

GODS

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

WILL



MATTHEW JOHN ECHAN

“... for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”

2 CORINTHIANS 3:6

This book is a fictional dramatization based on a true story and real events, and was drawn from a variety of sources including the author's present recollections of experiences over time. For dramatic and narrative purposes, the book contains fictionalized scenes, composite and representative characters and dialogue, and time compression. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. The views and opinions expressed in the book are those of the characters only and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views and opinions held by individuals on which those characters are based.

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D E D I C A T I O N

To my moms, who taught me to sing in the dark.

A loud rattling noise woke me up. I pulled my seat upright to see what was going on. We were on some back-country dirt road, and rocks were kicking up against the floorboard. There was nothing but trees on either side, so thick I couldn't see ten yards in any direction. Not even up.

My moms looked like she was a hundred miles away, thinking about things that parents think about.

"Why in the world would anyone want to live out here?" I asked. "This is crazy."

She told me I'd met my godfather before, at a reunion or something when I first got adopted, but I don't remember meeting anybody who lived in Missouri. I feel like I woulda remembered that. And I definitely didn't know much about him. I didn't even know what a godfather was until my moms told me.

"He probably thinks we're crazy for living in the city," she said.

We hadn't been talking much since she told me I had to come with her to visit him. For one, I was still pissed she had sent me off to Big D's to kick off the summer. All my friends were playing ball and hitting up 38th Street, and I was on lockdown, all cause I told the principal I had no spiritual desire. But more than

anything, I was pissed I was missing the first week of summer basketball.

“Well, I hope he has a basketball hoop.”

“I’m sure he does, Sam. But if he doesn’t, I don’t want to hear you complaining, okay?”

It was always something. Pretty much anything I said or did was wrong, as far as she was concerned.

“I’m not complaining. Geez, I’m just asking.”

She didn’t say anything. Just sat there with her eyes fixed on the winding orange road, thinking about whatever she was thinking about, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel.

“What happened to the music?” I asked.

“I thought I’d enjoy some quiet time.”

“Do you care if I turn it back on?”

“Sam, I really don’t want to listen to garbage right now.”

She was pretty strict about what music she let us listen to. It was pretty much Christian or country. We used to be able to listen to U2, but after one of their albums, I forget which one, she changed her mind and said their music wasn’t Christian anymore. I can’t really get mad at her for calling my music garbage. She found a 2 Live Crew tape in my closet at the start of summer, and even I have to admit, they’re pretty dirty. Like any Christian mom, she about flipped out. And ever since, she thinks that’s all I listen to.

I just wanted to kill the silence.

“I won’t turn on rap or anything. What about country? I’m sure they got some good country out here.”

“Sam, I’d really prefer to just keep it down right now, okay?”

“Geez. Why are you in such a bad mood?”

She gave me the look. The one where, normally, she'd be saying, get in my bedroom for some swats. "I'm not in a bad mood, Sam."

"I'm just sayin, how much longer?"

"I really hope you can be respectful, Sam. He said it's about eight miles up the dirt road, so we should be there pretty soon."

I thought about pulling out my Walkman, but I didn't want to waste the batteries. I only brought a pack of four, and if they didn't have a basketball hoop, I was gonna need a whole lot more. I don't remember meeting my godfather at the reunion, but I do remember it was a bunch of blue hairs, and there's nothing more boring than sitting around watching old people dip veggies in ranch and listening to them talk about the medications they're on. I reclined my seat to try and catch a little more of the sleep I lost on the red-eye into St. Louis.

About half an hour later, my moms nudged my shoulder and woke me up. I was hoping maybe we had passed through the country and were back in the city, but we were just farther away from anything and anyone.

Right outside our window was a wooden sign that read "Office" in big yellow letters.

"An office? What's he need an office for?"

"I have no idea, Sam. Maybe for his work."

"What's he do?"

"I don't know, honey. Last I remember he was a farmer of something or other."

"Geez, this place is huge. Does he have a bunch of kids or what?"

"He does, but I believe they're all grown up. Remember, honey—"

"I know, Moms. Be on my best behavior. Geez. I know."

I hopped out of the car for a stretch and a better look around. Something was burning somewhere, but I couldn't spot the source of the smell. A big red building stood at the opposite end of the concrete road we were parked on, a baby blue tractor parked under its tin roof. Other than that, the three other buildings were stained clapboard, just like the office. It was a quiet little compound.

A small garden enclosed with timbers sat off to the right of our car. Beyond the tall husks of corn, I spotted a big grey backboard and a red rim.

"Yes! He has a hoop."

My moms was still sitting in the car, her hands on the wheel.

"Moms, you okay?"

"Yes, honey."

"Are you crying?"

She got out of the car and wiped a tear from under her glasses, then straightened her dress. "Oh, you know me. I cry at everything."

I didn't really know her to cry at all, actually. I'd seen her angry, but sad? Never. Not that she never got sad, I'd just never seen it before. Even when her husband just up and split, right after they adopted me, I never saw her cry. Just like I'd never seen her wear a dress.

"Should I grab our luggage?" I asked.

"Why don't we go say hi first?"

She came over and put her arm around me, rubbing circles on my lower back. "I love you, Sam, okay? I just want you to know that."

There was something familiar in the way she said it, almost like a goodbye or something, and I got this sense that things weren't what they seemed.

As we walked around the car toward the stone pathway leading to the front office, I noticed two boys out on a porch along the side of the building. They were standing on a deck locked in by a high razor-wire fence, shucking corn and watching us. Why the razor wire?

The bigger boy, wearing a pair of overalls, stuck his hand in the air and waved.

In the back of my mouth, I could taste the lie. She was making good on her promise to send me away, and that's why, out of six kids, I was the only one she brought. My knees buckled and my feet stopped moving.

"I'm not here to see my godfather, am I?"

She tried to explain something to me with her eyes, then she shook her head. "Honey, this is your new school."

Christians always lie like that, like God gives them permission to say anything they want to further the cause. Like they're Moses or something.

I threw her hand off my back. "You're really doing this?"

"Honey, I love you—"

"Don't lie to me. That's bullshit."

"Honey, I understand why you're upset, but I don't know what else to do. I love you too much to let you keep going down the road you're on."

"What about basketball?"

"What about it? They have basketball here."

"Yeah, but I'm not gonna make it anywhere playing there." I pointed to the hoop.

"Honey, it's only a year. You'll have plenty of chances to play when you get back home. You're only a freshman."

The porch door swung open, and a little old man with long sideburns stepped out and hopped across the porch, his blue

boots clicking against the wooden floorboards. A boy, a good head taller than him with bright orange hair, followed him down the steps toward us.

“Ye’ all found us,” the old man said.

“Yep. And on time, too.”

He shook my moms’ hand, then looked at me. “Sam, my name is Charles Ward. But everyone here calls me Papa.”

He put out his hand, but I didn’t shake it. He wasn’t intimidated in the slightest, but he could tell I was upset, and he didn’t push it.

“I reckon you understand this where you’ll be going to school this year?”

I shrugged.

“How bout we go on inside and get settled in a bit?”

I wasn’t sure what to do, but I felt like if I took one step closer, I’d never be able to take it back. I just stood there, looking around the property, swallowing fire in the back of my throat.

The old man put his hand on my arm. “This here is Graham,” he said. “You and him gonna walk right through that door and sit down and get acquainted while your mama and I discuss a few things.”

I didn’t shake Graham’s hand either.

“We can do this the easy way, or the hard way,” the old man said, squeezing a little tighter on my arm and raising his bushy white eyebrows.

I yanked my arm from his grasp, and Graham lunged forward, all clenched up.

“Sam. I’m a give you one more chance. It’s up to you. Easy way, or hard way? We ain’t going through it a third time.”

I wanted to take the hard way, but Graham looked like a pit bull, just waiting for the command, and I didn’t have the guts.

“You don’t need to put your hands on me. I can walk.”

Graham took the lead, and I followed him up the steps and through the front door, angry thoughts I’d never had before bouncing around in my head.

When we got inside, my moms wrapped her arms around me, and I knew it was the last hug I would be getting for a long time. I just stood there, my arms by my sides, unforgivably betrayed.

The old man opened the door behind me. “Ye’ all gonna be in here,” he said. “Graham, you just holler if you need any help.”

“Yes, sir.”

We walked into a small room with two chairs. Graham took the seat next to the end table and desk phone, and I sat down across from him. I was shaking, I was so nervous. I didn’t really feel like talking, but I needed answers.

“So, what’s the name of this place?”

“Mount Zion Baptist Boarding Academy.”

“Does it suck here?”

“It is what you make it.”

“Do I have to dress like that?” I pointed to his chocolate brown bell-bottom dress jeans and penniless penny-loafers.

“When you go to school you do. But when we go out to work, you don’t have to. You can wear jeans and a T-shirt.”

“Sounds like it fucking sucks.”

“You can’t say that here.”

“Sorry. Sounds like it fucking blows.”

He cautioned me with a stare.

“I don’t have freedom of speech?”

“Not here, you don’t.”

“Sweet.”

Graham continued to give me all the rules. No cussing. No saying words like “crap” or “fart.” It was “junk” or “poxe.” Just like my moms. No talking about the past, no singing worldly songs, and no talking to anybody on orientation, like me, which, at the time, was only one other kid Graham called T-Dogg. And they didn’t really play much sports, cause they spent most of their time working, and when they did get free time, most of the guys liked to lift weights or hack.

As he was talking, some girl in a cream dress with big flowers all over it came barreling through the door opposite the one we entered. When she saw us sitting there, she stopped dead in her tracks and backed out the way she came, her eyes glued to the floor.

“What’s her problem?” I asked.

“That’s another thing. No talking to the girls.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not. No staring either. You get busted if you get caught staring.”

“Like what?”

“Like sentences, maybe lose your sweets on Friday night. If you keep doing it, swats.”

I wanted to say, “That’s fucking stupid,” but I caught myself, and I just shook my head.

The little old man came barging back in. “Let’s wrap it up, boys. Sam, your mom would like to say goodbye before ye’ all head down to the dorm.”

I hopped up and practically ran through the door, ready to change her mind. She was standing at the door at the other end of the hall and started walking toward me, her shoulders folded in and her arms reached out for another hug.

“Moms, don’t do this. Please, I’ll be good. I promise.”

“Sam, let’s not make this more difficult for your mama than this already is,” the old man said.

“I love you, honey, and I believe this is where God wants you. And the best place you can be, no matter what, is in the center of God’s will.”

She took another step toward me, but I backed away. “Then just leave. Goodbye. That’s what you want. I don’t need another hug.”

I did want another hug, but I really wanted to change her mind, make her think a little more about what she was doing. I thought if I gave her the cold shoulder, she’d soften up and listen.

The old man wasn’t having any of it, though. He’d done this a million times. He positioned himself between my moms and me. “Graham, let’s go ahead and take Sam down to the dorm while Miss Schneider and I finish up.”

“Yes, sir. Do we need to grab his luggage or anything?”

“Nope. Brother Raymond’s down there with it, waiting for ye’all.”

“Yes, sir.

I heard my moms sniffing as I walked back out the front door, but I didn’t look back.

Brother Raymond and Graham went through everything. They even had me get naked to make sure I wasn't storing drugs up my wazoo. Didn't make no sense to me. The closest I'd ever been to drugs was when my brother, Jake, brought home some Swisher Sweets, and I gave him a hard time for even thinking about being so stupid. "Athletes don't smoke," I told him. "Look what happened to Isaiah Thomas's brother." I guess they did it with every new boy, but it seemed a little odd to me, cause I ain't never been naked in front of nobody, not even my moms. Course, I went along with it. And I didn't say much either, cause I was still hoping maybe if I kept my mouth shut for once, my moms would change her mind. Or maybe I'm just a wuss.

Graham handed me back my tighties and told me to sit on a footlocker next to a closet under the stairwell. The wall behind me was plywood, but most everything else was concrete. Wires hung down from the exposed ceiling joists, copper pipes wrapped around the cinder blocks. A basement. Quite a bit different from any school I'd ever been to.

I threw on my tighties and watched as Brother Raymond pulled everything out of my bag and spread it across the floor.

He dumped out my backpack and searched everything, saying something every once in a while to break the ice.

“So, I hear you like to play basketball.”

“Yeah. I did.”

“I may not look it,” he said, rubbing his belly, “but I get out there and play with the guys every now and again. Back in the day, on the right night, I could even dunk. Probably can’t touch the bottom of the net anymore.”

Only reason I said anything at all wasn’t cause I was in some mood to be talking. My mind was a mess of dead ends, and Graham already told me they didn’t have no team. Plus, I knew Brother Raymond didn’t have no game. He was short and fat, with glasses, and he lived in Missouri. Even if he was any good, it wasn’t anything to get excited about. I was only saying something cause I can’t keep my mouth shut, and I wanted him to know how pissed I was about the change. Other than that, the only person I wanted to talk to was my moms.

“Cat got your tongue, Sammy? Here, go ahead and throw these on.”

He handed me a pair of brand-new blue jeans and a plain yellow T-shirt from a bag my moms had packed. The jeans were stiff as cardboard.

“It’s Sam. Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Yes, sir,” Graham reminded me.

“Yes, sir. Can I put on my shorts? I hate jeans.”

“We don’t wear shorts here,” Graham answered. I swear he was practically salivating at the chance to bark orders at me.

“What about my wallet or my Walkman? Can I have those?”

“You can keep the Walkman, but you ain’t gonna need your wallet,” Brother Raymond answered.

“I had a picture in there.”

Jenna, my girlfriend back home, dug up a picture of her and I at Disneyland on eighth grade grad night and gave it to me at church the Sunday before I left in case I started to miss her. Skin tight white shirt and little cutoff jean shorts. It was the day I first touched her boobs, and she laughed at my “Eiffel Tower.”

“Might as well start erasin her out of your memory. Ain’t gonna do you no good thinking about her. And I’m willing to bet, she ain’t gonna be thinking about you.”

Graham got a kick out of that. If he wasn’t twice my size, I would’ve spit in his face.

“So, I’m just wondering, what good is a Walkman without any music?”

“We got sermons on cassette upstairs by Dawson’s bed,” Graham answered again.

“Sermons? Like Bible studies?”

“Like preaching. Good preaching, too .”

“Yeah, that’s all I need, more Bible study. Just like my moms to send me to a place like this. What about music? Is there anything I can listen to?”

“Hymns. You can ask your mom to send hymns, and they’ll let those in.”

“Hymns. I don’t listen to hymns. What about worship songs from my old church?”

“You can try, but if it has drums, they won’t allow it.”

“This is stupid. Can I go up and talk to my moms?”

“You already said goodbye to her.”

“Oh, so now I’m not allowed to talk to my own moms when I want? That’s my right.”

He looked over at Brother Raymond, waiting for him to tell him how to answer. Brother Raymond gave me a big Jesus smile. “You’ll be alright. Just takes a few days to get used to the change.”

“A few days? Fuck that.”

“Hey!” Graham yelled. “Watch your mouth. I told you, no cussing.”

“What the heck? Why can’t I just talk to my moms one more time, huh? This is a free country.”

“You can talk to her in three weeks on your phone call,” Brother Raymond said. Then he pointed to the pile of clothes I brought, and picked up where he left off. “No need for those. I’ll send those back with your tapes and some of this other stuff, like any shirts with print. No shirts with print.”

“I can’t keep that Stussy shirt? It’s not even mine. A friend let me borrow it.”

“Especially not that,” Graham said. “Stussy stands for Satan, if you look at it closely.”

“Stussy is a guy’s last name. His name is Shawn Stussy. A friend of mine used to go surfing with him.”

I looked at Brother Raymond, thinking that would change his mind, but he wasn’t even listening. He held up a sweatshirt I won at a basketball tournament and was reading what it said on the back: “Somewhere someone is practicing, and when you meet him in head to head competition, he’ll beat you.”

“This is a cool sweatshirt,” he said. “I’m only letting you keep it, cause you gonna need it for winter, but other than that, you wear blue jeans and a yellow shirt when we go outside to work, and you wear dress jeans and a dress shirt to school. These other shirts are for when you get off orientation.”

“Yes, sir,” Graham reminded me.

“Yes, sir.”

The more I heard, the more I wanted to stand up and fight, but I ain’t no Bruce Lee or nothing. It’s not like I was gonna take them both. All I could do was sit there, waiting, hoping my

moms would have a change of heart, nervously asking questions to get a sense of how bad it was gonna be if she didn't.

"How long does orientation last?"

"Until you can be trusted to do the right thing," Graham said, all convinced there was nothing good about me. "Most guys get off around three months."

I slammed my hand on the footlocker. It was the only thing I wasn't afraid to hit.

"Sam, relax, man." Brother Raymond walked over and put his hand on my shoulder. "I know this is a lot, and it's not gonna be easy for the first few days, but you're gonna make it, I promise. You might think we're a bunch a whackos right now, but we ain't. You know, California's actually the land of fruits and nuts."

He waited for me to laugh, but I didn't.

"We're just here to help you get your life on the right path is all," he added.

That's when it began to settle in, how stuck I was. How my moms had tricked me into going with her.

"I was on the right path. I don't care what my moms says. And you know what? I don't care what she does. She can make me stay here forever, for all I care, but I'll never be a Christian. Freakin liar."

"You can't say that word, Sam," Graham said.

"What can I say? Huh? How about that?"

"Most of us say stinkin when we get upset."

"Fine. Even better. She's a stinkin liar."

"Your mom cares about you, Sam," Brother Raymond said. "She doesn't want you throwing your life away."

