was worse, being alone or listening to Steven’s chatter all afternoon? Maybe Zeke would come by and either release him or send him home.

Chris grabbed his swim trunks and headed for the bathroom. “If you’re going to the beach, I’m leaving as soon as I change.”

The odor of sweaty bodies and loud voices filled the cabin as more boys returned from Rec. Steven felt for his swim trunks hanging over the clothes bar in the open closet. “What if Taylor comes in?”

Brady wrinkled his nose. “I’ll be okay. Go on.” Right now, he’d rather face Taylor than Claire. He was glad he wasn’t going with Steven. But after his friends left, resentment set in. He suddenly hated this confinement.

He gazed around the room, trying to think of something to do when Taylor strutted into the bunkroom. Their eyes locked. The hostility in Taylor’s gaze mirrored Brady’s lingering anger. Taylor’s mouth opened, his lip pulling up into a sneer.

“Get what you need, Taylor.” Matt spoke from the doorway. He crossed his arms over his chest. “You’ve got two minutes to get your stuff and go.”

Taylor glanced back toward Matt and threw one more look of challenge at Brady before grabbing a ball cap and heading out. Matt shot Brady a warning look and followed Taylor out the door.

Brady blew out a deep breath and lay back on his bed. What were the words Matt said to pray? *Dear God, Please bless Taylor in whatever way he wants.* That didn’t sound right, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

The boys trickled back to the cabin in twos and threes, then left again when it was time for supper. Brady still waited for word from Zeke, while Steven chattered on about every little thing that had happened outside the cabin that afternoon.

“Steven, let’s go to supper.” Matt walked over to his bunk.

“Can’t I stay with Brady?”

“We’ll bring a tray back for him. Come on.” He guided Steven out. The screen door slammed and the cabin fell silent again.

Brady took out his trumpet and ran through a couple songs he’d memorized. Restless, he got up and walked around while playing. At an open window, he stopped and played his talent show selection to an imaginary audience. The screen door’s creak alerted him to someone’s presence, but he ignored it until he’d finished his performance. He turned and saw Zeke leaning against the doorframe.

“Sorry! I didn’t know it was you. I would’ve quit playing.”

Zeke stepped into the bunkroom. “I’m glad you didn’t. Now I understand what everyone’s talking about. Where’d you learn to play like that?”

Brady shrugged. “I don’t know. I just like doing it.” His fingers mashed the valve keys up and down.

“Have a seat.” Zeke motioned him to sit on the nearest bed and sat down opposite him. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “First, let me hear you say your verse.”

Brady searched his memory for the starting word. It was an odd one, not the kind he normally used. Grace? No. Brace? B–bless! “Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.”

The corners of Zeke’s mouth hid beneath his white mustache when he smiled. “Good. And Matt says you’re working on doing what it says.”

“I did pray for Taylor.” Once. That was honest. Twice if Matt’s prayer was included, but since he hadn’t closed his eyes, it probably didn’t count.

Zeke sat up straight. “I’m glad to hear that. I’ve talked with Taylor some more about the teasing. He understands there’s to be no more. And I’ve decided not to send you home, provided there’s no more fighting.”

Brady’s shoulders relaxed, and his breath came out in a whoosh. “It won’t happen again. I promise.” He laid the trumpet on the bed. “Do I still have to stay in the cabin?”

“After supper, you may leave. I assume someone’s bringing you a tray?”
He nodded. “Matt and Steven said they would.”

“All right then.” Zeke’s fingers tapped together between his knees. He appeared to study something underneath the bed. “Matt tells me things at home are not the way you’d like them. That might explain why you went after Taylor, but it doesn’t justify it. It’s important to learn how to express your anger in acceptable ways, not by fighting. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Brady didn’t want to go over all this again. He reached for his horn and twisted the mouthpiece round and round.

“If something bothers you so much you feel out of control, I hope you’ll come talk to me or Matt or any of the counselors. That’s why we’re here. My goal is that everyone who comes to Rustic Knoll takes something home with them.” He caught Brady’s eye and winked. “Black eyes don’t count.”

Brady couldn’t keep the corners of his mouth from turning up.

Zeke stood to go. “I’ll leave you to your practice.” He walked to the doorway and turned around. “What was that verse again?”

“Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.” Brady rattled it off with ease this time.

Zeke clicked his tongue and winked. “That’s it. See you tonight at worship.”

Steven pressed Brady about his promise. “So, when are you going to call your mom?”

“She doesn’t want me. Why would she come all this way to watch me play something she’s heard a zillion times already?” He led Steven into the chapel and looked for a place to sit. The front rows were filled, though there was still plenty of time before evening worship started.

“But you promised you’d call her if Zeke didn’t send you home.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think I’d be here for the talent show.” Brady pretended not to see Claire waving them toward the empty seats beside her.

“I’ve never known Zeke to send someone home,” Steven said. “He’s into more creative kinds of punishment.”

“You could have told me that before you made me promise to call.” He urged Steven in the opposite direction from Claire, but she’d already left her seat and was heading straight for them. No escape.

“Come on. I saved seats for you guys.” She guided Steven through the maze of campers and led the way into the row. Brady breathed a little easier with Steven sitting between them, but Claire leaned over and tapped his arm. “Steven told me what happened. Are you okay?”

Brady nodded. As if she cares. Still, he liked the idea that she was concerned about him.

“Taylor deserved it. Proud of ya!” She raised her hand for a high-five.

Brady slapped it and sat up straighter in the seat. Maybe now she’d see him as more than a fourth-grader. A hand on his shoulder made him look up.

“What’s the good word?” Zeke raised one white eyebrow in an expectant look.

Brady closed his eyes, trying to remember that first word. “B-B-Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.”

“Very good. Now, wait just a minute.” Zeke stopped Taylor as he walked by, put an arm about his shoulder and brought him around to face Brady. He asked Taylor to recite his verse, then said, “This may seem childish to you boys, but I think it’s important to ask forgiveness when we’ve wronged someone. Would either of you like to go first?”

Taylor’s lips pressed tight together. He avoided looking at Brady, seemingly more interested in the conversation between Steven and Claire.

Claire shushed Steven. “Wait a minute. Shh.”

Oddly, the prayer Matt had suggested Brady pray earlier popped into his mind. *God, bless Taylor any way you want.*

Brady opened his mouth. "I'm sorry I jumped you. It won't happen again." He meant it. How weird was that?

Taylor inhaled, opened his mouth as if to speak, then looked down at the floor. He crossed his arms over his chest, hands snug in his armpits. "Yeah, same here. Sorry." He raised his head and looked behind him, as if something exciting were happening on the other side of the room.

"Thank you, gentlemen." Zeke gave each boy's shoulder a squeeze. "And Steven, you're a witness. They both promised it won't happen again. If either one breaks his word, I trust you'll let me know."

"Deal!" Steven elbowed Brady as Zeke and Taylor walked away. "Hear that? Zeke doesn't like it when you break a promise."

Brady leaned sideways to see around the head of the kid in front of him. A familiar figure took shape on Zeke's drawing pad.

"How many of you talk with God?" Zeke faced the audience and held up his index finger. "I didn't say *to* Him, but *with* Him. There's a difference. Most of the time, we treat God like this guy."

"What guy?" Steven whispered.

"Santa Claus," Brady said. "He's drawing a picture of Santa."

Zeke shaded in the red suit while he spoke. "Once a year, we communicate our list of requests to Santa. When he fails to give us what we asked for, we get angry and decide he's not real." He looked to the audience for confirmation, peeking over the top of his reading glasses at them. "Is that what you do when your parents say no to something you want? Decide they're not real?"

Laughter rippled through the chapel.

“Of course not. But don’t we do that very thing to God? Let’s pretend for a minute that you treat your parents that way. How would they react if the only time you ever spoke to them is when you want something? Or if the only time your friends talk to you is to ask a favor, would your friendship last very long?”

Zeke’s words made Brady think. Not too long ago, he and his mom talked a lot, about almost everything. Lately, though, he mostly just answered her questions about which friend he was hanging out with, what movie they were watching. Or he’d ask her to take him somewhere, or buy something he needed. Was that why she didn’t want him anymore, because he acted like she was Santa Claus? When was the last time he’d told her what was going on at school or that he dreamed of being a professional trumpet player someday?

What had happened to make them stop talking to each other? Mom hadn’t exactly been easy to talk to since she married Richard. Lately, she always looked tired. And she’d started chewing her lip again.

Maybe Steven was right about the talent show. If Brady could persuade her to come without Richard, maybe they could talk like they used to. Maybe she’d change her mind and let him come home.

Or maybe not. If she only wanted Richard and didn’t care about him anymore, he might as well run away. He’d never seriously thought about doing that before. It kind of popped out while he was talking to Steven. *Would Mom miss me? Would she care enough to look for me?* He pulled his attention back to what Zeke was saying.

“Santa only comes around once a year, but God is a constant presence. He’s with you no matter what time of the day it is or what time of year it is and no matter where you are. Santa’s only reason for existence is to fulfill your wishes, like a genie in a bottle. That’s not real.” Zeke drew a thick, black circle around his picture, then added an X over Santa.

“We don’t pray to Santa. We pray to our Creator God who is great enough to hang the stars in the sky and call each one by name. We pray to a God who is personal enough to know your name, so personal He knows the number of hairs on your head. He sees your life from beginning to end and knows what you need today, tomorrow, next week, next year. He promises to hear us when we call to Him. And when we cry for help, He answers, ‘Here I am.’ Let’s talk with him right now.”

Zeke bowed his head to pray.

An idea popped into Brady’s head. It needed more thought, but he might keep his promise to Steven after all.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BRADY'S EYES OPENED LONG BEFORE SUNRISE THURSDAY MORNING. HIS mind churned with indecision. If he decided to invite Mom to the talent show, it couldn't wait until tomorrow. He had to call her today.

At breakfast, he almost mentioned it to Steven, but clamped his mouth shut instead. Most of the time, Steven's cheerful confidence inspired him. But his friend didn't understand family conflicts, divorce, and stuff like that. Steven would only pester him to make the call, something he might regret later.

But what if Steven was right? If he didn't try to talk with Mom, he'd be living with Dad for sure. His pulse raced at the possibility of more rejection from Mom, but the alternative made it worth the risk.

On the way back to the cabin after Rec, Brady announced his decision. "I'm keeping my promise to you."

Steven stopped short, pulling back on Brady's elbow. A grin spread across his face. "You mean it?"

"Yeah. I've got it figured, what I'll say and how I'll say it. I think it'll work. But what phone do I use?"

"Zeke's office. Matt can take you. Come on, let's see if he's in his room." They hurried to the cabin where Steven rapped on Matt's door.

“Enter.” Matt sat cross-legged on his bed, a book in his lap. “Hey, men. What’s up?”

Steven blurted out, “Brady needs to call home right away.”

Matt tipped his head to one side, eyeing Brady. “Are you sick?”

“No. I want to invite my mom to the talent show.”

Matt shoved some clothes from the end of his bed and closed his book. “Sit down and tell me about it.”

Steven leaned against the doorframe. Brady sat on the bed. “I’ve decided I’ll apologize for talking back to her on Sunday, then tell her they want me to do the final act in the talent show on Friday.”

“You think she’ll come?”

“If not, I’ll ask her to do it as a favor. Tomorrow’s my birthday. It’s the only birthday gift I really want.”

Matt winced. “What if she still says no? Can you handle that?”

Brady shifted his position on the bed, wiped a drop of sweat crawling down the side of his face, and closed his eyes. Was he kidding himself? Had the shock from Sunday worn off? He wanted to believe she’d come, but what if she said no?

Matt bumped Brady’s knee with his fist. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m all for it if you think she’ll come. I just don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

Brady inhaled and let his breath out slowly. With forced confidence, he said, “I’ll be okay.”

A grim expression settled onto Matt’s face. He dropped his book on the floor and stood up. “All right. You have to call from Zeke’s office. Let’s go.”

Brady’s hands grew sweaty as they neared the main building. What if Mom wasn’t home? What if she couldn’t, or wouldn’t, come? Maybe this wasn’t the great idea he’d thought it was. It had kept him awake last night and gnawed at his mind all morning. Still, he had to try, like when he

jumped off the diving board. If he didn't, he'd always be sorry he didn't take the chance.

Zeke was at his desk when Matt tapped on the open door. "Brady wants to call his mom and invite her to the talent show. Is this a good time for him to use the phone?"

"Come on in." Zeke closed a folder and dropped it into a side drawer. "Give me just a minute, Brady."

"Should I say my verse to you first?" Brady moved to stand in front of the desk.

A corner of Zeke's mouth lifted. "I'd like that."

"Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. Luke 6:28."

Zeke turned the phone around, lengthened the cord and set it in front of Brady. "Pull one of those chairs up to the desk here. That door locks automatically when it closes, but you can open it from the inside. Just be sure to close it when you leave." He came around the desk and took Steven's arm, guiding him out of the office. "Why don't we all wait out here?"

The door clicked shut. Brady stared at the phone as if it were a vicious dog threatening to bite. He picked up the receiver. The dial tone buzzed in his ear. He rehearsed the conversation in his mind while his finger punched ten numbers on the phone's keypad. It rang once, and three whistle tones sounded in his ear.

A woman's voice said, "We're sorry. Your call cannot be completed as dialed. You must dial a one or a zero first. Please hang up and try again."

He held the receiver out and stared at it, his brows scrunched together. A one or a zero? What for? He studied the keypad and carefully punched in his mom's cell number, beginning with a one.

His mouth went dry with the second ring. It was almost too much to hope that she was alone, that Richard wasn't home yet. He waited through

four rings. Her voicemail usually picked up after five. If she didn't answer, should he leave a message or not?

Click. "Hello?"

"Mom! It's me." He gripped the receiver with both hands.

"Brady? What are you calling for? Are you sick?"

"No, I . . . I'm in the talent show. Tomorrow night. They want me to do the grand finale. Can you come and watch?" This wasn't at all how he'd planned it. He meant to apologize before telling her about the talent show.

"You want me to drive all the way up there again?"

"Yeah, but first, I'm sorry for what I said to you on Sunday. You're not at all like Dad. I didn't mean it." His mother said something, but her voice sounded muffled. Richard's voice in the background came through short and clipped. Why was he home so early?

Brady pressed on. "All the kids in the talent show get to invite their parents. You can stay overnight here at the camp, and we'll go home the next day." Did she catch the part about going home?

"I'm sorry, Brady."

"But Mom, did you hear what I said? I apologize."

"Yes, I heard that and I appreciate it. But I can't go up there tomorrow."

He clutched the receiver tight against his ear and tried to suck moisture back into his mouth. Richard's voice rose in the background, sounding angry.

Brady's chances were slipping away. "Mom, please? It's my birthday. Can't you come up and watch the show?" He hated the whiny tone in his voice.

"Honey, I can't."

"Pleeease? Make it my birthday present. You don't have to get me anything else. Just come for the show. Richard doesn't have to come if he doesn't want to."

"I'm sorry, Brady. I'll send your birthday present to your dad's house."

“No! I don’t want to live with Dad! Please, Mom.”

Richard’s voice was louder now, deep and threatening.

“I’m sorry, Brady. I can’t talk now.”

“Mom! Wait!”

“I have to go. G’bye.”

“Mom!” The phone clicked. Brady’s hand shook until he slammed the receiver down onto the base. His whole body trembled as he sank against the back of the chair. His chest was caving in and crushing his lungs, his breathing heavy and difficult.

It hadn’t gone at all the way he’d planned. Maybe if Richard hadn’t been there, his mom would’ve been more willing to talk with him.

He hated that man. Brady had tried to like him, especially when Mom told him they were getting married. She’d seemed happy, at least for a little while. But there was something about Richard he didn’t trust. What did Mom see in the guy? More important, what did he sense that his mom apparently couldn’t see?

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Brady rose to open it. Steven stood on the other side.

“What did she say?”

Brady avoided looking at Matt and worked to keep his voice casual. “She’s busy.”

Steven’s shoulders fell. “You’re kidding!”

Brady shrugged. “She already had something planned.”

“Are you okay?” Matt’s voice suggested he wasn’t fooled.

Brady dipped his head, stepped out of Zeke’s office and closed the door behind him. “Yeah, I’m okay.” He met Matt’s gaze. “Really, I’m fine. I’ll be all right.”

Matt’s eyes narrowed slightly. His jaw twitched, but he said nothing.

Steven reached out for Brady’s arm. When he found it, he landed a light punch to his shoulder. “I’m really sorry, Brady.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t expect her to come up anyway.” Brady looked straight at Matt, challenging him to disagree.

Matt’s nostrils flared as he exhaled. “All right, then. I’m going back to the cabin.” He turned on his heel. The slap of his flip-flops echoed down the hall.

“So,” Steven asked, “what do you want to do now? You wanna swim?”

Brady turned up his lip. “Not really.” *I don’t want to do anything, except maybe slam my fist into something.*

“I know. Let’s take out a canoe and this time, you can steer.”

“I don’t know how.” *And I don’t want to know either.*

“Come on. I’ll show you.” Steven tugged on Brady’s arm.

“Are there any canoes left? I thought Claire said some other group needed them. That’s why the carnival was held early.”

“Zeke wouldn’t let all of them go. There’s bound to be a couple left.”

Brady dragged his feet as they headed off to the boat dock, hoping the canoes would all be gone. But Steven was right. Two were held back for the campers, and one of them was returning to the dock as he and Steven descended the stairs. He took the life jackets Ryan offered, gave one to Steven then fastened the straps on his own. He gave them an extra tug before guiding Steven to the canoe.

The air had grown sticky, making his neck and chest already sweaty under the life vest. Clouds piled up too. Every so often, they blocked the sun for a bit, providing a minute or two of welcome shade. His mind kept replaying the phone conversation.

Steven climbed into the bow of the canoe and settled onto the seat. “You sit in back, so you can see what I’m doing with the paddle.”

Brady took the rear seat, swaying backwards when Ryan pushed them off. The sensations were different back here, with the canoe out in front of him. The impression of gliding through the water thrilled him, and it wasn’t as scary as it had been the first day they went out. Was that the result of

practice? He'd survived being dumped out of the canoe. Maybe Steven's dad was right, after all. Once you experience the worst, you can deal with anything.

Steven began his instruction before they cleared the buoys for the swim area.

"If you're paddling on the right, and you want to turn to the right, reach the paddle out as far as you can before putting it in the water. Then as you pull it back, pull toward you. Like this." He drew his paddle through the water in a semi-circle.

Brady imitated, leaning a little too far out so that the canoe tipped. He almost landed in the water again. "Sorry."

"No problem. Try it again." Steven shifted his weight to counterbalance.

Brady's thoughts kept going back to the phone call as he reached out again, pulling the paddle toward him. The motion was awkward and stiff. There wasn't much change at first, but soon the canoe pointed toward the swimming area.

"Okay, I think I've got it." He dipped his paddle in again, pulling hard against the water's resistance. The canoe turned toward shore.

Steven hoisted his paddle in the air. "I feel it. We're turning. Okay, now, to turn the other way, put your paddle in closer to the canoe. But when you pull back, at the end of the stroke, push out away from you. Like this."

Brady mimicked Steven's actions. The canoe swayed back toward their original direction. His thoughts swayed back to his mother's voice. It sounded different, especially after he'd heard Richard's voice. Not worried, exactly. More like...scared. Yes, it was fear he'd heard in her voice. What was she afraid of? Or maybe he should ask who. Was it Richard?

Steven interrupted his thoughts. "Hey, you want to do circles?"

"Sure." Brady didn't care what they did, as long as he could think.

"Keep doing what you're doing." Steven reached his paddle out to the left and pulled it toward him in an arc.

The canoe swung in a complete circle once, twice. Brady's attention was elsewhere. He needed to be at home, to find out what was going on and why his mom was scared.

"Had enough?" Steven pulled in his paddle and twisted halfway around in his seat.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay? You're not saying much."

Brady needed more time to think. He had to keep Steven occupied. "Yeah, I'm good. Let's keep paddling. I want to practice a little more. Then we can head back."

"Okay, you're in charge." Steven faced forward again and dipped his paddle in the water.

How could he get home? Brady's mind searched for a solution. He couldn't wait for Saturday, in case Dad actually showed up to take him home. He needed to leave tonight. But how?

He dug his paddle into the water, pushing the canoe farther out on the lake. He wouldn't get very far on foot. Besides, walking home would take longer than waiting for his dad. He and Mom had driven through a nearby town on the way up here. Maybe there was a bus station there. He still had most of the money Mom gave him, but how much would a bus ticket cost?

Run away? The very idea brought a suffocating tightness to Brady's chest, and his sweaty hands slid on the smooth neck of the paddle. Still, the memory of his mother's voice stirred his determination to get home. He'd wait until dark to make it easier to hide, in case Zeke or anyone came looking for him. They'd look on the highway that ran past the camp's entrance first. But what other way was there?

"Whereabouts are we?" Steven turned halfway around.

Brady noted their position past the boundary line. "Farther than we should be. I'll turn us around and head back to shore." He extended the paddle as far as he could reach, drove it into the water and pulled it toward

him. A couple more strokes and they were facing Rustic Knoll's shoreline. Surprising how far they'd come in only a few minutes.

That's it! Brady sat up straight, looked toward the shore then looked behind him. They were maybe a third of the way across the lake. It would probably take longer without Steven to help paddle, but no one would expect him to escape across the lake. It was perfect. Even if they discovered his route, they'd search that shoreline for hours while he hitched a ride into town and caught a bus for home. All he needed to do was pick up a paddle and life jacket that weren't locked up.

Brady smiled and thrust his paddle through the water with renewed energy. He was going home.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BRADY SCOOTED HIS DINNER TRAY ALONG THE COUNTER BEHIND CLAIRE. Steven followed, but Brady wasn't worried about him seeing the food he stuffed into his pockets. It could be a long time before he ate again. As soon as Claire pushed ahead, he swiped a couple packages of soup crackers.

Janie pushed through the door to the kitchen and eyed the food left on the buffet. Her face lit up when she saw them. "How are my favorite campers tonight?"

Steven leaned toward her. "Janie, I'm hungry for cake. Could you make some for tomorrow?"

Her dark eyebrows arched up. "What kind of cake?"

"Birthday cake." Steven grinned and jerked his thumb in Brady's direction.

Brady froze. He never imagined Steven would tell.

Janie clapped her hands. "Is tomorrow your birthday?"

Claire gripped his forearm. "Seriously? You didn't tell us."

"He told me." Steven pushed his chest out. Claire put her hands on her hips and stuck her tongue out at him, as if he could see it.

"A birthday cake it is. What kind do you like? Vanilla? Chocolate? Spice? Lemon?" Janie ticked off the flavors on her fingers.

Brady shrugged away the attention. "I like any kind." On second thought, it was kind of nice having someone make a big deal about it, especially since Mom wasn't around.

"Oh, come on," Claire said. "Janie can make anything. What's your favorite?" Her eyes sparkled, and he couldn't help smiling at her excitement.

Steven nudged him. "Go ahead. It's your birthday." "Fifteen?" Claire asked.

"Fourteen." He hated to admit he was younger.

She leaned back. "Really? You seem older."

He clamped his lips together to keep a smile from breaking out.

"Pick a flavor," Janie prompted. "What's your favorite?"

"Carrot." It slipped out before he could stop it.

"Carrot cake?" Steven's lip curled up and his nose wrinkled. "What kind of birthday cake is that?"

"You've never tasted my mom's. All that cream cheese frosting." He licked his lips.

Janie slapped the buffet counter. "You got it. Carrot cake with lots of cream cheese frosting."

Brady moved on to fill his glass with soda, marveling at Janie's kindness. Too bad he wouldn't be here to enjoy it.

"Time for evening worship." Matt hustled the stragglers from the cabin. "Everybody out. Let's go."

Brady slipped the crackers he'd taken into his backpack and zipped it shut. Even with everything he might need for the trip, it wasn't very full. Maybe it would attract less attention that way. He set the backpack on the floor by Steven's bed, camouflaging his trumpet, which he'd conveniently

neglected to return to Matt's room. The instrument weighed more than his backpack. But if he left it here, he might never get it back.

Claire was waiting for them at the chapel door. "It's about time. Come on. Probably no seats left up front."

She led them up the center aisle, her head swiveling left, right, left, checking each row for three seats together. When she found them, she squeezed past the kids sitting near the aisle. Brady and Steven followed her.

Not the easy escape he'd hoped for. Brady gazed out the windows. Though the sun had set, there was still enough light to cast blue shadows from the cross-shaped window onto the stage. A few kids hurried up and down the aisle, looking for a place to sit. He waited until the music started, then leaned over and spoke into Steven's ear.

"Need to hit the bathroom. If Zeke starts before I get back, I'll sit by the door. Don't worry about me." Steven nodded, and Brady squeezed through the row until he reached the aisle. He hurried to the back and scurried out the door.

Ryan stopped him. "Where're you going?"

"Bathroom. Have to hurry so I don't miss Zeke." He kept going, hoping Ryan didn't see through his lie. He dashed toward the cabins, but circled behind and headed for the clinic, staying far enough from the chapel to keep from being seen through the windows. Hopefully, Willie hadn't gone fishing yet. That could ruin everything.

He tiptoed to the door and peeked through the window. Light from the clinic shone on the entryway floor. Nurse Willie must be in there. Could he get in and open the closet door without getting caught?

Brady backed against the wall. His pulse pounded in his ears, and he fought to still his breathing. He was already in trouble with Zeke. He squeezed his eyes shut against the embarrassment and punishment if Nurse Willie caught him. Could he go through with this?

He had to. Compared to what he heard in his mom's voice, it was silly to worry about being caught. He peeked through the window again and laid his sweaty hand on the doorknob. Mouth open, tongue pressed against his teeth in concentration, he turned the knob. It didn't make a sound, even when he pulled the door open. He stepped inside and let it close until the latch rested gently against the jamb.

Now for the closet. Brady held his breath and turned the knob. The door swung open, revealing a mop, bucket, and other cleaning supplies, as well as the paddle and life jacket. In the clinic, Nurse Willie's footsteps shuffled back and forth. Was she talking to herself?

A thump on the floor startled him. The outer door clicked shut. Too scared to move or even breathe, Brady glanced at the clinic door. His heart pounded in his throat.

Nurse Willie stepped out and peered at him over her reading glasses. She held a fishing pole in her hand and thumped the handle on the floor. "I thought I heard someone come in. What's the matter, Brady? Poison ivy bothering you?"

He nodded, the words stuck in his throat.

"Well, come on, then. Let's get you fixed up. Aren't you supposed to be in worship?" She glanced at the closet. "Did I leave that door open? Close it for me, will you please?" She shook her head, setting the lures on her hat to tinkling. "One of these days, I'm going to forget to wake up in the morning." She turned back into the clinic.

Brady followed her, but left the door open. First Janie, and now Nurse Willie. He hated fooling people who were nice to him.

Willie shook the anti-itch spray and examined his ankles before blasting them with cool moisture. "That should do it. Looks like they're healing all right. Is Steven coming by for some antihistamine tonight?"

"Um, probably. I think so." He averted his eyes.

“All right then. Hurry back to chapel now.” She put the spray back in the cupboard and took up her fishing rod again.

He nearly stumbled in his rush to leave, but slowed in the entryway. Reaching into the closet, he called a thank you while he pulled out the life jacket and paddle, counting on his voice to mask any noise. At Willie’s “You’re welcome,” he closed the door. A second later, he sprinted up the path toward the cabin.

The last rays of sunlight grew dim. Brady set the gear down alongside the outer wall of the cabin. Guilt gnawed at him for stealing from Nurse Willie, but what else could he do? He moved around to peek through the screen door. A light burned in the bunkroom, but he heard no sounds.

“Anybody here?” He kept his voice low. No one answered. He opened the screen door, stopping when it started to screech, then squeezed through and snatched his backpack and trumpet from the bunkroom. Back outside, he shrugged the backpack onto his shoulders and slung the life jacket over one arm. Then, paddle in one hand and trumpet in the other, he stole along the edge of the woods.

In the deepening darkness, he tripped over a vine snaking across the ground, but managed to stay upright all the way to the lake. A bullfrog croaked and splashed into the water as he approached. He wrinkled his nose at the pungent, marshy smell, and used the paddle to scrape a mosquito off his arm. Another mosquito landed on his face, and soon, the air swarmed with the bloodthirsty insects. He batted them with the paddle, swung his trumpet case in an attempt to clear a path through them, but finally moved back from the edge of the water. Ugh. His shoes were soaked through and now his feet squished with every step.

Away from the marshy area, the ground rose from the lake, and Brady hurried along the edge near the campfire site. Tomorrow night, after the talent show, everyone would gather for a final campfire. Everyone, but him.

He would have liked to say good-bye to Steven and Claire. Maybe after he got home, he'd look them up online.

The trumpet weighed heavy on his arm as he hurried past the swimming area and felt his way down the steps to the boat dock. In the dark, he squinted to find the two canoes where they lay overturned on the sand. No moonlight glistened on the lake, no stars winked at him from the sky. Odd how quickly clouds could move in. The nearest light came from a neighboring boathouse where figures moved around on the deck above it. Their voices carried on the breeze. Farther out, running lights marked the progress of motorboats crossing the lake.

Brady dropped his load to the sand and fit his fingers under the gunwale of the closest canoe. He lifted, but it was heavier than he expected. He moved to the canoe's midsection and lifted again, grunting as it came to rest on his shoulder while his hands searched for a better hold. He pushed, and the canoe tipped up on its side, teetered then fell away from him, scraping his shin as it came to rest on its hull.

"Ow!" He grabbed his leg and hopped on the other foot, rubbing his shin. A swift kick to the aluminum hull only made it worse. "Ouch!" Now, both his shin and his toe ached. He picked up his backpack and threw it into the canoe, then set his trumpet case next to it. With the life jacket strapped securely around his chest, he slipped the paddle into the stern and gave three strong shoves before the canoe slid into the water. He followed, jumping into the back. Water squished from his saturated shoes as he settled on the stern seat and pushed his paddle against the lake's sandy bottom.

Faint whoops and laughter told him evening worship was over. He'd have to hurry. He dug the paddle into the water and pulled back hard, eager to get away before anyone noticed. The canoe cleared the swimming buoys and headed into the cave-like darkness. Floodlights and decorative party lanterns marked residences on either side of the bay. Their light didn't reach the middle, but they helped him gauge his progress. He found a rhythm to

the drops that fell from his paddle as the canoe whispered through the water. The wind increased, raising waves that pushed against the bow.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness, but once he left the bay, black night closed in around him. The lights from shore stretched away on either side, and it was difficult to gauge distance. Peering ahead, he targeted a spot between distant deck lights where he'd land and continue his journey on foot. A brief lighting of the sky exposed a silhouette of the trees on the far shore. A cool rush of wind followed, and moments later, a gentle rumble vibrated through the air.

A storm? Now? He paused in mid-stroke. He was heading right into it. Maybe he should turn and head for the shore to his right. Was it the same distance? He couldn't be certain in the darkness.

Another noise made him twist in his seat, searching for the source. Starting soft and low like some kind of vibration, it soon grew louder, becoming more of a buzz. Distant running lights glowed high above the water, indicating a much bigger boat. They weren't wasting any time crossing the lake, and they were coming his way.

It couldn't be anyone from Rustic Knoll. Steven would try to find him, but they couldn't have figured out his escape yet. The lights advanced toward him, and then his gaze swept the length of his canoe. With no running lights, they'd never see him.

Forget the storm; he needed to get out of their way now.

He dug his paddle down, back, up and forward. Again. Switch sides. Repeat. Faster. The boat bore down on him, probably about as far as the distance from his cabin to the beach. Was it the darkness that made it seem like the boat was following him?

"Hey! Watch out!"

Silly. They'd never hear him over the noise of the motor. But a light might get their attention. He dropped the paddle and grabbed the backpack at his feet. He unzipped the front pocket and felt around for his flashlight.

Where was it? In a panic, he thrust his hand into the main cavity where his fingers closed around it. He drew it out and flicked the switch. Under other circumstances, he might have laughed at the puny beam that barely reached to the other end of his canoe. Still, maybe someone on the approaching boat would notice it. He kicked the pack away and waved the light at the motorboat. The monster kept coming.

Maybe if I turn parallel...

He held the flashlight beam up, his hand atop the paddle, and worked to swing the canoe around. At the last moment, he jumped to his feet and shone his flashlight at the boat's windshield. He screamed, but couldn't hear himself above the roar as the huge bow scraped against the canoe, shoving it aside like a toy. Brady gulped air just before his body slammed into the water.

Blackness everywhere. No daylight told him up from down. And the roar, now muffled by the water, moved away as quickly as it had come.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DARKNESS. EVERYWHERE.

Brady kicked, pumped his arms up, down. Which way was the surface? Something exerted a gentle but constant pressure against the back of his neck, and in seconds, his head broke the surface of the water. His life jacket! He'd done something right this time.

He blew water from his nose, coughed up what was left in his throat. Water plugged both ears, and he tilted his head, shook it, ducked beneath the surface to equalize the pressure and hopefully drain it. Where was the canoe? He peered through the darkness.

Lightning exposed the tree line again and reflected briefly off the aluminum craft. Brady dog-paddled over to the canoe and clung to the side. Could he climb back in? He gripped the gunwale and tried to lift his leg out of the water, up over the side. His weight on the gunwale made it dip below the water's surface, and water gushed into the canoe. He shifted from the center to the stern, near his seat, and tried again. He couldn't lift his leg high enough without tipping the canoe over. His backpack was probably soaked through by now. And his trumpet. Water would seep through the cracks where the case opened and soak the lining. The brassy gold finish would tarnish quickly. How much additional damage would a soaking cause?

More lightning lit up a mountainous cloudbank. Moments later, thunder rumbled low and distant. He had to get out of here before that storm hit. Another attempt to climb into the canoe only allowed more water to flood the inside. With an angry growl, he pounded his fist against the aluminum hull. Which would be worse when the storm hit, being in the water or in an aluminum canoe? Not much difference, as far as he could tell.

Even if he made it into the canoe, he had no paddle. It was in his hand when he fell. Must be floating out there on the water somewhere, but he couldn't see it. Not without his flashlight, which had probably sunk to the bottom of the lake.

Another burst of lightning. Brady studied the shore on every side of him. Camp looked farther away than the other three sides, though darkness made it difficult to know for sure. The lights to his right looked closest. He'd have to swim for it, and fast. Lightning flashed every few minutes now. He clung to the canoe, gathering his strength. What about the trumpet? Would the canoe capsize in the storm? He hated the thought of his horn settling to the bottom, next to his useless flashlight.

He couldn't think about that now. Lightning splashed across a chunk of sky and thunder grumbled. He pushed off from the canoe and started swimming. One of his shoes had come off. Now he kicked off the other one as well, letting it drift to the bottom. Just like Hansel and Gretel, leaving a trail of crumbs only a diver could find. At least it made it more difficult for anyone to track him.

Brady itched to take off the life jacket too. It was uncomfortable and made swimming difficult, but he didn't dare let it go. His arms soon tired, and he turned onto his back and continued kicking. He closed his eyes so they wouldn't have to readjust to the darkness after every lightning flash. How fast was the storm moving? There was nothing he could use to judge its progress, no way to tell time. Had he been swimming for five minutes? Or twenty? No idea. He turned back onto his stomach. The shore didn't

look any closer. Maybe he was swimming in circles, like people lost in the woods.

Treading water, Brady studied the shore for something to aim at. One floodlight shone brighter than the rest. Darkness engulfed most of its surroundings, except for a small dock and the side of the old boathouse where it was mounted. He took a deep breath, then poked his head into the water and swam as hard as he could. The life jacket kept him near the surface, but it also restricted how high he could lift his head when he came up for breath. A wave splashed in his face as he inhaled. He choked and nearly coughed his guts out.

“Augh!” Though loud in his ears, the darkness and wind swallowed his shout. Why did everything have to be so hard? He just wanted to get home to Mom. Was there something wrong with that? He looked up into the starless sky.

“God! Are you there? If you can see me, do something! Help me!”

Nothing. No answer.

He had to keep going, had to reach Mom. His muscles protested, but he pushed on, remembering to breathe on his right, away from the wind-driven waves.

One. Two. Three. He counted twenty breaths and looked up to measure his progress. The counting gave his mind something to do besides thinking about the thunder’s increasing volume. Still, the shore didn’t look any closer even after several intervals. He chafed against the life jacket’s restrictions. What if he wrapped it around his waist instead? That would keep him afloat but wouldn’t interfere with his strokes. Nineteen. Twenty.

The light at the boathouse still looked impossibly far away, and he was off course. Probably pushed aside by the waves. He untied the top lashes of his jacket and unbuckled the bottom strap. Careful to not let go, he opened the vest and pushed it down around his waist, kicking furiously to keep his head above water. He wrapped the long bottom strap around his body and

the jacket itself twice, sliding the buckle out as far as it would go. Now, the jacket snuggled against him and he could move his arms a lot easier.

He started out again, his arms pulling hard to rest his legs. One, two, three. At twenty, he raised his head, but the shore still didn't look any closer than when he started out. Was his mind playing tricks on him? Maybe it was too far. He'd never reach it. The storm would hit and he'd be struck by lightning, right here in the water. Whatever made him think he should run for home, anyway? What good would he be against a man like Richard?

His arms ached. Cramps curled his feet and his lungs burned for a normal breath. The chill wind across his wet body made him shiver. At this rate, he'd never reach shore. No one would care anyway. Claire thought he was childish. Steven might care, but not Mom or Dad, the people who mattered.

Brady turned over to float on his back. Was this how Jonah felt just before the fish swallowed him? Hopeless? Ready to give up? He imagined what it would be like to drown – his lungs filling with water, struggling to breathe. How soon would he lose consciousness?

Lightning snaked across the sky, and thunder boomed loud enough to startle him. His hand moved to the buckle on his life jacket. He just needed to unsnap it and his pain could be over. Forever.

“Brady? Brady!” The voice was faint, distant.

Who was it? Where was it coming from? He raised his head and twisted around in the water. Someone must be looking for him, but who?

“Brady!” It sounded like Matt. But where was he? There were no boats on the water, at least none with running lights.

“Brady!”

“Here! I'm here!” Brady shouted as loud as he could, but it sounded like a whisper in the roar of wind and crashing thunder. He listened again. The voice seemed to come from the shore, possibly even the boathouse with the bright light.

“I’m coming! Wait for me.” Brady nearly cried with relief. His arms churned despite the pain. He ignored the fatigue in his legs and kicked, stopping only when he needed to gulp some air. A moment later, he started in again.

The next time he looked, he’d made a little progress, but he didn’t hear Matt calling anymore.

“Matt? You still there?” He turned circles in the water, listening. “Where are you?” His heart dropped like a rock to the lake bottom until he heard his name again.

“Brady! Braa-a-ady!”

He waved an arm in the air. “Here! I’m here. I’m coming!” He started swimming again, uncertain if the drops on his back were raindrops or simply water splashed up from his swimming. It didn’t matter. He had to get to shore, had to let Matt know he was there.

Lightning lit the sky overhead. A moment later, thunder clapped, but he pressed on. His lungs burned like they’d explode any minute now. His arms grew numb. They rose out of the water and flopped forward. He alternated strokes, using the crawl as much as possible but switching to the breaststroke when he could no longer lift his arms or when his feet cramped. Occasionally, he’d flip onto his back to give his breathing a chance to recover. But always, he moved forward. The light on that boathouse grew bigger, brighter.

“Matt! You still there?” He needed the reassurance, the encouragement.

“Brady?”

Close enough now to make out shapes along the shore, he looked for a lone figure. Matt must be standing in a shadow. Maybe he took shelter under an eave from the raindrops falling big and heavy. They pelted Brady as bolts of lightning split the night sky. The thunder’s vibration shook him.

“Hang on! I’m almost there.” He willed his limbs to pull, kick, move. Being in the water grew more dangerous every second. He needed to get

onto dry land before a lightning bolt fried him. The dock was close, but he still couldn't touch bottom here. The lifejacket dragged on him, even while keeping him afloat. As tired as he was, it was tempting to unbuckle it and let it go. But no, he wouldn't risk drowning this close to his goal.

The floodlight on the side of the boathouse beckoned him while casting ghostly light on nearby trees. Their branches whipped in wild frenzy in the wind. Raindrops peppered his back like BB's. He still couldn't see Matt anywhere, even in the brief moments when lightning brightened the world like midday. Still, the intermittent calling of his name spurred him on until he neared the dock.

Twenty yards away, he was forced to stop and catch his breath. His stomach lurched from the amount of water he'd swallowed, but the nausea disappeared as soon as his toes tapped sand. If he'd had any strength left, he'd have let out a happy whoop. Good thing the water supported him, because his legs buckled when he tried to stand. His cold fingers fumbled with the buckle on the life jacket until it finally let go. He pulled the vest up around his neck again and half walked, half floated to the dock. Breathless, he called for Matt.

"I'm here. I made it."

His fingers closed around the rungs of the ladder on the dock as thunder crashed above him. He dragged his body onto the dock and lay still, letting the rain hammer his back, neck and limbs. Where was Matt? Why didn't he come help him? Brady rolled onto his side and called.

"Matt? I made it. Where are you?"

No answer.

His teeth chattered as rain stung his face and arms. His t-shirt and shorts offered little protection from the rain's lashing. The seconds between lightning and thunder told him the storm was directly overhead. He needed to find shelter, get off this metal dock. Flinging off his sodden life jacket, he pushed himself up and gingerly tried to stand. His legs held him only a

moment before they collapsed. Even his arms rebelled at the pressure of crawling on hands and knees to the boathouse. He reached up and tried the doorknob, but it refused to turn.

“Nooo!” He shook the door, pounded his fist against the weathered wood. Tears slid down his cheeks, mingling with rain, and he fell against the old door, shoulder butting the splintery wood. The door gave way and he tumbled inside.

Sheltered from the wind and rain, Brady curled his body up and tried to draw warmth into his arms and legs. The chilly concrete floor did nothing to still his constant shivering. The flood light outside illuminated only a small area inside the door, but nearby water slapped against something solid. A dull thumping or rubbing sound too, and the air held an odd mix of scents: lake, fish, gasoline, motor oil.

Lightning momentarily brightened the scene through two windows on the hanging garage door. A pontoon boat bobbed about on restless water, straining against tie-ropes and shifting back and forth between rubber bumpers.

Thunder pounded the roof. Beneath him, the concrete vibrated. The building shuddered and creaked in the wind, trembling with each roll of thunder. Tree branches clawed at the roof. He shoved the door closed and huddled, shivering and wet, palms pressed against his ears.

Clenching his teeth, Brady swallowed hard. He’d never been so scared. Scared. Tired. Cold. And utterly alone. Dad didn’t care. Mom didn’t want him. Matt left him. Even nature, it seemed, was against him. And where was God? Nowhere that he could see.

Lightning blazed through the rain-spattered windows, temporarily blinding him with its brilliance. But in that moment of light, he glimpsed something on the pontoon boat. He closed his eyes tight until the image inside his eyelids faded. Feeling his way, he crept along the floor until he touched the side of the boat and grabbed a towel hanging over the side

railing. One end was damp from the water splashing up, but he threw it around his shoulders, hugging it tight around his back and clutching it to his chest.

Another burst of light revealed a second towel hanging on the opposite side. He gripped the side rail with both hands, using the motion of the boat lifting on a surge to pull himself up. Steadying himself, he waited as the boat fell and rose again. At the next low, he flung his leg over the railing and his body followed as the swell lifted him up and over. He dropped onto the floor of the boat and rolled to the other side where he pulled the second towel around him. Warmth seeped back through his skin, into his blood, and hopefully all the way to his bones.

The rocking of the boat grew less violent as the storm passed. He found it soothing, even relaxing, except for the hard floor. He sat up and groped his way to the bench seat at the back, easing onto the cushion. His muscles ached as much from shivering as from exertion. He wrapped one towel around his legs and kept one around his upper body as he stretched out on the cushion, willing his body to stop trembling.

So tired. So. .very. .very . . tired.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MUTED VOICES INTRUDED ON HIS CONSCIOUSNESS, BUT HE WASN'T READY TO open his eyes.

“Heard the report over the police scanner last night. Came down here this morning to check for storm damage and found him snuggled up like that. Figured he’s probably the one you’re looking for.”

The voices were unfamiliar and he turned away, waiting for the gentle rocking to lull him back to dreamland.

“That’s him. Thank you, Lord! In all my years as camp director, I’ve never had to call a parent and tell them we couldn’t find their child—until last night. I hope it never happens again.”

That voice was familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it. Was it a teacher from school? A jolt interrupted the pleasant rocking, and someone shook his shoulder.

“Brady? Time to wake up, son.”

Brady opened his eyes and looked around. This wasn’t like any bedroom he’d ever seen before. Where was he? He turned his head.

Zeke peered at him. The older man knelt on one knee beside Brady and helped him sit up. “Praise God, you’re safe. Are you hurt?”

Brady dropped the towel from his shoulders and stretched. His arms and legs were stiff and tight. “No, just sore.” He rubbed the sleep from his eyes

and pulled at his wrinkled shorts and t-shirt. Memories of last night came and went like waves washing up on shore.

Zeke's expression showed concern, but no hint of the scolding Brady expected. "Are you hungry?"

Starving, now that he thought about it. He nodded.

"Good. Janie's waiting to feed you pancakes, French toast, eggs, anything you want. Let's go back to camp." He helped Brady to his feet and held on while he took his first stiff steps. "Can you walk all right?"

"I'll make it." His muscles loosened up as he stepped off the pontoon boat.

A police officer in a brown uniform waited near the boathouse door, thumbs hooked in his belt. Another man wearing a faded Hawaiian shirt, shorts and deck shoes reached out and ruffled Brady's hair when he walked by.

"Next time, come on up and knock on my door. No need to spend the night out here, 'specially in a storm like that." He smiled and patted him on the back, then pulled the door open. The man pressed in the lock on the doorknob, jiggled it and looked at the officer.

"Can't figure out how he got in. I put this new knob on a few weeks ago." He scratched his head.

The officer rapped his knuckle against the door where the wood was starting to splinter. "Should've replaced the whole door."

Zeke motioned toward a stone stairway. The rustic steps climbed a hillside to a two-story house with tall windows overlooking the lake. Brady flinched at lifting his knee high enough to set his foot on the first step. About halfway up the hill, his sore legs demanded rest.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Zeke sat beside him while the other two men continued to the top. "We found your canoe with your backpack and trumpet. It washed ashore near camp."

“You’ve got my trumpet?” Brady shook his head in amazement. He’d tried not to imagine it lying on the bottom of the lake. The case was probably ruined after being out in the storm all night. How well had the trumpet itself survived? He’d have to dry it off, pull out the valves and inspect it. Energized, he jumped to his feet. “Let’s go get it.”

Zeke chuckled and followed him. A sheriff’s squad car waited at the top. The officer opened the back door for them to climb in.

Brady hesitated. “Am I under arrest?”

“No.” Zeke grinned. “A little trouble, maybe, but you’re not under arrest. We’re just thankful you were found alive and relatively well. Let’s get you back to camp.”

Brady climbed in and buckled his seat belt. “Why the police car, if I’m not under arrest?”

“When we couldn’t find you last night, I notified the sheriff’s department. They’ve been out looking for you. Mr. Breidenbach is on the volunteer fire department and heard about you on his police scanner last night. When he found you in his boat this morning, he called it in. Officer Scott picked me up on the way so I could identify you.”

Brady stared at his bare feet and wiggled his toes. The shoes he’d pestered Mom to buy were at the bottom of the lake. What would she say about all this? Was she okay? Yesterday seemed like ages ago.

“Does my mom know I ran away?”

Zeke nodded. “I called her right after I called the police.”

“What did she say?”

“Not much. I think I woke her up. Would you like to let her know you’re all right?” Zeke pulled out his cell phone and handed it to him.

Brady hesitated, not sure what to expect after his last phone call. At last, he took the phone and dialed her cell number. It rang several times before a recorded voice told him his call was important to her and asked him to leave a message.

What should he say? “Hey, Mom, it’s me.” Duh! “I’m okay, in case you’re wondering.” He paused again before saying good-bye and cutting off the call.

Zeke took the phone back and shifted his position in the seat. He faced Brady, his arm resting along the top of the back seat. “Tell me about your adventure.”

Brady glanced at Officer Scott and hung his head. “I wanted to go home so I . . . I took Nurse Willie’s paddle and life preserver out of her closet.”

“And you made it all the way to Mr. Breidenbach’s before the storm?”

Brady avoided Officer Scott’s frequent glances in the rear-view mirror as he described the accident with the larger boat, his swim to shore and how tempted he was to just give up and die.

Zeke’s eyebrows arched at the mention of Matt calling. “What made you think it was Matt?”

Brady shrugged. “It was his voice. Why?”

Zeke rubbed his mustache with his thumb. “And you swam from the middle of the lake? In the storm?” He appeared to consider that for a minute, then asked, “Did this have anything to do with the trouble between you and Taylor?”

Brady shot him a startled look. “No. I just needed to get home, that’s all.” He hadn’t given Taylor a single thought since the phone call to Mom.

The squad car pulled into the Rustic Knoll parking lot and Zeke instructed the officer to drop them off at the clinic.

“What about breakfast?” Brady’s stomach growled, loud enough for all to hear.

“I’ll have Janie send someone down with a tray for you. I want Nurse Willie to check you over before we do anything else.”

The car rolled to a stop in front of the clinic. Officer Scott got out and opened the door for them, stopping Brady when he climbed out.

“A lot of stuff happens to kids who run away, and none of it is good. Next time, talk to Zeke here instead. He’s a good man.” He winked and gave Brady’s shoulder a light squeeze, then turned to go. Zeke called his thanks as he ushered Brady into the clinic.

Willie closed a cabinet door and faced him with hands planted firmly on her hips. Brady fidgeted under her scrutiny, grateful for Zeke’s hands on his shoulders.

“He had a rough night in the lake, Willie. Check him over and make sure he’s okay. I’ll ask Janie to send down a breakfast tray.”

Zeke left, and Nurse Willie directed him to sit on the bed and approached him with a stethoscope around her neck. He found it difficult to look her in the eye. Surely, by now she knew her gear was gone, and he was the thief. She stuck a thermometer in his mouth and waited for the electronic beep.

“He said *in* the lake. Didn’t he mean *on* it?”

Brady opened his mouth to release the thermometer. “No, the rough part was in the water.” His ears grew hot and his face burned. “I’m sorry I stole your paddle and life jacket.”

Willie fixed him with a stern look that softened a bit. “I accept your apology. And I forgive you.”

She said nothing more while she listened to his heart and breathing. He squirmed as the silence lengthened.

“Stick out your tongue and say ‘ah’.” She held his tongue down with a wooden tongue depressor. “Most kids wish they could stay here all summer. Can’t say I’ve ever known anyone to run away from camp. Where were you going?”

“Home.”

She tipped her head. Her dark eyes studied him. “You don’t strike me as the homesick type.”

He shrugged and looked at the floor. “I just wanted to go home.”

Willie checked his eyes and ears, and asked a few questions about his ordeal before the door burst open and more than one pair of footsteps pounded through the entryway.

“Brady!” Claire left Steven in the doorway and raced to his side. She threw her arms around his shoulders and gave him a quick hug. “You’re back. I was so worried about you. Are you all right?”

Better than ever. He couldn’t keep the smile from his lips, even when Taylor appeared and leaned against the doorway. He gave Brady a brief nod before his gaze settled on Claire. Chris popped in as well, crowding the tiny clinic. Nurse Willie pulled a chair up next to the bed and guided Steven to it. Steven held his hand out and clasped Brady’s, holding it in a tight fist.

“You lied. Said you were going to the head.”

The anger in Steven’s voice made Brady’s stomach clinch as if punched. He’d not only stolen equipment, he’d lied to his friend.

“I was afraid you’d try to talk me out of leaving.”

“Why’d you leave?” Steven loosened his grip.

He owed Steven an explanation, but not in front of all the others. He caught Willie’s eye, hoping she’d rescue him.

“Don’t you all need to be getting on to morning worship? You can talk to Brady later, after he’s had a chance to eat some breakfast and get his strength back.” She waved her hands to shoo everyone out of the clinic.

Taylor straightened. “Hey, I promise not to tease you about running anymore.” His lips pulled into a friendly smirk, but his eyes sought Claire.

“Is that all you can say after what he’s been through?” Claire rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Grow up, Taylor.”

She gave Brady another hug before getting up to leave. Taylor’s smirk wilted into a frown, and his shoulders drooped as he turned away.

Taylor? And Claire? Now the conversation made sense, the one he’d overheard between the two girls from his small group. They were talking about Taylor, not him. Was Taylor jealous of his friendship with Claire?

Steven released his hand and rose with a promise to return later. Claire guided Steven out the door behind Chris and Taylor. As Brady settled back on the bed, Willie encouraged him to lie down and rest. Last night was catching up with him again and he rolled over to get more comfortable when Matt arrived with a breakfast tray. His stomach rumbled at the scent of bacon. The butter-drenched toast beside a mound of scrambled eggs made his mouth water almost to the point of drooling.

Matt placed the tray on the bed beside him then stood back with hands on hips, looking him over. “I don’t know whether to hug you or strangle you.”

Nurse Willie cleared her throat. “No strangling in my clinic.” She busied herself straightening up the cupboards and wiping down the counters.

Brady sat up and went to work devouring the eggs and bacon while sorting out his thoughts. If Matt hadn’t been out in the storm, calling his name, he wouldn’t be enjoying this breakfast right now. But Matt had left him, just like everyone else in his life.

Matt flipped around the chair left from Steven and straddled it, his arms across the back. “I wanted to come with the other kids, but Janie made me wait so I could bring the tray down. We all cheered when Zeke said they found you. I just wish you’d have come and talked to me—”

“You left me.” Brady set the glass of orange juice on the tray and fixed his gaze on Matt.

The counselor’s mouth fell open. His brows came together and his eyes moved quickly from side to side. “When? Yesterday, after you called your mom? From that look you gave me, I didn’t think you wanted to talk in front of Steven.”

“No, I mean last night.” Brady swallowed a bite of toast. “You left me alone last night.”

Matt held out his hands, palms up, and shook his head. “What are you talking about? You’re the one who left last night.”

Irritation burned in Brady’s chest. “Yeah, and you came out to look for me, but you left me there.”

Matt looked to Nurse Willie. She raised an eyebrow, hunched one shoulder, and went back to laying out fish hooks, corks, feathers and other tiny items on her desk. He turned back to Brady. “I wanted to go out and look for you. I begged Zeke to let me take the boat out, but he wouldn’t let anyone leave. I was in the chapel all night.”

Brady studied Matt through narrowed eyes. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy who would lie, even to save himself embarrassment. But Brady was positive about what he’d heard. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not! Ask Steven. Ask Claire, and Chris. We were in the chapel all night. Even Taylor was there for a little while.”

“Taylor? In the chapel? What for?”

“A prayer vigil. We spent all night praying for you.” Matt jumped up and circled the tiny room, arms folded across his chest. He stopped and eyed Brady. “What do you mean, I left you?”

Brady pushed his breakfast tray away. How could Matt have called to him if he was in the chapel all night? “I heard you calling my name. A big motorboat knocked me out of the canoe. It was too far to swim to shore and the storm came up fast. I almost gave up, but I heard you calling.” He searched for some sign of recognition in Matt’s face, but found none. “You called my name. Every time I wanted to give up...” Had he really wanted to die out there? “I heard you calling. It saved me, knowing you were out there looking for me. That’s the only reason I made it to shore.” He glanced at Nurse Willie who sat motionless on her stool. Her dark eyes ignored the lure makings and focused unblinking on him. Brady turned back to Matt. “I called to you, but when I finally got to shore, you were gone. You left me.”

Matt's head moved slowly from side to side, his wide eyes never leaving Brady's face. He spoke barely above a whisper. "I wasn't out there last night, Brady. I was here at camp, in the chapel, begging God to keep you safe."

The hair on Brady's neck stood up. He managed to swallow, forcing the dry lump down his throat. "Then who was out there calling to me last night?"

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I DON’T KNOW WHO CALLED YOU, BUT IT WASN’T ME.” MATT DROPPED into the chair, pulled it closer and leaned forward. “You almost gave up? Why?”

“Why not?” Brady wrapped his arms around his knees. “If I didn’t make it to shore, I figured I’d get hit by lightning. Mom doesn’t want me. Dad doesn’t want me.” He pulled his knees tighter to his chest and sighed. “I was reaching to undo my lifejacket when I heard you call.”

Matt shook his head. “Wasn’t me. Wish I could say it was, but I’m not your hero.”

Brady was insistent. “Who else would be out there calling my name in a storm?”

“God.” Willie’s whisper startled him. Her normally rough voice held such confidence and awe, both he and Matt looked at her. His arms prickled with goose bumps.

Willie’s dark eyes held him spellbound. “The Lord called your name. Storms don’t bother Him. He made ’em! And your Heavenly Father loves you more than any earthly parents ever will. Just because you don’t know He’s there doesn’t mean He isn’t. God never abandons his children.” Her voice grew louder, more adamant.

Brady's arms fell away from his knees and he sat up straight. His eyes cut toward Matt as he tried to absorb Willie's words. God called his name? For real? He looked back to Willie.

"Zeke talked about recognizing God's voice. But how am I supposed to know it's God if He sounds like someone else?"

She rolled her stool closer to him and spoke softly. "God speaks in many different ways: through scripture, dreams, prayer, circumstances. Maybe this time, you needed a voice you'd recognize. How many times did you hear it?"

Brady's shoulders lifted. "A bunch." His gaze skipped between Willie and Matt. "Every time I wanted to quit, I'd hear my name. Why would God do that?"

"Because He's in the business of saving people." Willie rolled her stool back, slapped her palm on the counter and picked up her lures, as if that explained everything.

Brady shivered, but the goose bumps were replaced by warmth as if a blanket were being wrapped around him. "He's real, isn't He? It's like Zeke said, I knew about God but I never really knew Him. Until now, He was just a story to me."

The lures on Willie's hat tinkled as she nodded in agreement.

Matt grinned, his eyes reflecting the same amazement Brady felt. He clamped Brady's hand in his and held it up. "Yeah, He's real, all right. And now you know how much He loves you. When your parents or your friends let you down, when we aren't there for you, remember what happened last night."

Matt's words flowed from Brady's head down to his heart. "Will He ever talk to me again?"

Willie made a couple quick snips on a nylon fishing line. "Oh, He'll talk, but not always in the same way. Sometimes it depends on you."

“Me?” Brady frowned. “Do I have to be in trouble again, like last night?”

She swiveled her stool to face him. “Not necessarily, but you do have to listen. The police and others were out all night looking for you, calling your name. You never heard them. Maybe you couldn’t hear them in the boathouse. Maybe the storm was too loud, or you were asleep. Sometimes, life’s noisy storms can drown out the Lord’s voice. That doesn’t mean He’s not speaking to you. Just means you have to listen harder. Pretty soon, you’ll recognize His voice even in the middle of a storm.” She held up a finished lure. “But He won’t always sound like Matt.”

Willie’s comments rolled around in Brady’s mind. He looked at Matt, lips curling into a sly grin.

“Hey, since you talk like God, the next time I get dumped in the lake, think you could walk on water to rescue me?”

Silence. Willie and Matt both stared at him then turned to look at each other. Willie giggled and bent over her lures while Matt threw his head back and laughed.

“I think the storm must’ve knocked you silly. That’s the first joke I’ve heard out of you all week.” Matt gathered up the breakfast tray and got to his feet. “I need to get these back to the kitchen and hustle over to morning worship. How long do you have to stay here?”

Brady looked to Willie.

“He checks out fine, but I can’t release him without Zeke’s okay.”

Matt reached out for a fist bump. “Glad you’re back safe. Have you talked to your mom?”

Brady’s smile flattened, and he gathered his knees to his chest again. “Zeke let me call her on the way back to camp, but she didn’t answer.”

Matt looked down, lips pressed together. Releasing a deep breath, he raised his head. “Well then, we’ll keep praying for her. See ya later.”

Willie tied a knot in the fishing line. “Why don’t you lie down and rest until Zeke comes back?”

Brady lay down, stretching out his tight muscles before relaxing them. He plumped the pillow under his head, inhaling the fresh, clean smell of the pillowcase.

Knowing God was real made him feel different inside. He’d gone to church and learned the stories from the Bible when he was little, but God always seemed more like an old grandfather who lived a long way away. When Mom stopped going to church after Dad left, it kind of felt like God left too. The Bible stories had about as much meaning as the sinking of the Titanic. No doubt it happened, but it really didn’t affect him.

Zeke talked about God in a different way, calling it a relationship. Probably something like his friendship with Steven or Matt. But how can you be friends with someone who’s invisible? He’d never heard God say anything, until last night.

