

Desire of the Soul

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Desire of the Soul

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Smashwords Edition

ISBN: 9781301237234

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Fight Forever—coming 2014

ONE

Jessica Hall's mind was blank, not thinking of anything as she was flipping through the hundreds of TV channels. She was slouched on the couch after so many days of recording and preparation. She had just released her debut album called *Pieces of Time*. Her album consisted of 12 songs and was a mixture of Pop, Teen Pop, and Hip Hop. It was Jessica's second year with Diamond records; a very popular and big record label. Most of the top Billboard artists were signed with Diamond Records.

The young music sensation had released an EP exactly one year prior to the release of her album. At just the age of 15 she was popular on YouTube gaining 500,000 subscribers and one-hundred million video views. It was then that she started getting noticed by some record labels. After offers from small record labels she decided to wait against the will of her parents. One year later she landed a one million dollar contract with Diamond Records.

Living with her parents and two brothers, Jessica only got to use the TV if no one else was using it. After she came home from the interview earlier today she placed her purse on the couch and plopped on it.

"Oh, come on, I was about to watch something," her brother Phillip said.

"Yeah well I got here first so go do something else," Jessica said.

Right then a music channel popped up. The channel was popular for playing music and interviews with producers or the artists. The song that was playing was the hit *A Time to Love* from Jessica's new album.

"Hey, Jess, that's your song!" Phillip said excited.

"Yeah, I know, I'm the one who made it, doofus," Jessica replied really wanting him to leave.

"Whoa, chill, it was a compliment; no need to get so worked up about it."

The song ended and the host, Dian Hayes, came on and introduced the special guest named Bruce Cooper. Bruce was a big producer but has recently diminished with the rise of Diamond Records. A record label from Bruce's company first offered a contract to Jessica but was rejected after she decided to wait.

"So what do you think of the young sensation Jessica Hall?" Dian asked Bruce.

"Well, the album was a real let down. Most of the songs lacked energy."

Jessica sat straight up and grabbed her purse. She frantically dug her phone out. She was not going to let Bruce Cooper, an old music producer, to put her new album down like that.

Continuing the interview Dian asked, "So, you don't think she is talented?"

"No, no. Of course she is talented. It is the record label which she is signed with is where the problem lies," Bruce replied.

Jessica frantically tapped the screen punching out a tweet to Bruce that said, "You are just jealous that I didn't sign with the outdated Domino Record label. I bet you never had an artist's album go platinum in just the first week!"

Jessica's tweet popped up on the TV which prompted a question from Dian. "Is it true that you tried to sign Jessica, Bruce?"

"Like I said before Jessica is a very talented singer and I do not see what provoked such irrational behavior from her," he replied cautions not to let information about it out.

The TV shut off and Jessica's mother said, "Creep. Why do you even watch this? Plus, don't you have some school work to catch up on?"

"Can't I have a little bit of free time? I come home from an interview and I just want to relax, but no! You have to come along and just ruin it for—" Jessica was stopped by her mother.

"Excuse me! I am still your mother and I expect to be treated with respect! As long as you stay under this roof and eat our food you go by our rules."

"Yeah well what if I don't like them?" Jessica challenged.

"Well, you will just have to wait until you turn 18 in a few weeks."

"Well, I can't wait for my birthday!" With that Jessica stormed out of the living room, her green eyes swelling, and leaving her mother troubled.

Lying on her bed, feeling unloved, Jessica frantically tapped the screen of her phone knocking out a message to her friend Brittany. Brittany, slightly older than Jessica, was Jessica's friend since junior high school. Since then Jessica left school to attend an online school, to have more flexibility, she kept in touch with Brittany.

Just before finishing a math assignment, one of the toughest for Jessica so far, her phone vibrated and almost fell off the table.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Jess, how are you feeling now?"

"Oh hey, Britt. I'm better but still a bit crummy."

"Oh," Brittany said with sympathy in her voice. "Do you want to come over? I can pick you up. Maybe we can grab a bite?"

"Sure thing, I skipped dinner and my parents shouldn't be checking on me any time soon. I still have my shoes on, so I'll just slip out the window. Can you pick me up a few houses down the street?"

"Yeah, sure, anything for my depressed friend."

"I'm not depressed, Britt; it's just my parents and all."

"Yeah, I know it was a joke. See ya in a bit."

"Bye."

Jessica put a sweater on and silently slipped out her bedroom window into the silent sunset sky. She tripped and almost splashed into the pool, but was able to regain her balance. *That was close*, Jessica thought, *note to self: be more careful next time*.

Jessica saw Brittany down the road near Jessica's house and she started waving. Brittany pulled up and Jessica got in the car. Then Brittany said, "Sometimes I wonder why a star like you doesn't have a bigger house."

"Well, it's not like I need one. Plus when I move out then I can get my own house and I won't have to live with those," Jessica paused for a moment.

"Those..." Brittany said trying to draw out the words from Jessica.

"Those people."

"Wow, is that what you call them?"

"Well, I could not think of anything else."

"How about morons?"

"Well sometimes, but you know..."

"Sometimes you are so soft. Only a few times though."

Jessica smiled, but did not have a response. It was true that she was a bit ruthless around people. She was quick to judge and comment. However, whenever the topic was her family she could not feel good about saying something bad about them to her friends.

“Where do you wanna go, Jess?”

“I don’t know a small place; I don’t feel like autographing anything now.”

“The only bad thing about being famous,” Brittany said and smiled.

“Well, there are other things too.”

“Like what?”

TWO

Driving home from a Clippers game Jimmy King felt a craving for a donut like never before. He just had to find a donut shop. His mouth was watering at the thought of the soft dough and the sweetness of the glaze. *Boy, I really need to get one*, Jimmy thought, *oh, there was that one I passed a few minutes ago*. Just a few minutes away from home Jimmy turned his mom’s SUV around and headed towards the donut shop.

It was a small independent place; Jimmy was used to some of the bigger chains so he did not know what to expect. There was only one other car in the parking lot. Jimmy opened the door and he saw the familiar face and long light brown hair of Jessica Hall.

“Hey Je—” Jessica held her finger to her lips indicating him to be quiet. “—ssica,” Jimmy continued softly.

He sat down at the table where Jessica and Brittany were. “What are you guys doing here?” Jimmy asked.

“Just hanging out, what are *you* doing?” Jessica asked

“I just had this huge craving for a donut on my way home from a Clippers game. Do you ever get those?”

“No, never. I do like chocolate though.”

“Ha ha. Excuse me while I go get a donut.”

There was not that big of a selection of donuts to choose from. That didn’t bother Jimmy though, because they had a normal glazed donut. Those were his favorite ones. Out of every donut he tasted he could not find one better than the traditional one. Feeling slightly hungry he ordered three of them. Jimmy sat at the table again and Jessica asked, “Oh, one for everyone?”

Grabbing his donuts Jimmy said, “No, but I can get you one.”

“Hoarder,” Brittany said.

Jimmy and Brittany had only met a few times when they were at Jessica’s house. All Jimmy knew was that Brittany and Jessica went to the same school before Jessica changed schools. Brittany seemed to be a nice and humble person as far as Jimmy could gather. She was also quiet or did not say very much when he was around. “How was the game?” Jessica asked.

“It was great, very close as well. I got sideline seats.”

“Wow, cool. But it was the Clippers so...”

“So what? They are a good team, and they won tonight which made it even better.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. One of Jessica’s songs came on in the shop. Jessica looked up and then said, “Hey, I’m making money now,” a bit too loud.

The cashier paused for a moment then suddenly realized who was sitting in the shop. The girl looked about the same age as Jimmy, 17. He could see that there was someone older in the back taking a nap or something. The cashier went to the back and got a pen and came back to the counter to grab a napkin. She rushed over to the table and enthusiastically asked, "Can you sign this for me?"

Jimmy knew that the only reason that Jessica would be in a small place like this is because she did not want anyone to recognize her. Jessica stalled by taking a sip from her drink. Jimmy looked at the cashier's name tag and said, "Sure, I'd love to Taylor." He grabbed the napkin and pen and wrote his signature on it. He handed it back to the girl with a smile on his face.

Taylor lingered around a little longer waiting for Jessica to act upon her request. "What? You don't like my signature?" Taking the napkin and pen again Jimmy wrote his twitter name on it and said, "Follow me and I will follow you back."

The girl waited a few more moments before taking Jimmy's signature with her back behind the counter. Jessica started to laugh then went over to the counter and grabbed a napkin. With a pen in her hand Jessica signed the napkin and offered it to Taylor.

"Here, sorry for my friend back there, but keep his napkin, he could become famous."

Taylor was in awe and started jumping up and down. "Would like a picture with me as well?" Taylor nodded her head unable to speak.

"Well, do you have a camera?" Jessica asked after a few moments of silence. Taylor rushed to the back and brought her phone back out with her. They took the picture and Jessica sat back down. Jessica looked happy, but I quickly changed to a worried or depressed look. Jimmy decided he should not hang around any longer and let the girls get on with their talking. "I better be leaving before my parents wonder where I am."

Jessica grimaced. *Oops, Jimmy thought, did I say the wrong thing? Well who knows what she thinks, she never tells me anything. Probably Britt knows a thing or two. Why doesn't Jessica ever talk to me about anything? I mean we've known each other for a few years.*

Jimmy wanted to ask Jessica when they would be writing new songs or if or when she would be doing another cover that she needed help with. He decided against it and just walked out.

Jimmy got home with just a few minutes to spare. When he entered the kitchen he found his mom there. She looked at her watch and said, "You're late; I'm gonna have to punish you for that."

"Really mom? Do you wanna know where I was?"

"No, no excuses. Because you were late you are grounded."

Jimmy's mom had him stumped. He looked at the clock and it was the exact time that he needed to be home by. "Mom, look at the clock, it says eleven thirty; and normally you let me stay out later anyway."

"No, we agreed ten thirty. You need to start remembering things correctly son. Now, off to your room."

Jimmy just stood there in the kitchen dumbfounded. He didn't know what to say other than "Sorry." He turned around and started to walk towards his room. His mom came up behind him and shouted, "April fools!"

“But it isn’t even April.”

“So, that doesn’t mean that I can’t do one now.”