"I wasn't. She just went all crazy, cause I told her I don't want to be a Christian or go to stupid Calvary. I don't deserve to be here."

“Sam, now I don’t know a whole lot. Mosta the guys’ll tell you that, but I know one thing for sure. God’s gotta purpose for your life. He chose you to be here. Now, what do you say we get that haircut out of the way?”

My hair wasn’t hippie long, but it was long enough that Brother Raymond didn’t want to wait for Brother Stan to get back from vacation, so he decided to cut it himself.

Graham slid an old torn up barber chair from the mudroom into the sink room. The vinyl was all cracked, and underneath the cracks, orange foam was peeling back from the wood.

“Hop up here, Sam,” Brother Raymond said. “I’m just gonna trim up some of those locks.”

It was probably the worst haircut I’ve ever had. Brother Raymond had no idea what he was doing. Every time he cut one part, it was all uneven, so he had to cut another part, and it kept getting shorter and shorter. It might have even been worse than getting naked. I’m serious. I felt like Samson, all my strength falling to the floor, and I couldn’t do nothing about it. I just stared into the mirror, watching Graham fold my clothes on a dresser against the back wall. It was either that or start crying, and no way was I gonna cry.

“Dress clothes go on the hanger facing the kitchen,” Graham said, pointing toward the main office, “which is that way. And for anything on the shelves, even socks and underwear, it’s seams out. Got it? Seams out. Like this.”

You should have seen it. Once Brother Raymond got done plastering a part down the side, I had a buzz with a comb over. I looked stinkin retarded.

All the guys came running upstairs after school. Graham was giving me the rundown on how to make my bunk when I heard a voice downstairs yell, “The new boy’s upstairs with Graham,” followed by an army of footsteps rushing up the stairwell.

All these kids with zit covered faces and neat parts circled around me. I was a tiny goldfish dropped in a bowl, everyone mesmerized by something new and different. I looked around, trying to work out how each of them ended up there and what in the world they could be all excited about. Guess I was just as mesmerized by them. The guys were nice enough though. They shook my hand and gave me their names, told me what state they were from.

Whitey was the first guy who introduced himself. He wasn’t albino, but he was close. Kinda goofy looking with long skinny arms, unusually white hair, with this alfalfa cowlick bouncing around on the back of his head.

“Name’s Dom,” he said, “but you can call me Whitey. All the guys call me Whitey.”

As I shook his hand, this little kid noticed I was wearing Graham’s boots. “Dude, no way. Graham let you borrow those? He never lets me.”

“They don’t fit you, Timmy,” Whitey clarified.

“Who cares? I’ll still wear em. Graham’s a lame brain. I saw you had some fresh pumps downstairs. You play basketball?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“We play every once in a while, whenever we get free time. Graham’s probably the best basketball player we got outta all the guys, so he’s the perfect guide for you. I think Brother Ray’s the only one to ever beat him.”

“Who’s Brother Ray?”

“Oh, Brother Raymond. We call him Brother Ray, cause he’s like a ray a sunshine.”

“Uh, nope,” Whitey said. “If I recall, Holland whooped up on Graham a few times.”

Whitey sounded like a bank of information.

“Yeah, Holland beat me a few times,” Graham answered. “But we played best out of three the day he left, and I won two in a row, so I think he just got lucky.”

“I’m putting my money on the new kid,” Timmy said. “No offense, Graham, but he’s got pumps. I’m betting he’s pretty good.”

“Yeah, too bad we aren’t allowed to bet,” Graham scoffed.

The guys were all waiting for my response, but like I said, basketball was over, and I wasn’t in the mood. It was the last thing I wanted to think about. Then, outta nowhere, a loud twangy voice broke the silence.

“Sam, I’m Chris.”

I turned around to shake his hand and saw he was wearing a shiny belt buckle the size of a dinner plate.

“Sam,” I said.

He shook my hand like he was tugging a dead limb off a tree trunk, whipping it all around and squeezing it as hard as he could. Like that’s all it took to be a man. I hate when guys do that.

“Sam, this here my student, T-Dogg,” Chris said. “You can’t talk to him, so don’t say nothing. Just wanted you to know who he is.”

T-Dogg was almost a head taller than Chris, but they probably weighed about the same. He was so skinny. I could tell he was just as pissed as I was about being there, the way his eyebrows were all pressed together. He gave me a nod.

“That’s communicatin, Tyler,” Chris snapped. “Whad I tell you bout communicatin?” His accent was thick, redneck, and proud.

“You need to relax, bro. That ain’t communicatin. I didn’t say a word.”

“It’s communicatin you acknowledgin his existence. Wanna go check with Brother Ray?”

“Chris, you’re trippin, bro. You introduced me. I just nodded. Next time, don’t introduce me.”

Chris looked like he was about to scrap about it, but Brother Ray walked upstairs yelling at some kid I hadn’t met for not having his work boots on. “Whatta you been doing the last fifteen minutes? Don’t make me put you back on orientation.”

“Haha, look at the new boy’s face,” Whitey said. “He’s looking at Brother Ray like, what? Back on orientation.”

I swear it was the funniest thing they’d seen all year. A pack of hyenas or something, busting up. But whatever. We followed Brother Ray out to the porch, and Graham kept explaining the routine.

“During summer, we only go to school a half day, and after lunch, we work outside. Mostly on the new girls’ dorm, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we get assigned to mowing the lawn in front of the office. It’s pretty long, and I’m usually the one who does all the mowing around here.”

From the porch, I could just see over the top of the garden. I noticed our rental car was gone.

“Ye’all, this Sam Snyder, from California. Where bouts in California you say you from, Sam?”

Graham elbowed me and nodded.

“Sir?” I asked.

“Where bouts in California you from?”

“Orange County.”

“That’s right. I knew it was a fruit.”

The guys gotta kick outta that. I was still thinking about my moms. She had really done it.

“Those a you can talk to Sam, I want you to help him get settled in. Remember how tough it was when ye’all first came in. It ain’t easy getting sent away, but you guys can help him see he’s gonna make it.”

“Yes, sir,” the boys answered.

“Now, we got plenty a work to do today. Nick, Dawson, why don’t ye’all take half the boys with you to the new dorm. We got some plywood needs to be moved into the dorm just in case we get some rain.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nick was a giant compared to everyone else, him and Dawson both, actually. But Nick had at least twenty pounds on him, most of which was in his traps. No wonder they were in charge. Nick picked out a few of the guys and led them down the porch stairs.

“Graham,” Brother Ray continued, “why don’t you and your student head up to the burn pit and work on clearing out some of the ash.”

“Yes, sir. Where do you want me to dump the ash?”

“On the compost. It’s all gonna get covered up anyway.”

Of course, Graham and I got assigned to the worst job possible on my first day. Welcome to Mount Zion. You can start by digging your own grave.

We walked down to the tractor shed, one of the red buildings behind the bus barn, where the baby blue tractor was parked over a service well, to grab some wheelbarrows and shovels, and I’m not kidding, in the time it took us to get out tools and push

them up to the pit, the sky went from bright blue to a sheet of black. It was still sticky hot, like we were walking through warm honey, but it looked like the end of the world. I'd never seen anything like it back in California.

"Alright, start shoveling," Graham said, stabbing the ash with his shovel.

I ain't one to just make a scene and start fighting, but like I said, I ain't one to just sit there and be silent neither. One thing I do when I'm upset, I say something. I can run my mouth till the cows come home. I guess after taking it in for a few hours, it was sticking that shovel into that pile of ash that brought my true colors shining through.

"Looks like God's about to start crying," I said. "I bet he's sad my moms sent me here."

"Shut up and get to work."

"So, every other teenager in the world gets to date girls, play sports, and have fun after school, but not me. No way, I was soooo bad."

"I said, shut up." He threw his shovel to the ground. "Do you want me to shut your mouth for you?"

I didn't say nothing, but I knew we were headed for a collision.

A few shovelfuls, and I was spent. There was a lake in my butt, my quads were raw from rubbing against my new cardboard blues, and my heels were sore from walking in those boots. I wasn't dripping sweat, but my shirt soaked through pretty fast, and it reeked this foul mildew smell, like steamed broccoli. I had to smell it twice, cause I couldn't believe it was my own stench. I wasn't hungry or nothing, but I hadn't eaten much all day, and I was a little shaky. With all the changes, the never-ending feed of bad news, and the jet lag, I didn't have much left in the tank. I just wanted the day to be over. But anytime I stopped for even a

second, Graham was right there to get all over my case about it. I swear it was like he had eyes in the back of his head.

“Keep working.”

For a minute there I thought about hitting him over the head with the shovel, but like I told you, I ain't like that. The only fight I'd ever been in was when this kid cut in front of me in line in first grade and called me a little girl, and I kicked him in the nuts. There was one other time when this other kid punched me in the face when he heard me say the girl he liked was chunky, but he broke his hand punching me, so I didn't really need to fight back. He just kinda stumbled, grunting in pain for a second, and then ran off holding his hand in front of his face. I was busting up, cause it didn't even hurt. So, I don't really count that. I mean, I ain't gonna back down if it comes to it, but I ain't one to go after someone for no reason, if you know what I mean. And even though Graham kept barking orders at me, and he kinda walked like a jalopy, bouncing up real high on his toes and swinging his long arms, I wasn't really mad at him. I mean, he had to go through it all too. I wasn't his friend or nothing, though, I'm just saying. He just annoyed me is all, and I thought about hitting him a few times.

We didn't get all the ash cleared, but we had finished most of it when little Timmy ran up and told us Brother Ray said we could have free time. “The guys are all playing basketball,” he said.

Graham dumped what he had scooped into his wheelbarrow back into the pit, threw his shovel in, and just about broke into a full on sprint. “Let's go,” he said.

I don't know. There's just something about hoops. Makes me forget about everything. Suddenly, I had all kinds of energy. “Can I grab my pumps?”

“Sure you wanna ruin those on the dirt?” Graham yelled over his shoulder. “I ain’t changing.”

Don’t ask me why, but when they laid the concrete, they didn’t lay any for the basketball court. Not a priority I guess. There was a long paved driveway connecting the front office with our dorm and our dorm to the staff houses, but they went right around the hoop.

The way Graham said it, I knew he was saying it shouldn’t matter what shoes I was wearing, not if I was any good anyway.

“Fine. I don’t need my pumps.”

When we got back to the tractor shed, I noticed all the guys were gathered close to the court. A few of them were sitting on the timbers by the stove. Behind the hoop, a few kids were hacking. Nick, the big kid I told you about, was on the other side of the court, sitting on the bottom of the steps by himself, reading from a pocket New Testament. A bunch of kids were hanging out on the porch, looking down at us. It was like a prison yard, except we weren’t allowed to cuss, and we had to wear tight blue jeans instead of jumpsuits.

T-Dogg and Chris were playing two on two against Brother Ray and some other kid with the worst acne I’d ever seen, this kid, Cagey. He was one of the few kids I hadn’t met upstairs. He had purple craters all over his cheeks, and any time he shot the ball, the guys yelled, “San Jo, punks.” He wasn’t the prettiest kid there, but he was pretty yoked up.

T-Dogg grabbed a rebound and walked a country mile before clanging a shot off the backboard. He was taller than everyone by half a foot, but basketball wasn’t his thing. I could tell. His thing was drugs.

Brother Ray surprised me big time. You’d never guess by looking at him that he was that quick, but he still had some

spring. He was even pulling off crossovers. Neither Chris nor Tyler could stop him. He'd back them both under the basket and spin the ball off the backboard. One play, he passed it to the kid with the purple craters, and Chris practically ran him over.

"Dew, why you gotta be hackin like that?"

"Shut up, Cagey!" Chris yelled. "Quit being a sissy."

"I'm serious, dew. Quit foolin round, or I'm gonna mess you up."

"When does the kicking start?" somebody up on the porch yelled.

"Is he saying, dew?" I asked Graham.

"Yeah, a few guys say 'dew' instead of 'dude.'"

"Nobody's gonna mess nobody up," Brother Ray said. "Play ball, Cagey."

It was raining by the time Graham and I got up. It wasn't too bad, and the ball still bounced pretty good, but every time I tried a crossover, I did the splits. I was sliding all over the place in Graham's boots, I couldn't push off for nothing. But I wasn't letting up though. Not in my first game.

Cagey guarded me at first. I was so amped up, ready to show the guys who I was, that I was a little out of control, slipping and sliding, dribbling the ball off my foot, missing layups. But once I crossed Cagey up and ducked under Brother Ray for a reverse, the guys were impressed, and I started heating up.

"Dew," Cagey said, "like Tim Hardaway or sumpin."

Brother Ray finally switched with Cagey after I kept picking his pocket. I was driving and dishing the ball off to Graham for layups. Graham wasn't bad. He had a weird looking jumper, like Cartwright or something, but he was putting them in.

Brother Ray crossed me up one time pretty good and tapped the fiberglass backboard on a layup. Guy could get up, even with

the tire around his waist. He grabbed his belly with both hands. "Still got it, boys," he said. "Still got it."

In the heat of the moment, I forgot where I was and accidentally said, "Damn," giving him props. Graham was on me like color on crayons and jumped all up in my face about it. He didn't have to say much. He just gave me a look like if I said it again, he was gonna clean my clock. I was feeling so good, I almost said it again just to tempt him.

"My bad," I said.

Brother Ray stood at the pole, knocking on it and holding his ear in the air. "Hear that?" he asked. "You guys hear that?"

Everyone waited for his answer.

"School's in session."

"Nice move," I said. "Bet you can't do it again."

Graham wanted to keep playing after we beat Brother Ray and Cagey, but the rest of the guys went inside to get out of the rain, so he challenged me to a little one on one. As soon as I agreed, little Timmy ran over and opened the door to the dorm. "Graham and the new boy are playing!" he shouted, and the guys came running back out.

I went up on him 4-0 pretty quick. I was too fast for him, and once I got warm, I wasn't missing. Then Graham started getting all pissy about it once guys were cheering me on, yelling, "New boy! New boy!", and he started playing like a monkey, hacking the heck out of me, lowering his shoulder into my face whenever he drove to the basket and just pushing his way around the court. He tied the score, then went up on me and was all cocky about it. He took the ball at the top of the key and waited for me to come check him. When I got close enough, he lowered his head and whispered, "Hardaway this," and plowed right over me.

Losing wasn't an option on my first day with everyone watching. I bounced up, boots and all, and ran in and stole the rebound. Then I dribbled to the top of the key and waited for him to get close.

"Million dollar move, two cent shot," I said.

"Yeah, what's the score, punk?"

"I'm going right, okay?"

I took a jab, and he bit on it.

"Now I'm going left."

I jabbed left. He bit on it again. He was getting pissed. He wasn't about to be embarrassed on his home court by some cocky little California kid wearing his boots. He relaxed his stance for a second, and I bounced the ball off his head, which is almost like pantsing a dude, and blew by him for an easy reverse. I carried the ball back up to the top of the key, and when he checked the ball back to me, I waited for him to come guard me.

"Get up here. You can't give me that kinda room."

"You can't hit that."

"I'm in range anywhere on the court."

I didn't hesitate, rising up for the shot.

Graham didn't hesitate either. He lowered his shoulder as the ball left my hands and ran right through me, falling on top of me. I'd had enough.

"Fuck you, bitch," I whispered as I got back to my feet.

Before I even finished my sentence, he had me on my back, grabbed my head, and started pounding my face to hell. Going completely apeshit. He hit me five or six times in what felt like less than a second, and he'd probably still be hitting me if it wasn't for T-Dogg. He came flying in and tackled Graham off me.

"Bro, what's your problem?" he yelled.

“I told him to quit cussing.”

“More like you were getting whooped, bro. Stinkin punk. Pick on somebody your own size. Somebody go grab some ice and water.”

“Quit communicatin!” Chris yelled.

“Shut up, bro. He needs some stinkin ice and water. I don’t see anybody else doing nothing. You guys are a bunch of stinkin punks.”

I didn’t know what hit me. It took me off guard, cause at Calvary, my old high school, guys never really went to blows. Even when two guys got real pissed, they just pushed each other around a little until somebody came and broke it up. Last thing I expected was Graham to start swinging, but he snapped, and before I knew it, there was blood dripping all over my shirt. Both my eyes swelled up, and the guys hovered over me like blurry trees. Brother Ray came running outside when he heard all the yelling.

“What’s going on?”

“Sam kept cussing, sir,” Graham said.

“Get inside, Graham.”

My nose was throbbing, but it didn’t hurt as much as my pride. Not exactly the first impression you wanna make at a new school full of bloodhounds. I was two inches tall. Brother Ray and Tyler helped me to my feet, then Brother Ray walked me over to the spigot to clean up. Blood rinsed over the rocks, splashing up on the boots, and as I watched it wash away, I knew, no way I was making it outta Mount Zion.

Graham was gone two days after he hit me. We woke up Thursday morning, and his bunk was empty. Just a sunken mattress with stains all over it. I didn't understand why he was allowed to just leave. It was like he got rewarded for knocking some sense into me or something.

"Graham's gone," everybody whispered after roll out.

Brother Ray walked over to my bunk, holding his towel around his waist. He didn't take showers with us. Unless something came up, he took his showers in the morning before roll out. This kid, Jude, who slept downstairs in the sink room to make sure nobody tried to run at night, was strutting behind him, smiling.

"Sam, you gonna be on orientation with Jude now," Brother Ray said.

Jude had these little lugnut ears that stuck out like a yard off his head. He leaned his elbow against my bed, and gave a nod. He wasn't too much bigger than I was, but you could tell he'd been in a few scraps. Probably over kids making fun of his ears.