Brady turned on his side, facing the wall, and closed his eyes. He replayed of the voice from the storm, calling to him. *Brady. Brady.* He dreamed he was out on the water again, paddling in the dark, but not getting anywhere. There was the voice. Only this time, it sounded like Mom.

“Brady?”

Someone rubbed his back. He opened his eyes and tried to separate dream from reality. Twisting his neck around, he saw Zeke and Nurse Willie talking, their heads bent close together.

“Brady.”

That *is* Mom’s voice. It wasn’t a dream. He rolled all the way over and found her sitting on the bed next to him. She must have just gotten there because she still wore sunglasses.

“What are you doing here?” He didn’t mean it to sound unwelcoming. “I thought you weren’t coming.”

“When Zeke called and said you were missing, I had to come.”

“What about Richard?”

Mom bit her lower lip. “He doesn’t know I left.” She inhaled and let it out slowly. “Well, he might know by now, but he was . . . sleeping . . . when I left.” Her eyes softened as she reached out to touch his hair. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

Brady sat up and tried to sort out his conflicting feelings toward her. Five days ago, she’d rejected him, said she didn’t want him anymore. Now she acted like the familiar Mom he knew and trusted. But could he trust her? He couldn’t see her eyes behind the sunglasses.

Funny, he was so used to seeing Steven in dark glasses, he hadn’t really thought about Mom still wearing hers inside.

“Don’t you want to take your glasses off?”

She lowered her head, hands clutching the sunglasses to keep them in place. The bottom edge of her sleeve moved just enough to reveal a sliver of blue- black bruise on her upper arm.

“Did he hurt you?” Brady took her arm and pushed the sleeve back. His pulse rose. “He hit you, didn’t he?”

Zeke and Willie fell silent as Mom’s hands dropped away from the glasses and moved to cup her quivering chin. She bit her lower lip again and she nodded.

“Let me see.” Brady took hold of her wrists and demanded again. “Let me see. I knew something was happening when I called yesterday. Your voice didn’t sound right. That’s why I ran away, Mom. I was trying to get home and help. What did he do to you?”

Mom kept her eyes averted while she pulled one hand from Brady’s grasp and slid the glasses down her nose. Her left eye was swollen half-shut. The skin around it blazed an angry red.

Willie’s shoes made no sound as she moved to inspect the eye. She reached to take Mom’s hand and put an arm around her shoulders. Mom leaned into Willie’s embrace, tears squeezing out from the swollen eye as

her sobs broke the silence. Willie nodded to Zeke, who pulled out his cell phone and started punching in numbers as he retreated outdoors.

Brady's breath came fast and heavy. His own mother abandoned him to stay with a man who beat her. He ground out one word through clenched teeth.

"Why?"

Mom swallowed and swiped at her tears. "He didn't want me to come. I think he's jealous of you."

"That's not what I mean. You sent me away so you could stay with him. Why? How could you do that?" Brady's eyes narrowed. "Your own son!"

Mom flinched, and Willie's rebuke was swift.

"Here, now. No need to talk like that when your mama's hurting."

Mom held up her hand. "He's right." She pushed herself upright, squeezed Willie's hand before letting it go, and laid her sunglasses on the bed. After wiping her sniffles and taking several deep breaths, she spoke.

"I sent you away to protect you." Her chin trembled. "I didn't see Richard's drinking problem until after we married. He kept it hidden. I asked him not to drink while you were around and he agreed. But one night, when you stayed over at Tony's, he came home drunk and started calling me names and shoving me around." Her voice broke. Willie handed her a tissue.

The memory of that night flashed through his mind. Or rather, the memory of the next day. He'd come home from his friend's house, expecting to go to the car show with Richard. Instead, Mom said he was sick and needed to sleep. He did look sick when he woke up, and Brady expected her to pamper Richard, the way she treated him whenever he was too sick to go to school. Instead, she kept her distance, and never once asked if she could get something to make him feel better.

Mom blew her nose and reached out to touch Brady's knee. "He promised it wouldn't happen again, but it got worse. I was afraid he'd start

in on you.” Her fingers tightened. “I didn’t choose him over you. I only wanted to protect you.”

Her words flowed over and through Brady. Tension seeped away. His fists opened and he sat back on his ankles until another question demanded an answer.

“But why didn’t you leave? Why stay around and let him beat you up?” His voice held its harsh tone. Mom’s shoulders hunched, and she took a shuddering breath. She’d never looked so small and defenseless.

“I thought maybe I could help him if I stayed. I didn’t want another divorce. For you or for me.” She shook her head then reached for his hands, taking both of them in hers. Her eyes sought his and held them. “Leaving you here was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Your father isn’t much of a dad, but I knew he’d never hit you. I’d never send you away for any other reason.”

Brady pulled his hands away. Willie scowled like she wasn’t happy with his attitude as she turned back to her desk and pulled items from the cupboards. But the anger he’d nursed about his family’s situation wasn’t going to disappear in an instant.

Mom eased from the bed to the chair. She bent forward to rest her elbows on her knees and dropped her head, covering her face with her hands. “I’m so sorry, Brady. I’ve made such a mess of our lives.”

He pulled his stiff legs out from under him and stretched. For some reason, the word forgiveness stuck in his mind. Was he supposed to forgive her? First Taylor, now Mom.

He slid from the bed until his feet were on the floor, his knees touching Mom’s. Taking her wrists again, he pressed her hands open and held them in his.

“Mom.” He waited for her to lift her head and look at him. “I forgive you.”

Tears poured down her cheeks like last night's rain. He didn't know what he expected, but this wasn't it. He blinked, pulled back and let go of her hands. What should he do? He hated seeing her cry; it scared him. He looked to Willie whose hat tinkled as she nodded her approval.

"Here, put this on your mama's eye," she said.

He took the cold pack and held it out to his mom. She wiped her eyes and nose before gingerly placing it against her upper cheek and eye. He had one more question for her, though he was afraid of what her answer might be.

"Are you going back...to him?"

Her good eye closed, and she inhaled, holding it a moment before letting it out slowly. "I don't know. Probably not right away. I need some time to think." She opened her eye and looked directly at him. "But whatever I do, I'm not leaving you behind. Never again."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE CHAPEL'S STAGE WAS DECKED OUT FOR THE TALENT SHOW WITH BLUE and white banners hanging from the ceiling. Matching streamers decorated the walls and the piano. A large projection screen provided a plain backdrop for the talent show acts.

Sitting next to Steven in the second row, Brady whispered a brief description of the dance routine accompanying Claire's and Hayley's song. His eyes never left the stage, taking full advantage of the chance to watch Claire's every move.

Steven elbowed him. "You like her, don't you?"

His gaze swung from the stage to Steven. "Who?"

"Claire. You were grinning just now when you told me what she was doing."

Brady pressed his lips together, trying to keep the corners from turning up. "How would you know whether I'm grinning or not?"

"I can hear it in the way you talk." Steven sat up straight, a smug smile on his face. "Don't worry. It's cool."

Amazing. They hadn't known each other for a full week, and now Steven, who couldn't see a thing, was reading him better than his friends back home ever did— kids who'd known him for years. Brady's cheeks burned remembering how he'd lied to him. Steven forgave him after he

explained why he left and what Mom looked like when she got here this morning. Not only forgave him, but agreed he'd done the right thing. Steven even said he would've covered for him if he'd known the reason.

The girls finished their performance and Claire flung herself into the seat next to Brady, breathing hard. "Whew! Glad that's over."

"You were great." His knee was warm against hers, and it wasn't just the temperature in the crowded chapel.

"Thanks!" She smiled, complete with dimples, and ran her fingers through her bangs, holding them back while her other hand fanned her face.

As the announcer brought up the next act, he glanced over at his mom. A large bandage hid her bruised eye better than sunglasses. His jaw tightened. Imagining the scene at home last night nearly gave him the heaves. His blood grew hot at the thought.

Leaving Mom in the clinic when he was released wasn't easy, but Zeke and Willie promised to settle her in a guest room where she could rest. He'd visited her this afternoon, and was relieved to learn that Zeke persuaded her not to return to Richard until they'd both attended counseling. So they wouldn't go home tomorrow, but the rest of their plans were like the balls being juggled onstage. They might end up staying in the guesthouse until Monday when Mom had to go back to work.

Claire nudged him when the announcer called his name. His stomach did a somersault. He shouldn't have eaten so much carrot cake at supper. The familiar butterflies rumbled more like cargo planes under all that frosting. He climbed the steps and stood center stage. Mom smiled and gestured with two thumbs pointing to the ceiling. From the corner of his eye, he saw Claire pump her fist, but he didn't dare look at her.

He inhaled deeply, slowly, willing himself to relax. Moistening his lips, he raised the horn to his mouth and the melody of "Amazing Grace" soared through the room crisp and clear. His eyes found the back corner of the ceiling where he was safe from distraction. He played the first verse at a

soft, easy pace then bumped it up to a march tempo the second time through. The third verse was a jazz version and the audience responded by clapping along. The tempting rhythm even had him tapping his toe.

Finally, he slowed it down, his breath traveling from the mouthpiece through the valves beneath his fingers and out into the chapel on reverent notes. The words of the sacred song flowed through his mind. He was lost, but now was found. He'd been blind to God's love for him – as unseeing as Steven. Now he saw clearly how God wanted to be part of his life every day. The words pressed on his heart. Through many dangers, toils and snares, God's grace had kept him safe so far, and grace would lead him home.

Zeke dismissed the campers for a quick break before campfire, and invited the parents to the dining hall for coffee and refreshments. Claire left with her friends, and Brady ran back to the cabin to drop off his trumpet. He returned to find Mom waiting with Steven.

“I just wanted to say goodnight.” She hugged him close and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

He should've been embarrassed, but not tonight. He returned the hug and said goodnight, then took Steven to the Snack Shack for a bag of corn chips before they made their way down to the campfire. He'd gotten used to the depth of darkness out here, but when Steven tripped over something, he missed his flashlight. It sure didn't do him any good on the bottom of the lake.

The logs around the campfire pit were all occupied by the time they got there, so he and Steven wiggled in among some kids sitting on the grass close to the fire. Wood-scented smoke rose, drifting in random directions and mingling with the pungent odor of mosquito repellent.

“Don’t breathe,” he warned Steven when the smoke turned their way. Pinching his nose as it engulfed them, he squeezed his eyes shut against the sting and fanned away the smoke. His face and arms absorbed the toasty warmth from the campfire. The smoke shifted directions again, and the fire’s flames bobbing and dipping among the logs mesmerized him. Moisture from last night’s rain escaped in a slow hiss. Behind him, the night’s cool air sent a chill up his back.

Two counselors strummed guitars to start the singing, and he joined in the now-familiar melodies. These weren’t the kind of songs he remembered singing in church. He’d have to persuade Mom to start going to church again. Maybe things had changed.

When the singing ended, Matt stood with a Bible in one hand, a flashlight in the other. “It’s our last night together. Tomorrow, you’ll all go home—back to your family, your neighborhood, your friends. What are you taking home with you besides good memories? Will life be different because of your week here at Rustic Knoll?”

Steven nudged him, offering his bag of corn chips. Brady dug his hand into the bag and pulled out a few chips, popping them into his mouth while Matt continued.

“This week, we’ve encouraged you to meet God in a personal way. You’ve heard from His own word how much He loves you. Here at camp, it’s easy to believe that. But back home, you’ll be challenged by people who think faith in God is ridiculous. Some kids will laugh at you. A teacher might make fun of you. Maybe the guy or girl you really want to impress will say you’re stupid to believe in God. Then what?”

Matt aimed the flashlight beam at the Bible’s pages. “Listen to this. ‘You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’ When you’ve studied for a math test and you know the answers, you’re not all tied up with worry and fear. You’re free!

“Tonight, I’m asking you to decide. Will you believe the truth?” He raised the Bible over his head. “Or will you believe the lies the world tells you? If you feel worthless, if you think God can’t love you after what you’ve done, those are lies. Let the truth of God’s love set you free.”

Sparks from the fire danced high into the air before blinking out. Brady had believed a lot of lies this week, lies that kept him tied up in knots. Six days ago, he believed Mom wanted to get rid of him because she cared for Richard more than him. Wrong! He’d assumed camp would be awful and boring. Wrong again. He’d thought God didn’t exist, or if He did, He didn’t care enough to notice him. Seriously wrong!

The truth was Mom loved him enough to protect him, even when it meant she’d get hurt. Camp was a lot of fun; he’d made some good friends here. As for God, He was definitely real and He cared.

Right now, he may not have an address, but God knew where he was. Even in the middle of a lake, in the dark of night and the fury of a thunderstorm, God saw him and took care of him. Yeah, he believed. No, he *knew* God would guide them home as surely as He’d guided Brady to shore.

Saturday morning passed in a frenzied, sleep-deprived blur. If he’d known the chores required before they could leave, he might not have stayed awake half the night. After breakfast, they’d packed and dragged all their stuff outside before vacuuming, scrubbing toilets and sinks and wiping down the shower stalls. All that remained now was to say good-bye.

With mixed feelings, he tied his duffle bag to Steven’s suitcase handle. It hadn’t been an easy week. Parts of it had been no fun at all, but if he didn’t come back next summer he might never see Steven or Claire again. He shrugged his backpack on and picked up his sleeping bag, pillow and

trumpet. Steven pulled the suitcase and they headed toward the main building to meet Mrs. Miller. She greeted both of them with a hug.

“I hope Steven behaved himself this week and didn’t get you into any trouble.” A wink accompanied her teasing tone, but Steven objected.

“Me? I wasn’t the one who got in trouble.”

Mrs. Miller raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Does that mean someone else did?”

Brady elbowed him, and Steven hesitated only a moment. “Yeah, one guy in our cabin was a jerk. He landed in Zeke’s office a couple times.”

Brady released the breath he’d been holding as Matt jogged up, catching Mrs. Miller’s attention with a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey! It was great having Steven in my cabin this week. You must be very proud of him.”

Mrs. Miller beamed and thanked him. Matt clasped Steven’s hand, pulling him into a man-hug, then did the same with Brady. “You guys keep in touch, okay? I won’t be online much until school starts again but don’t forget about me. I want to hear what’s going on.”

He winked and gave Brady a fist bump. “Let me know how everything works out.”

“I will.”

Matt jogged off toward Zeke’s office. Brady untied his bag from Steven’s suitcase.

Mrs. Miller took her son’s sleeping bag and pillow. “I hope you’ll be back next year, Brady. I know Steven will be anxious to hang out with you again.”

“Yeah, call me sometime, okay?” Steven took his mom’s arm and they started toward the parking lot.

“Okay,” Brady called. “See you next year.”

A steady stream of campers and parents laden with luggage trudged toward the parking lot now. Dillon waved to him from the crowd and

shouted.

“Next year, you’re on my team!”

Brady grinned and waved back. Keeping an eye out for Claire, he wrapped the duffle bag’s strap around one hand and dragged it behind him. Halfway to his mom’s room, he spotted Claire. She saw him, too, and left her parents to run over to him.

“I hoped we’d get to say good-bye.” Her arms encircled a pillow and a worn pink teddy bear. With one hand, she pulled a phone from her back pocket. “Can I get a picture of us?”

“Sure.” He set down his trumpet case and his pulse quickened as she stepped close, bending her head next to his. His nostrils tingled at her fresh, clean scent.

“Smile,” she said, holding the phone in front of them. Click. She checked the picture—a close-up of their faces that would look awesome on his mirror at home. “Perfect.”

“I want that too.”

“I’ll send it to you. What’s your number?” She typed his number into her contacts then threw an arm around his neck and squeezed. “Take care, Brady. And come back next year!” With that, she ran to catch up with her parents.

He stared after her, trying to capture everything about her to savor once he got home. Wherever that might be. Mom met him at the guesthouse door, keys in hand.

“You ready?” She looked better today, wearing her dark sunglasses again.

“We’re leaving? Where are we going?”

She singled out the car key, the rest of the keys jingling below her palm. “To your dad’s. I talked to him last night.”

Brady’s knees went weak. After all that had happened, surely she wouldn’t send him away again. “I’m not living with him, am I?”

“Yes, but...”

“Mo-om! You said...”

Mom held her hand up at his protest. “Let me explain. I called to let him know he didn’t need to drive up for you today. When he heard everything that had happened, he said we could stay at his place. He’ll be out of town for the next couple weeks anyway, so we’ll have it to ourselves.”

“He was planning to leave me alone for two weeks?” Brady shook his head and scuffed his foot against the ground. Dad hadn’t changed. Business always came first.

Mom hoisted his duffle bag onto her hip. “He’s not a bad person, honey. Just clueless when it comes to relationships.” She started for the parking lot.

Weird. The father he could see and touch took no interest in his life and thought nothing of leaving him alone for two weeks. His heavenly Father, who couldn’t be seen or touched, knew every detail of his life and was always there for him.

“Brady?” Mom called. “Come on, let’s go. I want to hear about your week.”

His arm tightened around the pillow and sleeping bag, and he hurried to catch up. He’d probably still be talking about his week when they reached Dad’s house.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Brady is stunned by his mother's announcement that he must go live with his dad. How did his reaction affect his mom's response? How might he have handled it better?
2. Taylor enjoyed teasing Brady. How did Brady's reaction give Taylor a sense of power? Near the end, when Brady sees his friends in the clinic, he realizes jealousy over his friendship with Claire might have motivated Taylor's teasing. What are some other reasons kids tease and bully?
3. Steven was used to kids making fun of him and had learned not to let it bother him. Right from the start, he defended Brady from Taylor's criticism, even if it meant he would become a target as well. How else could you help someone who is being teased or bullied?
4. Brady observes two ways of dealing with conflict. Steven urges him to ignore it and walk away. Claire faces it head on. Which way do you think is better? Are there situations where one might be a better choice than the other?
5. Have you ever been bullied or had kids make fun of you? How did you handle it? Think of as many different ways as possible to manage bullies.

6. Zeke pointed out the difference between knowing about someone and knowing him or her personally. Brady realized he only knew about God. What steps should he take to develop a personal relationship with God?
7. Forgiveness is a difficult thing to do when we don't think the other person deserves it. What reasoning did Matt use to show Brady he could forgive Taylor even if he didn't want to? How did Brady learn to forgive Taylor?
8. In his blackest moment, Brady was ready to give up on life. What lie did he believe that made him give up hope? What truth did he learn when he got back to camp?
9. Nurse Willie tells Brady that God speaks in many different ways. Name some of the ways we can hear from God. How should Brady train himself to recognize God's voice?
10. Brady's mom kept her troubles to herself, which meant Brady couldn't understand her decision to send him to his dad. Even though it wasn't his fault, it affected his life in a huge way. How might this story help kids when adults in their life take action that seems unreasonable?

RESOURCES

Abuse: If you or someone you know is hurt by verbal or physical abuse, it's important to talk to someone you trust. This could be a pastor, school counselor, a trusted teacher, friend's parent, or a neighbor. Abuse is NOT your fault, so don't be embarrassed about it.

Alcoholism: Alcoholics Anonymous runs a program for families of those addicted to alcohol. [Al-anon](#) has groups just for teens to help them cope with a parent's addiction.

Divorce: Divorce Care for Kids (www.DC4K.org) is a support program to help kids deal with their parents' divorce. www.divorceandteens.weebly.com

Running Away: For help before or after you decide to run away from home, call 1-800-RUNAWAY or go [online here](#).

If you need to find a safe place, click [here](#).

Christian camps: To find a camp in your area, type "Christian Youth Camps" and your state into any search engine. Or go to the [Christian Camp and Conference Association](#)

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Most importantly, I give all the glory to my Lord Jesus Christ. Any criticism of this book belongs to me, but all praise belongs to Him who alone is worthy.

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SPEAK NO EVIL

RUSTIC KNOLL BIBLE CAMP
BOOK TWO



MARY L. HAMILTON

*This book is dedicated to my late parents,
Rev. Paul and Florence Watson
and to
Lutherdale Bible Camp
where they served for nearly 20 years.
May the Lord continually bless Lutherdale's ministry.*

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CHAPTER ONE

TAYLOR DIXON RIVETED HIS GAZE TO THE RED CORVETTE PULLING INTO THE parking lot of Rustic Knoll Bible Camp. Its supercharged engine purred like a monster cat as the 'Vette prowled the rows of parked cars hunting a space of its own, finally settling across two slots in the back row.

Forgetting Dad's command to unload the car, Taylor stuffed his auto magazine into his pillow and put some distance between himself and the family's van. He drank in the Corvette's sleek body, his heart racing with the engine as the driver revved it up before shutting off the machine. Oh, for a closer look, but he didn't dare. Not with Dad nearby. His younger sister came up and leaned into him.

"Nice." Marissa drew the word out, keeping her voice low.

"It's awesome."

Her finger poked his side. "I wasn't talking about the car."

Taylor glanced sideways at her, then looked back at the 'Vette.

A boy about Taylor's age emerged from the passenger's seat. The kid stretched and surveyed the parking lot, a smug grin hugging his face. His eyes met Taylor's. One eyebrow arched as he lifted his chin high. His grin changed to a smirk before his gaze slid over to Marissa.

Wait. Was that a wink?

Marissa stiffened, caught her breath and stifled a squeal. She squeezed Taylor's arm, her fingernails biting into the soft skin of his inner elbow. But before he had time to consider some guy flirting with his sister, Dad finger-thumped his head.

"Don't get any ideas. You're not getting your driver's license. I don't want you anywhere near a car like that until you're eighteen and I'm not responsible for you anymore."

Taylor huffed and turned back to their drab gray minivan. "Dad, I'm at camp, remember? Swimming? Softball? Sermons? No cars."

"Yeah, so quit drooling and get your stuff out of the car. I don't want to be here all day."

Ducking under the lift back, Taylor muttered while he pulled out his duffle and sleeping bag. "I wasn't drooling."

Reaching for her pillow, Marissa giggled and whispered, "I was."

Taylor growled. "Forget it, Riss. He's a stuck-up snob."

"How do you know? You haven't even met him." She didn't bother to keep her voice down.

"Didn't you see the way he looked down his nose at us? He thinks he's hot because he came to camp in a 'Vette."

"Oh, he's hot even without the car. Maybe he looked down his nose at you, but he winked at me. Admit it. You saw it, too." Marissa struggled to pull her suitcase out of the van. "Ugh! Can you get that out for me?"

Taylor tugged on her overstuffed bag. "What's in here? You must've packed your whole bedroom." He hauled it out and set it on the ground.

"Everybody ready?" Mom grabbed her purse and closed the passenger door.

Dad shut the lift back door. Even though it was summer, he wore his football coach's shirt. Dad's hefty build and graying buzz-cut hair were so different from Taylor's, few kids at school ever guessed he was Coach Dixon's son. Before Taylor took two steps with his own duffle bag on

wheels, Dad clamped a vise grip on his shoulder. “Take your sister’s suitcase. It’s too heavy for her.”

Taylor handed Marissa his pillow and sleeping bag, then dragged both their suitcases across the gravel parking lot. Marissa’s had to be loaded with bricks. He stopped to switch hands. “Riss, we’re only here for a week. Why’d you bring so much stuff?”

“I only brought what I need.” Marissa repositioned her purse strap on her shoulder, then shifted the pillows to her other arm. “Taybo, I can’t wait until you have a car like that Corvette.”

Dad grunted. “In his dreams.”

“His dreams will come true. One day, he’ll be a famous race car driver and he’ll get to drive Mustangs and Corvettes and all kinds of hot cars.” She threw a smile Taylor’s way. “And he’ll take his favorite sister for a ride in them, too. Won’t you?”

Dad shot Taylor a warning look. “He’ll stay miles away from those cars if he knows what’s good for him.”

Arguing was useless, but Taylor couldn’t help it. “Can’t I at least get my license? I’m almost sixteen. All my friends are learning to drive, and I pulled my grades up like you wanted.”

“Prove to me you deserve to drive.” Dad might as well have been talking to one of his players.

“How? What do I have to do?”

“Show me you’re responsible by staying out of trouble.”

Like that would ever happen. Not as long as he kept getting blamed for Marissa’s adventures. Taylor gave up, but Marissa continued the argument.

“Daddy, just because Jesse stole a car and went to jail doesn’t mean Taylor will, too.”

“Princess, you can stick up for your brother all you want, but I know boys. Taylor hung around Jesse and those delinquent friends of his. Who knows what they taught him?”

Mom threw a glance at them over her shoulder. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

Taylor slowed, letting the others walk ahead of him. Marissa was only thirteen but the way things were going, she’d get her license before he did. The family princess. And Jesse was the prince, Dad’s favorite from the moment he put on a football uniform.

Where does that leave me? Stuck between a princess and a prince.

Taylor yanked hard on Marissa’s suitcase and joined the rest of his family at the end of the check-in line. Like last year, Nurse Willie manned the registration table wearing her weird hat with the fishing lures all over it. He’d almost persuaded Mom to let him stay home this summer. But then Marissa decided camp sounded like fun, and if she was going, he had to go, too.

Taylor searched the line for a familiar face, but didn’t recognize anyone from last year. Whenever they inched forward, Dad checked his watch and sighed loud enough for everyone nearby to hear.

Marissa nudged Taylor’s arm. “Tell me what the buildings are so I don’t get lost. That one must be the church.” She pointed to the chapel with its steep roof and blue cross-shaped window.

Taylor nodded toward the nearest low building with redwood stained siding. “That’s the dining hall. The girls’ cabins are over on the other side of it. Guys cabins are over this way, past the chapel.”

“What’s that little hut over there?” Marissa indicated the small building at one end of the dining hall.

“That’s the Snack Shack. A message board is posted on the outside wall on the other side. You’ll need to look there for your Rec team assignment and daily activities.”

“Will we be on the same rec team?”

“I hope not. You’re such a klutz, we’d never win anything.”

“Hey!” Marissa punched his arm and turned her back to him, acting insulted.

But it was true. Marissa was as uncoordinated as Jesse was athletic.

Jesse. Even though five years separated them, Jesse had always let him tag along, announcing to his friends, “Hey everybody! Taylor’s here. Say hi to my little brother.” Had there really been a note of pride in Jesse’s voice or was it his imagination, wishful thinking on his part? For a while, he’d taken on his brother’s shuffling walk and the way he pointed both thumbs in the air when something pleased him. But Jesse had often teased him, too, and they’d had their fights. Still, when Jesse was around to toss a football or shoot hoops, it was easier to handle the lack of attention from Dad. Hopefully prison wouldn’t change his brother too much by the time he got out.

When they finally reached the check-in table set up in the shade of a large oak tree, Mom handed their health forms to Nurse Willie.

Marissa eyed Willie, her white hair a contrast with her dark skin, and the bucket hat adorned with fishing lures atop her head. “Cool hat.”

Dad rolled his eyes and walked away, shaking his head.

“Thank you.” Willie scanned their health forms. “You must be Taylor’s sister. Good to see you again, Taylor. Looks like you’ve grown a couple inches since last year.” She held the papers out so the counselor sitting next to her could see the names. “Lauren, this is Taylor Dixon and his sister, Marissa. Taylor was here last year.”

“Hi! Welcome to Rustic Knoll.” Lauren’s smile showed off perfectly white teeth. A bit of red chewing gum peeked from the corner of her mouth. “Marissa and Taylor?” She snapped her gum and slid her finger down a list of names. After highlighting two in pink, she looked up. “Okay, Marissa, you are in Magnolia Cabin. That’s back over here.” She pointed to the right behind her back. “And Taylor, you’re in Spruce Cabin.”

“I know where it is.” Taylor let go of Marissa’s suitcase and flexed his hand a few times. No way was he dragging that thing to the cabin for her. He glanced again down the check-in line for a familiar face. He knew the kid with red hair standing with the one wearing dark glasses.

Brady and Steven were in his cabin last year, but he didn’t expect a friendly greeting from them. Not after all the trouble he gave them. The girl with short blonde hair talking with Brady and Steven was Claire Thompson. No surprise there. She and Steven and Brady were buddies. Would Claire remember him? Taylor caught her eye and waved, but she barely lifted a hand before turning away. Not the response he’d hoped for.

“Who’s that? She’s cute!” Marissa sounded incredulous, as if surprised he would know any pretty girls.

“Yeah, but she didn’t look too impressed,” Dad said. “I’d say she’s a little out of your league.” He prodded Taylor away from the check-in table. “Show me to your cabin, Hot Shot.”

“Aren’t you going to help Marissa with her suitcase?” Anything to keep Dad from accompanying him to the cabin.

Mom moved the suitcase away from the check-in table. “We girls can manage.” She kissed Taylor’s cheek, and gave him a quick hug. “Bye, Honey. Have a good week. We’ll see you on Saturday.” Mom took hold of the suitcase handle. “C’mon, Marissa.”

Dad urged Taylor forward. “Let’s go.”

Taylor yanked his bag behind him, using his chin-length brown hair to cover the frown on his face. Last year, Mom brought him to camp while Dad stayed home with Marissa. But with both him and Riss coming to camp this year, Mom talked Dad into joining them for a “family outing.” At least with Marissa here, he wouldn’t have to endure Mom making his bed and hanging up his clothes like last year. But he could only hope no one else was in the cabin to hear Dad’s opinions.

They skirted the chapel, walking alongside the windows that looked out over the lake. Dad peered inside. “How often do they make you go to church here?”

“All morning, plus another worship session in the evening.”

“Worship session? You mean like Sunday church?”

Taylor shrugged. “Kinda, but the music’s more like our kind of music.” His roller bag bounced and tipped when they reached the end of the sidewalk.

“You listen to what the preacher says?”

“Sometimes.” Taylor righted the bag and tugged on it. The wheels didn’t work so well in the grass.

“Sometimes? If you want your license, you’d better pay attention all the time, y’hear? Your mother and I don’t need another jailbird, like your no-good brother.” Dad whacked the back of Taylor’s head. Not hard, but his wedding ring bit into Taylor’s skull.

“Ow!” Taylor dropped his sleeping bag and rubbed his head. “I’m not Jesse. Okay?”

“We’ll see. You listen to that preacher every time he talks. Do you understand?”

“Okay!” Taylor moved out of ring-shot range. Nothing he did would ever convince Dad he wasn’t running in Jesse’s footsteps. His brother, the star player on the school’s football team, could do no wrong. But he’d fooled everyone, including Dad whose dreams of borrowed glory got smashed when Jesse quit the team, got arrested and sent to prison.

They skirted the giant blue spruce tree that identified the cabin and Taylor climbed the two concrete steps to the front door. The screen door squeaked as they entered and Taylor led the way through the common room, its worn couches and ragged armchairs perfect for teenage boys to lounge on.

Dad wasted no time finding fault. “Rustic Knoll, huh? Rusty nail is more like it. And we pay good money for this.”

Taylor entered the bunkroom and tossed his sleeping bag onto the first empty bed, shoving his duffle bag underneath. A couple of sleeping bags lay tossed on other bunks, but the cabin was empty at the moment. Now, if he could get rid of Dad before anyone else arrived. He dug his hands into his pockets.

“This is it. Not much to it.”

The screen door squeaked open and slammed shut. A young man with dark skin and close cut hair unlocked the door to the counselor’s room before glancing in their direction. He strode toward them and extended his hand.

“Hi! I’m Harris Franks, your counselor. And you are—?”

“Taylor Dixon.” He shook the counselor’s hand, then watched as Harris shook Dad’s hand. Dad liked to test the strength of guys’ handshakes. Taylor didn’t see the customary wince, but considering those biceps, he wasn’t surprised. When did a counselor get time to work out?

Dad released Harris’s hand. “You’re here all summer? How much they pay you to live in this dump?”

Harris’s brows popped up and an uncertain smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. His gaze flicked from Dad to Taylor and back to Dad. Taylor hung his head, his long bangs falling over his face.

Harris tapped his keys against his thigh. “I don’t do it for the money.”

“Uh-huh. You in college?” Dad eyed Harris who stood half a head taller but only half as wide. “Yes, sir.”

“What’s your major?”

“I’m in a Biblical Studies program, planning to enter the ministry.”

“Gonna be a pastor?” Dad grunted. “Good for you. Maybe some of it’ll rub off on Taylor this week. Keep your eye on him. He likes to get into trouble.”

Taylor peeked at Harris through strands of brown hair.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Dixon. I’m sure Taylor and I will get along fine.” Harris patted Taylor’s shoulder then stepped between them and gently guided Dad toward the door. “If we do have any problems, how do you suggest I discipline Taylor?”

“Well now, I’m not one for smackin’ kids around...” Dad’s voice trailed off as they exited the cabin.

Except for vise grips and brain thumps. But it was the verbal smack-downs that hurt the most.

“Taylor?” Dad called from the front steps. “You keep an eye on your sister this week.”

“Yeah, I know.” Having the Princess at camp with him was going to be a royal pain.

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CHAPTER TWO

TAYLOR UNROLLED HIS SLEEPING BAG, GRABBED HIS PILLOW AND HEAVED IT to the end of the bed. Personal guard for the Princess, that's all he was. And without the athletic ability equaling Jesse's, he had no hope of Dad taking notice of him. It was fun living in Jesse's shadow when he took the team to State. But the occasional bits of glory dust that settled on him turned to ashes with Jesse's conviction. Now, Taylor might as well be covered in soot. Dad never spent time with him the way he did with Jesse. At least he didn't have to put up with the constant criticism Jesse had endured. But couldn't Dad notice him for something more than looking after Marissa? Couldn't they watch a car race together or something?

Taylor plopped down on his bed and stretched out, pulling the car magazine from inside his pillowcase. He'd go look for his buddy, Nick, in a minute, after he finished checking out the rest of these Mustangs and Camaros.

Other campers arrived and claimed bunks, including the kid from the Corvette. He was tall with a sturdy build and sand-colored hair that ended just above his ears. His shorts hung low on his hips, revealing boxers with Corvettes on them. Cute. The label on his shorts wasn't exactly a discount brand, either. The kid dumped his stuff on a bunk, then leaned across the empty one between them and introduced himself. "Luke Erickson." He

cocked his head to read the title of Taylor's magazine and wrinkled his nose. "You like those?"

"Yeah. Something wrong with that?"

Luke shrugged and unrolled his bedding. "I guess not, if you like common cars. My dad's getting the new 'Vette, a custom job. I get his old one." He stood and faced Taylor. "I almost talked him into letting me drive it up here, told him I needed to get used to driving it." Luke laughed out loud. "That's like saying you have to get used to eating steak."

Taylor closed his magazine and laid it on the bed. The images inside had lost their appeal.

Luke looked around. "Hey, where's the toilet in this place?"

Taylor pointed in the direction of the bathroom. Familiar voices outside the cabin grew louder. *Brady and Steven? Surely, we're not all in the same cabin again this year.* The screen door squeaked and slammed. Brady led the way into the bunkroom, guiding Steven in his dark glasses and pulling a suitcase behind him. Brady stopped short when he saw Taylor.

Steven let go of Brady's arm and reached out, feeling for the bed in front of him, the empty one between Taylor and Corvette Boy. "Is this one taken?"

Brady glanced at the other bunks. "I don't think you want—"

Taylor interrupted. "Yeah, it's open. Take it. And Brady can have the top bunk."

Brady shook his head. "I'm in Ash Cabin this year."

"Taylor?" Steven's head turned in his direction.

"Yup. Cabin buddies again. Exciting, huh?"

Luke returned from the bathroom and stuck his hand out toward Steven and Brady. "Hi, I'm Luke."

Steven's head swiveled to the right. "Hey, I'm Steven. This is Brady." Brady reached around Steven to shake, but when Steven failed to

acknowledge the gesture, Luke's fingers curled into his palm and he pulled his hand back.

Taylor suppressed a grin. He'd made a similar mistake last year, before he knew Steven was blind. How long before Luke figured it out?

Luke eyed Steven. A single chuckle escaped his lips. "What's with the shades? Are you, like, a celebrity or rock star or something?"

Steven moved forward to claim the bed between Taylor and Luke. "Yep, I'm traveling incognito. Don't tell anybody, okay?"

Brady dropped Steven's sleeping bag and pillow on the bed. His eyes cut to Taylor, a grin curling his lips.

Luke's gaze hopped between Steven, Brady and Taylor. "Okay, what's the joke?"

"What? You don't recognize Steven Miller?" Taylor rolled his eyes. "How could you not know him? Maybe you need to forget those fancy sports cars and pay more attention to the real world." He pushed himself off the bed and headed out the door, muttering loud enough for the others to hear. "Sheesh, he brags about his dad's 'Vette, but doesn't recognize Steven Miller when he sees him. What a loser!"

Taylor found Nick in Elm cabin and told him about the joke he'd played on Luke. "He's gotta be filthy rich if his dad can afford to give him a Corvette."

Nick rummaged through the clothes in his suitcase. "What's the matter with that? You jealous?"

Taylor snorted. "No way! He's a stuck-up jerk."

"Yeah, and he'll be driving a 'Vette while your dad won't let you get your license." Nick muttered to himself while he pulled the clothes out of his suitcase and dumped them on the bed.

Taylor's childhood buddy knew him too well. Still, he was not jealous of Luke, even if he did get to drive a Corvette.

“There they are!” Nick lifted his swim trunks from the pile of clothes beside the suitcase. “Give me a second to change and then we’ll go back to your cabin.”

Luke, Brady and Steven were all gone by the time Taylor returned to Spruce cabin. He changed, grabbed his towel, and hurried to the beach with Nick. They tossed their towels on the sand and started toward the water. One look at the diving raft stopped Taylor in his tracks.

“Aw, look who’s out there on the raft.”

Nick shaded his eyes from the sun.

“Claire?”

“No. Luke.”

Nick looked sideways at him. “So, does that mean we’re not going out there?”

“Fat chance. Last one there buys a snack from the Shack.” Taylor ran into the water, dove headfirst and swam like shark bait until he reached the raft. He clung to the ladder, catching his breath while Nick caught up. “You owe me a bag of chips.”

“No fair. You got a head start.”

The raft swayed as Taylor climbed onto it. He stepped onto the surface as Luke performed a flip off the diving board. Claire and another girl sat on the raft’s edge beside the board, legs dangling above the water, clapping their hands in appreciation for Luke’s dive.

Taylor mounted the board, barely giving Luke time to get out of the way before he took a running leap off the end. Pulling himself into a ball, arms tight around his knees, he dropped into the lake. That splash should get the girls’ attention.

Surfacing, he saw the girls had moved. “What’s wrong? You’re not afraid of a little water, are you?” He shook the hair away from his eyes, sending water droplets in an arc around him.

Claire glared at him from her perch on the diving board.

“Any idiot can do a cannonball.” She turned her back to the water and balanced on her toes at the end of the board. Bounce, bounce. With the third bounce, she launched herself into the air and flipped over backward, her body slicing through the water like a sharp knife.

“You gonna let a girl show you up like that?” Nick razzed.

Before Taylor could respond, Claire called up to her friend. “I’m going back to the beach. It’s getting a little crowded out here.” Her friend jumped into the water and they swam toward the pier while Taylor climbed onto the raft.

Nick landed a playful punch to his arm. “She loves you as much as she did last year.”

From a corner of the raft, Luke added, “I hear she’s crazy about that rock star, Steven Miller.” Taylor laughed, but Luke wasn’t smiling. “Do you always make fun of people you’ve just met?”

Nick stepped onto the diving board. “Oh no, you’re not that special. He makes fun of everyone, whether he’s just met you or not.”

Taylor gave Luke a fake smile. “Just trying to make you feel like one of the gang.”

Luke’s lip curled and his eyes narrowed. Taylor turned his back to him and, moments later, a splash told him Luke had left.

Nick positioned himself for a dive. “I don’t think he liked our company.”

Taylor mimicked Claire’s voice. “Yeah, it was getting a little crowded out here.”

Whose dumb idea was it to make everyone in the cabin eat their first meal together? Steven was the only one Taylor knew from last year, and that was

a little awkward after he'd flipped Steven's canoe in the Water Carnival last summer. He'd rather be sitting with Nick.

Ignoring the chatter around the table, Taylor scanned the dining hall for familiar faces. He spotted Brady and recognized a few others at the thirty or more round tables filling the cavernous room. With everyone talking, the noise was worse than the school lunchroom. There was Claire, her hands making wild motions as she spoke to the girls at her table.

A slower movement beside Claire caught his eye, a hand waving side to side. The smiling face behind it belonged to *Marissa*? At Claire's table?

The name of Jesus Christ escaped Taylor's lips.

One of the boys at his table jumped up. "Where? Is He here, too?" He looked all around. "I wanna see Him!" Luke and the other boys at the table laughed.

Even Harris smiled, despite the serious tone of his voice. "That name deserves more respect. Don't be using it carelessly like that."

Taylor grimaced and hung his head. Chewed out by the counselor already, and in front of everyone else, too. This could be a long week. He tossed his hair back and caught Luke's scornful smirk. *Enough*. Taylor shoved back his chair, picked up his tray and went to find Nick.

On their way back to the cabins, a group of girls crossed their path. One waved and Nick waved back. A silly-looking grin stretched across Nick's face from one ear to the other.

"Who's that?" Taylor asked.

Nick's gaze followed the girls. "Her name's Alexis. She goes by Alex. She was behind me at check-in." Still grinning, he called to the girls. "Where're you going?"

Alex flashed a smile. "Down by the lake. 'Wanna come?"

"Sure!" Nick backhanded Taylor in the gut and whispered, "Meet you in chapel, near the back." He jogged to catch up with Alex and her friends.

Taylor huffed and stared after Nick. Now what was he supposed to do? His friend disappeared down the hillside to the lake. This week would really stink if Nick hung out with his girlfriend the whole time.

Taylor trudged on toward the cabin until a roaring engine interrupted his thoughts. The sound didn't last long enough to tell exactly where it came from. He stopped and listened. Another throaty rumble sent him hurrying toward the parking lot. It couldn't be Luke's 'Vette; his dad would have taken that home by now. Besides, this sounded too rough. Must be some other car.

At the edge of the parking lot, Taylor stopped and studied the few remaining cars. Most of the vehicles probably belonged to counselors and staff members. None looked capable of producing the sound he'd heard. He cocked an ear and listened again.

Another roar, louder and longer this time from the white shed off to the left of the lot. He'd seen the building before but never given it much thought. A forest green pickup with Rustic Knoll's emblem on the door was parked in front of one of the three garage doors lining the front. The other two overhead doors were open, revealing a tractor in the middle bay and a much smaller grille peeking out from the near end. That must be the source of the rumble. Heart racing, Taylor sauntered up to the bay where a car's hood stood open in a toothless yawn. A man in brown uniform shirt and pants leaned over the engine.

Taylor peered into the garage, then sidled up to the car. He coughed. "Sweet car. Mind if I look?"

The man's head came up and he gave a friendly nod. He wiped his hand on a cloth rag, motioning for Taylor to look around. "You like?" His Spanish accent fit the deep chestnut brown of his face and arms. He wasn't much taller than Taylor, but he was stocky and his hair would soon be more white than black.

“It’s awesome. I love cars.” Taylor ran his hand across the left fender, the new red paint smooth beneath his fingertips. One wide black stripe bordered by narrow stripes ran front to back atop the raised hood. Another thin stripe raced along the side of the car, from the Mach 1 lettering behind the front wheel to the rear wheel well. He bent down and stuck his head through the open passenger window. Compared to modern cars, the dashboard instruments looked small and simple. The seat covers, though tattered and ragged, beckoned him inside. Taylor resisted, moving on toward the back. His palm slid easily along the fastback down to the spoiler. Dual exhaust pipes peeked from beneath the bumper.

The man stepped off to the side, using the rag to wipe oil off the dipstick. “Is nice, eh?”

Taylor joined him, drinking in the sight of the old Mustang.

“It’s really nice! What year?”

“1970.”

“Can I sit in it?”

“Si! Yes.” Taylor pulled the door open and slid onto the driver’s seat, ignoring the foam that bulged through the fabric. His fingers curled around the narrow steering wheel. He closed his eyes, pressing his sandaled foot ever so lightly against the gas pedal. He itched to stomp on it, to hear the roar of the engine going full out. In his mind’s eye, he watched the speedometer’s needle push past 80, 90, 100.

Taylor opened his eyes and leaned his head out the open window. “Have you driven it yet?”

The man replaced the dipstick, then replied, “Is not quite ready.” He came over and leaned his forearms on the window. “You drive?” His hands made steering motions.

“Not yet. I’m only fifteen. Next year, I get my license.” As if that might actually happen. Taylor leaned his head back against the seat.

“Someday, you have a car like this, no?”

Taylor ran his hand across the instruments on the dash and let it fall to the gearshift. “I’d love a car like this.” He gripped the wheel again and imagined speeding around a track, the sidelines a blur, engine revving until his teeth rattled. The man watched him with an understanding smile.

Taylor savored the dream a moment longer before dropping his hands to his lap, then reached for the door handle. The man stepped back, Taylor got out and shut the door.

“Your name?”

“Taylor.”

“Nice to meet you, Taylor.” He put his hand out to shake. “I am Roberto Rodriguez. You know my wife, Juanie?”

Wa-nee? Taylor shook his head. How would he know this old guy’s wife? “Oh! You mean Janie?”

Roberto’s smile widened. “Si. Yes, she is cook.”

“Sure, everyone knows Janie. I’ve seen you around, mowing the grass and stuff, but I didn’t know you and Janie were married.” Taylor took one more look at the Mustang and crossed his arms, sliding his hands into his armpits. “Thanks for letting me check out the car. It’s really cool.”

Roberto tipped his head sideways. “You come again. Maybe you help?”

Taylor shook the hair from his eyes for a clear view of Roberto’s face. “Seriously? You’d let me work on it?”

“Si. You know about cars—engines, changing out seats, carpet?”

“I know a little about engines, but nothing about restoring a car.” Taylor looked the car over again, his eyes wide. “How much work did you have to do on this?”

Roberto crooked a finger at him. “Come. I show you pictures.”

CHAPTER THREE

ROBERTO PULLED A THREE-RING BINDER FROM THE SHELF ABOVE HIS workbench, grabbed a small cooler and set it outside in the evening sunlight.

“You want a drink?” He flipped open the cooler to reveal cans of iced soda.

Not much variety—the man must like root beer. Taylor helped himself to a can and popped the top open.

Roberto took one as well, closed the lid and invited Taylor to sit on the cooler. He placed a metal folding chair speckled with dirt and paint next to Taylor, sat down and opened the binder. It had a battered look to it, like Taylor’s notebook at the end of a school year. But the pictures inside were better than any algebra equations or sentence diagrams. The first page protector held an 8”x10” photo of the car sitting on blocks, its wheels missing. Dents marred the body in several spots, and its red paint looked faded and dull. A crack split the windshield. Rust clung to the fenders around the wheel wells.

Taylor turned the page. An inside shot showed the torn seat covers, the vinyl peeling away from the foam cushions, and a sagging headliner. One handle for raising and lowering the window was missing. The next several

pages showed before and after shots of the engine parts—dirty and worn, then restored and looking like new.

Roberto leaned closer, adding his comments.

“I look for engine I can overhaul, keep original. No replace.” He shook his finger.

Taylor looked up from the pictures. “How can you tell it’s the original?”

“The number.” He pointed to a picture showing numbers cast onto the engine block. “They match the car number. You know the VIN?”

Taylor nodded. “The vehicle identification number.”

“Si. If engine is changed, numbers do not match.”

“Is that important? I mean, if you can’t tell except by checking the numbers, what’s the difference?”

Roberto took a sip of his root beer, then tipped his head sideways and pressed his lips together. His fingers rubbed the late day stubble on his cheek, then he pointed to Taylor’s chest. “Is like your heart. The one you are born with works best for your body, si? You can replace it, but the body rejects it, no?” He shifted his weight on the chair. “Engine is heart of the car. So, I keep original. Clean it, repair it. I know what makes the car run.” He pointed to his temple, then his chest. “I know its heart.”

Sounds kinda hokey, but yeah, I get it.

Taylor flipped through more pictures of the engine going back into its compartment, and the body in various stages of repair and painting. At last, he closed the binder and handed it back to Roberto.

“Thanks. It’s cool seeing what it looked like before.”

Happy shouts and shrieks sounded from somewhere near the dining hall. Roberto checked his watch. “I keep you too long. You go?”

Taylor made no move to get up. “They’re just playing some stupid game to make sure we all get to know each other. If it’s okay with you, I’d rather stay here.”

A smile creased Roberto's weathered face. "Is okay with me." He put away the photo album, then went to stand by the engine again. "You help?"

Taylor's comment to Dad about no cars at camp crossed his mind. He bit his tongue to keep from laughing out loud. If Dad only knew! He jumped up and stood beside Roberto.

I'd give just about anything to own a Mustang like this.

But without a driver's license, that would be pointless. He'd need to stay out of trouble, which meant keeping Marissa out of trouble. And that was next to impossible.

The band had already started their first song when Taylor slipped into the chapel. He spotted Nick in the middle of a row near the back and squeezed past the other kids. His buddy shouted over the music.

"'Bout time you got here. Where've you been?" Nick leaned away, his attention fastened on the front of the chapel.

Taylor shivered with excitement. "I've been working on a 1970 Mach I Mustang." He pronounced the name precisely.

Nick clearly did not believe him. "Where'd you find one of those?" His gaze shifted to the other side of the aisle.

"That shed out by the parking lot. You know the guy we see mowing the grass and stuff? That's Janie's husband. He's restoring this old Mustang out there where they keep the camp tractor and pickup. It's awesome."

"Does it run?" Despite his questions, Nick seemed distracted. He kept looking across the aisle.

"Yeah, it runs. He said I could help him work on it every night after supper." Taylor followed Nick's line of sight a few rows up and to the left. Alex. His buddy had fallen hard for this girl.

A drop of sweat slid down Taylor's spine, tickling as it went. Fans hanging from the ceiling's apex might have cooled things off if they rotated faster. The high ceiling of the chapel's A-frame did little to draw the heat up and away from a room crammed with teenagers bouncing to the music's rhythm. But he couldn't get into this kind of music no matter what the temperature. It was almost as boring as the hymns they sang in church back home. Now, if they played screamo music, that would be really cool.

The band finished and everyone sat down. While Zeke climbed onto the stage, a counselor moved a small table to the center and set a fancy, decorated box on top. The box sparkled with colored stones and glitter. Zeke dragged his easel with the pad of paper nearer to the box. The camp director's short nickname fit him better than his proper name, Rev. Zacharias. His stature along with his white hair made him easily recognizable around camp.

Taylor sank further into his seat. Not really hiding, but he'd spent way too much time in Zeke's office last year. Tipping Brady, Steven and Claire out of their canoe. The fight with Brady. He couldn't blame that trouble on Marissa. He might need to make a small change here and there if he wanted his license.

Zeke removed the cover from his box of artist's chalk. "Who can tell me what it means to say someone has 'opened Pandora's box'?" Someone up in front answered and Zeke repeated it for everyone to hear.

"According to Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman on earth. When she married, she received a large jar with instructions not to open it under any circumstances. But Pandora always wondered what was in that jar."

Zeke selected a piece of chalk and drew several green streaks on the paper, then stepped aside and drew the campers' attention to the box on the table. "Later generations have changed the jar to a box. Attractive, don't you think?"

Someone shouted, “What’s in it?”

Others echoed the question and Zeke held up his forefinger. “Ah, you’re curious, aren’t you?”

A chorus of voices answered, “Yes!”

“Well, so was Pandora.” He chose a different color chalk and went back to drawing the picture. “Eventually, her curiosity got the best of her. She only meant to take a peek. Thought she’d open it just enough to see what was inside and then close it again. Unfortunately, as soon as she lifted the cover from the jar, all kinds of evil escaped and spread over the whole earth.” Zeke moved to the box and laid his hand on the lid. “Should I open it?”

Most of the campers cried yes; a few yelled no. Taylor sat up straight to see what Zeke would do. *Probably nothing in there. He’s just playing it up to keep us interested.*

Zeke removed his hand, leaving the box unopened, and moved back to his easel.

“This myth is a perfect lead-in to the question I want us to consider this week. While you wonder about what might be in the box, I want you to think about what’s in your heart. The Bible has a lot to say about the things we carry in our heart. For example, Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:21 that wherever our treasure is, that’s where our heart will be. Our affections will be caught up in whatever we value and spend time on. In another place, Jesus said whatever comes out of our mouth reveals what’s in our heart.”

A pine tree took shape on Zeke’s pad of paper, looking a lot like the tree outside Taylor’s cabin. But now he was adding little red circles, like balls, to the tree. *Christmas? In July?*

Zeke put away his chalk and faced the campers. “Who knows what kind of tree this is?”

Several campers called it a Christmas tree, but Zeke shook his head. Others guessed pine or spruce but Zeke rejected every answer. Finally, he

asked, “Doesn’t anyone recognize an apple tree?”

Protests erupted, and campers called out their arguments.

“No way. That’s not an apple tree.”

“Apple trees have leaves, not needles.”

“Apples don’t grow on pine trees.”

Zeke argued back. “What do you mean? Haven’t you ever heard of *pineapples*?”

Taylor groaned along with the rest. “Okay, that was a bad joke.” Zeke chuckled. “But you just proved my point. You don’t expect to find apples on pine trees. Do grapes ever grow on a rose bush? Or flowers on an oak tree? Of course not. What if you went to the water fountain for a drink and dirty water came out of the spout? Would that surprise you?”

Zeke picked up his Bible and stepped off the stage into the aisle. “In Luke 6, Jesus reminds his followers that trees are recognized by their fruit. Good trees don’t bear bad fruit and bad trees don’t bear good fruit. In the same way, he says, ‘A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart. And an evil man brings evil out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.’”

The camp director paced the aisle, hands behind his back. “Let that thought sink in. Out of your mouth come the things that are in your heart.” He returned to the front and faced them again.

“If your mouth is a water fountain, are you putting out sweet water that nourishes those around you? Or is it disgusting, foul water that people avoid? Do your words encourage others and build them up, or do you tear them down?” He held a fist over his heart. “You only get two choices. Good or evil. There’s no in between.”

Zeke raised a hand toward his drawing. “Bad trees can’t produce good fruit. If you’re filling your heart with dark stuff, don’t expect your words to be light and uplifting. But if you store up good things in your heart, you

don't have to worry how your words will affect others. James, the brother of Jesus, called the tongue a fire, a restless evil full of deadly poison.”

That verse sounded familiar. Zeke had Taylor read it out loud in his office last summer after the fight with Brady.

The director climbed back onto the stage and stood near his drawing. “The tongue can only speak what is in the heart. You have an assignment for tomorrow. Between now and our next evening worship, listen to yourself. Pay attention to what comes out of your mouth. Is it sweet or sour? Garbage or good? Discover what’s in your heart by listening to what comes out of your mouth. We’ll leave the box up here as a reminder. And each evening, we’ll talk about what we might find when we look inside.”

If my heart is where my treasure is, it must be in the garage with that Mustang.

Taylor left Nick to flirt with Alex and sucked in the cooler air outside the chapel. He hurried to the cabin and pulled out his magazine. It had regained its appeal since he'd been with Roberto. He flipped through the pages until he found a 1970 Mach 1 Mustang like Roberto's. The picture didn't do it justice. Taylor held the magazine beside his bed to look at it in better light.

Luke wandered over, toothbrush in hand. “Pony cars.” He said it like he'd just found horse manure on his shoe.

Taylor pulled the magazine to his chest. “What's your problem? Pony cars are cool.”

Luke wiped his mouth with the towel slung around his neck. “Corvettes are cool. Pony cars are just pony cars. Like ponies on a merry-go-round. They're for kids.”

Harris interrupted, calling everyone for devotions. Luke tossed his toothbrush across Steven's bed onto his own and made his way into the

common room. Taylor stuffed the magazine under his pillow. He'd look at it again when "Puke" wasn't around.

The comfortable armchairs had all been claimed and Taylor wasn't about to squeeze into the spot beside Luke on the sofa. He dropped to the floor near the front door. The cabin was almost as warm as the chapel had been, but occasionally a cool draft filtered through the screen door and wafted over his legs.

Harris looked around the group, checking names on a list in his lap and matching them with the faces around the room. He ran through a short review of camp and cabin rules—no swimming without a buddy, no noise or leaving the cabin after lights out—then repeated Zeke's question of the week. "What's in your heart?"

Taylor kept his eyes averted, like most of the other guys trying to avoid answering the question. Finally, someone spoke up.

"That's kind of a girly question."

Harris pursed his lips and appeared to be thinking. "Okay. What's in your gut? What is it that makes you do the things you do and say the things you say? Is it ego? Fear? Anger?"

Steven raised his hand. "Does it have to be negative?"

"Good question. No, there could be positive things like love, courage, selflessness, faith." Harris waited, his gaze traveling around the room. No one else spoke. "Each night this week, Zeke will talk about different things we might find in our heart, or in our gut, if we take the time to look close and be honest. Don't just blow it off. Think about it. Be honest with yourself. You might find you have some decent things inside. Or you might discover it's more like Pandora's box, full of evil, disgusting stuff. If that's the case, let's spend this week of camp working on changing that."

Taylor jumped to his feet the moment Harris finished praying. He hurried to brush his teeth, then pulled off his t-shirt and dropped it on top

of his duffle bag. He hopped into bed, turning his back to the Puke-ster and the guys chatting it up on the other side of the bunkroom.

Opening his magazine, he turned to the next to last page of photos. Was it even worth dreaming about a car like Roberto's? If he had his driver's license, he could get a job, save enough to buy a car he could fix up like Roberto was doing. Dad should be happy with that—a job and a car to work on would keep him out of trouble. If only he could make Dad see it that way.

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CHAPTER FOUR

TAYLOR MET NICK AT HIS CABIN THE NEXT MORNING AND THEY HEADED FOR the dining hall. The sticky sweet aroma of pancakes and syrup laced the air, and Taylor's mouth watered. A small crowd of kids surrounded the announcement board at the Snack Shack as they neared the dining hall. Taylor stopped, backhanding Nick's arm. "Maybe they put us on the same Rec team this year."

Nick grunted. "That'll never happen. Don't you know Zeke watches to see who's hanging out together so he can make sure they're on different teams?" He craned his neck to see the board from the back of the crowd while Taylor pushed through to the front, earning a sour look from Claire when he moved up next to her.

Marissa called from somewhere behind him. "Taybo! Look at my team and tell me if you know anyone."

He flinched at the use of his pet name, especially when Claire arched an eyebrow at him. Her lips formed the word—Taybo? She barely suppressed a dimpled grin, and turned back to the board.

Ignoring her, Taylor studied the posted lists until he found his name. He scanned the other names on his team. There had to be a few he knew from last year. None sounded familiar, except one.

Blue eyes met his as he turned to look at her. *Claire Thompson*. She wrinkled her nose and with a groan, pushed her way out from the crowd of campers. No matter what she thought of him, being on Claire's team was a good thing. Athletic and competitive, she never wimped out like a lot of girls.

Nick moved up beside him and, after looking over the lists, he turned a full-on grin toward Taylor. "Alex is on my team."

Before Taylor could respond, Marissa nudged him from the other side. Having taken over Claire's spot, she leaned in to him. "Did you look at my team? Is there anyone good?"

Taylor found her name and read through the others on her team. He moaned at the names he recognized. "Your team is stacked. You guys are gonna kill everyone."

Rissa clapped and bounced on her toes. "Really?"

Besides the familiar names from last year, Taylor recognized another one on Rissa's list. But he wasn't about to tell her Luke-puke was on her team. Let her find that out on her own.

The Rec schedule listed Wheel Steal for his team's organized game after lunch. Taylor made his way down to what used to be the volleyball court behind the clinic. Since last summer, a new volleyball court had been built with a sand base. What remained of the old site was mostly dirt, the grass on both ends having long ago surrendered to the continual trampling from hundreds of teenage feet. Today, dozens of inflated inner tubes lay in a jumbled line where the net used to hang and the whole area had been watered down enough to resemble a giant mud pit.

Taylor wandered about one end with the rest of his team. Claire ignored him, chatting with some of the other kids like they were old friends. He

checked out the team at the opposite end and caught sight of Marissa waving to him.

Seriously? Playing the stacked team on the first day?

Then again, he'd be playing against Luke-puke. He'd have a chance to see what the Pukester was made of.

Harris jogged up and blew his whistle. "Who's ready to get down and dirty?"

A few guys roared their approval. Some moans came from the girls.

Harris displayed a fake-looking frown. "Ladies, you can't let these guys have all the fun. Don't you remember making mud pies when you were little? This is just like that. Almost."

The girls bunched together, casting doubtful looks at the muddy field.

"Can I go back to the cabin and change?" asked one. "My mom will kill me if I get these white shorts all dirty."

Harris cocked his head. "Girl, haven't you heard of detergent and washing machines? And bleach?" He blew his whistle again. Clearly, the girls were not thrilled about this game. Even Claire grimaced.

Taylor glanced at his shorts and t-shirt. No problem. He'd go jump in the lake after they were done.