“Well then name it something else. But you really had me there.”

“How was the game?”

“Oh it was great. It was tied at eighty-eight points and we were only two seconds left. So they inbounded it to Ch—the point guard and he threw it from half court. Then the buzzer sounded and the ball went in. It was really cool when everyone jumped up and said ‘Waaahhhh.’” His mom seemed to have no clue what he was talking about. “You had to be there to understand. Anyway, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, hon.”

Jimmy walked down the hall to what he called ‘his part of the house.’ His part had his bedroom and studio. The house had a main part which had two floors and then there was a hallway to the left after you entered which was Jimmy’s part of the house. As he was about to open his bedroom door he heard music coming from the studio. *Well that is strange*, Jimmy thought, *I didn’t have any music playing when I left; and you should not be able to hear anything since I remember closing the door. I must be hearing things.*

To his surprise the door was open and music was playing. It was not his music, but the voice sounded familiar.

“Seth, what are you doing in here?” Seth at the age of 15 liked to rap; and Jimmy had to admit that Seth was pretty good at it.

“Oh, I was just recording something while you were out. I figured that you didn’t need anything in here while you were at the game.” *Fair enough*, Jimmy thought.

“I just hope you haven’t messed around with anything. And why are you wearing my hat?” Jimmy had an extensive hat collection in his studio. It consisted of more than 50 different hats. They ranged from snapbacks to baseball caps. Jimmy didn’t care much when someone wore his hats but only if they asked to wear one.

“Because I want to. Plus, you have so many hats already.”

Jimmy was the kind of person who liked to keep the rules, break them once and you don’t get a freebee. It helps him make sure that they wouldn’t do the same thing again. At six feet Jimmy towered over his little brother who was sitting in a small chair.

“Put it back,” Jimmy hissed his blue eyes boring into his brother’s. Seth scrambled out of the chair almost falling over and immediately replaced that hat where he found it. Jimmy broke out in a brief smile then kindly said, “Next time you wanna wear one just ask. Now, can I hear what you did? It sounded really great before.”

“Yeah, it’s right there.” Seth, however, did not move toward the computer.

“What, you too afraid of coming close to me?”

“Nah, I was just gonna pull up another chair is all.”

As Seth approached Jimmy shouted, “Bah!”

“Ahh! Come on, not cool.”

“Sorry, I just had to,” Jimmy said while laughing.

THREE

Jessica Hall slowly crept up to her window trying not to make a sound. She grabbed the bottom of the window and tried to slide it up. It wouldn’t budge. At 2:00 in the

morning it had been dark and cold for a while. Jessica had only a light sweater on her. Thinking that the window could have been frozen she tried a bit harder and made some noise. The window shade opened and much to Jessica's surprise her dad stood on the other side.

Her father unlocked the window and let Jessica in. "Where have you been?!"

"I was just with a friend; we were hanging out."

"A friend huh? Was it Caleb? Is that why you didn't tell us where you were going? What did you do at his house?"

"No dad, it wasn't Caleb. Plus how do you even know who he is?"

"I have seen you two kind of close to each other lately. I hope you didn't—"

"We are just friends, dad, don't worry. I won't do anything stupid." Jessica cut him off.

"Sure you won't. You had your mother worried sick about where you were."

"Well I'm not two anymore; I can figure out how to do things by myself."

"I didn't say you were. But, since you live in this house then you have to follow our rules."

"I don't have to follow anyone's rules except for my own!" Jessica said with a raised voice and tried to push past her dad.

Grayson grabbed his daughter's arm and said, "That is the first thing. You will talk respectfully to your mother and me."

"Let go of me!" Jessica said and tried to brush her dad off.

He knew better than to have a struggle with his daughter. He let go and as he backed out of the doorway he said, "We'll talk more about this tomorrow. Right now you are grounded. We'll also talk more about those terms later."

Jimmy King could not get to sleep. He didn't know what was keeping him up. All he could think of were song lyrics. He got up, went to his desk, and turned on a light. He took out a portfolio where he had all of his and Jessica's songs. Most of them were not out yet or had been rejected by the record company.

He took out a fresh piece of paper and tried to gather his thoughts to put them into lyrics. As Jessica's unofficial lyric writer, he did not get paid for it although Jessica had offered many times. Jimmy always included Jessica's writing in all of the songs he wrote. This was only because he felt it was a bit wrong that Jessica handed in his work as hers.

Although Jimmy had written or played a part in most of the songs a few of them were only what Jessica wrote. Those songs were mainly about what Jessica was interested in: money, friends, and men. As he poured over song lyrics written by Jessica there was one that caught his attention. It was unlike the other songs she wrote.

Jimmy couldn't help but wonder if this is how she felt. He checked that date on the paper. It was from two days ago. He felt compelled to do something about it. He reached for his phone, but then realized that she would probably not want to be woken up because of what could be a silly thing. The only other thing he could do about it was to pray.

Heavenly father, Jimmy prayed silently, I'm praying for someone that I have prayed for countless times before, but this is something different. I don't know how she is feeling now but I know you know. I ask that you would encourage her and that she would not give up hope. Just let her know that she is loved. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Jessica Hall was restless and could not sleep. She could not help but think of what was going to happen tomorrow. She was planning on going over to Jimmy's, but with these new rules that she might have to obey she may not be able to. *Hey, Jessica thought, Jimmy seems to never get in trouble with anyone. I bet it is because he somehow smooth talks his parents into letting him go places.*

Although it was three in the morning, Jessica did not think it was a big deal to call at this time. "Hey, Jimmy?"

"Yes?" His voice was groggy.

"Are you awake?"

"Well, I was working on some lyrics, but then I kind of fell asleep. So you woke me up. Is it important?"

"You are working on that now? I should really pay you for doing this."

"No, I'm good; I already have a job. But is it important?"

"Yeah, how do you get your parents to like you?"

"Who's asking?"

Jessica pondered for a bit then said, "A friend."

"At this time of night? Or morning?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Well, can't they call me in the morning?"

"They don't have your number."

"Well, can you give it to them?"

"No, they are sleeping now."

"Well, then can't you ask them—"

"Jimmy!"

"OK, OK. Calm down please. I'll tell you. I—"

"Great!"

"Can you please stop interrupting me?" It sounded to Jessica as if he was losing his patience.

"Sure, sure. Go ahead."

"Thank you. To be honest I don't purposely get them to 'like' me. I just do what they ask of me—most of the time—and they give me more freedoms. In the Bib—"

"Oh really?"

"Jessica, remember?"

"Oh, yes, sorry." Jessica felt a bit embarrassed. No one cut jimmy off when he spoke; it was a kind of respect people had for him.

“The Bible tells us that we need to obey our parents and if we do we will live a long and fruitful life.” Jessica couldn’t care less about the Bible; all she wanted was how to smooth talk herself out of her predicament.

“So you don’t smooch them into letting you do stuff?”

“Maybe you want to choose a different word, but no I don’t. Why? You need to get out of something?”

“Um, I told you it was for a friend.”

“Oh right, how I seem to have forgotten.” Jimmy said with a chuckle and then asked, “Are you free later this morning, say around eleven? I need to go over something with you.”

“About music?”

“Yeah, there is a song which I think we need to work on.”

“I don’t know Jimmy. I’ll call you when it actually gets light out and tell you if I can meet. If I don’t call then it is because I am still sleeping.”

“Alright, hope all is well. Goodnight.”

Jessica didn’t wish him a goodnight and just hung up. She did not get any help and she still had to face her parents in the morning. There was one more friend who could help her. Brittany. She usually got Jessica out of trouble and was the best source for good information.

FOUR

Jessica Hall took Brittany’s advice on dealing with her parents. Just before meeting with her parents in the living room Jessica went over what she was going to say. Knowing her mom, Jessica put on a gloomy face and pushed her bedroom door open. Just as Jessica expected her mother walked up to Jessica and gave her a hug. Jessica did her best to keep her saddened look.

“Are you OK Jessica?” Her mom asked.

“Kind of, the reason why I was out last night was because I was feeling a bit lonely and sad. I won’t do it again I’m sorry.” Only part of that was the truth; Jessica had no intentions to stop sneaking out.

“Oh, it’s OK honey.” Her mother said and embraced her once again. They spoke for a few more minutes mostly about the night before. Finally her dad said, “I don’t think that grounding you is the right punishment for right now. However, your mom and I still need to think more about this.”

“So can I go to Jimmy’s? It is about music. I’ll come right home after we are done.”

Her dad thought about it then said, “Yes you may, but I expect you back before lunch, and then we will give you your punishment.”

“Don’t worry, it should not take very long.” Jessica was slow to get up so that she would not give away that it was all just a joke to her. She got to her room and had a smirk on her face; Brittany’s tactic worked.

Jessica took a quick shower and looked at the clock. It was a few minutes to ten. That would give Jimmy and Jessica around two hours by the time she got to his house. It would be a short bike ride to Jimmy’s house; she only lived a few streets away from him.

The bike ride was really easy since it was mostly downhill, but Jessica was more worried about the ride back to her house. She parked her bike outside the front door.

Jimmy King had just woken up. Still in his boxers he made his way to the kitchen knowing that no one else was at home. He had received no phone call from Jessica so he assumed that she was either still sleeping and would call later or that she wasn't coming.

Jimmy liked to keep up with the news every day. He noticed that his dad, Robert, did not take the paper in from this morning. Still groggy Jimmy made his way to the door to collect the paper outside.

Jimmy immediately snapped out of his grogginess to the sight of Jessica Hall right in front of him. Both stood there speechless at the sight of each other. Embarrassed Jimmy hid himself behind the door. He stuck his head out from behind the door and said, "Uh, hi. I wasn't expecting you now."

Jessica pushed her way in and said, "Well, you told me that you needed me to come over. And don't worry, I have seen you in a bathing suit before."

"Okay. Do you want to go into the studio while I shower and get dressed?"

"Yeah, fine, whatever. What is it that you *need* me for?"

"I don't *need* you, but I thought if you had time we could work on some new songs."