I nodded back.

"Yes, sir. What happened to Graham?"

“His year was up, and what I been told, he told his mama he wanted to go into the Air Force. That’s all I know, Sam.”

I was kinda glad Graham was gone. It was pretty crazy after he jacked me up. They split us up and put me on orientation with Nick for a while, but it was still weird walking around with all that unfinished business. I felt like I needed to get him back, like all the guys thought I was a pussy for not doing nothing. I tried telling myself, in a fair fight, I had a chance, but I was still pretty scared he’d mess me up again. He was like a black cloud following me wherever I went, a storm lurking around every corner.

Jude was cool. He was into motorcycles and old cars, which wasn’t really my thing, but he was way better than Graham. For one, he didn’t make me sing to him while he was on the crapper like Graham did. I swear, I almost pissed on Graham’s shoes the first time he told me to sing. Jude was the opposite. He was way laid back, talked a lot, and I’m guessing he knew I wasn’t gonna run away. Either that or he didn’t care.

The only thing that really bothered me about Jude was when he told me he was the reason my moms knew about Mount Zion in the first place. We were downstairs in the locker room, and he was showing me how to spit-polish my penny loafers, and he told me his mom was in a prayer group with my moms back home.

I looked up at him. “Really, you went to Calvary? I never saw you.”

“Yep. I know your older brother, Gabe. I didn’t know him very well, but yeah, how do you think your mom found out about this place?”

“Why didn’t you tell your mom the truth?”

“What do you mean?”

“That this place ain’t cool. The Bible doesn’t teach this crap.”

“Can’t say crap. Say junk.”

“What difference does it make? Geez. Fine. The Bible doesn’t teach this *junk*. The Bible teaches love. Grace. Taking care of the orphans. You went to Calvary—”

“I did tell my mom this place wasn’t cool. For the first few weeks.”

“So, she’s the crazy one? Telling other people to send their kids?”

“No. Then I got saved.”

“You mean brainwashed?”

He laughed. “I was on my way to hell. If I didn’t come here, I’d probably be dead right now, the things I was doing. This place saved my life.”

“Yeah, well, it’s ruining mine. I just don’t know why I don’t get a choice. I should be running point for the varsity team.”

“I know exactly how you feel, man. I wasn’t too happy when I first got here either. All I can tell you is your mom is just trying to help you, and whether you like this place or not, you gotta try to find something good in it.”

I should have guessed he was from Calvary High. Everyone there named their kid after someone in the Bible. Jude. The only name more obvious than that was Moses. He was right though. I needed something positive to help me press through.

The next few days were rough cause I couldn’t get much sleep. I could hardly breathe through my nose, and my throat kept drying out. But what was wearing me down the most was I couldn’t stop thinking about home. Guys told me it wasn’t helpful to count days or think about home too much cause it made time drag, but I couldn’t help it. Especially at night. There was a small window at my bunk, and I just laid there, staring out at

the dim yellow light up at Brother Mike and Mrs. Sarah's house. They were local folks from the closest town, Piedmont, who felt called to join the ministry shortly after Brother Ray moved it from Mississippi. Their house was nothing fancy, just a small, orange-paneled single bedroom. Their light wasn't too bright, but it was the only light for miles, and for some reason when I stared into that thing, it would send me off into some dream about home. Getting off the airplane back home at John Wayne Airport. Jenna. My brother. Leading our team to the championship. Freedom. I could see everyone, all my family, my friends, hiding behind the door at our house and yelling "Surprise!" as I walked through the door. I knew it wasn't helping any, but the light was irresistible. Then I'd wake up exhausted, several times a night, scrambling to figure out where I was, and if there was any truth to my dream. But nope. Just a bunch of strange faces dimly lit by the moon, in some cabin 2,000 miles away from my room. The changes were slowly scraping away at me.

On Saturday night, it all finally caught up with me. After push-mowing the entire field in front of the office in the morning and unloading bales of hay down in the barn in the afternoon, and my mind constantly pedaling a bicycle with no chain, my body just gave up. As soon as I hit my mattress, my lights went out. No worry and no dreaming out at my lighthouse, just some much needed sleep. I was so out of it, Jude had to practically drag me out of bed on Sunday morning. I didn't hear Brother Ray dragging his heavy feet up the stairs, I didn't hear his booming "roll out," and I didn't hear the low hum the lights gave when they flickered on.

"Dude, your face is about to be covered in water," Jude said, shaking me. "I'd get up if I were you."

At first I jumped up, afraid I'd slept in cause it was light outside my window. It was dark the first few mornings.

But at Mount Zion, Sunday was literally a day of rest, and it began with an extra hour of sleep. I took every minute of it. I'm not gonna say I was feeling brand new or nothing, but I woke up with the feeling I was on the other side of something, that's for sure. And I hoped it was the worst.

Jude laughed. "What, you think the Rapture happened?"

Brother Ray made a round through all the bunks, cracking jokes with the guys. He straight up lifted Tyler out of his bed and put him on the floor. They seemed pretty tight.

"There you are, your majesty."

Brother Ray waddled up to the front of the room and sat down on the hearth as we counted off. "Ye'all in for a treat today," he said.

Guys cheered for a break in the routine.

"Victory?" guys asked. "We going to Victory?" somebody yelled from the back. Chris yelled, "Tell me we're going to Victory."

I knew his voice.

"Papa just told me we're going to Victory this morning," Brother Ray answered.

Tyler and I were the only ones not shouting.

"We'll be leaving right after breakfast," he continued, turning to look at the clock that hung in the corner above the phone. "That gives ye'all thirty minutes to get all pretty. Can ye'all do that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you in your suits and up at that gate at seven thirty sharp. You ain't there, I'm eating your breakfast."

"Yes, sir!" the guys shouted.

It was a madhouse downstairs. There were only four sinks for twenty-four guys. Two small mirrors hung on either side of a conduit on the cinder block wall above the sinks, so pretty much everyone was crammed in the sink room, hustling for a sink or a piece of the mirror to pretty up their face. Shaving, brushing their teeth, combing parts in their hair, popping zits in the corner, and wiping pus on the wall. It was a kennel of half-trained stray dogs scrambling for a tit.

Jude and I got up to the sinks, and I leaned over the counter to get a closer look at my face. Most of the swelling was gone, but I still had deep purple swoosh marks under my eyes, and my nose was all stinkin crooked.

“Don’t look too bad,” Jude said.

“Except my nose is all jacked up. Look.”

“Who cares? Makes you look tough. Chicks dig tough guys.”

Maybe I woulda felt tough if I’d done something about it, but all I did was get my butt kicked. That’s not the guy girls want. I rinsed the sleep from my eyes and brushed my teeth.

“If I were you, I’d start washing my face,” Jude said, “or you’ll start breaking out pretty bad.”

Last thing I needed to deal with was to look like Cagey, or even Sutter. He had pretty bad acne too.

“Can I go get my soap?”

“Just use mine. And don’t forget to part your hair.”

“That’s gross, man.”

“It’s soap. It’s not like it’s dirty. It’s either that or nothing.”

I still wasn’t comfortable with it, but I lathered up anyway.

Whitey set up an ironing board next to the outlet by the stairwell and offered to iron shirts in exchange for PBJs on Friday night. Rex, a funny Puerto Rican kid who was trying to

lose weight, handed him a blue oxford, squished his stomach together to make a mouth, and made it start talking.

“Don’t take my PBJ, please.”

The mood was unusually light thanks to the news about Victory. Guys were telling jokes, ripping on each other, humming their favorite hymns, you know, just relaxed. Except T-Dogg, of course. He looked like he had words pushing on the back of his lips, dying to come out. He pulled a comb from his pocket, dipped it in Jude’s sink to get it wet, then began working a part down the side of his head. When he noticed I was watching him, he nodded at me, and began speaking to everyone in the room.

“Anyone else ever think it stinks we gotta share four sinks?”

I covered my face in a towel to hide my smile cause I didn’t want anyone thinking I was communicating.

“Quit complainin, man,” Chris said. “Even when we get to go to Victory, you still gotta be complainin. Man.”

“I ain’t gonna quit complainin, bro. I don’t care if we go to Victory or not. Brother Parker’s a moron. Course you’d get all excited to go see some guy who just likes to yell at everyone that they’re going to hell.”

“Sounds like someone’s gettin schooled over there, dew,” Combos, the craziest fat kid you’ve ever met, said as he came around the corner from the commodes.

“Ye’all don’t like it, cause he preaching the truth,” Chris argued.

“Yeah right, bro. I’ll tell you the truth. Truth is, my mom’s paying \$1,500 a month for me to be here. I shouldn’t have to share a sink with 5 stinkin guys, and be forced-“

“We get it, Tyler. You don’t like it here.”

Chris got up in his face, his fists clenched. “Keep it to yourself. I’m tired of it. Just cause you have a bad phonecall don’t mean you gotta go around here cryin bout everythin. Some of us have enough sense to be grateful the Lord’d pull us out the world and give us a second chance.”

“Looks like you’re the one getting mad at the truth.”

Whitey set down his iron and came to the rescue. “Guys, guys. Come on. Take a day off. You have the rest of your life to be tough guys.”

“I’m serious, Tyler.”

“I am too, bro.”

They stood there staring at each other until Whitey pulled them apart and patted them both on the back. “Relax guys. Relax.”

That’s the thing about Mount Zion. It could be all peachy one minute, but deep down, everyone was always one wrong word away from starting World War 3. Always one tick away from an explosion. I guess the mood was never really light. Even Jude and Cagey almost got into it in the locker room.

Cagey had the locker right next to the doorway, two down from mine, and when Jude and I walked in, I noticed him wiping deodorant over his entire body. Shoulders, arms, chest, stomach, everywhere.

“What in the world are you doing, dude?” I asked.

Jude answered for him. “Cagey’s a germaphobe.”

“Dew, shut up. I like to be clean. You gotta problem wit dat? Beat your smelly butt.”

“That’s why you take showers, Cagey.”

“Whatever. Maybe if I coulda taken a shower in the morning, I wouldn’t need to. I can’t help it’s so nasty out here.”

Jude looked at me. “You really want to piss Cagey off? Hide his deodorant.”

“Dew, shut up,” Cagey snapped.

“When does the kicking start?”

“So what, Jude? I don’t see you doing nothing.”

Jude looked at me. “Did Graham tell you Cagey talks in his sleep?”

“Who cares, dew?”

“And when he first came in, he fell off his bunk and was wrestling around with his pillow. We were all, like, what the heck is going on? And Cagey’s rolling around on the floor, yelling, ‘San Jo, punks. Two on one. No fair, no fair. When does the kicking start?’ He says he was having a dream about when he got jumped back home. Sure. Cagey the vato for life.”

“Whatever, Jude. Like you know what’s up, dew. At least I ain’t all talk.”

“Cagey, I’ve boxed you, like, ten times.”

“I don’t care. I ain’t afraid of you, dew. We can make it eleven any time.”

“You need to take a joke, man. Chill out.”

Jude pulled a suit from his locker and held it up to see if it might fit me. “Here, try this on.”

“Yeah, now you one of us, boy,” Cagey said.

It was at least two sizes too big, and it felt like burlap. It was heavy wool with oversized faded gold buttons. The pants were so long they practically covered my loafers.

“It’s way too big.”

“You can keep it.”

“Thanks.”

“What? You gotta have a suit. Trust me, you’ll grow into it.”

“Do I have to wear this? I look like a dweeb.”

“Yep. We all wear suits to Victory. You don’t like that one, then tell your mom you need a suit. But today, you gotta wear a suit, and that’s the only one I got. I already asked around.”

“Cause it’s a sin for me to just wear a T-shirt and a pair of jeans, right? So stupid.”

“That’s right, Sammy. And you know where sinners go. Just put it on, geez. You whine more than my little brother, and he’s seven.”

“It’s Sam, dude. My name is stinkin Sam.”

“Stinkin Sam, huh? Okay, Stinkin Sam. Dude, you need to lighten up too. Geez, everyone just needs to lighten up. Be happy. We’re going to Victory. Geez.”

“No. I need a suit is what I need.”

I heard a few chuckles down at the other end of the locker hall. I looked down, and T-Dogg was smiling. We didn’t need to talk to communicate.

Brother Ray pulled the old yellow bus up in front of the dorm, and we loaded up for my first trip off the property. I had slept most of the drive in with my moms, so I wasn’t sure what was out beyond our little dirt road. I was hoping for some civilization, some signs of life, but it was just more trees. They had us tucked away where nobody could see what was going on. There were tiny white churches every few miles, and every once in a while, I saw a trailer or an old clapboard barn or house hiding out in the woods, but not much else.

It took us about an hour to get to Victory. Of all the churches we passed, it was the biggest and the nicest. Unlike most of the other churches right alongside the highway, Victory was in a half mile or so from the road, a little city on a hill, with red brick

walls, rolling lawns, and a white steeple piercing the wide open sky. God's houses are always so much nicer than ours.

We chugged up and parked behind the girls' bus. The staff hurried us out to have us form a wall from the girls' bus to the door, just in case one of them decided to make a run for it. I wasn't sure why they were always on such a tight watch, and we weren't. They had a huge razor wire fence around their dorms, and rarely went outside, and when they were lucky enough to get outside, we were always somewhere close, ready to track them down. All we had was Jude sleeping downstairs at night, securing the exit. Only reason I could think of was that girls are crazier than boys. I mean, all the moms I ever had were pretty crazy. Maybe all girls were like my birthmom when they got pushed into a corner, capable of doing the unthinkable.

"Stand closer," Brother Ray ordered.

One by one, the girls stepped off the bus. Just when I thought there couldn't possibly be any more, another one stepped out. Like one big caterpillar, single file into the church. I didn't see who it was, but one of the guys closer to the bus mooed like a cow, and a few guys laughed, until one of the girls looked over and told them to shut up. She obviously didn't care if she got caught communicating to the boys.

"Dude, how many are there?" I asked.

"I'm not sure what the exact number is, but it's over a hundred, I know that."

"That's like 4 per guy."

"You wish, perv. One man, one woman. The Bible's pretty clear about that."

Really, I hadn't been thinking too much about any of them girls. After a few days, though, I was noticing them more and more. I won't pretend I wasn't. Like the girls serving behind

the counter. There was one blonde with long straight hair and these huge bangs that was pretty cute. She looked unhappy as all get out, but underneath her frown, she had this irresistible charm, you could just see it. And she had lips you could kiss for days. Also, I noticed the worker girls cause they were the ones always barking orders, herding the girls around, just like Nick and Dawson did with us. One of them had the biggest boobs I've ever seen for a girl in high school. I noticed that. But for the most part, I wasn't really interested in amenities cause I still hadn't really accepted the place as my new school. It was still just this cabin in the woods I was sleeping in until I got my act together. A tough love summer camp. I was going to wake up one morning to my moms or something, some good news that I was going back to Calvary, and all this crazy Bible thumping would become a distant memory. Kinda like when my moms sent me to live with the Ramirez's in La Puente. Once summer ended, I was back at school with my old friends. The last thing on my mind was that there was going to be a down the road at Mount Zion, and I still kept one foot back in California. Knowing I couldn't talk to the girls anyway kept me from thinking about liking one of them or something. It was almost like they weren't real people. They were just an assembly line of dolls, like some of the guys had been saying, probably just there to keep us from being gay. Anyway, I was still trying to keep my head down, but at the same time, I was beginning to notice they were there too. I don't know if that makes me a perv, but it was hard not to.

One thing that surprised me was how much they all looked the same. They came in different sizes and shapes, of course, but in every other way, they all had this resemblance. A uniformity, I guess. Bangs and long dresses that went down to the middle of their shins, or navy-blue skirts that went just past the knee. No

makeup, from what I could tell, and if so, it was very little, like maybe just the stuff I'd see my sisters putting on their cheeks to cover up zits. Not much though. And just like with us guys, most of them looked sad or angry, like cracked china or something. I could tell all the girls that were new too. They didn't smile, and they had batty eyes, like they were looking for any chance to run.

Jude elbowed me in the ribs. "Dude, take a picture. It'll last longer. Quit staring."

"I'm not staring."

"Yeah? Then what are you doing?"

"I'm keeping an eye out. Isn't that we're supposed to be doing?"

"You don't need to look at their faces to keep an eye out."

"Is that biblical too?"

"Shut up."

Every eye in the place was glued to us when we walked in, like those locals were the jury, ready to decide our fate. Old folks, deacons, parents, kids, everyone. It was the biggest event that little town had seen in months. I wouldn't doubt if a few of them had heart attacks as we shuffled by, right there in their Sunday best. I could almost hear them telling their kids not to look at us or talk to us. Those are all the bad eggs.

It was pretty funny to watch all the guys jockeying, cutting, trying to be slick and get in the row right behind the girls. It was like a gate was closing, and everyone was making a mad dash, especially Jude. He told Whitey and little Timmy I wasn't allowed to sit in the back row, so we ended up sitting on the end of the row right behind the girls. Whitey tried to get us to squeeze in and make some room, but Jude wasn't having it.

"I ain't squishing in any more, Whitey."

He was hell bent on staying where he was. It didn't matter to me. I mean, it made perfect sense why all the guys were pumped to go to church and why Cagey was throwing on extra deodorant, being that's as close to the girls as we ever got, other than in the dining hall when the servers slopped food on our trays. But cause of my face, I was fine with not sitting all that close to the girls. I looked like the biggest pussy poindexter in the world with my baggy suit, spit-polished penny loafers, and sweat dripping from my purple face. I didn't want them seeing me like that, thinking about what a wuss I was.