From mid-field near the pile of inner tubes, Harris shouted to both teams. "Welcome to Wheel Steal. Your goal for this game is to grab the most inner tubes, or wheels, and get them back to your starting line. At my signal, each team member will run to the center, grab as many tubes as you can and run them back."

Someone from the other team asked a question. "Can we roll them or do we have to carry them?"

"Any way you like. Just get them back to your starting line." Harris pointed to the opposite ends of the mud field. "If two of you from opposing teams grab the same wheel, whoever gets it across their line first gets to keep it, even if the opposing team member is still attached. However,

stealing wheels from the other team's starting line is illegal and you will be arrested and thrown in jail. Any questions?"

One girl raised her hand. "Does everybody on the team have to do this?"

"That's up to you and your team. But if they lose because you stood and watched, remember you will be playing with these same people every day for the rest of the week." When no one else asked any more questions, Harris called, "Okay, line up across your starting line."

Taylor kicked off his flip-flops and assumed a runner's stance at the starting line. With Claire next to him, he couldn't resist a little teasing. "Not worried about a little mud, are you?"

Claire raised one eyebrow. "Not me. I bet I can grab more wheels than you."

Taylor grinned. "You're on."

Harris blew the whistle and Taylor raced for the tubes. Mud squished between his toes and splattered his ankles. Twice, his feet nearly slid out from under him, but he reached the middle, grabbed two inner tubes and tried a skating motion on the way back, using the slippery mud to his advantage. After tossing the tubes across his goal line, he headed back for more and met Claire. One of her arms skewered two tubes through the center while her other hand clutched a third. Her forearms and legs were smeared with mud.

Taylor growled to himself. Already one tube behind and the game had just begun. He pulled two from the jumble in the center and slipped his left arm through the middle like Claire had done. He yanked on another one, but Marissa pulled from the other side.

"Let go, Taybo! I got it first."

"Nope, it's mine." Taylor pulled again, but Marissa held on with both hands. He relaxed for only a moment, then tugged hard. Marissa lost her balance and stumbled toward him, still clinging to the tube. She dropped to

her knees in the mud and Taylor dragged her several yards before Luke came to her rescue.

Grabbing onto the tube, Luke held it steady while Marissa regained her footing. Mud stuck to her legs in globs, but together, she and Luke pulled the tube past the center and on toward their goal.

Taylor dug his heels into the ground to keep from being dragged along, but it did no good. The inner tube worked itself loose from his grip, slipping through his mud-covered hands. No way was he letting Luke win this one. He dropped the two tubes on his other arm and adjusted his grip on the disputed one. He almost fell backward when Marissa let go of the tube.

She ran to his side and grabbed the tubes he'd dropped. "Luke! Catch."

Luke released the disputed tube, caught the one Marissa tossed and they both hustled back to their goal, leaving Taylor sitting in the mud with one lousy tube. He'd landed on his backside when Luke let go, splattering mud onto his shoulders and head.

Taylor swiped his face, but his muddy hands only made it worse. Dirt grit leaked through the corners of his mouth, crunching when he clenched his teeth. All around him, campers screamed, shouted, grabbed tubes and dragged them back to their starting lines. But the noise didn't drown out Claire's familiar laughter.

"You'll never beat me sitting around like that." With one tube on her left arm, she reached for Taylor's tube, now lying in the mud beside him. She turned to race back to the starting line, but Taylor grabbed her foot, sending her sprawling in the mud. The inner tubes flew out to her sides, splattering mud in every direction.

Taylor howled at the sight of her mud-covered cheeks and the chocolate-colored clumps of dirt that clung to her blonde hair. Rising to his knees, he mimicked her voice. "You'll never beat me lying around like that."

Claire snarled. “We’re supposed to be on the same team, you idiot.” She pushed herself to a sitting position, scooped up a handful of mud and flung it at him.

Taylor’s raised arm only partially succeeded in shielding his face. He returned the volley. Claire turned away, but not soon enough. The mud ball hit the side of her head and dripped down her hair onto her ear, neck and shoulder. Chin jutting out, eyes narrowed, she dug her fingers into the mud.

Harris’s whistle blasted. “Taylor, you’re out. Your girlfriend, too. You two come sit here on the sideline until you learn how to play nice.”

Claire moaned.

Taylor protested. “What? No way. My team needs me.”

Harris spoke around the whistle clenched between his teeth. “Shoulda thought of that before you tripped your girlfriend.”

“I’m not his girlfriend.” Claire jumped up from the mud and kicked at the tubes she’d been carrying. She peeled away the bangs plastered to her forehead, scraped the mud from her hands and shuffled to the sideline where she dropped to the grass with a huff. Her shoulders rose and fell with every breath and she pointedly ignored Taylor.

Taylor followed her to the sideline, keeping distance between them, and sank to the ground. Every square inch of his shorts and shirt were dirt brown. He peeled the wet cloth away from his skin. Luke would pay for this. If he hadn’t come to Rissa’s aid and let go of the tube, Taylor would still be in the game. But the memory of Marissa’s mud-covered legs and Claire’s belly-flop brought a grin to his face. *Worth every speck of dirt.*

The game continued a few more minutes. When all the tubes had been moved to one side or the other, Harris counted and declared Luke and Marissa’s team the winner.

Who cares? The mud on Taylor’s body and clothing was drying and becoming stiff. As soon as Harris dismissed them, he headed across the camp to the lake.

Outside the dining hall, Roberto was painting some kind of narrow wooden platform that rose several feet above the ground. He laughed when he saw Taylor. “Wheel Steal?”

“Yeah. I’m going to the lake to wash off.” Taylor detoured over to where Roberto was working. He’d seen that structure last year but hadn’t noticed any use for it. “What is that?”

Roberto drew his brush along one of the supporting legs. “Is for a bell, to wake you up and call to meals, Bible study.”

“How come you’re painting it if there’s no bell?”

“New bell is coming.”

“What happened to the old one?”

“Stolen. Last summer.”

“Who would steal a bell?”

Roberto shrugged. “Police say is probably kids living around lake. Maybe a summer home.” He pointed his paintbrush at the lake. “They come late at night, by boat. Take bell and leave. Must have been two, maybe three. Bell was iron. Heavy.” He flexed his arms in a muscle-builder pose.

“So, when’s the new bell going up?” Taylor looked to the top.

Roberto dipped his brush into the white paint. “Tomorrow.” Before he touched the brush to the tower’s leg, he eyeballed Taylor from head to toe. “You go wash?”

Taylor glanced at his dirty hands, arms, legs and feet. “Yeah, I better get going or I won’t be able to move when all this dries. See ya later.”

“Tonight?” Roberto held his paintbrush up in a kind of salute.

“Yeah! I’ll be there right after supper.” No way he’d miss the best part of the day.

A surprise punch to the arm at supper almost sent ice water spewing from Taylor's mouth. He managed to swallow it, but the water in his glass splashed all over his hand and dripped onto his lap. The glass thunked as he set it down. He raised a fist toward his attacker, but released it when he saw his sister.

"Rissa! What was that for?"

"You are so rude." She punched his arm again. "No wonder she practically ignored you. How do you expect to get a girlfriend if you treat her like that?"

Taylor twisted in his chair to see her better. "What are you talking about?"

"What you did to Claire. I am so embarrassed. How could you be so mean?" She crossed her arms and shifted to one leg while her other foot beat the floor.

Taylor grabbed a napkin and wiped off his arm. "She threw mud first."

"Yeah, after you tripped her so she fell on her face. In the mud. I apologized for you, but from now on, I expect you to treat her the way you treat me."

"And what happens if I don't?"

Marissa pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowing as she fixed him with an angry glare. Then, slowly, her mouth curled into a sly smile and her voice took on a sugary tone.

"If you don't, I tell Daddy all about it and you'll never get your license." She stuck out her tongue and flounced away.

The guys at the table hooted.

"Guess she told you." Nick laughed and slapped him on the back.

Taylor's cheeks grew warm. He shoved his chair back and stood up.

Nick looked up in surprise. "Where you going?"

"None of your business. Go hang out with Alex." Taylor grabbed his tray and hurried for the exit.

CHAPTER FIVE

TAYLOR LEFT THE DINING HALL AND HEADED FOR THE MACHINE SHED. Marissa's chewing out in front of the guys still burned. She wouldn't really tell Dad. At least, she never had before. But he couldn't afford to take a chance. Not if he hoped to get his license any time before he graduated.

At the edge of the parking lot, his steps slowed to a stop. The shed was closed. None of the garage doors stood open, no sound. His breath left him and his shoulders sagged. *Where's Roberto? He said he'd be here.* Taylor curled his lip at the thought of playing the stupid all-camper games scheduled between supper and evening worship. If only there were a camp dedicated to cars, where guys could go and learn all about mechanics, maintenance, styles, speed. He'd love it, but of course Dad would never send him to a camp like that.

What should he do? Go back to the cabin? He took one last look just as a sudden squeaking and grinding signaled the opening of the shed's overhead doors. Roberto waved from inside and Taylor ran to join him. "I didn't think you were here."

Roberto motioned him inside. "I am here, like I promised. Tonight, we work on timing and carburetor." He tossed the key to Taylor, who caught it in the air. Roberto lifted the hood. "Start it for me?"

Taylor hadn't started a car since that one time when Jesse let him drive around the parking lot of an abandoned shopping center. What a kick to bring this machine to life, and he didn't even have to ask! He sank into the driver's seat, rested one foot against the accelerator, fitted the key into the ignition, and braced himself for the engine's roar. He turned the key. The engine coughed and went silent.

Roberto peeked around the side of the hood. "Push the pedal to the floor, then let up. Try again." He twisted his wrist like he was turning the key.

Taylor followed the instructions and this time, the engine rumbled to life. The seat vibrated beneath him. *Feels like it can't wait to get loose and cruise the roads.*

Calling for Taylor to join him, Roberto leaned over the engine and pointed. He had to shout over the engine noise. "You work on these before?"

"Some."

Liar. He hadn't actually worked on them, but he'd watched when Jesse and his friends tinkered with their cars. This engine, with all the wires, carburetor and everything exposed, looked different from the modern engines. Exhaust swirled around them, dangerous if not for the open bay doors.

"Listen." Roberto bobbed his head and shoulders in time with the engine's throbbing. "Rough. You hear?"

The sound pulsated in Taylor's chest, the jerky quality Roberto indicated.

"Is too much gas in carburetor." He handed Taylor a screwdriver and pointed to a spot near the bottom of the engine. His hands made a twisting motion, then he pointed to his ear and motioned for Taylor to begin.

Taylor reached down, and dropped the screwdriver. It clattered against the engine and hit the floor beneath the car. So much for looking like he

knew what he was doing. “Sorry.”

Roberto bent down and reached under the car to retrieve the tool then handed it back to him.

“Is no problem. Try again.”

This time, Taylor held tight as he fitted the screwdriver’s head into a screw about the size of a pencil’s eraser. Gripping the handle with both fists, he gave it a slight twist. The engine evened out to a steady rumble. Roberto moved his index finger in a circle, and Taylor turned the screw farther. The engine sputtered and almost died. He looked to Roberto, whose finger now circled in the opposite direction. Taylor switched direction, twisting the screwdriver slowly until the engine returned to an even hum.

Roberto clapped him on the back and took the screwdriver from him. “Good!”

Taylor stood a little taller and slung the hair back from his eyes. Jesse’s friends used to talk about adjusting the idle on their cars, but they’d never let him close enough to see exactly what they were doing. He’d bet his monthly allowance Luke had never done anything like this. Luke’s dad probably made enough money to hire any mechanic he wanted, but did Luke even know how to check the oil? The guy had probably never lifted the hood of one of his fancy Corvettes.

Roberto handed Taylor something that looked like a ray gun from an old science fiction movie. They worked on adjusting the timing and made other tweaks to the engine. When they finally shut off the car, the noise from the other campers engaged in the evening game reached their ears.

Roberto tipped his head toward the voices. “You no want to play?”

“Naw. Those games are stupid. I’d much rather do this.” Taylor jerked his thumb toward the car. He itched to see how it performed on the road. “When can we take it for a drive?”

Roberto shook his head. “Is not ready to drive.”

He put away the tools and offered Taylor a drink from his cooler. The garage had grown especially warm with the car's exhaust. Taylor accepted the soda and followed Roberto outside where the evening was beginning to cool down. He opened the can and gulped down half the cold drink, but couldn't control the belch that followed.

The older man didn't seem to mind. Roberto clapped him on the shoulder. "You are good student." His smile wrinkled the tanned, leathery skin around his eyes. He tapped his ear. "You will be good mechanic. Like musician, you hear the music of the engine."

Taylor chuckled. A musician he was not, but the analogy made him smile. Car engines did sound like music to him. Some were loud and powerful, like his screamo tunes. Others were smooth as elevator music. If only Dad understood him like Roberto. But Dad never said anything positive, even after he'd raised that D in Algebra up to a B+.

Roberto set up his folding chair. "You take driving class?"

Taylor's hair fell over his face as he bent to sit down on the cooler. "I hope so. I turn 16 next February. I can't wait to drive."

"You have brothers? Sisters?"

"One of each. My brother's older, but my sister's here at camp. She's only thirteen." He braced for an embarrassing question about his brother, then decided to change the subject before it came. "Do you have kids?"

Roberto held up two fingers, then three, then one. "Two boys, three girls. And one grandchild almost here. My oldest daughter is due soon. Any day." He raised his soda, as if in a toast. "I be abuelo!"

Taylor raised his can as well. "You'll make a great grampa. Do your sons like cars?"

The older man took a sip of soda and smacked his lips. "They play soccer, baseball. No time for cars."

Irony. That's what his English teacher would call it. Roberto loved cars, but his sons were athletes. Taylor loved cars, but Dad's a coach. Why does

that happen?

Taylor looked back at the Mustang. "How long before you can drive it?"

Roberto pursed his lips. "Still has much work to do. You come back tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Sure." Not very enthusiastic. Where's the fun in working on a car if you can't take it out for a spin, see how it works? Still, he'd learned more in one hour with Roberto than he'd ever learned hanging around Jesse and his friends. And Roberto actually seemed to like having him around. "I'll be here every night."

Roberto nodded. "Good. Tomorrow, we change carpet, maybe seat covers." He got up and stowed the cooler and chair in the garage. After locking the side door, he grabbed his hat and punched a button, then ducked out beneath the descending bay doors. "You go to worship now?"

Taylor sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, I guess."

"You no like Pastor Zeke?"

"He's okay. I like his stories, but the rest of it's kind of boring. I'm not really into religious stuff."

Roberto seemed to chew on that. He took another swallow of soda. "You know God?"

"Yeah, I know all about God." Taylor shrugged. "But it doesn't seem like He's real interested in me, y'know? Cars are more interesting. They're exciting."

Roberto nodded again, studying his shoe as he scuffed the sole against the edge of the pavement. "You think maybe God is like car factory?"

Taylor frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He makes you, sends you out, but then He does not care what happens to you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that's pretty close. I mean, unless you go kill someone or rob a bank. Then I think He cares."

Roberto finished the last of his soda and rolled the can between his palms. “Tonight, you listen to Zeke. Tomorrow, tell me what he say. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Roberto waved goodnight and shuffled across the parking lot.

First Dad tells him to listen to Zeke, and now Roberto. *Is there something I’m supposed to hear?* Taylor hurried to the chapel where he found Nick in the crush of campers. They squeezed through the doors and Taylor grabbed two seats near the back. Nick craned his neck, searching the crowd. Looking for Alex, no doubt.

Marissa and a friend sidled through the row in front of them. Resting one knee on the seat, Marissa leaned toward Taylor and Nick, smacking her gum. “Hi guys!”

Taylor returned her cheery look with one of disgust. “Riss, you’re not going to sit there, are you?”

Her hands flew to her hips, elbows jutting out. “Fine! I’ll just pretend I don’t know you. It won’t be hard.”

She spun around and plopped down hard on the seat. Her gum popped louder, one snap after another.

Taylor rolled his eyes. He and Nick were here first. She should be the one to move.

Luke sauntered in and Marissa waved him over to the empty seat beside her. Before sitting down, Luke sent a smirk in Taylor’s direction, as if his whole reason for sitting there was to annoy him.

A foul word formed in Taylor’s mind and his gut burned when Marissa leaned into Luke’s shoulder. How could he pay attention to Zeke with those two in front of him? They ignored the music and singing, and spent the whole time chatting and laughing instead.

At last, the band finished and Zeke took the stage, moving his easel and pad of drawing paper to the center. The jeweled box still sat on the table at center stage.

“Last night I asked you to think about what’s in your heart. If we opened your heart, like Pandora opened her jar, what would come out of it? Did you listen to your words today? Some of you may have heard bad language, gossip or insults coming out of your mouth. Tonight, we’ll talk about something else that might be in your heart. It’s something that’s not always wrong but can lead to serious consequences if given free reign.” Zeke took a piece of chalk and sketched a house with vines growing up the walls.

Taylor leaned sideways to see around Luke’s head. He stretched his legs and knocked over an empty water bottle left behind earlier in the day. The thin plastic crackled as Taylor caught it beneath his foot.

Marissa half-turned toward him. “Shh!”

Taylor gave it one more crackle to show how little he cared what she thought.

Zeke turned from his sketch and faced the campers. “Pride is good when it motivates us to do our best, to take care of what God has given us. But if it’s not balanced with humility, pride is a lot like the kudzu vine that grows in parts of the United States. Kudzu grows so fast, it’s often used to prevent soil erosion. It can feed livestock, its fibers can be used to make baskets, and it has some medicinal qualities. But if left to grow unhindered, it will cover everything in sight. Kudzu vines can overtake trees and vegetation, smothering them by shading out needed sunlight and eventually killing them.

“If we allow our pride to grow without any restrictions, it becomes arrogance. And arrogance endangers not only the one who possesses it, but also anyone who comes under its shadow.”

Luke and Marissa whispered back and forth. Taylor leaned forward. “Shh!” They both turned and glared at him.

Who cares? Luke’s the one who should be listening to Zeke. He needs to hear this.

Zeke drew more vines over the house until they blocked the windows, the doorway, and covered the roof. Several tendrils reached for a nearby tree like bony fingers in a horror movie. “The Bible warns us, ‘Pride goes before a fall.’ A person who thinks they can’t fail usually will at some point. After the Israelites moved into the Promised Land, they forgot that God had blessed them with houses they didn’t build and crops they didn’t plant. They took the credit for their prosperity, eventually rejecting God completely, and the nation of Israel became slaves to the Assyrians and the Babylonians.”

Taylor shifted in his seat. That was all ancient history. *What does it have to do with us?*

As if in answer to the question, Zeke set his chalk down and faced the campers. “Now, let me give you a more recent example to show you how destructive pride and arrogance can be.” He stepped down from the stage and paced slowly down the aisle.

“Several years ago, a wealthy Colorado businessman was known for his arrogance. When he hired someone to do a job for him, if he thought the job should be done a certain way, even an expert couldn’t convince him to do it differently. It had to be done his way, because he knew best—or so he thought.

“This man owned a small airplane that he used for business. But he also enjoyed flying for fun, soaring over the mountains outside of Denver to enjoy the beautiful scenery.”

Zeke reached the back of the room, turned and made his way toward the front. “One day, this man took his twelve year-old grandson and another friend for a ride in his plane. They went up late in the afternoon and by the time they returned, it was dark. As they were coming in for a landing, the control tower radioed him a warning that he was coming in too low and needed to increase his altitude. But the arrogant man thought he knew better

than the tower operator and flew his plane right into a hillside, killing himself, his grandson, and his friend.”

Taylor blinked. Not even an occasional shuffle of sandals on the floor broke the silence that blanketed the room.

“What’s in your heart?” Zeke asked. “If it’s unbridled pride or arrogance, get rid of it. Don’t let it affect you or those you love.”

Dad will make sure I don’t get arrogant, but I sure hope Luke was listening.

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CHAPTER SIX

ZEKE'S DISMISSAL SENT CAMPERS INTO THE AISLE, BLOCKING TAYLOR'S exit. He had to get away from Marissa and Luke. Every time Luke bent down to whisper in her ear, her giggles made bile creep up Taylor's throat. He imagined lots of things Luke might be saying and none of them were good.

Luke wedged himself into the aisle. Leading Marissa by the hand, he elbowed his way to the door. She waved to Taylor on her way out. "G'night, Taybo!"

Taylor gritted his teeth. Tomorrow, he'd threaten her life if she used his nickname again. He'd warn her about getting so friendly with Luke, too.

When he finally made it back to the cabin, he pulled off his shirt and dropped it in the growing pile on his duffle bag. Auto magazine in hand, he stretched out on his bunk until Harris called his name.

"Taylor, you coming? We're waiting for you." The bunkroom had emptied. His cabin mates, laughing and joking, were all gathered in the common room for devotions. Taylor jumped from the bed to join them.

Crack! Searing pain exploded in his little toe after it smacked against the steel frame of his bed. A foul word shot from his mouth. He grabbed his foot and hopped into the common room, falling onto the nearest sofa where he nearly landed in Steven's lap.

Harris winced. “Oh, man, I know that hurt.”

Understatement of the year.

The counselor looked around the room. “Who else is missing?”

Catching his breath against the pain, Taylor glanced around at the other guys. *Luke?* His gut tightened. Wherever Luke was, Marissa was probably there, too. “Luke’s still out. Want me to go look for him?”

He wasn’t going anywhere with this toe, but it sure would be fun to sneak up on them.

Harris pulled out his cell phone. “It’s okay. I’ve got it.” He typed a message and slipped the phone back in his pocket. “The God Squad will find him.”

“God Squad?” asked one of the guys. “What’s that?”

“Not what. Who. Sometimes it’s Zeke, but usually the maintenance guys make rounds after hours.” Harris settled into his chair and opened his Bible. “I want to go back and talk some more about what Zeke said last night. And Taylor, I hope you don’t mind if I use you as an example.”

Did he have a choice? Taylor rubbed his throbbing toe.

“We just witnessed a great illustration of Zeke’s lesson. What’s in your heart? Your gut? How do you react to something that’s painful? What comes out of your mouth when you’re hurting, either physically or emotionally?”

Taylor piped up. “It’s not hallelujah, praise the Lord. That’s for sure.” Disrespectful, yeah, but his toe was killing him. He wasn’t going to worry what came out of his mouth.

Harris didn’t seem to take offense. “I don’t expect an immediate spiritual response to pain. I’m talking about how we tend to act one way when people are watching compared to when they aren’t watching. Most of us control our language. We avoid picking our nose and other things we don’t want people to see us doing. It’s when no one’s looking, or when

something shocks us—those unguarded moments that tell you what’s really in your gut.”

The counselor flipped some pages in his Bible. “This is the passage Zeke talked about last tonight, where Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. They kept a strict code of behavior so everyone would be impressed with their righteousness. Outwardly, they kept all the rules, but Jesus saw that their hearts were full of jealousy, hatred and anger. They’d point fingers and accuse anyone who didn’t live up to their outward standard of perfection. But Jesus called them whitewashed tombs— looking good on the outside while their hearts were dead.”

Sounds like Dad. He wanted everyone to think he was the perfect coach with the perfect team. But when Jesse missed that pass that cost them the state championship, the things that came out of Dad’s mouth were nowhere near perfect.

Steven leaned over and whispered. “How’s it feel? Any better?”

“Not much. I think I broke it.”

“I believe it. Man, I know how that hurts. Done it a zillion times.”

“Tonight,” Harris continued, “I’m going to ask you guys to be totally honest. You won’t get in any trouble. I’m not taking down names. But I want you to raise your hand if you’ve ever cussed or used a vulgar word. I’ll be the first one.” He lifted his hand above his head.

Taylor raised his hand, along with Steven and most of the other guys. The one or two who didn’t raise their hands were probably lying.

Harris thanked them for being honest. “Now I’ve got another question for you. If a girl uses bad language, does that make her more attractive or less?”

Taylor had to think about that one. Some of the girls at school cursed and used a lot of crude language. They liked being seen as tough, gritty, even boyish. But a lot of other girls used foul language, too. He’d never connected the way they talked with whether or not he found them attractive.

Maybe that's what made Claire different. Even during Wheel Steal when he tripped her and she fell flat in the mud, she didn't cuss him out like most girls would have. Why not?

Harris continued. "If cussing and foul language makes a girl less attractive, why is it any different for us guys? We use words to make other guys think we're tough. But really, how tough do you have to be to say a simple cuss word? It's easy, right? Don't even have to think about it. What does that tell us about what's in our gut?" He paused for several moments before pointing toward the lake.

"You're able to swim in that lake because it's fed by springs. Good, clean water bubbling up out of the ground. But what if those springs started putting out some foul-smelling, poisonous water? Not all the time, but once or twice a day. Enough for you to notice the smell, the taste. Would you still swim in it?"

Harris leaned forward in his chair. "Listen, guys. Don't blow off Zeke's message. I really want you to think about this. Whatever is in your heart—your gut—whether it's healthy or contaminated can set the whole course of your life."

An image of Jesse in his prison cell sprang to Taylor's mind. Crude language didn't send his brother to jail, but was it a sign of the poison in his heart? Jesse had seemed like a great guy. Taylor and his friends all looked up to him, especially when he led the football team to the first state tournament in the school's history. He was a hero. Until he quit the team. He never said why, but he'd probably had enough of Dad's criticism. The other coaches recognized and celebrated Jesse's successes, but not Dad. All Dad saw were the mistakes. If Jesse'd heard one word of encouragement from Dad, he might have played his senior year, might have gone back and won the state tournament. But Dad wouldn't let him forget losing that one championship game. So Jesse turned in his uniform.

Was Dad's criticism the poison that filled Jesse's gut, prompting him to steal a car to embarrass Dad? Was that same poison now dripping into his own life? Maybe Dad was right and he'd end up in jail like Jesse. But if he did, whose fault would it be—his or Dad's?

Footsteps approached the door. It opened and someone ushered Luke in.

"Thanks, Paul," Harris called as the figure retreated. He waited for Luke to settle onto the floor, the only place left to sit. "Glad you could join us. Where've you been?"

"Just hanging with a friend." Luke shrugged, a lazy smile spreading across his face. He crossed his legs at the ankle and leaned back against the wall.

"Well, since you like being out after hours, you can expect an early wake-up call tomorrow morning. You'll be hanging with me while I run five miles."

Gasps echoed around the room. Luke's smile drooped, losing some of its cockiness.

Was Marissa the friend he was hanging with? Had he whispered an invitation to break curfew as they hurried out of chapel?

If Taylor had any hope of getting his license, he'd have to keep her out of trouble. Sometimes, her 'try anything once for fun' attitude made him laugh, but every time she got into trouble, the blame fell on him.

Harris finished devotions and dismissed them with a five-minute warning until lights out. With his toe still at a dull throb, Taylor stood and hobbled to his suitcase for his toothbrush, then limped to the bathroom and waited until a sink opened up. Usually, he elbowed someone aside, but tonight he didn't want to risk anyone stepping on his toe. And he stayed well clear of the bed frame on his way back to bed.

Harris turned the lights out and Taylor lay in bed, thinking about Roberto and his Mustang, and Marissa and Luke. An idea took shape. The

perfect payback for Luke dropping him in the mud. And if all went well, no one would connect him to the crime.

The screen door's squeak roused Taylor from sleep. He struggled to open his eyes. Morning sunlight brightened the windows, but everyone was still asleep. Well, almost everyone. He pushed up on his elbow and peered across at Luke's bed. Empty. How long does it take to run five miles? He needed to hurry.

Stifling a yawn, he kicked back his sleeping bag and slipped out of bed, arranging his bedding to look like he was still sleeping there.

His shorts from yesterday lay in the heap on his duffle bag. He pulled them on while rounding Steven's bed, stepping gingerly around sneakers and suitcases to protect his injured toe. Without a sound, he crept over to Luke's bunk. One leg of boxer shorts with Corvettes on it stuck out from the corner of Luke's suitcase under his bed. Taylor pulled out the boxers, stuffed them in his pocket and hurried to the front door. Now, how to get out of here without waking anyone else? He couldn't waste any time. Harris and Luke would be back soon.

Using light pressure, Taylor opened the door just wide enough for his slim frame to slip through. The squeak threatened, but he was outside and easing the door closed before it could do any damage. With a quick check in every direction for possible spies, Taylor leaped off the top step and dashed toward the flagpole, ignoring the dull ache in his toe.

Sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the ground. Dew chilled his bare feet and made the ground slippery, but at least the cold numbed his toe a bit. He neared the flagpole and hid behind a tree, scanning all around for witnesses.

The flagpole stood near the bell tower, a short distance from the dining hall. Out there in the open, he'd be visible to anyone. He listened. No sounds, other than the birds making their early morning racket.

Sucking in a deep breath, Taylor raced to the flagpole and unwound the halyard rope from its double-pronged cleat. He pulled the shorts from his pocket, attaching one snap hook to the side waistband and the other to the hem of the opposite leg. Any kind of breeze should make the Corvette print stand out. Then, raising the makeshift flag hand-over-hand to the top, he secured the halyard again and ran for the nearby bushes. Another scan for anyone who might be watching and Taylor beat a path straight back to the cabin, stopping outside the door to catch his breath.

He didn't dare open the door until his breathing slowed, but at last he squeezed through and rested the door silently against the jam. He listened, making sure the runners hadn't returned. All was quiet. He stepped toward the bunkroom and his wet foot shot out from under him. His hand caught hold of an armchair to break his fall, but his body still hit the floor with a thump.

Taylor clenched his teeth, squelching a few unsavory words while he massaged his hip. Pulling his legs in close, he rubbed the moisture from the soles of his feet before standing up.

A voice from the bunkroom made him freeze. He waited, listening, but heard nothing more. Padding carefully back to his bunk, he'd almost made it when Steven mumbled, "Oh, good. You're back."

Taylor halted. Just his luck to be caught by the kid who can't see. He whispered to Steven. "Had to use the toilet."

No response. Steven rolled onto his side and snuggled into his sleeping bag, eyes closed the whole time. *Talking in his sleep?*

Taylor crossed his fingers and slid into his bunk. His sore toe didn't hurt nearly as much as last night, but his cold feet sought the warmth of the sleeping bag and he burrowed into its comfort.

Moments later, the squeak of the screen door signaled the runners' return. Taylor turned to his side, closed his eyes and hid a smile in his pillow. Mission accomplished.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

TAYLOR DID HIS BEST TO AVOID LOOKING AT THE FLAGPOLE ON THE WAY TO breakfast. Better to let someone else discover it. He couldn't pass up the chance to see Luke's reaction, so he joined his group heading to breakfast. Luke gave him a curious look.

What if no one noticed the flagpole? Most of the guys looked half asleep as they followed in Harris's footsteps, heads down. Taylor ducked his head and snuck a glance at the flagpole through his hair.

An American flag? What happened to Luke's shorts?

Of course. Zeke always put the flag up before breakfast. He must've take down the boxers when he raised the real flag. All that work for nothing, not to mention losing an hour of precious sleep.

Taylor moved through the buffet line, loading his plate with scrambled eggs and bacon. He grabbed a slice of toast and some jelly, and joined Nick at a table with Brady and Steven. He set his tray on the table then listened as Zeke made an announcement over the loudspeakers at the back of the room.

"Apparently, our cabins need more storage units for clothes. I'm sorry someone had to resort to using the flagpole instead." He paused as he held up Luke's shorts. "I apologize for any embarrassment this causes, but the

owner of these may claim them in my office any time today.” He’d barely finished his sentence when the room erupted in whistles and laughter.

This was even better! Luke bragged about his dad’s Corvette so much that everyone would guess those were his shorts.

“There he goes.” Nick laughed and pointed. Amid the catcalls and laughter, Luke stalked out of the dining hall, leaving his tray of uneaten food on the table. “I guess he doesn’t like that kind of attention.”

Brady explained the joke to Steven. “I wonder if he’ll actually claim them.”

Steven chuckled. “Poor guy. Who do you think put them up there?”

Taylor made no comment, and focused on eating his breakfast. He kept an eye out for Marissa, but didn’t see her until morning Bible study, and then he was too far away to talk to her. He finally cornered her after lunch. “Where did you and Luke go after chapel last night?”

Rissa frowned at him and set her tray on the conveyor belt for dirty plates and utensils. “Nowhere. What do you care?”

“Your boyfriend didn’t get back to the cabin until nearly lights out. Said he was hanging with a friend.”

“So?” Marissa tried to leave, but Taylor blocked her way.

“So where were you? What were you doing out after curfew?”

Marissa huffed and planted her hands on her hips. “I was not out after curfew.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I wasn’t. Ask anyone in my cabin. Ask Claire if you don’t believe me.” Marissa looked him square in the eye.

Maybe she was telling the truth.

“Then who was Luke out with?”

“How should I know?” She threw her hands out, palms up. “Why don’t you ask him? And leave me alone.” Marissa pushed him aside and marched out of the dining hall.

Taylor called after her. “Leave him alone, Riss. He’s a jerk.”

Marissa waved her hand behind her, as if brushing off his advice. At least she wasn’t out after curfew last night. Maybe he was worrying over nothing? No. It was only a matter of time before her thirst for adventure kicked in. He’d better be ready for it.

Taylor headed for the Snack Shack to see what his rec team was doing. He looked down the list and found his team. Volleyball. A chick game. Why couldn’t they play guys’ games, like basketball or football? Turning away from the board, he noticed Roberto and the God Squad guy at the bell tower. The camp pickup was parked on the grass nearby and the two men stood on ladders, one on each side of the tower. The new bell rested atop the platform. Taylor hurried over for a closer look.

Roberto greeted him with a friendly nod as he threaded a rope around the bell’s flywheel.

“Are you going to ring it now?” Taylor asked.

“Soon.” Roberto asked Paul to make sure the rope was seated correctly behind the wheel. When he finished winding it around again, he looked it all over one last time—clapper, supports, yoke, wheel. He tugged on the rope and watched the wheel turn the bell, catching the clapper before it could make a sound. With a nod to Paul, he pulled out his phone and punched a number. Paul climbed down and stowed his ladder in the back of the pickup.

Roberto spoke into his phone. “Is ready. You come?” He listened for a reply, then clicked off. After climbing down his ladder, he laid it in the pickup beside Paul’s. He lifted his hat and used his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his forehead, then replaced the hat. “Zeke is coming. He will ring it.”

A moment later, Zeke appeared. “No more excuses for missing breakfast, Taylor. This bell will make sure you’re awake.” He checked his watch. “Just in time for Rec.” Zeke took hold of the rope and pulled down.

The wheel rotated, the yoke turned, the bell tipped.

Clang!

It was a rich, meaty sound. Zeke let up on the rope, then pulled again.

Clang! Clang, clang!

Zeke let the clanging diminish then wound the rope around a cleat. Roberto put his tools in the truck and climbed into the driver's seat. Before he started the engine, he called to Taylor. "Tonight?"

Taylor held his thumbs up. "Si! Tonight."

"What's tonight?" Zeke asked.

"He works on the car with me. Good mechanic."

"In the shop? Working on your car?" Zeke looked back and forth between them. "When?"

Zeke's tone didn't sound good. Taylor let Roberto answer.

"After supper. Before evening worship."

Zeke scratched behind his ear, then smoothed his white mustache. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

Taylor's shoulders dropped, even as Zeke laid his hands on them.

"You go on to Rec and let me talk with Roberto about this."

Taylor shot a pleading look at Roberto, but the older man dismissed him, pointing his chin in the direction of the Rec field. A wink and one hand raised in a gesture that said *Let me handle this* did little to reassure him.

Sucking in a deep breath, he turned and dragged his feet toward the Rec field. What if Roberto's car turned out like his driver's license—so close, but off limits? He wouldn't be able to stand it. And now he had to play this dumb chick game.

Taylor ignored his teammates, kicking off his flip-flops beside the timbers surrounding the new sand court. He staked out a position on the front row, wiggling his toes into the loose sand, digging his heels deep to where the sand felt cool. Too bad it couldn't chill his mood as well.

Other kids crowded onto both sides of the court until the counselor had to pull some out, making sure both sides had an equal number of players.

She blew her whistle to start the game and the other team served the ball. It sailed across the net toward Taylor. He jumped and smacked it back. At least he could take out his anger on the ball. Landing in the sand was easy on his sore toe, too.

The score seesawed with the ball dropping out of bounds or hitting the net. When forced to rotate out, Taylor paced the sideline. Even in a stupid game, he'd rather play than watch. By the time he rotated back in, his team was behind 10-6. The serve came across the net and was volleyed a couple times before coming straight at him in the back row. He could really pound it this time. He raised his hands and slammed the ball forward.

The ball shot straight into the net, missing Claire's head by inches. She glared at him from the front line. "Quit trying to show off."

Taylor spread his hands out. "Yeah? Let's see you get it across the net from back here."

"Try setting it up. That's why we're here." She pointed to the front row, rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Taylor's insides burned. Hands on hips, he tromped around in a tight circle, kicking at the sand. Can't a guy make a mistake?

By the time he rotated up to the front again, the other team needed only one point to win. The serve flew back to the third row where Claire stood ready. Fists together, wrists up, she scooped the ball into the air and called for help as it neared the net.

"I got it!" Taylor jumped and spiked the ball to the other side of the net. *Whump!* It hit the ground, and his teammates cheered.

Even Claire gave him a grudging, "Nice shot."

Not much, but he'd take it. Taylor smoothed the sand with his foot. Is that what it took to get her approval?

They lost the game after two more plays and switched sides to start again. Whenever the ball came his way, Taylor tried to set it up for Claire. But the thing usually bounced off his wrists in a random direction. The few

times it did find her, she popped it over the net. The second game ended in a loss as well, but only by a difference of three points.

Last game. With the score tied at 14-14, Claire moved into server's position. "Come on, you guys! We can win this one. Let's do it!"

She stepped to the corner of the court, tossed the ball in the air and batted it across the net. It volleyed back and forth several times before falling to the ground on the other side. While the other team argued over who should've covered it, Claire hurried into her position on the serving line. "One more and it's ours! Let's take it."

She sent the ball over the net, but the other team sent it right back to her. She popped it into the air. "Taylor, it's yours!"

Taylor eyed the ball as it dropped, timing his jump. At the last second, he leaped into the air and smashed the ball down the other side of the net.

"Game!" called the counselor. Cheers erupted from the team, and his teammates clapped Taylor on the back. Claire ran toward him, both hands in the air for a double high five. A warm glow spread through his chest.

"Nice play!" Her dimpled cheeks glistened and were tinged with pink. Sand smudged her chin on one side.

"Thanks."

Was that all he could say? *Lame*. Claire dropped his hands and shuffled her feet through the sand to the edge of the court. Balancing on a perimeter log, she turned back to Taylor.

"Your sister's crazy. In a cool way, I mean. Crazy cool. I like her." With that, Claire hopped onto the ground and grabbed her sandals. "Wish my little brother bragged about me the way Marissa brags about you."

She exhaled a single laugh, shook her head and hurried to join the other girls on their way to the cabins. Not exactly a compliment, but she hadn't curled her lip or rolled her eyes at him since the first game. Taylor slipped his feet into his flip-flops. Progress, that's what he'd call it. Definitely progress.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BACK AT THE CABIN, A COUPLE BOYS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BUNKROOM bragged about their rec team's win. Nick sank onto the bed to wait as Taylor headed for the bathroom with his swim trunks.

Luke emerged from the bathroom in swim gear, a beach towel slung around his neck. He blocked Taylor's path. "You. Stay outa my stuff."

Taylor stuck his chest out. "I don't know what you're talking about." He held his ground as Luke stepped closer, breathing into Taylor's face.

"Who else would put my shorts up the flagpole? Keep your hands off my stuff, y'hear?"

Taylor's pulse accelerated. Could he take Luke in a fight? Doubtful. The guy was bigger, and he had some muscle. He jabbed a finger into Luke's chest. "I didn't touch your stinking shorts. You stay away from my sister."

Luke grabbed Taylor's t-shirt in his fists and backed him up against the end of Steven's bunk. "No one tells me what to do, especially punks like you."

The boys on the other side of the room fell silent. Of course, they'd be watching, but where was Nick? Why didn't he jump in to help? Taylor dropped his swim trunks to the floor and wedged his hands against Luke's chest, trying to put more distance between them, but Luke leaned into him even harder.

Taylor's teeth clenched. "Leave Rissa alone." He lowered his right hand and thrust a fist into Luke's side, only to take a blow to the gut. Air whooshed from his body.

"Fight! Fight!" The boys on the other side of the room chanted.

Nick sprang from Taylor's bed and tugged on Luke's arm. "Let go. Leave him alone."

The door to Harris's room flew open and the counselor filled the bunkroom doorway. "Break it up! Knock it off."

Luke eased the pressure. His lip curled in a sneer as he released his hold on Taylor and yanked his arm from Nick's grasp.

Harris eyed them, nostrils flaring. "Morning runs not enough for you, Luke? That means even earlier tomorrow and we'll add some crunches and pushups as well." He tipped his head to one side and looked at Taylor. "And you get to join us."

Taylor stepped sideways. "Why? I didn't start it! He pushed me."

"Did I ask who started anything?" Harris's dark eyes challenged Taylor to disagree. His right hand played toss- and-catch with a ring of keys. "Both of you can expect an early wake-up call tomorrow. And it'll only get earlier if there's any more fighting." He gave them a humorless smile. "Your choice."

With a huff, Taylor snatched his trunks off the floor, pushed past Luke and escaped into the bathroom. He clamped his mouth shut to keep from spewing the words on the tip of his tongue. Harris was right—it was way tougher to hold them in than to let them gush out. He leaned against the sink, taking deep breaths, willing his heart to slow down.

The screen door squeaked and slammed. Probably Luke leaving. *Too bad it's not for good.*

Nick poked his head into the bathroom. "Are you okay? What was that all about?"

Taylor answered Nick's reflection in the mirror. "He thinks I'm the one who put his shorts up the flagpole this morning."

Nick's mouth went through several contortions. "Um...did you?"

Taylor couldn't admit anything, no matter how tempting it was to share some laughs with his friend. "Doesn't matter if I did or not. He's convinced I did." Taylor slapped his swim shorts against the counter. "I don't feel like swimming anymore."

"Why? Because he's down there?" Nick blew a breath between his lips. "You gonna let him decide what you do? That'd make him real happy."

Nick was right. Taylor changed into his swim shorts and they headed down to the beach. Claire, Brady and Steven were among the kids waiting to use the diving board, but no Luke. Where was he? In the water? Taylor dropped his towel on the sand and waded into the water, scanning the lakefront for Luke.

A canoe was returning to the boat dock, its crew frantically trying to steer around it. The bow bumped against a corner, and the counselor in charge waded in to tow them to shore. Another canoe launched, gliding past the swimming pier and the boundary ropes that marked the deep-water swim area. Marissa paddled in front, Luke in back.

What would Rissa say about Luke picking a fight with him? Would she still be all gooey about him and take his side? Or would she jump to Taylor's defense, the way they'd done for each other ever since he could remember? For once, he had no clue.

Tuesday night's picnic supper did little to stir Taylor's appetite. He waited while Janie placed a fresh pan of sloppy Joe sandwiches on the outdoor serving table. Normally, he'd grab two or three, but nothing looked good after finding out Zeke wouldn't let him work on the car. Roberto had been

in the cabin fixing a clogged toilet when Taylor returned from swimming. He gave Taylor the bad news.

The aroma of barbecue filled his nostrils as Janie pulled back the foil from the tray of hot sandwiches. “There you go. Help yourself.” She took a second look at Taylor. “Aren’t you the young man who’s helping my husband work on his car?”

“I was.” Taylor shook the hair back from his eyes.

Janie clapped her hands together. “He is so excited to have someone share his love of cars. Neither of our boys showed any interest.”

Roberto must not have told her about Zeke, maybe because he still believed he could change Zeke’s mind.

Janie peered at Taylor across the table. “You do like working on cars, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I love cars. But Zeke found out and now he won’t let me do it anymore.”

Janie straightened. “What?” She scowled, wringing a white dishtowel in her hands. “Zeke said no?”

“Rober—Mr. Rodriguez thinks he can persuade Zeke to change his mind, but...” Taylor shrugged.

Janie slapped the towel over her shoulder. “Well, if he doesn’t, I will. I’ve never seen the man so happy as when he told me how you admired his car. He looked like a little boy on Christmas morning.” She shook a finger at Taylor. “Don’t you worry. You’ll be back in that garage soon. Now, eat up!” She encouraged him to take more sandwiches, but Taylor moved on to dessert.

Zeke’s decision meant Taylor would have to play the dumb after-supper game. Would anyone notice if he hid out in the woods for a while?

Before anyone wandered away after supper, Zeke climbed onto the bed of the pickup truck and raised a bullhorn to his mouth. “For tonight’s game,

you're competing against the other seven cabins, so you'll need to find your cabin mates and stick together in a group."

There went his chance to hide in the woods. Someone would miss him for sure. Worse, he'd be spending the next hour with Luke.

Brady and Steven came up beside Taylor. Brady jerked his head toward Steven. "Can he hang out with you? He's in your cabin, right?"

"Yeah, sure." Taylor shouldered up next to Steven as Brady left to find his cabin group. "Actually, I was thinking about hiding out in the woods until the game's over. Or are you into these things?"

Steven lifted his foot and wiggled his toes. "Not unless I go back and put shoes on. Last year, Brady and I got poison ivy walking through the woods."

"Oh. Probably not a good idea then." At least, Luke wouldn't harass him much with Steven close by.

Minutes later, Taylor and Steven joined their cabin group, and Zeke finished his instructions. "Tonight, you're on a counselor hunt. All eight counselors are hiding in various places around the camp. They'll be outside and in plain view, but not necessarily easily seen or recognized." He held up a stack of papers and a fistful of pens. "Each cabin group needs a pen and one of these sheets that lists the counselors' names with a place for their signature. When you find a counselor, they must sign their name to prove you found them. The first cabin to return here to me with all eight signatures wins a small ice cream treat from the Snack Shack. And let me remind you, forgery is a sin. Any team caught forging signatures will pick up trash around camp during the first hour of afternoon free time tomorrow. Any questions?"

Taylor whispered to Steven. "Doesn't it get old, not being able to do stuff like this?"

"Who says I can't?"

"But you can't see where the counselors are."

Steven laughed. “You forget, I’ve done this before. I may not be able to see them, but I know where to look. Without me, you guys won’t even come close to winning.”

Taylor grinned. “You are a genius.”

Steven laughed again. “Thanks. Who has the list of names?”

Luke moseyed up to the group as Taylor called everyone in close. “Hey, pay attention! Steven’s going to tell us how to win this game.”

Steven called out. “Okay, the counselors will be—”

“Not so loud,” Taylor warned. “There’s other groups around.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Steven lowered his voice. “The counselors are in plain view, but they’re disguised. Look for people doing normal things, like taking the trash out from the kitchen, or raking, or working in a flowerbed. Think about it. Most of the staff is off duty by now so anyone still working is probably a counselor. They may be dressed to look like Nurse Willie or Roberto or maybe even Zeke.”

Luke pointed. “There’s someone in a hat and work gloves.” He grabbed the paper and pen and took off. A few of the other boys followed.

“Wait!” Steven turned toward Taylor. “Did he leave already? I thought you said there’re other groups around.”

“Yeah, and Luke showed them all where to find their first counselor. Everyone’s getting that signature. What an idiot.”

Luke returned, waving the sheet in triumph. “One down. That was easy.”

Taylor scowled. “Yeah, especially for those other two cabins. Next time, wait.”

Luke’s hands dropped to his sides. The paper flapped against his leg. “Who cares? It’s only a stupid game, anyway.”

That’s one thing they agreed on, though Taylor would never admit it.

Steven held up his hand. “Don’t worry about it. But next time, try to make sure no one else is around to see you.”

Taylor had an idea. “Maybe only one of us should get the signature. If we act like we’re looking for something, the rest of us can spread out, kind of like a screen so other teams can’t see who’s getting the signature.”

The other boys agreed and they wandered around the end of the chapel toward the lake. A different group had fanned out along the waterfront. Taylor glanced back at the chapel and noticed a figure hunched over the side garden. He hissed at Luke for the signature sheet.

Luke frowned and held the paper against his chest. “I’ll get the signature.”

Taylor huffed, but Luke was already on his way. He whistled softly to the other boys, motioning them to close in a bit without making it obvious.

Luke returned with another scribble on the page. “There. Satisfied?” He thrust the paper and pen into Steven’s hand and cut Taylor’s reply short. “Actually, you can do it yourself next time.”

He broke away and went galloping down the hill toward the group of girls searching the waterfront. Marissa separated from the group and met him with a huge smile.

Taylor’s stomach churned. He would’ve turned around and searched somewhere else, but the rest of the guys followed Luke’s lead. He and Steven tromped down the hill.

Claire waved to them as they approached. “How many have you found?”

Steven hid the paper behind his back. “None of your business, but I bet it’s more than you.”

Claire laughed. “No way. You’re not the only one who’s done this before. We’re going to win this one.”

“Oh yeah? Guess you’ll have to prove it.” Steven tugged on Taylor’s arm. “C’mon, let’s get moving or we’ll run out of time.” He whispered to Taylor. “Try the boat dock.”

Taylor called the others to follow, and took a wandering path toward the boat dock. Luke hung back, catching up to the group as they neared the steps leading down to the dock. The boathouse door was closed and padlocked, the motorboat sat high on its lift and six canoes lined the bank, bottoms up.

“I don’t see anyone.” Taylor turned away, but Steven held him back.

“Check everywhere. There’s always been someone hiding here.”

The boys spread out and soon a shout came from the opposite side of the boathouse. “Hey, over here!”

Taylor winced. Nothing like announcing it to the whole camp. He and Steven hurried around to the other side. Brush lined the sides of two parallel ruts sloping down to the lake. A lone figure stood painting the wood-frame gate across the boat launch entrance. Taylor recognized Roberto’s hat, but the brown uniform shirt and pants fit too well for it to be Roberto.

Luke laughed. “That’s Harris.”

Taylor checked to be certain no other groups were within eyesight before bringing Steven close to get Harris’s signature.

The counselor kept his head bowed so the hat hid his face, and signed his name without a word. A sudden shriek brought his head up with a jerk.

“Snake! A snake crawled over my foot.”

The soles of Luke’s bare feet kicked up grass as he fled. When he finally stopped some distance away, he kept hopping, lifting his feet high in the air as if trying to avoid touching the ground.

“Kill it! Someone get it!” Luke’s arms flailed.

Harris studied the ground, then grabbed at something.

It took a few tries before he held up a slender, wriggling gray snake with a white stripe down the length of its back. “Is this what you’re scared of? I’ve seen earthworms bigger than this.”

“I hate snakes.” Luke’s voice cracked and he turned away, hurrying off in the direction of the cabin. Harris called after him, but Luke kept going.

Taylor laughed, his guffaws joining Harris and the others. Who would've guessed Corvette Boy was terrified of snakes?

Perfect. This was perfect.

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CHAPTER NINE

LUKE'S AFRAID OF SNAKES. NOT JUST AFRAID, BUT TERRIFIED.

Taylor's mind churned with possibilities, oblivious to the kids around him clapping and swaying with the beat of the evening worship music. He grinned at the memory of Luke's shriek and the way he hopped from one foot to the other. Priceless.

Nick tugged on the leg of his shorts. "Hey, dude, you can sit down any time."

The music had finished and everyone else was sitting. Taylor sank onto the seat as Zeke moved to the stage and set up his easel. With Luke on his mind, it'd be nearly impossible to pay attention. But in case Roberto ever asked, he needed to know at least something of what Zeke talked about tonight.

Zeke turned his pad of paper sideways and made two black circles. "I have four brothers, one younger than me by about four years. With three older brothers, I got a lot of hand-me-downs. Clothes, shoes, toys, bikes. We did a lot of bike riding, and you can imagine what kind of shape the bike was in by the time my older brothers had outgrown it."

He drew some red lines to connect the black circles into the outline of a bicycle. "One day, I saw a shiny new bike in a store window downtown. It was fire engine red with gleaming chrome handlebars. It had a banana seat.

Those were all the rage at the time. More than once, I asked my parents to buy the bike for me. Their answer was always, ‘We’ll see.’”

Zeke turned and faced the campers. “Do your parents ever say that? ‘We’ll see.’ It took me years to figure out it was a polite way of saying no. The way I remember it, I begged my parents for that bike every time we passed the store. One time, my little brother was with us when I asked for the bike and he said he wanted a bike, too.

“Well, months later, his birthday came around and guess what my parents gave him. Not just any bike. My bike. The one I’d begged for. The bike I’d dreamed of riding. It wasn’t fair. A seed of envy sprouted that day, and I watered it well. Every time I saw him riding ‘my’ bike, I grew more and more jealous of him, until one day I decided to teach my little brother a lesson.”

Zeke finished the drawing, put his chalk away and faced the campers. He dug his hands into his pants pockets.

“One November day, I took his bike and hid it. Buried it under a pile of brush and leaves my dad had raked up. When my brother asked if I’d seen it, I said no and scolded him for not putting it away the last time he rode it. He said he had put it away, but I pretended I didn’t believe him.” Zeke bowed his head, scuffed his shoe against the floor.

The room fell silent. Taylor guessed what happened. He could see it coming when Zeke raised his head.

“That weekend, my dad burned the leaf pile. I’d never smelled burning rubber before. And to this day, that awful, acrid odor reminds me of how destructive jealousy can be. My jealousy hurt my brother far more than I’d intended. It destroyed a beautiful bicycle. I destroyed the very bicycle I’d wanted so badly.” Zeke walked the aisle, stopping now and then, hands still deep in his pockets. “My parents never pressured us to confess how the bike got there, though I’m guessing they had a pretty strong suspicion. They simply left that horrible, charred bike out where I could see it. Every day.

Every time I walked out the door, I got a vivid reminder of what jealousy is capable of doing.”

Zeke reached the back of the room beside where Taylor was sitting.

“The Bible is full of stories about anger and jealousy. Right from the beginning, Cain’s anger and jealousy prompted him to murder his brother Abel. Joseph’s jealous brothers sold him into slavery. Daniel was thrown to hungry lions because the other overseers were jealous of his reputation and abilities. Jesus’ own disciples struggled with jealousy among themselves. And jealous Jewish leaders crucified God’s own son.”

On a slow pace back up the aisle, Zeke asked his question of the week. “What’s in your heart? Gossip, lies and insults? Pride and arrogance? Anger and jealousy? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus equated anger with murder. The Bible also lists jealousy among the traits of God’s enemies. James says that where you have envy, you find disorder and all kinds of evil deeds. Peter tells us to put it aside, get rid of it.”

Zeke stopped at the front, near the stage, and gazed out at the campers in the chapel. “What’s in your heart?”

Marissa passed Taylor on her way out of the chapel, wiggling her fingers in the secret wave they used at school to avoid notice by the teachers. Taylor didn’t return the signal, not with Luke right behind her. Seeing them together nauseated him.

Luke bent to whisper something in Marissa’s ear, and she responded with wide eyes and a mischievous grin.

Uh, oh. He’d seen that look before. His life was about to get complicated real fast. Taylor followed them out the door, watching until they separated with a *See you later* and Luke headed to the cabin. *Later?* Meaning tomorrow? Or tonight?

Taylor kept an eye on Luke in the cabin. Would Luke try to sneak out tonight, maybe after everyone was asleep? If he did, Taylor would have to follow him to find Marissa and make her return to her cabin.

Luke was still in his shorts during cabin devotions, but then so were a couple other guys. His eyes often fixed on the door. Was he scheming how to get out without the squeak giving him away? Harris finally dismissed them, and Taylor stood up, stretched and yawned as if he couldn't wait to get to sleep.

"Remember," Harris said, "you and Luke and I have an early appointment tomorrow morning."

Taylor groaned and slumped. He'd forgotten all about their early morning workout. Maybe Luke wouldn't sneak out tonight after all. But he still needed to stay awake long enough to find out. And that made tomorrow morning a problem.

The moment Luke's foot cleared the windowsill, Taylor slipped out of bed and hurried to see which way he went. The light in Harris's bedroom had been off for at least an hour. Deep breathing and soft snores filled the bunkroom as Taylor peeked out the window, careful not to disturb the screen Luke had set on the floor. The moonlight caught Luke's bare back as he jogged between trees past the chapel.

Taylor picked up the screen and set it on Luke's bed, then followed him out the window and past the chapel. The nearly full moon illuminated the ground, casting shadows from the trees, and Taylor stayed in the darkness as much as possible. No sense giving himself away until he knew Marissa was out here, too. But where was Luke? He'd lost him in the time it took to climb out the window. *Think*. Where would you go if you wanted to meet up with someone, especially a girl?

Taylor moved toward the girls' cabins. He peeked around a tree trunk, but the only motion near Marissa's cabin was the on and off glow of fireflies. Where else could she and Luke have gone? The woods? Marissa wouldn't go near the woods in the dark. Besides, the mosquitoes would eat them alive.

A giggle, quickly stifled, sounded to his right. The lake! Stooping low and moving from shadow to shadow, Taylor made his way toward the beach. The floodlights that usually lit the lakefront at night were dark, probably set to go off at midnight. The gate to the beach would be locked, but with so much open lakeshore, anyone could step into the water and wade over to the swimming area as long as they didn't mind stepping on rocks instead of sand. Taylor caught a glimpse of Luke and Marissa as they hurried across a moonlit spot. Hand in hand, they moved along the edge where the ground made a steep drop to the lake.

Taylor ran the other way, toward the boat dock. Strange that the swimming area had a locked gate but nothing blocked entry to the boat dock. Except for that flimsy one across the boat launch—a square frame with a couple crosspieces, secured by a fork latch. He hurried down to the lake. It was warm as bath water as Taylor eased in, crouching and moving out until he was neck deep. Silently, he worked his way around the boat dock and over to the swimming pier. The night air carried Luke's and Marissa's whispers across the water, but he couldn't make out their words. Only an occasional soft sploosh as they dipped in and out. Their silhouettes rose from the surface within the area bounded by the swimming pier. Marissa's shoulders shone white in the bright glow of the moon.

Taylor stopped outside the pier, near enough now to hear Luke warn Marissa about staying low in the water to avoid detection. Taylor ran his hands along the pier's supports until he found an open spot, then slipped into the sheer darkness underwater and pulled himself between the supports. He resurfaced within the shallow swimming area and without thinking,

whipped his head back to shake the hair from his eyes. Droplets of water pelted the surface.

Marissa gasped. “What was that?” Their two shadows froze in the moonlight. Luke spoke just above a whisper. “Who’s there?”

No use hiding anymore. Taylor stood up.

“It’s me.”

“Taylor?” Marissa’s voice squeaked.

Even in the dark, Luke’s sneer was obvious. “What are you doing here?”

“Trying to keep my sister out of trouble.” Taylor moved closer, but kept some distance between them, in case Luke threatened him again.

“She’s not in trouble so you can get lost.”

Marissa slapped her hands on the water. “I can’t believe you followed us down here.” A dog barked from a neighboring yard, and she cut her voice to a whisper again. “You don’t have to stand guard over me, Taybo. I’m a big girl now.”

“Then prove it and get back to your cabin before you get caught.”

Luke moved toward him. “We won’t get caught. No one knows we’re here.”

Marissa dunked her head, letting the water pull her hair back from her face. “We won’t be here long. We only wanted to see what it was like to swim in the dark. Go back to your cabin and leave us alone.”

Taylor stood his ground. “I’m not leaving until you go back to your cabin.”

A light flared from the hill above the beach, catching Taylor in its beam. He whirled away from its blinding glare, hissing at Luke. “Get her out of here. Now! Don’t let them catch her.”

Luke and Marissa dove under the pier and splashed back to where they entered the water. Covering for them, Taylor splashed as much as he could while plunging in the opposite direction. With luck, that flashlight would

stay focused on him. He had to give Luke a chance to get Marissa back to her cabin without getting caught. Taylor turned and dove under water, surfacing under the pier.

Whoever held the flashlight moved the beam quickly over the rest of the swimming area. Taylor splashed to draw it back to him.

“Come on out,” a voice from the flashlight ordered. “And bring your friends with you.”

Paul, the guy from the God Squad. Taylor ducked underwater again and swam halfway back to the boat dock, making sure to splash a few times. A couple trees and lots of weeds and bushes crowded the shoreline between the beach and the boat dock. Taylor crawled onto shore and hid behind the largest tree.

“You want to play hide and seek?” Paul’s light splashed across the tree that hid Taylor. “Just warning you, I’ve never lost a game yet.”

Could he stay quiet and hidden long enough to evade capture? Doubtful, but he had to try. The longer he played this out, the better chance Marissa had of returning to her cabin.

The light bounced around, moving closer. Paul spoke to someone, but Taylor heard no response. Was he on his phone?