"Really Jimmy? I'm gonna go on tour in a few weeks and the new album might not come out for like at least eight months. Why do we have to work now?" Jessica said slightly exhausted. They reached Jimmy's room and he went in and got some fresh clothes. Then he said, "We'll talk after my shower. In the meantime if you want to go to the studio you can make something. Or maybe you want to check out what my brother made last night."

"Alright, can I take a hat?"

"You can *wear* one."

Jessica Hall looked at Jimmy's hat collection and a cap caught her eye. It was nothing flashy but it stood out from the ones around it. It was a dark green fitted cap that had "AF-1₈₂" on the front outlined in white and stitched on. She opened the door and checked down the hall for Jimmy. She could not see him so she walked out into the hallway.

The hallway walls had a beige color to them and were lined with family pictures. Jessica had been all around Jimmy's house many times before. She shuddered when she saw the family picture. *They look so happy, Jessica thought, they never fight, they always get along, and worst—or best for them—they are actually happy.* Jessica knew that their pictures, were unlike the King's. Sure the Halls looked happy in their pictures but the reality was that she—deep inside—was sad, lonely, and depressed. But she could not let it show. She did not want to look weak in front of her friends or family.

Jessica made her way up the stairs to some of the other bedrooms in their big house. The carpet on the stairs was so soft it felt like she was walking on clouds. Jessica was daydreaming of her dream house when Jimmy's voice snapped her out of it. "What are you doing up here?"

"Oh, I was just taking a tour of the house. I hope you don't mind."

"Nah, I don't. Just don't go into any of the rooms, I think they are messy. Nice selection on the cap."

"Yeah you like it?"

"The hat? Not especially. I just said it looked good. But actually I think the blue one would look way better on you."

"Oh yeah. Well then I had better put that one on instead." Jessica took the cap off of her head and said, "Can you catch it on your head?" Before Jimmy could reply she threw it at him. He ducked to catch it and it landed on his head with the back facing forwards.

Jimmy adjusted the cap; his hair was still damp from coming out of the shower. He then raced Jessica down to the studio. She donned the blue cap and they both sat in front of a desk. Jimmy pulled out the portfolio containing lyrics and he put it on the table. Then Jessica asked, "So, you have a new song? Or what?"

Jimmy King did not know how to ask Jessica the question. His mind was flying around with ideas of how to ask the question. "Read this," Jimmy said. Jessica took a minute to read it through then asked, "You want me to sing a song about depression? I don't think that the producer would like this."

"I didn't write it Jessica. I-I-I was wondering if this is how you really feel. I mean last night you didn't look too well at the donut shop. Then later you called about your parents ____"

"A friend's parents," Jessica said defending herself.

"Let's just say it was about your parents. So you called about your parents and I assume you were in trouble about something. This would only increase how you feel; if it is how you feel. Is it?"

Jessica appeared not to be able to say anything. Jimmy guessed that what he said didn't either help her out. Her eyes start to cloud up. Jessica tried to regain her composure and formulate an answer. "Yes, and then some."

"What else is there?"

"Well, I just have this enormous weight on me and whenever I do something 'bad' it just seems to pull me down." At this point Jessica was fighting the tears in her eyes.

"Well, can I suggest something to help?"

"What, are you gonna go all preacher on me and tell me that Jesus or God can help?"

"Well, no, I wasn't, but if you want to then..." Jessica burst out of the studio and ran outside to her bike. Jimmy trailed behind her. As Jessica was mounting her bike Jimmy stood in the doorway. "I'm sorry Jessica, I was just wondering-"

“Well, stop wondering!” Jessica snapped at Jimmy, cutting him off. She then tore out of the drive way.

Jimmy started running after her and shouted, “Jessica! I’m sorry I didn’t mean to!” *She is probably ignoring me*, Jimmy thought. *Stupid! You should have just let it go and not asked.* Then Jimmy swore. It surprised him that it came out of his mouth and that he even thought of it. He turned to his right and an oldtimer, who was his neighbor, stood there staring at him.

Jimmy raised his hand at him and said, “Mr. Anderson.”

“Jimmy,” came the reply. Jimmy hastily went back into his home and shut the door. He slapped the wall and threw down his cap, trying to release some of the anger before he took it out on other things.

FIVE

Jessica made it back to her house faster than ever; it was her anger that turned into speed. She was still sobbing when she entered her house and made a beeline for her room. “Jessica?” She heard her dad ask wondering who came in. Jessica buried her face in her hands as she lay on her bed.

This is stupid, Jessica thought. *What am I even crying about? Jimmy gets what my problem is; so what?* Jessica took off the hat and was about to throw it, but then thought better of it. *Oh why does he have to know? Now he is going to go all out preacher on me and tell me all kinds of crazy ideas of how God can help me.*

“Jessica? It’s me, can I come in?” Jessica recognized it as her mother. “Yes, come in,” Jessica said and wiped away the tears.

“Are you okay, hon?”

“Yeah, just a bit overwhelmed, mom.”

“Does this have anything to do with us?”

“Us?”

“Your dad and I punishing you.”

Jessica thought about it for a moment. She would not know what would get her out of trouble. “Yes it does.”

“Oh, it’s okay, sweetie. We have decided that you are old enough and smart enough to make your own decisions.”

Jessica tried her best to hold her happiness inside. It was just a bit of happiness in her gloomy world. They spoke for a bit and just as her mom was going out the door Jessica asked, “Mom, can I go to a party tonight?”

“Will there be alcohol? And how late are you planning on staying there?”

Jessica knew the answer to that, of course there would be. “No. And I’ll stay ‘til one. I’ll just go through my window so you don’t have to worry about me when I am home. Also it won’t wake anyone up.”

“Alright, but I’ll be checking.”

Jessica pulled her phone out and dialed Brittany. “Hey Britt? It worked. And I can come to the party tonight.”

“Great news, I told you it would work didn’t I? How long can you stay until?”

“I gotta be home at around one.”

“Really? You can’t stay later?”

“Brittany! I just got out of a punishment; be happy I can even go!”

“Oh right, see you later.”

Jimmy King had spent the entire day working on a song. Singing, playing, and coming up with music to go along with it. It was hard work and he did not notice the time until his dad called him for dinner. Whenever his mom was not going to be home to make dinner the job always fell to his dad.

Jimmy’s dad had to become a good enough cook to make dinners. Linda, Jimmy’s mom, was always busy at the fitness center at these times, it was her job after all. Jimmy ate ravenously finishing his first helping before the others even took a bite. “Either you are very hungry or you really like my cooking,” his dad noticed.

“I’m just hungry; I didn’t eat since last night.”

“You’re serious?” His dad asked surprised.

“Yeah, why would I be joking?”

“It is unlike you to not eat anything throughout the day.”

“Yeah, I just got a lot on my mind right now, OK?”

Jimmy’s brother opened his mouth to ask something but Jimmy quickly cut him off. “Like nothing you need to know about.” After dinner Jimmy went straight back to the studio to get back to work. He checked his phone and saw that Jessica left a message.

“Hey, Jessica. You called?”

“Yeah, just to say that I’m sorry about earlier today,” she said.

“I shouldn’t have asked; it wasn’t my business.”

“Well, yeah, but still I overreacted a bit and sorry I just left without us really getting anywhere.”

There was silence for a moment. Jessica broke the silence, “There is a party tonight, wanna come?”

“Where is it?” Jimmy asked but he had no real interest.

“At Amy’s.”

“Alright, I might go, but I got a lot of work I’m doing. Can you swing by tomorrow to preview the song? I’d like some input from you.”

“Oh, so it’s one of yours. I can’t wait. When are you expecting me? I’ll call this time.”

Jimmy smiled, reminded of earlier today. “I it is anytime in the morning, you have to call; otherwise come at any time.”

“Alright, Britt is here to take me to the party.”

“Have fun. Make good choices,” Jimmy said in Jessica’s mother’s voice.

“Don’t worry mom,” Jessica replied playing along.

“No, but seriously, I need your help tomorrow. Bye.”

“Come on, Jessica, just try it,” June said. Jessica had tried beer before and did not really like it. Now they wanted her to try hard alcohol. “I’ll pass, girls,” Jessica said.

Brittany pulled Jessica aside. “Come on, Jess, just try it. It will make you happier and then you can just focus on having a good time at the party. Just forget about all of the things going on.”

“Really, it helps?”

Brittany nodded her reply. They both walked back to the drinks and the girls. “Who is gonna take one with me?” Jessica asked excitedly. One of the girls poured the liquor into shot glasses and they all held them up and chinked the glasses.

Jessica tilted her head back and threw the liquid to the back of her throat. It burned all the way down into her stomach. It left her coughing. “One more!” one of the other girls Jessica had never met before. Reluctantly Jessica put her glass back with the others to await another round.

By now Jessica hadn’t eaten in hours. The alcohol was getting to her and she started moving more freely. Jessica grabbed a bottle of whisky and started chugging from the bottle. Everyone in the room started chanting “Chug chug chug!” This kept Jessica going. She was barely able to drink a quarter of the bottle before it started spilling all over her. Jessica could still feel the burning sensation in her throat, but it seemed to be less.

“Jessica, I gotta get you back home and sober before you get home,” Brittany said earnestly. Jessica was the happiest she had been in weeks. She did not want it to end or have to go home.

“No, no. Not yet,” Jessica said with very slurred speech. It was obvious to everyone that Jessica was drunk. Brittany laid a hand on Jessica, but she just shrugged her off and went in search of more drinks.

Jessica found herself in Brittany’s car at Mc Donald’s and Brittany was ordering something. In an attempt to get Jessica sober and reduce the side effects tomorrow Brittany stuffed Jessica with fries and water.

It was clear to Jessica that her friend was trying to ask her something but she could not formulate an answer. Jessica finally made the words out to be: “Can you try to speak without slurring anything? I have to get you past your mom.”

“I said I would use my bedroom window.”

“That sounds understandable. EW! Your breath is horrible.” Brittany shoved a few mints into Jessica’s mouth to try to neutralize the stench in her breath. When they finally reached Jessica’s, Brittany dropped her off and waited until Jessica was in the gate.

She could barely get to the gate without stumbling every few feet. Brittany got out and helped Jessica to her room. Knowing what will happen in the morning or later Brittany put a plastic bag next to Jessica’s bed when the need would arise.