By the time all of us got situated, we took up one entire side of the little church. I bet, from God's point of view, it probably looked like the Civil War all over again, us in our navy blues wishing we were free, and all them hicks over on the other side, supporting the ministry.

Brother Parker thanked us for coming. He spent a few minutes telling the congregation about Brother Ward and the work, a bunch of going on about nothing, really. He didn't know the truth. No way anybody could know they wouldn't let us talk to our own families, and were forcing us to do all their labor, and be cool with it.

"You know, Charles, I remember when you first came out here with the kids. Mississippi running you out for using the paddle like the Bible teaches, doing the Lord's work, not sure how He was gonna provide. Brother, tell me, what'd you have, thirty kids at the time? I know you only had the one bus, that ol Silver Eagle."

"Yes, sir. Twenty-two girls and eight boys. We'd had just about seventy when the State came in and took about half our boys and girls. Brother, you know what I told them?"

"What's that? They have no business—"

“That’s right. I told them we aren’t bound by man’s law. We are bound by the law of God, and when those two laws disagree, we gonna follow God every time.”

Some deep “Amens” rang out across the room.

Maybe they did know, and they were all just a bunch of dumb hicks who were lost in black and white, and didn’t care what the rest of the world thought.

“We just love what you’re doing. Committed to those boys and girls no matter what trials and tribulations come your way. We pray for you and Mrs. Ward every day. What an absolute miracle God is doing in the hearts of these young people. Especially when you bring Raymond back to us. We always appreciate his gift.”

Jude kept knocking my elbow off my knees, telling me to sit up.

“Say, since we got Raymond here, why don’t ye’all come on up here and stop me from ramblin all morning?”

Different men and women around the room stood to their feet and began making their way to the stage behind Brother Parker, lining up in front of the baptismal. Brother Ray stood with them and waddled down the center aisle, greeting people with his bright smile on his way up. Somebody handed him a mic, and he stood front and center. I sat up and leaned in a little for a better view. It was the first time I was interested in anything at Mount Zion.

The lady at the piano looked exactly like Jenna’s mom, only with glasses, and for a minute, I swear I was seeing Jenna all over the church, looking at me. That’s one thing about keeping one foot in California. You’re almost always daydreaming. She was in the pews. Behind the beams. Among the choir. Like Waldo or something. Long, dark, curly hair. Thin. My mind was playing

tricks on me, and I was convinced if I looked a little closer, Jenna would pop up somewhere. The impossibility didn't even register.

Moments later, a high, booming voice filled the room, rattling the pews. *"We shall see Jesus, just as they saw Him. There is no greater promise than this."*

It was stinkin Brother Ray. His mouth was hardly open, but it was him alright, pumping it out of that belly like I'd never heard. Effortless. People were going bonkers. Men rose up all around the sanctuary, shouting "Hallelujah!" and "Amen!" Women threw up their hands. Some old lady in a wheelchair up front waved a little white flag.

I'd sat through my share of worship back at Calvary, but nothing like this. This was a whole other level of singing. I wasn't even sure the words he was singing, but I know one thing, I believed him, whatever it was.

Then, in the middle of the song, while I was tuned in to Brother Ray, I felt something knock against the front of my foot. I looked down and noticed a black Bible. I figured the girl in front of me had accidentally knocked it back, and I reached down for it, to slide it back under her seat, you know. But out of nowhere, Jude's steps on my hand, and drags the Bible over toward his other foot, his eyes wide open and blank. I knew it wasn't his, cause his Bible was on his lap, but I wasn't sure what the big deal was.

"Sorry, dude. Geez. Relax."

Jude nudged it forward with his foot, locking his explanation up in a secret file, a file his eyes suggested I better never ask about. The only reason that made sense was that, even sliding a Bible back was too far, and he was just making sure I wasn't trying to communicate. It bothered me for a few minutes, then Brother Ray started singing a second song, and I just forgot about it.

After all the singing, that little old dude, Brother Parker, was screaming and spitting like a man who'd just returned from hell itself. He had this weird little part down the middle of his hair, and these long, saggy cheeks, and every time he got going, they'd get all red and start shaking around. He was mostly just saying if you're really saved, you won't have no interest in doing worldly things no more, like smoking, sex, and rock n roll. I never did any of that anyway, depending on how you classify rock n roll, but I'm telling you, if I wasn't saved already, I probably woulda been before he even got to the altar call. It was that crazy.

The guys were pretty worked up on the bus ride home, shouting hymn after hymn and telling the stupidest jokes you've ever heard. I knew one of the hymns from back home, but I wasn't singing. I turned around and noticed T-Dogg wasn't singing either. He gave me a nod. Everyone was too busy singing to notice.

Jude and I were sitting up front, the seat right behind Brother Ray, who was driving the bus. Jude took the window, and I sat across the aisle from Jack, this hossy kid from Arkansas. He had a huge scar running up the side of his head and a glass eye, so he always looked like he was up to something. Jude told me he had gotten all jacked up riding his motorcycle and smacked into the side of a car or something, and part of his brain got removed or some crap like that. But other than that, all I knew about him was he was from Arkansas, and he'd been at Mount Zion longer than anyone else. Going on three years. He hadn't really said anything to me since he introduced himself upstairs the day I came in, but I think he felt me staring at his face.

During a break in the singing, he hit my shoulder. “Hey Sam, didja even get a punch in?” he asked, smirking through his one good eye.

Jude leaned over my shoulder. “Don’t be a jerk, Jack.”

“Just askin’s all. Hey, Brother Ray, it true that Graham went to the Air Force? Or ye’all make him leave, cause he whooped on the new boy?”

Brother Ray kept his eyes on the road, answering over his shoulder. “He wanted to join the Air Force.”

“Just wondering, cause he tol’ me the night before he left, ye’all made him leave, cause he was staff, and ye’alld get sued if workers were beating up on kids and junk.”

“Jack, quit instigatin,” Brother Ray said. “You’re trying to cause trouble. Graham stayed on, cause he wanted to. And he left, cause he wanted to join the Air Force. He’s an adult, and that decision was up to him. Just keep it shut. You don’t have nothing good to say.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jack looked at me. “That’s how they do things round here. Make their own laws.”

Jack chuckled to himself, and the grin on his face made it hard to tell if he was telling the truth. It didn’t really make a difference if Graham left on his own or they made him leave. All that mattered was he got out, and I didn’t. But I stored it away as information I might be able to use in my letter home. Maybe help my case for a ticket out, you know.

“I could show you a couple a tricks, Sam,” Jack said, raising his fists like he was boxing. “You ever want to learn.”

“Tommy None,” Jude said, and laughing. “Don’t listen to Jack. He’s dumber than a box of rocks, and he couldn’t beat up a punching bag.”

Jack's wheels were turning.

"Jack says his cousin is Tommy Gunn," Jude continued, "you know, that fighter from *Rocky 5*?"

"Yeah. I loved that one. Where they fight on the street? Yo, Tommy, I ain't heard no bell. That's your cousin?"

Jack nodded. "That's right. Sparr'd with him a couple times."

"Sure, Jack," Jude scoffed. "We call him Tommy None, cause he can't see nothing, and he always gets his butt kicked."

"Jude, I bet you a Friday night plate you can't take me body boxin."

"Dude, you serious?" Jude asked. "You just wanna give away your dinner like that? I'll give you my Friday night plates for a month if you win."

Brother Ray looked over his shoulder. "I don't want to see no boxing in front of the dorm."

"Yes, sir."

"Mama don't like it. Ye'all can take it up to the woodpiles."

"Yes, sir."

It didn't take long for news to travel to the back of the bus. Combos started to cheer and pound the back of the seat in front of him. "Jude! Jude! Jude! Jude!"

Just like that, guys went from singing hymns to shouting a fight chant. Even the preacher boys were yelling. Well, except for Nick. His head was down, and I'm guessing his eyes were on his little New Testament, like always. Jack sat in his seat shadow boxing, ducking and jabbing and ignoring all the noise.

That's all these kids think this place is, I thought. One big fight.

Guys were so worked up by the time we got back, they were running each other over when Brother Ray cranked the door open.

“Ye’ all got fifteen minutes to be up at the gate!”

“Yes, sir!”

Guys were dancing, doing jumping jacks, throwing punches in the air, all kinds of excited. We all marched behind Jude and Jack up to the woodpiles behind the dorm.

Jude and Jack took off their coats and ties and hung them over a cord of wood. They set their Bibles on top of their coats.

Combos stepped up to moderate. I wasn’t hooting and hollering or nothing, but as I found a spot in the circle, I was itching to see someone get the crap kicked out of them. I didn’t care who.

“Whiteys and gentlemen,” Combos said, laughing.

“Shut up, Combos, or you’re next,” Whitey answered.

“Boys and Timmys,” Combos continued.

“Oh, shut up,” Timmy said. “You’re so fat, you roll over four quarters and make a dollar.”

“Oooh. Never heard that one before. Come up with that yourself?” Combos smiled, then explained the rules. “No hitting above the neck or below the waist. Whoever gets knocked down first loses.” Then he rang an imaginary bell, and said, “Ding, ding.”

Jude charged right in, swinging a hundred miles a minute, circling Jack, pounding away on anything he could hit. Arms, stomach, chest. He had a fire in his eyes, like a switch flipped inside or something. He wasn’t the same laid back kid from the last couple of days. He was a machine gun.

I could tell Jack knew how to box too, the way he was standing and all, but he couldn’t land any punches. I don’t know if it was cause he was losing, or if fighters just know how to take punches, but he grinned the entire time. It was like he was

saying, "Ain't so bad. Come on, ain't so bad." I wondered what he could do if he had two good eyes.

It didn't last long. A few minutes, tops. I'm not kidding, Jude probably landed fifty punches before Jack stumbled and fell. Jack landed maybe ten, if that. He tried to explain that he tripped over a branch, and he actually did, but he was getting worked so bad, the guys told him to quit making excuses and let it stand. Jack owed Jude his Friday night plate.

There wasn't much time after the fight, so we headed straight up to the gate instead of changing out of our church clothes. Jack lined up right behind us and kept disagreeing with the loss. "I ain't giving you my Friday night plate," he said as Jude grabbed his Bible and coat.

"Yeah, you are."

Usually, we prayed and quoted Bible memory verses before we went in, but for Sunday supper, we always prayed and sang with the girls. Supper was our biggest meal of the day. Usually a helping of meat, potatoes, and vegetables. Occasionally, some peach cobbler. And don't ask me why they called it supper when it was lunchtime. For breakfast, we usually got grits or cheese toast, and for dinner, unless it was Friday night, we got a plain meat and cheese sandwich. That's why a lot of the bigger guys lost weight when they got to Mount Zion. All the work and half the food. But anyway, all I'm saying is Sundays were different all around, and Sunday supper was a feast. Mama put her apron on with the girls in the kitchen and made yeast rolls, casseroles, mashed potatoes and gravy, tender beef, the works. The best part was we got seconds. It was the only time we ever ate till we couldn't eat no more. Every other meal was like we were just putting fuel in the body to hold us over a few hours.

The girls had all changed into t-shirts and long culottes, and they didn't look too happy to be around us. Maybe it was cause guys were still mooing and crap, thinking it was funny.

I might be a perv for thinking this, but seeing them all unhappy like that made me daydream about rescuing them and hooking up with them. Just to cheer them up, you know. Could you imagine how happy they'd be if I broke the gate loose and opened my arms to give them a piece of my love? They'd probably be happy even if I was the ugliest guy in the dorm. Girls need that. My moms always told me a girl wants to be rescued by a knight in shining armor, and even though my heart still belonged to Jenna, looking at all those sad faces, I thought, if Jenna had quit thinking about me, like Brother Ray said, maybe I could save a few of those girls, and could get one, or four, of them to marry me or something someday.

We were all crammed into the dining hall, and once everyone was present, Papa took Mama's hand and the hand of a girl whose face looked like it was stuck in a smile and started singing. Everyone else followed her lead and joined in.

"We thank thee Lord, for this our food, God is love, God is love, but most of all, for Jesus' blood, God is love, God is love."

As weird as it was to sing before a meal, I enjoyed it more than listening to somebody pray, that's for sure. I don't know why, but when people pray, they always start doing something annoying, like trying to show off how godly they are, or they start praying for you, like you're not in the room. These long drawn out self-righteous rants. Drives me nuts. But all those voices coming together was a rapture. I stood there with my eyes closed and my head bowed, listening to all those voices rise and fall together so peacefully, and I slipped away somewhere. It took

me further away from Mount Zion than that bus ever could, I know that.

Mama stepped up to the counter to help the servers. She moved like she had a million things to do and the wrinkles on her face looked like they'd been frowning her entire life. There was a kindness in her eyes somewhere, but you could tell it was almost gone. One thing's for sure, though, if we were a hive, she was definitely the queen bee, and everyone knew it. Even me.

"Girls, ye'all need to get moving, less you want to be in here all afternoon. Let's go."

Jude told me Mama was the nicest lady in the world and how sometimes she'd come outside when the guys sang at her doorstep, and she'd hand out treats, like moon pies or something, and how she worked harder than anybody at Mount Zion, even though the doctors said she shouldn't be on her feet, because her arthritis was so bad. He also said, if she ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.

She picked me out as I got closer to the front, squinting through her old thick frames. She had big, all knowing, blue eyes, and I felt them all over me.

"Hi, Mama," I said when I grabbed my tray. I don't know what got into me. I think it was cause I was so nervous. I was so disappointed in myself for breaking that easy, but like I said, I'm no badass.

"I don't believe we've met. You must be the new boy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She squinted harder, and her eyebrows pushed together.

"How'd that happen?"

I was embarrassed to tell her the whole story.

"Ma'am, I was just playing basketball."

“That’s it, huh? Playing basketball. From what I hear, basketball is your God.”

“No ma’am, I just like playing—”

“I’ll tell you what. I don’t want to see you pick up a basketball again, you hear me?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Anytime you think about playing basketball, you just pull out that Bible and start reading.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“God don’t want you playing basketball. That ain’t why He brought you here.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Everyone listened when she spoke.

“Jude, ye’all have some Tylenol down at the dorm?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Make sure you get him some Tylenol for that.”

“Yes, ma’am. Want me to ask Brother Ray?”

“Well, duh, Jude. How else you gonna get it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The guys all got a kick out of that, laughing and saying, “Yeah, duh, Jude.”

After dinner, we got three hours of free time upstairs at our bunk. Most of the guys used the time to write letters home, cause they were due Sunday night, or to catch up on some Zs. Jude got me some Tylenol and sent me upstairs. I sat on my bunk holding my notebook, half waiting for the words that were going to get me home to spill out, and half daydreaming about being there.

Across the room, Tyler was twirling a pen through his fingers. He glanced around and made sure nobody was looking, then jerked his head back to say, “What’s up?” I nodded back.

Jack was over by his bunk doing dips and pushups, shadow boxing in between sets. He’d probably mess some fools up if he could see.

The preacher boys, Nick, Dawson, and Chris, read their Bibles. That woulda knocked me out for sure. The Bible always puts me to sleep.

Ali, the only black boy at Mount Zion, had the bunk next to mine. He was drawing something.

“Dude, what are you drawing?” I whispered.

“Nothing. Just bored.”

“Dang. That’s pretty good. Is that a Trans Am?”

“It’s a Firebird from a show I can’t talk about. I just put the bird on it cause it’s fresh, and supposedly it rises from fire and becomes immortal.”

“I think I know what show it is.”

“Don’t say it. Don’t need you to be getting me in trouble and junk, bro.”

“That’s stinkin sweet. You gonna send that home?”

“Nah. Just passing time.”

“You draw before you came to Mount Zion?”

“A little. You?”

“No, I suck at drawing. I wish I could. They say a picture’s worth a thousand words. Maybe if my moms saw a picture, she’d take me home.”

Chris looked up at us and jerked a finger over his lips to tell us to shut up.

Ali shook his head. “I doubt it. Ain’t nobody get outta this place. But you’ll have plenty of time to practice on Sundays.”

In between Sunday services, we had about four hours at our bunks to rest. I opened my notebook, put my pen to the blank page, and penned that first letter. I wish I'd held on to it for proof, but I think it's for the best I got rid of all my crap from Mount Zion.

All I remember is telling my moms I needed to see a doctor, cause I thought my nose was broken, and I asked her for some shower shoes. I put that in just about every letter until my visit, I know that. And whatever else I said, I'm sure I used every square inch of the page.

Right before we were dismissed from school on Monday, Mama walked into our classroom and asked Brother Ray if he could have a few boys go out and pull some weeds from the garden. Jude raised his hand to volunteer immediately.

“You always help Mama,” he told me later. “She’s the nicest woman on the planet.”

Seemed more like brown-nosing to me. But whatever. I ain’t against helping nobody. I’d rather help somebody than sweep concrete that’s just gonna get muddy again in five minutes, which is what most of the other guys wound up doing. Except for the laundry crew, Whitey and little Timmy. They were inside bleaching collars and passing out clothes. The most cake job, if you ask me.

The garden was nothing fancy. Just a few rows of tomatoes and cucumbers, some tall husks of corn, okra, and beans. Mama was getting so old she couldn’t move around like she used to, and she could hardly get to it anymore.

It was an oven outside. Like the burn pit was following me everywhere I went. The sun parked right over us, punishing us, dripping hot wax on our necks as we inched along the first row the better part of the morning. The biggest red ants I’ve ever seen

came crawling out from every direction, mounting a full out attack, stinging like mothers. It was a three-day job, minimum, and we were hardly making a dent.