Taylor peered out at the lake. Should he climb the tree or go back into the water to hide? If he went back in, he couldn’t stay under forever, and every time he surfaced, the ripples would give him away. The moon was so bright he could see the undulations of the water around the boat dock. But when he looked up, the lowest tree branch was just beyond his reach. He’d have to jump, and there’d be no second chance. If he missed, the rustle of his landing would give away his exact location.

Crouching, Taylor gazed up into the tree and planned his jump. Moonlight outlined the branch and he closed his eyes, imagining the distance, the thickness of the branch. He flexed on his knees twice, just like on the diving board, then launched himself upward. His hands caught the

branch while his body swung back and forth. For once, he was sorry he hadn't worked harder in P.E. A few more pull-ups might've helped right about now. He walked his feet up the trunk far enough to hook one leg over the branch.

The light bobbed closer and the rustling grew louder as he pulled himself up onto the branch. His breathing alone could give him away. Taylor opened his mouth and forced himself to breathe slow and even. He needed to climb higher but his pursuer was too close. Weeds and brush rustled as Paul pushed his way through, stopping just to the left of Taylor's hiding spot.

A mosquito feasted on Taylor's cheek, but he didn't dare move. He held his breath as the flashlight's beam shone on the water, crossing paths with the moon's reflection. Paul ambled over and squatted beside Taylor's tree. He flicked off the light.

A lone motorboat pattered across the lake. When the noise died away, Paul spoke.

"You want to come down now or wait a little? I got all night. It's up to you."

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CHAPTER TEN

TAYLOR COLLAPSED ONTO HIS BED AFTER THE EARLY MORNING TORTURE session. His whole body ached, worse than any gym class ever. Harris was not a happy camper last night when Paul woke him up, and this morning he made Taylor pay for it. Along with running as punishment for his fight with Luke, Harris made him do push-ups and crunches and more push-ups and more crunches. Now his arms flopped like spaghetti noodles, his gut insisted someone had used it for a punching bag.

All during the workout, Luke wore that irritating smirk. The jerk had made it back to the cabin and pretended to be sound asleep through the whole confrontation in Harris's room last night. Taylor was one breath away from ratting out Luke, but that meant getting Marissa in trouble, too. If he wanted his driver's license, he couldn't let that happen.

Taylor groaned and pulled the sleeping bag over his head to shut out the noise from the other boys getting up and off to breakfast. His stomach hurt so badly, he might skip breakfast and sleep for another hour.

Not a chance. Harris prodded him out of bed.

"Up and at 'em, Taylor. Breakfast. You also have an appointment with Zeke this morning."

Harris made sure he got out of bed, out the door and to the dining hall where Zeke was waiting for him.

“Let’s go to my office.”

So much for staying out of trouble. He might as well kiss that drivers’ license good-bye forever. He’d be an old man before he got his license if Dad found out about this.

Zeke led him down a wide hallway to his office and closed the door behind them. He motioned Taylor into one of two armchairs in front of his desk. Large windows occupied most of the two outer walls. One commanded a nice a view of the lake. Zeke half-sat on his desk in front of Taylor, crossed his arms and tipped his head to look at him. “I hear you went for a midnight swim last night. All by yourself?”

Taylor shoved his hands into his armpits and nodded, forcing himself to meet Zeke’s gaze.

“Seems odd to go swimming in the dark by yourself. Can you tell me what prompted such an idea?”

Taylor shrugged one shoulder. “Just felt like swimming.”

“Do you understand how dangerous that was, not only swimming alone, but in the dark? What if you’d slipped and hit your head on the pier? I know you weren’t planning on that happening, but there’s a reason we call them accidents. We don’t expect them to happen.”

Zeke studied him until he felt like a bug under a microscope. Taylor gazed at his knees, the floor then out the window. Finally, Zeke moved around behind his desk and sank into his chair. He rested his elbows on the desk, chin on his clasped hands as if deep in prayer. A moment later, he opened his Bible, pulled a blank index card out of his desk and slid them both across the desk toward Taylor.

“Read Matthew 7, verse 26.”

Taylor scooted the chair up close to the desk and ran his finger over the page until he found the verse.

“But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.” He glanced

up at Zeke, who handed him a pen.

“Write it out on the card, and say it out loud as you write it.”

Taylor said the words, pausing between each one to scribble them onto the index card. He laid the pen down on the desk. Zeke closed the Bible.

“Now, read it back to me one more time.” Taylor squinted at his writing and repeated the verse. “Do you know that story, Taylor? What happened to the house built on the sand?”

“It collapsed.”

“That’s right.” Zeke leaned forward. “Outside forces damaged the house. Our rules here at camp are meant to keep you safe, so you don’t end up like that house on the sand. Ignoring them could very well result in danger and serious injury. Does that make sense?”

Taylor’s mouth pulled to one side. “Yeah.”

I get it, but the whole thing was never my idea. Marissa needs to hear this more than I do.

Zeke rose to his feet. “Take that card with you and read it during the day. You know the drill. Any time we meet, I want to hear you say the verse out loud.” He came around the desk and laid a hand on Taylor’s shoulder. “If I know Harris, he’s already disciplined you enough to make you think twice about swimming at night. And that means you’re pretty hungry by now, so go get something to eat before Janie closes up shop.”

Taylor hustled out the door, but Zeke called him back. The director smoothed his white mustache with his thumb and forefinger. “Janie tells me Roberto needs you to help him work on his car. I disagree, but I’ll give my permission under one condition.” He crossed his arms and fixed Taylor with a piercing look. “I don’t want to see you in my office again. Understood?”

Taylor’s lips spread into a wide smile. “Yes, sir! I understand perfectly. Thanks!” He hurried to the dining hall and lingered through the buffet line, hoping to see Janie to thank her. But he only saw the girls who worked in the kitchen replenishing the food. Maybe he’d catch her at lunch.

Marissa swooped by his table and set her tray with dirty dishes down next to his.

“Thanks for covering for us last night. I almost didn’t make it to the cabin.” Her voice was just loud enough for him to hear over the din of the dining hall.

“What happened? You guys almost get caught?”

Marissa pulled out the chair next to him and sat down on the edge of it.

“I don’t know. There was a second guy out hunting us, but I think when Luke took off for his cabin, the guy followed him. I was so scared. I’ve never run so fast in my whole life.” A sly smile stole across her mouth and her eyes sparkled. “That was so much fun.”

“Yeah, fun for you, but I got caught.” He gulped his orange juice, the sweetness mixing well with the salty bacon.

Marissa gasped. “Oh Taybo! What happened?”

“The guy knew exactly where I was hiding. He took me back to the cabin, woke up Harris, who was not happy. Harris made me get up at dawn to run with him and that jerk boyfriend of yours.”

“He is not a jerk. You’d like him if you’d give him a chance.”

“Rissa, he left you alone to save his own skin. He’s cocky, thinks he’s better than everyone else.”

Rissa stood up. “No, he’s not. You’re just jealous because you got caught and we didn’t.”

Taylor frowned at his sister. “I’m the reason you didn’t get caught. And don’t you dare do something stupid again. I’m tired of paying for your little adventures.”

“No one asked you to join us last night.” Her hands flew to her hips. “You’re the one who decided to crash the party, so don’t complain to me about getting caught.”

Taylor pushed back his chair and stood nose to nose with her. “Okay. I won’t crash anymore of your little parties. Let’s see how long it takes you to

figure out that your idea of fun means trouble.” He snatched his tray and stalked over to set it on the conveyor belt.

Marissa grabbed hers and followed him.

“Fine. I don’t need you anyway, so don’t even bother talking to me.” She dropped her tray on the belt and brushed past him, her nose in the air.

A sense of relief washed over him, but it didn’t last. She’d do something else before the week was over. The tightening knot in his gut told him so.

Human foosball. A step above volleyball, maybe, but shooting baskets would be much better than trying to kick this ball past three lines of defenders. He caught the soccer ball beneath his foot. The goal, a soccer net, sat below the backboard at the other end of the basketball court. His hands slid along the waist-high rope stretched across the width of the concrete court. He angled for a better shot at the goal, but the opposing team’s mid-field line, his own attack line, the defense and goalkeeper lines stood between him and the goal.

Claire glanced at him from the attack line. A slight jerk of her head signaled she was ready. He kicked the ball, a clear shot straight to her. She added a strong kick that sent it racing past the defenders and goalkeepers into the goal.

“No!” The other team moaned and protested, but Taylor’s team erupted in cheers as the score tipped in their favor.

“Come on, we can win this,” Claire called. “Let’s do it!”

Only two more points. But the other team managed to even the score and pull ahead, and Dillon’s shot-assist from Brady won the game.

Claire came up to Taylor, her hands in the air for a double high five.

“Good game,” she said. “That was a nice shot at the end.”

Taylor slapped her hands. “You’re the one who drove it into the goal.”

“Just lucky.” She shrugged and left to join Brady and Dillon. Taylor almost called her back to ask if she’d heard Marissa come in last night after her little escapade. But what did it matter? He wasn’t responsible for his sister anymore. Let her figure her own way out of trouble.

Taylor headed back to the cabins to find Nick. He passed the bell tower with the camp’s pickup parked next to it. Roberto knelt on the ground as Taylor approached.

“Is something wrong?”

Roberto pushed back his hat with a dirt-covered gloved hand. “No. I put in a flower bed.” He gestured at the mound of dirt that circled the tower. A path of four round stepping-stones in front of the tower allowed access to the bell. Flats of red, white and purple petunias sat on the pickup’s tailgate.

Roberto set one of the flats on the ground and dug his trowel into the dirt, creating a hole. He pulled a flower from the flat, dropped it into the hole, then moved a few inches and repeated the motion. This time, his digging unearthed a fat wriggling worm that he held up for Taylor’s inspection.

“You like to fish?”

Taylor shook his head. “No, but Nurse Willie would like that.”

Roberto chuckled. “Si, si.” He dropped it back into the dirt along with another flower. “So, I see you tonight? We work on car?”

“Yeah! I can’t wait.” He paused, then said, “Zeke said Janie talked him into letting me work on your car. Is that right?”

Roberto nodded. “Si. Who can stand when Juanie shakes her finger?” He pointed his index finger and imitated the shaking, then laughed and spread his hands out. “No one argues with Juanie. Not me. Not even Zeke.”

Taylor laughed, imagining Zeke caving in to his cook. “I’ll be sure to thank her. See you tonight.” He hurried back to the cabin to find Nick waiting for him. Within five minutes, they headed for the beach. The afternoon sun was getting hot and that water would feel great.

Taylor kicked his flip-flops off on the sand, dropped his towel and raced Nick into the water. As soon as he was knee deep, he dove under, then surfaced and threw a challenge to Nick.

“Last one to the raft pays for ice cream.”

“You’re on.”

The lifeguard standing on the pier would surely catch him if he tried to swim under it so Taylor hoisted himself up from the shallow end and over into the deep side. His arms and legs churned the water, but Nick stuck right beside him. He sucked in a breath and got a mouthful of turbulent water, spit it out and tried again, this time facing away from Nick. It carried him the rest of the way and he slapped the side of the raft, only to find Nick there at the same time. The two of them gulped air, trying to catch their breath.

“Tie,” Nick declared as he exhaled.

Taylor nodded and pulled himself up the ladder. Nick followed. Minutes later, Luke climbed onto the raft. He jacked up his trunks with a smug grin, as if expecting them to applaud his presence. Taylor ignored him, until Luke sidled up next to him and spoke in a low voice.

“Nice of you to cover for us last night.”

Taylor regarded him through narrowed eyes. “I was covering for Marissa, not you. You could’ve stuck around to make sure she got back to her cabin without getting caught.”

“She didn’t get caught, did she?”

“No thanks to you. Just don’t try anything like that again. I’m not bailing out either one of you next time.” Taylor pushed past Luke, making sure to bump his shoulder in the process, and stepped up on the diving board. He took a running leap and dove into the water.

Nick was waiting for him in the water after Taylor surfaced. “What’d you say to Luke?”

Taylor swam away from the diving area before answering. “He and Rissa snuck out and met down here to swim after lights out last night. I followed him. And I’m the one who got caught.”

“You? What about him and your sister?”

Taylor explained what had happened, then suggested they go get some ice cream.

Nick side-stroked to the pier. “I heard he freaked out over a little grass snake last night. Is that true?”

Taylor laughed out loud. “That was so funny. I wish Rissa’d seen her hero running scared, squealing like a pig.” He laughed again, and an image of Roberto holding up that wriggling earthworm came to mind. Snakes. Worms. Hmmm.

Time to visit Nurse Willie.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

NURSE WILLIE CLICKED OFF THE PENLIGHT AND LET GO OF TAYLOR'S eyelid. "I don't see anything that shouldn't be there. Maybe some drops will help soothe the irritation. Probably just an allergy to the grass or trees or something around here."

Taylor blinked his eye a few times, then tipped his head back while Willie squirted some drops.

"If it doesn't clear up by tomorrow, come back and let me take another look at it."

Taylor dabbed his eye with a tissue while Nurse Willie washed her hands and put away her penlight and the eye drops. He coughed and cleared his throat. "Um, can I ask you...what kind of bait do you use for fishing?"

Nurse Willie turned a raised eyebrow his way. "Since when are you interested in fishing?"

"Just wondering." Taylor shrugged. "Thought I might try it while I'm here."

Willie pursed her lips, then opened a small cooler beneath her desk and took out a Styrofoam dish like the ones mashed potatoes came in at the fried chicken restaurants. She peeled off the cover and held the container out for his inspection. A fat worm wiggled down into the dirt. "Nightcrawlers."

Perfect.

“Do you buy them or dig ’em up yourself?”

Willie scowled. “Waste of good money to buy them. You can find them down there by the lake where it’s kind of marshy at the edge of the woods. Go at night, especially after a good rain. Take a flashlight and you’ll be pulling them out of the ground like weeds.” She replaced the cover and set the dish back in the cooler, then reached up and opened the cupboard above her desk. A small stack of Styrofoam dishes sat way up on the top shelf. She handed one to Taylor.

“It’s been so dry lately, you might not see many. But fill this with moist dirt before you go looking. Nightcrawlers need to stay moist and cool. Let ’em get too warm and you’ll have a stinky, gooey mess. You might ask for a cup of ice at the Shack to keep them cool.”

Taylor smiled as he exited the clinic. The something-in-the-eye complaint worked like grease on a hinge. Willie practically gave him her own stash of worms. Now, if he could beat the crowd out of chapel tonight, he’d have ten minutes to nab a couple nightcrawlers and get back to the cabin. No need for ice. He’d have to ditch the cup, too. Wouldn’t want anyone to notice him bringing a white cup into the cabin. If he carried the worms in his hands, nobody would know. And if the nightcrawlers turned into a stinky, gooey mess later—well, that might be just as much fun.

Taylor ran to the machine shed as soon as he finished supper. Roberto was waiting for him.

“Ready to work?” Roberto picked up a piece of new carpet lying on the driveway. It was molded to fit over the hump that ran through the center of the car. The tractor that was normally parked in the bay next to the Mustang sat outside next to the carpet pieces. In its place were the Mustang’s front

bucket seats and the back seat. The car's dirty old carpet lay in a stiff heap between the bays.

Roberto thrust one end of the carpet into the car through the driver's door to Taylor on the other side. The car had been gutted—seats, carpet, seatbelts. Everything had been removed down to the floor pan. Only the gearshift lever and the steering column remained. Roberto had already added a new floor liner, and Taylor tugged the carpet into place over it.

Roberto measured, made a slit in the carpet and fitted it down around the gearshift lever. "I leave carpet out in sun today, so is warm. Bends easy."

Taylor pressed the carpet down his side of the hump in the middle, up under the dashboard, and out to the passenger door. "Good idea. It's not hard to work with at all." When the carpet lay flat enough to satisfy Roberto, they went to work on the back half.

Clang. Clang. Clang, clang. The bell called campers to evening worship.

Taylor looked up from pressing the back carpet down towards the rear of the car. "Already? I just got here."

Sweat dripping from his nose, Roberto sat back on his heels and shook his head. "I hoped we could put in the seats."

"Do I have to go?" Taylor pressed his advantage as the bell's clanging died off. "Ple-ease?"

Roberto chewed his lip, staring at the carpet. His head bobbed once. "I like you to stay, but you go. Zeke will look for you in chapel, but," he wagged his finger, "tomorrow we put seats in." He stopped and tilted his head, as if listening to an inaudible voice. "My daughter—her baby comes any day now." Roberto put his palms together. "But we will pray she waits until after tomorrow. Okay?"

Taylor frowned and backed out of the car. Roberto came to him, laying an arm across his shoulders.

“You are good worker. You love car like I do.”

A smile pulled at one corner of Taylor’s mouth. “Yeah, I do. Someday, maybe I’ll restore a car like this.” He met Roberto’s gaze. “Thanks for letting me help.”

Roberto laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Tomorrow night, we finish the seats.”

Taylor took his time getting back to the cabin to grab his flashlight before heading to evening worship. The band was already playing when he stepped into the chapel. Purposely late, he checked to make sure Nick hadn’t saved him a seat and wasn’t watching for him. If he sat alone near the back, he wouldn’t have to explain to anyone why he needed to race out the door as soon as the service ended. He’d still have to beat the crowd by jumping into the aisle before the final prayer’s amen.

Taylor selected a seat, mentally sketching out his plan while the band played and led worship. By the time Zeke stepped onto the stage, he was itching to go hunt nightcrawlers. How would he ever sit through the sermon now? Maybe he could listen long enough to know what the talk was about. Roberto hadn’t asked him about Zeke’s talks yet, but he didn’t want to be embarrassed if and when that time came.

Zeke left his easel at the side of the stage, and instead carried a spool of fishing line in his hands. He tied the end to one leg of the table that held the decorated box. “This week, we’ve talked about the words we say that reflect what’s in our heart. We’ve also talked about pride and arrogance, anger and jealousy. Tonight, I thought we’d focus on lying and deceit. Have you ever walked into a spider web? You try to back away or get out of it, but it only seems to make things worse?” He waved his arms to mimic someone entangled in a spider web. “A nineteenth century author named Sir

Walter Scott wrote, ‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.’ Lying is a lot like a spider weaving a web. You tell a little lie, nothing big, but then you have to tell another one to cover it up. Pretty soon, that lie isn’t enough so you tell another one. But now, you can’t remember exactly what you said in the very first lie.”

While he talked, Zeke wove the fishing line in and around the other table legs so it crisscrossed itself several times. “I chose fishing line here for a reason. I could’ve used yarn or thread. But many times, our deceit is invisible at first, at least to other people.”

Taylor craned his neck to see as Zeke summoned a couple of campers from the front row to the stage, positioning them on either side of the table. One tried to peek inside the box but Zeke wound the nylon line over and under the box, then around each of the campers until they were both so entangled in the fishing line, they couldn’t move their arms or legs. *A nice change from the drawing, but I need to get out and get some worms...* He grinned, What would Luke’s reaction be to a worm crawling up his leg? How could he make Luke think it was a snake?

Taylor went over his plan again. Of course, he’d have to lie a little, but this was merely a joke. A harmless prank wasn’t really deceit, was it? He squirmed and eyed the door.

Zeke seemed to take forever to make his point, but at last, he concluded with, “What’s in your heart?” and a prayer.

Taylor wasted no time bolting through the door. Outside, he slowed to a more normal pace. *Take it easy.* Make it look like you’ve got all the time in the world. He meandered from one shadow to the next until he was certain no other campers were close enough to see him. Afraid the flashlight might give him away, he stumbled a couple times before his eyes adjusted to the darkness. When he reached the marshy area Nurse Willie had mentioned, he peered up the hill. Figures moved toward the cabins, their voices carried by the night air. Taylor could make out a word or two, but most of it was

unintelligible. He turned his back to them and squatted close to the ground before turning on his flashlight. The beam swept back and forth over the soft ground. His feet sank into the dirt if he stayed too long in one place, but when he tried to move, the suction nearly pulled off his flip-flops. Taylor muttered.

“C’mon, c’mon. I don’t have all night.”

At last, he spotted a nightcrawler trying to wriggle back into the earth. He yanked it from the ground, but only half of it came up in his hand. His lip curled in disgust and he dropped it. Finding another one still wholly above ground, he snatched it up. It wiggled and squirmed, smearing mud on his hand. At least, he hoped it was mud and not something else.

Moving on, he spotted another worm burrowing into the earth. This time, his fingers gently tugged it from the ground. Two! He should’ve brought the dish Willie gave him. These things were so big, two nearly filled his hand. He needed to hurry. The only voices he heard now were muffled within the cabins. He had to get back soon, before Harris or anyone else noticed he was missing.

Taylor widened his search until he discovered two more night crawlers. He’d hoped for six, but these four were already a good handful. And he still had to get them into the cabin without anyone noticing.

Taylor flicked off his flashlight, stuck it under his arm and raced up the hill to the cabin. At the last minute, he swerved to approach the cabin from the direction of the chapel, just in case anyone saw him coming. Before opening the door, he wrangled his fist into his pocket, still loosely cupping the worms. The screen door slammed behind him as he sauntered into the bunkroom.

Steven was messing around with his suitcase, laying out his clothes for the next day. *Weird, but maybe that’s what blind people do.* Luke sat on his bed, yukking it up with the guys on the other side.

How to sneak the worms into Luke's sleeping bag without getting caught?

Taylor couldn't keep his hand in his pocket all night. What if they turned into a stinky, slimy mess right there, before he had a chance to slip them out?

Luke stood up, toothbrush in hand. He glanced at Taylor on his way to the bathroom, an irritating smirk pulling his lips to one side.

Let's see if you're still smirking later on, Puke.

While Taylor searched for an excuse to get close enough to deposit his treasure in Luke's bunk, one of the boys whacked his friend with a pillow, knocking him onto Luke's bed and pushing the bottom of the unzipped sleeping bag off the side of the bed.

Perfect.

When the boys resumed their fight elsewhere, Taylor snatched Steven's swim trunks which hung on the cross bar at the end of his bed. They were still damp from the afternoon's swim. Hiding them behind his left leg, Taylor crouched between Steven's and Luke's beds and pretended to lift them from the floor.

"Hey, Steven, are these your swim shorts?" He held them out to Steven while his other hand slid inside Luke's sleeping bag and released the nightcrawlers.

Steven took his shorts and felt along the decorative stitching and the seams. "Yeah. Where were they?"

"I picked them up off the floor."

Steven looked puzzled. "How'd they get down there? I know I hung them up."

"Someone probably knocked them off when they walked by." Taylor turned to the boys engaged in the pillow fight. "Hey, watch what you're doing. You're messing up other people's stuff. Look at this." He shook the

corner of the sleeping bag so it lay squarely on the bed again, then asked Steven, “Want me to hang them back up for you?”

Steven held them out. “Yeah, thanks.”

“No problem.” Taylor rolled his lips in to suppress a smile. Now to plant the thought of snakes in Luke’s mind. He rubbed his muddy hand on his beach towel, then squirted a dab of toothpaste onto his toothbrush and entered the bathroom. Moving along the wall, he bent over as if examining the baseboard.

Luke peered at him through the mirror’s reflection. “What are you doing?”

Taylor glanced at Luke, but continued his examination. “I don’t think you want to know.”

Luke spun around. “Let me decide that. What are you looking at?”

“No, really. Trust me. You do not want to know.” Taylor’s gaze traveled along the baseboard from the bathroom door all the way to the other end.

Luke huffed and shuffled toward the door. “You’re just being stupid.”

Taylor murmured to himself. “I thought for sure I saw one of those little snakes crawling along here. Guess I must’ve imagined it.”

Luke practically leaped through the door. Some of the other boys in the bathroom joined the search, but they found nothing.

Harris soon called everyone for devotions and Taylor came out of the bathroom to find Luke on the farthest couch, feet tucked up underneath his crossed legs.

Taylor bit his lip to keep from laughing. What a hoot this was going to be. As long as Luke didn’t smooch the worms before they had a chance to crawl up his legs. He crossed his fingers they’d survive inside the sleeping bag. For now, the cabin was too warm with the day’s accumulated heat. It would take a couple hours to cool off enough to slip inside a sleeping bag. But Taylor intended to stay awake for this, no matter how early he’d been up this morning.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LUKE'S CRY WOKE EVERYONE IN THE CABIN, INCLUDING TAYLOR. NOT QUITE a scream, but definitely more than a yell. Luke fell to the floor with a thump and continued a battle with his sleeping bag.

Steven raised himself on one elbow. "Luke? Are you dreaming? What's wrong?"

Taylor sat up in bed, straining to see the cause of the muffled thumps and bumps coming from the other side of Steven's bunk. What had he missed by falling asleep?

Harris appeared in the doorway, silhouetted by the light from his room. "What's going on?" He frowned at Luke. "What are you doing?"

Luke thrashed, barely able to get the words out. "S-s-snake. In my bag. Let me out!"

Harris flipped the cabin lights on, prompting groans of protest from the rest of the boys. He took hold of Luke's sleeping bag, untwisted it and held it taut while Luke scrambled out.

"It was slithering up my leg." Luke backed up, flattening himself against the wall, then hopped onto his bed. "I felt it. I felt it." He shivered and ran his hands up and down his legs as if wiping something off.

"How would a snake get into your sleeping bag?" Harris laid the bag flat on the floor and pulled the top back. "I don't see any snake."

Luke pointed to a spot about two-thirds down from the top of the bag, his voice nearly hysterical. “There! Right there!”

Harris took a closer look. “That’s a worm, a nightcrawler.” He picked it up and let it dangle from his finger. “And a half-dead one at that.”

“There’s another one!”

Harris picked up the second one and examined the bag more closely. “Hmm. You’ll want to wash this out tomorrow. Looks like you laid on a couple. They’re smashed.”

The kid on the top bunk leaned over the edge of his bed. “Let’s see it!”

“Eeuw.” The kid in the bottom bunk on the other side of Luke curled his lip.

Another kid threw the top of his sleeping bag aside and curled his legs up close to his body. “I think I feel something in my bag.” Others checked their bags as well and Taylor followed along, pretending to thoroughly check his sleeping bag.

Harris picked up Luke’s bag, shook it outside the front door and returned it to Luke. “Just turn it inside out. You’ll be fine.” He switched the lights off again and yawned as he headed into his room. “Everybody go back to sleep. No talking.”

Taylor snickered to himself. The pure terror on Luke’s face was so much more appealing than his usual cocky expression. He turned over and snuggled his face into the pillow to muffle his laughter. Sleep would come, eventually. For him anyway. Luke probably wouldn’t get any sleep at all. Maybe not for the rest of the week.

Taylor pushed his tray along the buffet line Thursday morning. Getting up for breakfast was rough after being awakened in the middle of the night. He chuckled to himself remembering Luke’s reaction to the worms.

Hmm. What to eat? Oatmeal? No way. Eggs and bacon? Definitely the bacon. And a mound of sugar-frosted flakes in his bowl. He snagged a couple cartons of milk and looked for a table. Nick was already sitting with Claire, Steven and Brady so Taylor joined them, setting his tray on the table in time to hear Steven's version of last night's excitement.

Claire scooted over to make room for Taylor. "Did you see all this, too?"

"I couldn't see him wrestling with his sleeping bag, but I heard him hit the floor in it. He practically ran into the wall when he finally got out, and then he bounced back onto his bed—" Laughter choked out the rest of what he meant to say.

Claire giggled. "Why was he so scared of a few worms?"

Steven was laughing, too. "He thought it was a snake."

Brady's chuckle turned to a grimace. "A snake?"

Claire shuddered. "Why would he think that?"

"He's terrified of snakes." Taylor dumped one carton of milk on his cereal. He'd save the bacon for last. "We saw a little one the other night during the counselor hunt and he ran like someone dropped a firecracker in his shorts."

Brady's eyes narrowed. "So, who put the worms in his bed?"

Claire's gaze swiveled from Brady to Steven to Taylor. "Taylor?" She drew his name out.

Shrugging, Taylor pushed soggy cereal around the bowl with his spoon. "I admit I might have planted the snake idea in his mind when I thought I saw a snake crawl into the bathroom."

"For real?" Brady asked. "In the bathroom?"

Claire grimaced. A shiver shook her hunched shoulders.

Taylor rolled his bottom lip in. "Let's just say there was nothing there when I looked."

“O-oh, that’s mean.” Claire’s dimples appeared as she and Brady exchanged knowing grins.

“What are we doing for rec today?” Taylor asked. “I forgot to look before I came in here.”

“Ka-joe-bee can-can?” Claire pronounced each syllable. “I guess that’s how you say it. Do you know what it is?”

“Never heard of it.” Taylor raised the bowl to his mouth. The sugary milk left over from the cereal was the best part. A rough slap on his back splashed the milk up his nose, down his neck and chest. He blew out his nostrils and dropped the bowl to the table, sloshing what was left of the milk onto the table. Beside him, Marissa stifled a giggle.

“Need a napkin, Taybo?”

Luke snorted from behind and Taylor jumped to his feet to face him. “What’d you do that for?”

Luke’s smile evaporated. His jaw hardened and his eyes narrowed. “That’s for last night.”

“What are you blaming me for? You’re the one who freaked out over a couple of worms.”

Marissa squinted at Taylor, then Luke. “What are you guys talking about?”

Luke crowded Taylor against the table, chest to chest.

“If you ever go near my stuff again, I’ll make you so sorry.”

Taylor shoved him back. Luke lunged and grabbed Taylor’s wet t-shirt in his fists.

Marissa yanked on Luke’s arm. “Leave him alone. What is wrong with you two? Stop it.”

Voices from the surrounding tables grew quiet. Whispers of a fight rustled through the air until Luke backed off. He glared at Taylor.

“You’ll pay for this. I promise you’re gonna pay.”

Taylor tugged at his shirt to straighten it and glared right back. “Ooh, I’m scared. But look! I’m not running away screaming like a big sissy.”

Luke lunged again. More than one chair scraped the floor behind Taylor. Suddenly, Brady stood at Taylor’s shoulder.

“Cut it out, Luke,” Claire ordered.

Eyes wide, Marissa grabbed Luke’s arm and pulled. “Leave him alone. C’mon. Let’s go.”

Luke allowed her to lead him away, but every few steps, he tossed a dagger-glance back over his shoulder. Taylor’s breathing slowed to normal after they left the dining hall. He turned back to the table where Steven and Claire were both standing at alert. Milk dripped onto his chair. His damp shirt stuck to his chest. Claire handed him her napkin, then got up to grab more from the condiments nook. Taylor made a quick swipe at the spilled milk. Claire returned and helped sop up the milk.

“He is such a jerk.”

Brady added Steven’s napkin to the cleanup effort. “Yeah. Reminds me of someone I knew last year.” He eyed Taylor.

Steven sucked in a slow breath. Claire’s hand froze. She shot nervous glances between Taylor and Brady. Taylor threw the dripping napkins onto his tray. He didn’t need this from Brady, especially not now. He faced him, jaw set.

“I said last year.” A corner of Brady’s mouth turned up. “This year’s different.” Not a hint of challenge showed in Brady’s expression.

No condemnation. No hostility. Somewhere deep inside, a pinprick of guilt stabbed Taylor’s gut. Brady wasn’t trying to pick a fight like Luke.

Taylor swallowed the angry words on his tongue, picked up his tray and headed for the exit. Last year, he’d made Brady’s life miserable—insulting him, teasing him, dumping him out of his canoe, along with Steven and Claire, to keep them from winning a race. They had every right to hold a

grudge, but instead they stood up, ready to fight for him. No one had ever done that before.

Guilt nibbled at Taylor's gut all morning, and the Bible study about King Ahab didn't help. Ahab wanted a vineyard, but the owner refused to sell it to him. Ahab went home and pouted until his wife, the evil queen Jezebel, got the vineyard for him. She framed the owner for something he didn't do and put him to death. Poor guy. Just because the king envied his vineyard.

Envy. Jealousy.

The truth hit him like a chilly, early morning dip in the lake. He might as well be Ahab. He'd tormented Brady because of the attention he got for playing his trumpet so well. And he'd envied Brady's friendship with Steven and Claire. That was last year, but was this year any different? Was he really picking on Luke because of his cocky attitude? That was part of it, but if he were honest, he envied Luke's driver's license and his hot car. After what Dad said to him on Sunday, hearing Luke's bragging about his dad giving him the 'Vette was more than Taylor could stand. He folded his arms tight across his chest, but it did nothing to quell the ache inside. What should he do now? The weird feeling in his stomach told him something had to change, and that something was most likely him.

Three waist-high aluminum garbage cans dotted the open rec field like points of a triangle, each about ten yards from the others. A counselor stood in the middle and called out instructions.

"Welcome to Kajobe Can-Can. I need everyone to form a circle around the outside of the garbage cans, alternating team members. Do not stand

next to a member of your own team.”

Another counselor handed out a two-foot length of heavy rope to each camper. The ropes were knotted at both ends. Taylor tried several different grips on the sturdy rope in his hand.

“Any of you ever play this before?” The counselor in the center looked around the circle. Only a few hands went up.

“Okay. Your right hand should be holding one end of your rope inside the knot. With your left hand, grab the other end of your neighbor’s rope. Again, hold it inside the knot. There shouldn’t be any breaks in the circle.” She waited until everyone was connected all the way around. “When I blow the whistle, start moving to your left around the cans. Your goal is to avoid any kind of contact with a garbage can. At the same time, you’ll try to force members of the other team to come into contact with the garbage cans. A pinky-touch or even if a part of your clothing touches a can, you’re out of the game. Also, if you lose your grip or let go of the rope at any time during active play, you’re out. Any questions?”

Taylor glanced across the circle at Claire. Head down, feet apart, arms out to the sides gripping the ropes, she looked like a boxer preparing to enter the ring. He imagined her wearing a mouth guard, breathing hard through her nostrils. Seeing him, she smiled slightly and raised her eyebrows. He returned the smile. *Good luck to you, too.*

The counselor finished. “Whenever anyone gets cut, we’ll take a time-out to regroup. The last team standing wins. Everybody ready?”

A roar went up from the circle. “Yeah!”

The counselor blew her whistle and the circle moved clockwise.

Taylor backed away from the garbage can. Let the others play first. If he followed along and watched, maybe he could come up with a strategy for winning. Ahead of him, a section of the circle swayed toward a can and one of his team members missed it by an inch, avoiding it by turning sideways at the last minute.

On his right, the circle pulled back, stretching his arms in opposite directions. His little fingers pinched against the knots in the ropes. Taylor struggled to pull his arms in, but one minute he was pulled forward, the next sideways, then backward. Simply staying on his feet was a challenge. If he stumbled, they could pull him right into one of the cans.

Like a swarm of gnats, the circle shifted, constantly changing shape and direction. The younger, weaker kids left the game first, running into a can or losing their grip on the rope. Each time-out, Taylor tightened his grip and pulled his elbows in close. Adrenaline pumped through his body in anticipation of the whistle to resume the game. How much longer could he avoid the cans?

The whistle sounded and his side of the tightening circle surged toward one of the garbage cans. Opponents on either side dragged Taylor closer, closer. His shoulders burned from the strain as he was pulled within feet of the can. A backward feint, then he sprinted forward, spreading his legs wide as he leaped over the can. *Made it!* But as soon as he landed, he was pulled backward. At the last minute, Taylor sidestepped the can, missing it by a hair.

Now the other side surged. Claire's strength was no match for the bigger guys, but Taylor could almost see the wheels turning in her head. No doubt she was scheming a way to outsmart them. If only he could help her out. Facing off on opposite sides of a can with a heavy guy on her left, Claire dropped her hand down close to the can. A flick of her wrist and a sharp tug scraped her opponent's hand across the rim of the can. He threw his end of the rope at her and stalked away, muttering in a disgusted tone.

The circle was shrinking. A counselor removed one of the garbage cans and started the game again. Taylor's biceps ached. His palms burned from the twisting and pulling of the rope, but nothing hurt as bad as his little fingers smashed up against the knots. Sweat dampened his hair and dripped

from his nose as he twisted and juked like a football player. He and a teammate dragged the opponent between them to the can. *Out.*

Taylor looked for Claire. She was still in the game. They circled the cans again and again, losing players until two opponents and a teammate separated him from Claire on each side. One opponent lost his grip, and the circle was reduced to seven players around one can. Cleats would've helped a lot right now, but who brings cleats to camp?

Claire caught his eye. She glanced to her left. The briefest shake of her head signaled an attack on the opponent to her left. But when the whistle sounded, the opponents on either side yanked her forward, straight in to the can. Claire skirted it like a batter avoiding a pitch, only to be pulled back toward it.

Taylor leaned hard to the left, his weight throwing off their opponents' strategy. Claire edged around the can and tugged the opponent on her right into it.

Three against three now. A single rope separated Taylor from his other teammate, but Claire had opponents on both sides of her. She looked ragged. Sweat glued her t-shirt to her ribs. Her arms and shoulders sagged. Taylor jutted his chin at her. *Keep going. Stay strong.* She inhaled deeply, adjusted her grip on the ropes and nodded.

The game resumed, catching Taylor's teammate off guard. He hit the can and dropped out. Three opponents— two boys and a girl—against Taylor and Claire. Could he and Claire stand? Doubtful. All around them, the kids who'd been eliminated shouted and cheered on their remaining players.

Claire's eyes flicked back and forth between Taylor and their female opponent.

No.

Taylor cut his eyes to the guy on her left. Claire frowned. Taylor flexed his aching biceps, flinching at the pain. *Take out the strongest guy first.* Did

she get the message? No time to wonder. Game on.

The circle rotated clockwise. In two running steps, Taylor leap-frogged over the can, jerking sharp left upon landing. Claire pulled to her right, forcing the two opponents backward. They split around the can, but the girl lost her balance and fell against it. Out.

Two against two. Every part of Taylor's body hurt, from his little fingers to his arms, up his shoulders and neck. Even his legs ached from the strain of resistance. If he was this wasted, how could Claire even remain standing? Would her strength hold up? They squared off, an opponent between them on each side, the ropes taut between them. At the whistle, Taylor jerked left. The opponent on his right leaped over the can and with help from his teammate, forced Taylor backward toward the garbage can. Claire countered, throwing her weight to the side to pull Taylor past the can. One opponent tried a back-jump over the can. His leg caught the rim.

Claire grinned at Taylor, new light shining in her eyes. They just might win.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TAYLOR SHOOK HIS ARMS, ROLLED HIS SHOULDERS, AND READIED HIMSELF for another round. Hopefully, their last.

The three players circled, so close now that any sudden move could send one or all of them right into the garbage can. Taylor sped up, careful not to pull Claire too fast while pushing the guy ahead of him. The kid yanked Taylor's rope, tipping him off balance, then switched direction. Taylor recovered, met Claire's gaze and they both pulled back, yanking hard on their ropes. The guy nosedived into the can.

The counselor's whistle blew.

"Winners!"

Cheers filled the air and their team flocked around them. Taylor tried to release his grip on the ropes, but they were too stiff to respond. His little fingers had gone numb.

Claire pried her fingers away from the rope and lifted a rigid hand to massage her upper arm with her palm. "I'd give you a high five, but it hurts to raise my arm."

Taylor held out his stiff, cupped hand for a fist bump.

Claire barely tapped her knuckles to his. "I think my little fingers are permanently injured, and those ropes scraped my hands raw!" She held her palms out for his inspection.

Their last opponent walked past and Taylor couldn't resist. "Too bad, loser."

The kid scowled at him.

Claire dropped her hands to her side. "Why do you do that?" She regarded him with a mix of disappointment and disapproval.

"Do what?"

"Say mean things like that."

Taylor's mouth pulled to the side and he rolled his eyes.

"The way Marissa brags about you, either she's never heard you talk like that or she lives in a dream world."

Taylor hunched his shoulders and looked away. Yeah, Rissa lived in Fantasyland, where everything was fun and rosy. Kind of like his dream of racing cars. Maybe that's why she believed in his dream when no one else did.

Claire started toward the cabins, following the others. She stopped and turned toward him. "Hey, did you know she was out after curfew? Tuesday night, she must have snuck out after the rest of us were asleep. She woke me up trying to get back in."

"I know." Taylor caught up with her. "She and Luke went for a midnight swim." He flexed his hands as the feeling returned to his fingers. "I made her go back to the cabin before she got caught."

Claire caught her breath. "You did? You were out, too?"

"I had a feeling Luke was meeting her when I heard him sneaking out. So I followed him down to the lake and surprised them."

"Well, I'm glad you guys didn't get caught."

Taylor glanced sideways at her. "They didn't get caught. I did."

Claire halted. She tipped her head to the side. "Wait. They snuck out. You followed to make Marissa to go back to the cabin and you're the only one who got caught? Did Zeke punish you?"

“Zeke and Harris both.” Taylor shrugged and kept walking. “Nothing new. Happens all the time at home.”

Claire hurried up to him, pulling on his arm until he stopped. “Do you always take the blame when Marissa gets into trouble?”

Taylor nodded. “Pretty much.” He shifted under Claire’s steady gaze and looked away.

“No wonder she adores you.”

Taylor leaned over the driver’s seat to tighten a bolt on the floor. Sweat dripped from his nose onto the carpet. A fan would’ve made things more comfortable as he and Roberto replaced the back seat and now the front bucket seats. Or moving the car out of the garage would’ve let them catch a breeze, at least. He pulled the front of his t-shirt up and wiped the sweat from his face before it dripped onto the new seat cover. The leather added a real touch of class to the car.

Roberto grinned at him from the passenger side. “Looks good, no?”

“Looks great!” Taylor admired the interior.

Roberto held out his keys. “Start her up. Let’s see how they feel.” He sat on the passenger seat.

Taylor twisted around and settled into the driver’s seat, adjusting it forward an inch or two. His foot pressed the gas pedal once and he turned the key. The engine rumbled to life.

Roberto tested the passenger seat with a slight bouncing motion. “Is good, huh? Comfortable, si?”

“Yeah, I like the new cushions. And the covers look awesome. Can we take her out now?”

Roberto shook his head. “Is not ready.”

What's not ready? Couldn't they at least take it out around the parking lot? He'd never get to see what it was like on the road before camp ended. Taylor closed his eyes and drank in the sound. The purr of the engine vibrated to his fingers around the steering wheel. His imagination ran free—driving along the highway, windows down, wind blowing his hair back, cooling his neck.

A tap on his arm brought him back to the garage where Roberto offered him a can of root beer. That's what his dream was missing, a cold drink in one hand. But for now, he'd better not risk spilling soda on Roberto's new seat. He cut the engine and looked through the windshield to see another car make a quick circle in front of the shed. It came to an abrupt stop in front of the open bay door. The driver's door flew open and Janie jumped out.

"It's Gaby. She's already at the hospital." Janie left the car running and hurried around to the passenger side. "We need to go now!"

Roberto started for Janie's car, then doubled back, holding out his soda can. Taylor scrambled from the Mustang and took the can from him. Roberto headed back to Janie's car, only to turn around again and pull a wrench from his back pocket. He tossed it onto the worktable.

"Roberto, come on. Hurry!" Janie stamped her foot beside the open passenger door.

Roberto scurried out to the car. He called to Taylor over his shoulder. "You will close up, por favor? Lock everything?"

"I will." Taylor grinned at Roberto's frenzied dashing back and forth between the car and the garage. Who'd have thought he could move that fast? "Don't worry. I'll put everything away and lock it all up. Go on! You're going to be a grampa!"

A smile broke out on Roberto's leathery face as he stuck one foot in the car. "Abuelo! I be abuelo." Both car doors slammed. Roberto gunned the engine and they sped away from the shed, tires squealing.

Taylor chuckled and set the soda can on the worktable. He opened his and downed half of it, then waited for the belch. Buurraaaap! He patted his stomach. That felt good.

Roberto's unopened soda went back into the cooler, his wrench in the toolbox. Taylor leaned into the Mustang to retrieve the wrench he'd used and saw the keys dangling from the ignition. He grabbed them and raced outside to catch Roberto, but the car was long gone. Maybe halfway to the hospital by now.

Taylor fingered the keys, studying them as he went back into the garage. Should he leave them here or take them with him when he locked up? Roberto usually kept them in his pocket rather than leave them in the garage. A few other keys jingled on the ring as well. Maybe one unlocked the side door? He walked over and tried the different keys until he found one that worked. In that case, he'd better not leave them locked inside the garage. Tomorrow morning, he'd go to breakfast early and hand the keys over to Janie.

Taylor made sure the side door was locked, then retrieved his soda. He took another gulp of the chilled soda and let his gaze wander over the Mustang. What was left to fix? He flirted with the temptation to take it out around the parking lot. He sat in the driver's seat again, inserted the key in the ignition. One hand atop the steering wheel, he peered out the windshield at an imaginary road. His foot pressed the accelerator pedal to the floor and let it up. He twisted the key, bringing the engine to life. His right hand moved to the gearshift.

Was it possible to want something so bad it was almost a physical ache? Taylor pressed the accelerator, his heartbeat racing along with the revving of the engine. The tachometer needle bobbed higher, higher. His eyes closed and once more, he was out on the open road. No, this time he was at a stoplight, challenging Luke in his Corvette. Their engines roared in

competition. The light changed to green and he stomped on the accelerator, shooting out ahead of Luke.

He shook his head. *That'll never happen, but it's fun to dream.*

Opening his eyes, he noticed Luke standing in the doorway. Still dreaming? He blinked. No, Luke was real. The smirk should've been a clue; he'd never allow the Pukester to wear a lousy sneer like that in his dreams.

Taylor shut the car off. "What are you doing here?"

"This where you've been hiding every evening, skipping out of group Rec?" Luke sauntered over to the car, giving it a once over as if it were a hot chick. He worked his way from front to back, peeking inside.

Taylor pulled the keys and got out of the car. "Time for evening worship. I was just closing up."

"Liar." Luke's eyes dropped to the keys in Taylor's hand. "You've got the keys. Let's take her out. I bet she runs sweet."

Taylor's fingers curled around Roberto's keys. Luke had no clue how tempting his idea was. They could do a quick run around the parking lot. No one would know. And maybe it would shut Luke's mouth.

Luke opened the passenger door and stuck his foot in. "Come on. Let's go." Taylor didn't move. "What's the matter? You scared? This little pony too much for you to handle?"

Taylor sucked in a breath and shoved the keys in his pocket. "It's not ready to drive yet." He turned off the garage lights and reached for the button to close the overhead door. "Time to get out of here."

The bell rang for evening worship. Luke scowled and slammed the door shut. "You're just chicken, scared of the old man. He doesn't have to know." He laughed, but without humor. "What could he do even if he did find out?"

Taylor's jaw clenched and his fingers balled into a fist. Luke stepped out of the garage. Taylor pressed the button then ducked under the descending door. Luke waited, making no sign of leaving. Taylor wasn't

about to leave him here, even with the place locked up. “Aren’t you going to evening worship?”

“Yep, right after you.” Luke motioned for Taylor to lead the way.

Taylor started for the chapel, his blood sizzling. If Zeke had asked what was in his heart at the moment, he’d have to say hatred. Seeing Luke in the garage shattered his dream and fouled the whole place. That car had been his escape this week, the garage the only place he could go and not have to think about Luke or Marissa or Claire or anything else. Luke’s opinion of pony cars had been clear from Day One. So why the sudden interest in Roberto’s Mustang?

Taylor entered the chapel and threw himself into a seat next to Brady and Steven. They acknowledged him, but continued their conversation. Luke continued on to where Marissa was sitting and plopped down beside her. The worship band finished warming up and everyone stood to join in singing the first song.

Taylor rose too, but the image of Luke peering at him from the garage entrance replayed over and over in his mind, along with some ugly words.

Chicken. Scared of the old man.

Yeah, he was scared, but not the way Luke meant. Taylor hated the thought of disappointing Roberto, and not just because of the Mustang. Roberto accepted him, never made him feel stupid or worthless. Nobody at home trusted him with anything, but Roberto left him to close up the garage and take care of the car. As hard as it was to have the keys in his hand and not take it out for a test run, if Roberto said it wasn’t ready, he’d believe him.

The band finished their last song, and Taylor and the rest of the campers sat down. Zeke stood next to the jeweled box, resting one arm atop the lid.

“What’s in your heart? I’ve asked you that over and over this week. Have you discovered things you didn’t know were there? Did you find things you don’t want anyone to know about? Things you wouldn’t want

exposed?” He opened the lid of the box and pulled out a two-liter bottle filled with a dirty-looking liquid, holding it up for everyone to see. “Have you ever seen what comes out of the tap after the water’s been turned off for a while? It usually looks like this.” Zeke shook the bottle and the brown water swirled around inside. “When the water is turned back on, it gushes through the pipes, pushing out the sediment that has collected there. Anyone care to drink this?”

“Eeuw!” The campers voiced their disgust. “No!”

Taylor wrinkled his nose.

Zeke strolled down the aisle, giving everyone a closer look at the unappetizing water in the jar. “Would you wash your hands in this? What about your clothes?” He turned around and walked to the front of the chapel again. “‘Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.’ The water in this bottle symbolizes the words that come from your mouth. If you wouldn’t drink it, wash with it, or do your laundry in it, why should it come out of your mouth? Why permit dirty, disgusting and unhealthy words and thoughts to dwell in your heart?”

Zeke set the bottle on the table in front of the box. He reached inside again and this time, he pulled out a black balloon that had yet to be inflated. “Is your heart puffed up with pride?” He took a deep breath and blew into the balloon until it reached softball size. “Are you arrogant, with an inflated sense of your own importance?” He blew into it again, until the balloon was fat and round.

Taylor inhaled and exhaled along with Zeke. Before long, the balloon looked about to burst and Zeke held it high in the air.

“The Bible warns us to think soberly about our own worth and abilities, and to consider others as better than ourselves. That doesn’t fit with the general attitude of our competitive culture. Being puffed up with pride may not seem like a dangerous thing but, at some point, the bubble will burst. It might be a slow leak.” Zeke pinched and stretched the balloon’s neck until

it let out a high-pitched squeal. “Or sometimes, it happens all at once.” He released the balloon. It zoomed crazily over the first two rows before falling to the aisle floor. “What’s in your heart?”

Again, Zeke reached into the box. This time when he pulled out his hand, it was covered with green slime, the kind Taylor had made in grade school with detergent and glue. The director caught the drips with his other hand.

“What about jealousy and anger? Does jealousy seep into your relationships like mold that sickens and destroys? Does your anger get the best of you, so that it controls you more often than you control it? What’s in your heart?”

Zeke scraped the slime from his hands into a bowl that sat next to the bottle of dirty water. He wiped his hand on a towel, and once more withdrew something from the box. A mask. No, two masks. One was a clown face, the other a grotesque old man.

“Has lying and deceitfulness found a place in your heart? Does lying come easier than telling the truth? Or maybe you’re hiding behind a face you want the world to see.” He held up the clown mask, then raised the ugly one. “Do you play the clown or the tough guy to keep people from seeing what’s really inside, to mask some deep hurt and keep it from showing?”

Taylor crossed his arms, sliding his fingers between his arms and his ribs. His gaze dropped to the floor. Jealousy wasn’t his only problem. It was all there inside, everything Zeke talked about—the things he said to other kids, lying, deceit, pride, anger. Could he change? Give all that up? He glanced at Luke. *Not yet.*

Zeke dismissed them, and Taylor walked with Brady and Steven back to the cabins. He was glad Steven kept up a steady monologue so he didn’t have to say much. Brady veered off to his cabin and Taylor guided Steven into their cabin and the bunkroom. He checked his pocket again, feeling the lumpy, jagged outline of Roberto’s keys before dropping his shorts on the

heap of clothes atop his duffle bag. He wouldn't have to get up for another torture session with Harris tomorrow morning, but he'd need to hit the dining hall early to give Roberto's keys to Janie.

Luke entered the bunkroom. The sight of him still got Taylor's blood pumping. He dug out his magazine and paged through it to avoid the smirky looks Luke kept throwing at him. Even during devotions, the Puke grinned like he was keeping a secret. Planning to sneak out again to meet Marissa?

Good luck, Riss. I won't be there to bail you out this time. You're on your own.

With two minutes to go until lights out, Taylor hurried to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Luke stood at the first sink, his mouth curving into a foamy grin when he saw Taylor. He spit and rinsed his mouth, tapped his toothbrush against the sink and spoke to Taylor's image in the mirror. "How about we go for a ride tonight after everyone's asleep?"

Taylor ignored him, continuing to brush his teeth until his gums grew sore. When would the guy leave?

Hands on the counter, Luke leaned closer and wheedled. "Come on, I dare ya. Just around the parking lot. We'll have it back in the garage before anyone even knows we're out."

Taylor leaned over to spit, fighting the urge to spew in Luke's face. He rinsed his toothbrush and swiped his mouth a couple times before replying. "It's not ready to drive yet."

"What's not ready? You're just scared of the old man." Luke clucked like a chicken.

"And you're an idiot." Taylor pushed him aside and left the bathroom, gritting his teeth against the cackling noise Luke made behind him. The jerk. What does Marissa see in the guy?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A DARE, HUH? YOU'LL SEE. I'M NOT SCARED OF ROBERTO OR ANYONE ELSE.

The metal key cooled Taylor's hot fingers. The ignition caught, sending a thrill up his spine as the engine rumbled to life. His foot pressed the accelerator and he revved the engine once, twice, three times. He smiled at the Mustang's throaty roar. Ready, set, go! He stomped the accelerator to the floor and the car leaped forward.

Wait! The garage door's not open!

Taylor jerked upright in bed, eyes wide open, but seeing little in the sparse moonlight that made its way into the cabin. He gulped air into his lungs and waited for his heart to throttle back to idle speed. Sweat trickled down his chest. He expelled a breath and flopped back onto his pillow. Just a dream, but it was so real—the turn of the key, the pressure of the accelerator, the rumble of the engine.

Somewhere in the night, an engine growled, bringing Taylor upright again. This time, he was awake and that sound was real. Why would Roberto be working this late at night? It had to be well past midnight. And how did he get the key? A spare, maybe?

Taylor glanced at Luke's bunk. Empty. He scrambled out of bed, groping for his shorts. Where are they? He'd left them right there on top of his other clothes, but now they weren't there. He tossed t-shirts and other

items onto the bed, then stood up and looked all around. A dark lump of something lay in the bunkroom doorway. His shorts maybe? He went over and picked them up. How did they get over here?

Taylor stepped into them, feeling for the keys in the pocket. He thrust his hand deep inside, then patted the other pockets. No keys. His heart took off like a racecar in the home stretch. He dashed out the door, letting it slam behind him, and sprinted toward the garage. His bare feet stung from hitting stones and twigs hidden in the darkness, but he didn't stop until he reached the edge of the parking lot. Except for an occasional lightning bug, all was dark, the bay doors closed. The camp pick-up truck was parked off to one side as usual. Had he imagined it? Maybe Roberto had been there, but he'd closed up and gone home. Taylor stepped closer, his senses on high alert as he peered through the moonlit darkness, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Vrrooomm.

The garage door did little to muffle the sound that nearly lifted him off his feet. The bay door rose, its rollers grating in their tracks. Headlights flicked on, illuminating a figure scurrying around to the passenger's side. Marissa!

The car door slammed. If Rissa's in the passenger seat, Luke must be driving. The motor revved and the car charged out of the garage, tires squealing.

"No-o-oo!" Taylor ran toward the car, waving his arms in the air. The car jerked away from him, making a sharp turn into the parking lot before it swerved drunkenly onto the road that wound through camp.

"Marissa!" Taylor followed them on foot, but the car was going way too fast. He gasped, unable to close his eyes as the car came within inches of sideswiping a tree. The engine protested a downshift and the car slowed, but its speed was still too high for the narrow, winding service road. He'd never

catch up chasing them, but maybe if he cut across camp. The road angled around behind the girls' cabins and ended at the boat launch.

Taylor reached the road behind the girls' cabins as the Mustang approached. He stood in the middle of it, waving his hands. "Stop! Stop!"

The headlights blinded him. The horn blared and he jumped out of the way at the last second, the car barreling past him toward the lake. Marissa's screams rose above the engine noise, and Taylor swore. He had to stop them, had to keep Marissa from getting hurt. *Why doesn't he just cut the motor?*

The car crashed through the boat launch gate with a sickening crunch, then splashed into the lake. The sound stole Taylor's breath away. Dizziness threatened to knock him over, and he choked back the nausea that clawed up his throat. The car's engine died in the water. Taylor's heart nearly exploded in his chest.

Sudden silence sent Taylor sprinting down to the lake. Light from the full moon revealed the car at an angle with its nose in the lake. Water splashed the black stripes atop its hood.

Luke emerged from the driver's seat and bent over, looking back into the car. "Come on! Cut the tears and let's get out of here before we get caught."

Taylor splashed toward Luke, but Marissa's sobs drew him to her side of the car. Through the open window, he glimpsed his sister leaning forward, head in her hands. He screamed across the roof at Luke. "What have you done? You—"

"It doesn't have any brakes! Why didn't you tell me this piece of junk couldn't stop?" Luke sloshed through the water to the rear of the car.

"I told you it wasn't ready to drive." Taylor shouted, his gaze sweeping the car from front to back. "You won't get away with this. You are going to pay big time."

Luke laughed. “Me? Guess again, fool. Who had the keys in his pocket?” He splashed water onto the car’s trunk. “Marissa, you coming or not?”

“Nooo,” she moaned.

“She’s hurt!” Taylor yanked the door open. Water rushed in, soaking the already wet carpeting.

“I’m not waiting. You two are on your own. Have fun explaining why you stole a car.” Luke laughed and loped off up the boat ramp, disappearing into the shadows.

Taylor swore under his breath and pulled Marissa around so he could see her face in the moonlight.

“Ooow.” She cried and doubled over. Her bloody face and hands looked ghoulish in the moonlight.

Taylor pried her hands away and dunked them in the water. “Splash a little water on your face to wash the blood off.” He waited then encouraged her to wipe it off with her t-shirt. The moonlight exposed on a gash in her forehead.

Voices from somewhere on the hill above them drew their attention. Two lights bobbed toward them. Taylor pulled Marissa from the car. “You gotta get out of here.”

“I can’t. My head really hurts.” She whined and stumbled into him.

Taylor grabbed her by the shoulders and pressed the tip of his nose to hers. “You don’t have a choice. Dad will kill you if he finds out about this. Now go!” He stepped aside and pushed her toward the shore. “Stay in the shadows and go back the way you did the other night. Don’t make any noise.”

Marissa looked back at him, one hand clutching her forehead. Moonlit tears glistened on her cheeks. She sniffed. “Taybo, the car. I’m so sorry.” Another sob escaped her lips.

“Shhh! Get out of here. Hurry!”

Marissa staggered into the shadow of the tree where Taylor'd been caught two nights before and he turned his attention to the car. He had to get it out of the water. Maybe Paul and his God Squad buddy would help him push it back up onto shore. Footsteps pounded down the steps to the boathouse. Flashlight beams jumped crazily across the water, catching Taylor in their glare. He couldn't see a thing, but he knew the voice.

"You again?" Paul aimed his flashlight full in Taylor's face. "Didn't you—"

"Hey." His buddy interrupted him. "Isn't that Roberto's Mustang?" His flashlight played over the car.

Taylor shaded his eyes with his hands. "Yeah, it's Roberto's. Cut the light and help me get it out of the water."

Paul's flashlight splayed across the car. "Oh, man, he's gonna freak."

"C'mon, help me push it out." Taylor waded around to the front and lowered his shoulder against the damaged front end. He threw all his weight against it, but the car barely moved. Paul and the other guy kicked off their shoes and waded into the water.

Playing his flashlight around the interior, Paul asked, "How'd you get the keys?"

"Roberto left them with me." Taylor pushed against the car again.

"Yeah, right." Paul reached inside the car. "Hang on. Let me put it in neutral." He shifted, then closed the door and got into position to push from the side. His buddy moved to the front with Taylor. "You guys ready? On three. One, two, three."

The car crept backward until all four tires rested on dry ground. Paul reached in and pushed the gearshift to park.

Easing up and away from the car, Taylor expelled a breath. No telling how much damage the water had already done to the engine. He winced as the moonlight accented the dents and scratches from the gate. A flashlight beam hit him in the eyes again.

“Now, you want to tell me how you got the keys, and why you took Roberto’s car for a joyride?”

Taylor focused on a knot in the wood floor beside Zeke’s desk and refused to answer the second question. Fingering Luke meant bringing Marissa into the blame as well, and he couldn’t let that happen. Even with Roberto thinking the worst of him. Even with Zeke calling the police.

How many hours had passed since Paul brought him to Zeke’s office? Taylor rubbed his eyes. They felt grainy and sore and he desperately wanted to close them, to sleep. Maybe when he woke up, this nightmare would end.

Despite the early morning hour, Zeke had called Roberto. The older man shuffled into the office and sank onto the other chair in front of Zeke’s desk. Roberto’s unshaven face lacked its customary cheerfulness. Droopy eyes, knitted brow and a serious frown replaced his elation from the previous evening. He balanced on the edge of the chair, shoulders rounded, hands clasped between his knees. Yes, he’d left in a hurry and forgot the keys, but trusted Taylor to keep them until the next day.