SIX

Jessica woke up with a mild headache but nothing that Brittany said it would be like. That was one of the few things she remembered from the night before. However, she felt depressed and lonely. She needed to get out of the house and do something.

Her phone chirped and it gave Jessica a shock. She looked at it and saw that it was a reminder that she was supposed to meet with Jimmy. She turned on her light, but it hurt

her eyes too much so she quickly turned it off. She called Jimmy to let him know that she would be over in an hour.

“How was the party last night?” He asked.

“Why do you care?” Jessica scowled.

“Dang, can’t a man ask a question without getting a hostile reply? You still mad at me?”

“No, it was OK.”

“Just OK? It wasn’t fun or anything?”

“Ok it was fun but...”

“But you don’t remember much,” Jimmy finished her sentence.

Jessica was bewildered not knowing how he knew all of this stuff about last night.

“How is the hangover today?” He asked.

“How do you know about all of this stuff? Were you there?”

“Nope, I just know.”

“Stalker.”

“No, you don’t think I know who Amy is?”

“What does she look like?”

“Dirty blonde hair, green eyes, about 5’4, and slim. Would you like to know which school she went to? Her teachers in middle school?”

“I swear Jimmy, you are such a creep. Anyway, I’m not sure I wanna come over anymore today.”

“Look, we were in the same classes in middle school. And we were pretty close as well. I spoke to her this morning and she told me about last night. I asked how you were to see if you would be of any help this morning and she told me all about it.”

“I still don’t believe you. I’ll see you later,” Jessica said then hung up.

Right on time Jessica pulled up on the sidewalk next to Jimmy’s house in her pink Camaro. It was the first thing she bought with the money after signing the contract. It had a black interior and she recently fitted it with dark tinted windows. Her parents suggested that she should get bulletproof windows, but Jessica didn’t think it was needed and she didn’t want to pay for them. Her parents eventually paid for them. Jessica thought that it was a waste of money.

Jimmy opened the door and saw the lovely sight of Jessica Hall. Her long, wavy, hair cascaded down her head. Her smile was like nothing Jimmy had ever seen before. Her brown eyes had a twinkle in them that no other girl had. She was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen. To top it off she was also a celebrity. But Jimmy didn’t think much of that when he thought about her.

She invaded his thoughts every moment of the day and Jimmy could not help but wonder what she thought of him. He always played it cool around her and tried to not give away that he was interested in her. Part of the reason was because she was always giving him mixed signals and he didn’t know what she truly felt about him. Sometimes she was—

more often than not—hostile towards him and other times she seemed interested in something more than friends. The other part was—”

“Can I come in or should we stare at each other for a few more seconds?” Jessica asked halting Jimmy’s thoughts.

Jimmy had no problem looking at Jessica, but he knew it wasn’t the right time or place. “Um, right, come in. Want a drink?”

“Ice tea? I really want to hear that music of yours though.”

“Well it’s not done yet, that is why you are here. I need your finely tuned ears and your knowledge.”

“My knowledge? You are the expert here, like I would know anything you don’t know.”

“Fine then, I need your opinion.”

They both took their drinks into the studio and Jimmy turned on the red light hanging on the door to indicate that they were recording and to not disturb. He played the song for her and she seemed to be speechless. Either that was good or bad, but Jimmy could not tell which one. “I can tell that you either hated it or loved it; which one?”

“Let me ask you this first: is this song aimed at girls? Because it sure seems like a love song towards girls.”

“Well, it is a song about love, but I guess different people interpret it differently.”

“So who or what is it about?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Um, yeah of course,” she said. Jimmy looked at her then simply pointed in the air.

“Oh, it’s about *Him*,” Jessica said.

“Yeah, or His love. But did you like it?”

“Yeah, it was really touching.”

“Really? I guess that’s good. So, anything I should do better or change?”

“Yeah, that part that you sing ‘He loved you all along’ is flat compared to the rest; it should be a little higher.”

“Higher? That is like the highest I can go.” Jimmy tried to sing it like she wanted, but it came out all wrong and Jessica burst out in laughter. Then he challenged her. “You try it then.” It came out perfect and just what he was trying to get to. “You want to be featured in this song?” he asked.

“What, just to sing that part? You know that we sound different. No one is going to want a sudden change of voice in the middle of the song.”

“No, I mean you sing other parts of the song as well, or maybe just the chorus and stuff.”

“That will be fun, have you already written my part?”

“Ha, no. So we will have to work on it. Are you free for a few hours so that we can do it today?”

“Yeah, but I have a meeting at four.”

“Well that gives us a few hours then. What would you like for lunch? I can order some pizza or sandwiches or ...?” Jimmy already knew what she was going to say. She loved pizza; it was definitely one of her favorite foods.

“Pizza, Jim.”

“Jim? You never called me that before,” he said; then dialed what he guessed was her favorite pizzeria.

“Oh, Jim.” She said playfully.

“Rawr.” He said and then both of them laughed. He got up and grabbed a random cap and threw it at her head. It floated perfectly on to her head and she jumped when it hit her. He donned one and settled in for another long day of recording.

SEVEN

“Did people like your new song?” Jessica asked Jimmy over the phone. It had been almost a week since they last recorded.

“Yeah, thanks to you being in it and tweeting it I have almost two million views and like twenty-thousand more subscribers. I have mainly positive reviews so I guessed that people really liked it. You should look at some of the reviews.”

“Cool. Need any help with other songs?”

“Nope, not now at least.”

Jessica was sad. She really wanted to see Jimmy. He was a small light in her darkening world. Neither fame nor money could take her out of the hole she was in. It was like a big part of her heart was gone and left a gaping hole. The only things that seemed to fill the void were Jimmy and getting drunk. It was the only way to get rid of it.

“But a few of my friends and I are going to the beach. Want to come and bring a few friends along?” Jimmy continued. Jessica was excited to come, but did not want to sound too desperate.

“I’ll check my schedule, I may be available. What time are you going?”

“Like right now. Should I wait to ride down together or will you go by yourself?”

Jessica checked her schedule and to her surprise she had an appointment in less than one hour. “Sure, I can meet you, at your house?”

“Sounds good, now will it actually be a few minutes or will it take more than that?”

“You underestimate my time management ability,” Jessica said.

“Mhm, just be ready.”

Jessica made a quick call and was able to move the meeting to the next day. Excitedly, she got dressed to go to the beach and hopped on her bike.

Just as Jimmy pulled up in front of Jessica's house she got out of the gate. Instead of Jessica coming to him he decided to take the initiative and pick her up at her house. When she came out of the gate her hair was flying in the wind. She was wearing a white T-shirt with a black logo on it and the sleeves just covered her shoulders. She wore short shorts which exposed much of her tan, olive colored legs. Hanging off her feet were pink flip flops.

Jimmy looked her up and down then back up. He wasn't sure if their eyes had met because she was sporting dark sunglasses. He waved and she held up a hand in acknowledgement. As she did this she wobbled and almost fell off her bike. She had been biking for years and Jimmy knew she could also bike with no hands. When she came to a stop near Jimmy, he said, "I need you to breathe into this." Then pretended to pull out a breathalyzer.

"No need Officer; I haven't had a drink today."

"Oh yeah? Then how come you wobbled with one hand on the bike when you can easily do it with no hands?"

"It is because I was going too slowly. If I had gone faster I would have been able to hold it."

Jimmy wasn't so sure; she was going fast enough that it wouldn't be very hard to balance. He let it go and they biked down to the beach side by side, but not saying anything. "What's in the bag?" he asked.

"Towel and stuff. You know, the usual."

"I hate it when people are so specific that you just can't take in all of the words they say," Jimmy said sarcastically. "Did you invite anyone?" He continued.

"I guess I should really cut down on my words. And no, you didn't give me any time. You are always rushing me."

"I am not. How are you?" He asked with more concern.

"OK today. But nothing fun was going to happen today so nothing to wake up to. I just lay in my bed for like the whole morning."

"Wow. That is the most you have ever told me about yourself. Are you OK?"

They parked their bikes near one of the barriers and before Jessica could reply, Jimmy hollered to his friends. They waved back and Jimmy made his way towards them with Jessica right on his tail.

The only person Jessica did not recognize of Jimmy's friends was one who introduced himself as Mark. He wore a cute smile on his face. His blue eyes met hers and his warm smile enhanced his handsomeness. As he spoke you could see his sharp jaw line and perfect teeth. After she introduced herself he stuck out his hand. Instead of taking it Jessica attempted to hug him but he was puzzled. He quickly recovered and they embraced. She could feel his soft skin and felt his muscles tense. As her arms reached around his back she felt the outline of his ridged muscles.

"It's not every day you get to hug a beautiful celebrity like you," he said.

Jessica looked away sheepishly. “Thanks.” His muscular body stood a few inches taller than Jessica, but he was not taller than Jimmy. Jimmy led the way as he staked out the best spot for all of them to stay. They put their things down and all but Jessica and Mark ran straight for the water. Jessica really wanted to get to know this new guy and it became clear that he also wanted to stay to chat.

Jimmy surfaced near one of his friends. The water dripped down his face into the cool ocean water. He looked back towards the beach and he saw Jessica talking to someone. “Hey Ryan, you know who Jessica is talking to?”

“What, you jealous?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m asking.” Jimmy said sarcastically. “No, I just saw him meet with us and I was wondering if one of you brought him. I didn’t catch his name.”

“His name is Mark, but I didn’t bring him. Neither did Tim because we came together. It could have been Jeff though.”

“Alright, it doesn’t matter anyway.” To Jimmy it wasn’t alright; a buff stranger talking so intently to Jessica. He also seemed to be seducing her with his charm—as it appeared from this range—and his masculinity. He moved towards the man intent on driving him off. Then it struck him; who was he to make her decisions? After all he was just a friend of hers; he had no jurisdiction over her. Maybe he was just jealous that he seemed not to be able to do that. He took the thoughts out of his mind and swam further out into the water.

EIGHT

As Jimmy King waded onto the beach he found out he had just missed Mark. Jessica looked as if she was floating in the clouds. He assumed that it was because she chatted it up with Mark. As Jimmy approached Jessica she took her shorts and shirt off showing her bathing suit. She proceeded to ask Jimmy, “Are you ready to go for a swim?”