“Hey, Jude!” I shouted across the garden.

“Dude, I don’t want to hear it!” he yelled back. “I’m tired of you complaining. They’re just ants. Quit being a wuss.”

“I’m not complaining. I’m just saying, we should get paid for our work, don’t you think? Like building the girl’s dorm. They profited from that, so it’s basically like our parents send us to this place where we’re held against our will, and forced to make these people rich. How is this not slavery? Right in the middle of America.”

I really wasn’t trying to complain about it, but anytime they said no freetime, it got me thinking about my personal rights, you know. Like, how is it that one day I’m free to shoot hoops after school and hang with Jenna, and the next day I’m memorizing Bible verses and pulling weeds from God’s buttcrack? If only I had lied to my principal and told him I was a Christian, I’d still be back in Cali. Just one little lie. Anyway, I’d always get a little spun out when they wouldn’t give us freetime, but you know what I’m saying. Maybe I was being disagreeable, but I wasn’t complaining.

“Idle hands are the devil’s playground,” Jude said, thinking he’d found the cure to cancer.

“*This* is the devil’s playground. Misery. Where kids go to die.”

“You been listening to T-Dogg too much.”

T-Dogg was the one I’d heard calling the place misery, during one of his rants about how we aren’t slaves, but I’m sure he wasn’t the first to call it that. I looked at Jude to see what he was suggesting.

“I wasn’t communicatin.”

“Didn’t say you were. Guilty conscience?”

“Nope. Not at all. Jude, can I ask you something?”

“Long as it ain’t complainin.”

“Why’d you get sent here?”

He walked toward me and stopped and wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve. “We’re not s’posed to talk about the past or nothing, but let’s just say, what didn’t I do? I was a wreck, man.”

It’s funny, guys would always say we couldn’t talk about the past, but then they’d start right in telling you about something they did back home or something some kid who used to be there did. I mean, people talk. That’s what they do. Nobody can stay in the present all the time.

“Drugs, sex with all kinds of girls. You name it, man, and I was doin it.”

“What’s sex like?”

“Dude, I’ll tell you this. A girl is always ten pounds bigger when she’s naked.”

“I don’t care. First thing I’m doing when I get home is having sex with Jenna. I don’t care if she’s twenty pounds heavier. We’re gonna have sex every day.”

“Just remember, it ain’t about quantity, it’s about quality.”

Jude wasn’t holding back, so I kept asking questions. “What about drugs? What’s that like? I mean, is it fun?”

“Yeah, for a season, I guess. It makes everything like a cartoon.”

“That sounds cool.”

“It gets kinda old after a while.”

Jude kept on for a while, practically bragging about all the crap he’d done, and right about the time he had just about convinced me that I had completely missed out on life, he said, “Then Jesus saved me from all that junk.”

Not to judge or nothing, but I thought he wasn't so sure he had made the right choice. He turned to go back to pulling weeds and said, "Come on, let's get back to work."

"You ever miss home?" I asked. "I mean, I know God changed you and all, but ..."

"I did at first. But not anymore. I'm fixin to graduate next May, and who knows?" He stopped and looked at me. "I may just find me a cute little country girl and settle down somewhere out here. Who needs California?"

"Dude, you're crazy. I do. California is way better than this. I could never live out here."

"You are now."

"Yeah, and I hate every minute of it. Once I get my phone call, I'm telling you, my moms won't stand for this crap. I mean, junk."

"Trust me, she ain't taking you home, Sam. Let me ask you a question. You told me you got saved back home. You get saved at Calvary?"

"Yeah, at junior high camp. Seventh grade. I just didn't tell anybody."

"Dude. With Dean Farris?"

"Yeah."

"No way. I used to go surfing with him all the time, man. Love that guy."

"Yeah, that guy is a pimp. All the girls wanted him."

"What a trip, bro. Can't believe you got saved with Dean Farris. It's crazy having somebody from my school here."

"Yeah, we were all sitting out on the sand, watching the waves while he talked about being accepted by the Beloved. He asked if anyone wanted to have the best friend anybody could ever want."

Seemed like a pretty good deal. Then he pulled out his guitar and started singing ‘White as Snow.’ Remember that song?”

“Yeah, totally. What a trip, bro. Nobody else here knows any of those old Maranatha and Vineyard songs. *White as snow, white as snow,*” he sang.

Jude had a huge Adam’s apple, and he could hit the lowest notes I’d ever heard, like he had a frog in his throat. Guys were always asking him to sing something or trying to copy the way he said, “Yes, sir.” I joined in, singing as loudly and as sarcastically as I could.

“Though my sins were as scarlet, Lord I know, Lord I know, that I’m clean and forgiven through the power of your blood. Through the wonder of your love. Through faith in you I know that I can be, white as snow.”

“Man, Sam, I don’t know. No offense, but when I got saved, I was shouting it from the rooftops.”

He seemed pretty serious about it, but I didn’t believe him.

“Really? Shouting?”

“You know what I mean. I didn’t keep it a secret.”

“I don’t want people to know. People start thinking I’m a Christian, then they’ll think I’m some kind a jerk.”

“See? That brings me back to my original question. How’d you get saved if you didn’t tell no one? What if the devil tricked you, and you ain’t really saved?”

“If the devil can trick me into salvation, then I’m pretty much doomed anyway. Who cares, dude? I just believed in my heart, like the Bible says.”

“Yeah, but the Bible also says, *if you confess with your mouth.*”

“Confess to the whole world?”

“No.”

“Exactly. It doesn’t say to who. It says, ‘Confess with your mouth,’ and that’s what I did. I confessed to God. If He’s really up there, then He heard me.”

“Fair enough. That makes you probably the first Christian I’ve ever met who didn’t want anybody to know. And the first one to ever get sent here.”

“Why do you think I keep saying I don’t deserve to be here? All I did was be a sinner.”

“Oh my stink, dude. Here we go again. Do you ever stop? Here’s the thing. You gotta get over it. It doesn’t matter why you got sent here. You’re here. Who cares? Life goes on. Look at all of us. We ain’t cryin about it.”

He was right. None of the other guys were crying about it. Or at least, I never heard them. But besides Nick, the big kid who never said nothing to nobody unless he was asking someone to listen to him recite chapters from Romans, nobody else was all that pumped about being there either. Preacher boy or not, like I keep saying, everyone walked around on a razor’s edge, on a hyper threat alert, sniffing for blood. And deep down, unless they were completely brainwashed, or actually did need someone to tell them how and what to think, every kid at Mount Zion wanted to go home and woulda taken the first ticket out if they had a choice. Sure, nobody else was crying, but nobody else was happy either. They knew we were being treated like slaves.

“Yeah, well, maybe somebody should,” I said.

“Should what?”

“Cry.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean? Dude, you can’t stop, can you? That’s probably why your mom sent you here. Your stinkin mouth. Let me give you a piece of advice.”

“I don’t care. I have freedom of speech.”

“Okay, tough guy. *I don't care*. You don't care how long you're on orientation?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then keep your mouth shut. Quit complaining, and you might get off before your year's up. *Freedom of speech*. That's the funniest thing I've heard in sixteen months. The only freedom you have here is choosing whether or not you want a Payday or a Zero. That's it. Now get back to work.”

Jude was growing on me. At least he talked. All Graham ever said was, “Don't do this, don't do that,” or some weird crap like, “I don't like when people look at me when I eat.” But deep down, it was hard to buddy up with the kid who got me sent there. I still held a grudge, and I still found myself trying to get him to admit he really didn't like Mount Zion. I just wanted to smear it all over my moms' face.

We got about halfway through the garden when a girl's voice came over the intercom. “Jude, bring the new boy up to Papa's office. Jude, bring the new boy up to Papa's office.”

When I heard her say “new boy,” I was so afraid it hurt. It was like a vacuum started sucking on my chest, and I couldn't hear anything except my own loss of breath. I knew I was in trouble, but I wasn't sure for what.

My feet got heavier and heavier with each step I took around the front lawn. Across the stones. Up to the front door. I waited as Jude slammed the brass knocker. It read, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” I hadn't noticed it on my first trip in through the front door, but my moms had the same verse engraved on a piece of wood above our front door at home.

Papa opened the door. “Come on in, fellas. Go on and have a seat in my office.”

Jude gave me a bump to get me going, and I walked down the hall to the room on the right, the room my moms came out of the last time I saw her.

Papa slid two chairs from the back wall in front of his oak desk. It matched the two bookshelves behind it, each chock full of books. Between the bookshelves was an old painting of a man who looked just like Papa. His father maybe.

I noticed a folded letter on Papa's desk as I took my seat, and I immediately connected the dots, my mind scrambling to remember everything I wrote.

Papa pulled off his glasses, folded them through his two middle fingers, and took giant strides toward his chair, like he was taking a measurement, but he didn't sit down. He rubbed his long nose and paced for a minute more.

"You know how long we've been taking boys in, Schneider?" he asked, looking down at his blue ostrich skin boots, his southern drawl as smooth as a serpent.

"No, sir."

"Twenty-five years. That's a long time, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know you think you got it all figured out, Schneider. Your poor mama, myself, all the rest of us grown ups, no, we haven't any idea what we doing. But you, fourteen years old, on your way to hell, you the one with all the answers."

"No, sir, I just think—"

"Schneider, let's understand ourselves. Ain't nobody paying you to think. We didn't get to where we are today, cause we doing it wrong." He walked behind his desk and looked at me. "I've been dealing with boys like you a long time. I'ma tell you right now, there's one of two ways this is gonna go. The easy way, or the hard way. It's up to you."

He was saying my name all wrong, but I was so pissed he had read my letter, it was the least of my worries. Call me ignorant, but it didn't seem legal. Some stranger going through my mail. Nobody said nothing about that.

"Yes, sir."

"One thing I do know, Schneider, easy or hard, no matter how you wanna lie in your letters, you ain't going nowhere. Your poor mama don't want you back home."

Lying? It wasn't lying, but it didn't matter. It was clear why all the other guys weren't saying anything. What could they do without honest communication with the outside world? The odds of me talking my moms out of keeping me at Mount Zion were shrinking by the second.

"I wasn't lying, sir."

"Graham told me you was cussing. Now, you telling me you weren't using foul language?"

"No, sir. I did."

He wouldn't let me get a word in.

"But you didn't mention that in your letter?"

"No, sir."

He picked up my letter and dropped it into a trashcan beside his desk. "See, Schneider, I know your mama. She don't want you cussing neither. You know what she gonna say?"

"No, sir," I said, my eyes on the letter.

"I ain't a betting man, but if I was, I'd be willing to bet she'd tell me you got what was comin to you."

He did know my moms. That's probably exactly what she would say. How stupid I was for thinking differently. She would stand for a place like Mount Zion, and she'd stand by it until the day she died. She wasn't gonna just wake up one day and start

caring about my side of the story. She lied to me. What more proof did I need?

I sat there, hands folded in my lap, hundreds of things I wanted to say whirring around in my head but not sure how to say any of them without digging myself into a deeper hole. It was clear I was gonna have to play by different rules if I hoped to ever talk to my moms again, but I still felt this urge to leave the old man with something to think about. I wanted to get a word in, and I was thinking, counting the cost.

“Now we gonna settle up on the cussing and lying with ten licks today,” Papa said, “then you and Jude gonna go down to the dorm, and you gonna write another letter.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You lucky I’m giving you another chance.”

It was complete bullcrap. Getting swats after getting my nose broke. I don’t care if I lied or not. I already got my punishment. I couldn’t keep silent anymore.

“Am I allowed to tell her I want to go home?”

“You tell the truth, and show your poor mama some respect, and you can tell her you want to go home till the cows come home. It ain’t gonna change a thing. But you welcome to ask away.”

“What about if I say you guys are ruining kids’ lives? Cause I think that’s the truth, and, like the Apostle Paul says, ‘Do I become your enemy because I tell you the truth?’”

“Schneider, I’ll tell you what. You think you know the scriptures, cause you come from some liberal church with a bunch of effeminate hippies? You find something we doing that ain’t according to the AV 1611 KJV, and we’ll change it. Meantime, you gonna do as I say, you understand?”

It was the easiest task in the world. How about, “Love thy neighbor as thyself?” But I knew he wasn’t gonna change nothing, especially for me, some punk kid from the land of fruits and nuts. Christians never change. I don’t care what sect or branch they are. It’s their way or the highway. Grace and love, my butt. Only if you agree. But here’s the thing, even though I knew Papa wasn’t gonna change for me, when he challenged me like that, looking at me with those hard grey eyes, an idea anchored down in my soul, and it was as if I knew my calling. I’d prove him wrong one day. There was no doubt in my mind. I even had a vision of myself standing in the very same office with a bunch of guys behind me, shutting him down. I don’t like to make things all spiritual, but you might even say that was the first time I ever knew God’s will for my life. If I did end up staying for a year, it’d be the death of him. I’d expose him and his stupid school to the whole world, and show him exactly how he was wrong. Maybe it’s cause I was just pissed he read my letter.

“So, am I not allowed to see a doctor?”

“Looks like you’re breathing just fine. I think you tough enough to handle a little bruise.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, looking true into his eyes.

I signed a three by five card saying I got ten swats for cussing and lying, and then I pulled my britches down, laid my palms flat on his desk, and stared into the eyes of the old man in the portrait.

Jude signed the card as a witness and then moved out of the way, over by the door.

Papa pulled the chairs out of the way and took a practice swing to see if he had enough room, then he swung away.

I counted along quietly, laughing at myself for being so afraid. My moms’ swats were ten times worse.

It was three weeks before I heard anything from my moms. I got a letter instead of a phone call. I remember, cause T-Dogg got his phone call at choir that day.

Rule was, we couldn't have our first phone call until after three weeks. That gave everyone some time to settle in and get adjusted and all, or for them to break us, however you wanna think about it. Then after that, we got ten minutes every two weeks, unless your parents were divorced. In that case, you got a phone call every week, cause you could get calls from each parent. They were only supposed to get seven minutes each, but guys always went over, and even if they didn't, they were still getting more time than the rest of us. And trust me, four extra minutes with the outside world makes a big difference.

Of course, my moms didn't call when she was allowed to. She did that crap on purpose too, I guarantee it. When we did finally talk, she told me she got all tied up with some stupid litigation with my Grandpa's business or something, and it just slipped away, but I know my moms. She wanted to drive home a point. She heard about the fight from Papa, and just like Papa said, she probably decided I not only got what was coming but that I also needed a little attitude adjustment. She was always saying that. I mean, who forgets to call their son? If I had kids, I'd be calling as much as possible, I'd be so worried. Then again, who sends their kid to reform school across the country with people they don't know in the first place? She didn't forget.

Call me stupid, but I still woke up that third Tuesday, clinging to the hope that my moms would change her mind after I talked to her. My head told me I wasn't going anywhere, but my heart was convinced it was gonna be my last day, and with them reading my letters and all, it was the only shot I had left.

I was on my feet before Brother Ray hit the lights, and I had my bunk made before Jude got up the stairs. It was like I had Pop Rocks in my socks.

During morning assembly, I was still so worked up about it, I started writing down the things I wanted to bring up. The thing with Graham. My nose. The cover up. Jude's true colors. How I needed my brother. Basketball. How I was never going to earn a scholarship if I couldn't train with a team. I also wanted to bring up Jenna, but I knew I shouldn't. My moms didn't want me thinking about girls, period. It was like she wanted me to be gay.

That morning, Brother Ray read from Proverbs 17, about how it was better to fight a bear robbed of her whelps than a fool in his folly. It was confusing. I'd rather fight some fool any day of the week.

I almost missed my memory for the first time that morning too. I was so excited about my phone call that I couldn't get one of the verses in Psalm 126. I could say verses one to four no problem, but verse five was killing me. I tried to say it twice to Nick and once to Dawson, and I got stuck at the same spot each time. I knew the last verse just fine too. It was just that stinkin verse five. As time wound down, I caved in and scribbled "sow" on the bottom of my wooden divider to jog my memory while I was quoting. "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." I erased it right after I was done. Funny how now that's the verse I can't forget.

The choir had started meeting up again to prepare for a tour that Papa announced was coming up at the end of the month. Jude, with his froggy bass, was one of the five guys in tour choir, so I had to tag along with him.

With my first phone call hanging out in the open air, all I was interested in was the clock. But I fought the urge to look

at it, cause every time I saw the minute hand move, I remembered what Papa said and came up with one more reason why my moms wasn't going to call.

Occasionally, I found myself daydreaming about Mrs. Sarah. She was hands down the most beautiful woman at Mount Zion, and I'm not saying that just because she played the piano. She sat a few feet in front of me, behind the polished, black grand piano in a forest green dress. She had soft, pale skin and bright red hair that hung to her shoulders. Under her arms, I could see the curve of her huge boobs. In the back of my mind though, it was just her and I in the room. Her and I sitting on the piano bench, and we're both naked. As she sings about the coming into the light, I feel its warmth run from my head to my toes. It sometimes happened when she played for church too. I just had the hots for her bigtime. The best part was, so long as I wasn't looking at any of the girls in choir, nobody even noticed how bad I was staring.

Chris was also in the choir, so T-Dogg got dragged into it too. He was sitting at the opposite end of the rollaway desk, slouched against the corner, his long legs stretched out onto the platform. He looked like he was watching paint dry, bored out of his gourd. He glanced at me every once in a while, when everyone was paying attention to Mrs. Sarah. One time, he even pretended to shoot himself in the head. I didn't mind choir at all though. It was way better than getting worked like some slave or something, like the other guys.