Taylor kept his face averted. He couldn’t stand to see the hurt and betrayal he expected in Roberto’s eyes.

You dirt bag, Luke. You beat me. With Marissa involved, Luke knew he was safe. He knew Taylor would never allow her to be linked with trouble.

Zeke took off his reading glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He leaned back in his chair and spoke to Roberto. “I’ve asked the boys to tow the car back up to the shed as soon as it’s light enough. You can look it over and decide what needs to be done. I’m so sorry, Roberto. I could’ve prevented this.”

Roberto’s protest was cut short by the phone. Zeke answered it, gave a quick okay and hung up. “Deputy Scott is on his way.”

Dad was right. I'll go to jail, just like Jesse. Except I didn't do anything wrong!

Roberto's chair creaked as he shifted his weight. "I do no' want to press charges."

Taylor lifted his head. For the first time, he dared to look at Roberto. He'd never seen the man in anything other than his tan work uniform, but here he sat in jean shorts and a white t-shirt.

"Are you certain?" Zeke asked. "Stealing a car, even on private property, is a serious matter."

Roberto straightened, threw his shoulders back, and planted his hands firmly on his knees. "No. No charges."

"You've put a tremendous amount of money and work into that car, Roberto." Zeke leaned forward, elbows on his desk. "I admire what you tried to do here with Taylor, but he needs to understand the seriousness of his actions."

"He did not drive the car into the water."

"He was caught red-handed," Zeke argued. "There was no one else around when the boys found him. He was trying to get the car out of the lake by himself."

Roberto turned his head, meeting Taylor's gaze. His voice was quiet, but firm. "I do not believe it."

Taylor's pulse thundered in his ears. Roberto's eyes held no hint of doubt or condemnation. Unable to breathe, he stared at the floor again. All the evidence pointed to him. How could Roberto not believe it? What if they discovered the truth? What if Marissa got in trouble after all? He couldn't let that happen, even if he ended up in jail. *Better me than her.*

"I did it." Taylor blurted it out. Both men regarded him in stunned silence. He faced Roberto, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I am really sorry. I wasn't trying to steal it. I just—I couldn't wait to see how it felt to drive it."

Roberto said nothing. A shadow clouded his eyes and he exchanged glances with Zeke.

Taylor pressed his lips together to stop the quivering, and blinked hard against the moisture in his eyes. Keeping Marissa out of trouble meant betraying the kindest man he'd ever met. *Why did it have to be this way?* He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands.

Roberto stood, his steps heavy as he came close and squeezed Taylor's shoulder before shuffling out the door. It wasn't a vise grip, like Dad would've given him, but a firm, gentle squeeze that communicated—what? Not anger. Grief, maybe, but more like encouragement, forgiveness—like Brady's comment at lunch. Forgiveness? After he'd confessed to stealing the car and driving it into the lake?

Taylor's gut tightened like a spring about to snap. Doubled over, nauseous, he clenched his teeth and pictured every single one of his dreams crashing into the lake and sinking, just like Roberto's Mustang.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZEKE'S CHAIR SQUEAKED AND HIS HANDS CAME TO REST ON TAYLOR'S shoulders. *Was he praying?* It didn't matter. Not even prayer could help him now. He might as well get used to the idea of going to jail—not finishing school, not getting his driver's license, not seeing his friends or Marissa or his family for a long time. He breathed deep, blinking back the wetness in his eyes.

Zeke prayed the Lord's Prayer aloud. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Taylor straightened and drew in a shuddering breath as he dragged his fingers down his face to get rid of any telltale moisture. Someone rang the bell to wake up the campers. If only he could wake up too, but the nightmare continued.

A sheriff's deputy in a brown uniform rapped on the door of Zeke's office.

"Morning, Zeke. Kind of early in the day for problems, isn't it?" He assumed a wide-legged stance, hooking his thumbs into the front of his belt. His head tipped sideways to observe Taylor.

Zeke rose to his feet, but kept one hand on Taylor's shoulder. "I'm afraid so. Deputy Scott, this is Taylor Dixon. It seems he went for a joy ride last night in a car that belongs to my facilities manager—a 1970 Mustang he's been restoring. A couple of my security guys found Taylor with the car down at the lake He'd driven it into the water."

Deputy Scott moved closer and half sat on the edge of Zeke's desk. "How old are you, Taylor?"

"Fifteen."

"Are you in driver's ed?"

Taylor shook his head, keeping his eyes averted.

The officer folded his arms across his chest. "What made you decide to take the car?"

Taylor lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug.

Zeke's voice was gentle, prodding. "Go ahead and tell him, son. You've got nothing to lose."

Taylor swallowed hard. "I wasn't stealing it."

"Why'd you drive it into the lake?"

"I didn't mean to drive it into the lake. It wouldn't stop. The brakes aren't connected."

"You didn't know about the brakes?" Zeke asked.

"No. Roberto kept saying it wasn't ready to drive yet, but he never mentioned the brakes."

Deputy Scott took a notepad out of his shirt pocket. "And you did this all by yourself? Not to show off to a friend or a girl maybe?"

Taylor shook his head.

The officer addressed Zeke. "I'll need to talk with Roberto. Is he around?"

"He was here, but he left. He doesn't want to press charges."

"Well, if he doesn't want to pursue it, there's not much I can do since it was on private property."

“What do you suggest then?”

Officer Scott stood. “Let’s all take a walk out to my patrol car. I want to show Taylor something.”

Taylor pushed to his feet. His legs shook, threatening to collapse as he followed the officer out the door. Zeke trailed behind them. The squad car was parked in front of the Snack Shack, where everyone would see it on the way to breakfast. A few early birds had already stopped to check their Rec assignments. They hurried out of the way as soon as they saw Taylor with the deputy, but took their time getting to the dining hall, casting curious looks over their shoulders every few steps.

Mechanical voices chattered on the car’s radio when Deputy Scott opened the rear door.

“Take a look, Taylor,” he said. “This is where you’ll be sitting if Roberto changes his mind.”

Facing the car, Taylor shut his eyes, but he couldn’t keep out images of what lay ahead for him, nor the memories of Jesse being put into a patrol car. He opened his eyes and looked inside, noticing the steel reinforcements on the back of the front seats. The clear protective shield between the officer in front and the prisoner in back. No handle on the door and no window control meant no escape. Taylor drew his shoulders in close, crossing his arms tight across his chest. How long would they make him stand here staring at this portable prison cell?

A familiar laugh cackled in the morning quiet. From the corner of his eye, Taylor saw Luke approaching with another kid from the cabin.

“Oh, look! Someone’s in trouble.” Luke’s sing-songy voice sparked heat in Taylor’s cheeks. Zeke urged Luke on his way while Deputy Scott took Taylor by the arm and guided him into the back seat of the patrol car. The seat was hard, some type of uncomfortable molded plastic. There was barely enough room for his legs, and the ceiling was low, giving the back seat a cramped feel. Would they handcuff him, too?

A scream split the air. “Taybo! No! No! You can’t arrest him. He didn’t do it.” Marissa tore away from Claire’s side to push between Zeke and Deputy Scott.

Taylor jumped from the car. He grabbed Marissa by the shoulders, barely noticing the angry gash on her forehead, and spoke through clenched teeth. “Shut up, Rissa! Shut up. Don’t say anything.”

Marissa ignored him, turning her head and reaching for the officer. “You can’t arrest him.” She twisted out of Taylor’s grip and grabbed the deputy’s arm. “He didn’t do anything. It was my fault. Please don’t arrest him.”

Taylor went after her. “She’s lying. Don’t listen to her. Marissa, shut up!”

Zeke took Marissa’s hands in his while Officer Scott restrained Taylor. Claire watched in wide-eyed silence.

“Calm down,” Zeke ordered. “No one is arresting Taylor. At least, not yet.”

Marissa struggled to free herself from Zeke’s grasp, still pleading with Deputy Scott. “You can’t arrest him. He didn’t take the car. Taylor would never do that.” Tears streamed down her cheeks and dripped from her chin. Hair clung to her wet cheeks and she used her shoulder to brush it away. “Please! Let Taylor go. He didn’t do it.”

“Marissa.” Zeke’s calm voice brought her attention back to him. “Do you know who took the car?”

“Yes, it was Luke. Taylor had nothing to do with it.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MARISSA'S PLEAS DREW THE ATTENTION OF MORE CAMPERS ON THEIR WAY to breakfast. Zeke assured her that Taylor wasn't being arrested.

"But I think we need to sort this out in my office." He released Marissa, turned and nearly bumped into Claire. "You're not part of this, too, are you?"

Claire's head moved side to side, her eyes big as Rustic Knoll's dinner plates.

"She helped me last night," Marissa pointed to her forehead, "helped me clean up the blood after I got back to the cabin."

Zeke took a good look at her wound. "What happened?"

"I hit my head when the car went into the lake." Marissa reached out and clung to Claire's arm. "We were going to see Nurse Willie when I saw Taylor there in the car."

"All right, Claire, you'd better come too." Zeke led the way to his office.

Taylor pulled away from the officer. Anything he said would be overheard by Zeke and the deputy, so Taylor hurried to Marissa's side and shot her a warning glance. One arm still linked with Claire's, Marissa slipped her other arm through his. Did she misunderstand? Or was she

trying to suck up to him? Taylor jerked away and put some distance between them.

The five of them crowded into Zeke's office. Taylor and Marissa took the two armchairs and Zeke offered Claire his own padded desk chair. Officer Scott closed the door. Zeke stood at his desk. "Now, tell me what happened last night."

Marissa sniffed. "Taylor didn't do anything wrong." She glanced sideways at Taylor, then kept her eyes downcast. Her hands and fingers twisted in her lap and her chin quivered. She sniffed again. "It was Luke who took the car out. He told me to meet him at the garage at midnight. Said we'd go for a ride in the Mustang."

Zeke interrupted. "How did Luke get the key?"

Marissa shrugged and looked at Taylor. All eyes fastened on him.

"Taylor," Zeke asked, "do you know how Luke got the key?"

Taylor sat on his hands. Everything was falling apart. He might as well tell the truth. At least he wouldn't be going to jail, but Dad's reaction to this whole mess might make him wish for a jail cell.

"I had Roberto's keys in my shorts pocket. Luke must've taken them while I was sleeping."

"You had the keys because Roberto left quickly and asked you to close up, right? How did Luke know about the key and where you put it?" Zeke half-sat on his desk.

"He showed up at the garage last night after Roberto left. I was closing up. I'm sure he saw me put them in my pocket. He tried to get me to take the car out then, but I told him it wasn't ready yet."

Zeke's forefinger brushed his mustache as he switched his gaze to Marissa. "What happened when you met Luke?"

"He was waiting for me and he had a key that unlocked the side door. He showed me the button that opens the garage door and told me to open it as soon as he got the car started. It took him a few tries, but when he got it

running, I opened the door and we took off.” Marissa shivered and wrapped her arms around her waist. “He floored it right away, and we were going so fast. We almost hit a tree. I screamed for him to slow down, but he yelled at me that the brakes weren’t working. I think he made it slow down a little with the gear shift, but he needed both hands just to steer, to keep it on the road.”

Marissa’s face scrunched up and tears squeezed from beneath her closed eyelids. Her hands flew up to cover her mouth and her voice rose to a tiny, bird-like pitch. “I was so scared. We hit that gate and then all of a sudden, we were in the water. I thought I was going to die. I’m so sorry.” She clutched her middle and bent over, burying her face in her knees. Her shoulders shook.

Claire slipped from her seat and knelt beside Marissa. Her arms encircled the sobbing girl.

Zeke’s eyes shifted to Taylor. “Is this the truth?”

Taylor pressed his lips together and nodded. “I think so. As far as I know.” He glanced up long enough to see Zeke’s serious expression soften.

“Why did you tell Roberto you took the car?”

“So Marissa wouldn’t get caught. If I told on Luke, I knew he’d say Marissa was with him. I couldn’t let her get in trouble.”

The director’s white eyebrows drew together. “Why not?”

“Because I’m responsible for her.”

“Who made you responsible for Marissa?”

“Mom and Dad.” Taylor shrugged. “I’ve always had to watch out for her.”

Zeke frowned. “And you’d take the blame for stealing a car rather than let her get caught?”

Taylor frowned and nodded, bringing on a fresh flood of tears from Marissa. Zeke offered Marissa a box of tissues. Claire sat on the floor at Marissa’s feet, holding her hand.

Zeke and Deputy Scott exchanged looks, then Zeke asked, “Marissa, if we question Luke and he says something different—”

“If he says something different, he’s lying.” Marissa sat up straight and took a deep breath. She looked at Taylor. “I should’ve listened to you. Both times, he left me alone and let you take the blame.” She dabbed her eyes, then blew her nose.

Zeke held up his hand. “Wait. Both times?”

Marissa hung her head. “I met Luke down at the lake Tuesday night. Taylor showed up and told me to go back to the cabin.”

The white eyebrows reached high on his forehead. “And Taylor took the blame for that, too.” Zeke continued rubbing his mustache as he looked from Marissa to Taylor. “Come with me. Let’s go see if we can find Luke.” He waited for everyone to stand, then led the way to the dining hall.

Upon entering the hall, Taylor’s gaze swept across the spacious room, searching the campers at each table.

Marissa stood beside him on tiptoes and pointed to a table near the center of the room. “That’s him in the blue t-shirt with his back to us.”

Zeke instructed everyone to wait there while he went to talk with Luke. He weaved around the breakfast tables and leaned down to speak into Luke’s ear.

Luke nodded and stood up. He picked up his tray, but set it back on the table when Zeke said something. He started toward the dining room exit, but as soon as he caught sight of Taylor and Marissa, he slowed almost to a stop. From behind, Zeke urged him forward and almost instantly, his narrowed eyes opened wide and his lips relaxed into a lazy smile. He walked up to Deputy Scott and extended his hand. “Good morning, Officer.”

Zeke kept his hand on Luke’s shoulder while giving instructions to Taylor and the girls. “You kids get some breakfast while we talk to Luke.

Claire, you can go on to Bible study when you're finished. Taylor and Marissa, wait for me here."

The buzz of conversation in the dining hall intensified as Zeke and Deputy Scott escorted Luke out the door. Taylor exhaled, the tension in his shoulders easing away in a slow melt. He and Marissa and Claire said little as they made their way through the buffet line. Nothing looked appetizing. The events of the last several hours had left his stomach as unsettled as his brain. And what if Janie came out of the kitchen? Did she know about the car yet? He grabbed a couple individual boxes of cereal and a carton of milk and hustled away from the serving line.

Marissa and Claire sat at a table well away from anyone else, and Taylor joined them, his back to the rest of the room. The last thing he wanted was to answer questions from Nick or any of the other kids who might have seen him sitting in the cop car. He emptied the cereal into a bowl, poured milk on it and put a spoonful in his mouth. It tasted like cardboard. Maybe it would go down easier if he poured more milk on it.

Marissa and Claire huddled close, both totally focused on their plates though they didn't seem to be eating much either. No one spoke until Claire stood up, mumbled "See you later," and left the table.

Marissa toyed with the last few bites of her French toast and eggs. "What'll happen to me, Taybo? Do you think I'll go to jail?"

Taylor shrugged and lifted one eyebrow. "Who knows?" He gave up on the cereal and pushed the bowl away. "Why'd you do it?"

Marissa frowned and pushed little pieces of French toast around her plate with her fork. "I really wanted Luke to like me."

"I know that. But why'd you tell? You shouldn't have said anything. They didn't know a thing about you and Luke."

Marissa gave him that look, like he was the dumbest thing alive. "They were going to arrest you. It's bad enough Jesse's in prison. How could I let you go to jail for something I did? I'd never be able to live with that." She

shoved her tray aside, crossed her arms on the table and hid her face in them.

The sniffles told him she was crying again. She'd finally owned up to doing something stupid, but Taylor's mouth went dry imagining Dad's reaction. He'd never get his license now.

The dining hall had cleared out by the time Zeke walked in. Marissa raised her head as he pulled up a chair and laid his hands flat on the table, fingers splayed with thumbs touching. "Luke admitted taking the car, but he won't say anything else. During the day when he's not in session, he'll be confined to my office. Harris is with him now, gathering some things from the cabin. I'll be calling both his and your parents and asking them to meet with me tomorrow when they come to pick you up." Zeke slid one hand in Marissa's direction. "You understand what you and Luke did was wrong?"

She sniffed and nodded.

"Not only wrong, but dangerous and foolish as well."

"I know." The last word trailed off into more tears. "I'm so sorry. What's going to happen to me?"

"You're fortunate Roberto still refuses to press charges, but I'll be asking Luke's and your parents to share the cost of repairs to the car."

Taylor's stomach sank. He let go his last hope of getting his driver's license anytime soon.

Zeke continued talking to Marissa. "You'll need to apologize to Roberto. And I'd like to talk with you some more, but we'll wait until this afternoon." He slid his other hand toward Taylor. "I've told Roberto how everything happened. He said he knew all along you didn't take the car. And I owe you an apology. I was quick to judge you guilty based on our previous encounters. I'm sorry, Taylor, and I beg your forgiveness."

Taylor straightened. Zeke apologizing to him? Asking his forgiveness?

"Um, sure. No problem."

“There’s something I want both of you to understand. Whatever your family agreement has been in the past, Marissa, you’re old enough now to know right from wrong. It’s time for you to start making wise decisions. And Taylor, the more you cover up for your sister, the longer it will take her to learn that poor choices have ugly consequences. I admire your willingness to protect her, but part of growing up is learning to accept the results of our actions. Give your sister some room and let her grow into the beautiful and responsible young lady she was meant to be.” He looked from one to the other. “Understood?”

Taylor nodded. *Tell that to Dad when you ask him to help pay for the car.*

“Okay, then.” Zeke pushed back his chair and stood up. “Go put your dishes away and head on to Bible study. Marissa, come see me at lunch time and we’ll go talk to Roberto.”

Taylor put his tray on the conveyor belt behind Marissa’s and followed her outside.

“Are you going back to get your Bible?” she asked.

“No, I’m going to find Roberto.”

“But Zeke just told us to go to Bible study.”

Taylor ignored her and kept walking toward the garage.

“Taybo, didn’t you just hear what Zeke said about making wise decisions?”

“Yeah.” He faced her, walking backward. “He said that to you. I need to ask Roberto something.” He left Marissa and jogged off toward the garage. Had they towed the car back yet? He’d seen the damage under last night’s full moon. How much worse would it be in daylight?

Taylor halted at the edge of the parking lot. All the bay doors were closed, the camp pickup truck gone. Where was Roberto? He needed to find him, needed the answer to one question.

Why did he believe in me when everything and everyone said I was guilty?

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A CHUGGING SOUND GREW LOUDER AND TAYLOR PEERED DOWN THE SERVICE road. The Rustic Knoll pickup topped the rise and turned into the parking lot. Roberto's elbow hung out the driver's side window. Paul and his buddy rode in the back, keeping watch over the Mustang in tow. Roberto circled in front of the garage, positioning the Mustang to slip back into its bay. The guys jumped down from the back, opened the garage door and directed Roberto as he backed the Mustang into the garage. Taylor ran up while they were unhitching it.

Paul stopped and glared at him. "What are you doing here? Didn't you see enough last night?"

Roberto shushed him. "He did not do this."

"Yeah, right." Paul took a step toward Taylor, but Roberto blocked his way.

"Finish what you are doing." Roberto stood beside Taylor while Paul returned to freeing the car from the back of the truck.

Seeing the damage in daylight brought a lump to Taylor's throat that made it difficult to talk. Dents and scratches marred the hood. The flattened chrome bumper had taken the brunt of the gate's bottom crossbar. The grille was smashed and one headlamp shattered. Who knew how bad the engine might be after sitting in water?

As soon as the car was unhitched, the guys drove off in the pickup. Taylor swallowed hard, unable to take his eyes off the car. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Roberto twisted his head to look at Taylor. “Why do you apologize? Is not your fault.”

“Yes, it is.” Taylor shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “I should’ve left when you did last night, but I stayed around, sat in the car and turned it on. If I’d left, Luke wouldn’t have found me here. He wouldn’t have known I had the key. Or maybe I should’ve given the key to Zeke instead of waiting to give it to you.” He couldn’t meet the older man’s gaze.

Roberto moved to stand in front of Taylor. “You did nothing wrong. He took the key from your pocket. He is the one who drove the car to the lake.”

Taylor raised his eyes to Roberto’s. “Why were you so sure it wasn’t me? You knew I wanted to try out the car. All the evidence pointed to me, but you didn’t believe it. How did you know I didn’t take it?”

A smile creased Roberto’s face. “Because I see what is here.” His calloused forefinger tapped Taylor’s chest near his heart. “You love car too much to do this.”

“But how—how did you know?”

Roberto shuffled over to the Mustang, lifted the damaged hood and propped it open, then moved aside and beckoned Taylor to join him. Leaning his bronze forearms on the left fender, he pointed to the engine.

“You remember the pictures?” He jerked his thumb at the photo album above the workbench. “The first ones?”

Taylor nodded. Those first pictures, taken shortly after Roberto bought the car, showed an engine so filthy a mouse had even built a nest in it.

Roberto pointed to the engine again. “Is same engine as in pictures. I take apart, clean, rebuild. Now, is like new.” He pointed to his chest. “Same with my heart. Your heart. We get dirty, plugged up. But God—He take our

heart, sometimes He break it apart, clean it, restore it. Just like engine.” His gaze roamed over the car. “You and car both need repair, restore. Si?”

Taylor turned that over in his mind. With a car and an engine, that made sense, but was it really the same with people? “How does that explain—I mean, I lied to your face. Even when I said I wrecked the car, you didn’t believe me. Why?”

Roberto chewed his lip a moment then asked, “Why you say you take it?”

Taylor raked his hair back from his face. He paced to the workbench. “If I had ratted on Luke, he would’ve told everyone Marissa was with him. I couldn’t let her get in trouble.”

“Why not?”

Why not? Hadn’t he told her he wouldn’t bail her out anymore? Was he so used to protecting her, like a habit he couldn’t break? No, his reason was much more serious. If he lost Marissa, there’d be no one who believed in his dreams. Could he admit to that?

Taylor shrugged. “I’ve always watched out for her, ever since I can remember.”

“And you would go to jail for her?”

Taylor inhaled a shaky breath. That was a close call, but yes, he’d have gone to jail in her place.

Roberto’s hand gripped his shoulder, turning him so they stood face to face. “Your sister too is like dirty engine, no? Always giving trouble?”

Taylor’s mouth pulled up on one side, imagining Marissa’s reaction to being called a dirty engine, but Roberto got the trouble part right.

“And you would take punishment for her. You would go to prison so she does not have to, si?”

Taylor nodded, still trying to figure out where this was going.

“You would do for her what Jesus did for us, for you. Not prison, but a cross.” Again, he tapped his fingers against Taylor’s chest. “Is good heart in

there, like good engine, but needs work—cleaning, rebuilding to make like new. Restore. Ask Jesus to clean it, make it new. He is waiting for you to ask.”

Now the pieces were fitting together. Taylor recalled Zeke’s words from last night. He hadn’t paid close attention, but he did remember Zeke reading a Psalm, one that King David had written after his affair with Bathsheba and the arranged murder of her husband. Pretty bad stuff compared to what Taylor had done. But David asked God to forgive him, to wash his heart and make it clean, to restore his heart.

Roberto looked him square in the eye. “Comprende?”

“Yeah, I understand what you’re saying, but how does it happen? I mean, how does Jesus do that—restore a heart?”

Roberto dropped his hand from Taylor’s shoulder and shrugged. “Is a mystery. You ask. Find out.” He turned back to the car and opened the door. Leaning in, he pressed his hand into the carpet. Water squished up between his fingers.

Taylor followed him, peeking over his shoulder. “Will you have to replace all that new carpet?”

Roberto pursed his lips. “Maybe not, if I take out, clean and lay in sun to dry.”

“I’ll help. The sooner we take the seats out, the sooner we can pull that carpet out and get it drying.”

Roberto checked his watch. “You are supposed to be in Bible study, no?”

Taylor shrugged. “It’s kind of late to join my group. Besides, it’s the last day and I just had the best lesson of the week from you.”

Roberto chuckled. “One time, Zeke will not mind. Let’s work.”

The bell was calling campers to lunch by the time Taylor and Roberto finished pulling out the carpet and laying it out in the sun to dry. Nick was at the cabin when Taylor ran back to change the clothes he'd been wearing since late last night. Actually, he'd worn them most of yesterday, too. No wonder they'd developed their own fragrance.

Nick barely took a breath when he saw Taylor. "Where've you been? Why were you sitting in that sheriff's car? Someone said that old guy's Mustang was in the lake. Did you take it? I couldn't believe you'd do something like that. What's going on?"

Taylor filled Nick in on everything while he threw on a different t-shirt and shorts. Sliding his feet into flip-flops, he rubbed his growling stomach. "Come on, let's go eat."

As they neared the dining hall, the spot where the police car had been parked stirred all the emotions from the long night. Everything from anger and fear to hope and gratitude. He wouldn't face Dad's wrath for stealing a car, but what about Dad's reaction when he found out Marissa was involved? Taylor shuddered and set the thought aside. He'd worry about that later. Right now, he had to get through lunch and all the curious stares from the other campers. He never wanted to see the back seat of a police car again. Ever.

Whose idea was it to smear lard all over a watermelon, throw it in the lake and make forty or more campers try to hold onto it long enough to lift it onto the pier?

Taylor's hands clamped around the sides of the slippery oversized football, but it squirted away. He let it go and watched the others chase it. Chasing a greased watermelon around the swimming area was stupid. The whole water carnival seemed pointless compared to thinking he was going

to jail for something he didn't do, then being found not guilty. Or maybe he was just tired after being up all night.

Now and then, he caught a glimpse of Claire in the middle of the action, but Taylor stayed on the edge of the crowd, following the massive jumble of shrieking campers from one side of the shallow swim area to the other. Both teams fought to move the watermelon toward their goal, while the lifeguard paced back and forth on the pier, whistle clamped between his teeth.

At last, the other team hoisted the watermelon onto the pier, and the lifeguard blew a blast on his whistle. Claire waded out of the water, holding up her greasy hands and grimacing at the slippery mess on her swimsuit. "Gross!" She shook the sand from her towel before wiping her hands on it and wrapping it around her waist.

Taylor slung his towel around his neck and they walked up to the grassy hill above the beach.

Claire shaded her eyes from the bright afternoon sun. "I was looking for you earlier. Wanted you to do the canoe race with me, but I couldn't find you."

Taylor had turned around to watch the lake, but snapped his focus back to Claire. "Seriously? You wanted me in your canoe after what I did to you last year?"

"Sure!" Her cheeks dimpled as she smiled. "I figured you wouldn't dump me out if we were both in the same canoe."

Taylor smiled, then fastened his gaze on the lake before him. The water sparkled in the afternoon sunshine, but he didn't really see it. Instead, his mind bounced from image to image—the car nose-deep in the lake, the back seat of the police car and Marissa's tearful confession, the engine as a picture of his heart. And over it all hung Zeke's question, *What's in your heart?* It was just like Roberto said. His heart was like a dirty, old, plugged up engine that needed cleaning and restoring. He turned to Claire. "I'm sorry about last year."

Claire studied him for several moments before she spoke. “Okay, I’ve been trying to decide if you’ve changed since last year or if I just understand you a little better after knowing Marissa.”

Taylor tugged on the ends of his towel. “And? What’d you decide?”

“After what I heard this morning, I think there’s a pretty cool guy hiding in there somewhere. You should let him out more often.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AFRAID OF FALLING ASLEEP BEFORE THE FINAL CAMPFIRE WAS OVER, Taylor searched for someone to sit with. He scanned the circular rows of campers, their faces lit by the fire's dancing orange glow. No use sitting next to Nick. With camp ending tomorrow, his buddy would be so focused on Alex, he probably wouldn't even know Taylor was there. Who else could he sit with? Claire? Nope, not with Marissa beside her. In a section across from them, Taylor spotted some room near Steven and Brady. He slid in next to Brady. "Hey, nice job at the talent show."

"What?" Brady's voice held disbelief.

Steven leaned forward and spoke across Brady. "I thought you weren't impressed with trumpet solos."

"That was last year." Taylor glanced at Brady. "This year is different."

The corners of Brady's mouth curved up. "Thanks. I heard about Luke and the car. Good thing your sister bailed you out." A couple counselors strummed their guitars and Brady turned his attention to the music.

Was it a good thing Marissa bailed him out? Not going to jail was a good thing, but they still had to face Dad tomorrow. He tugged his sweaty shirt away from his back. The air was already warm, too warm for a campfire. Moisture in the burning wood hissed and crackled. The flames licked higher, sending a narrow plume of smoke up into the night sky. The

odor of bug spray overwhelmed the smoky smell, with little air circulation where he sat in the middle of this crowd of campers.

Running lights from a motorboat crossed the lake, its low hum audible only during a break in the music. Taylor's gaze followed a spark drifting away from the fire until it burned out, then reignited. *Guess that was a lightning bug, not a spark.* Harris, along with Luke, squeezed in next to him and Taylor scooted closer to Brady. Taylor hunched his shoulders together, even more uncomfortable than before.

Harris leaned toward him. "Zeke filled me in on what happened. I guess I owe you an apology. I worked you hard that one morning for making me lose sleep. Forgive me. I'm sorry about the car, too."

Taylor shrugged. "It's okay." Would it have made any difference if he'd told Harris the truth? Doubt it, but it was nice to hear him admit he was wrong.

The guitars continued playing softly in the background while a counselor stood up to speak. "All week, Zeke has been asking what's in your heart. Have you answered that question? Have you found any of the stuff he's talked about—jealousy, selfishness, foul language?" He held up his Bible. "It says here all of us have sinned and fallen short of what God requires. Every last one of us, and it's impossible to please God that way. But the cool thing about God is that He still loves us, even in our filth and our greed and when we only think about ourselves. He loves us too much to make us suffer the punishment we deserve. That's why He sent Jesus, His own son, to take our punishment. When we believe that, when we trust that He loved us enough to do that, God doesn't see the mess anymore when He looks at our heart. He sees Jesus on the cross and says, 'My child, you are forgiven.' We may still feel guilty, but Romans 8:1-2 says there is no condemnation for those who trust in Jesus' sacrifice, because He has set us free from the law that requires punishment for our sin."

That's what Roberto was saying this morning. Hard to believe, after all the stuff he'd done to Luke, Brady and the others—after all the mean things he'd said—God could still love him. Dad's unending criticism and punishment made it hard to imagine the kind of God Roberto and Zeke and the others talked about. Dad probably loved him. Didn't he? He never hesitated to punish Taylor when it looked like he'd done something wrong. Or when Marissa did something wrong.

Brady elbowed him. "Hey, isn't that your sister?"

Marissa? *Why is she standing up?* Taylor mentally backtracked. He hadn't been paying attention, but he'd heard enough to recall the counselor's request for personal stories. *Oh, no.*

Marissa's small but determined voice rang out in the darkness, her face lit by the campfire's ever changing flames. "This is my first year at camp, but it has made a huge change in my life. I've been pretty much all about myself, doing what I wanted to do no matter how it affected other people. I like having fun, especially if it's something a little daring. But this week, I saw what that was doing to me and to—someone I love." She sniffed and wiped her eyes. A smile flitted across her face as she glanced Taylor's way. "Don't worry, I won't embarrass you."

Taylor ducked behind the kid sitting in front of him.

"I made some really stupid choices and," Marissa's voice rose and quivered, "I expected someone else to take the punishment for me, because that's how it's always worked out. But this week, I saw how selfish I've been and how much that hurts people I love. So from now on, I'm going to make better choices. Jesus already took my punishment, just like my bro—I mean, someone else always did. I'm believing what the Bible says so I can become someone new." Marissa sat down. She received an immediate hug from Claire and applause from the rest of the campers.

Taylor waited until someone else stood before he dared sit up straight. Brady and Harris both nudged him and nodded their approval, while Luke

sat stone-faced.

Marissa got it. She understood what Roberto was telling him this morning, what Zeke and the counselors had been saying all week. Envy over her quick understanding pricked Taylor's heart like the mosquito on his foot. He stomped and reached down to scratch the itch. Roberto's words came back to him. *You would do for her what Jesus did for you.*

Taylor lifted his eyes to the lake beyond the campfire. Lights twinkled along the opposite shore, bigger and brighter than the thousands of stars overhead. He blocked out the campfire, the kid speaking, Brady and Harris on either side of him and stared at the lights and the stars above them.

God, I don't know how this works, but I know what I was willing to do to keep Rissa out of trouble. And if I'd do that for her, I guess maybe you'd do the same for me. I hope you love me like everyone says, because I'm as messed up as Roberto's old engine. Right now, I'm asking you to clean out my heart, or my gut, or my life. Whatever. I was expecting the worst punishment, but Roberto believed in me and Rissa cared enough about me to save me from that punishment. So, I'm going to believe in Jesus and trust You to do what the Bible says you'll do.

Taylor drew in a long breath and let it out slowly. Now what? Was something supposed to happen—lightning or angels singing or something? Shouldn't he feel different? The campfire burned a little lower. The counselor strummed the guitar a little slower and the campers sang a soft, meditative song. Hmm, maybe something was different. He didn't feel cramped anymore, even though he was still scrunched in between Brady and Steven on one side and Harris and Luke on the other.

Taylor looked up again into the sky. Free. That's how he felt, like a part of him could soar up there with the stars. All this time, he'd been living in a prison, but it wasn't the same as Jesse's prison. No, he'd built this one for himself out of jealousy, anger and resentment. But God freed him, in spite of all that. It was a mystery, like Roberto said. God wasn't waiting to punish

or condemn him. He felt as free as when he'd imagined himself driving the Mustang out on the open road.

Free. The word ran through his head the rest of the evening, and all the way back to the cabin. He barely heard Harris's devotions, the way it kept echoing in his thoughts. After brushing his teeth, Taylor went back to the bunkroom and pulled down the top of his sleeping bag. He wouldn't need it tonight, not with the warmth of the evening.

Two bunks over, Luke stood beside his bed. He'd pulled back his sleeping bag, too. Completely unzipped and opened all the way. From where he stood, Taylor could see a couple smears of squished night crawlers on the inside of the bag. Taylor grabbed his own bag off his bed and padded over to Luke's bunk. "Here, you can use mine if you need it tonight."

Luke's eyes narrowed. His lip curled into an ugly sneer. "I don't need anything from you." He closed his sleeping bag and lay down on top of it, his back to Taylor.

Hands tight around his sleeping bag, Taylor marched back to his bunk. *The jerk won't even accept a peace offering.* A hand touched his back and he turned to find Steven behind him.

"Nice try," Steven said, his voice low, "even if he didn't take it."

"Yeah, thanks." Taylor took a deep breath and dropped the bag onto his bed. Habits are hard to break, but he wasn't going to allow the old anger and resentment to imprison him again. He was free.

"Can you hear what they're saying in there?" Marissa gave up her perch on her suitcase and slid to the floor in the hall outside Zeke's office.

Taylor shook his head but inched closer to Zeke's closed door. He recognized each voice coming from inside the office—Dad, Luke's dad,

Roberto and Zeke—but he couldn't tell what they were saying. Luke was in there, too, but he'd been mostly silent. Claire appeared at the other end of the hallway.

“There you are! I've been looking all over for you to say good-bye.”

Marissa jumped to her feet and hugged Claire's neck. “Thank you so-o-o much for everything this week. Things would've turned out a lot different if you hadn't been in my cabin, looking out for me.”

Claire returned the hug, throwing Taylor a dimpled smile over Marissa's shoulder. “We had some fun, didn't we? You're coming back next year, right?” She released the hug, but still held onto Marissa's arms. “And you've got my cell number so be sure to let me know how things go.”

“I will.” Marissa gave her a firm squeeze before letting go. “And I'll see you next year.”

Claire wiggled her fingers at Taylor. “See you next year, too. Bye!”

Taylor waved. Maybe if he'd stood up, she'd have hugged him, too. Or not. At least she was talking to him, instead of turning her back like she did on Sunday.

Marissa settled back onto the floor. “How long are they going to talk?” She sighed and rested her elbow on her knee, head in hand.

Moments later, the door opened. Luke's dad stalked out, jaw set, eyes blazing. Taylor imagined steam blasting from his ears, and pulled his feet in close to avoid getting stepped on.

Luke followed, frowning as he grabbed his suitcase, sleeping bag and pillow, and hurried to catch up with his dad. His suitcase ran over Marissa's toe.

“Ow!” She grabbed her foot. “You jerk!”

Luke didn't stop to apologize. “Dad, wait up.”

His dad's voice came back loud and clear, though he must have been outside. “Do not tell me what to do. Do not speak until I say you can talk. Not another word out of you until then. Understand? Not. One.”

A grin crept across Taylor's face. "I bet he doesn't get that Corvette he was planning on." Weird. He actually felt a little sorry for Luke. Dad's wrath would come soon enough, and Taylor wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Marissa grimaced and rubbed her toe. "I bet he did that on purpose."

Taylor shushed her, but the door to Zeke's office closed again. What more did Zeke and Roberto have to say to Dad? He leaned his ear closer to the door.

"Can you hear them?" Marissa whispered.

Taylor shook his head. Dad wouldn't explode in front of Zeke. Maybe he'd have chilled a bit by the time they drove home. Or maybe that was too much to hope for.

Ten minutes later, the door opened. Taylor scrambled to his feet while Dad shook hands with Zeke and said good-bye. The director came out and put his arm around Taylor. "Will we see you back next year?"

"I hope so." Taylor shot a glance at Dad as he exited the office behind Roberto. Despite the grim expression, Taylor saw none of the controlled fury that he expected.

Zeke put a hand on Marissa's shoulder. "You remember what we talked about. I look forward to seeing how you've grown next year."

Marissa nodded, snuck a peek at Dad and glanced uneasily at Taylor.

Taylor responded with his own uncertain gaze. Even Dad's voice sounded firm but calm.

"Take your sister's suitcase and let's go. You kids can load up while I take a look at this car."

Taylor took hold of Marissa's suitcase and dragged it toward the door. He'd have liked to keep up with Dad and Roberto, to listen in as they talked about cars, but when they reached the parking lot, he and Marissa veered off to stow their luggage in the van.

Marissa threw her sleeping bag into the back. "I don't get why guys are so fascinated with cars. I mean, I know some look cooler than others, but

they're all just chunks of metal." She opened the flap of her purse and dug around inside.

Taylor grunted as he lifted her suitcase into the van. "Yeah, the same way purses are all hunks of fabric. So what's the big deal? Why's one worth hundreds of dollars just because someone's name is on it?"

"Okay, but at least we don't discuss purses for hours and hours." She pulled her cell phone out of her purse. "I'll be right back."

"Where you going?" Taylor called after her as she dashed toward the machine shed.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

TAYLOR HESITATED BEFORE FOLLOWING AT A SLOWER PACE. SEEING THE Mustang all messed up left a lump in the pit of his stomach. Maybe next year, Roberto would have it ready to drive and they could go for a ride in it. Dad and Roberto were inside, still talking engine sizes and mechanics, so Taylor stopped outside. Dad was going to be really ticked off at him for working on the car after being told to stay away from them.

Marissa approached the two men and waited in silence until they paused to look her way. “Is it okay if I take some pictures of your car?”

Roberto nodded. “Si! Is okay.”

Frowning, Dad continued his conversation with Roberto about the cost of the repairs, how much Roberto would do himself, and the process of restoring a vintage car. His eyes followed Marissa as she took pictures of the mangled front end from different angles, plus some close-ups of the broken headlights, the crumpled bumper and the scratched hood.

Finally, Dad shook Roberto’s hand and called to Marissa, his voice firm but not harsh. “That’s enough, Marissa. What are you going to do with all those pictures?”

Marissa held her phone to her chest. “I’m keeping them right here to remind me.”

Storm clouds gathered on Dad's face. "To remind you? Shame on you—"

"Daddy! Let me finish. It's to remind me to think about my decisions before I ruin my life or someone else's." She turned to Roberto. "I know I said it before with Zeke, but I really am sorry about the car, Mr. Rodriguez."

Roberto smiled at her. "Is good to learn from mistakes. I forgive you." He turned to Taylor. "You come back next year. We take ride in car." He shook Taylor's hand, holding it firm. His kind eyes brought a burning to Taylor's throat.

He choked out the words. "I'll be back. Thanks for letting me help you."

Dad still stared at Marissa. He swallowed hard before rasping out, "Time to go." He nodded to Roberto and motioned to Marissa and Taylor, but said nothing more as they got into the van.

Taylor skipped his usual argument with Marissa for shotgun position and climbed into one of the captain's chairs in the second row. Marissa claimed the other one. She must be as wary as he was about sitting up front with Dad. Taylor pulled out his magazine and settled in for the ride home.

Several minutes down the road, Marissa tapped Taylor's arm and tipped her head toward Dad, her eyebrows drawing together in a question.

Taylor shrugged. *How should I know?* Dad had never given them the silent treatment before. It was odd that he wasn't saying anything. Nothing at all. But no doubt, he'd let them have it when he was ready to talk.

Taylor dozed off, but startled when Marissa kicked his foot. Sitting up, he scowled at her. She pointed at Dad's back and mouthed the words, *Say something*. Taylor shook his head, turned his back to her and snuggled down into the seat.

Before he dropped off to sleep again, Marissa broke the silence. "Daddy?" She used her little girl voice, the one that always worked on Dad. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Dad glanced at them in the rearview mirror. “I’m thinking, Marissa. We’ll talk later, not right now.”

Eyes wide and brimming, Marissa shrank back into the seat. She plugged her ears with ear buds, and scrolled through her phone for some music. A tear splashed onto her hand and she wiped it against her shorts.

Taylor stretched his legs and reclined his seat. Whatever was going to happen apparently wouldn’t happen until they got home. He closed his eyes and the next time he opened them, they were pulling into their driveway at home.

Dad brought the car to a stop, telling Taylor to stay put as he shut it off. “Marissa, you go on in the house. I need to talk with your brother. We’ll bring the stuff in when we’re done.”

Uh-oh. Taylor sat up and rubbed his face, trying to wake up. His neck was sore from sleeping at a weird angle, and he wiped spit from his chin where he must have been drooling.

“But Daddy, it wasn’t Taylor’s fault.”

Dad cut her off. “Go inside, Marissa. Please.”

She pressed her lips together and glanced at Taylor, a scared look in her eyes as she slid the van’s side door closed and walked toward the house.

Here it comes.

Dad turned around in his seat. “Pastor Zacharias and Mr. Rodriguez both had very complimentary things to say about you.”

But... Taylor waited for the chewing out.

Dad looked down at the floor. “Luke’s dad agreed to pay 75% of the cost of repairs if I pay 25%. I don’t like it, but I agreed. Marissa was involved, even though she wasn’t wholly responsible.” He paused, his jaw working back and forth. His foot scraped at a stain on the carpet. “I’ve been thinking—about ordering one of those do-it-yourself driver training courses, to help with your driver’s ed class.”

Taylor cut off the beginning of a chuckle. “You mean, I get to take driver’s ed?”

“We’ll sign you up next week. But I’d like to have a hand in teaching you. It’ll give us something to do together.” Dad rubbed the bristly five o’clock shadow on his cheek. “It seems other people know my son better than I do. Kind of embarrassing, y’know what I mean?” A rare smile touched Dad’s lips, though sadness shaded his eyes.

Taylor had never seen that before, but his breath escaped him as he realized he was going to get his driver’s license. His lips refused to stay in a straight line, spreading out in a wide grin. “Thanks, Dad.”

Dad swung around and opened the door. “Let’s get the stuff and head into the house before Mom wonders what happened to us.”

Taylor hopped out of the car. The way his heart soared, he could probably fly all the way back to Rustic Knoll. This time next year, he’d have his driver’s license and maybe— just maybe, Roberto would let him drive the Mustang around camp. Man, he couldn’t wait!

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What dreams or goals do you have that seem unattainable? What keeps you from striving to reach them? Have you shared them with someone who will dream with you?
2. “Being stuck between a princess and a prince stinks.” What made Taylor feel this way? Have you ever been jealous of the way your siblings are treated compared to you? How did you handle it?
3. Much of Greek and Roman mythology attempts to explain certain aspects of life on earth. What event or problem does the myth of Pandora’s bottle try to explain? How does the Bible explain this same event?
4. Luke 6:45 says whatever is in our heart will make itself known by what comes out of our mouth. What does your speech reveal about what’s in your heart?
5. Claire didn’t use foul language even when Taylor made her fall headlong into the mud. Why did this impress Taylor? Do you know any kids who refrain from cursing and using obscene language? How do you feel about that? How do you think they manage to keep their speech pure, to “speak no evil”?

6. How do the words Roberto speaks to Taylor differ from the words Taylor's dad speaks? Which would you rather hear? Do your words more closely resemble Roberto's or Dad's?
7. Taylor is known for his verbal bullying. How does he react when Luke bullies him?
8. If actions speak louder than words, what is Taylor saying by his actions toward Luke? Toward Marissa?
9. Zeke discussed problems of foul language, anger and jealousy, pride and arrogance, lying and deceitfulness. How does each play a part in Taylor's week at camp?
10. Taylor discovers that jealousy and anger toward his brother, his sister, Brady and Luke is the root motivation for his bullying. How might the other heart issues listed in Question 8 motivate someone to bully others?
11. What are the parallels between restoring the Mustang and what happens to our heart when we put our faith and trust in Jesus? What are some differences?
12. Taylor was willing to sacrifice himself and his dreams for the things he cared about. How does this illustrate Jesus' love for us?

RESOURCES

Abuse: If you or someone you know is hurt by verbal or physical abuse, it's important to talk to someone you trust. This could be a pastor, school counselor, a trusted teacher, a friend's parent, or a neighbor. Abuse is NOT your fault, so don't be embarrassed about it.

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, and attacking someone verbally or physically. Learn more at StopBullying.gov

Christian Camps: To find one in your area, type "Christian Youth Camps" and your state into any search engine. Or go to the [Christian Camp and Conference Association](#)

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SEE NO EVIL

RUSTIC KNOLL BIBLE CAMP
BOOK THREE

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*For Wayne
My husband and my encourager
throughout the writing of this book
Your love and confidence in me
help me achieve new heights*

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CHAPTER ONE

STEVEN MILLER PULLED AWAY FROM HIS MOM'S HAND AS SHE straightened his t-shirt before getting out of the car. "It's fine, Mom. Leave it alone."

Blindness was no excuse for sloppy dressing, but this was camp. Some guys wore the same clothes they'd slept in the night before. He got out of the car, leaving behind its air-conditioned comfort. Ugh! This heat wave would make the cabins feel like saunas. He adjusted his dark glasses, then reached into the back seat and found the rough canvas of his duffle bag.

"Can I get that for you?" Mom's door slammed and her footsteps hurried around to his side.

"I've got it." *As if I'm not capable of doing it myself.* He bit his tongue as he lifted the bag out of the car and set it on the gravel parking lot. Mom wasn't trying to be annoying. So why did she get on his nerves so easily lately? She'd always watched out for him during Dad's tough lessons on living with blindness. 'Survival for the Blind 101,' they'd called it. Had she grown more protective in the three years since Dad died? Or maybe Dad's absence failed to balance out Mom's hovering. Either way, it would be nice if she'd back off a little.

Claire called from somewhere nearby. "Steven! Wait for me!"

Where is she? Car engines and voices of other excited campers made it hard to tell which direction she was calling from. He waved his hand in the air to acknowledge her, then closed the car door and leaned against it. “Mom, you don’t have to stick around. Claire can get me through registration.”

Mom stuttered. “Well, I—I’m not in any hurry.”

He’d done it again—said something the wrong way. “I’m not trying to get rid of you. I just thought Claire could get me up to the check-in table and I’m sure I can make it to the cabin on my own if you want to get home earlier.”

At that moment, Claire arrived and gave him a quick hug around the neck. “Great to see you again, Steven. Ooh! You’ve been working out. Look at those muscles.” She squeezed his upper arm. “Hi, Mrs. Miller. Can you believe it’s our last year at Rustic Knoll? This time next year, we’ll be graduated and getting ready for college.”

Mrs. Miller groaned. “Don’t remind me. Seems like last week you two were playing in the sand together down at the lake. With your blonde hair and Steven’s, everyone thought you were twins.”

Claire laughed. “That was a long time ago.” She touched Steven’s arm. “Are you ready to go check in?”

Mom made no move to leave. “Are your parents here, Claire?”

“No. My younger brother has a Little League tournament today, so Mom dropped me off. She’ll have to hurry to make the game. But I can take Steven to check-in if you want. Dillon’s heading our way, too. He can make sure Steven gets to his cabin.”

Mom hesitated. “Are you sure?”

Steven reached out and Mom put her hand in his. “We’ll be fine, Mom. We know the routine. You really don’t need to stick around, unless you want to see some of the other parents.”

She sighed, hugged his neck and kissed his cheek. He jerked away before she could swipe her fingers over his hair.

“You have your health form? And money for snacks?”

“I have everything I need. Honest, I’ll be fine, Mom. I’ll send you a postcard like always. Saturday will be here before you know it.”

“All right, then. Have a good week, both of you. I love you, Steven.” She hugged him one more time.

“Love you, too, Mom. Bye!”

The car door squeaked open and closed, and a moment later, the engine started. She called one more good-bye before the tires crunched on the gravel as she drove away. Steven let out a long breath. “Good thing you came by. I was afraid she might walk me to the cabin and stay to tuck me into bed tonight.”

Claire giggled. “I love your mom, but I feel the same way about mine. I can’t wait to get out of the house and be on my own.”

Dillon shuffled up, dragging his suitcase. “Hey, Claire! Steven-man, how’s it going?” His hand met Steven’s in a high five and they clamped hands tight. “Ow! Dude, you must be lifting weights. Look at those biceps.”

Steven grinned. “I’m giving you some competition for super-jock this year. You ready?”

Dillon chuckled. “I’m always ready for competition.”

“Come on, let’s check in.” Claire nudged Steven’s arm. “You want to hold on?”

“No thanks. I’m practicing my echolocation.”

“Your what?” Claire started toward the grass where the registration table sat.

“Echolocation.” Dillon snorted. “Isn’t that what bats use?”

“Euw!”

“Same idea.” Steven walked close beside Claire. “It’s figuring out the sounds around me to judge my location. Like right now, I’m judging my

distance from you by the sound of your feet hitting the ground.” Claire’s steps moved farther away, and Steven adjusted his own path to follow her.

“Okay. Just testing,” Claire said. “You passed.”

“It’s easy here, but grass tends to muffle sound.” Just then, they moved onto the grass, but Claire’s flip-flops made it easy to follow them. They had to be getting close to the registration table. A warm breeze rustled the leaves of the trees overhead and carried a whiff of the lake that lay beyond the dining hall. Steven inhaled the familiar scent as Claire brought them to a stop. He set his duffle beside him. “How long is the line? Do you see anyone else we know?”

Claire moved forward a couple steps. “Taylor and Marissa are up ahead.”

Dillon grunted at Taylor’s name. “I wouldn’t admit to knowing him.”

“He’s not as bad as he used to be.” Claire tugged Steven forward. “Give him a chance. He’s changed.”

Dillon scoffed. “Hey! Who’s the new lady? Where’s Nurse Willie?”

“What?” Steven’s hand moved to his chest. “What are you talking about?”

Claire braced herself on Steven’s shoulder and jumped for a better view. “Some Asian lady’s checking people in. I don’t see Nurse Willie anywhere.”

Dillon pulled his suitcase closer as the line moved forward. “Wonder what happened to ol’ Willie.”

“Maybe she had something to do today.” Claire made it sound more like a question.

“If she’s busy, why not use one of the counselors?” Steven scratched his ear.

“Maybe she left, got a job somewhere else,” Dillon suggested.

Nurse Willie leave Rustic Knoll? *Impossible*. She hadn’t missed an opening day of camp in all the years he’d been coming to Rustic Knoll.

Ever since he was five years old and asked his dad about the tinkling sound her hat made, she'd always been there to take his health form, wearing her bucket hat decorated with fishing lures. Steven's fingers traced the edges of the medallion hidden beneath his shirt. It stuck to his skin in the afternoon heat.

Before long, an unfamiliar voice called, "Next!"

Claire moved ahead to the registration table, urging Steven along with her. A crinkling of paper reminded him to pull out his health form.

"Welcome to Rustic Knoll," the new voice said. "You are Claire Thompson?" The woman spoke with an accent, pronouncing her words precisely, like the Vietnamese lady who lived down the street from Steven.

"Yes, ma'am," Claire answered. "Where's Nurse Willie?"

"She's had some health problems. I'm Mrs. Hoang. I'm taking her place until she gets better."

"Mrs. Wang?"

"H-wang." Steven corrected Claire by exhaling on the first letter.

"Very good!" Mrs. Hoang said.

"How did you know that?" Claire asked.

Steven pointed to his ears. "Being blind means I have to listen harder." He held out his health form toward Mrs. Hoang. "Steven Miller. Is Nurse Willie all right?" Dillon moved up next to him.

"Pastor Zacharias will make an announcement at supper."

"But is she okay?" Claire asked.

Several seconds passed. Was she checking his health form?

"You'll have to ask Pastor Zacharias," Mrs. Hoang sighed. "I don't want to say too much."

Claire's fingers clamped around Steven's arm as they received cabin assignments and moved away from the table. They stopped to wait for Dillon. Her breath carried a minty scent when she spoke in his ear. "It can't be good when she won't give us a straight answer."

Steven searched for an explanation. “Maybe it’s something personal and she doesn’t want it blurted out in front of everyone.”

Dillon joined them. “Pastor Zacharias? Who calls him that?”

Claire mimicked Mrs. Hoang. “I’m going to find ‘Pastor Zacharias’ and ask what’s up with Willie. You guys want to come along?”

Steven waited for Dillon’s response, but it never came. He lifted his arm that carried the sleeping bag and pillow. “Can we unload our stuff in the cabin first?”

“I suppose. Meet you in fifteen minutes.”

“What’s the rush?” Dillon grumbled.

Claire’s sigh screamed impatience. “Just get back here as soon as you can or I won’t bother to wait for you.” She headed off toward her cabin.

Dillon nudged Steven toward the guys’ cabins. “It’s not like she’s dying or something. That Wang lady said she’s here until Willie gets better.”

“H-wang.”

“That’s what I said. Wang. So, how long have you been lifting weights?”

Steven shook his head, pulled his suitcase around and kept pace with the flapping of Dillon’s sandals. “I started last winter when I decided to do a triathlon.”

“You’re doing a triathlon? A real one?”

“Not a long one like the Ironman. Sprint triathlons are half the Olympic distances, so I swim a quarter mile, bike about twelve miles, and run a little over three miles. They’re held all over the Chicago area through October, but the one I’m doing is at the end of August, about five weeks from now.” Grass tickled the sides of his feet, and the perfume of roses told him they were passing the garden beside the chapel.

“So you’re competing along with sighted people? Wouldn’t that be dangerous with the size crowds they attract?”

“I’d be tethered to a partner for swimming and running, and use a tandem for the bicycle part of it.”

“They let you do that?”

“I’ve applied for permission from the race officials. Hoping I’ll hear this week.” Steven hefted his sleeping bag higher on his hip.

“Who’s your partner?”

“As of last Tuesday, I don’t know. The guy I’ve been training with is having knee problems. You want to fill in for him?”

Dillon hopped up the cabin steps. “Maybe. Sounds cool.”

The screen door squeaked when Dillon opened it. Every cabin’s screen door sounded like that. Steven had been in all four of the Rustic Knoll boys’ cabins over the years. They all had the same floor plan, the same furniture in the common room. He entered the cabin and strode past the couch and easy chairs in their assigned places, stopping at the doorway to the bunkroom.

Dillon spoke over Steven’s shoulder. “The bunk to your right is open. I’ll take the top if you promise no earthquakes.”

Steven laughed. “It’s tempting, but I think I’m past that prank.”

Every kid who’d ever come to camp had lain on a bottom bunk, braced his feet against the top bunk and pushed up while yelling “Earthquake!” Steven had been the unsuspecting top bunk occupant once and nearly got pitched off onto the concrete floor. He’d claimed the bottom bunk ever since. He spread his sleeping bag out on the mattress, stowing his suitcase below the bed.

Dylan followed, throwing his stuff onto the bunk above Steven’s and zipping open his suitcase. “What got you interested in triathlons?”

Steven straightened. He fingered the cord around his neck, hesitating to share something so treasured. Finally, he drew the large medallion out from under his shirt and held it in his palm for Dillon to see.

“This was my dad’s. Mom found it when she was cleaning out some of his stuff this past year. I didn’t know he did triathlons, but she said he’d done a couple before I was born.”

Sweaty fingers grazed Steven’s as Dillon turned the medallion over and back. “That’s cool. Bet it’s nice having something of your dad’s, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s a nice reminder.” Steven cupped it in his hand before dropping it down inside his shirt again. Not that he needed anything to remind him Dad had once been alive and well, a triathlon finisher. *It’s my fault Dad’s not still alive to compete in triathlons.*

The screen door screeched and Brady entered the bunkroom. “There you are. I’ve been checking every cabin looking for you.” He high-fived Steven, exchanged greetings with Dillon, then plopped down on Steven’s bed. “Do you know what happened to Nurse Willie? Why wasn’t she at check-in?”

Dillon flipped the lid on his suitcase closed and pushed it under Steven’s bed. “She’s sick. That’s what Mrs. Hoang said.”

“Who’s that? Oh, the other lady? How do you say her name?”

“H-wang.” Steven squeezed past Dillon. “We’re meeting Claire to go ask Zeke what’s up. You want to come, too?”

“Sure.”

The three of them exited the cabin and met Claire near the Snack Shack. She greeted Brady, then led the way to Zeke’s office. “I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

A weight settled in Steven’s stomach as well, but he’d wait to hear what Zeke said. The four friends crowded through the open door of the camp director’s office.

“Looks like the gang’s all here.” Zeke chuckled. “What can I do for you?”

Steven moved far enough into the room to rest his hand on the smooth wooden desktop. A faint musty smell of paper drew his attention. Over the

years, he'd imagined Zeke's office lined with shelves crammed full of books. Is that where he kept his Bible, the one Brady said he carried to chapel? Sometime during his years at Rustic Knoll, Steven had learned the outer walls of Zeke's office held two large windows that he kept open to catch the breeze off the lake. No breeze today, but Steven still caught a whiff of sand and water.

Claire came right to the point. "What's wrong with Nurse Willie?"

A soft sigh came from Zeke's lips. "Late last summer, she complained of headaches. She went in for some tests and they found a brain tumor. Surgery removed most of it, but it's something she'll have to live with."

"Cancer?" Steven's stomach turned to a rock. "A brain tumor?"

"What causes that?" Claire's voice almost cracked.

"They don't really know what causes brain tumors."

"How bad is she?" Steven swallowed bile. Did he really want to hear the answer?

"It will probably grow again, but for now, the chemo seems to have put it into remission."

Brady sank onto one of the armchairs in front of Zeke's desk. "She's not well enough to work?"

"The doctor says she should be, but she's not bouncing back the way we expected. I think she's experiencing some depression, which is not unusual." Zeke's glasses tapped against the desk. "We're the only family she has, so she's still in her apartment at the back of the clinic. Mrs. Hoang agreed to stay in the guesthouse. Willie helps Mrs. Hoang whenever she's able, but I think seeing someone else in her clinic hasn't helped her attitude."

Steven leaned against the desk. "Can we visit her?"

"Not all of you at once. Talk to Mrs. Hoang. She'll know when Willie is up for having visitors."

Claire expelled a heavy breath. "It's not the same without Nurse Willie."

Zeke shuffled some papers. “I’m sure seeing you kids will cheer her up. She needs your prayers, and Mrs. Hoang could use a few, too. It’s been hard on everyone and filling Nurse Willie’s shoes has been especially difficult.”

Steven turned to leave the office, and the others followed him in silence. No slapping of flip-flops now. Their feet shuffled, as sluggish as an August breeze.

A brain tumor. Willie didn’t deserve this, not after all her years of digging splinters out of fingers, dispensing bandages, checking for fevers, wrapping sprained ankles and broken bones, hunting down kids who forgot to come and take their medicine at the proper time. She’d taken good care of him that time he and Brady got into poison ivy.

As soon as they were outside, Claire spoke up. “I’m going down to see her. Who wants to come with me?”

Steven didn’t answer. Zeke said seeing all of them would cheer Willie up, but did he really want to see her? Wasn’t there something else he could do to help, something more than visiting her?

Finally, Dillon spoke up. “Sorry. I’m going swimming. Anyone else going back to the cabin?”