“I don’t know, I was just out there for like an hour, but you were talking to Mark.”

“Yeah, your friend is a great guy.”

“Um, let’s talk about that,” Jimmy said. He then pointed to the towels lying on the sand. “Sit or lie down if you want.” They both lay down and faced each other. Jessica’s hair was blowing in her face covering the left side. She pushed her hair back revealing the rest of her face and Jimmy lay there admiring her beauty. He shook the thoughts from his mind and focused on what he was going to say.

“What do you mean you don’t know him?!” Jessica exclaimed. Jimmy held a finger to his lip and Jessica repeated her question quieter. “What do you mean you don’t know him?”

“Well I have never seen him or spoken to him. The same thing goes with *my* other friends. I just think it is a little suspicious that he knew exactly when and where to be and who we all are. And then flattering you like he did. I don’t know,” Jimmy replied.

“You noticed that?”

“Yeah, I think it was pretty obvious. You know you get flattered really easily, right? You like him?”

“And who are you to ask that?”

“Hey, just curious.” Jimmy raised his hands up in surrender. *Yeah*, Jessica thought, *that’s right, back off*. Then Jessica realized that it was one of her best friends she was talking to. She decided she wouldn’t tell him that she liked Mark, but to not be so harsh next time.

Ryan, Jimmy’s friend, came over to the two and said, “Jessica you believe in the evolution thing right?”

“Yes, why?”

“OK, if people evolved from apes and monkeys why are they still here?”

Out of the corner of her eye Jessica saw Jimmy shake his head. She looked away and said to Ryan, “If we are not descended from apes please explain how we came here. What I see is the end result of many millions of years of evolution. How do you think it happened? A man waving a magic wand?”

“If you are saying that the ‘man’ is God then yes; but I don’t think He was waving a wand. I mean look around you, all of the people, and then the water and hills and trees. Do you really think all of this happened over millions or billions of years?”

“Yes, I can’t see how you can believe the Bible when there are many contradictions in it.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Like who was made first, the animals or man?”

“The man?” Ryan said and looked to Jimmy. “No, the animals.” Jimmy corrected. He continued, “It says in Genesis 1:25-26: ‘God made the wild animals, each according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the grounds according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all of the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”’”

“You memorized that?” Ryan asked in surprise. Jessica had to admit that she was also stunned, but before Jimmy could respond she was quick to make her point. “See the animals were made before man; that proves my point that evolution is true.”

“Remember that it was all on the sixth day, like it says in the later verses. And also it was not over millions of years. Oh, and it says that God made man in His own image; so that says that we didn’t evolve.” Ryan was quick to point out.

There was silence for a bit, then Jimmy said, “Jessica, how do you get an idea of justice and injustice?”

“I don’t know; all of us have different things.” Jessica said then let out a sigh. The weight that had been lifted when she met Mark had now come crashing down even harder. She decided to get drunk with Mark at a party would fix the problem.

“I mean don’t you wonder? Like a fish probably doesn’t feel wet under water, but if you go you feel wet. If there was no light at all you would not know what light was. And you would not call the darkness ‘darkness’. What I am trying to get at is how you can deny the existence of a higher power? We would not know if something was right or wrong if we did not know what right was. For us to know what right and wrong are we need a good power and a bad power. Do you understand where I am getting at?” Jimmy said. That got Jessica thinking; *If I believe that everything came from something before it, then where did my good and evil sense come from? A monkey? Surely they have a sense of good and evil, right? But what about that bacteria thing, that didn’t have a sense of good and evil.* Jessica was stumped.

“Yeah, but it still does not prove the Bible is true.” Jessica said smartly. Jimmy was sure that his point did not come across like he thought it would. He could tell that she was just ignoring him and that she did not want to talk. But here was an opportunity to tell her how the Bible can be true. He had learnt it a long time ago and has used it in many arguments. “So you say that the Bible is not true right? So let’s take World War Two. Were you there? Did you see it with your own eyes? The killing and battles that took place?”

“No I was not.” Jessica replied.

“But you believe that it all happened right?”

“Yeah. But there are personal accounts which people have written and there are history books to prove it.”

“That is kind of what the Bible is. Especially the New Testament is full of personal accounts which prove that the prophecies from the Old Testament and the existence of Jesus are true. Since you believe that history is true then you must believe that the Bible is true. I could say the same for evolution. Have you seen monkeys evolve into humans? Are there any half humans half monkeys? No there are not but you believe it.”

After a long pause Jessica finally said, “OK, fine, you got me. I have nothing to say against that. I’m just going to go home and work. Jimmy you also have some of my music to work on don’t you?” She got up and gathered her things. Jimmy thought of telling her that she was not his boss. He could work when he wanted to and decide if he didn’t want to anymore. However, knowing her situation he decided to let it go. “Yes I guess I should go work as well.”

Jimmy clasped Ryan on the shoulder and pulled him close. Whispering he said, “The Bible says that it is no use to argue with people who don’t want to know the truth. But if she becomes a Christian I am sure that she can influence so many people. I am not sure whether or not to give up. Will you pray for her?”

Ryan pulled back to stare at Jimmy. Jimmy’s face was serious and he was hoping that Ryan would pray. It was the least he could do to help a friend and a fellow brother in Christ.

“Alright man. I hope it works out between you two.” Ryan replied.

“Thanks. Catch you later.”

NINE

It was the second day in a row that Jessica was out partying with the intent of getting drunk. Losing herself was her goal every night. It was still early and Jessica knew that when she got drunk she would have to stop drinking as much so that she would not pass out; although that didn't seem like a bad idea to her. She hated her family—parents especially—and Bruce Cooper did not make her job any easier. She always had to defend herself against his claims and false critiques.

This time the party was held at Brittany's house. The doorbell rang and Jessica got up to open the door. She was a bit wobbly, but eventually made it to the door. Mark was standing on the other side of the door and she invited him in. She hugged him, which made her feel better, and showed him where to get the drinks.

By now all the people Brittany had invited had arrived and Jessica was still the only one drunk. As far as she could tell it was as if no one else had anything to drink. She sat next to Mark on the couch and burst into conversation with what was on her mind. Mark listened intently and seemed to understand her whilst he sipped his beer.

The birds chirped and Jimmy could smell the ocean from where he was in the cliffs. Green surrounded him as he stared out over the blue horizon. The sun was setting but there was still an hour of good light left. He rode his bike into the hills overlooking Malibu and was now on his computer and tried to type out some lyrics.

As quiet as it was with no other sounds but the nature, Jimmy could not help but think about Jessica. He guessed that she was at someone's party trying to get drunk if not already. He hated the thought of knowing what she was doing and not trying to warn her of what could happen if she drank too much and so on. He knew that it was not his responsibility to tell her what to do, but he just could not shake off the thoughts.

The perfect evening with Jessica kept playing in his mind. He knew that it probably would never happen, but he just couldn't help thinking about it. He started to type his thoughts out into a document. After he was done, he had a great idea. He thought it would be a great idea to make a book about his fantasy life with Jessica. He would, of course, make a story out of it.

He thought about selling it, but he would need to finish it before he could even think about selling anything. He could also use it as another way of earning money on top of his job at a small recording studio. He edited music for some small, up-and-coming bands. He didn't get much from them, but he also got money from his parents.

“Oh, this morning was so bad. I woke up with such a headache it wasn't even funny. Then when I got home my parents made this huge deal about me getting drunk. I couldn't

hide it from them this time,” Jessica told Amy over dinner. Amy had hosted the party when Jessica started drinking for the first time. She had also been part of the girls who pressured Jessica into drinking.

“I told you to stop drinking but you were already drunk by the time I came to Britt’s,” Amy replied.

“Well, I don’t remember that. Heck, I don’t remember anything after I saw you. What happened?”

“Well, after things warmed up you and Mark were on the couch and getting pretty close. Where do you know this guy from?”

“We met at the beach the other day. He is a real nice guy.”

“Well, obviously, the way you were all over him last night. Psh.”

“And that is not your business, Amy.”

“Alright, I guess you don’t want to know what happened later then.”

Jessica hated how Amy always did this; if Jessica got annoyed with something Amy always had something to say to draw a question out from Jessica. Jessica tried to resist the urge to ask Amy what had happened. A few seconds of silence later Jessica gave in and asked, “OK, so what happened?”

“Nothing much. You got more drinks and talked with a few others,” Amy said.

“Oh, great, so I didn’t do anything stupid,” Jessica said relieved.

“Well, if you want my opinion getting drunk and being under aged isn’t one of the smartest.”

“I mean that Mark and I didn’t, er, leave the couch, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, yeah, you guys didn’t do that last night. But, he seemed pretty close to taking you off the couch.”

“Well, it’s good that you are at the parties to keep him off me.”

“Yeah,” Amy said not convinced that Jessica would try hard to keep Mark off of her.

Jimmy was having a lot of trouble trying to decide what to do about Jessica. He liked her more than a friend, but knew that if he were to take their relationship further it could end up coming back at him. He didn’t know what to do. Most of him wanted to go for it and by doing that he would hope that she would accept it. After all, if she rejected him then it was worth the try.

Then Jimmy recalled his earlier conversation with his youth pastor which opposed his own argument:

“Sit. So what baffling questions do you have on your mind for me today?” Frederick Curtis asked, his hands clasped together and leaning back in his chair. The office was cold as the last rays of sunlight shone through a window.

“Well, Fred, it’s about dating,” Jimmy replied, his face expressionless.

“Ha ha, I never knew you liked someone, who is it? Kelsey?” Fred asked humorously. Jimmy frowned at Fred for not taking the matter seriously. Fred got the message and sat up right; forearms resting on the armrests. “What can I help you with, son?”

“Thanks, now she isn’t a believer and I wanted your opinion on what I should do.”

“I see, well, who might this girl be?” Fred inquired and dug in one of the drawers and revealed a Bible. He flipped through the fine gold rimmed paper.

“Uh, I’d rather not say a name.”

“Alright, so you want me to tell you what I think of it or what the Bible says?”

“Both, although I’d rather not want to hear either.”

“Then why did you come to me then?”