A few songs in, one of the girls walked in through the foyer. "Tyler Douglas has a phone call on line one. Mama said to take it in Brother Ray's office."

Tyler lept out of his chair and darted off. Chris followed him through through the back door.

“Tyler, wait up!”

Brother Ray’s office was in the back of the boy’s schoolroom, on the other side of the wall behind Mrs. Sarah. All of the walls around the sanctuary had huge glass windows in them, but from where I was sitting, I couldn’t see T-Dogg or Chris.

Mrs. Sarah continued with the choir. “Girls and guys, I want you to put three fingers in your mouth. That’s how wide I want your mouth when you’re singing. Let’s try it again. Convince me that you believe what you’re singing.”

The choir members opened their mouths wider and sang louder, but it still wasn’t convincing. They were just going through the motions.

Mrs. Sarah stopped playing midway through the chorus. “Boys, I can’t hear you. Let’s do it again together. Just the boys. Ready, two, three, four, ‘I have come from the darkness to the light of the Lord.’”

Suddenly, we all hear yelling coming from Brother Ray’s office. Everyone froze, and Mrs. Sarah turned toward the source of the commotion and covered her mouth with her hand just as we heard a bang on the wall.

Nick jumped off the back row and ran to help. Everyone in the choir could see from where they were standing on stage, and they watched through the window. I could only listen.

“Fuck that. Why don’t you listen to me? You’re fucking up my life!”

“Quit cussing, or you’re done!” Chris yelled.

“Fuck you, Chris.”

“Hang up, Tyler. That’s it. You’re done.”

Most guys I’d seen get phone calls in my first three weeks were either yelling or crying about something when they got theirs, so, as weird as this sounds, it wasn’t all that unusual. But

even though I half expected it to get crazy when someone got a phone call, it was still a surprise when it did. And I'd even venture to say most of us loved the entertainment. I did anyway. It was just more proof that I wasn't the only one.

"I'm warning you, Mom. Don't leave me at this fucking place. I'm not gonna make it."

Then it sounded like a piece of wood cracked, and there was a loud bang against the glass. Everyone in the choir gasped and got all wide eyed. And then it was silent.

"I done told you, T-Dogg, but you ain't listen, man."

A few seconds later, they all come strolling out. First Tyler, then Chris and Nick, like nothing happened. Tyler's hair was a little messed up, and his shirt was untucked out the back, but other than that, it was business as usual. He held a notepad in his hand, and he plopped back down in his chair at the other end of the desk, like he had never left. Nick and Chris slid back into their places in the back row of the choir, and Chris whispered something to Dawson, and everyone waited for Mrs. Sarah.

"Everything okay, boys?" she asked. "Do I need to call Brother Ray up here?"

"No, ma'am," Chris answered. "We got it handled. Tyler just had another bad phone call is all. He ain't gonna get no more he keeps it up."

"Tyler?"

"Yes, ma'am. Everything's great."

T-Dogg sounded pretty convincing when he said it, but the closer I looked, the more I realized he didn't look fine at all. His eyes were watery and empty, like he didn't care anymore. I didn't want to bother him or stare or nothing, but I couldn't help glancing over at him to see if he had a fat lip or a black eye or anything. Nothing.

Maybe ten minutes after the scuffle, after things died down a little, I looked over and saw Tyler tear a small piece of paper from his notepad. He made eye contact with me, then looked away while he held the paper against his leg, where only I could see it. It said, "Run?" I looked at him like he was crazy, but I didn't give him an answer.

I wanted to run, but nobody had ever gotten away. In fact, Graham told me nobody had ever made it past the state line. I don't know if I was scared or smart, but it just seemed stupid to think we'd ever make it all the way back to California. A mutiny with a few guys made more sense. Unless we had some money, a gun, a car, or something. I needed to think about it more.

He crumpled the note and stuffed it back into his pocket.

There were no other phonecalls during choir, as I had feared. After the choir had finished up and we were pushing all the desks and chairs back into place, Mama dropped by to give Nick the day's letters. He usually didn't pass them out until dinner, but he gave me mine as we were walking out the gate back down to the boys' dorm cause he knew how much I wanted to talk to my moms.

"Schneider, you got your first letter," he said, holding it up, already torn open. "Should I make you wait for dinner?"

"Whatever," I told him. "And it's Snyder."

Nick pushed me. "Dude, cheer up. You're like Eeyore, walking around here moping and complaining for the last three weeks. You think three weeks is bad? Cagey hasn't had a phone call in eight months."

"No wonder he's always fighting."

We got back down to the dorm, and I sat on my footlocker to read it. Wouldn't you know it, Papa knew my moms better than I did. I thought she might give a rip, but nope. She gave

me the whole spiel from the Bible about how bitter and sweet waters can't come from the same fountain, which wasn't even talking about cussing, if you ask me, and she encouraged me to quit worrying about basketball and put my focus on Jesus. I sat there for a second, like a deflated balloon. This was really gonna be my new school. I was really staying for a year. Hoops was over. I could have told her they were gonna kill me, and she still woulda left me there.

"Any news?" Jude asked.

"Yeah. I wanna kill my moms."

"Don't say that, dude."

"Fine. I hate my moms. Is that better?"

I wanted to yell a thousand cuss words and strangle something in my bare hands. I wanted to watch something feel what I was feeling.

Later that night, Tyler sat up after the lights went out and looked over at me, shrugging as if he was asking me one last time. I knew how he felt, but I still didn't have what it took. I shook my head and rolled over to look out my window at the light on Brother Mike and Mrs. Sarah's porch. There were a bunch of things I was gonna do when I was free again. The first thing was make my moms pay.

The next morning, Chris woke up to an empty bunk. In the middle of the night, Tyler had somehow snuck out the window at his bunk without anyone hearing or noticing. Slid right out onto the porch.

Chris ran downstairs calling for him right after Brother Ray called roll out.

“Tyler? Tyler? Any a ye’all seen Tyler?”

I wish I had a camera to take a picture of Chris. I woulda framed the failure written all over his face and laughed myself to sleep. He knew T-Dogg got him. Meanwhile, everyone else was looking around at everyone else for an answer. The preacher boys looked at me, like I had something to do with it. Whatever. Just cause I knew about it didn’t make it my fault. And even though I knew he wanted to run, I honestly never thought he’d do it. I mean, I knew he was pissed, but when he was asking me, I thought he was just asking, not like he was seriously gonna run away.

I was rooting for him to get past the state line, but at the same time, I was also kind of worried something bad was gonna happen to him. Jude said they didn’t have no bears out there, but I wasn’t so sure. Looked like bear country to me. And what

about poison ivy? I heard about this one kid, Trenton, who left before I got there. He ran away one night, but his face started itching, and his eyes swelled up so bad he thought all the fireflies were people with flashlights, so he turned around and came back and tried to pretend like he had never gotten out of his bed. It was about the funniest thing I'd ever heard, but I'm telling you, there's all kinds a crap working against you out in the Ozarks. If it ain't getting caught, it's getting killed. I just had this sick feeling in my stomach about it.

Jack, on the other hand, looked as cool as a seed in a cucumber. Leaning against his bunk, smirking out his one good eye, like he had told Tyler which way to go or something.

"Let's go, ye'all," Brother Ray said. "The show must go on. Let's get a move on, and get ready for school."

It was like we were standing at the scene of an accident or something, and all we could do was stand there, like our feet were glued to the wood floorboards.

"Yes, sir."

We ran behind schedule getting ready downstairs cause everyone was lollygagging, taking their guesses as to which way Tyler mighta gone and how far he was gonna get.

"If he's smart, he took the river," Whitey said. "Everyone knows to go to the river. He'd have to be stupid to take the roads."

Whitey was using a small mirror in the back of his locker to get his tie just right. He was crazy like that. He wore a tie even when he didn't have to.

As I thought about it, following the river seemed like the right way to go, like something you'd see in the movies. If Tyler got super hungry, he could always spear a fish or something.

In the sink room, I noticed Nick sitting at the foot of the stairs. He was reading that little New Testament of his, but every once in a while, I saw him look up and listen to the commotion. He either knew where Tyler was, or he was all relaxed cause he knew how it was gonna end. Nothing fazed that kid, man. Nothing.

Brother Ray came back from a meeting with Papa and pulled Nick aside. "Nick, come here a minute," he said.

Nick followed him into his closet under the stairwell. Except for the sound of the sinks and guys brushing their teeth or clinking their razors against the sink, the commotion stopped. We all stood at attention, watching, waiting for some sort of verdict.

Something about being in the "need to know" group, like Nick, appealed to me. To be important. Somebody who others relied on. Someone who could solve problems. Someone whose name got called when it mattered.

When they finished talking, Nick came out holding a jug of water. He trotted around all us rubberneckers to his footlocker. He was pretty focused about it. He pulled some ankle weights from the bottom of his footlocker and wrapped them around the top laces of his steel toe military boots. Then he threw the jug of water and a sweatshirt into a backpack that he hoisted over his shoulders and ran out of the dorm into the dark morning sky.

Jude looked at me. "Dude, Nick's crazy. He just packed on, like, fifteen pounds for the extra burn. What a nut."

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Seventeen. I know. He's a beast for seventeen. It's a good thing he's saved, or he'd knock us all out."

"So, they trust him not to run away?"

“Nick? No. Nick is practically a junior worker. He already told Mama and Papa that he feels called to stay on after he graduates.”

To be trusted like that.

Nick went solo, but he wasn't the only one who went looking. On our way up to school, Papa came out and took Dawson and Sutter, a pretty yoked up kid from Denver, the one that had pretty bad acne. He was one of the preacher boys in the choir too. They hopped in Papa's blue Silverado and headed down the road, all zealous for the cause, soldiers in the Lord's army. I wanted to go along for the ride, be one of the lucky ones to get a break from the routine, but I knew I couldn't be one of them. If I found Tyler, I wouldn't a stopped him. I probably woulda snuck him some food or a pocketknife or something. I just wasn't cut out to be a preacher boy, no matter what the perks.

There was no word all day. We went to school, said our memory verses, hauled wood, and carried on with everyday life at Mount Zion, only with a small wrench in the gears. Everyone dying for details to drop from the sky. That's how life was at Mount Zion. It was so routine, monotonous, and boring that anything out of the ordinary made the sun stand still. We couldn't comb our hair or take a bite of food without wondering what was gonna happen in the next five minutes, and it was relieving to have something in the present worth talking about, other than the Bible.

Brother Ray passed out letters at dinner, cause Nick was still gone. Nothing for me. Meals were usually pretty quiet, cause we weren't really allowed to talk, unless we had guests or something, but that night, it was a lot quieter than normal. I think everyone was getting worried cause the sun was going down. It was so quiet, you could have heard a mouse fart.

Later on when we were taking showers, Jack walked in and set his bar of soap on the wall and called “next” on Jude’s shower, across from me. It was the nicest shower we had. The back two had a little trough, where whoever built it didn’t know how to level the concrete, and the water built up and got all stagnant. The guys said that’s why we got jungle rot, cause there was some sort of worms in it. You’d think what our parents were paying, and how much they worked us, we’d have some stinkin tile in the shower. Or even ceilings for that matter, so the wires didn’t hang down next to all the showers. But everything about our dorm was worn down, broken, or it was a pre-historic hand-me-down. Whitey and Combos were in the worm showers. I tried to stay out of those cause my moms still hadn’t sent me shower shoes. The two front showers just dribbled water, and nobody used them, cause if you did, they’d eat up all the pressure to the other four. It was either pressure in four, or pressure in none. So the front two were out of operation. Mostly guys stood in those while they waited for one of the other four to open up. Jack waited in the open one diagonal from me. We were all listening to Combos tell a story about this kid, Jason Holland, who left a few months before I got there.

“I’m telling you, dews, I ain’t lying. Kid had grapefruits for balls.”

He kept spitting out the side of his mouth into the rot canal. He missed a few times, and his spit would crawl down the wall.

“Check this out, this other time, Holland ran away when Sutter was on the dumper. Just took off. Yelling bout how he was tired a being a slave. Can you magine Sutter? Like, ‘Dew, get back here,’ trying to push out his loaf. He didn’t even wipe. He just pulled up his pants and ran after him, yelling, ‘Stop, you little punk!’ J eats it outside by the stove, and Sutter does some

crazy wrestling move and spears him on his back. Then get this. It gets crazier. To teach him not to run, Sutter and Hutchins hogtied him.”

“You mean Dawson?” Whitey asked.

“What?”

“It was Sutter and Dawson, after he got saved.”

“Oh yeah, dew, you’re right. It was stinkin Dawson. But whatever, they got his hands all tied up to his ankles and started rolling him around. I’m telling you, J was little, but he didn’t care. He didn’t take crap from nobody. Specially you mess with Micah, his little brother. Ask Jude. He got Jude one time pretty stinkin good for pushing Micah or some junk, haw dew?”

“Yeah. He got me alright. It was a cheap shot though.”

“Who cares, Jude? Don’t get all butt hurt about it. I ain’t sayin you ain’t tough. I’m just saying the kid didn’t mess around.”

“No, he didn’t, cause he didn’t know how to think before doing something.”

“You mess with him or Micah, kid would snap. So, anyway, where was I before Jude got all butt hurt? Oh yeah, so, a bunch of guys jumped in and started kicking dirt in his face, sweeping his face with a broom, rolling him back and forth and junk, you know? Stretchin him out more. Veins started bulging outta his neck and on his forehead, and he was yelling all kinds of junk, cussing up a storm. When they finally got him calmed down enough to untie him, guess what Dew did? He stood up, dusted off a little, then decked Sutter in the face, and bolted. Right there. No lead, nothing.”

“Yeah, J had a rough year, man,” Whitey said. “And that’s exactly why he was the only kid ever to be on orientation the entire time he was here. Wouldn’t stop running. I remember

when they started making him sleep naked. Remember that, Combos? That night was pretty nuts too.”

“Oh yeah, dew. It took, like, six guys to hold him down and get his underwear off. He just kept yelling he wasn’t nobody’s little N word we’re not allowed to say anymore, thanks to Ali,” Combos yelled, hoping Ali would hear. “You guys remember the day J came in?”

“Oh yeah,” Jude said. “How can I forget? That blood on his shirt.”

“I remember that,” Jack agreed.

“Yeah, that was nuts, dew,” Combos said. “I remember he told me one of the undercover cops his mom hired to transport him told him, ‘You think Rodney King was bad?’ after he threw him into the car.”

“When you think about it, I bet that had something to do with why he killed that cop’s son,” Whitey said.

“I heard it was self defense,” Jude replied.

“Yeah,” Whitey said.

“What do you mean a cop’s son?” I asked.

“They went in, allegedly to steal some dope from this kid, who just happened to be an LAPD officer’s son.”

“Of course, right?” Combos said. “Stinkin crooked cops. He was probably slangin for his pops. Bet nobody ever investigated that.”

“Micah went into the fort first,” Whitey continued, “and I guess he didn’t come back for a while, so J went in to see what was up. He heard a fight going on when he walked up to the kids’ fort, and he ran in and saw this kid working Micah. So, Jason, being crazy and seeing some cop’s son beating up on his brother, jumped on the kid. And the only reason J ever pulled the knife was cause there was two of them, and they started

kicking him in the face with their steeltoes. He started swinging around, trying to defend himself, got a piece of the kid's lung, and it was game over."

"Dew was mano y mano. At that point, it's combat for your life."

"Let me guess, and ye'all think J should go free?" Jack asked outta nowhere. "Even though he done killed him?"

"Course, you idiot," Combos ripped back. "It was self defense. I don't know about Podunk, Arkansas, but in the civilized world, if somebody tries to kill you, you can defend yourself."

"So, if somebody breaks into your house to steal your junk, you can't fight em?"

"I did say 'allegedly,'" Whitey clarified.

"It don't even make sense," Combos interrupted. "They stole money from some other lady earlier that day, but Micah didn't go in there to steal. I'll tell you dew's what happened. Something went down. I think them corrupt prosecutors made that up to put em away. Give em life with no possibility a parole."

"Yeah, I don't think it adds up either," Jack said. "Jason wouldn't have sent Micah into a fort in the middle of the day with guys there to steal something. If they planned on stealing something, J woulda done it, or they woulda waited till nobody was there. Something about that story ain't adding up."

"Exactly, numb nuts," Combos scoffed. "They weren't breaking in, but even if they were, I don't care. What's worse, dealing drugs to kids or stealing?"

Combos spat on the floor before continuing. "Far as I'm concerned, if they wanna say he stole, then punish him for stealing. But other than that, J was defending himself, and the little cop kid started some combat he couldn't finish. Someone starts

kicking my head in with a boot, you better believe I'ma swing anything I can get my hands on."

"What do you think if they didn't break in, Jack?" Whitey asked. "If it really was self defense? Do you still think they should get life with no possibility of parole?"

"What are you asking him for?" Combos said, laughing. "He got a peanut for a brain. Member, it got all mashed in."

"Just let the guy state his case. I'm interested to know what he thinks."

Jack wasn't interested in the discussion after Combos' remark. He smirked at Combos. "At least I don't weigh three hundred pounds."

"It's three hundred and fourteen, you Arkansas bumpkin. And at least I can fix my problem. You ain't got no hope, you hillbilly. Look at you, face half metal. You think you ever gonna score some chick, dew? Why don't you tell everyone the real reason you been here longer than anyone else? Ain't no cure for stupid. I will mess you up, dew. I ain't lyin'."