Brady volunteered. “Yeah, I’ll go back with you,” Brady said.

“Steven?”

The pleading in Claire’s voice almost got him. “I’ll go later, but tell her I said hi.”

He shouldn’t leave Claire to visit by herself, but he wasn’t ready for Nurse Willie yet. Unwanted memories and doubts of Dad’s death rushed back. Still, he couldn’t sit by and do nothing when someone he cared about was sick, maybe dying. He never wanted to do that again.

Ever.

CHAPTER TWO

STEVEN TUGGED AT THE ENDS OF THE BEACH TOWEL AROUND HIS NECK AS he and Dillon approached the cabin. The lake had cooled him off, but Nurse Willie's condition festered in the back of his mind, stealing the fun out of swimming. How could he be active and play around in the water while she battled brain cancer?

Inside the cabin, he and Dillon dried off and hung their towels on opposite ends of the bunks. Steven felt around his bed for the shorts and shirt he'd left there.

"Whoa!" Dillon sounded pleasantly surprised.

"What's up?"

"Oh, I just got a text message. Heh, heh. Ni-ice." He stretched out the last word.

"You brought your phone? Don't let the counselor see it."

Dillon chuckled. "Definitely can't let him see this. I'd be in big trouble."

"Why? What is it?" Steven peeled off his wet trunks and pulled on dry shorts.

"It's...from a girl I know from school."

"What'd she say?"

"It's not really what she said."

Steven picked up his shirt. “What do you mean?”

“She sent me her picture, and she’s not wearing much.”

Dillon sexting? Here?

Steven pulled his shirt down over his shoulders. “You know you shouldn’t be looking at stuff like that.”

“I didn’t ask her to send it.”

“Yeah, so tell her to stop.”

Dillon chuckled again. “Come on, what’s wrong with looking? I mean, I understand *you* can’t, but we’re guys. Y’know?”

Yeah, he knew. Dad had told him about all that when they’d had The Talk. It only made him all the more curious to know what girls looked like when they weren’t wearing clothes. Dad hadn’t exactly called his blindness a blessing, but he did say Steven would avoid certain temptations because of it. That must be what Dillon was facing.

“Yeah, we’re guys,” Steven said, “and you know how we think. Would you like it if some guy was looking at your sister or your mom like that?”

“Ack, my sister’s ugly. No one would want to look at her. And there’s no way my mom would ever look like this.” Dillon pulled his clothes from the top bunk and started changing.

Steven put on his dark glasses and sank onto his bed. “You’re missing the point. Looking at stuff like that disrespects girls. Besides that, it can mess with your brain. Even worse if it gets to be a habit.”

Dillon clicked his tongue. “It’s not a habit. This is the first time. And I still say there’s nothing wrong with looking.”

He headed off toward the bathroom.

Steven felt for the medallion under his pillow where he’d hidden it before swimming. The coin-sized metal cooled his hand as his fingers closed around it. He inhaled deeply and let his breath out slowly. It *would* be nice to see exactly what a pretty girl looked like. But that desire had

drawn him into other things he never wanted to repeat. If only he could go back and change what he'd been doing when Dad had his heart attack.

Steven lifted the medallion's cord over his head, and settled it around his neck, dropping the medallion down inside his shirt. *If I'd listened to what Dad told me, maybe I'd have heard his call for help.*

Their counselor showed up shortly before the supper bell rang. "Welcome, everyone! I'm Jake. Give me a minute to change. I'll be right out."

Steven cocked his head. "Changing?"

"He's wearing swim trunks," Dillon replied.

Minutes later, Jake emerged from his room. "Okay, sorry I wasn't here this afternoon. I'm in charge of the boats, so if you guys need me in the afternoon, that's where I'll be. Who's ready to eat?"

"Me," cried Steven along with the rest of his cabin mates. His stomach had been growling for the last thirty minutes.

On the way to the dining hall, Jake announced, "Each of you tell me your name and something I should know about you." He tapped Steven's arm. "You go first."

Steven said his name and added, "This is my—" he stopped to count "—thirteenth straight year at Rustic Knoll."

"Thirteen? That's got to be some kind of record."

Steven tapped Dillon next. "Name's Dillon Petroski, and I'm doing a triathlon with Steven."

"Yesss!" Steven lifted his hand for a high five, and Dillon slapped it. A couple of the other boys added their approval.

"That's cool. When?" Jake slapped their hands. "And where?"

"End of August in Chicago."

The other boys introduced themselves, finishing just as they reached the buffet. Steven sniffed. “This doesn’t smell like Janie’s usual chicken noodle casserole. It smells more like—”

“Pizza!” Dillon picked up his tray and utensils. “She’s changed her menu.”

“Pizza? Yum!” Steven grabbed his tray and silverware and followed Dillon, taking two slices each of pepperoni and ground beef.

The noise level in the dining hall rivaled a school lunchroom as Steven and Dillon reached the table reserved for their cabin. Steven almost had to shout to Jake sitting next to him. “Isn’t it about a mile across the lake?”

“Yeah, why?”

Steven swallowed his bite of pizza. “I need to keep training this week and I’d love to swim in open water.”

“What distance?”

“A quarter mile. Do you think Zeke would let me swim it outside the beach boundaries?”

Jake hesitated. “You’d need a lifeguard in a boat alongside you, but I could do that. And you’d have to do it early in the morning, like before seven. There’s hardly any traffic on the lake then. Usually only a couple fishermen.”

Steven scooted to the edge of his seat. “I’m cool with that.”

On the other side of Steven, Dillon groaned. “Before seven? Isn’t that illegal during summer vacation?”

Steven elbowed him and told Jake, “He’ll do it. But we still need to get Zeke’s okay on this, don’t we?”

“I’ll talk to him about it and see what he says,” Jake said. “But you might want to start praying, because I have no idea whether he’ll okay it or not.”

Dillon returned the elbow jab. “Steven, you start praying for Zeke’s okay. I’ll pray for a later start time.”

After supper, Claire caught Steven and Dillon as they headed out the door. “I tried going to see Nurse Willie this afternoon but Mrs. Hoang said she was sleeping. Told me to come back later. Will you guys go with me now and see if she’s awake?”

“Not me,” Dillon said. “I’m going back to the cabin.”

Claire tugged on Steven’s arm. “Come on. She’ll be glad to see you.”

“Me? Why me?” Steven pulled back. He wanted to visit Willie, but still didn’t feel ready.

“Because you’re good at cheering people up and encouraging them.”

“Says Miss Cheerleader herself.”

Claire punched his arm. “I’m not a cheerleader, but I’ll take that as a compliment. Anyone who’s got cancer could use some encouragement and cheering up.”

Steven gave up and traipsed alongside Claire. His sandals stuck to the road’s hot asphalt, and slapped hard against his feet with every step. The day’s heat radiated off the road onto his ankles and calves, and brought the pungent asphalt smell to his nose. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

As they neared the clinic, Claire murmured, “She’s up, sitting on the front step.” Her steps quickened and hurried Steven along. “Hi, Nurse Willie!”

Willie said nothing until they were standing in front of her. When it came, her greeting was less than enthusiastic. “Hello, Claire, Steven.”

“I came by to see you earlier but you were sleeping. Did Mrs. Hoang tell you?”

“No.” Willie had never been the excitable type but the flatness in her voice was new.

Claire whispered in his ear. “Say something.”

She directed him to sit next to Willie on the step and joined his hand to Willie’s.

Nurse Willie's hand, once strong enough to hold a foot still while extracting a splinter now lay limp in his hand, little more than knuckles and bones. She pulled her hand away.

"Hey Nurse Willie. How ya doing?" He scooted to the side, opening a space between himself and Willie, and patted it for Claire to sit between them.

"I've been better."

Claire sat down. "What a pretty blue shawl. Did someone make that for you?"

"A woman at church. She heard I was sick. Calls it a prayer shawl. Says she prayed every time she worked on it so the prayers are knitted into it."

"That color looks good on you. And you're still wearing your hat."

"Keeps my head warm. Got no hair anymore."

No tinkling of the lures adorning her hat accompanied Willie's bitter words, as if even their cheery jingle had been silenced. This wasn't the Willie Steven expected. Where was the confident nurse whose healing included faith as much as medicine? Had the chemo destroyed more than cancer cells?

Maybe he should change the subject to something she enjoyed. "Have you been doing any fishing?"

Claire kicked his foot. Hard.

"I don't fish no more."

Even her vocabulary had changed. She'd have corrected any kid who spoke like that in her clinic. But who could blame her? She'd had to give up fishing and the clinic—the two things she loved most—to fight an illness that threatened her life.

Willie rose to her feet. "Don't you kids need to be getting on to chapel or something?"

Was she trying to get rid of them?

Claire stood. “Maybe we should be going. We don’t want to tire you out.”

Steven got up from the step. Judging by the proximity of Nurse Willie’s voice, her hand should be right about there. He found her limp hand and gave a small squeeze. “We’ll come back another time.”

He released her but Willie didn’t let go. “When did you get so strong?”
“Me?”

Claire giggled. “She’s not talking to me.”

“You was always a scrawny kid. Now all o’ sudden, you got broad shoulders and big strong arms.”

Steven nodded and smiled. “I’ve been working out, training for a triathlon.”

Claire caught her breath. “You’re doing a triathlon?”

“It’s a beginner’s triathlon with shorter distances.”

“So? It’s still a triathlon! Those things are crazy. What got you started on that?”

Steven’s hand went to the medallion under his shirt. He pulled it out and let it dangle in front of him. “It was my dad’s. Mom found it in some of his things. She said he’d done a couple races before I was born.”

Claire examined the medallion. “Take it off so Nurse Willie can see it.”

“I don’t want to see it. You kids go on now.” She shuffled toward the clinic door.

Claire let his pendant drop.

Steven slipped it back under his shirt and took Claire’s arm. “We’ll be back. You take care, Nurse Willie.”

She didn’t answer as he and Claire walked back up the road. The farther they went, the more Claire leaned into him until it almost seemed he was leading her. He didn’t mind the closeness.

“I can’t stand seeing her like that.” Claire’s voice trembled. “She’s lost so much weight. The way she talks and all, she’s just not the same. Willie

never smiled much but now she looks almost angry.”

“Can you blame her? Everything she enjoyed was taken away? She can’t work, can’t fish, can’t be involved in the camp or with the rest of us. I’d be angry and depressed, too. We’ve got to do something for her.”

“I know, but what?”

They walked side by side in silence, his mind searching for ideas, until Claire broke into his thoughts. “This triathlon—are you doing it because of your dad?”

“What do you mean?” Steven moved sideways, putting more distance between them.

“I remember your dad telling you blindness was no excuse for anything. But a crowded triathlon seems kind of dangerous. What if someone trips you or you have a bike accident?”

“That’s why I’ll use a partner. Dillon volunteered, since my original partner is out, but I’m waiting to hear if they’ll accept that modification.”

“Oh, okay.”

“What? Now that Dillon’s doing it, you approve?”

“It has nothing to do with Dillon. If you’re doing it to honor your dad, that’s cool. But I’ve watched you do things before, risky things, as if to prove your blindness doesn’t hold you back. That you’re as capable as the rest of us who can see. You don’t have to prove anything, y’know.”

Steven’s fingers traced the grooves in the pattern on the medallion’s face. Was he trying to prove something? Maybe. He claimed it was to honor Dad, but this race was really about making up for his own failure. What was that fancy word the pastor used in church last Sunday? Atonement. That’s why he was doing a triathlon—to atone for his mistake that resulted in Dad’s death.

CHAPTER THREE

NOT EVEN A HINT OF AIR MOVEMENT FROM THE CEILING FANS CROSSED Steven's neck and shoulders. And the smell of sweaty bodies, hot from playing Capture the Flag, would soon be overwhelming as more campers filtered into the chapel. He kicked off his sandals and pressed his feet onto the cool floor.

"There she is." Brady stood to let Claire into the row. Taylor's sister, Marissa was right behind her. Steven didn't know Marissa very well. She and Claire had become friends last year when Marissa and Taylor got into all the trouble with the car. Brady let the girls sit between them, with Claire next to Steven.

Guitars whined and twanged, but when the music started, everyone was on their feet. Steven bounced with the beat, but his mind couldn't let go of Nurse Willie. There must be something he could do to help her. Like the swimming incident, he felt a stab of guilt for singing happy songs when she was probably in her room, trying to figure out what to do with what life had thrown at her.

When Zeke took the stage, Steven wondered how he handled knowing Willie was so ill. He'd been the director for more than a decade, as long as Steven had been coming to camp. Zeke, Janie, Roberto—they'd all worked

together with Nurse Willie. How did they get through their workday without feeling guilty about doing their jobs when Willie couldn't do hers?

"Each one of you has been fearfully and wonderfully made." Zeke paused. "Do you believe that about yourself? Raise your hand if there's at least one thing you'd change if you could."

Steven lifted his hand high. Claire's arm brushed against his as hers rose in the air. When had he become so aware of her touch?

The rustle of restless teenagers and shuffling of shoes and sandals against the floor filled the silence while Zeke drew on his pad of paper. Steven imagined Zeke's familiar easel set up close to center stage. He leaned over and whispered to Claire.

"What's he drawing?"

"It's some kind of animal, maybe a beaver?" A couple minutes passed. "Oh! I think it's a platypus."

Zeke's shoes tapped the floor as he hopped off the stage. "I want you to imagine for a few minutes what it would be like to be one of these little critters. Who wants to look like a platypus? Anyone?" A chorus of no's answered. "During the time the platypus was first discovered, naturalists were known to play pranks on the public by stitching together body parts of differing animals and trying to pass them off as a new species. So when the platypus was presented, many refused to believe such an animal really existed. They were certain it was simply an elaborate hoax." Zeke's voice came closer, then farther behind Steven as the director made his way down the center aisle. "Look at the creature. He's a little chubby. His legs are shorter than mine, poor guy." A wave of laughter rippled through the chapel. "He hunts for food under water like a fish, has webbed feet for swimming and lays eggs like a water bird, but is considered a mammal. He has the body of a beaver, but the beak of a duck." From the back of the chapel, Zeke said, "Platypus. Even his name sounds ridiculous." More laughter.

Zeke returned to the front. “Have you ever felt like a platypus? Ever complained that you’re too fat, or too short? Your nose is too long. Your legs are too chubby, or too skinny. Why can’t you look more like her? Or him? Why can’t you be as good an athlete? Why can’t you sing or play an instrument as well as someone else? ‘God, why didn’t you make me smarter?’ Have you ever said something like that?”

How many times have I asked God why I’m blind? Especially since Dad died. Mom said it was a blessing in a way, since I’d never have to live with the image of Dad lying dead on the kitchen floor. But if blindness was no excuse, it wasn’t any great privilege either.

Zeke hopped onto the stage again. A gentle riffing of pages meant he’d opened his Bible. “We’ve all said something like that at one time or another. And we’re in good company. When God chose Moses to speak to Pharaoh about letting the Israelites leave Egypt, Moses tried to wiggle out of it by saying he was slow of speech. Jeremiah too complained that he wasn’t good at speaking. Gideon asked God why he should lead Israel against their enemies when he was the youngest of his lowly tribe, the least of the least. Esther, a Jewess in a Persian royal court, thought she had nothing to offer in the way of saving her people from extinction. And when Samuel came calling to anoint the next king of Israel, even David was not considered by his family to be worth calling in from the fields where he was tending the sheep. Surely this short, ruddy-looking kid who smelled like sheep manure would never become king.

“While these thoughts are normal and we all have them from time to time, I’m here to tell you they come straight from our enemy, Satan. He’s been at it since the Garden of Eden. Remember how the serpent spoke to Eve in the Garden? His whole purpose was to make her dissatisfied.

“Eve?” Zeke used an incredulous tone. “What could she find to be dissatisfied about? She had a perfect husband, a beautiful garden home with pets of every kind, fresh food every single day, and what’s more, she and

Adam walked with God every evening. But what did Satan do? He focused her attention on the one little tree that God had declared off limits.

“‘If you eat that fruit,’ Satan whispered, ‘you’ll be like God.’ Do you hear that hissing of dissatisfaction? Of envy? Suddenly, it wasn’t enough to be who God made her! She wanted to be someone else.”

The Bible closed with a dull snap. “This week, I hope to convince you that you are fearfully and wonderfully made, and you can be confident you are just the way God wants you to be.”

Crickets sang outside the screened windows. Jake had finished devotions and warned of lights out in fifteen minutes. That was probably twenty minutes ago. Steven shook out the sheet he’d brought for nights like this when the cabin was hot and stuffy. Usually the cooler night air would seep into the cabin overnight, but with this heat wave, he wasn’t counting on that happening. He settled the sheet over his sleeping bag and lay on top of it.

Dillon stood beside the bed. He drew in his breath, exhaled quickly and chuckled. “That’s what I call fearfully and wonderfully made.”

“What?”

“This girl sent me another picture.” Dillon laughed. “Man, it stinks you can’t see. You are missing out big time.”

“Dillon, you shouldn’t be looking—”

“It’s not hurting anything.”

“It’s wrong! Don’t you get that?” Steven rose up on his elbows.

Dillon sat on the edge of the bed. “You’ve never been able to see, have you? You don’t really know what girls look like.”

“I know they have the same basic shape as guys do. A little more on top. Little less in the middle. Usually longer hair. Why?”

“I was thinking that, since you’re blind, you wouldn’t ever get that... y’know, that rush like the rest of us guys do when we see a pretty girl.”

“Sure, I do. It just doesn’t come visually.” Steven lay back on his pillow and crossed his arms behind his head. “I’m still a guy. A girl’s perfume might catch my attention, or her voice. Sitting close to a girl I like, close enough to touch her will do it. I still react like any other guy.”

“Really?” Dillon pushed Steven’s legs over and moved further onto the bed.

Steven held out his hand. “Sure. Here, let me see your phone.”

Dillon put it in his hand. Steven shifted it to his other hand, reached over the side of the bed and shoved it under his mattress.

“Hey! What are you— You tricked me. Give me back my phone.” Dillon threw himself across Steven, trying to reach beneath the mattress.

“Who’s got a phone?” Jake bellowed from the bunkroom doorway. Dillon straightened up, but his effort to recover his phone left him breathing hard.

“Not me.” Steven didn’t hesitate. “We were talking about megaphones. Those things cheerleaders use?”

Jake closed in on Steven’s bunk. “I know what a megaphone is. There better not be any phones in this cabin or I’ll take ’em away. Now, everybody get in bed. The lights are going off. Five, four, three—”

Feet pounded across the hard floor. The bed shook as Dillon hoisted himself onto the top bunk without a word. Jake finished the countdown and flipped the switch. “Anyone I hear talking will be on garbage detail tomorrow.”

Steven reached beneath the mattress and quietly brought out the phone. He turned on his side, fluffed his pillow and stuffed the phone deep inside the pillowcase.

Moments later, Dillon whispered from above. “I want my phone.”

Sounded like he was leaning down over the side.

“You heard Jake. If he sees it, he’ll take it.”

“He won’t see it. Give it back.”

“I’ll give it back to you at the end of the week.”

“No way! I want it now.” Dillon pounded the bed frame.

“Nope. Either I keep it or I give it to Jake. You want him to know you’ve got a phone? Want him to see what you’ve been looking at? He’d probably show it to Zeke.”

A four-letter word erupted from Dillon’s mouth, but the bed creaked as he raised himself back up. Steven heard nothing more. He lay on his back and closed his eyes.

Was it really a blessing to be blind, unable to see evil? It hadn’t made any difference three years ago. He still had ears to listen. Occasionally, that sultry voice and the provocative language still echoed inside his mind, sending his pulse racing the same as it had the first time. It made him feel good in a way nothing else could. Made him feel like...a man. He understood Dillon’s attraction. But the memory of Mom bursting through his bedroom door, the panic in her voice, always brought him back to reality, back to Dad.

Steven clutched the medallion against his chest as memories of Dad rushed to mind. Rustic Knoll had plenty of them. Dad teaching him to swim and canoe at the lake, to navigate accurately from one place to another, never letting him use his blindness as an excuse for laziness or misbehavior.

Dad’s death had steeled his resistance to the pull of pornography and erotic phone messages. Mom had been impressed when he asked her to install a filter on his phone. She never guessed the real reason for his request. It worked, but apparently he’d only pushed his desires into a deep dark closet. The old temptation was back, strong as ever.

CHAPTER FOUR

STEVEN YAWNED AND CLIMBED OUT OF BED. HE'D HEARD SOME MUMBLING from Dillon when Jake woke them up, but there was no movement from the top bunk now. Steven reached up and pushed against Dillon's shoulder.

"Come on, partner. Time to get up," he whispered.

Dillon mumbled again. "I changed my mind. You'll have to find another triathlon partner."

"Aw, you're just mad because I took your phone, which you're not supposed to have anyway. You're a sore loser." Steven pulled on his swim trunks and a rash guard shirt, slid his feet into flip-flops and wrapped his beach towel around his shoulders.

"Ready?" Jake whispered as he came out of his room.

"Yeah." Steven hit Dillon's shoulder again. "We're leaving." He followed Jake out the door.

Jake hesitated on the steps. "Isn't he coming?"

"He'll catch up. Dillon's too competitive to let me do this alone."

Though cooler than last night, the air still felt warm for 6:30 in the morning. The sun was high enough to promise another hot day, but that didn't keep the birds from chirping and calling to one another. Steven figured they were a little more than halfway to the boat dock when the

cabin door slammed behind them. Dillon caught up with them as they descended the steps to the dock.

“You made it.” Jake handed them their life jackets.

“’Bout time,” Steven added.

“Shut up.” Dillon grabbed his life jacket.

Steven slipped his down over his head. “Yuck, this one must’ve gotten dropped in the water yesterday. It’s feels clammy.” He fastened the buckle and reached for the ties. “Do we really have to wear these if we’ll be jumping into the lake without them in a few minutes?”

“Yep. Sorry. Camp rules.” Jake’s feet pounded the wooden dock on his way to the motorboat. “If you’re in the boat, you wear a life jacket.”

“Stupid,” Dillon muttered.

Waves washing against the shore made barely a sound as Steven left his sandals on the shore and waded in up to his ankles. “Feels chilly. Colder than yesterday afternoon, anyway.”

“Yeah. It cools off overnight, even when the air temperature stays warm.” Dillon came to stand beside him. “How do you want to do this? Are we tethered or something?”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot.” Steven called to Jake. “Is there some rope or something we can use as a tether between us?”

Jake answered. “Dillon, check the boathouse. There should be some kind of rope in there.”

While Dillon looked for the rope, the boat’s motor coughed, choked, then rumbled to life. Dillon returned and put one end of length of cotton rope in Steven’s hand.

Steven wound it loosely around his waist. “Don’t make it tight or it’ll chafe while you’re swimming.”

Jake called from the boat. “If you guys are ready, climb aboard.”

The boat dipped and bobbed as they clambered aboard and sat on the rear bench seat. Jake slipped it into reverse and the boat moseyed backward,

then turned. The motor's low growl grew as the boat gained speed, a jarring note on a quiet, peaceful morning.

"Good morning for a swim. Nice and calm." Jake shouted over the motor's noise. "Only one boat of fishermen out."

That should be Nurse Willie. How long had it been since she'd been out for some early morning fishing?

The boat made a sharp turn before Jake cut the motor back to idle speed. "Okay, my GPS says we're just over a quarter mile from shore. You can swim straight back to camp from here. I'll wait for you to get going, then swing around and putter alongside you."

Steven removed his life jacket and dropped it on the seat beside him. The boat rocked gently when he stood to do his warm-up stretches.

"How deep is it here?" Dillon moved to the side of the boat.

"Twenty, thirty feet maybe. Are you counting on me to keep you on course?"

"Nope, that's Dillon's job." Steven tugged on the tether rope. "Might as well get used to it." He finished his stretching and shook out his arms and legs to loosen up. "Ready?"

Dillon stood beside him. "Let's go."

The boat dipped sideways as they both jumped into the water. Steven's skin prickled at the sudden chill. Seaweed tickled his legs. He kicked at it and angled upward, trying to stay below the surface. This weightless gliding through the water was the best part of training. Complete freedom to move in any direction with no fear, no worry of running into people or structures, no obstacles to trip over. Maybe this sensation had kindled the dreams that began shortly after he started training. He often dreamt of running full speed up a hill with total abandon. When he reached the top, he'd take off into the air like a bird, soaring and turning and gliding through the skies. Swimming had that same feel, of moving through the water with little effort and no restraint.

Steven surfaced and filled his lungs with air, then set his arms to their rhythmic motion. The rope chafed his stomach, even without being taut. Dillon swam on his left. On his right, the boat's rumble was dulled under the water. His limbs were warming up, comfortable with plenty of strength left. He lifted his face sideways, sucked in a breath, then faced down again to repeat the motion on the other side. If this were the actual race, the water would be roiling, churning and gurgling with hundreds of other swimmers.

How far had they gone? Probably a little less than halfway. The rope tugged him to the left, and he stopped long enough to hear Dillon's breathless plea.

"Slow down. I need to catch my breath."

"Float on your back until you're ready." Steven treaded water, listening to Dillon's breath slow almost to normal again.

"Okay, I think I'm ready." There was a tug on the rope between them as Dillon turned back onto his stomach. "Veer to the right just a little."

Steven's body rocked side to side as he swung one arm forward, lifted his head to breathe, then dug down through the water and pulled back, repeating the motion with the other arm.

You can swim to think, or you can swim not to think. That's what his friend on the school's swim team had told him. It was true. He could put his brain in neutral, concentrate on his mechanics and forget all the cares and worries of the day. Or he could put his body on automatic, giving his brain focused time to work out a problem. Rocking from side to side with each stroke, his brain seemed to follow along, rocking back and forth between Dillon's sexting and Nurse Willie. Could he take Willie out fishing? Surely that would cheer her up. She'd taken him enough times over the years when he couldn't participate in the Rec games. He made a mental note to ask Zeke about it at breakfast.

As for Dillon, the phone was still inside his pillowcase this morning, but his friend would probably search for it the first chance he got. If he moved

the pillow even a little bit, the weight would be a guaranteed giveaway.

The sleazy voice from years ago whispered again in Steven's head. How could something both repel and fascinate him at the same time? He strained harder, forcing his legs to kick faster. His chest heaved as he sucked in air and blew it out, the bubbles adding to the turbulence of his strokes. He couldn't seem to put that voice behind him any more than he could outdistance the memory it stirred.

Swim to think, or not to think. Train the mind as well as the body. Steven focused on the feel of his elbow coming out of the water, his arm forming a proper arc, reaching forward and down, pulling his hand back toward his hip.

Dillon stopped one more time, but soon they were close enough to shore for Steven's hands and knees to scrape the lake bottom. He stood up and waded onto shore. Behind him, Dillon inhaled one long breath and let it out slowly. "Man, I have a new appreciation for the guys on swim team. This is worse than sprint training for soccer."

Steven caught his breath and his pulse slowed to a more normal pace. "Think you could get on a bike if we put a couple events together toward the end of the week? Maybe swim and bike on Thursday, bike and run on Friday?"

"I'm game to try it. As long as we're not swimming and running yet."

After Jake docked the boat, stowed the life jackets in the boathouse and locked it up, he met them at the bottom of the steps. "Ten minutes after seven. Perfect timing. You guys ready to head back?"

Steven retrieved his sandals from the beach near the dock, shook the sand from the towel and used it to mop his face. Drawing it over his hair and back, he let it rest around his neck. A faint tinkling came from Jake's direction. "You wore your whistle this morning?"

"How do you know about my whistle?" Immediately, the sound became muted.

“The little ball inside was jingling as you walked. And you just put your hand over it.”

Jake chuckled and shook the whistle. “You’re good. Guess I grabbed it out of habit when I left.”

A squirrel jabbered as they approached the cabin. Jake opened the screen door, stepped inside and blew a sharp report on his whistle. “Everybody up!”

Steven and Dillon followed Jake to the bunkroom doorway, where he stopped and blew his whistle again. The sound reverberated off the walls, much louder than at the beach. It prompted groans and protests, and Steven covered his ears with his towel.

“Come on, everybody up. I’ll keep blowing until I see everyone out of bed.” Another whistle blast brought louder protests, but with the shuffling of feet and constant movement, Jake retreated and unlocked his door.

Steven squatted to pull some clean shorts and a shirt from his suitcase.

Dillon bent over his shoulder. “Come on, man. Let me have my phone back.”

“You know you’re not supposed to have a phone at camp.” Steven stood and shucked off his swim trunks and shirt, hanging them to dry on the crossbar at the foot of the bed. “Keep bugging me and I’ll hand it over to Jake. You can thank me later for not getting you in trouble.” He stepped into his dry shorts and pulled them up.

Dillon cursed, grabbed some clothes from his suitcase at Steven’s feet and left the room. Steven picked up the pillow, slipped his hand inside and in one smooth movement, transferred the phone to his pocket. Dillon wouldn’t get hold of it if he carried it with him all day.

Minutes later, Brady arrived. They waited for Dillon and headed over to breakfast together. Steven’s mouth watered at the sweet aroma of Janie’s pancakes that hung in the air. His stomach growled. Monday’s breakfast was the best.

A murmur of voices told him they were near the Snack Shack. Steven hung back while Brady and Dillon checked their Rec team assignments and the day's activity.

Brady returned to his side. "I'm glad I didn't waste time taking a shower this morning. I'll need it after Wheel Steal."

Dillon tapped Steven's arm. "You're on my team. We're playing water polo."

"You are," Steven said. "I'm not."

"You can play water polo. Just stand next to the net. When I put the ball in your hands, toss it in."

"Nope. I've got other plans. Keep a lookout for Zeke." Steven followed Brady into the dining hall and along the buffet.

Janie Rodriguez, the cook, greeted him and Brady as they filled their plates. "Good morning, boys. That's what I like to see—healthy appetites."

"You made my favorite again, Janie." Steven picked up five pats of butter and the same number of serving cups of maple syrup, one for each of the five plate-size pancakes he'd loaded onto his tray. Early morning training sessions left him hungrier than usual.

Janie laughed. "Only the best for my favorite camper."

Steven picked up his tray and waited for Brady and Dillon. They went to sit at the table where Claire and Marissa were sitting.

"Steven," Claire exclaimed, "is that a phone in your pocket? What are you doing with that at camp?"

"It's not mine." Steven arranged his utensils beside his plate. "It's...a friend's. I'm just holding onto it until the end of camp so he doesn't get in trouble."

Dillon pulled out his chair and threw himself into it without saying anything.

"Is it that easy to see?" Steven covered his pocket with his hand.

“It’s not real obvious, but if anyone looks at your pocket, they’ll see it’s a phone.” Claire paused. “That’s kind of weird. What happens if *you* get in trouble?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out.” He’d have to find a better hiding place in the cabin, sometime when Dillon wasn’t around.

While Brady, Marissa and Dillon talked about their Rec teams and what games they were playing that day, Claire leaned over to Steven. “I couldn’t get Nurse Willie off my mind last night. I wish I knew what to do for her. She needs to keep a positive attitude. I’ve heard that’s a big part of fighting cancer.”

Steven stabbed a chunk of pancake. “I’ve heard that too, and I have an idea that might cheer her up. But I have ask Zeke about it.”

“What’s your idea?”

“She’s always taken me out fishing when I couldn’t do the Rec activity. So maybe now, I can take her fishing instead.”

Claire’s hand was warm and soft when she squeezed his arm. “Oh, Steven! That’s perfect.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

“I LIKE THE THOUGHT.” ZEKE’S CHAIR CREAKED, AND THE WHEELS GRATED against the floor as he rose from his desk. “But I’m not sure taking Willie fishing is such a good idea.”

Steven sank onto one of the armchairs positioned in front of the desk. He’d come here straight from breakfast. “But she loves fishing. When was the last time she went?”

“It’s been a while,” Zeke admitted. He shuffled some papers. “Probably not since she started treatment.”

“Isn’t keeping a positive attitude really important for people with cancer? Getting Nurse Willie out in a boat with a fishing pole in her hand would lift her spirits. I know it would.” Steven scooted to the edge of the chair. “Every year, when I couldn’t play the Rec games, she’d take me fishing. Now it’s my turn to take her.”

Zeke’s chair squeaked again. “You make a good argument, Steven, but I’m not sure Nurse Willie is physically up to doing it. She’s sleeping a lot and isn’t eating much. I’m afraid the exertion might be too much for her.”

“She won’t have to exert herself. Doesn’t the clinic have a wheelchair? I can take her down in that. Once she gets into the canoe, I’ll do all the work. She can sit back and enjoy the ride, as long as she gives me directions. We

won't stay out long. I'll bring her back as soon as she wants, even if we don't get to do any fishing. Please?"

Several moments passed before Zeke answered. "Let me ask her what she thinks of the idea. I'll speak with her this morning and see if she's up for it."

Steven bounced up from the chair. "Thank you! I know this will be good for her."

"I hope so," Zeke muttered.

"It will. I promise." He started for the door, but Zeke called him back.

"May I ask what you have in your pocket that looks very much like a cell phone?"

Steven clapped his hand to his pocket. His mouth went dry, his mind spinning through various explanations. "It's a—a cell phone." He hurried to add, "But it's not mine. It belongs to...another kid in the cabin."

"And why do you have it?"

"I told him he wasn't supposed to have it but he wouldn't put it away. So, I grabbed it."

"You didn't turn it over to your counselor?"

"Not yet."

"Hmm. I really should take it from you, but I'll trust you to give it to your counselor when you get back to the cabin."

"Thanks." Steven rubbed his sweaty hand against the leg of his shorts and backed up, straight into the doorjamb. "Sorry." Steven hurried out of the office, found his way outside the building and stopped to orient himself. *That was close.* He'd have to find a better hiding place for this phone. Getting Dillon in trouble wasn't his goal. But even if he never asked the girl for those pictures, he didn't seem to discourage her from sending more.

Steven continued past the Snack Shack, turned and crossed the grass until he found the sidewalk running alongside the chapel. The pavement stopped at the far end of the chapel, but from there, the cabin was straight

ahead. No trees stood in his way, and voices from within the cabin helped him find the front steps without ramming his toes into the concrete.

When he entered, Jake had everyone hustling to straighten bunks and suitcases before morning Bible study. Steven folded the sheet he'd slept on and, hunching over his bed, stuck it inside his sleeping bag. Where could he hide the phone? His suitcase was probably the first place Dillon would check.

At that moment, Dillon whispered in his ear. "Can I please have my phone back? I promise I won't use it."

Steven stayed hunched over his bed so Dillon wouldn't see the phone still in his pocket. He pulled at each corner of his sleeping bag multiple times until it felt perfectly smooth. "Zeke told me to hand it over to Jake and let him keep it."

Dillon gasped. "What? You didn't." He pounded the bed frame. "How did Zeke find out?"

"He saw it in my pocket. But don't worry. I didn't tell him you were sexting."

Dillon grabbed Steven's arm. "Are you serious?"

The bell rang outside, signaling the start of morning Bible study. Inside the cabin, Jake blew a piercing note on his whistle. "Time to head over to the chapel. Let's go."

Dillon released Steven's arm with a foul word under his breath. "I'm leaving."

"Go ahead. I need to use the bathroom. I'll catch up." Steven straightened and smiled to himself. That was easier than he expected. Now he could leave it in his suitcase and not worry about Dillon looking for it. *But what if Dillon or someone else happens to see it in there?*

Dillon's footsteps retreated through the bunkroom and the common room. The screen door slammed and Steven went to use the bathroom. When he returned to the bunkroom, he listened to make sure everyone had

left. A blue jay cried *thief* outside the window, but no other human sounds. He called, just to be sure.

“Anybody still here?” No one answered. Now, where could he hide the phone? Under his mattress? No, Dillon already saw him hide it there when he first took it. What about under Dillon’s mattress? Perfect!

Steven reached to the top bunk. He found Dillon’s pillow at one end and ran his hand along the thin mattress to the other end. Lifting the mattress, he shoved the phone underneath. *No, what if he sits on it and breaks it?* He moved it closer to the foot of the bed, a little off center from the middle. Still no good. He could climb up and put his knee on the spot. Better put it at the other end, under the pillow. That end was against the wall so Dillon wouldn’t be climbing up and accidentally landing on the phone. And with his pillow covering the spot, Dillon shouldn’t notice any bump in the mattress. Steven played with the phone’s volume controls, then turned the phone completely off. No sense wasting the battery. He laid it on its face and lowered the mattress over it, then smoothed out Dillon’s sleeping bag and hurried to the chapel.

Zeke wasn’t in his office when Steven checked after morning Bible study. He asked Brady to watch for him in the dining hall, but he wasn’t there either when they came through the buffet line for lunch.

“Dillon and Claire are at a table,” Brady said. “Want to sit with them?”

“Sure.” Steven barely set his tray down before Claire quizzed him about Willie.

“Did you ask Zeke about taking Willie fishing?”

“Yeah, he was supposed to let me know after he talked with her about it. Let me know if you see him anywhere.” Steven sat, bowed his head for a brief prayer of thanks.

Dillon belched and didn't bother to excuse himself. "Personally, in this heat, I'd much rather play water polo for Rec than go fishing. But then, I'd rather do anything besides sit in a boat staring at the water, waiting hours for a fish to come along and take a bite. Bor-ing!"

Steven couldn't imagine Dillon sitting still long enough to give fish a chance to bite. "It's peaceful. Whole different purpose than fast sports like soccer and basketball."

"My rec team is playing volleyball," Claire said. "I'm glad there's at least a little shade on the sideline. It'll be hot out there in the sun. Probably the only time in my life I'd rather do the Wheel Steal."

"Yeah, playing in the mud with inner tubes would be cooler." Steven took a bite of his roast beef.

"I see Zeke." Brady pushed his chair back. "Oh, wait. He's coming this way with Jake."

A moment later, Zeke's hand rested on Steven's shoulder. "I've talked with Nurse Willie. She doesn't want to go, but Mrs. Hoang thinks it might be good for her. Jake will help you get Willie down to the boat dock and get you set up in a canoe as soon as you're finished eating."

Steven jumped in his chair. "Yes! Give me a couple seconds." He gulped down his water and shoveled a few bites of peach cobbler into his mouth. Claire grabbed his wrist as he got up to leave.

"I'll put your tray away. And I'll be praying for you and Willie."

"Thanks!" Steven squeezed her hand, then hurried to the clinic with Jake.

Willie's husky voice was the first one he heard when they entered the clinic building. "I don't want to go fishing."

Mrs. Hoang answered. "It will be good for you. You're already dressed. Now get up out of that bed."

Willie grunted.

Jake led Steven past the clinic office to the door of Willie's one-room apartment. "Hi, Nurse Willie. Ready to catch some fish?"

"Steven. Why you making me go fishing with you?"

Steven's mouth went dry. Maybe this wasn't the thing to do. He swallowed. "I thought it would be fun. You've taken me fishing every year since I started coming here without Mom and Dad. I figured it was time for me to return the favor."

"You want your friends to see you with an old bald lady?"

"You're not that old, and I can't see your bald head. But be sure you wear your hat."

"Oh, you're embarrassed by the scar on my head."

"I can't see your scar either. Didn't even think about it. Besides the fact it's blazing hot out there, I want you to wear the hat because you're not Nurse Willie without the tinkling of those lures."

"Oh, for pity's sake, give me my hat."

Mrs. Hoang gave it to her and Willie brushed past Steven as he stood in the doorway.

"Jake, take this with you." The wheelchair squeaked as Mrs. Hoang pushed it toward them.

"I don't need no wheelchair," Nurse Willie argued. "I'm not a cripple."

On the way out, Mrs. Hoang pulled Willie's fishing gear from the closet inside the front door. She set Willie's tackle box on the seat of the wheelchair and handed two poles to Steven.

"Where's my umbrella?" Willie demanded. "Gonna need it for some shade."

"Here you go." Mrs. Hoang handed the umbrella to her.

Jake took the wheelchair and Steven grasped Willie's elbow.

"Mind if I hang on 'til we get down to the boat dock?" he said.

Nurse Willie started to pull her arm away, but then relented. She set a slow pace, taking fifteen minutes instead of the normal five to walk the road

that wound back behind the girls' cabins and ended in a circle just above the boat dock. Jake grabbed the tackle box but left the wheelchair at the top of the stairs while he unlocked the boathouse.

Steven and Willie made their way carefully down the steps and each took a life jacket from Jake. Steven set the fishing poles on the ground and slipped the life jacket over his head while Jake helped Willie settle into the front of a canoe at the water's edge.

"Don't forget the tackle box," Jake called.

Steven brought the poles and the tackle box to the canoe. Jake traded him a paddle for the gear and spoke into his ear.

"Remember, I'll be over at the beach while you're out. There's a water polo game scheduled, so I can keep an eye on you and Willie in case you need anything." Jake put the fishing gear in the canoe, pushed it into the water and held it steady while Steven climbed into the back.

"Willie, I put a couple cushions from the motorboat behind you," Jake said. "If you get tired, turn around and sit on the bottom of the canoe on this cushion. You can lean the other one against the cross thwart for your back."

Willie sniffed. "Not gonna last more than five minutes in this heat."

"Steven, your pole is down here in the middle." Jake tapped the canoe to indicate the location of the pole for Steven. "Willie has hers along with the tackle box and bait. I dug up a couple worms for you. Zeke wanted you to stay close around here."

Steven nodded. "We'll be fine."

"Okay, then. Everybody ready?" Jake shoved the canoe away from shore. "Catch us some dinner, Nurse Willie!"

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CHAPTER SIX

STEVEN SWAYED BACKWARD AT JAKE'S PUSH TO THE CANOE AND DUG THE paddle into the lake to keep their momentum going. Willie couldn't be expected to paddle in her condition, so it was all up to him. The paddle dripped water onto his knees as he switched sides and plunged it down again on the other side of the canoe. The sun's heat on his bare shoulders reminded him of the sunscreen he'd left in the cabin. He hadn't thought to go back and grab it before leaving the dining hall with Jake.

Nurse Willie called to him. "Fish don't bite in the middle of the day. Don't know why you're so set on doing this."

"Fishing's not only about catching fish. You told me that every year when I complained about not catching anything."

Willie didn't answer, except to say, "Can't we find some shade?"

"Our usual spot has some shade. Tell me when to turn."

Nurse Willie's directions were sparse, but Steven managed to paddle around the swimming area and over to the marshy spot below the boys' cabins. Years ago, Willie had described for him the water lilies and other hydro plants that grew here, providing food and hiding places for fish and breaking the momentum of the waves. Only the wake of an occasional motorboat was strong enough to overflow the plants and slap at the lake's edge.

Sweat trickled down Steven's chest and caught on the medallion. His tank shirt stuck to his back, and his shoulders welcomed the shade of the trees overhanging the lake. He slowed the canoe. "How's this?"

"It'll do." The lid of the tackle box creaked as Willie opened it, then thwacked against the side of the canoe. Seconds later, a short tick-click came from her reel.

Familiar sounds. Even the odor of decaying fish somewhere along the shore was somehow right and good. Steven smiled and dropped a concrete anchor shaped like a pail over the side. He laid the paddle in the bottom of the canoe and picked up his fishing pole.

"You got your license?" Willie asked. "I'm not getting caught out here and you fishing without a license."

"I don't have it on me right now, but Mom and I stopped to get one on our way to camp." Steven put his hand out. "May I have a worm?" Willie dropped a wriggling worm on his palm. He chuckled. "Did you hear what Taylor did last year to a kid in our cabin? He went out and found some night crawlers and stuck them in someone's sleeping bag. The guy woke up screaming that there were snakes in his bed."

Nurse Willie took her time answering. "If I'da known that's what he wanted them for, I wouldn't have told him where to look." Willie's reel spun out a tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tick, followed by a soft *plip*—the signal for silence.

Willie always demanded silence as soon as the hook was in the water. Speaking might scare the fish away. Not that they'd ever gotten more than a nibble or two this time of day. Steven cast his line straight out to the side, keeping it well away from Willie.

The buzz of flies competed with the roar of distant motorboats. Shouts and laughter grew from the beach as the water polo game got underway. Occasionally, a reel clicked like a gentle cicada as Steven or Willie pulled in their line and cast off again in a different spot.

“Thank you, Steven.”

He almost missed the husky whisper, but it made him smile. “You’re welcome. I knew you had to be missing this. I know I would if I—” He should’ve kept his mouth shut, shouldn’t have reminded her of the cancer. Steven gave his line a sharp jerk, but there was no answering tug.

“I’ve had enough.” Willie’s reel clicked continuously as she pulled in her line.

Steven bit his lip and reeled in his line and stowed his pole on the bottom of the canoe. *Stupid*. With one little sentence, what little progress he’d made was lost. “Do you want to sit on the cushions like Jake suggested?”

“All right.” The tackle box snapped shut. “Hold the canoe still so I don’t end up in the lake.”

Steven gripped the gunwale on each side to steady the canoe. It jerked from side to side until Willie settled into the cushion on the hull. Her umbrella whooshed and snapped. He pulled up the anchor and set it down behind his seat before picking up his paddle. “Okay, tell me when I’m heading the right direction.”

Willie spoke only to give directions on the way back to the boat dock. Had this been too much for her? He’d hate to cause a setback, especially now when she seemed to be softening, opening up. He needed to keep her talking.

“Did you ever go to the campfire on Friday nights?” What made him ask an odd question like that? In all the years he’d been coming to camp, he’d never known Nurse Willie to attend the campfire. She probably used that time to restock her clinic or prepare for the next week of camp. Maybe she went to bed early so she could get up and fish at sunrise.

“I did, but not with all you kids.” Willie paused so long, Steven thought she wouldn’t say any more than that. Finally, she added, “I used to take the motor boat, just offshore from where you kids were singing. I’d turn off the

engine—keep the running lights on so no one ran into me—and I’d sit out here on the water and listen to the singing. All those young voices singin’ praise to God and his stars twinkling up there in the heavens. Best worship service I’ve ever been to.”

“Maybe I can take you out again on Friday.” That would be his last Rustic Knoll campfire. Claire had reminded him that next year they’d graduate and be too old to come back for camp. She could return sometime as a counselor, but Zeke probably wouldn’t hire him with his blindness. *Is that how Willie feels—unwanted, unneeded?*

The hardness returned to her voice. “I can’t. Can’t do campfires, can’t fish, can’t nurse my campers. Not much good for anything no more.”

“What?” Steven pulled his paddle out of the water. “You can’t give up, Nurse Willie. The camp needs you. *We* need you. Rustic Knoll just isn’t the same without you.”

“You’ve got Mrs. Hoang now. Who needs sickly ol’ Nurse Willie when they can have an expert, highly trained critical care nurse?”

Steven opened his mouth to argue, but changed his mind. He couldn’t blame her for feeling unwanted, unneeded. Not with “the expert” Mrs. Hoang taking over all her duties. This fishing trip had opened a brief window to the old Willie. It must have taken a lot of effort for her to thank him. But like a fish that only nibbles the bait, she’d refused the hook and gone back to her sullen, angry self.

“Turn left,” Willie ordered.

Steven dug the paddle wide, turning the canoe toward the dock. Maybe actually catching a fish would bring her out a little more. If he took her out again after supper, the fish would be more likely to bite. And maybe he could figure a way to take her out to hear the campfire singing on Friday night.

Brady agreed to visit Nurse Willie with Steven before evening worship, but Mrs. Hoang intercepted them when they entered the clinic. “She’s sleeping. I think this afternoon wore her out.”

Steven fiddled with the medallion under his shirt. “I wanted to ask if she’d go again tomorrow, maybe after supper when it’s not so hot. The fish might be biting better that time of day, make it more fun.”

“I’ll let her know.” Mrs. Hoang dismissed them and went back into the clinic.

She might deliver his message, but how much enthusiasm would she put into it? He still needed to check with Zeke about it, but if he could say Willie wanted to go, how could Zeke object?

Steven matched Brady’s stride as they left the guesthouse and clinic. The evening worship bell clanged, and Brady quickened his pace.

“What’s your hurry? That chapel is going to be sweltering.”

“I was hoping to sit...near the front.”

Steven elbowed him. “Because you want to see Zeke’s drawing or because you want to sit with a certain someone? Maybe someone named Marissa?”

“For a blind kid, you sure see well.”

Steven laughed.

Brady bumped his shoulder. “What about you and Claire?”

“Claire?” Steven shrugged. “We’re just friends. Good friends, but nothing more.”

“Is that the way you want it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just a guess, but I think that could change if you want it to.” Brady tapped Steven’s arm, a sign that they were close to the chapel.

Steven took hold of Brady’s arm as they wound their way through the crowd. Claire had always been a close friend, ever since they played in the sand together. Their time together was limited to one week a year at camp,

but she seemed to understand him better than a lot of his guy friends. Other guys talked about how cute Claire was, but he liked her spirit and determination. She never shied away from a challenge, whether it was a canoe race or a bully. But she had a tender heart, especially for people who were hurting.

Inching their way up the aisle to the front, Steven noticed the hum from the ceiling fans and the swirl of hot air, but it wasn't making much difference. Steven's dark glasses rode the sweat down his nose and he nudged them back up, only to have them slide down again.

Brady scooted into an aisle. "Whoa! What's that?"

Steven stopped. "What's what?"

"Some kind of loom or something up on stage." Brady sat down.

As Steven sat down next to him, he recognized Marissa's habitual gum popping and the classic Bubble Gum scent. Claire and Dillon's voices reached him from farther down the row, probably on the other side of Marissa.

Steven fingered the medallion beneath his shirt. He'd been so caught up in worrying about Nurse Willie, he hadn't thought much about Dad or the triathlon. He and Dillon would need access to the tandem bike in the morning. It normally took him a little less than an hour to ride twelve miles. No doubt Dillon would gripe about the early start again, maybe even threaten to drop out of the deal to train with him. The guy was ticked about his phone, but he'd get over it. They'd known each other long enough that neither would let the other one down.

The band started and everyone got to their feet to sing. Moving around felt slightly better than sitting still. At least with his mind on singing, he didn't notice the sweat dripping down his back so much. They sang four songs before Zeke got up to speak.

"I know it's hot in here tonight so we'll try to speed things up a bit. Last night we talked about how each of you is fearfully and wonderfully made.

In the following verse from Psalm 139, David tells how God saw him and formed his inward parts, weaving him together in his mother's womb. Some Bible versions use the word 'knit,' but the Hebrew word is closer to our idea of something that's woven. Have any of you seen a weaving loom in action?"

A smattering of responses indicated very few had seen a working loom.

"Tonight, I've invited my friend, Sherry, to join us. Sherry's a local artist who makes rugs, blankets, table runners, and other woven items. I've asked her to describe the process of weaving to give us a better understanding of what David was saying."

Sherry took over. "Thank you, Zeke. I want you to imagine a couple hundred separate threads all lying flat and parallel to each other. Now imagine them all attached to a piece of wood at one end. At the other end, each alternate thread is attached to one of two boards called a harness."

Her voice was strong and determined, just the way Steven imagined someone who worked threads and yarns into such practical things as rugs.

"Can everyone see this row of threads that are held up at an angle? They're called the warp. The alternate threads are held down below. Each harness keeps the threads separate and taut. Now watch what happens when I do this."

Steven leaned over to Brady. "What happens?"

"She stepped on a pedal and it switched the two harnesses." Brady paused, then whispered, "You know what a right triangle looks like, the kind where one leg is longer than the other?" Steven nodded. "Think of the longer leg lying horizontal with the short leg sticking up. What she called the warp would be the triangle's hypotenuse. But when she steps on the pedal, the threads that form the hypotenuse trade places with the ones that form the bottom leg."

Steven cocked his ear to the soft swoosh-shwoosh of the loom.

Brady continued describing the shuttle, wrapped end to end with yarn, and how she shoved it through the space formed by the angle of the two sets of threads, making a wooden rattling sound. Then came the *swoosh* of the threads changing places.

“Each time I pass the shuttle through,” Sherry explained, “we switch the warp threads. This traps the yarn from the shuttle and holds it in place. Then I use this beater to press the yarn tight against the previous yarn.”

So many sounds—clacking, things rubbing against other things, plus the swooshing and clattering. Steven detected the pattern and identified the motions. Swoosh-swoosh, clatter, clack, rub, swoosh-swoosh, clatter, clack, rub.

Zeke interrupted and sounds stopped. “Sherry, what kinds of materials do you weave?”

“It depends on what you’re making. Clothing, of course, uses thin threads that have been dyed different colors. Yarn makes a thicker fabric for rugs or maybe a light shawl. You can even use strips of fabric to make a heavier rug.”

“Can you change colors?”

“Sure. Pieces can be all one color or if I use multicolored yarn, it makes its own pattern as I weave. I can also change out the colors of the yarn, thread or fabric to create my own design.”

“Have you ever made a mistake?” Zeke asked.

Sherry laughed. “Oh, yes.”

“Do you go back and correct it?”

“Only if it weakens the strength and durability of the piece. A flaw often makes something more valuable because it indicates the item was handmade, not machine-woven. There’s an old myth or legend about weavers intentionally adding flaws to their work as a sign of humility, because only God is perfect.”

Zeke laughed. “I bet someone made that up to rationalize their mistake.”

“You’re probably right, but I like the idea that flaws in our work demonstrate our weakness in contrast to God’s perfection.”

“Thank you, Sherry.” Zeke hopped off the stage. “That loom looks pretty complicated, doesn’t it? Weaving requires knowledge of threads or fibers that work best together, as well as understanding how to operate the loom and getting the right tension. Then, there’s the design factor knowing which colors to use and how to vary them to make an interesting design.”

There was a soft whisper of pages being turned. “Let me read this verse to you. ‘My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.’ I love this verse because it implies a certain complexity. Woven together, adding one layer, one thread at a time, over and under another layer. One color here, another color there, intertwining them all to make one whole piece.”

Zeke walked the length of the aisle and back while he spoke. “You were no accident, no surprise. God didn’t throw you together in a hurry. He thought about how He wanted you to look and wove you together, piece by piece, selecting the right hair and nose and lips, your fingers and your toes. He wove your particular tastes, your personality, and even your ability to change. Tonight, when you go back to your cabins and you’re getting ready for bed, take a look at yourself in the mirror. Whatever you see there was woven together deliberately and purposefully with love.”

Did it matter that he couldn’t see? Was that something God wove into him on purpose?

Zeke continued. “You are a work of art, created by the greatest artist of all time. The God who made the flowers and the trees, the lake out there and the stars up in the sky took time to weave you together, one thread at a time. You may see a flaw, something you consider a mistake. But God is perfect. He doesn’t make mistakes. You were woven together just the way He wanted.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER EVENING WORSHIP, DILLON JOINED STEVEN AT THE BATHROOM SINK and landed a light punch to his arm. “It’s too bad you can’t see this perfectly woven specimen standing next you. There’s not a single flaw anywhere.”

Steven shook his head, his mouth frothy with toothpaste. He spit and tapped his toothbrush against the sink. “I know of one flaw.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s missing a little humility.” He cupped his hands under the faucet and brought the water to his mouth to rinse.

Dillon sighed. “A slight flaw only makes me more valuable.”

Steven spit, sucked in more water and aimed a stream of it in Dillon’s direction.

“Ack!” Dillon caught Steven in a headlock. The other boys’ laughter echoed in the bathroom as the two wrestled their way into the bunkroom before Dillon released his hold. “Let that be a lesson. Don’t mess with perfection.”

Steven laughed and pulled out his bed sheet, spreading it over the top of his sleeping bag. Jake herded stragglers out of the bathroom, threatening to turn out the lights in thirty seconds. Steven called to him. “Hey, Jake, Dillon and I are riding the bike tomorrow. Should I wake you up for the key?”

Jake sauntered over to his bed. “What time are you guys getting up?”

Dillon answered from the top bunk. “Noon.”

Steven clicked his tongue. “No later than six.”

Dillon groaned.

“I’ll wake you up and give you the key.” Jake returned to the bunkroom doorway and issued a stern warning to the rest of the cabin to quiet down. A few protests when the lights went off gradually died down.

Steven lay on his back, moving his arms and legs to find a cool spot on the sheet. Thoughts crowded his mind like campers heading for supper. Would Mrs. Hoang remember to ask Nurse Willie about going fishing tomorrow evening? Would Willie agree to it? He still needed to get Zeke’s permission.

Zeke’s message was something to think about, too. Was his blindness a flaw, a mistake? Most people would probably say yes, but Mom and Dad never acted like they considered it a flaw. He’d never thought of it as a problem until he started going to public school. Sighted kids would trip him or move things around so he couldn’t find them.

Did God purposely weave blindness into him? How could the inability to see people and things make him more valuable? It didn’t make sense. But then neither did cancer and heart attacks.

Tuesday morning, Dillon yawned and leaned against the outer wall of the Snack Shack as Steven fit the key into the padlock that linked the ends of the tandem bicycle’s security chain. “You want me to do that?”

“No way. You’re still half asleep. Can’t see any better than I can.” The lock popped open and Steven pulled the chain apart, then dropped the key back in his pocket. “You can get the bike out.”

“We should try it on separate bikes.” Dillon yawned again.

Steven grinned. “Think we could?”

“Naw, you’d never be able to keep up with me.”

“Still haven’t fixed that humility flaw, have you?” Steven smiled. “Stick with the tandem. That’s what we’ll be using in the race.” He waited while Dillon pulled the security chain from the bike’s frame and removed the bike from the stand.

Dillon twisted the handlebars to turn the bike. “I’m up front?”

“Yeah, but let’s move it onto the road so we can get a decent start.”

“What about helmets?”

Steven clapped his hand to his head. “Oh, man, I forgot all about helmets. They’re locked up inside the Snack Shack. And all I’ve got is the padlock key.”

“We’ll be fine without them.”

“Yeah, I’m not going back and asking Jake to get them for us. Let’s get going.”

Dillon steered the bike out from behind the Snack Shack. “How do we know when we’ve done twelve miles?”

“I usually do twelve miles in about an hour.” He pulled Dillon’s phone from his back pocket. He’d managed to sneak it out from under the mattress while Dillon was in the bathroom. “Here.”

“My phone! You’re giving it back to me?”

“Only to use as a timer. Set it for sixty minutes.”

“You trust me not to look at the pictures?”

“Forget about the pictures. You have to watch where we’re going.”

A few seconds passed before Dillon gave the okay. “Sixty minutes. We’re on.”

Steven found the rear handlebars and slung his leg over the bike. His right foot found the pedal. “Ready.”

Dillon counted *one, two, three*, and Steven pressed the pedal down, lifting his left foot onto the other pedal and sitting back on the seat. “Warn me when we come to the end of a road so I’m ready for the sharp turns.”

Riding made the warm still air feel like a breeze brushing against Steven's face and ears. They turned right and traveled down the road past the clinic, behind the girls' cabins.

"Sharp circle to the left," Dillon warned.

They rounded the circle near the boathouse and rode past the girls' cabins again. The tires hummed against the pavement and the bike's chain clicked softly on its journey around the sprocket. Dillon laughed at a rabbit's zigzag path away from the bike and hollered when a squirrel dashed across the road in front of him.

By the time they finished, Janie would be cooking breakfast, and the air would be filled with the scent of frying bacon. But for now, the air was heavy with the smells of nature and dew-drenched grass. They rode out to the highway that ran past Rustic Knoll's entrance. A car drove by and the exhaust burned Steven's nostrils.

Dillon spoke over his shoulder. "So you didn't really give my phone to Jake."

"No, but don't get any ideas. I can still turn you in."

"But you didn't. Why not?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah! I can't afford to get in trouble with those pictures. Not if I want to be the starting forward this year. Or any other position on the soccer team." The bike skidded over a piece of gravel and made a popping sound. "I still don't get why you're making such a big deal out of it. It's my phone and it's not hurting anyone."

"It *is* hurting someone."

"Who?"

Steven thought back over the arguments Dad had given him. Back then, he couldn't exactly relate to them. But now that he was older and could imagine getting married someday, they made sense. "It's hurting both you and the girl."

“How?”

“You think you’d ever marry her?”

“No way.”

“You think someday her husband will like knowing you and maybe other guys have seen something that should’ve been reserved for him? Would you like that if it was your wife?”

“It’s just looking. I’m not doing anything else.”

“My dad always said ‘thoughts lead to action.’ Maybe not now or next week or even next year, but some day, you’re likely to take the next step. Besides, if you get in the habit of looking now when you’re not married, do you really think you’ll suddenly stop looking when you do get married? You think your wife will be okay with you looking at other half-naked women?”

Dillon’s only response was to warn him about a sharp turn. Steven leaned into the curve and stopped pedaling until they rounded out of it. Then his legs pumped hard again.

“Besides all that,” Steven added, “it’s a habit that’s addicting. You think you’re controlling what you look at and when, but pretty soon it’s controlling you and you start making excuses to look at it every time you get the chance.”