“Because I didn’t want to do anything irrational.”

“Ah hah, so you know that it might be wrong or that people will downplay it.”

“I guess, now please get on with it.”

“Alright, alright. The Bible teaches us that we should not be yoked together with unbelievers. It says here in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, ‘Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said,

“I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”

“You see, light and darkness is like the Christian and the non-Christian. Where there is light there cannot be darkness; it just doesn’t work.”

“But isn’t that about marrying them? I only want to date her now. I’m not thinking about marrying her now.”

“How do you know? You may get so attached to her that you can’t let go. You know what a yoke does, right?” Jimmy nodded. “Where one animal goes the other will go. It happens even if you aren’t married. Trust me, I have had a few friends whom have gone stray from their faith to be with a girl whom they thought were made for each other.”

“But it’s not like she is a bad person, she isn’t wicked like the verse says. She also doesn’t worship any idols. Also, what if by me dating her she starts to come to church and then becomes a believer? You never know right?”

“More often than not it is the believer who drifts away from their faith in God. Like I said, some of my friends have gone too far to turn back.”

“But Jessica really needs Christ and maybe if I date her she will listen to me.”

“You don’t mean Jessica Hall the singer, do you?”

“I mentioned her name, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Well thanks for your help, it wasn’t what I wanted to hear. Besides, it tells us not to marry one, it says nothing about dating them,” Jimmy said then stood up abruptly. Fred got up and grabbed Jimmy’s arm. “Just remember one thing: you can always pray for her instead of making the wrong choice.”

“Who says that this is the wrong choice? And I’ve prayed for like years for her and God hasn’t answered it yet. It’s about time that I make it happen.”

“Jimmy, God will do things in His own time. His plan is the best one.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t have time for His plan,” Jimmy said and stormed off. Just before the door closed he heard Fred say, “She has already gotten to him. Father help him...” and then the door shut completely.

TEN

The house was empty as Jessica crept into her father’s office. She tried not to mess anything up so her father would not know anyone had messed with his things. A mahogany book case held all of her father’s books. It ran along the length of the wall and went all the way up to the ceiling. It was filled with instruction manuals and books from his favorite authors. He was an electrician and ran a family business. He taught himself many of the things he knows. He was largely successful until they moved to Malibu where business was slower.

The books weren’t the things Jessica was looking for. She sat at his computer and pressed the power button. The computer whirled to life and startled Jessica, because it had been quiet when she entered. To her dismay the computer asked for a password to log in under her father’s account. She raked her brain, trying to find a password to enter. She went for the obvious one and typed in her home address. After she hit enter she remembered that her father’s password only had six characters in it. She tried her home address again but took out a few characters, but to no avail. She knew that after three wrong attempts the computer would fry itself and would be rendered useless.

She weighed the odds; get it right and then she could have access to whatever she needed. Get it wrong and she would have to answer to her dad. It was worth the risk. She tried the first letter of each of her family’s names and arranged them into their birth order. Her mom was first, then her dad followed by their three kids herself, Philip, and James. That was only five characters. She looked around the room and saw the book shelves. She guessed there had to be around one thousand books and manuals. Could that have something to do with the password? She put “1000” at the end of the letters but it didn’t make sense. Then it hit her; she would put it at the beginning. One thousand shortened would be “1K”. She closed her eyes and hit the enter button.

The computer hummed as it computed the password which Jessica inserted. She half expected it to shut down. She crossed her fingers and hoped to God that she got it right. A minute went by and the computer kept humming, faster now. She peered out of one eye and exclaimed when she saw the start screen. Then she realized what horrible password her dad had.

She opened up the pictures folder and searched for a few good pictures she could manipulate. She needed to get her mother to argue with her dad over something to add to her argument to leave the house. Her eighteenth birthday had already passed a few weeks ago and her tour would soon be starting. She wanted out of the house badly, but somehow her parents were able to coax her into staying with them. Jessica had found a nice two story mansion that was within her price range. She liked the Malibu area, but distanced herself from her parents’ home as much as she could.

She heard a noise outside the door and quickly e-mailed herself the pictures that she could use. As she closed the door to her father's room he said, "Hey Jessica, what are you doing in there?"

Jessica swore under her breath and hoped her dad didn't hear it. She had to come up with something quickly. "Um, I was looking to see if you had a manual for my computer; I think there is something wrong with it."

"Well, you know that your hardware on your MacBook Pro can't really be accessed that well. And I don't have any manuals on Macs; you know that, don't you? *And* I am an electrician not a computer guru."

"Yeah, well it's kind of the same thing, right?"

"Not exactly, I do the things like installing wires for new lights and stuff with circuit boards..." Jessica stopped listening knowing that he could go on and on about his job and the differences between one thing and the other.

"Thanks for the help, dad," Jessica said and patted him on the shoulder.

"But I wasn't finished yet." Jessica heard her dad say distantly as she closed the door.

She plopped onto her bed. The doctoring of the pictures could wait until the next day. The darkness closed in around her and she drifted off into a deep sleep.

Jimmy King shot up out of bed startled by a phone call. "It's Jimmy."

"Hello, Mr. King?" A woman's voice said. Jimmy did not recognize the voice and checked the number. That didn't ring a bell either. He wondered who would be calling.

"Yes, speaking. Who is this?"

"Hi Mr. King, I am calling concerning your dinner reservation for two at The Piping Turtle this evening at six thirty. Y—"

"Yes, it is the one at six thirty. One question before you continue: why are you calling so early?"

"Sir, it is one o'clock in the afternoon."

Jimmy looked at his clock and sure enough the woman was right, it was one o'clock. He had overslept by a lot. Luckily he didn't have any appointments and school was a minor thing; he could catch up later.

"Yes, of course, your name again?"

"Sandra."

"OK Sandra, what about my reservation?"

"Yes, unfortunately when my colleague took your call we were overbooked at that time. However we have an opening at eight or—"

"Well, no thanks, I'll find somewhere else," Jimmy said then hung up. There went his dinner with Jessica. He didn't want to go to another place because he knew that it was her favorite restaurant and he also liked it as well. Also, he didn't know of any other high quality restaurants with good food. He didn't need to worry much seeing as he had not actually asked Jessica out for dinner.

“How do you think this one would look on me?” Jessica Hall asked Brittany as they looked at bathing suits. It was a red two-piece with white polka dots.

“Um, I don’t think you should get anything with polka dots on it.” Brittany responded then picked up a blue and red striped two-piece. “How about this one?”

“I don’t know, how does it look?” Jessica asked then held it up to her body. From behind she felt someone grab her around the waist and say, “It looks great!”

Jessica jumped and turned around. To her surprise, and relief, it was Mark. She looked into his eyes. His deep blue eyes smiled at her. He leaned toward her and pulled her toward him. Jessica lifted her heels slightly. She whispered in his ear, “Not now Mark, she needn’t know now.” Then she hugged him and said louder so Brittany could hear, “Hi, Mark how are you?”

“Hi Jess, I’m good. And how are you, Brittany?”

“Britt, and yes, I’m fine, thanks. What’s with the getup? You look like a referee.” Brittany replied.

“Oh, you don’t know? I work at Foot Locker over there,” Mark said and pointed to the shoe store. “I saw you guys and no one was in the store so I popped over.”

“Do you really like the bathing suit though?”

“Yeah, I think it will look really great on you. In fact how about we go to the beach later today? I get off at five and maybe we can bring one of those one-time grills and make some food.” Mark suggested.

“Yeah, that’s a great idea!” Jessica exclaimed.

“Do you want to come too, *Britt*?” Mark asked rolling the r in her name.

“No thanks, *Mark*, I’m going out on a date tonight.” She replied.

“Ohhh, a date, I didn’t realize you had a boyfriend.” Mark responded sarcastically; he had seen the guy and Brittany together before at parties and sometimes in the mall. He looked at his watch and said, “Oh, better go before the boss gets mad, see you later, Jess.

“Bye, Mark.” Jessica replied.

“I should go too, Jess, I don’t mean to leave you here alone, but you know,” Brittany said.

“Yeah, I understand. Bye.”

Jessica slowly walked up to the counter to pay for the swimsuit. The long lonely walk to the car is all that Jessica could think about. She paid and grabbed the bag and headed for the exit.

On his way from a clothing store Jimmy King saw someone whom he thought he recognized. He walked closer and then he knew exactly who she was, she was holding a small bag in one hand and a purse tight against her body in the other. It was the unmistakable figure of the one and only Jessica Hall. He wondered how so many people didn’t recognize who it was.

Jimmy slid right beside her and clasped a hand on one shoulder. “Hey, what you doing here?”

Jessica jumped and recognized who the person was. She smiled, but it seemed forced. “Are you two boys stalking me or what?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. What are you doing here?”

Jimmy peeked into her bag and saw a swimsuit. “I got a swimsuit, its blue and red. You?”

She stopped and said, “Really?! I also got one, look.” She dug her swimsuit out of her bag and showed it to him.

“Nah, I’m joking, but I did get a few t-shirts from Fitch.”

She hit him on the arm and said, “You mean like Abercrombie and Fitch?”

“Um, yeah. What did you think it was?”

“I’ve just never heard that expression before, is all; like nobody ever uses that.”

“You’d be surprised. Anyway, why are you down?”

“Down? I’m not down.”

“Hey, you don’t have to lie to me, girl.”

“How do you see right through me? Do you have some supernatural abilities or what?”

“Yeah, I get them from God.”

“Uh huh, sure you do.”

“OK, maybe not, but really, it isn’t hard to tell when you are sad or depressed or whatever. And now you are going to get all defensive and say how you aren’t depressed and then give a reason for something happening at home.”

Jessica glared at him. “Maybe you know me too well.”

“Fine, so what is wrong? Want some ice cream?”

“Sure, so...”

Jessica told Jimmy about her plan and how it might work to get her out of the house.

Finally Jimmy said, “Don’t you think that it will ruin your parents’ relationship though?”

“Who the hell cares about their relationship?”

“Well, I thought that you might, seeing as they are your parents.”

Jessica scowled at Jimmy.

“What?” Jimmy said surprised, “You hate them? Oh, you recalled our first conversation about them.”

Jessica nodded her head.