Jack wasn't one to go on and on talking. He walked over and got in Combos' face. They stood there for a minute, nose to nose, with Whitey standing a few inches from Jack, scrubbing shampoo into his hair.

"Come on you guys," Whitey said. "Cool it. Plus, Combos is stinkin naked."

"Say when, dew, and I'm down. I'll go a couple rounds naked. I don't care, dew. I'll mess you up."

Jack backed away. Combos nodded. "That's a good choice, dew." Then Jack picked up Combos' soap dish, turned around, and chucked it at his face. Combos jumped out of his shower like a raging bull.

"That's it, dew!"

He rammed into Jack, driving him into my shower. I jumped out of the way just in time, and they smacked into the back wall, both swinging away, rolling around under the water. Jude jumped in and grabbed Combos off Jack. They were all sliding around, privates flopping all over the place. Jack's towel had come off and was soaked.

"I'll kill you, Jack! Stinkin hillbilly!"

Jude pushed Combos back into his shower, and Whitey stood in front of my shower, while Jack got up and secured his towel. He didn't seem to mind it being all wet. He was still grinning.

"Cool it, guys," Whitey said. "Your junk's all hanging out. Come on. It's stinkin nasty, or as Sam likes to say, it's stinkin nakty."

"I ain't as dumb as you think, Combos," Jack said.

We all settled back into our showers, rinsing off. I don't know what was happening to me, but there was something about a good fight that really got my blood flowing. It was starting to make sense to me, like a natural instinct had been woken up. I wanted them to go at it some more, see somebody land something. I wanted to see some blood.

"No. You dumb as you look."

"Stinkin save it, guys. Geez. And Jack, I still want to know what you think. You think J deserves to be in jail for the rest of his life for that? Cause I don't. Maybe he deserves to do some time, but I mean, throw away the key? Really? It's not like he went out and murdered someone in cold blood."

Jack looked down, rolling his towel a little tighter to keep it up on his waist. He looked around at us, then looked at me for some reason. "I think Mount Zion is guilty," he said. "They the one's screwing us all up."

“Well, Amen, Jack!” Combos yelled, walking over to Jack to shake his hand. “Maybe you ain’t as dumb as you look. Why didn’t you just say that in the first place?”

But Jack wasn’t just saying it. I could tell by the sparkle in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to do something about it. And that’s when the words came flying out of my stupid mouth.

“You know if we had enough guys, we could shut this place down.”

“Shut up, Sam,” Jude warned.

“You ain’t the first person to think that, that’s for sure, dew,” Combos said. “The Persian Prince wants to set up his empire.”

“Persian?”

“Don’t even play, dew. You look like one of dem homies at 7-eleven, easy, don’t he?”

I wasn’t sure what a Persian was. Most of the guys that worked at 7-eleven where I lived wore these funny hats, and had dots between their eyebrows. Pretty sure they were Indian.

“You right, though.” Jack said, going back to the idea. “Just depends what guys joining you. You couldn’t get by Graham.”

“I’m not saying I’d do it, I’m just sayin.”

Thanks to Jack’s comment, I was able to turn it into a joke. I played the whole, ‘I’m a lover, not a fighter’ bit, and told them Graham told me a story about how some kid asked him if he wanted to start a revolt with him. I think most of the guys brushed it off cause it was something everyone thought about from time to time. But there was nothing funny about it. I hadn’t brushed it off, and I knew Jack wasn’t going to either.

At lights out that night, there was still no word about Tyler. Dawson came back with Papa right before dinner, but Nick

was still out. Jude said he'd stay out until he found him or until he got so hungry he couldn't go on.

"It's not Nick I'm worried about," I said.

"Tyler's fine. Ain't nothing that's gonna kill you out there. What, you ain't never camped under the stars before? Ain't gonna kill you. And if it does, well, he shouldn't a ran."

A few hours later, a loud thud woke me up, and the first thing I saw were red and blue lights crawling up the cedar walls, across the ceiling. Little Timmy was outta bed. It was his feet that thudded against the floor when he hopped down from his bunk. He was standing at one of the two windows in the back, peeking out through the curtains.

"It's T-Dogg," he said. "With a cop. He's talking with Papa and Brother Ray. Chris's down there too."

"Get back in bed, Timmy!" Dawson yelled.

Alls I could think about was some movie I saw when I was a kid, where this boy kept running away from his school, with his sister or something, until they caught him one time and broke his legs. He never walked the same again.

The night T-Dogg got caught, Jude went downstairs with the rest of the preacher boys to find out what happened. Or, like I told Jude, to go talk about the past. I swear it was a party downstairs. They were all talking so loud, none of us could sleep. Except Tyler. He was out soon as he hit his bunk.

I guess some guy from Victory saw him walking down the highway with his thumb out. He recognized the yellow shirt, so he pulled over and offered him a ride. He never let on that he knew Tyler was a Mount Zion kid, and Tyler thought he was on his way out of Dodge. Until they pulled up to Sheriff Hale's office. Can you imagine? Run all that way, only to have some Christian lie to you and throw you back to the wolves. Chris said once Tyler got cuffed, he spit on the guy. Combos and a few other guys heard what I heard and got a kick out of it.

"You're my hero, T-Dogg!" Combos yelled across the room.

"Go to bed, Combos!" Dawson yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

After school the next day, Chris and Nick took Tyler up to Papa's office. The rest of us went back down to the dorm, got ready for work, and waited for Brother Ray to assign jobs. Most of the guys went out on the porch, but Jude wanted to do some

curls for the girls, so we were down in the mudroom pumping iron with a few other guys. I had never lifted weights before, but it seemed like a good idea to try and get a little bigger. Just in case I got in another scrap. Nobody bothered the bigger guys.

When Brother Ray finished rapping with some of the guys, he called everyone into the sink room. He was sitting on a footlocker, lacing up his boots. Jude and I put away the weights, and I sat down on the sinks, waiting for the other guys to arrive. It seemed like as good a time as any to talk.

“Brother Ray, can I ask you a question?”

“You just did,” he said, laughing.

“Can I ask you another one?”

“You did.”

“I mean ...”

“I know what you mean. What’s your question, Sam?”

“I just don’t understand why we have to stay here if we don’t want to be here. Like, why don’t we get a choice?”

“Well, for one, you’re not an adult yet, and your mama chose to send you here.”

Tully, this other kid from SoCal, walked in and joined the conversation. When I first arrived, he secretly asked me if I had heard any new Pearl Jam songs, so I knew he was cool.

“I agree with Sam. I still think we should get a choice,” Tully said. “I mean, unless you’re court-ordered, like Combos, or you got half a brain like Jack.”

The rest of the guys had all filed in and found a spot along the wall or on the floor.

“It just seems unfair to me to hold someone here,” I pressed, “and force God down their throat. Like, why do I have to pray and read the Bible? Why can’t I read the Book of Mormon or something?”

“Well, for starters, Mormonism is a cult,” Brother Ray answered.

“But how do I know that? What if Mormons are out there saying Baptists are a cult? Why don’t I get to decide for myself?”

“Cause you’re just a kid. Listen guys, I understand how you feel, I do. And I know this is hard. But look, if you weren’t sent here, you would never have met me.”

He was half joking when he said it, but I’m telling you, it struck something with every guy in that room. We all knew he was right. I’d only known the guy a few weeks, but when he said that, I knew he was the closest thing to a dad I’d ever have.

“I love you guys, okay? This ain’t always easy. Not for any of us. Trust me, I miss being back home too, but we’ll get through it.”

I’d never really thought of it that way. He was from Piedmont, so his family wasn’t too far away, and he usually went to see them on his days off, but he was still making sacrifices too. Like, he coulda been out looking for a wife or something, but he chose to be there with us, a bunch of bad seeds. Not even our parents wanted that job. He looked around at all of us to show us that he meant it, and then he came and put his arm around me.

“Alright Sam?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Five, ten years from now, ye’all gonna look back on this and see how much stronger it made ya. Like iron sharpenin’ iron. There’s gonna be friction, sure. That’s part of the process. But you’ll be surprised how fast time flies, and you’ll be back home before you know it, sharper than ever. You can’t see it now, but every single boy in this room, and Tyler and Chris and Nick, God has a purpose, and He who began a good work will be faithful to complete it. Amen?”

“Amen.”

I didn't really believe what he was saying, but I believed where it was coming from. He had our backs.

“Now, listen up. I need a few volunteers to go wash Papa's truck.”

Jude raised his hand, of course.

Two girls were out on the deck in front of the kitchen. One of them was the girl who sat in front of us at Victory. They were breaking down boxes and tossing them to the fence as we walked by with our buckets. The one girl smiled at Jude, and he smiled back.

“Hey Julie,” he said.

“Hey Jude.”

“Thought we weren't allowed to talk to the girls, dude,” I whispered.

“Dude, I'm not talking to them. I'm offering to help.”

Seemed like communicatin to me, but I didn't make a stink about it. I didn't really care, but you know me, always gonna say something. I just wanted to give him a hard time and let him know two could play his game.

Jude scrambled for something else to say, trying his best to keep the conversation going for as long as he could. “You need us to take them boxes out?”

“Probably. It's not like we can do it.”

She and the other girl laughed. Jude soaked it up, grinning ear to ear.

“I'll go ask Mama,” Julie said.

“Alright, we'll be right here, washing Papa's truck.”

Papa parked his truck on the driveway between his back porch and Mama's garden, backed up close to the fence. We set down our buckets and walked around the front of the office to get the hose, over by the new girls' dorm.

"Why do they keep the girls locked up and not us?" I asked.

"Cause they'd be running every day. They didn't always have the gate, but they had to put it up, cause girls kept running away. One girl actually made it all the way to St. Louis fore they caught her."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, I ain't lying. Another girl somehow got out after the gate was up, and we never found her."

"I thought nobody ever got past the state line."

"They don't think she did. They think she mighta got hit by a truck, actually." Jude loosened the hose from the spigot and threw it over his shoulder.

"Geez. That's crazy. I thought the fence was just to make sure we aren't hooking up."

"Yeah, that's part of it too. I wasn't here, but the guys used to be able to talk to the girls after their year. If they was doing good with the Lord, of course."

"This place would only be half as bad if we could talk to the girls."

"I know. It'd be pretty fresh. But some idiots screwed it up. That's what always happens whenever we get privileges. Guys and girls were sneaking out and hooking up, I guess."

Guys at Mount Zion were always saying "fresh." I hated it. But after a few weeks, I warmed up to it, because the older, cooler kids from California were saying it. It didn't take long before I was saying it all over the place, even using it in my letters

home to make sure whoever was reading them knew I was still cool.

“Oh no,” I said. “Can’t have that.”

On our way back to Papa’s truck, Nick, Chris, and Tyler walked out of the front office. We crossed paths at the end of the walkway in front of the driveway. Tyler noticed me staring. His face was a thousand words, none of which were remorse. He was hard to read, but I guessed either he was pissed that I hadn’t gone with him, or he was thinking about how he was gonna run next time.

“Where ye’all headed?” Jude asked.

“Out to the field,” Chris replied. “Papa said if Tyler wants to run so bad, he can run laps as much as he likes.”

“How many laps?”

“Until dinner.”

“Oh, that stinks, man.”

“Let’s go, guys,” Nick said.

“How many swats he get?”

“Ten. Every day till Friday.”

Something in the way Chris said it pissed me off. All high and mighty, like Tyler deserved it. I don’t know, maybe he did, and I was just taking his side cause he stopped Graham from killing me, but it seemed like they were going too far. And trust me, I know how it feels when Christians take it too far. When I was in sixth grade, my moms did the same thing to me after I got an office referral for cussing out my PE teacher. Looking back, I’m sure there were better ways of handling the situation, but my moms never even cared about my side of the story. I was just trying to protect her. Here was this guy, this short yoked out dude, who came out of nowhere, started hanging around my house, working out with my older brother, Gabe, giving eyes to

my moms. Everyone at school made fun of the guy for the way he talked. I don't know if he had a speech impediment or what, but I didn't want him and my moms going anywhere, and it was embarrassing when kids found out he was hanging out at my house. I mean, he lived in the maintenance yard at Calvary. Not exactly the guy you want going after your moms. One day it just got the best of me.

"Here's an idea," I said, the entire class tuned in. "Why don't you quit coming over to my house and eating all our food?"

"That's it, Sam. After your laps, we're going up to the office."

"I don't care. Stay away from my moms, you fucking dwarf."

But my moms never even asked me why. She was so embarrassed, she couldn't stop hitting me. She had this Jokari racquetball paddle. I didn't know her to ever play racquetball, so I'm not sure why she had the thing, but she got her money's worth, that's for sure. When she called me into her bedroom and told me to pull down my pants and bend over, she was so irate, her eyes were like hot black coals, and she had smoke coming out her ears. It was so bad that, when she finished, I ran into the bathroom with Jake, and I had these huge purple ovals covering my entire ass. One on each cheek. I don't think I've ever seen my brother so mad in my entire life. He almost ripped the door down and started yelling down the hall at my moms.

"Child abuser! You're a child abuser!"

"Oh, I'll show you child abuse!" she yelled back.

But that wasn't enough for my moms. Nope. She had to take it further. After thirty-six licks, she called up Calvary and insisted they put me to work after school every day. I was off the basketball team, and instead of practicing with my friends until she picked me up from daycare, I was cleaning toilets and wiping bird shit off the lunch tables for three months.

Anyway, I'm just saying, I know what happens when Christians take it too far. It never ends well. It's like Proverbs says, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city." All they were doing was pissing Tyler off and teaching him to be smarter about it next time. And, I mean, when it comes down to it, it's not like he was hurting nobody. He just didn't want to be at Mount Zion, like anybody else in their right mind. But whatever. I'm just saying. Junk like that'll mess you up.

When Jude and I got back over to Papa's truck, the gate was open, and Julie and the other girl were setting out the boxes and some bags.

"Jude, Mama wants you to take this out to the compost pit."

We walked over to the gate to grab the trash, not even two feet from the girls. I coulda touched one of them if I wanted to. Jude and Julie were all smiles. That close, I noticed how different the girls were from each other. They weren't just quiet, submissive little robots in culottes. There were real girls under those makeupless faces and bangs, who, just like us, were unfit to be among the general population.

Julie held a heavy ring of keys in her hands. I wasn't really into either of them, but if we really wanted to, we could have all hopped in Papa's truck and been gone. Just like that. It seemed so simple.

"Careful with that one," Julie said, looking at Jude. "It has a lot of fragile stuff in it."

"This one?" Jude asked, picking it up.

"Yep."

"Will do."

It took us a few trips, but we got everything hauled up to the burn pit.

Julie and the other girl were gone when we got back and finally got started on the truck. Of course, Jude wouldn't let go of the hose. He elected himself solo rinser, so I had to do all the hard work. I followed him around with a sponge, scrubbing all the mud and bugs he couldn't get off with the hose. It was caked all over the wheel wells and running boards.

Jude was so busy checking the deck for Julie that he kept spraying me by accident. It actually felt kinda good, so I didn't say nothing.

When Jude walked over to turn off the hose, I lifted the door handle to Papa's truck. Both sides were locked. I had never driven a car before, and the only time I ever tried to ride a little 50 CC, I crashed it into our fence, but my wheels were spinning and I was curious to know if he left it unlocked. Things were changing fast, and I wasn't as afraid as I was just the night before. Either my balls were growing or, like Brother Ray told me after I got swats, when desperation exceeds your fears, progress begins.

T-Dogg ran laps until the sun went down. And just in case he thought about trying anything crazy, Nick sat at one corner of the field, reading his little orange KJV, feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of fear, and Chris was on the other side, whacking weeds around the edge of the field with a sling blade, his two-edged sword of truth. When T-Dogg finished, he came down to the dorm looking beat down and ripe with mildew sweat. His spirit was gone, and there was a heavy cloud over him. I wanted to run up to Papa's office, douse it with gasoline, and light a match.

They didn't break his legs or nothing, but they might as well have. After that, T-Dogg didn't talk to nobody. He hardly even

looked at anybody. At choir, he just kept his head down, like he was thinking through word problems.

Guess I wasn't the only one changing. We were all changing. Becoming good godly young men.

Toward the end of the week, T-Dogg started to pull out of his funk. He still wasn't talking to the rest of us, but he was talking with Brother Ray. After they told him he didn't have to run no more, he was chillin over at Brother Ray's bunk. I'm pretty sure they were talking about Jesus, cause when I woke up later that night to take a leak, I went downstairs and they were still at it, sitting outside Brother Ray's closet with a Bible open. I'm telling you, Brother Ray could get through to anybody.

I kept getting into scuffles with guys. Over stupid crap too. This kid Hodge and I were body boxing, and one of my punches brushed off his shoulder and got him in the ear. He wiggled out and started pushing me and getting all crazy. I wasn't gonna do nothing about it, but then all the guys started cheering and junk, and I didn't have much of a choice after that. I popped him in the lip. It wasn't too bad. He had braces, so his lip was busted up pretty good, but nothing else. Plus, I think I got the worst of it. My knuckle was gushing blood. I didn't care though. At least he shut up.

I got in another one at movie night over a stinkin chair. We had these two comfy chairs we pulled in from the orientation

rooms, and it was first come first serve. Most of the guys brought pillows and laid on the floor, so it wasn't usually no big deal.

After I grabbed my plate, I noticed one of the chairs was still open, so Jude let me run and grab it. This kid, Bones, came running up, fussing about it.

"I had that seat, Sam."

"I don't see your name on it."

"Ask Whitey. I called it. And that's my plate right there. I just ran back to grab my pop."