Over his shoulder, Dillon said, “How would you know? You can’t look at anything.”

“I can listen. It’s almost the same thing.” Steven stood up and pumped the pedals even harder as they raced up the hill past the clinic, his head right behind Dillon’s. His pulse was fast and his breath came in rhythmic huffs. “You know it’s wrong, or you wouldn’t be worried about the coaches and Zeke and Jake. Leave it alone. Don’t go there.”

“So you’ve listened to porn? Now it’s do-as-I-say, not-as-I-did?”

Steven didn’t answer. They entered another sharp turn and he steered the conversation toward sports and Rec until at last the phone alarm

sounded. “Woohoo! We’re done.”

Minutes later, Dillon braked to a stop near the Snack Shack. “Oh, man, my legs feel like jelly.”

He let Steven off first, then dismounted and returned the bike to the rack.

Steven retrieved the key from his pocket and locked the security chain through the bike’s frame. He stood and held his hand out, palm up. “Give me the phone.”

“Seriously? You really don’t trust me, do you?”

“Nope. Turn it off and let me have it. Remember, I can still turn you in.”

Dillon expelled a breath and slapped the phone against Steven’s sweaty palm.

Steven dropped it in his pocket, then inhaled the bacon-scented air. “Mmm. Let’s get going. I’m really hungry, and I need to catch Claire at breakfast.”

“You and Claire are pretty tight, huh?”

Steven shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I’ve known her about as long as I’ve been coming to camp.”

“So, are you real tight or—”

“She’s not my girlfriend, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Dillon exhaled. “Okay, good.”

It was true there had never been any romantic interest between him and Claire. So why did it bother him now that Dillon might be interested in her? It had to be the guy’s attitude toward the pictures on his phone. Claire deserved better than that. Steven stopped and gripped Dillon’s arm tight. “You treat her right. If you don’t, I promise you someone else will see what’s on this phone.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

AT LUNCHTIME, STEVEN WAITED WITH CLAIRE AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE buffet while Janie fixed a tray for Nurse Willie. Strange how both Brady and Dillon thought he and Claire were more than friends. He did like hanging out with her, but she'd never hinted that her feelings were any deeper than friendship.

So why did Dillon's interest in her bother him? Because if the guy liked getting sexy pictures of some girl from back home, he might want the same from Claire. A chuckle burst from Steven's mouth as he imagined Claire's reaction to such a request. It would make his own threat to turn over the phone seem pitiful in comparison.

Claire giggled at him. "What's so funny?"

Steven worked his lips into a straight line. "Nothing. I just thought of something that...never mind."

Janie approached them with a tray of Wednesday's specialty—steaming ham, green beans and mashed potatoes. "You tell Willie if she won't eat my cooking, I'll come down there and feed it to her myself."

Claire laughed. "That should get her eating, even if the yummy smell doesn't." She inhaled and sighed.

"There's enough there for you and Steven, too." Janie handed the silverware and plates to Steven. "You carry these."

They set out for the clinic and Steven matched Claire's pace. "Good idea to bring lunch to Nurse Willie."

"I just hope she'll eat with us. Last time I visited her, she wouldn't even leave her room. I've thought about pretending I'm sick and trying to get her to treat me, but I haven't been able to get past Mrs. Hoang." Claire sighed.

"You don't think Mrs. Hoang is keeping you away from Willie on purpose, do you?"

"I don't know if it's that, but something's not right." Claire mounted the steps to the clinic and waited for Steven to open the door.

Mrs. Hoang met them in the entryway. "What is this?"

Claire held up the tray. "We're here to see Nurse Willie. We brought her some lunch."

"Wait here while I see if she is awake." Mrs. Hoang marched a few steps down the hall to Willie's room and knocked on her door. "Nurse Willie, are you up? It's lunchtime." She knocked again. "You have visitors who brought lunch. Get up and open the door." Impatience tinged Mrs. Hoang's words, but soon the door opened.

Mrs. Hoang beckoned them. "You come now."

Claire entered Willie's room first. "We brought you some lunch. Can we come in and eat with you?"

"You can come in, but I don't want anything to eat."

No enthusiasm. She sounded weak, almost disoriented. The fishing outing hadn't made any difference.

Mrs. Hoang retreated to the clinic and Claire set down the tray. "Mind if I open the curtains to let in some light?"

Willie rasped, "I guess so." She seemed resigned to their presence and moved to sit in a chair by the window where Claire had opened the curtains. An air conditioning unit in a second window on the back wall spewed cool air into the room.

Steven let the cold air cool his face and shoulders before he took the foam plates and plastic utensils from the bag and handed them to Claire. She set up the meal on a small desk and they moved it to where Willie sat. After retrieving an extra chair from the clinic, she waited for Steven to bless the meal.

Steven bowed his head. "Lord, thank you for this food and for Nurse Willie. I ask you to heal her and make her strong again. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen."

Willie mumbled an 'amen,' then excused herself and stood up. "I need my hat so Claire doesn't have to look at my bald head while she's eating." The familiar tinkling started near the bed and continued until Willie sank into the chair again.

"That sounds like the Nurse Willie I know." Steven arranged his plate and utensils.

Claire sat down next to him. "Janie said to tell you she'd come down and feed you herself if you didn't eat, so you'd better eat up."

The ham hadn't lost any of its mouthwatering aroma during the walk to the clinic. Steven cut a chunk and forked it into his mouth. No sounds of chewing or any other movement came from Nurse Willie's direction. How could she resist Janie's moist, delicious ham? He swallowed and cleared his throat.

"Nurse Willie, I had a better idea for fishing. Instead of going out during Rec when it's so hot, what if we try going after supper?"

"It will be a little cooler then," Claire added.

"And the fish are more likely to be biting, too." Steven took a bite of his mashed potatoes, the butter lingering on his tongue.

Willie's response was slow. "I know what you kids are trying to do." She heaved a sigh. "I appreciate it, but I simply don't have the strength."

"That's why you need to eat," Claire argued. "Won't you take even a little bite?"

“It’s the chemo that ruined my appetite. I’d eat if—”

Through the open door, the sound of a girl’s crying in the clinic drowned out Willie’s response. “Ow! Ow, it hurts.”

Nurse Willie rose from her chair until Mrs. Hoang was heard over the commotion.

“Stop it! You act like a baby. Haven’t you ever been stung before?”

“Noo-o-o.” The girl wailed.

“If you don’t calm down, I can’t help you. Now be quiet and sit still.”

After several minutes, the crying stopped, but in Willie’s room, no fork or knife scraped against a plate. Steven choked when he tried to swallow the piece of meat he’d been holding in his mouth.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Nurse Willie, if you don’t want to go fishing, that’s okay. But please eat something. I don’t care how highly trained Mrs. Hoang is, we need *you* back in the clinic. It’s where you belong.”

Steven sat on his bed, waiting for Jake. Zeke had suggested he help with some boat maintenance instead of playing triple kickball with Dillon and the rest of the rec team. The cabin was empty, now that all the other guys had left for their rec assignments. Some of the games had already started, judging from the distant shouts and laughter. In the trees outside, a few locusts buzzed like power saws.

He’d stuck the phone back under the mattress this morning when Dillon was out of the room, but now that he was alone, an urge to retrieve it took hold. He could take it out, dial that number and no one would know.

No! Where did those thoughts come from? He’d worked hard to resist, to build the discipline to stay away, but his body was already reacting to the thought. He pushed off the bed and walked around the room, in and out

among the bunks, stretching his arms over his head, behind his back. He stopped beside Dillon's bunk. His hands gripped the frame like a drowning swimmer grips a life ring.

Don't do it. Don't do it.

The cabin's screen door squawked as it opened and Jake hollered. "Steven? You ready?"

Steven sucked in a breath and let it go, almost as if coming out of a trance. "Yeah, I'm coming." He joined Jake at the door and they walked to the boat dock.

"What am I helping with?" Steven held the railing and silently counted the seven steps down to the dock area.

Jake unlocked the boathouse. The hinges squealed as he opened the door wide. "Cleaning out this place. And organizing it. Things get pretty messy after a few weeks of camp. How about if you step inside and hand the life jackets out to me?"

After all the life jackets were outside, Jake and Steven switched places. Steven went over each life jacket, making sure all the ties and buckles were securely attached. "Do you know anything about Mrs. Hoang?"

Jake swept out the floor of the boathouse. "A little. She worked in the critical care unit at the hospital in town. Someone said she got fired for something that wasn't her fault, someone else's mistake. But I don't know that for a fact."

Steven tugged on a tie that felt loose. "Maybe that's why she doesn't have much patience with us kids. Isn't she kind of over-qualified to be a camp nurse?" His fingers probed the stitching and found the tie hanging on by a few broken threads. He tossed it to the side for repair.

"Probably. But I'm guessing she needed a job at the same time Zeke needed a nurse." Jake straightened the paddles and other equipment. "How's your training going? You think you'll be ready?"

“Yeah, I think so. Dillon needs to work on swimming but he did fine with the bike this morning and he’s used to running from soccer. Thursday we’ll try swimming and biking, so we’ll need you to take us out a little earlier. Like maybe 5:30.”

“That’s getting early even for me. Did Dillon agree to that?”

“Not exactly, but he won’t let me down. And this time, we need to remember some helmets for the bike.”

Jake groaned. “Forgot about that today. Remind me tomorrow morning and we can get the bike and helmets on our way down here. Then they’ll be waiting when you’re finished swimming.”

“You want these life jackets now?”

“Sure. Hand them to me and I’ll hang them back up in here.” Jake took an armload of life jackets from Steven. “Have you heard whether the race will accept your request to use a partner?”

“No. I asked Zeke about it at lunch but he hasn’t heard anything from my mom.” Steven snapped his fingers. “That reminds me. I need to send Mom a postcard today if I want her to get it before I get home.”

“You can write?”

“A little, but I usually have someone else write it for me. I’ll have to get a postcard at the Snack Shack later.”

Someone called Jake’s name from the beach. He stepped out of the boathouse. “Hang on a minute,” Jake said. “The lifeguards want me for something over at the beach.”

Jake splashed over to the swimming area and didn’t return until campers began straggling down from their cabins after Rec. Footsteps pounded down the steps to the boat dock and two of the guys from Steven’s cabin asked to take out a canoe.

Jake’s feet sloshed through shallow water on his way back from the beach. “Steven, you want to help them?”

“Sure!” Steven pulled a couple life jackets off the pegs and felt for the smooth wooden shafts of the paddles. He handed everything out the door and each of the boys grabbed a jacket and a paddle.

Jake stopped at the canoes and helped them with their launch. Afterward, he came back to the boathouse. “You can leave if you want, since Rec is over.”

Steven hesitated, as more footsteps, softer and less hurried, descended the stairway.

“Steven!” His stomach did a strange flip when Claire called his name. Her steps drew close. “What are you doing down here?”

“This is what Zeke had me doing for Rec, helping Jake clean out the boathouse. What about you? Want to go for a boat ride?”

“I’m already going with Dillon. He’s coming, but I told him I’d get our stuff and put it in the boat.”

Steven drew two more life jackets off the pegs. He should’ve known. It wasn’t like Claire to come down here by herself. And there was no way she could’ve known he was here. He let out a heavy breath and handed her the life jackets, then carried the paddles over to the canoe, walking alongside her.

Claire dropped the life jackets in the canoe. “I keep thinking about Nurse Willie at lunch. She would never talk to a camper the way Mrs. Hoang did. I think you got through to her by telling her we want and need her back in the clinic.”

“I hope so. Maybe now she’ll start eating.” Steven laid one paddle in front and one in back. “Should we try it again at supper? Bring another tray down for her?”

Claire’s hand touched his arm. “Yes! Good idea.”

Dillon bounced down the steps. “Hey, guys! You waiting for me?”

“Yep, everything’s ready.” Claire’s enthusiasm did nothing for Steven’s mood.

Dillon shoved the canoe into the water. “Okay, climb in.” Claire splashed into the water and climbed into the bow of the canoe. Dillon stepped in and sat on the rear seat. “Steven, how about a push?”

Steven stepped into the water, bent over and gave the canoe a strong thrust.

“Thanks! See ya,” Dillon called.

Waves lapped at Steven’s legs. His arm still felt warm where Claire’s fingers had touched it, and it wasn’t from the day’s heat. He reached for the medallion and held it. Dad was right. Blindness was no excuse for not pursuing your dreams. But it would be nice to know what your dream looked like.

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CHAPTER NINE

STEVEN STOPPED IN THE CLINIC'S ENTRYWAY AND SNIFFED. "SOMETHING smells hot."

"It's 95 degrees out. What do you expect?" Claire continued toward the back of the building and Willie's room.

"No, I mean like something's overheating, something mechanical."

"I don't smell anything. But I'm glad Mrs. Hoang isn't standing guard duty this time. I saw her up at the dining hall before we left." Claire knocked on Nurse Willie's door. "It's Claire and Steven. We brought your supper."

Shuffling noises came from the other side of the door before it opened and Willie invited them in. "You kids are spoiling me."

She grabbed her hat and collapsed into her chair by the window.

Steven unpacked the plates and utensils while Claire set up the desk. "Janie didn't know if you'd want tonight's sloppy joes, so she heated up some chicken from yesterday. She thought that might be a little easier on your stomach."

The outside door to the clinic opened and soft footsteps stopped somewhere near the clinic. A timid voice called, "Hello? Is anyone here?"

Claire jumped up and hurried through Willie's open door. "Hi! Do you need something?"

“Is the nurse here? I think I’ve stepped on something.”

“Sure, just a minute.” Claire came back into Willie’s apartment. “She needs you, Nurse Willie.”

“I heard.” Willie pushed herself from the chair and shambled out the door. “I’m Nurse Willie. How can I help you?”

Claire took hold of Steven’s arm and whispered, “Come on. I want to see this.”

Steven followed as Claire slipped through Willie’s door and stopped in the entryway that led to the clinic.

“It feels like I stepped on a piece of glass,” the girl explained. “I can’t put any weight on my heel.”

“Let me take a look.” Willie turned on the water in the sink and washed her hands, instructing the girl to lie on her stomach on the bed. She moved the rolling stool beside the bed. “All right, lift your foot up and let me see what I can find. This might hurt but I’ll try to be gentle.”

The girl gasped. Willie explained how she planned to get the offending particle out, her voice growing stronger with each sentence. Drawers opened and shut, cupboard doors banged, and the odor of rubbing alcohol filled the room. The girl stifled a couple squeals of pain.

Steven smiled to himself over Willie’s transformation. This is what she was meant to do, what God had woven into her from the beginning. With Nurse Willie in the clinic, everything seemed right.

“Got it!” Willie’s stool rolled across the floor, the trashcan lid thumped open and dropped closed.

The outer door opened again.

“What are you doing?” Mrs. Hoang spoke through tight lips. “Why you stand out here in the entryway?” Without waiting for an answer, Mrs. Hoang pushed her way between Steven and Claire into the clinic. “I thought you wanted to rest,” she chided Willie. “You should have waited for me to come back.”

Something small, maybe the tweezers, pinged on the counter. The stool rolled across the floor and hit the wall.

“Excuse me.” Willie’s voice was low and controlled, her words few but precise. She hurried past Steven toward her room. A door slammed shut.

Mrs. Hoang rolled the stool back under the desk. “What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing,” Claire answered, “we were here to—”

“If you don’t need help, then you leave. Go.”

The girl spoke up, her voice tiny even in the small clinic. “They’re waiting for me.”

We are? Steven didn’t recognize her voice. Claire stood close at his side, tension seething from her. He shifted from one foot to the other while he suspected Mrs. Hoang was cleaning and bandaging the girl’s foot. Silence hung in the room.

“You need to wear shoes,” Mrs. Hoang finally said as the girl tiptoed out of the clinic. “Don’t walk barefoot. It’s not good for your feet.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The girl brushed against Steven’s arm as she slipped between him and Claire. “Let’s get out of here,” she whispered. They exited the clinic and followed the incline of the road. “Thanks for waiting. I did not want to be alone with that woman. Why is she so angry?”

“I don’t know,” Claire said, “but if I were you, I’d do what she says. You don’t want to risk going back there again.”

Steven kept a strong hold on Brady’s arm as they threaded their way to the front of the chapel for evening worship, squeezing through a third knot of campers.

Steven gave Brady’s arm a light squeeze. “Why’s everyone in the aisle tonight? And what are they laughing about?”

“Funny mirrors.” Brady drew him into a row of seats. “There are three full-size mirrors along the aisle and everybody’s looking at them.”

“What’s so funny about mirrors?”

“They make you look fat or skinny or crooked. They warp your reflection.”

Mirrors. He’d never needed them, but Mom used one every day. Dad too. “What’s the point of a mirror that doesn’t show you what you really look like?”

“They’re just for fun, to laugh at yourself. You see them a lot at carnivals and fairs. There’s one up on the stage, too.”

Visual humor was usually lost on him.

Claire arrived with Dillon. She sank into the seat beside Steven. They hadn’t had a chance to talk about the incident in the clinic while the girl was with them. They’d all had to rush to grab a couple sandwiches before Janie closed the buffet, and there’d been no way to talk during the giant game of Duck, Duck, Goose.

Claire leaned against his shoulder. “What do you think about Nurse Willie and Mrs. Hoang?”

Steven frowned. “Even I can see there’s a power struggle going on. Willie needs her job back. Did you notice the way she perked up when the girl needed her help?”

“It was our old Nurse Willie come back to life. But why won’t Mrs. Hoang let her do anything? Is she trying to take over Willie’s job for good?”

The band started playing, making it hard to talk. Claire shouted in his ear. “Let’s talk later.”

Steven nodded. The music lifted his spirits, but by the time they finished, his sweaty shirt clung to him. He sat down and a soft buzz sounded from Claire’s direction. A movement of air swept across his shoulders. “Have you got a fan?”

Claire aimed it at him. “It’s one of those little battery-operated things. Brought it from home. Figured it might come in handy with this heat wave, except I forgot all about it until tonight.”

“Sweet. Wish I’d thought of that.”

Zeke’s footsteps pounded onto the stage. “Do you like the new mirrors? Should we switch out the ones in the cabins?”

Campers responded both ways, with most of the girls voting no.

“I’m having this one installed in my bathroom,” Zeke continued. “Doesn’t it make me look...tall?” Laughter rippled across the room.

Brady leaned over to Steven. “He’s standing in front of a mirror that stretches his image top to bottom so he looks tall and skinny.”

Ah, now the visual humor made sense. Zeke’s short stature had been the topic of many jokes over the years he’d been at camp. Steven chuckled at the idea of Zeke using a warped mirror to make himself look taller.

Zeke continued. “What’s wrong with these mirrors? Why don’t we use them all the time?”

Someone on the other side of the aisle answered. “Because they don’t show us how we really look.”

“And is that important?”

Many campers responded. “Yeah!”

“Why?” Zeke waited for an answer.

Finally, a girl spoke up. “Because we don’t want people to see us looking ugly. If the mirror is distorted, we can’t fix what’s wrong.”

“If the mirror is distorted.” Zeke let that phrase hang in the air for some time. “If the mirror is distorted, your reflection will be, too. The way you see yourself will be distorted. Do you agree? So which mirror you use makes a difference in the accuracy of your reflection. Let me ask you another question. Whose image do you see when you look in the mirror?”

A riffing of pages indicated Zeke had picked up his Bible.

“Let me read to you from Genesis 1. It says, ‘Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...’ And the next verse tells us, ‘So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ When you look in a mirror that’s not distorted, but shows an accurate reflection, you are seeing a young man or a young lady who was made in the image and likeness of God. You. Your image. That reflection looking back at you is the likeness of the Creator of the whole universe.”

Zeke stepped down from the stage. “So what mirror are you using? I’m not talking about the one in the bathroom, or over your dresser. I’m talking about other things we use to tell us how we should look. Movies, magazines, commercials. Even friends and family can give us a distorted picture of ourselves. If you’re using them as a mirror, you’re getting a warped image. Those are distorted mirrors. They’ll tell you you’re ugly if your hair is the wrong color or isn’t done a certain way, if you’re not wearing a certain brand of clothing or not using the right toothpaste. Those are warped mirrors, kids. Their lies are as silly as these mirrors you’ve all been laughing at. You’ve been made in the very image of the one true God. He has woven His own image into the fabric of who you are.”

Zeke’s steps came closer, then passed and stopped, probably about midway down the aisle. “You can use a true mirror or a warped mirror, but know this. It’s only when you look at yourself in His mirror that your true beauty and worth will be reflected. The world will tell you differently and they’ll make it very convincing. But the reflection you see will always be distorted if you use a warped mirror.”

Steven tapped his toothbrush and rinsed his mouth as Dillon came to stand beside him in the bathroom.

Dillon huffed, then spoke in a high voice. “This must be one of those warped mirrors. It makes my butt look too fat.”

Another cabin mate joined in. “Seriously, how can I put on my mascara with a mirror that makes my eyes so thick?”

Steven chuckled and went back to his bunk. He pulled off his t-shirt and lay on his bed, one hand behind his head, the other covering the medallion resting on his chest. Was it a distorted mirror that made him question his blindness, his worth? Wasn't it ironic to think he, a blind kid, was made in the image of a God who sees everything? Until recently, he'd pretty much accepted his blindness. Now, he'd give just about anything to be able to see the way other kids see. To participate in the games, to enjoy seeing pretty girls, to move through his normal world with the same ease as swimming out in the middle of the lake.

Dillon came in after brushing his teeth and climbed up to the top bunk. Jake called a two-minute warning for lights out and came to the side of Steven's bed. “You need anything for tomorrow?”

“Just a wake-up call. We're doing the run tomorrow.”

Dillon leaned over the side of the bed. “What time are we starting?”

Steven calculated the time. “6:45ish? And you'd better enjoy the later start time while you can,” he warned. “If we're doing the swim and bike on Thursday, we'll need to get up at 5:30.”

Dillon groaned and flopped back onto his bunk. “Just kill me now.”

CHAPTER TEN

STEVEN REACHED UP AND SHOOK DILLON AWAKE. “C’MON. GET UP.”

No one else in the nearby bunks stirred. Dillon groaned and jerked away from Steven’s hand, rolling to the far side of the bunk.

Steven sat on his bed to pull on the socks he’d laid out last night. He shoved his feet into his running shoes and tied the laces. The shorts he’d slept in would work, and why bother with a shirt? He lifted the medallion from around his neck and put it under his pillow. After crawling through to the other side of his bed, he stood and poked Dillon again.

“You better be up by the time I get back from the bathroom or I’ll run without you. And I’ll tell everyone I won.” He headed for the bathroom.

Dillon was pulling on his shoes when Steven returned. “You’re lucky. I almost left my running shoes at home.”

A minute later, they’d left the cabin and headed out to the camp road. The air was heavy and still. A good rain was needed to cool things off. Somewhere in the trees, a crow disturbed the quiet morning with its raucous call.

They stopped to stretch their legs. Even though they were outside, Dillon kept his voice down. “How many laps?”

“Out to the highway, down to the boats and once more out to the highway and back. That should be about three miles.”

“We’re not using a tether?”

“Not this time. You ready?” Steven started off at a slow jog.

The soles of their shoes scuffed against the pavement with each step, now and then syncing into a perfect cadence, then moving out of rhythm again. Neither spoke until they’d settled into a comfortable pace. The paved road made it easy for Steven to listen for Dillon’s footfalls and run beside him.

“Think what great shape you’ll be in by the time school starts.” Steven swung his hand out to slap Dillon’s arm. “Your coach’ll be impressed.”

Dillon grunted. “If he even notices. If he does, he’ll only expect me to work twice as hard. When is this triathlon again? And where?”

“Last Sunday in August. Downtown Chicago. It starts at Grant Park.” Steven’s breathing came heavier now, his words often separated by huffing.

“Man, that means there’ll be a ton of people. Why not start with a smaller one?”

“I figure start big and move up from there.” Was that his competitiveness? Or was Claire right when she said he often tried to prove he was as good as sighted people?

They’d turned back from the highway. Sweat streamed down his chest and back, but they’d soon be running in the shade, once they hit the stretch of road that ran past the clinic.

Dillon’s breathing was regular and steady, despite the exertion. “You haven’t heard anything yet about whether they’ll let you do the triathlon?”

“No. I’m hoping my mom will call any day now.”

“What if they turn you down?”

Steven concentrated on the *skch-skch-skch* of their feet against the pavement. “They can’t turn me down. There’s no reason. I can do a triathlon same as anyone else.”

The trees shading their run downhill to the boat dock made the return uphill climb bearable, but the stretch of road leading out to the highway

offered no shade at all. An occasional car whizzed past, creating a welcome breeze as they made the turn at the end of the camp road.

“Can you sprint?” An unmistakable challenge tinged Dillon’s voice.

“Yeah, as long as nothing’s in my way.”

“Want to race the last stretch? It’s a straight shot.”

Steven didn’t wait. “Go!”

He took off, lengthening his stride. His legs stretched out ahead of him—left, right, left—feet grabbing the ground to pull him forward, then push him ahead.

Dillon’s feet pounded next to him, passed him, then stopped. “You lose.” Steven slowed his pace and Dillon caught him. “Whoa! Don’t run me over.”

“That’s what you get for racing a blind kid.” Steven turned from Dillon and walked around drawing deep breaths into his lungs.

Dillon took less time to catch his breath. He swatted Steven’s arm. “Back to the cabin?”

“Yeah. You still want to do two events tomorrow—swim and bike?”

Dillon coughed and spit into the grass outside the cabin. “Do we really have to get up at 5:30?”

Steven calculated. “An hour for biking and 45 minutes for the swim including time to get out there. That’s almost two hours. And that means we don’t get back to the cabin until 7:30. Of course, if I didn’t have to drag you out of bed, we could make it 5:45.”

Dillon opened the cabin’s screen door. “Why’d I ever let you talk me into this?”

“I hope the Prison Guard Hoang will let us see Nurse Willie.” The bag containing lunch plates and utensils crackled as Claire switched it to her

other hand. She opened the door and let Steven enter first with the food.

Steven stepped inside and waited for Claire. As he passed the clinic's doorway, he noticed a heavy footfall and a chair being dragged across the clinic's floor.

"Second time I've replaced that bulb since I've been here," Mrs. Hoang complained. She tossed a spent light bulb into a trashcan. A splintering of glass followed.

Claire knocked on Willie's door and waited.

"I doubt she'll answer." Mrs. Hoang's voice carried down the hall. "She hasn't come out since last night."

"I don't blame her," Claire muttered. Then louder, "We can still try. She needs to eat if she wants to get better." She knocked again. "Nurse Willie? We've brought you some lunch. Can we come in?"

Mrs. Hoang stayed by the clinic doorway. "See? What did I tell you?"

Steven bit his tongue to avoid being disrespectful.

Willie's door swung open. "Can't come to the door unless I'm dressed. Had to put my hat on."

The faint tinkling of the lures caught Steven's ear as he followed Claire into the room. He grinned as he set the food on the desk then helped Claire move it in front of Willie's chair.

Occasionally during the meal, Willie's fork or knife scraped across the plate. But Steven couldn't tell how much she ate until he asked Claire on the way to return the lunch items to the kitchen.

"She did eat a little. It's a start. At least she's trying. Do you think she heard Mrs. Hoang's comments?"

"It would've been hard not to, unless she was sleeping. Why?"

"I got the feeling she opened the door simply to prove Mrs. Hoang wrong."

Steven chuckled. "You might be right. Hey, if it makes her eat, a little competition with Mrs. Hoang could be a good thing." Their flip-flops

slapped against their feet as they walked. “What’s your rec team doing today?”

“Playing bumper soccer. I hear it’s a soccer game but we all have to carry inner tubes around our waist.”

“Now that sounds like something I could almost do.”

“Actually I think we’re playing your team,” Claire said. “Aren’t you and Dillon on the same team?”

“Yeah, but Zeke has me hanging out with Jake, helping with the boats.” Steven bit his lip and debated whether to say anything about her relationship with Dillon. “Is he treating you right?”

“Yeah, he’s fun. Why, is there something I should know about him?”

Steven shrugged and opened the door to the buffet lines. “Not really, but I warned him he’d better treat you right. Just making sure he listened.”

How could a simple touch create so much tension?

Steven pulled off his wet swim trunks and changed into shorts and a t-shirt. He’d left Dillon and Claire at the beach, but his hand still felt warm where she’d touched it. How nice would it feel to hold her hand in his, not as part of a game or worship, but to simply feel close?

Thoughts like that drew him into dangerous territory. Already, Dillon’s phone was tempting him. What else could he think about?

His plan for Nurse Willieto get her working in the clinic again, if only for a few minutes. He’d developed it while he was swimming with Claire and Dillon, and left early to make it happen. The beach would close soon to allow the campers time to dress for supper. By the time everyone else got here, he’d be down at the clinic. He’d warned Claire he might not be available to help with Nurse Willie’s supper tray. Maybe Dillon would do that with her.

Steven grabbed the medallion from under his pillow and dropped the cord down around his neck. He shoved his feet into flip-flops, then grabbed a comb from his suitcase and combed until every hair seemed to be in place. The lifeguard's long whistle blast in the distance signaled the end of swimming. He hurried to leave before everyone else got to the cabin.

The screen door slammed behind him and Steven found his way to the road. If he stayed on the left edge, he'd soon be skirting the near side of the parking lot. He'd have to cross the road that led out to the highway and find the edge again on the other side, then follow it to the clinic's sidewalk. What if he had to get past Mrs. Hoang to talk to Nurse Willie? He'd figure that out when he got there.

The camp pickup truck rumbled by as Steven passed the parking lot. An aroma of fajita meat drifted past his nose as he drew even with the kitchen on his right, and his mouth watered. Occasionally, the late afternoon sun broke through the trees to warm his shoulders and legs, as if they needed any more heat, but most of his path was shaded. Across the road intersection, Steven found the edge of the road again and minutes later stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the clinic. Willie called to him.

"You need something, Steven?"

"Nurse Willie? You're outside." He approached the step where she sat.

"Decided I needed some fresh air."

Because of the stifling atmosphere inside? This was a good sign.

Willie asked again. "Do you need something?"

Steven pulled on his ear. "I've got a little bit of an ear ache and wondered if you could check it out."

"I bet you've been swimming a lot in this heat." Nurse Willie stood and opened the door, the lures on her hat tinkling. "Come in and let me look at it."

Steven followed her into the clinic.

Mrs. Hoang shoved a drawer closed. “You do not bring supper tray this time? Why not?”

“I’m helping him.” Nurse Willie washed her hands.

Mrs. Hoang directed Steven to one of the chairs. “Sit down. What is wrong with you?”

Nurse Willie tore a paper towel from the roll. “*I’m helping him.*”

The chill that filled the room had nothing to do with the air conditioning. A cupboard door banged. A drawer slammed shut.

“Fine. I’m going to supper.” Mrs. Hoang stomped from the clinic.

Steven relaxed against the back of the chair. Nurse Willie steadied his head and touched a probe to his ear. “This doesn’t look irritated. Let me check the other one.” She moved around to his other side and used the instrument again to peer into his ear. “I can’t see anything wrong. How bad is the ache?”

“I can live with it.”

“If I had some olive oil, I’d warm it up and put a couple drops in your ear. That usually soothes it.”

Steven nodded. “That’s what my mom does.”

Nurse Willie put the instrument in a drawer and washed her hands again. “If it gets worse, come on back. But right now, I don’t see anything wrong, not even a slight irritation. I can give you some pain reliever if you think you need it.”

“No thanks. It’s not all that bad.” He rose, debating whether to wait here for Claire or go on to supper. If Dillon was helping her, there was no reason for him to stick around. “Claire should be here soon with your supper tray.” Steven stopped in the clinic’s doorway. “Sure is good having you back in the clinic, Nurse Willie.”

The paper rustling and shuffling of tools stopped. “Thank you, Steven. It’s nice to be back.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLAIRE DROPPED INTO THE SEAT BESIDE STEVEN AT EVENING WORSHIP.
“Nurse Willie missed you at supper.”

“She couldn’t have missed me too much. I was there and left before you got there.”

“Why?”

“I had this idea to pretend I had an earache so I could insist on Willie helping me instead of Mrs. Hoang.”

Claire laughed. “Did it work?”

“Sort of. She did help me, but she was the one who insisted. She stood her ground with Mrs. Hoang instead of running off to her room.”

“Good for her! I thought she seemed a little different at supper.”

“Different? How?”

Claire took a moment to respond. “I don’t know if I can explain it. Just a gut feeling, but she did eat a little more than her usual three bites. And she told me not to bring any more trays. She wants to come to the dining hall for meals now.”

Steven and Claire moved over a few seats to make room for Brady and Marissa when they arrived. “Is Dillon coming?”

Claire growled. “If he does, I’m moving.”

Steven frowned. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“He’s what’s wrong.”

The drummer pounded a couple beats on the bass drum and the band started a loud, rousing song that cut off any further discussion. What had Dillon done? Steven’s hands clenched. His threat to turn in Dillon’s phone might be accompanied by a couple punches if he’d hurt or insulted Claire.

The band played several more lively songs before slowing down to prepare for Zeke’s talk. Steven tugged his sweaty shirt away from his body and shook it a little to get some air movement. Claire had her mini-fan going and every so often, a tiny breeze slid across his neck and shoulders. He pulled the medallion away from his chest and tucked part of his shirt under it, drying both the medallion and his chest. *How are we supposed to worship when it’s too hot to think?*

Zeke took the stage and started with a question. “What comes to your mind when I say the word ‘temple’?”

A few kids responded with worship, God, Israel, Jerusalem.

The legs of Zeke’s easel scraped across the stage’s wood floor as Zeke moved it to the center. “If I asked you to build a temple, what would you use for materials? Let’s start with the floor.”

Campers shouted their choices. “Tile.”

“Marble.”

“Granite.”

“All right, let’s go with a fancy mosaic tile,” Zeke paused, and Steven guessed he was drawing a tile floor. “What shall we use for the walls?”

Again, the campers offered suggestions, everything from plaster to wood panels to marble. Zeke continued with the ceiling, the roof and other features.

Claire’s lips tickled Steven’s ear as she whispered. “He’s drawing a picture of a temple. It’s square with columns out front and a high roof with a spire in the middle of it. Lots of decorations on the outside, and gold on the spire and the roof.”

When Zeke finished, he clapped his hands together. “Now, if you’re building a temple, would you use cheap, inexpensive materials or the very best money could buy?” He waited only a moment before continuing. “Would you slap it together any old way, or would you put careful thought into the construction and hire the most skillful builders? Would you want it to look plain and ordinary, or make it a thing of beauty?”

“The dictionary defines a temple as a building for worship or a holy dwelling. In First Corinthians, Paul uses the Greek word for temple that means ‘sanctuary.’ We often think of a sanctuary as a place of safety and refuge, but it also means a holy dwelling. What’s interesting is that twice, Paul uses the word ‘temple’ to describe our human bodies. In the third chapter and the sixth chapters, he asks, ‘Don’t you know your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit of God?’”

Zeke stepped off the stage. One of his shoes squeaked with each step he took down the aisle. “Did you know you are a temple of God’s Holy Spirit? Have you ever thought of yourself that way? You may see big clumsy feet, but God sees a foundation of the finest material. You might think of yourself as plain and unattractive, but God sees you as a beautiful sanctuary, gleaming with gold and silver and every kind of precious stone. Think about that.”

Zeke’s voice took on a tone of wonder. “Imagine God weaving you together. Not simply throwing together any old structure with whatever material is lying around. No, the master craftsman chose only the finest quality materials to build a holy place, a sanctuary dwelling where His Holy Spirit would live.”

His shoe squeaked all the way up the aisle to the front.

“The next time you’re tempted to complain about your hair or your shape or your appearance, remind yourself that God wove you together to be a holy place for his Spirit to dwell. You are a temple of God.”

He climbed back onto the stage and tore off the sheet of paper from his easel. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t try to fix your body if it’s sick, or injured, or if there’s something that can be changed for the better. Even architectural buildings need maintenance and repair, sometimes even major renovation. But when we think of our bodies only as something that’s flawed, a mistake, we devalue what God intended to be of great worth. Why else would He personally weave each of us into a temple for His dwelling? His presence gives us respect and dignity, and when we see ourselves as He sees us, we focus less on what we lack. Or think we lack. And when that happens, we understand better how to make the most of what we’ve been given.”

Steven shifted in his seat. He’d heard those verses before, but never really connected them with the way God made him. His body a temple? A holy place? Even with his blindness?

Minutes later, on the way back to the cabin, Dillon bumped into him. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself. What’d you do to Claire?”

“I didn’t do anything to her!”

“Then why was she so ticked off?”

Dillon hopped up the step and opened the cabin’s screen door. “She wanted me to help her take supper down to Nurse Willie, then stay there and eat with her.” He followed Steven through the door, letting it slam behind him. “I didn’t want to and she got all mad about it. I know you two are worried about Willie, but she’s not my project. That’s not how I want to spend my time here at camp. And I definitely don’t want to eat supper in some woman’s little apartment at the back of the clinic. Is that wrong?”

“That’s all? That’s what made her mad?” That sounded like Dillon. Sounded like Claire, too. Steven’s fists relaxed.

Dillon grunted as he yanked his shirt over his shoulders and slapped it against the bed frame. “That’s all. I swear it. You’re thinking I asked her to

send me naked pictures of herself or I said something disrespectful, but it wasn't anything like that. You can ask her. Just don't turn my phone in, okay?"

"All right. I'll believe you." Steven kicked off his flip-flops and nudged them under the bed with his toe. "Want me to talk to her to smooth things over?"

"Don't bother." Dillon snatched his towel from the end of the bed and headed for the bathroom.

Steven sat on his bed and blew out a breath of relief. If he'd known Dillon wasn't interested in helping Claire, he'd have made sure to be there. But maybe Dillon's loss could be his gain. His pulse sped up at the memory of sitting near her in evening worship. Tomorrow, he'd find out if Brady's hunch was right, if maybe they could become deeper friends.

After lights out, Steven tried to find a spot on the bed cool enough to fall asleep, though his mind was wide awake. His body as a sanctuary? A holy place, like the church he and Mom attended every Sunday? Did that mean God purposely made him blind, weaving his eyes so they couldn't see? What about the urges, the ones that made him and other guys crave pornography and erotic messages? Did God weave those in, too? How could that be holy? Even now, knowing that phone was right up above him, within reach, he had to fight the desire to sneak it out, to listen to that seductive voice.

Train the mind, train the body.

He rolled onto his side and forced his mind to think about sleep. Morning would be here way too soon.

Jake brought the boat around and cut the engine to idle.

“Isn’t there a law against the sun being up this early?” Dillon grumbled and tied the tether around his waist, adjusting his balance as the boat rocked with Steven’s movement.

A moment later, they both hit the water. The rope tugged at Steven’s waist until he and Dillon found a comfortable distance. He slowed his pace, giving Dillon a better chance to keep up. They stopped once to correct course and allow Dillon to catch his breath, but Steven’s hand hit the bottom sooner than he expected.

After Jake secured the boat, he joined them on the beach. “Thirteen minutes. That’s better than Monday.”

Dillon stowed the tether rope and life jackets in the boathouse, then joined Steven on the dock where he sat drying his feet and putting on his shoes. Jake locked the boathouse.

Swimming energized Steven and he hurried up the steps to where they’d left the bicycle.

Dillon followed close behind. “You got the pho—uh, the timer?” He snapped the helmet’s strap under his chin.

Steven threw back his head. “No! It’s back at the cabin. I was worried about forgetting the bike and helmets.” He called to Jake. “Have you got your phone? Can we use it to time our ride?”

“Take my watch. Just be sure I get it back as soon as you’re finished.”

“I noticed that. You actually wear a watch.” Dillon took his place on the front of the bike. “That’s so old-fashioned.”

“After you drop your phone in the water a couple times, a waterproof watch makes sense. I don’t have to worry about getting it wet. See you guys back at the cabin in, what, about an hour?”

“Yep.” Steven secured his helmet and climbed onto the rear seat. “Okay, ready when you are.”

“Let’s go!”

Steven pressed the pedal down and the bike started rolling. “Where’s Jake’s watch?”

“Right here on the handlebar where I can see it. You want to push it today, keep the speed up?”

“Sounds good to me. Just don’t forget to warn me about the sharp turns.”

“My legs feel so weird,” Dillon called over his shoulder. “The swim got them used to kicking. Now riding a bike makes me feel like I’m peddling through mud.”

“I know. Wait ’til Saturday when we add the run at the end.” Steven’s legs pumped the pedals, his hands gripped the handlebars and he leaned forward, pressing harder.

“Left turn coming.”

Steven hung on and leaned into the curve. The tire slid out and he dropped his foot to brace against the pavement. “Too fast!”

His foot tap, tap, tapped the ground as they rounded the curve. Falling on this pavement would tear up his leg at the very least, maybe worse. He couldn’t afford that. Not now.

Dillon brought the bike under control. “Sorry, I’ll slow down next time. Thought we could take it.”

Sweat trickled down Steven’s face from beneath his helmet and dripped into his eye. It stung, making his eye water. He blinked, then shoved his finger under his dark glasses to swipe away the salty mixture.

Out to the highway and back, down behind the girls’ cabins to the boat launch circle and then out to the highway again. Round and round, the longest part of the race. And Steven’s least favorite. Swimming and running measured his own effort. Even with a partner, he ran his own pace and swam according to his own ability. The bike required a combined effort with his partner. Claire’s words about proving himself pricked his conscience. Was this another example?

He'd worked up a good sweat all over by the time they brought the bike back to the Snack Shack. He pulled his helmet off before getting off the bike.

Dillon returned the bike to the rack. "Uh-oh. We forgot to get the padlock key from Jake. We can't lock up the bike."

"Or the helmets. I guess we take everything back to the cabin. We'll need them again tomorrow anyway. Maybe he'll let us hang onto them until then."

"Good idea." Dillon handed his helmet to Steven and commandeered the bicycle, falling into step beside him. "So, what Zeke said last night about our body as a temple? Not saying I totally agree with the idea. But I get what you were telling methat whole respect thing."

"Good."

"So, can I have my phone back? I promise I'll tell the girl not to send me any more pictures."

"Nope. Not 'til Saturday."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

STEVEN DETOURED TO ZEKE'S OFFICE BEFORE GOING TO LUNCH.

"Come on in, Steven," Zeke said. "Don't worry about knocking. What's on your mind?"

Steven stepped up to Zeke's desk. "Have you heard anything from my mom about the triathlon?"

"Not a word, but maybe that's good. At least it's not a no."

Steven's fingers curled tight to his palms. "I hope you're right. Will you tell me as soon as you hear from her?"

"Even if it's bad news?"

Steven's shoulders dropped. But it wouldn't be. They couldn't turn him down, could they? "Yeah, even if it's bad news."

He left Zeke's office and found his way to the dining hall, but stopped as he exited the buffet line. Where were his friends sitting? He could find his way to a table, but sitting with a bunch of kids he didn't know would be awkward.

"Hey, Steven." Claire stopped beside him. "Trying to figure out where to sit?"

His mood lifted. "Yeah. Where's your table?"

"I'm finished, but Brady is still here. Come on." Claire led him to a table on the far side of the dining hall. "How come you're alone?"

“I went to Zeke’s office first. Wanted to find out if he’s heard anything from Mom about the triathlon.”

Claire maneuvered between tables of chattering campers. “You don’t sound excited. Has he not heard anything or did they turn you down?”

“He hasn’t heard anything. But he asked if I’d be as anxious to know right away if they turned down my request. I know it’s possible, but I don’t like to think about it.”

“It’s really that important to you? I mean, I know you’ve spent a lot of time training and all, but it’s just a race.”

Steven pressed his lips together and half frowned. “I guess you’re right. I shouldn’t be so upset.”

At least not unless I actually get turned down. Claire was wrong about one thing. It wasn’t ‘just a race.’ This triathlon was his one shot at making up for his mistake—no, his sin—that led to Dad’s death. But he couldn’t explain that to anyone, especially not Claire.

Jake tipped the canoe onto its side and instructed Steven how to lift it. “Grab the cross bar, the thwart. One hand at each end. On the count of three, we’ll lift it overhead and carry it to the truck.”

Steven wrapped his hands around the cool aluminum thwart and braced his bare feet in the damp sand. Yesterday, the canoe had sprung a leak, so they were loading it onto the camp pickup truck. Roberto, the facilities manager, waited to take it to his shop for repair.

Jake got into position. “Ready? One, two, three.”

Steven bent his knees and hoisted the canoe over his head. Standing tall, he made sure of his balance. “Got it. Ready to go.”

They carried it over to where Roberto had backed the truck down the weed and gravel-covered boat launch ramp.

Jake slowed then came to a stop. “Okay, I’m setting my end down on the truck. Hang on ’til I climb up and pull it forward.”

Steven adjusted his stance as Jake’s end tilted down and teetered on its nose. He steadied himself until Jake lifted the bow again and drew it forward, tilting it up high to settle the gunwales against the roof of the cab.

Steven’s legs bumped into the tailgate. “Hold on.” He lifted the canoe as high as his arms could reach and slid his hands backward along the gunwales until he reached the tip of the stern. “Okay, keep going.”

He pushed forward, stopping when Jake called a halt, then lowered the stern to the bed of the truck.

Jake called to Roberto. “Can you look in the boathouse for some rope to tie this down?”

Roberto’s shoes crunched a few pieces of gravel scattered on the hard-packed sand leading to the boathouse. He returned with the rope and he and Jake secured the bow of the canoe to the truck’s front bumper. The tailgate banged shut, the door of the cab slammed and Roberto called an “Adios” before starting the engine. The old truck spit gravel as it labored up the ramp.

Footsteps skipped down the stairway and Claire called to Steven. “Where’s the canoe going?”

“To Roberto’s shop. It leaks.” Steven grabbed his towel from the dock post and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Is Rec over?”

“Yep. You want to go swimming?”

“Sure.” Steven slid his feet into his flip-flops and cupped his hands to his mouth. “Jake, I’m leaving.”

Jake’s voice sounded muffled from inside the boathouse. “Okay. ’Preciate your help with the canoe.”

“No problem.” Steven slung his towel around his neck and climbed the stairs.

Claire bounced beside him. “I’m excited about Nurse Willie. I mean, it’s been fun taking her meals to her, but when she said she’d be coming to the dining hall herself from now on...”

Steven nodded. “Was she eating any better? I couldn’t tell.”

“She’s still only eating a few bites, but at least she’s trying. And she’s looking a little stronger than she did on Sunday when we first saw her.”

“I think she’s determined to take back her clinic. That’s good.” Steven left his flip-flops and towel on the sand beside Claire’s, and they stepped onto the pier.

“Race you to the raft?”

Steven could hear the grin in her challenge. “You’re on. Is the path clear?”

“Yep. Ready, set, go!”

Steven dove into the water, gliding first, then working his arms to pull himself along. He’d made it to the raft before without stopping to breathe; he could do it again. His hand should be hitting the raft any moment now. He slowed down and sure enough, his hand knocked against one of the raft’s pontoons.

Claire splashed up beside him. “Ugh, I should know better than to race someone who’s training for a triathlon.”

Steven laughed and followed her up the ladder. The sun didn’t feel so blazing hot after being in the water. Motorboats buzzed across the lake while he and Claire took turns jumping off the diving board. But the raft grew more crowded each time he climbed back up the ladder, and when the line for the diving board stretched too far, he and Claire sat on the edge of the raft to rest. His feet dangled just above the water where an occasional wave from a ski boat’s wake covered them. The raft rocked and tipped every time a camper leaped from the diving board, and Claire swayed toward him. Their shoulders touched, sending prickles of excitement through his bicep.

Claire sighed. "Can't believe we won't be coming back here next year. I want to hang on and not let go."

"You could always come back as a counselor."

"And put up with all the stuff we've done? No way!" She laughed. "What about you? What will you be doing next year?"

"I'll probably take some summer classes, get some basics out of the way before college." Steven pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around his knees. A summer without Rustic Knoll sounded boring. He'd miss the guys, the swimming, and Zeke's talks. *And Claire.* "What'll you miss most about camp?"

"Hmm. I'll miss the place itself—the lake, the cabins, the chapel and the dining hall. But I think I'll miss the people most of all. It's sad to think I may never again see Zeke and Janie, Nurse Willie. And I'll miss you."

Warmth spread through Steven's chest. "We've been friends a long time, even if it's only for one week a year."

"I definitely want a picture of us before we leave."

A picture would be nice, if he could see. "Do me a favor? Describe yourself to me."

"What do you mean?" At least she didn't laugh.

"I've been told you have blonde hair, but I don't know anything else about what you look like. So tell me."

"Okay, well, let's see. I do have blonde hair and it's cut pretty short. I'm about five foot three. I'm not telling you how much I weigh."

Steven laughed. "Do you have freckles?"

"A few."

"Buck teeth?"

"No!" She slapped his arm.

"What color are your eyes?"

"Blue. And my nose kind of tips up on the very end. Looks like a pig's snout."

He laughed again. “Is that the one thing you’d change, like Zeke talked about?”

“Yes. I hate it. I seriously think someone bumped God’s elbow when he was weaving my nose.”

“Can I touch it?”

“My nose? Yeah, I guess so. Here.” Claire took his hand, singled out his index finger and placed it on the bridge of her nose.

Steven traced its shape, the hard, bony bridge down to the miniscule upturn at the very tip. He slid his thumb and forefinger down the slender sides of her nose to where the nostrils flared.

Claire giggled. “That tickles.” She pulled away. “And this feels really weird, sitting out on the raft and you feeling my nose.”

“It’s how I see. My fingers are my eyes.”

She laid a hand on his knee. “I know, but to me, it still feels weird.”

Steven covered her hand with his. It was small, but not what he’d call delicate. More like sturdy. Strong. She didn’t pull away. “Tell me more. Is your hair soft or coarse?”

“Right now, it’s wet, but when it’s dry, I guess you’d say it’s soft.”

“How short is it? Can I feel?”

Claire guided his hand up to her neck. “It feels longer now because it’s wet. When it dries, it kind of poofs up to about here.” She held his finger at the base of her skull.

Steven drew his hand away. “Claire, can I ask another favor?”

“Sure. What?”

“Would you let me touch your face to know what you look like?”

Claire hesitated. “Why the sudden interest in how I look?”

Steven inhaled. “I can’t take a picture of us. It would be worthless to me. I’d like something, some way to remember you after camp is over.”

“O-ka-ay, I guess. Right here?”

“No. I don’t want to embarrass you.” He grabbed her hand, stood up and pulled her up with him. “I have an idea. Let’s go.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STEVEN COLLECTED HIS SANDALS AND TOWEL, THEN REACHED FOR CLAIRE'S hand. "Let's go to the campfire pit. It's out in the open but no one should be there this time of day."

Claire's hand slipped into his and they stopped at one of the large logs that lay in concentric circles around the fire pit. Steven threw one leg over and sat on its smooth surface. No bark remained and the wood had been rubbed smooth from years of campers sitting on it. "Sit like this, facing me."

Claire straddled the log, and Steven moved close enough to touch his knees to hers. "Okay? You sure you're all right with this?"

"I guess. I mean, it's only my face, right?"

"Yeah. Just relax. You don't have to do anything." Steven raised his hands to her face, cupping her cheeks in his palms. His thumbs passed lightly across her cheekbones, and her eyelashes fluttered against his thumbnails. "You can close your eyes if you want. Relax."

"Okay." Claire released a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Steven's fingers moved up to her hairline above her forehead and worked their way down to her eyebrows, soft and arched. Her eyelids fluttered under his touch, the lashes brushing against his fingers like butterfly wings.

Claire giggled. "This is so awkward."

"Shhh."

"Sorry," she whispered.

Steven continued exploring her cheekbones and the curve of her cheeks, her dimples, the width of her mouth and the fullness of her lips.

Should he kiss her? His heart pounded. He leaned in, his mouth tingling with expectation.

No. First, he'd earn her trust.

His fingers traveled along her jawline and lingered on the angle of her chin. At last, he dropped his hands and rested them on his legs. He swallowed hard.

"Thanks for letting me see you."

"It's okay." Claire gave an uncertain chuckle. "It's weird, but I almost feel like I've been kissed."

Steven sang and clapped with the rest of the campers in the oven-hot chapel. Claire was right. They'd miss this. The traditional Friday night talent show tomorrow meant this was probably the last of Zeke's talks he'd ever hear. After tonight, there'd be no more drawing pictures to illustrate a point, no more stories that related to something in the Bible.

Zeke wasn't the only one he'd miss. Janie and Nurse Willie. The friends he'd made in Brady and Dillon. And Claire. Thirteen years he'd known her and now, with less than two days left of camp, he'd finally gotten something going with her. Having her beside him tonight was like a current of electricity running through his body. But would they ever get together away from camp?

The music and singing stopped and Steven settled into his seat. Did he dare hold Claire's hand? His was moist with sweat. He reached for her hand

and gave it a squeeze, then released it. She bumped her shoulder against his.

Okay, focus on Zeke, not Claire.

“If someone were to write a book about your life,” Zeke stepped onto the stage, “what would you want them to include?” He paused before making some suggestions. “Of course you’d want them to include your birth date and maybe some details about your family. You’d definitely want them to list any special talents you have, awards you’ve received at school or in sports, or art. You might not want anything written about your bad temper or the way you treat your little brother.” His steps traversed the stage from one side to the other.

“I have here in my hands a book that my wife wrote during the years our children were growing up. She wrote one for each of our four children.” He ruffled the pages. “Every time we learned she was pregnant, she started writing a book for that child. She’d record some of her feelings while she carried the child, her hopes and dreams for them. When the child was born, she’d describe what was happening in the world on that day and what their birth was like. In between changing diapers and chasing toddlers and bandaging skinned knees, she somehow found time to write about their first steps, their first words, their first birthday, the first time they lost a tooth. She wrote about their first day of school, and their first date and everything that happened until they left for college.

“Your mother might have kept a baby book about you, too. It’s fun to look back and find a lock of hair from your first haircut, maybe even the first tooth you lost.”

Steven fingered the medallion hanging against his chest. Did Mom keep a book like that for him?

“What if your mother could write out your whole life ahead of time? Would you like that?”

No way!

Zeke laughed at the groans and shouts of “No!” that filled the room. “Maybe it’s a good thing she can only write about things after they happen. Even though she might want to decide whom you’ll date and marry, you’ll probably get to make that decision yourself. Your mother has no way of knowing the future, just like she couldn’t tell when you’d start sleeping through the night, what foods you’d like, or what would be your favorite book.”

Or if I’ll get to participate in the triathlon.

“But there is a book written that describes your whole life from beginning to end. God wrote it long before you were born and He included a lot more than your firsts and your favorites. He wrote down every single day of your life. He even counted the hairs on your head.”

Claire’s head brushed against Steven’s shoulder. Why had he never before noticed the softness of her hair?

The pages of Zeke’s Bible seemed to whisper as he flipped through to find the right verse. “Psalm 139:16 says, ‘All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of the them came to be.’ That’s hard to believe! God wrote down every day of your life in His book before you were born. He wrote the day you were conceived and the day you’ll take your last breath. He wrote the days you disobeyed your parents as well as the days you made them proud. He’s already written down every challenge you’ll face and how you’ll overcome it.

“How many days is that? Just for fun, I took a calculator and figured out that if you live to be ninety years old, God has written over 32,850 days of your life in His book. Be glad you don’t have to read a book like that for English class.”

Steven laughed. Some of the other campers whistled and clapped.

“What does that say about God, that He would write a book like that? Who else would care what happens to you every single day of your life?”

Only someone who cares deeply for you, someone who loves you beyond any earthly love.”

Zeke stepped off the stage and moved down the aisle. “Remember when we talked about how you are fearfully and wonderfully made? And how God wove you together? Do you think maybe He did that for a reason? Is it possible He wrote down every day of your life because He has a purpose for you?”

A purpose for me? Steven turned his head to better hear Zeke as he spoke from the back of the room.

“God told Jeremiah, ‘Even before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I set you apart for a purpose. Long ago, I gave you the job of prophet to the nations.’ God wrote all of Jeremiah’s days in His book before one of them came to be.”

Zeke’s voice drew nearer as he made his way up the aisle to Steven’s row. “There are others in the Bible, too, whose purpose God announced before they were born. Can any of you name one?”

After a moment of silence, someone called out John the Baptist. Someone else said Jesus.

Zeke waited, but no one else offered any other names. “Isaac’s birth was foretold as the one through whom Abraham would become a father of many nations. And Samson’s mother was told of his purpose in leading the fight against the Philistines. Now, maybe you’re thinking those people in the Bible are special. God had a specific plan He wanted them to fulfill.”

What kind of plan could I fulfill being blind?

Zeke called out campers’ names. “Emily. Joshua. Madison. Tyler. Zach. Ryan. Kayla. You and everyone in this room are no different than Samson, or Isaac, or Jeremiah or John the Baptist. God had a reason, a purpose for weaving you together the way He did. He wrote down all the days of your life before your parents even thought of you. Remember that when you leave Rustic Knoll. Remember you have been fearfully and wonderfully

made and you were woven together by God Himself to be a holy dwelling for His spirit. What better purpose could there be?”

In the cabin, Dillon snapped his towel against Steven’s leg.

“Ow!” Steven jumped onto his bed and huddled against another attack. “No fair.”

“Hey, you know that book with all the days of my life written in it?”

Steven uncoiled himself as Dillon climbed onto the top bunk. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Mine’s gonna be a best seller. It’ll be on the New York Times list for months, years maybe. They’ll make a movie out of it and everything.”

“You’re still missing that humility thread.” Steven lay down on his bed. He smiled. Dillon’s humor was another thing he’d miss.

Footsteps stopped beside Steven’s bed. “What time do you want to wake up tomorrow?” Jake tapped his knuckles against the bunk’s frame.

“Noon. Thanks,” Dillon answered.

Steven leaned out the side of the bunk. “Try 5:30.”

“He asked what time I *want* to wake up, not what time we need to wake up.”

“All right.” Jake chuckled and knocked again on the bunk’s frame. “Wake up call at 5:30.” He turned. “Everybody ready? The lights are going out. Ten, nine, eight...”

Steven spread out over the bed. There’d been hot days at camp before, but never the whole week. Surely they’d get a storm soon that would cool things off. He nestled his head into the pillow and smiled at the memory of his fingers tracing Claire’s face. The softness of her skin. The way her lashes brushed against his hand. The dimples in her cheeks. He’d have to ask for her phone number so he could hear her laugh again.

There were a lot of things he'd miss about Rustic Knoll. Besides Claire's laugh, there was Brady's honesty, Dillon's egotistical jokes, Zeke's wisdom.

Imagine. A book with every day of his life recorded. Too bad he couldn't read ahead and find out if he'd ever get together with Claire in the future. He could find out about the triathlon, whether he was accepted to participate. How he and Dillon placed.

But if God wrote the days of his life in His book, then God knew he'd be in the closet listening to an erotic phone message while Dad needed him in the kitchen. God knew about Dad's heart attack. Why didn't He write it differently? Couldn't God have changed the way that day was recorded, the way it happened?

Steven let out a long breath. He'd give anything to be able to rewrite that page.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I FORGOT THE PHONE.” STEVEN POUNDED HIS PALM ON THE BICYCLE’S seat. “I was so worried about forgetting to get the key from Jake.” He threw his leg over the bike and jammed the helmet onto his head.

Dillon put pressure on one pedal and the bike rolled forward an inch or two. “No sweat. It took us about six times around before, so I’ll count. Then we get off and run a lap and a half?”

“Yep. Ready?”

“Let’s go.”

Steven pressed hard against the pedals and the bike gained momentum. Maybe if he weren’t blind, he could get into bike riding, especially on warm summer mornings like this. Birds singing in the trees, the sun on his back, and the fresh scent in the air moving past him provided a nice reward for getting up so early. The tires muttered along on the pavement and the chain ticked its continuous path around the sprockets.

Judging by the increasing hum of a car’s engine, they were nearing the highway. The car swooshed past as they made the sharp turn and headed back toward camp.

“My butt’s already sore,” Dillon called over his shoulder.

“Good. It’ll build up the calluses.”

“Yeah, but who wants calluses there?”

“You will, for all the time you spend on the bench this season.”

“Ha ha.” Dillon’s laugh held no humor.

They made the turn to go down past the clinic and around behind the girls’ cabins. The bicycle bumped over uneven spots in the road and they sailed toward the turnaround by the boats.

“Coming up on the turn,” Dillon warned. “Let’s see how fast we can take it.”

Steven tightened his grip on the handlebars and lowered his shoulder into the curve. These fast turns always felt slightly out of control. The bike leaned to the left, tires grabbing the pavement, fighting for traction.

A jolt and the bike skidded out from under him.

“Auugh!” Dillon thudded to the ground.