“I see, well, you doing anything tonight?” Jimmy asked. He still had not booked another place but he could easily get a spot somewhere; he had his contacts.

“Um, yeah, Mark, a few friends and I are going to the beach. So, do you want to come? We’re going to have a barbeque like thing there.”

“So, uh, are you and Mark together?”

“What?! No.”

“Sure... I’ll come; anything I need to bring?”

“Well, probably your bathing suit, although I would—”

“Now Jessica, come on, you know I won’t forget that. Ever.”

Jimmy walked Jessica to her car and headed back to the mall to look for a new racing bike. He met Ryan at the bike shop. As they were evaluating the bikes Jimmy felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and Mark pulled him over to the side.

“You stay away from my girl, OK?” Mark said menacingly. Mark was shorter and buffer than Jimmy, but Jimmy knew he could take him on any time.

“Great, as long as I know who *your girl* is, hot shot.”

“You know very well who it is, son.”

“Who you calling ‘son’, shorty? And no, I don’t know who it is.”

Now Mark was really red. “Don’t you make me go there, Jim.”

“It’s J-i-m-m-y, now get yourself back to the locker room, ref. I’ll see you later tonight.”

“You mean she invited you?”

“Aha, so Jessica is ‘your girl’ then? Last time I checked she was still available.”

“Well, guess what? After tonight she won’t be.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Yeah, we will,” Mark said then walked away backwards. Jimmy turned to Ryan, who pretended not to have heard the conversation, and said, “Creep, he’s always stalking someone.”

ELEVEN

Jessica ran her plan over in her head once more. She would plant the pictures in her parents’ room—in a not too obvious spot, but somewhere that her mom would find them—and head to the beach to meet up with her friend. Two days later she would sign the contract on the small, yet elaborate house. Then, slowly, to not attract attention, move her belongings over to her new home. Hopefully her parents’ arguments would escalate to the point where Jessica could justify moving. Brittany thought it was a foolproof plan and was bound to work. Now if Jessica could just get her mom and brothers out of the house before her dad came home from work and Jessica had to head to the beach.

The opportunity came within minutes of Jessica’s departure. Her mom took her brothers to football practice and Jessica was left in the house all alone. She edged into her parents’ bedroom. She envied the size of the bed and the room. Her room was small and she only had a single bed. She looked around the room trying to find a good place to hide the pictures. She noticed the walk-in closet—another thing she was jealous of—and remembered that her mom would be taking one of her father’s suit jackets to the dry-cleaners.

She fanned through the jackets looking for one that showed some sign of needing to be cleaned. She found one and stuck the pictures in one of the pockets on the inside. Knowing her mom, Jessica knew that her mom would check all the pockets before take it to the dry-cleaners. Jessica got out as fast as she got in.

Jessica met her father on the way out of the house. “Hey dad, how was work?” She wore a smile on her face.

“Well, you seem to be cheerful? What’s gotten into you?”

Jessica noticed that she did sound cheerful and had to admit that it was one of her happiest moments in her bleary days. “Uh, nothing? Anyway I’m off. I’ll be home at around two.”

“Two?” Her dad said as he gawked. “I thought that this was supposed to be a beach dinner no need for you to stay out that late.”

“It isn’t late. One o’clock or I’ll stay with a friend,” Jessica bargained.

“Alright, one it is, but you had better be there at one sharp! Or you will be staying with a friend!”

“Sure thing, boss,” Jessica said and walked to her bike with a skip in her step.

Jimmy King rode down to the beach on his new racing bike. He decided to bring it and show it off. The sleek bike cut through the air as he hurtled down towards the beach. The aerodynamic frame cut through the wind like a hot knife through butter. He neared 30 mph and saw where Jessica and her friends were. He waved and the bike wobbled a bit—he was still not used to handling it yet. He saw her looking at him and she had a horrified expression pasted on her face.

He heard a shriek from someone on the right and turned to notice a semi-truck about to cross the intersection that Jimmy had blazed into not yielding. The horn sounded loudly and Jimmy clamped on both brakes. As new as the brakes were Jimmy knew that he would not stop in time. Was this how his life would end? Getting smashed by a semi going 55 mph? Would anyone ever tell Jessica about Christ? Could Ryan fill in for him?

Jessica noticed that the truck driver made no attempt to stop as it roared towards the intersection on a collision course with Jimmy. He disappeared as the truck drove by and Jessica heard a faint thud as she ran towards Jimmy. She saw him lying on the ground, his leg trapped underneath his bike. She saw people on their phones and walking towards Jimmy aware of the surrounding traffic.

Jessica was the first to arrive at Jimmy’s side. He let out a little groan and it appeared that he had, thankfully, not been hit by the truck. She stood there shocked, hands over her mouth. Jimmy was holding his head with his right hand; his other hand was trapped underneath his body. Jessica tried to lift the bike, but when Jimmy winced she dropped it. He grimaced at the increase of pain as the bike fell once more on top of him.

“Just pull it all the way up,” Jimmy said through clenched teeth. Jessica was careful when she lifted the bike this time and was surprised at how light it felt. Then she helped as Jimmy gingerly got up favoring his right side. “Does the bike have any scratches on it?” Jimmy asked.

“Not much, just the left pedal and part of the front wheel.”

“Oh, great,” Jimmy said and breathed a sigh of relief. Jessica went around to the other side to help Jimmy cross the street. She gasped at the sight of his left leg and arm. There

was blood everywhere. When he slid the road had scraped up his whole left side apart from where his clothes were—which were ripped.

“Oh my God, Jimmy, look!”

“Please don’t use His nam—”

“Yeah, sorry, but look!”

Jimmy brought his left arm and leg into view. He tugged at his shirt and exclaimed, “Oh no! My new shirt! Darn it!”

“That’s all you care about? You are bleeding all over the place! Lemmie call an ambulance.”

“Nonsense, it isn’t bleeding, there is just blood on it. Did you bring your car here or bike?”

“Jimmy, some of it looks pretty deep. I biked here, why?”

“OK, here’s what I need you to do, bike home, get some bandages, and drive back here; then drive me home. Can you do that?”

“So what are you going to do with your bike?”

“I can take some things off so it will fit.”

“But your blood will—”

Jimmy grabbed Jessica’s arm with his good hand and said, “Jessica! Come on! That is the least of our problems right now, OK?! I just need to get home now. Please. You can get back to your barbeque when you are done dropping me off.”

“Alright, fine! Just wait here, I’ll be back soon.”

“It’s not like I’ll be going anywhere.” Jimmy muttered.

TWELVE

As people walked past Jimmy—as he was taking the tires off his bike—he caught strange glances and people kept asking if he was OK. He then proceeded to take his handle bars off and examined his wounds. The scrapes were deepest near his knee and elbow. He looked closer and could see bits of the asphalt clinging to the blood. He tried to pick it out but it stung too much. The blood had almost dried by the time Jessica returned to him.

She exited the car with bandages and some disinfectant. “I’ll just take those,” Jimmy said pointing at the bandage.”

“Oh no, kid. I’m gonna put this on you no matter what, and you can’t run away. It says it won’t sting, so bring that leg over here.”

“You and I both know that’s a lie. *And* you sound like my mother.” Jimmy allowed Jessica to put the disinfectant on. His face twisted when she put the liquid on him as it seemed to bite at his skin. Jessica noticed his expression.

“That just means that it’s working. Which is why it’s good that I’m putting this on you so you don’t get it infected. I still think you should see a doctor.”

“You’re all the nurse I need Jessica.”

“What a sexist thing to say, you know there are male nurses as well.”

“That wasn’t sexist. Many nurses are female and I know you aren’t a doctor so I’ll call you a nurse. I don’t see a problem,” Jimmy said as Jessica dabbed more disinfectant on his arm. They walked gingerly to the car trying not to bend any of the affected limbs.

After they got the bike in the car Jimmy knew that he would have to sit down in the car. That would mean bending his leg. He dreaded the thought of it. He stuck his left leg in and tried to keep it as straight as he could. He forgot to roll the seat back and when he inserted the rest of his body in he was forced to bend his knees.

Grinding his teeth was all he could do to keep from crying out in pain. He felt the thin scab crack and saw blood seeping onto the outside of the bandage.

“Oh! Jimmy, it’s bleeding again!” Jessica exclaimed.

He calmed her down and finally got her to drive to his house. He called his brother—who was the only one home because his parents were both out of town celebrating their anniversary—to ask if he was up for driving. His brother was glad that he got another opportunity to drive. Since he got his learner’s permit he has wanted to drive whenever he could, but he could only drive if he had another person with a driver’s license in the car.

He cautiously got out of the car and his brother ran to help him with his bike.

“Thanks a lot Seth.”

Seth nodded a response and asked, “So where are we going?”

“Mr. Berry, the old friend of mom’s?”

“The doctor?”

“Yeah, him. I called him on the way here and he said it is OK if we stop by so he can look at it.”

“And you don’t want to go to the doctor’s office or hospital?”

“I don’t know where mom keeps the documents and I don’t know if I have to get a parent or guardian’s signature and all that stuff.”

“Are you sure you need all of that stuff?”

“Just get in the car Seth.” Jimmy turned to Jessica, “Sorry to take you away from the party, but thanks for the help. I hope I didn’t dirty any of your interior.”

“It’s OK, and you didn’t, you were very careful,” Jessica said. They gazed into each other’s eyes. Jessica had a small twinkle in her eye that seemed to hide her feelings deep within.

Jessica felt Jimmy’s arms moving closer to her. A honk from Seth startled them both as they turned. They looked at each other once more and Jimmy walked backwards towards the car. Jessica smiled and waved as the boys took off and got into her car and hit the road.

As Jessica walked from the parking lot she passed the place where Jimmy was almost hit. She noticed a helmet lying on the spot where he fell and she assumed that it was his. When the traffic dispersed she retrieved the helmet. To her surprise most of the plastic on the top was shattered and appeared to be peeling off. The left side had a huge crack in it from the impact it made with the ground.

She clutched it tight. Jessica didn’t know whether Jimmy had suffered a concussion, it was very likely; however, he seemed to be able to stand upright and he did not mention anything about it.