I looked down at the plate sitting on the floor. "Well, you don't have to cry about it, dude."

"I ain't crying about it, but you ain't sitting there."

I sniffled like I was crying, and with my free hand, I pretended to rub out some tears. He snapped like a speckled king.

Good thing I saw it coming, or I woulda got clocked in the eye. I turned a little, so he got me on the side of the head. I threw my plate down and locked him up for a takedown, but Dawson came flying in and tackled him into the chair.

"You're lucky," I said. "I was about to mess you up."

"Yeah right, Sam. Stingin like a bee. I'm way too quick for you."

"Ha-ha. Quick? You mean 'cheap shot.' Just like you did with Ali. You're too much of a girl to fight square."

He jumped up, but Dawson had him by the arm, holding him back. I was shaking and crap, but I wasn't about to back down for nothing. I'm not the best fighter, but something happens when you get hit. You just don't feel nothing no more. I was shaking, but I was stinkin ready.

"I told you, you weren't sitting here," he said.

I thought about taking a swing, just to wipe the cocky grin off his face, but Dawson stepped in. "What makes you think

you get the chair, dude? Yeah right. You two wanna fight over a stinkin chair? I'm sittin in it now."

"It ain't about the chair," Bones said, "but you're right. I shouldn't a punched him." He put out his hand for a shake. "My bad, Sam. We good?"

Bones had a pretty witchy temper, but he was pretty cool. He was one of the few kids who was any good at ball, and he liked the Bulls, so we actually got along pretty good. I still wanted to punch him in the face to make it even, but whatever. I shook his hand, and we laughed it off. Funny thing is, then we sat together and watched the movie.

It was right around that time I wrote my moms and told her to tell my brother, Jacob, that if there was anything good about Mount Zion, it was that I was learning to fight, and he better watch out, cause when I got back, I was gonna work him.

It was like every punch I took, I started to feel like I could take anybody. Except Nick, of course. I still knew he would kick my butt any day of the week. He could take anyone. But I was moving up in the pecking order, that's for sure.

On Saturday morning, Brother Ray woke us up an hour early, all jolly, singing a song from tour choir. "*Singing I go, along life's road, praising the Lord, praising the Lord.*"

Everyone complained about it at first, mumbling, "What the heck? It's still dark out. This is a sick joke, sir." Combos' line was the best: "If God ain't up yet, why we gotta be?"

Brother Ray didn't care. He just kept smiling and singing, walking around and making sure guys were rolling out. All happy and crap. He wrapped his arm around Tyler and gave him a noogie.

After we finished making our beds and counting off, he stopped singing. "Listen up, ye'all," he said.

"Please don't tell me we're painting again!" Combos yelled.

"No. But I have some bad news."

That got everyone's attention real quick.

"I talked with Papa last night about getting some free time today. I told him I thought you guys needed it, and I asked if there was anything we could do today. He told me ..."

We were all hanging in suspense.

"He told me we have some old canoes behind the tractors in the woodshed, and we should take em down to the Saint Francis."

The guys went absolutely nuts, jumping up and down, yelling and running through the bunks. I even got in on it a little. I grabbed Ali and started shaking him to death, hollering in his face, "Whoooooooooooo!"

Anything to break the routine.

The sun was cooking by the time we got down to the river. It was like we were in the Amazon. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but it still felt like it was raining. And all kinds of noises were lurking behind the trees on the riverbank. Buzzing, chirping, skittering. Noises you only ever heard on the Discovery Channel.

The water was pretty muddy looking from all the silt, I guess. That's what Brother Ray said. He also said to look out for copperheads and snapping turtles, but the guys didn't care. They were all pumped up. Even after Whitey spotted a snake in the water, guys jumped in, swimming alongside their canoes, pretending they were gonna flip people, splashing with their paddles. Like a

bunch of kids at a waterpark. I was probably the only kid there worried about what might go wrong.

Dawson flipped his canoe on purpose. He was paired up with little Timmy, and Timmy kept getting tired, making Dawson do all the work, so Dawson flipped it to give him a taste of his own medicine.

“You ain’t gonna paddle,” he yelled, “you can float! I ain’t doing all the work, punk.”

You woulda thought Timmy couldn’t swim, he was screaming so loud. Everyone cracked up.

Jude turned into the ultimate frontiersman, all focused on being out front, so we dug in, paddling as hard as we could. He kept getting on my case. “Dude, get your paddle in the water. You’re splashing me like crazy.”

The original plan was to canoe all the way down to Sam A. Baker and meet Brother Mike there with the trailer and hop in the back of the dump truck for a ride back, but after Jude spotted a rock to jump off, he asked Brother Ray if we could stop and swim for a while. Brother Ray was cool about it, and he gave us an hour to goof around.

“Stay close!” he yelled.

“Yes, sir.”

Most of the guys parked their canoe next to Brother Ray along a sloping sandbar across the river from the rock. All Jude cared about was being the first to jump, so we paddled over to a small bank right beneath the rock. It looked twice as high when we got up under it.

“Come on, Sam.”

“No way.”

“Dude, come on. Don’t tell me you’re scared. It’s like ten feet.”

I was terrified of heights, but no way I was letting on. “Dude, I ain’t going in that water.”

“Fine, suit yourself, wuss.”

Jude turned around, scanning the bank for a way up. I hopped out and sat down on the rocks and noticed Combos and Jack coming in pretty hot, about to hit our canoe. They looked like Laurel and Hardy.

“Give us a hand, Sam!” Jack yelled from the bow.

“Dew, you pop a hole in this thing, and you’re on your own.”

I grabbed my paddle and stabbed the side of their canoe, barely stopping them from T-boning ours, and they slid up onto the rocks.

“How’d I end up with numb nuts? That’s all I wanna know.”

“You guys!” Jude yelled from behind us. “I think I found a way up.”

I turned around, and he was standing on a bluff, ripping his shirt off, beating on his chest like Tarzan. “Brother Ray!” he yelled across the river. “Is it okay if I leave Sam here with Jack and Combos to go jump? He’s too afraid.”

“Combos, Jack!” Brother Ray yelled back. “You got him?”

“Yes, sir!” they answered.

Jack raised his eyebrow, and he was thinking the same thing I was. My stupid idea. Only for different reasons. I needed to let him know I wasn’t really serious.

“Go ahead, Jude, but put your shirt back on. Everyone keep their clothes on.”

“Ahhh, come on, I want to get rid of this farmer’s tan,” Jude complained.

“I need to zap these zits for my visit coming up!” Tully yelled. “Come on, Brother Ray.”

“You ever want to come out here again, keep your clothes on,” he replied.

“Yes, sir.”

Jude disappeared into the trees, and Jack dragged their canoe up onto the rocks to keep it from drifting. Combos plopped down right next to me.

“How old you, Sam?”

“Almost fifteen.”

“Fourteen? Damn, dew, you just a pup. They take em younger and younger every year. When I first came in, everybody was like sixteen at least. You just a baby.”

I thought about asking him why he called me Persian, but I figured it was better to let it die. I didn’t really want to bring attention to it.

“I don’t care if you cuss in front of me. I ain’t gonna tell or nothing,” I said, playing it cool.

Jack looked over with that grin of his, his eye all bugging. I felt a sudden panic, like the feeling you get when you’re falling, or like you’re about to crash into something. It sat in my gut while I waited.

“You got money, they’ll take you in any age. Whad you do to get sent here, Sam?” Jack asked.

“Chh. Nothing.”

“You steal a candy bar or something, dew?” Combos asked, laughing.

“No. I mean, I stole a bunch a crap, but I’m pretty sure my moms sent me cause I got kicked outta this lame Christian school she wanted me to go to.”

“Wait, you went to Christian school?”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to, cause they suck at basketball, so I told the principal I had no spiritual desire. Basically, that I didn’t

really wanna be a Christian. And they were trying to get rid of kids who didn't have a heart for the Lord, so he told my moms I couldn't come back unless I had a change of heart. And my moms was like, okay, I'll change his heart."

"Haha. That's classic, dew. Classic. You're probably the first Christian ever sent here."

"Yeah. That's what Jude said. But I wasn't, like, a Christian or nothing."

Last thing I wanted was Combos or Jack thinking I was a Christian.

"Like, dew," Combos continued, "what's the worst thing you've ever done?"

"I don't know. Stealing crap. Sneaking out to see my girlfriend. Cussing. My moms didn't like my music either."

I left out my addiction to porn, of course. The cool kids don't look at porn cause they don't have to. They just go out and pull wool.

"Seriously, dew. I bet I did more shit in one week than you did in your whole life." He spat out the side of his mouth into the river and then looked at me. "You ever think of running, Sam?"

The first thing you learn at Mount Zion is that everyone is a threat somehow. You can't trust nobody. It's like everyone's in a deep ditch, clawing and fighting for their own way out. One wrong word could turn you into someone else's stepstool. Or, piss off the wrong kid, and they might try to stick a pencil in your neck while you sleep. Let's put it this way. You basically spend your first few days unraveling all the reasons you would ever have to trust anyone. The only reason I decided to open up a little was cause I was also beginning to learn that I needed friends if I was gonna make it. Everyone needs someone they

can talk to, you know. Someone that ain't just gonna tell you to shut up and read your Bible. Especially kids like us. Combos probably wasn't the best influence, for sure not if you asked my moms, but I always got along with guys that could make a joke, and all the guys there were there for making bad decisions, so it wasn't like I had some disciples to choose from. I didn't really trust Jack yet, but Combos, I figured he was trusting me, so why not trust him back, you know. Since I had to pretend Tyler didn't exist, it seemed like the best choice I had.

"Yeah, I've thought about it a few times. You guys?"

"Yeah right," Combos said, laughing. "You think I'm gonna get far? No thanks. I'll do my time."

Jack stood there shaking his head, looking across the river. Nobody was coming our way, and Jude was still climbing.

"I thought about stealing Brother Ray's truck when I first came in," Jack said. "Just to see how pissed my pops would get if I pulled up one day."

My palms were getting all sweaty, so I reached down and picked up a few stones to fiddle with.

"Hell, I'd steal his truck just for a joyride. That thing is sweet," Combos said.

"But stealing a car ain't the way to do it. You get caught, and you going to jail. I think the smartest way is, like you was saying, Sam. We get a few guys together and try to take out Papa."

It was a moment of truth. None of us knew what to say. We all stared at each other for a second, taking measurements. Jack's face was so mangled. He just didn't look right in the head. I thought I wanted to tell him I wasn't serious, but in the moment, I found myself reconsidering, unwilling to squash it completely. I knew I should put an end to it, but my heart was already set

like flint. I wanted to shut the place down and laugh in Papa's face.

"Yeah, maybe."

"You, me, a few other guys. Combos, if he has any balls," Jack continued, laughing. "I know we could take out Brother Ray and Brother Mike no problem. We do it right, we might not even have to worry about Nick or Dawson."

"I think you could take em, dew," Combos said. "but I don't think you gonna get anybody down to start a mutiny. Ain't gonna happen."

"Sure it is. That's the easy part. Just the other day we were hauling wood. You shoulda seen how pissed guys were getting when I told em how Papa lies to our parents about what happened at their last home, and how he makes em sign over power of attorney. There's a few guys right there."

"What happened at the last home?" I asked.

"Some girl got stabbed, and they got shut down when the state found out they was paddling pregnant girls and giving their babies up for adoption. He don't say none of that cause he knows parents wouldn't send their kids."

"Holy shit, man. Stabbed?"

"Yeah, some girls stabbed her with a butter knife for tattlin on em."

"You sure about that, dew? Who told you that?" Combos asked, and looked at me. "I don't trust this hick far as I can spit."

"This girl, Laura, shared about it in her testimony, back whenever I first got here. Ask Cagey. He remembers. She was all crying about it and got saved after she confessed to knowing they were gonna hurt the girl."

"Damn, dew, that's some messed up shit. I mean, them girls probably ain't got no business having kids, but you don't separate

a mama from her baby. That's just messed up. I swear, Baptists are straight lunatics. They probably find some verse to back it up, too."

In less than five minutes I had gone from wanting to make sure Jack knew I wasn't really serious about the whole mutiny thing to thinking up ways to convince Combos to join the uprising.

"So why not make them shut the fuck up?" I said, doubling down.

"Easy, tiger. I'm down for that. Not with this hillbilly, though. Look at him, dew. He look like he had a hard time tying his shoelaces."

"At least I can see my shoelaces." Jack said.

"You sure about that, glass eye?"

"What if Nick was in?" I interrupted.

"Oh, hell nah, dew. You get Nick, then yeah, count me in for sures. When you brought it up in the showers, I didn't think you were serious, but you losing your damn mind, dew."

Before I could figure out how to convince Combos that I wasn't going crazy, we all heard Jude yell, and we turned to watch him flying out over the water, his arms flapping like a bird. "Yeeeeeee-hawwww!"

A moment after he splashed down, his head popped out of the water. "Woooo-hoooo! You guys gotta try it."

Jude swam back toward us, but before he got close enough to hear anything, Jack looked at me. "You and me gonna be heroes, Schneider."

"More like homos."

"It's Snyder, dude. Heroes or homos, just get my name right."

Once Jude jumped, everyone swam across to try it.

Jude crawled out of the river onto the rocks and walked over to shake his water all over me. Then he stopped mid shake, and his face flushed with terror. “Don’t move, Combos,” he said.

Combos froze, only his eyes moving. “What is it, dew?”

I turned around and saw a charcoal snake coiled on a rock about two feet behind Combos. I jumped a mile and a half. The only snakes I’d ever seen were behind glass at the zoo.

“Snake!” I yelled.

“What? What kind?” Combos asked. “Tell me it ain’t no cottonmouth.”

“Should I chuck a rock at it?” I asked.

“Just calm down, idiots,” Jude said, picking up a boulder, his wet shoes squeaking as he inched toward it.

“Careful,” Jack said. “That’s a cottonmouth right there. Way deadlier than a copperhead.”

“What are you gonna do, dew?” Combos asked.

“I’m gonna kill it. What do you think?”

“Not like that you’re not.” Jack walked over toward the trees, looking around for something to kill it with.

“What if you miss?” I asked.

“You got a better idea?”

Jack yanked a long branch off a tree. “Jude, let me get her,” he said.

“Oh yeah, that’s way easier.”

Combos’ face went all pale, and he started praying. Like, for real. “God, if you save me, I’ll be good for the rest of my life, I promise.”

Jack walked up behind him and slammed the stick down right behind the snake’s head. Its body started whipping around all crazy. “Get up!” he yelled at Combos.

Combos hopped up and turned around. “Kill that thing, dew!”

Jack pressed harder and harder, smearing the snake’s guts against the rock, until the head finally tore off. He flicked the head into the water, then picked up the snake’s tail and tossed it into the woods. Then he walked over to Combos and offered him the stick.

“Looks like you owe Jesus your life, Combos.”

“Yeah right, dew. Unfortunately, I owe you.”

“I know how you can repay me.”

“Not a chance.”

“Then how bout a Payday Friday night?”

For Friday night dinner plates, we got PBJs, pop, a Payday or a Zero bar, and some popcorn. Unless Mama gave us Moon Pies for singing to her, it was the only time we ever got sweets, and it was good as gold at Mount Zion. Unless you were in my situation and you needed a phonecall, or you needed some stinkin shower shoes, nothing had more value than a Friday night plate.

“Yeah, right. I don’t owe you that much. More like a handful of popcorn. You just did everyone here a favor saving my life, dew. They should be giving you something.”

Combos took the stick and chucked it in the river. Then he took a seat in the canoe. All the guys hopped out of the water and ran over to see the dead snake.

I started walking toward the canoe as well. I wasn’t about to mess around with no poisonous snakes.

“Dude, Sam, let’s go. You’re coming up with me this time.”

“Yeah right. I ain’t going in that water. You’re nuts.”

“Either you come up with me, or you swim across to Brother Ray. I just thought about it, I don’t really trust leaving you with two guys that ain’t walking with the Lord.”

“Hey now, Jude, that ain’t right, dew. Don’t the Bible discourage judging someone else’s heart?”

“I’m not judging your heart. You said it yourself, you don’t believe in God.”

“I know, I just wanted to say that.”

“Can’t I just take the canoe across?” I asked, but Jude wasn’t budging.

“Quit being a little girl, dude. It’s safer in the water anyway.”

He just wanted to make me jump, and he knew I wasn’t gonna wuss out with all the guys standing around. I finally just gave in, and agreed, “Fine.”

We followed Jude up the trail he had cleared. Single file, through branches and brush, like lost boys looking for paradise.

Jude yanked a branch from a tree right next to the edge of the rock, so we could see better. Brother Ray looked like a small Buddha sitting across the river, looking up at us with a hand on his forehead like a visor. Seeing how small him and all the canoes looked, I started having second thoughts. I inched up slowly, a good foot from the ledge, and leaned over to get a better look at how far down it was.

Then Jude, always the cool guy, tackled me, and we were both flying out over the water. I was yelling like a madman.

Normally, I woulda been all pissed, but there ain’t nothing like letting go of fear. Nothing. Soon as I hit the water, I was already thinking about doing it again. And when I came up and heard everyone cheering, it was like I’d been baptized by the Holy Ghost. Clothes and all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MATTHEW JOHN ECHAN is a board-certified behavior analyst and education consultant for emotionally disturbed children and individuals with developmental disabilities. He currently resides in Southern California with his wife, three children, and their small dog. Matthew considers himself a “method writer,” and says when he is not writing, he’s writing.



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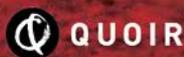
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