Steven’s body skated across the asphalt. His left leg and arm burned as they scraped the pavement. He came to a stop with a thunk of his helmet on the ground. He fought through the shock. Other than Dillon’s cuss words, the only sound came from a tire still spinning on the bike. He pushed himself up to a sitting position. “What happened?”

“We spun off the road. You okay?”

Steven rubbed his arm from the shoulder to his wrist. His hand came away sticky wet. Probably not sweat. “I don’t think anything’s broken. What about you?”

“My shoulder hurts and I’m scraped up, but not as bad as you. You’re a bloody mess.” Dillon took hold of Steven’s uninjured arm and helped him stand. “Let’s get the bike up.”

Steven limped over toward the slowly spinning bike tire.

Dillon cried out as he lifted the bike. “I think my shoulder is messed up.” He struggled to mount the bike. “Okay, I’m on but I can’t put any weight on my left arm. And I can’t lift it past my chin.”

“We both need to get to the clinic.”

“Does that mean we have to see Mrs. Hoang? I’ve heard she’s a witch.”

Steven grimaced as the pain started to set in. "I think she's not used to treating kids, but you're right. The idea of Mrs. Hoang treating me doesn't inspire a lot of joy. I can wake up Nurse Willie to help us."

"What should we do with the bike? Leave it here?"

Steven thought a moment. "Could we walk it to the clinic? Can you steer it with one hand?"

"As long as you've got the back."

Steven grasped the back handlebars as Dillon dismounted. They started walking but the pedal clipped his leg. "Ow!"

"What happened?"

"I forgot about the pedal and it took a chunk out of my leg. Is it bleeding?" He turned for Dillon to see.

"A little. Not enough to worry about, not like your other side." Dillon pushed the bike onto the pavement and gave a painful grunt.

Steven took the rear handlebar again, but this time he walked an arm's length from the bike. His left side stung on the outside and ached inside, but as long as his only injuries were getting scraped up, he wouldn't complain. Several times, he heard a catch in Dillon's breath. "You think you broke something?"

"I hope not."

At last, they reached the clinic. They dropped the bike in the grass and set their helmets on the step. Dillon pulled at the door. "Ow!"

His breath came in short rapid bursts.

Steven grabbed the door and held it open for him. "You go first. I think you're hurt worse than I am."

"I'll be fine," Dillon insisted. "I'm sure they'll be happy about you bleeding all over their floor."

The clinic itself was locked whenever a nurse wasn't there, so the boys stood in the entryway.

“Wait here,” Steven whispered. “Let me try to wake her up.” He touched the wall with his hand, then jerked it back. Mrs. Hoang would not appreciate a bloody handprint on the wall. He walked a few steps along the hall and used his foot to probe the wall until it encountered the doorframe for Willie’s room. He rapped his knuckles against the door.

“Nurse Willie? Are you awake?”

A sleepy voice answered. “Who is it?”

“It’s Steven. Dillon and I had an accident on the bike. Will you help us?”

Nurse Willie’s voice grew stronger. “How bad are you hurt?”

“Dillon’s shoulder hurts pretty bad and I guess we’re both scraped up.”

A brief pause. “All right, then. Wait by the clinic while I get dressed.”

Steven limped back to the front door. His injured leg felt like it was on fire. “She’s coming.”

“How long’s it going to take her?” Dillon started to take a deep breath, but stopped short and groaned.

“She has to get dressed.” Steven shifted from one foot to the other, but his leg ached too much to stand on it for long.

Finally, Willie’s door opened and she shuffled down the hall toward them. The tinkling of her hat would’ve brought a smile to Steven’s face if he weren’t in such pain.

“What are you boys doing riding a bike at this time of the morning?” Willie’s keys clinked together as she unlocked the clinic door.

Steven sank onto one of the chairs. “Remember that triathlon I’m training for? We were combining a bike ride and run today.”

“And what happened to get you so scraped up?”

Dillon dropped onto the other chair. “Took a turn too sharp and the bike slid off the road.”

Drawers and cabinets opened and shut as Nurse Willie mumbled about not being able to find anything. She turned on the water, washed her hands

and soon applied a wet cloth to Steven's arm.

He winced.

"Hold that there." She let go and wrapped another wet cloth around his leg.

Willie moved to Dillon with another wet cloth. "You're all hunched over. Can you sit up straight?"

"No. My shoulder hurts when I do."

"Let me see."

The outside door opened and footsteps approached the clinic's doorway. Mrs. Hoang's voice sliced through the conversation. "What is happening here? Why you not come get me? No need to bother Nurse Willie."

"Treating campers is never a 'bother.' But since you're here, check Dillon's shoulder. I'm guessing it's a clavicle fracture." Willie took the cloth Steven had been holding against his arm. She dabbed at several spots.

Dillon expelled a heavy breath with a sharp grunt.

Mrs. Hoang agreed with Willie's assessment. "He will need an x-ray."

"Give him something for the pain," Nurse Willie directed. "And would you finish cleaning his scrapes and scratches? I didn't get to those yet."

While Mrs. Hoang took care of Dillon, Nurse Willie swabbed Steven's wounds with something that stung not only his lacerations but his nostrils as well. He flinched when she pressed his knee.

"Let's hope it's only bruised from the fall." She stepped aside. "Flex it back and forth a few times."

Gingerly, Steven extended his leg until he held it out straight, then brought it back an inch at a time.

"You go for x-ray, too," Mrs. Hoang ordered.

Nurse Willie pressed her fingers along his shinbone and around his knee. "I don't think an x-ray is necessary. It doesn't feel like anything's broken, but they're both lucky they don't need any stitches." She set a cold pack on Steven's knee. "This should keep any swelling down. If you feel it

swelling later on, come back and we'll ice it again. Mrs. Hoang, will you call Zeke and tell him we'll have to make an emergency room visit?"

While Mrs. Hoang discussed transportation arrangements with Zeke, Dillon apologized to Steven. "I shouldn't have taken the turn that fast. You think you'll still be able to do the triathlon?"

"I'll be okay."

"You'll have to find a new partner. And what about training?"

"Don't worry about me. I hope we haven't ruined your chances for starting forward."

"Me too." Disappointment filled Dillon's voice. "Man, I'm sorry. Stupid..." His last words were said under his breath.

Mrs. Hoang finished talking with Zeke. "Reverend Zacharias will be here in a few minutes to take us. He wants me to go too. You can manage here while I'm gone?"

There was a slight pause before Willie answered. "Yes, I believe I can manage while you're gone."

Mrs. Hoang excused herself to get her keys. As soon as she left, Dillon complained. "Do I have to go to the ER?"

"If you want your shoulder to heal properly, it's best. Now hold still while I fit this sling around your arm and neck." Nurse Willie continued her first thought. "The x-ray will tell us if you need surgery or—"

"Surgery?"

"—or if the shoulder will heal on its own. Usually they heal on their own with rest, and that's what we'll pray for."

Mrs. Hoang came back and urged Dillon out the door. "Reverend Zacharias is waiting. You walk?" Dillon stood and shuffled his feet toward the door.

Steven called after him. "Later, buddy. I'll be waiting for you."

Nurse Willie bandaged Steven's arm and leg. "This is to keep the open wounds from getting dirty and possibly infected. No swimming until the

wounds close up. Try to keep the bandages dry. You can take them off to shower, but come back and let me change them if the wounds are still open.” She filled a cup with water, shook out a couple pills and handed them to him. “You’re likely to start feeling the stiffness and pain in a few hours. And you’ll probably feel worse tomorrow. If it bothers you too much, come back and get another dose. Any questions?”

Steven flexed both his leg and his arm. “I think I’ll be okay. Sorry to wake you up. I really appreciate you doing this.”

Nurse Willie drew in a breath and exhaled. She pulled the stool over and sank onto it. “It’s my job, the reason they call me Nurse Willie.”

“And you belong here. It’s not Rustic Knoll Bible Camp without Nurse Willie in the clinic.”

A deep chuckle rose from her throat. “Your mother should’ve named you Barnabas instead of Steven.”

“Barnabas? Why?”

“That name means ‘encourager,’ and that’s exactly what you are.”

“Thanks. But I think I’ll stick with Steven.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STEVEN TAPPED JAKE'S DOOR AND PUSHED IT OPEN AFTER JAKE ANSWERED.

"Whoa! What happened to you?"

Steven held the bike's padlock key out to him. "Went too fast on the turnaround by the boat dock and wiped out. Zeke and Mrs. Hoang took Dillon to the hospital. They think he broke his collarbone."

"Ouch! Those are awful." Jake took the key. "What about you? Can you still train?"

Steven shrugged. "Not for a couple days, but I go home tomorrow anyway. And I have to find a new partner." He turned to go to his bunk, then stopped. "Oh, we left the bike and our helmets at the clinic. Nurse Willie asked if you'd come get them sometime today." Jake agreed and offered to accompany Steven to breakfast.

Steven applied some deodorant, then pulled a clean shirt from his suitcase. Pulling his bloody shirt over his head and arm wasn't easy. In fact, it hurt. But so did getting the clean shirt on. The higher he lifted his arm, the more it hurt. And he didn't want to mess up the bandages. He slipped his injured arm through one armhole, then inserted his other arm into the opposite one. Gathering the back of the shirt in his hand, he lifted it up and over his head, shrugging it down over his shoulders and back. *That wasn't so bad.* The shorts were easier, and he finished dressing by pulling the

medallion out from under his pillow and dropping the cord over his head. He clenched the circular metal in his hand and vowed to complete this triathlon no matter what happened. *For you, Dad.*

He stopped by Jake's room and they headed for the dining hall. Steven repeated his story for Janie and countless others as he went through the buffet line and made his way to a table. Friday morning was his least favorite breakfast—oatmeal. Anything was better than oatmeal, so he grabbed some boxes of cold cereal instead. Before he opened the first box, he shook it and tried to guess what kind of cereal was inside.

"Frosted Flakes." He opened the box and popped a piece of the cereal in his mouth. "Yesss!"

"That's impressive," Jake said. "What's in the other three boxes?"

One by one, Steven shook each box. Rice Krispies, more Frosted Flakes, and Raisin Bran.

"Oh, so close." Jake shook one box again. "Corn flakes, not Frosted Flakes, but three out of four ain't bad!"

Steven finished eating and started back to his cabin. In spite of the pain medicine Willie had given him, he was feeling like he'd been tossed like a skipping stone across pavement.

Claire caught him exiting the dining hall and walked with him.

"What happened to you?" She touched his arm between the bandages, but pulled back quickly.

"Dillon and I wiped out on the bike this morning. He's at the ER. They think he broke his collarbone."

Claire gasped. "What?" She ran in front of him and stopped him with a hand to his chest. "Dillon broke his collarbone? That's awful. So now he can't be your partner. Are you still going to do the triathlon?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous." She made it sound like a question. "Steven, you guys were out here by yourselves and you still got hurt. The race will

be packed with people. What if you run into someone? Or worse, they run into you because you couldn't see them coming?"

"So? Bodies heal. I know there are risks, but if I go into this race expecting to get hurt, I probably will. Blindness is no excuse for letting fear control you."

"It's no excuse for doing something stupid, either."

"Oh, now I'm stupid for doing a triathlon."

"I said you're *doing* something stupid. What if you break your collarbone like Dillon? How will that honor your dad? How will it feel to sit around for weeks not able to do anything because you're injured?"

He wasn't up for a debate on the merits of doing a triathlon, and the fact that Claire was so against it jabbed his heart. "You don't believe in me, do you? You think because I'm blind, I can't do a lot of things."

"No! That's not what I'm saying."

"I thought you'd be cheering me on like you usually do, but I guess I was wrong. Thanks for the encouragement." He stepped around her and strode toward the cabin.

"Steven! Wait."

No, he wouldn't wait. They had nothing more to discuss. He clenched his fists and his chest rose and fell with every breath, more from anger than the rapid pace he set. Claire was the one person who should encourage his dreams and cheer him on. Why was she so against him doing a triathlon? She really didn't think he could do it. *Because I'm blind.*

Steven yanked open the screen door and let it slam behind him. He entered the bunkroom where a couple other guys were talking and laughing, and pounded his palm against the upper bunk frame. They quit talking. *Who cares?* Claire's fingers on his arm had been warm and gentle, but her words proved she couldn't accept him the way he was.

His left side ached and burned at the same time. He needed to get his stuff organized but couldn't raise his arm enough to fold the bed sheet. He

stuffed it into his sleeping bag and tugged at the corners of the bag to straighten it. After mashing his clothes down inside his suitcase, he shoved it under the bed. A sudden awareness of Dillon's phone washed over him like a wave. It was right there, within reach, calling to him. But he couldn't take it out now. Not with the other guys here. He had to get out. He'd done as much clean up as he could for cabin inspection. Steven grabbed his Bible and bolted from the cabin.

Claire's comments ate at him all through morning worship and small group Bible study. Her lack of confidence in him only intensified the constant ache on his left side. And where was Dillon? Why wasn't he back yet?

Steven grabbed a lunch tray and stepped up to the buffet line.

"You need any help with that?" Brady asked.

"No," Steven snapped. "I don't need your help."

"Whoa! I've never seen you angry before. What's wrong?"

Steven sighed. "Sorry. Guess I'm just sore."

In more ways than one.

Despite the pain, his stomach demanded food. He accepted a generous helping of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, green beans and a yeast roll. And chocolate cake for dessert. He followed Brady to a table where several other guys were seated. The banter around the table gradually relaxed the tightness in his chest and shoulders. Maybe he shouldn't have been so hard on Claire. Her criticism came at the wrong time, when he was worried about Dillon and finding a new partner in addition to the pain in his arm and leg. Later, he'd find her and apologize.

Zeke spoke his name. "I've been looking for you." He squatted beside Steven's chair.

"Is Dillon back? Is he okay?"

"He should be back soon. The ER was unusually busy. I came back and left Mrs. Hoang with him, but she just called to say they're ready to release

him. I didn't want to go until I let you know I heard from your mother."

"She called?" Steven sat up straight in his chair, his fork poised over his plate.

"Yes, she did, but the news isn't what you wanted to hear. The triathlon authorities turned down your request. They said it would be too much of a risk, too much liability since they're not set up to handle visually challenged triathletes."

Steven's breath left him. Zeke put a hand on his back.

"I'm sorry, Steven. I know how much you wanted to do this. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Steven swallowed the lump in his throat and shook his head.

"All right. I'm here if you need me. If there's anything at all I can do, you let me know. Okay?"

Steven nodded and waited for Zeke to leave. He wasn't hungry anymore. Not even the chocolate cake appealed to him. His stomach clenched. He pushed his chair back and picked up his tray.

Brady's words came to him as if from a deep tunnel. "Want me to come with you?"

"No, I can do it." Three steps later, his foot caught on a chair and he pitched forward, barely staying upright. He held onto his tray but dishes and uneaten food went flying. Yelps and screams of surprise replaced the normal noisy conversations which now grew quiet. He struggled to regain his bearings. Which way was the door?

Brady took his tray. "Leave the mess. I'll get you out of here. Come on."

Brady guided Steven through the maze, weaving in and out among the tables he'd passed earlier without a problem.

Steven let go of Brady's arm when they finally reached the door. "I can get to the cabin from here."

"No way. I'm going with you."

Too shaken to argue, Steven focused on staying in step with the slap-slap of Brady's sandals as they walked alongside the chapel to the cabin. At the cabin's steps, he offered Brady a fist bump. "Thanks, man."

Brady's fist met his. "No problem. Sorry about the triathlon. If there's anything I can do—"

"You just did. I'll be okay. Thanks." Steven climbed the two concrete steps and opened the screen door. It let out a weak squawk, and he guided it to a gentle closing behind him. He threw himself on his bed, pulled out the medallion and held it while trying to sort out his jumbled thoughts.

Six months he'd been working toward this goal. Now what?

The cabin door opened and closed several times as the other guys came back from lunch. Several checked to see if he was okay. *Yeah, sure, I'm fine.* All the training had been for nothing. Even Dillon's injury was for nothing. Would he ever make up for Dad's death?

Jake came and stood by his bunk. "Zeke told me about the triathlon. Are you okay?"

What if he said no? What would Jake do? What could anyone do?

"I'll be all right. Just have to deal with it."

"Yeah, it's rough when something like that happens. I'm really sorry. Let me know if I can do anything." Jake patted Steven's shoulder and went into his room, but came out a few minutes later. "Steven, are you still doing Rec with me?"

"Can I stay here? Wait for Dillon? I'm really not feeling up to anything physical right now anyway."

"I understand." Jake blew a short blast on his whistle. "Okay, everybody else to Rec. Come on, let's go."

The cabin emptied out and a lonely quiet took over. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, being alone with his thoughts. They weren't very good company right now.

No triathlon. Claire should be happy. No more worries about the pathetic blind kid getting hurt in the big crowd. *I hope she's satisfied.*

Claire. They were friends for one week a year, but that friendship had lasted thirteen years. He'd always felt comfortable with her, like the way a brother and sister must feel. But that brother/sister idea had gotten tossed out the window this week. He could listen to her voice, her laughter for hours, days. Her nearness excited him. Her touch sent his pulse racing. And now he had a mental image of what she looked like, more than just short blond hair. Thinking about her now was making him feel...like a guy. He didn't need eyes to feel this way.

A suggestion popped into his mind, lurid and steamy. *No!* He would not think of her like that. He pushed it away, but it came back, followed by other suggestions he'd heard long ago. That closet he'd thought locked burst open and his mind flooded with obscene words and phrases.

Steven jumped up and walked around the cabin. He should leave, find his way down to the boat dock and Jake. But he had to admit he liked feeling this way. This is what it felt like to be a man. He stopped beside the bunk bed, Dillon's bunk. All he had to do was reach under the mattress and take out the phone. It was right there, waiting for him.

He pushed away from the bed, turned and made his way to the front door. Distant cheers and shouts reached his ears. His hands moved over the rough wood of the doorframe, the wire mesh of the screen. His heart pounded in his chest. He shouldn't give in. No, he shouldn't. But just once? He wouldn't do it again. Ever.

Steven did an about face, took three steps and halted.

Just this once wouldn't hurt, would it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

STEVEN CRADLED THE PHONE IN HIS HAND, RECALLING THE NUMBER FROM three years ago with ease. Had it changed since then? What if some guy answered and he had to stumble through a *Sorry, wrong number* excuse? The voice, the one he remembered, echoed in his head, inviting, suggesting things that filled his body with a current of excitement.

He sat on his bed and pressed the button to turn on the phone. Did it still have any juice after several days without recharging? Was it password protected? He wouldn't know until he tried. His fingers swiped across the face and pressed the lower left corner where the phone symbol on his own phone was located. His thumbs pressed the numbers without hesitation. He lifted the phone to his ear but heard nothing.

The screen door squeaked and familiar footsteps shuffled through the common room. Steven shoved the phone beneath his leg as Dillon entered the bunkroom.

“Steven? What are you doing here? How come you're not down at the boat dock?”

Steven swallowed and tried to still his racing pulse. “I told you I'd wait for you. What'd the doctor say?”

Dillon came and sat on Steven's bed. “Nurse Willie was right. Broken collarbone. I have to wear a sling for 6 weeks. They gave me some pain

meds but it's still killing me. Kinda hard to sit up straight. Sorry, partner."

"Doesn't matter." Steven pressed his leg against the phone to muffle a whisper of the voice from the phone. He spoke louder. "My mom called. The race committee turned down my request."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. Something about them not being set up for visually challenged participants." The voice under his leg kept talking. He couldn't tell what the woman was saying, but the intonation was clear. Steven pulled at the neck of his t-shirt. "Man, I'll be so glad when this heat wave breaks."

Dillon shushed him. "Why do I keep hearing a girl's voice?" He leaned closer, bracing one hand on Steven's shoulder. "And why is it coming from your leg?" He lifted Steven's knee and pulled his phone out. "What are you doing with my phone?"

"Sneaking a look at your dirty pictures. What else?"

"Ha ha. Seriously. Who were you calling? A girl?"

The voice came again, slightly muffled, as if Dillon were holding it up to his ear.

"That's disgusting! Who would—? Wait, that area code is for—" Dillon jumped up, and the bed vibrated with the force of his blow to the frame. "You scumbag! All this time you're preaching at me about staying away from a girl's sexy pictures, warning me to treat Claire right. And here you are dialing up for phone sex? I shoulda been lecturing you, you hypocrite!" Dillon paced the room. He pounded his fist against one bunk and gasped. He leaned over, moaning and breathing like they'd just finished a swim.

Steven struggled to breathe through the tightness in his own chest. How had he come to this again? He shrank from Dillon's anger, but he couldn't get away from the self-loathing. *Why did he give in?*

Dillon stepped beside his bunk. "If I didn't have this sling on, I'd punch you out." He shoved Steven over and gingerly dropped down next to him. "Talk to me, dude. Why'd you call this number? What's going on?"

Steven pulled the medallion out of his shirt and lifted the cord over his head. “The triathlon.”

“Yeah, they turned down your request. What does that have to do with phone sex?”

Steven pulled in a shaky breath. “Back in eighth grade, the guys in the locker room were passing that number around. I wanted so bad to be like them. To have a girlfriend, to know what they were talking about. So, I had a friend read the number to me until I memorized it. I tried it a few times, always feeling sick to my stomach after listening, but still excited, y’know?” Steven rubbed the medallion, then twirled it between his fingers to turn it over and rub the other side. “There was one girl who didn’t seem to mind that I couldn’t see. But Dad wouldn’t let me go out with her. He said I was too young. We argued and I ended up going in my room and slamming the door.”

Steven clutched the medallion in a tight fist. “I called that number. But while I was sitting in my closet listening, my dad was in the kitchen having a heart attack.” He clenched his teeth so tight his jaw hurt. His chin quivered. “If he called for help, I didn’t hear him. I was too caught up in what I was hearing on the phone. That’s why I made such a big deal about your sexting. It’s all pornography, and pornography is a trap. I didn’t want you getting caught in it like I did.” He dipped his head, heat flaming his face.

Dillon released a sigh. “I’m sorry, man. I had no idea. But, I still don’t get what calling that number now has to do with them not letting you do the triathlon.”

Steven punched the pillow up behind him and leaned against it. “When Mom cleaned out Dad’s stuff last year, it brought everything back. All the garbage, y’know? I’ve always wished I could make up for what I’d done, for not being there to help Dad.”

“But you’re not sure he called for help, are you?”

“No, but Mom showed me this medallion and told me how Dad used to do triathlons before I was born. I knew this was what I’d been looking for. I’d do a triathlon like Dad, to honor him and hope God could forgive me.” Steven held the cord between his thumb and forefinger and let the medallion dangle.

Dillon scooted around in front and faced him. “Bro, you’re beating yourself up for nothing. It sucks that your dad died like that, but it’s not your fault. You did nothing”

“You got that right,” Steven interrupted. “I did exactly nothing.” He clasped the medallion in his fist, drew his arm back and pitched it into the common room where it hit the wall and fell to the floor. “I hate that stupid thing. I hate triathlons and I hate being blind.”

Dillon caught Steven’s hand in his, held it tight against his chest.

Steven drew in one ragged breath after another. His taut muscles shook like an earthquake in his soul, and he swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth again and again until the bitterness and anger and hatred were exhausted. Gradually, he relaxed against his pillow.

Dillon let go of his hand, and Steven rubbed his face, peeking out between his spread fingers. “Sorry. It’s been a suck-y day. The whole day.”

“I hear ya. But promise me you won’t call that number again.”

“I won’t. Keep the phone. Just don’t let Jake or anyone else see it.” Steven threw his legs off the side of the bed, stood up and stretched.

“Wait a minute.” Dillon paused. “There. I deleted the pictures and turned the thing off.” He dropped it in Steven’s pocket. “We’ll keep each other honest. I’m trusting you.”

Steven worked his way along the serving tables for the Friday night picnic down by the lake. With two hot dogs, chips, carrot sticks, baked beans and a

piece of watermelon on his plate, he tracked along beside Dillon to a spot on the hill and sat down on the grass. Jake joined them a few minutes later.

“Long afternoon for you guys?”

Dillon groaned. “Worse than when I broke my ankle. I can’t even play cards without hurting.”

Steven swallowed a bite of his hot dog. “My last chance at the water carnival and I had to sit out.” His mouth pulled to one side.

“You should come back as a counselor.” Jake crunched a potato chip.

Dillon laughed. “Can you imagine all the tricks guys would pull on a blind counselor?”

Steven objected. “Hey, I’d be wise to most of them.”

“As long as you’ve been coming to camp, you could probably teach them a few new ones,” Jake chuckled.

Steven tore the corner off a ketchup packet with his teeth and squirted it on his second hot dog. “I doubt Zeke would hire a blind counselor. But it is kind of sad to think this is our last week of camp.”

Jake spoke with a mouth full of food. “What will you miss the most?”

Steven didn’t hesitate. “Zeke’s evening devotions and Janie’s pancakes.”

Dillon added, “Bunk bed earthquakes. And the Rec games.”

“Friday night campfires and the people—Zeke, Janie, Nurse Willie.” Steven chewed the last of his hot dog and swallowed. “Oh! That reminds me. Jake, is there any way you could take Nurse Willie and me out in the boat for the campfire tonight?”

“Why the boat for a campfire?”

“When I took her fishing, she mentioned how she used to take the boat on Friday nights and listen to the campfire singing from out on the lake.” Steven set his plate aside. “She hasn’t been able to do that this year, being sick and all. Wouldn’t it be cool to surprise her and take her out tonight, let her hear it again?”

Jake spit out a couple watermelon seeds. “I think we could do that. You’d have to leave the talent show early to get her down to the boat and out on the water in time. Do you think she’s up to it?”

Steven’s teeth sank into his piece of watermelon and he licked the juice that dripped down his chin.

“She worked the clinic all morning while Mrs. Hoang was with Dillon. I’d say she’s up to it.”

Claire tapped Steven’s shoulder as the chapel filled with campers for the traditional Friday night talent show. “Why are you sitting back here?”

Steven raised his thumb toward Jake beside him. “We’re leaving early.”

“Oh.” She stood still a moment. “I’m sorry for what I said earlier. You’re not stupid. I admire your courage to try new things, but”

“But what?”

“It’s just that sometimes I worry about you, trying so hard Never mind. I don’t want to get into it again. I’ll see you later.” She hurried up the aisle.

Jake leaned toward him. “Girlfriend?”

Steven frowned. “Not at the moment.” He needed to put Claire out of his mind and concentrate on his plan to take Willie out on the lake tonight. Jake would walk him to the clinic, then continue on to the dock to get the boat ready. His job was to persuade Willie to come with him. If she was tired from this morning, he’d need the wheelchair to get her down to the boat dock before the campfire started. They needed to be anchored in place with the motor off when the singing started.

The talent show seemed to last forever. Brady played a new piece on his trumpet, but Steven fidgeted through his performance. Every act lasted way longer than it should.

Finally, Jake nudged him. “We’d better go now.”

Outside the chapel, Steven stopped. “I can find my way to the clinic if you want to go ahead and get the boat ready.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I just follow the road.”

“How do you know when to stop?”

“I follow the left side of the road until I come to the clinic’s sidewalk. I’ll be fine.”

Jake slapped his shoulder. “Okay. Meet you down there in a little bit.”

Steven winced. The bandages pulled at the edges of his wounds, and Jake’s pat on the shoulder made it worse. He headed toward the road, found the edge and made his way toward the clinic. What if Willie was already sleeping? Or too worn out after working the clinic all morning? Maybe he should’ve checked with her after supper and run the idea by her. No, he wanted to surprise her. But what if Mrs. Hoang was there and wouldn’t let him bother her?

As he neared the clinic, the odor of smoke assaulted his nostrils. And what was that brash buzzing sound? An alarm? The noise grew louder, the smell stronger the closer he got to the clinic. Fire! The clinic was burning. He reached for the door, then jerked back, his fingers scorched from the heat.

Nurse Willie! Was she inside, in her apartment?

Despite the heat now radiating from the door, Steven pounded on it. “Nurse Willie, are you in there? Willie?” He fell back, missed the step and tumbled to the ground, landing on his wounded side. Steven groaned and pushed himself up. He had to find Willie. Smoke choked him and he coughed. Heat seared his fingers as he felt his way around the building until he found the side window by her easy chair. The bottom sill hit about waist high on him.

“Willie!” He raked his fingers across the window screen. Was there a tear or a hole somewhere that would let him pull back the screen and get to

the window? Keeping one hand in place, he moved his other one all around the screen. Nothing. He clawed the screen top to bottom until the netting parted. Tearing it aside, he pounded on the window.

“Willie? Are you in there?” He flattened his palms against the window and tried to raise it. Thank goodness the glass felt cooler than the blaze out front. Should he break it?

The smoky odor grew worse as he tried once more to raise the window. Fitting the heels of his palms under the mid-sash, he pushed. The window budged and he pushed again. This time it slid up enough for him to call inside.

“Willie! Are you in there? Can you hear me?”

The alarm’s angry buzzing competed with the fire’s roar and crackle from somewhere inside. Or was it overhead? How could he hear anything over the noise? He cocked his head and put his ear to the opening.

It sounded like a whisper, Willie’s whisper.

“Steven!”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

COUGHING. THEN WILLIE'S VOICE CAME AGAIN.

"Help me, Steven. I can't..." The rest was lost in the noise of the fire.

How close was she to the window? Steven shoved his hands through the slender opening and thrust the window up as far as it would go. He swung one leg over the windowsill and ducked inside. Hot air stole his breath as it whooshed past him, escaping out the open window. Was the apartment door open? He took a step and sprawled across the easy chair where Willie had sat to eat with him and Claire.

He tried to shout over the alarm. "Willie, where are you? Keep talking so I can find you."

"Steven."

She sounded weaker. How long had she been breathing in this smoke and heat? His own lungs struggled for oxygen. His eyes stung. He dropped to his hands and knees, and closed his eyelids tight against the stinging. "Willie?"

"Yes. Dear God, help me."

Steven crawled forward. The wounds on his arm and leg felt like they were on fire in the heat. He swung one arm out in front and around him, catching a small end table and knocking it over. Something soft fell across

his arm. A square of material, maybe a table covering? He held it over his nose with one hand and crawled farther.

He must be close to the apartment door. The fire's roar grew louder, the heat more intense. He coughed and tried to inhale. Would he never get his breath back? The incessant alarm was deafening. His head throbbed. His chest ached. His skin felt like it might erupt into flames at any moment.

"Willie, I'm coming. Where are you?"

"I'm here. Help me."

"Where? Are you on the floor?"

"Yes."

Steven's shoulder hit a door jam. "Are you in your room or the hallway?"

The raspy cough seemed to come from the hall that led to the clinic. Keeping the cloth over his nose and mouth, Steven moved through the doorway. He reached out with his other hand and touched Willie's bald head. He moved alongside her where she lay on the floor.

With the alarm screaming, he spoke into her ear. "I'm here. Can you crawl?" As fast as the heat was increasing, the fire must be closing in on them.

"Tried to...fight..." Willie's words were swallowed in a coughing fit. Steven took a deep breath through the cloth, then pressed it to Willie's face as she continued coughing.

"We've gotta get out." His throat hurt. His lungs burned. Was it possible to cough them right out of his chest? Talking was nearly impossible. He tore off his dark glasses and threw them aside, then pulled his shirt up over his face to block some of the smoke.

"Willie, talk to me."

No response.

Steven sprang to his feet, inhaling thicker smoke. Would he pass out, too? He turned Willie onto her back, slid his hands under her arms and

dragged her well inside the apartment. Crawling back, he slammed the door shut, cutting off much of the smoke and heat. But a strong current billowed in under the door. He turned, recalling where Willie's bed sat against the opposite wall and scooted in that direction. Steven yanked the blanket from the bed and stuffed it under the door.

Nausea built in his stomach and inched up his throat. His eyes still watered from the intense stinging, and he went into a coughing spell. If only he could stick his head out the window and breathe some fresh air. But Willie needed oxygen more than he did. He sucked in short, shallow breaths. Something hot fell onto his arm and singed his skin. Was that a spark? Was the fire overhead now, the roof ready to collapse on them?

Lord, can you see us? Help me get Willie out of here. Please, don't let her die in here.

Steven shoved the easy chair out of the way and dragged Willie to the window. It was too narrow for him to carry her through. The alarm still shrieked as he slung his leg through the opening, then drew his head and the rest of his body out. He gulped air and was seized by a fit of coughing. But he couldn't afford to wait until it passed. He needed to get Willie out *now*.

I can do this. Months of triathlon and weight training had all been worth it if only for this moment.

Reaching back inside, Steven thrust his arms under Willie's, wincing as the bandage tore from his arm. Gasping for breath, he pulled her up to the windowsill, easing her body through the window inch by inch. His chest burned. He forced himself to suck in fresh air, struggled to control another coughing fit.

Willie's feet thumped to the ground. They were out, but not safe yet. Sparks rained on them from the roof. Steven adjusted his hold on Willie and backed up...seven, eight, nine...twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two steps. Was that far enough to keep from getting burned?

Steven lowered Willie's head and shoulders to the ground as Jake's panicked voice called from a distance.

"Steven! Steven, are you in there? Steven! Willie!"

Where was Jake? Around the corner at the burning entrance to the clinic?

"I'm here." Steven tried to shout but it came out as a raspy whisper. He took three steps toward Jake's voice and collapsed. He'd never been so exhausted in his life.

Jake shouted to someone else. "Call 911. The clinic's on fire. I'm afraid Steven and Willie might be inside." He paused, then said, "I don't know where they are, but I can't just stand here and watch. I have to do something."

Steven groaned. His raspy whisper would never be heard over the roar of the fire. He had to make some noise, let Jake know they weren't inside. He couldn't let his counselor risk his life.

Cough. He could cough.

Jake called, "Steven?"

Coughing hurt, too. Steven clapped his hands.

"Steven, is that you?"

He clapped until Jake dropped to the ground beside him and threw his arms around him.

"Thank God! Are you okay?"

Steven nodded and pointed behind him.

"Is that Willie?" Jake hurried over to her. "She's still breathing."

Steven crawled toward them. "She was awake, talking to me when I found her."

Jake coughed. A moment later, he spoke into his phone. "Zeke, I found them. They're both out of the building but we'll need an ambulance. Willie's breathing but unresponsive." He listened, agreed to something, then

spoke to Steven. “They’ve called 911. Zeke will be here in a minute. Tell me what happened.”

Steven whispered his report until Zeke arrived with Mrs. Hoang. She joined Jake while Zeke enveloped Steven in a bear hug. “Thank God, you’re safe. How do you feel?”

“It hurts to breathe. I’m kind of shaky. Will Nurse Willie be okay?”

Mrs. Hoang answered. “Her pulse is in normal range, but her breathing is shallow and she’s still not responding. She needs an ambulance stat.”

In the distance, a siren’s wail grew louder by the second. “It’s coming.” Zeke squeezed Steven’s shoulder. “I need to direct the fire trucks and ambulance down here.” He called to Jake. “I already instructed the other counselors to keep the kids down at the campfire until the fire is out. You head down and get your boys.” He patted Steven on the back, then stood and hurried away.

Steven lay back on the grass and concentrated on drawing breath into his aching lungs. His head ached, too, and the smoke nauseated him, though it wasn’t as intense as when he was inside.

“Take slow breaths.” Mrs. Hoang’s voice calmed and comforted him. “You need some water to swallow.”

More sirens, deafening as the trucks sped through camp then came to an abrupt stop. Doors slamming, running footsteps and shouted instructions followed.

“Over here. Bring some water,” Mrs. Hoang called. “Two patients with probable smoke inhalation. This one is not responding.”

Footsteps hurried through the grass with a rattle of equipment. The EMT’s rushed to either side of Willie. “Is she breathing?”

Mrs. Hoang responded. “Yes, but barely.”

Steven pushed himself to a sitting position. Mrs. Hoang’s expertise became obvious as she and the technicians discussed getting Willie on oxygen. She belonged in a hospital as much as Willie belonged in her clinic

here at Rustic Knoll. But what was Willie doing out in the hall where he found her?

A female technician placed a stethoscope on Steven's chest. "Can you tell me how you feel?"

"My throat and chest hurt and I've got a headache. But I'll be okay. Take care of Willie first."

"Don't worry. My partner's got your friend. Let's take a look at you. Any nausea?"

"A little."

A light shone dimly in first one eye, then the other, and the technician asked, "Are you vision-impaired?"

"Yes."

"How long were you in the building?"

"I don't know. I realized it was burning. Had to get Willie out."

"What happened to your arm? Is that from the fire?"

Steven lifted his arm and stuck out his leg. "No. Bike accident this morning."

"You've had a rough day." She checked his airways and listened to his pulse and his respiration. "Going in after your friend was dangerous. You're lucky you weren't hurt worse."

Steven bristled. "If I hadn't gone in after her, she'd probably be dead now. Are you saying I should've let her die?"

His outburst interrupted Mrs. Hoang and the other EMT for a moment.

"I didn't mean it like that," the medic replied gently. "You may be right, but it's best to let the trained fire fighters go in after people."

Stupid. She agrees I'm right but says what I did was wrong.

"Are you able to walk? Can you make it to the ambulance if I help you?"

"I'd rather wait here with Nurse Willie, if it's all right." He pushed himself onto his knees, and swayed when he stood up.

The technician steadied him. “Dizzy?”

“A little, but it’s gone now. I’m okay.”

Mrs. Hoang finished giving the other technician details about Willie’s condition and her recent cancer. The medics left to retrieve the gurney to transport Willie.

Steven moved to Willie’s side. Near the clinic, firefighters shouted to each other over the hum of the powerful engine pumping water onto the fire. The smell of wet ashes stuck in his nostrils. He licked his lips and tasted ash. Soot covered his skin. Would he ever enjoy the smell of a campfire again?

Mrs. Hoang broke into his thoughts. “You brought her out?” Steven nodded. “You are a hero.”

“No, I’m not.” He was no hero. Willie was still unconscious, and that meant her life was still in danger. “Thank you anyway. Do you think she’ll be all right?”

“We will see. She’s had much trauma recently.”

Steven found Nurse Willie’s thin hand and held it between both of his. He leaned close to her ear. “Stay with us, Nurse Willie. Don’t leave us. You’ll be getting a new clinic, so hang in there and keep fighting. We need you.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TOO BAD EMERGENCY ROOMS HAD CURTAIN DIVIDERS RATHER THAN REAL walls. The sound of vomiting from a nearby cubicle did nothing for Steven's nausea. His body ached. His hands shook. He had no more strength than a limp noodle, in spite of the adrenaline that still coursed through his veins.

Zeke entered and laid a hand on Steven's blanket-covered knee. "Would you like another sip of water?" With Steven's nod, he guided the straw to his mouth, then set the foam cup back on the bedside table. "They've moved Nurse Willie to a room. The ER doctor wants to keep you here a little longer to make sure you're okay. Your mother should be here any minute, but I'll stay until then."

"Thank you. Has Willie woken up yet?"

"Yes, she opened her eyes, but of course, it's difficult for her to talk." Zeke pulled a chair closer and sat down.

Steven relaxed against the raised portion of his bed and tried to ignore the crying from the other cubicle. The water had cooled and soothed his throat, but it still hurt when he tried to talk.

How long would they keep him? Tomorrow was Saturday, or was it today already? He'd lost track of the time. Would he get back to camp in time to say goodbye to his friends? What would Claire think of him now?

The hospital's air conditioning chilled him and Steven pulled the cotton blanket up to cover his arms. His eyelids grew heavy. He must have dozed off, awakening with a start when the nurse came in to check his blood pressure and pulse again. He'd been dreaming about a book. It was a huge book where Mrs. Hoang was writing down everything he did.

Weird how the mind takes things we hear and twists them. No wonder, after all the things that had happened to him in one day the bike accident, his argument with Claire, getting turned down by the triathlon officials and the fire. It was all written in God's book long before he was born, including the day Dad died.

"Zeke?" His voice still came out a little raspy.

"Yes, Steven. I'm here."

"About that verse that says all our days are written in God's book. Does that mean He's planned it all out and we don't really have a choice about the things we do or the things that happen to us? Are we like little robots doing only what He's decided?"

Zeke shifted in his chair. "No, I'm sorry if I gave that impression. It's difficult for us to understand, but God knows each one of us so intimately, He knows the choices we'll make whether for good or bad."

Steven twisted the plastic ID band around his wrist. "So even before we're born, He knows all the bad stuff we'll do?"

"Yes, and He loves us anyway. That's how He knew we'd need a Savior. From the very beginning, He knew we'd need the forgiveness only Jesus could provide."

"Wow, I never thought of it like that. He wrote my book and saw I'd need forgiveness." Steven tossed that idea around in his mind. "Hey, wouldn't it be cool if Jesus' death and resurrection was the first page in the book for everyone who believes in Him?"

Zeke laughed. “That would be very cool.”

Hours later, Steven’s mom stood beside his bed and waited until the newspaper reporter left. “You’re a celebrity. We’ll have to be sure we get a copy of that edition.”

“Do you think we can see Nurse Willie before we leave?” It still hurt to talk and his voice still wasn’t back to normal, but it wasn’t a whisper anymore.

“Let’s ask the nurse when she comes.”

Moments later, a nurse breezed in to give Mom instructions and get her signature on a couple of forms.

Mom scratched the pen across the paper. “Would you mind checking on another patient? Her name is Willow Woods. She was admitted with Steven and we’d like to visit her before we go.”

“I’ll check and let you know when I get back with your copies of these.” She handed Steven a bag. “Here are the clothes you were wearing when you were admitted. I’ll be right back.”

Steven wrinkled his nose at the whiff of smoke from the bag. “Can we trash this? I don’t ever want to smell that again.”

“I’ll take care of it for you.” Mom took the bag. “There should be a covered trash bin around here somewhere.”

Before she left, Steven thanked her for bringing extra clothes. “You’re the best, Mom.”

“Why, thank you, honey!”

Steven smiled to himself. He’d been so irritated with her lately. Was that because of his doubts and anger about Dad’s death? It didn’t matter so much now that he knew he was forgiven. The fire, too, had changed his

attitude. From now on, he'd try to appreciate the things he could do rather than getting all ticked off about what he couldn't do.

A stretcher with a squeaky wheel rolled past his curtained room and the authoritative voice of a doctor came from another cubicle. The night crew had mopped before the morning shift change, leaving behind a faint scent of floor cleaner.

Mom returned, but it was much later when the nurse finally pushed back the curtains surrounding his cubicle.

"Okay, you're free to go. And Ms. Woods has been asking for you. She's in room 2114. Would you like to use a wheelchair?"

"I think I'll be all right. Thanks." With Mom's help, Steven eased off the bed. Still a little weak all over, he tested his legs before putting his full weight on them. He crooked his hand inside Mom's elbow and they made their way out of the emergency room amid a smattering of applause and well wishes from the staff.

The elevator carried them to the second floor and Mom knocked on Willie's door. "Good morning, Nurse Willie! I've brought you a visitor." She guided Steven to the bedside and he held out his hand.

"Hey, Nurse Willie."

Her bony fingers closed around his, pulling him close until her arm snaked around his neck and drew his head next to hers. Her cheek was wet and she was sniffing. "You saved my life." A rough whisper reached his ear. "How did you know I needed help?"

She released him to blow her nose and stifle her sobs.

"I came to surprise you. Jake and I were going to take you out on the lake and let you listen to the singing from the campfire. When I realized the clinic was on fire, all I could think of was finding you. What were you doing out in the hallway?"

Willie sniffed and blew her nose again, then took a couple quick breaths. "I heard the alarm go off and went to see what was going on. Tried

to put the fire out myself, but it spread so fast, I was trapped, disoriented in all the smoke.” She took his hand again. “I owe you my life.”

“No, Nurse Willie. You don’t owe me anything except to get better so you can be Rustic Knoll’s nurse again.” Steven gave her hand a light squeeze.

“I promise I will. No more fussing and pouting about someone else taking over my clinic.” She pulled her hand away and jabbed her fingers at his chest. “But don’t even think about getting me near a campfire for a good long while.”

Steven threw back his head and laughed. “I know how you feel.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

MOM SETTLED STEVEN IN THE CAR AND STARTED FOR RUSTIC KNOLL. “Zeke promised to have your stuff ready and waiting in the dining hall. It’s too bad they didn’t release you earlier so you could say goodbye to all your friends. I expect everyone is gone by now.”

Steven didn’t have the energy to pack up his gear or face a crowd of people, but missing the last goodbyes sucked. Jake would still be there, but the chance to apologize to Claire was gone. And what about Dillon’s phone? He reached for the medallion, only to realize it wasn’t there. He’d never bothered to pick it up after throwing it in the cabin. Was it still there? His chances for entering a triathlon had literally gone up in smoke, but there was one question he should’ve asked a long time ago.

“Mom, how long did Dad live after they took him to the hospital?”

“He didn’t have a pulse when the ambulance arrived. They tried to revive him on the way to the hospital, but the doctor thought he died almost instantly.”

“So that means he probably didn’t call for help.”

“I doubt it. Not according to what the doctor said.” Mom turned a corner. “What made you ask that?”

How much should he tell her? “This triathlon I’ve been training for? It’s because I wanted to make up for maybe not hearing Dad call me when he

needed help.”

“Oh, Steven! You’ve been carrying that load of guilt all this time?”

He shrugged. “After the ambulance came, that day was kind of a fog with everything that happened. So much confusion.”

“And grief. I understand.” Mom sighed and reached for his hand. “No, I don’t think he had a chance to call for help. But if Dad can see us, I know he’s incredibly proud of you right now.” She squeezed his hand and let go.

Steven smiled. “Thanks, Mom.”

His stomach growled as the car rolled to a stop in Rustic Knoll’s parking lot. He’d been allowed some Gatorade and a taste of orange gelatin while at the hospital. But his stomach needed real food.

Mom helped him out of the car and he took her arm as they walked toward the dining hall. An odd stillness lay about the camp. No distant shouts or laughter. No tantalizing scents coming from the kitchen. Instead, the acrid smell of damp, burned wood hung in the air. The buzz of a motorboat carried on the lake breeze. He’d never heard the place so quiet.

A camp isn’t alive without campers.

Mom opened the door to the dining hall, then stepped aside and let him enter first. Applause and cheers erupted, echoing in the cavernous room, and Steven jumped back. Was that Dillon chanting? “Hero. Hero.”

Others joined the chorus.

Zeke came alongside Steven and drew him away from his mom to a chair where the chanting surrounded him, then gradually died away. “Steven, it’s not often we get to celebrate a real hero. Most of the campers have left, but a few people stayed behind to see you before you return home. I’ll be the first to express my thanks for rescuing Nurse Willie. I can’t tell you how proud I am of you. Over and over during the years you’ve come to camp, you’ve proven beyond any doubt that blindness truly is no excuse. Rustic Knoll will miss your courage and your enthusiasm.” His arm went around Steven’s shoulders and gave a firm squeeze. “Please

let me know if I can ever do anything for you. I'll say goodbye, but there's a couple more people who want to say something to you. Janie?"

Janie approached and placed a tall cup of something cold in his hands. "Steven, I wanted to make something special for you to thank you for saving our Nurse Willie. But Zeke said swallowing your favorite brownies might be difficult. So instead, I made a chocolate shake."

"Yesss!" Steven smiled, and the others around him laughed. "I'm so hungry, Janie. This is perfect! Thank you!" He opened his arms and gave her a hug. She sniffled as she let go. His throat welcomed a cold swallow of his milkshake, and he sighed.

Zeke patted his shoulder. "All right, who's next?"

Jake came forward, clasped Steven's hand and held it. "I still don't know how you did it. I wish you could see what the clinic looks like."

"Is it gone?"

"Nothing left but the ruins. They'll have to clear it out and build a new one. But in honor of Rustic Knoll's very own life saver," Jake let go of his hand and lowered a life vest onto Steven's shoulders, "wear it with pride. It's an honor to know you, man. God bless."

Zeke laughed with the rest of the group. "Next?"

"I guess that's me." Dillon stepped out from the others and shuffled up to stand in front of Steven.

Steven's mouth dropped open. "What are you still doing here?"

"Waiting for you...to give me back my phone."

Steven gulped. Camp was over, so it shouldn't matter if he said it out loud. "I hid it underneath your mattress."

Zeke objected. "I thought I told you—"

Dillon interrupted. "That's where it is! I packed up all your stuff, but still couldn't find it anywhere." Dillon cleared his throat. "Actually, there's another reason I had to stay. I have something that belongs to you and I needed to make sure you got it. Because you not only saved Willie, but you

probably saved me from making some big mistakes. You may be blind, but you see things a lot more clearly than some of us with 20/20. Just because we can see doesn't mean we should be looking at anything and everything. So, this is for being a hero to Willie and to me."

A cord came down around Steven's head and the familiar weight of his medallion thumped against his chest.

"You've earned the right to wear it, whether or not you ever complete a triathlon." Dillon knelt, clamped his hand around the back of Steven's head and pulled him close. "Keep in touch, dude. And if you ever need a triathlon partner, let me know." Dillon let go and shuffled back.

Steven wiped his eyes while Zeke dismissed everyone with a prayer of healing for Willie and Steven and safe travel for anyone going home. After the 'Amen', Steven asked him about the fire.

Zeke drew a chair up next to Steven. "The Fire Marshall looked it over this morning. We think the light fixture in the clinic is to blame. Mrs. Hoang mentioned it should be replaced, but we didn't get to it soon enough."

"Does Willie get a brand new clinic?"

Zeke chuckled. "We'll work on that. Hopefully by next year, she'll be in a new clinic."

Zeke bid Steven and his mother goodbye again.

Brady, the other counselors, Mrs. Hoang and a few others came by to shake Steven's hand and thank him for rescuing Nurse Willie.

No Claire.

Had he hurt her so badly she hadn't wanted to stick around and say goodbye?

Steven stood and waited for his mother to finish talking with Janie. He sniffed and caught the scent of mint gum. "Claire?"

"Hi Steven." The voice was Claire's, but much more timid than her normal bubbly self. "I'm so sorry for what I said yesterday. I was wrong,

and I will never again accuse you of trying to prove something.”

Steven turned toward her. “No, you were right. And I resented it. But it’s over now.” He opened his arms to her. “Still friends?”

She rushed in, her arms encircling his waist and squeezing tight. “Always.”

Steven held her close. Her head fit nicely against his shoulder, her hair soft against his chin, dispelling the pain left from his injuries. “Mind if I call you once in a while to keep in touch?”

“You’d better, or I’ll never speak to you again.” She laughed at her silly threat.

That’s the sound I want to hear again and again and again.

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EPILOGUE

NURSE WILLIE RECOVERED FROM THE SMOKE INHALATION AND RETURNED TO Rustic Knoll to continue her recuperation. She helped design and plan the new clinic and was well enough the following summer to staff it alone. The brain cancer flared up a few times, but she enjoyed many more fishing days before eventually retiring from Rustic Knoll.

Zeke continued as camp director until he retired. He's in demand as a substitute preacher for local congregations, but he spends most of his time drawing pictures and telling stories for his grandchildren.

Janie and Roberto Rodriguez continued working at Rustic Knoll until Janie developed back problems that prevented her from standing as much as the job required. After their son-in-law was killed in a military action, they took over the care of their grandchildren while their daughter works.

Brady McCaul returned to camp every year until he graduated, then worked as a counselor for two summers. He majored in music and is a band director in a Chicago suburb where he lives with his wife who was also a counselor at Rustic Knoll.

Dillon Petroski received his doctor's approval to play soccer shortly before school started. It took him a few weeks to get back in shape, but he eventually moved into the starting position on the school's soccer team. He

now works as a salesman for an auto dealership and coaches his children's soccer teams.

Taylor Dixon is mentioned only briefly in this book, but he did some amateur car racing until he decided to open an automotive repair shop. Occasionally, he finds an old car that he restores in his free time. He still calls Roberto once in a while for advice and to check on him and Janie.

Marissa Dixon married her high school sweetheart right after graduation. Unfortunately, the marriage didn't last, but she went on to build a career as a television news reporter, earning a gutsy reputation for asking tough questions and investigating stories that posed some risk to her personal safety.

Steven and Claire continued a close relationship during their senior year of high school and beyond. After college graduation, Steven suggested they visit Rustic Knoll one more time to see Zeke, Janie, Roberto and Nurse Willie. While they were there, Steven proposed to Claire at the log where he first "kissed" her. They were married in Rustic Knoll's chapel with Zeke officiating.

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AFTERWORD

I'm honored that you chose to read The Rustic Knoll Bible Camp series and hope you've enjoyed it.

Would you mind leaving a review on the site where you purchased this ebook? Just a few words on what you liked or didn't like about the stories would be most appreciated.

If you'd like to know more about what I'm writing, please consider signing up for [my newsletter](#). You'll receive periodic updates about the writing life, new books, and special previews available only to subscribers.

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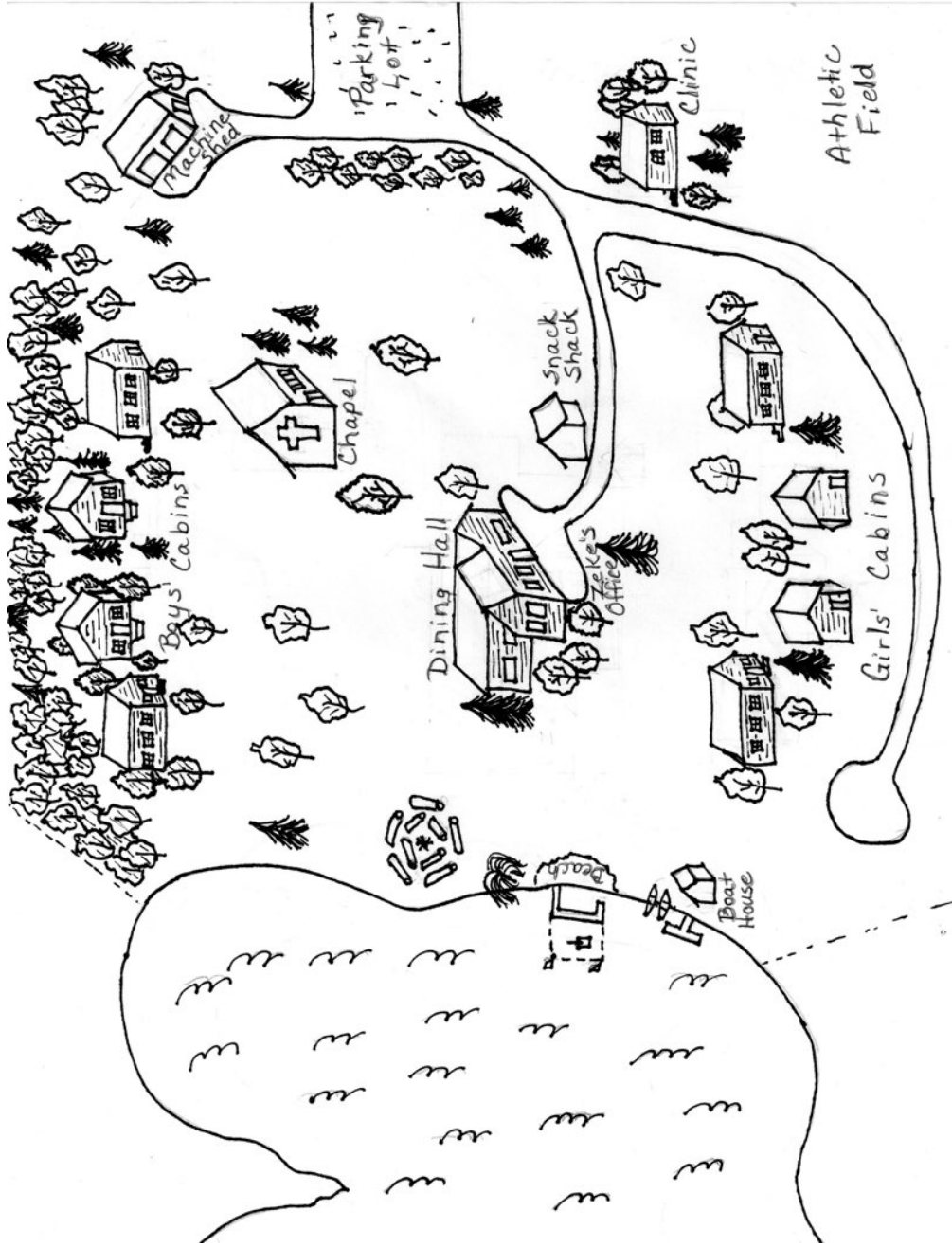
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Steven carried a load of guilt over what he'd done several years ago. How did he try to get rid of that guilt? Was he successful?
2. Steven hoped that completing a triathlon in honor of his dad would atone for his own moral failure. What does the word "atonement" mean? Are there any ways you've tried to atone for your sins?
3. What's the difference between false guilt and true guilt? What kind of guilt was Steven carrying? How can we know the difference?
4. Pornography can be addicting for boys *and* girls. One reason is the easy availability through the internet, movies, music, novels and sexting. Why is it dangerous to flirt with sexually explicit media? What are some possible consequences?
5. Even though Steven took measures to protect himself, the temptation to indulge in pornography returned with overwhelming strength. List some ways you can avoid becoming involved in pornography and other types of recurring sin.
6. Steven risked Dillon's friendship to keep him from getting involved in sexual sin. What are some practical ways we can encourage our friends toward purity?

7. What prompted Steven to continue reaching out to Nurse Willie even when she didn't seem to appreciate his efforts? Can you recall a time when your friendship with someone seemed unappreciated? What did you do about it?
8. Mrs. Hoang was rather abrupt and mean to the kids, but Steven "looked past" her outward actions to uncover a reason for her attitude. Think of someone who's been rude or unkind to you. List two or three reasons why they might act that way.
9. Eventually, Steven was able to show appreciation for Mrs. Hoang's abilities. Think of the person you identified in Question 8 and try to identify his or her strengths. How can you express appreciation for that person in spite of their attitude?
10. What mirrors are you using to evaluate your appearance or your character? Do they show you your true value or a warped image? If warped, what effect does that have on your confidence?
11. Psalm 139:13 describes how God knit or wove you together in your mother's womb. Zeke's friend, Sherry, explained how different types of thread or material and different colors are woven together to produce a variety of patterns. Pretend God used a gold thread for every positive attribute He wove into you. Identify five gold threads that make up who you are. If you have trouble, ask a friend or parent to help.
12. Sherry spoke of flaws that make the woven piece more valuable. The apostle Paul called his flaw a "thorn in the flesh" and asked God to remove it. Look up 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. How did God answer Paul's request? What was Paul's response?
13. Steven thought his blindness was a mistake, a flaw. Do you think his blindness affected his willingness to enter the clinic in search

of Nurse Willie? For example, might he have hesitated if he'd been able to see how bad the fire was? Why or why not?

14. Do you believe you are fearfully and wonderfully made? If not, study and memorize Psalm 139.

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RESOURCES

Can you remember an event or something someone said or did that seemed like no big deal at the time, only to discover later on that it really affected you? Maybe a teacher made a comment that motivated you to work hard and achieve your goals. Or maybe someone made fun of you, and you've tried to never put yourself in that position again.

Looking at pornography and other sexually oriented media may seem harmless at the time. Just like Dillon in this story, it all seems harmless at first. You're just looking and it's not hurting anyone. But those images stay in your mind. They pop up at odd times, and maybe make you curious to know how that would look or feel in real life. Pornography can have lasting consequences and impact. It has the power to destroy relationships and ruin lives.

There is a spiritual element to our sexuality, because sex is a gift from God, intended to be the deepest expression of love between a husband and wife. It symbolizes the all-consuming love God has for us, and the exclusive relationship He desires to have with His children. Treated with care and dignity, it can be a source of joy and fulfillment.

Pornography has nothing to do with care and dignity. It's similar to using your mother's best expensive china to play in the mud. Every time you watch sexually oriented scenes in a movie or television, on the internet

or your smartphone, or even reading books, you break down a little more of your resistance to it until you finally become desensitized and it all seems normal to you. You will lose respect for another person's body, forgetting that we are each a temple for the Lord's spirit. You'll give up your own purity and integrity, and your imagination will be taken over and dragged through the filthiest of sewers.

The Bible tells us to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23). King David vowed to put no vile or worthless thing in front of his eyes (Psalm 101:3)

If you already have trouble avoiding this temptation, don't let embarrassment keep you from seeking help. If you're not comfortable asking your parents for help, talk to a trusted pastor or counselor. Here are some other resources that might be of help.

1. [Overcomers Outreach](#)
2. [End a Pornography Addiction](#)
3. [Counseling for Porn Addiction](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary L. Hamilton grew up at a camp in southern Wisconsin much like the setting for her Rustic Knoll novels. Her experiences during twenty years of living at the camp, as well as people she knew there, inspired many of the events and situations in her novels.

When not writing, Mary enjoys reading, knitting and counted cross-stitch, being outdoors and spending time with her family. She and her husband make their home in Texas.

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