Jessica found where Mark was sitting and plopped down next to him in the beige, soft sand.

"Where did you run off to, Jessica?" Mark asked as Jessica sat down on a towel.

"Did you not see what happened to Jimmy?"

"Jim the guy who hit the semi right here?"

"Yeah that Jimmy. Did you see how he was bleeding?"

"Don't be so concerned, babe. It was a real good cover up."

"Don't call me *babe*—"

"What's the problem, babe?"

"—and a good cover up of what?"

"Never mind, it doesn't matter anymore since he isn't here."

After a moment's silence Jessica rested her head on Mark's shoulder and wrapped her arms around his waist. Mark responded by swinging one arm over her and held her close. Emotions were whizzing around in Jessica. She couldn't take her mind off Jimmy; how had he been able to stop so quickly? Surely he was going too fast to be able to stop by the time he noticed. And by the look of his helmet how had his head survived the contact with the road? She even heard a noise. A thought popped into her mind; could it have been this God that he spoke about?

The time seemed to go by fast as the sun dipped over the horizon filling the sky with a warm orange color. Jessica felt no comfort in Mark's embrace and withdrew from his grasp. His hand lingered by her side as he broke the silence. "Do you want something to eat? I saved you something."

"No. I can't eat," Jessica said, still shaken by Jimmy's near death experience that she witnessed. The emotions were overcoming Jessica and she needed out.

"How about a cold beer?" Mark offered opening a cooler behind her and reaching for a bottle.

"Yes," Jessica said wearily. Mark opened two bottles, one for each of them. They chinked bottles and Jessica went bottoms up. She tossed the empty bottle and reached for another one. That too, she guzzled. As she reached for a third bottle she stole a glance at Mark. He was wide eyed and surprised. Jessica took the bottle anyways and opened it.

"Whoa there girl, that's your third in a minute and you haven't even eaten anything since lunch I presume," Mark said and laid a hand on her bottle.

"Don't tell me what to do, *Mark*." Then tore the bottle away from his hands. She thought about downing the third as she had the other two, but decided against it. Jessica drank it more modestly and that seemed to settle Mark.

THIRTEEN

Jimmy's wounds were cleaned out once more, more thoroughly this time, by Mr. Berry. The room, which was in the basement, reminded Jimmy of a doctor's office or a hospital room. It was all white. Mr. Berry worked on Jimmy with clean latex gloves.

"I'm glad you came to me Jimmy, this could have been infected; then you would have gone to the hospital with more than a scrape," Mr. Berry said applying the last bit of bandage to Jimmy's leg.

"That would not have been good. Thanks for doing this Mr. Berry."

“No problem, if anything happens to it that doesn’t look right you should come back or go to your doctor. It will leave a big scar on your leg and arm.”

Jimmy’s face twisted at the sound of it. He didn’t want to imagine what it would look like. He thanked Mr. Berry once more and hobbled up the steps trying not to bend his leg. Before Jimmy was out of range he heard Mr. Berry call his name. Jimmy turned to see him poke his head out and say, “Say hi to your mom, will you?”

“Sure thing,” Jimmy replied and continued to work his way up the steps which led to the living room where Seth was waiting. He was on his phone but looked up to see who was coming up the steps. Jimmy motioned to the door and Seth understood.

Getting into the black SUV was easier for Jimmy than getting into Jessica’s low riding Camaro. Neither Seth nor Jimmy spoke to each other for a few minutes. Finally Seth broke the silence, “So what were you doing with Jessica before we left home?”

“What do you think we were going to do?” Jimmy replied harshly trying to make it obvious he didn’t want to talk about it.

“You two were going to kiss, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, but you ruined the moment.”

Seth pursed his lips and kissed the air mockingly. Jimmy punched him and stared out the front window.

“Are you two dating or something?” Seth asked with a tone of seriousness.

“No, still debating it; and now it seems that Mark is also interested in her. I don’t know who she is going to go with. Mark and I were supposed to have at it today before I fell.”

“Is she a Christian?”

“Who? Jessica? No.”

“Then what’s the debate? You know the answer, don’t you?”

“What? Have you talked to Fred?”

“Fred? No. I didn’t know that you did. I guess that means you know what the Bible says then. 2 Corinthians 6:14 says, ‘Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?’ What do you think that means?”

“Look Seth, I’ve heard that enough for one day, let’s just forget about it, OK?”

“No Jimmy, you can’t just ‘forget’ about it. You have to think about it, what impact do you think it has on your decision?”

Jimmy sighed, he hated when he had to explain himself, especially to his brother who thought he was so educated in every subject. “That verse just talks about marrying an unbeliever. And you know Jessica; do you think she is ‘wicked’? And what a better way to share the love of Christ with your girlfriend? At least she will listen this time.”

“It does talk about marrying them, but it also works for relationships. Let’s say that you two do date each other. Then what happens? What if you fall so madly in love with each other that you just can’t help but propose? Or she pressures you into proposing? When will you know when to draw the line, Jimmy?”

Jimmy was surprised at Seth’s answer. “Fred is real smart for using this opportunity to get you to try to convince me.”

“Honestly, I have no clue what your deal with Fred is. I saw you and Jessica going a little too far for me and mom and dad. All I’m doing is trying to find out what you are going to do next and help you,” Seth said and sounded confused.

“So you weren’t texting or on the phone with Fred?”

“The last time we had contact was last week.”

“Then who did you call? And who were you texting when I came up?”

“Oh, that was Kelsey.”

“Kelsey?! The one that goes to our youth group? Both times?”

“Yeah her, and both times.”

“Are you, er…”

“Interested in her? Yeah, she’s cute too,” Seth said with a smile as they pulled up into the driveway. Jimmy was glad that his room was on the ground floor so he did not need to climb any stairs.

He disrobed and plopped into bed, but could not sleep after many tries. He got out of bed and put on a sweatshirt and sweatpants. Then made his way to his studio to work on music. He and Jessica had an appointment the next morning and he needed to get some work done.

Jessica woke up with an immense headache and covered in sand. It was everywhere, in her hair, down her shirt, and every imaginable place. When she finally came all the way to, she noticed Mark nodding off then shooting back awake. He rubbed his eyes in an attempt to stay awake as Jessica got up. The sun was just peeking over the hills flooding the beach with light. It was very early in the morning.

Suddenly Jessica felt her stomach roll over. She knew what was coming; it had happened many times before. She groped around for a bucket or bag, but found none. She felt the liquid coming up her esophagus with a burning sensation following it. Jessica dug in the sand rapidly as she gagged and it all came out.

Mark held a plastic bag right under her mouth as Jessica discharged all of the alcohol from the previous night. Jessica lay back on the sand weary. It was the worst day to have a hangover. She had an appointment with Jimmy and meetings between the Diamond Records staff and her lawyer/agent all afternoon. She would probably need another couple of drinks after those meetings.

Mark drove the two of them to his house in Jessica’s car. Jessica was astounded at the size of his house. As they walked in the modern interior matched the modern exterior of the house. Mark quickly swept a brown folder off the table and placed it under a stack of books. When Jessica asked about the house he told her that it was his parents’ house before they died.

“I’m sorry,” Jessica said solemnly.

“It’s alright. The bathroom is over there and you can take any cereal you want,” Mark replied and headed for what Jessica assumed was the way to his bedroom.

Jessica quickly rinsed her mouth and tried to get most of the sand out of her hair and clothes. She was eager to look at the file that Mark discarded under a pile of books.

Jessica looked around for any sign of Mark. She slowly lifted the books off the folder. It had the word “Confidential” stamped in red on it. She opened it and it had pages of typed letters or something. The first page was a letter addressed to Mark Rodriguez. It talked about an operation that included “eliminating a target”. *Cool*, Jessica thought, *Mark works for some special military thing. I bet Jimmy would be jealous*. The letter was signed “BC” with a signature that Jessica thought she recognized.

She flipped the page, it listed the places, the deadline, and the target. Jessica was only able to glance at the name before she heard Mark coming back to the kitchen area. She closed the folder and piled the books back on. She ran to one of the drawers and pretended like she had been searching for a bowl.

“What are you looking for?” Mark asked Jessica and moved to within inches of Jessica.

“A bowl.”

Mark pressed lightly against her as he reached for a cupboard above Jessica. He brought two bowls down and Jessica smiled him a thanks. The two ate in silence as Jessica continuously thought about the names in the folder. There was one name she pondered over. She didn’t see the full name, but she could only assume what it was. Jessica didn’t like the thought of it. She convinced herself that it was in the next category and wasn’t part of anything special.

FOURTEEN

Jimmy woke to faint bangs on the door and someone shouting his name. Groggy he stood up and pain seared in his left leg as it hit the table. He cried out in pain and instinctively held his leg. He made his way to the door, careful not to bend his leg too much. After painstaking steps he finally was able to open the door to an angry, but beautifully dressed Jessica.

She stormed in through the door not even greeting him, “Where were you? I waited for an hour at my house for you! Why didn’t you show up? Did you forget? And now I have to go to a meeting in half an hour.” Jessica sat herself down obviously disgusted with Jimmy.

“Take a seat,” Jimmy said quietly. “Sorry I missed our appointment; I must have fallen asleep at the computer last night because I didn’t hear an alarm. Shall we get to work? And is that why you are dressed so nicely.”

“Glad you like it, but I’m still mad you didn’t come. Oh, you look so exhausted Jimmy. Have you eaten anything?” Jimmy was surprised at Jessica’s sudden change of tone.

“I’m fine. Do you have the songs?”

“Yeah right here.” Jessica dug in her black and white leather purse which matched her white button down and black blazer. She also wore a short white skirt. Her hair was straightened and had a glossy look to it, it also appeared to be darker than normal. She produced a USB stick and Jimmy plugged it into his computer. He opened the file and picked a song from one of the many he had to review.

He listened once, twice, and then a third time through his head phones. "Alright, if you want something to eat there is stuff in the fridge or cupboard. I should be done with this in a few minutes. How much time do we have?"

"It's fine, I already ate. Uh, only twenty now."

"Oh my," Jimmy said. His eyes darted back and forth across the screen. Loading new soundtracks and removing a few. He chose from hundreds of guitar and drum soundtracks. Mixing and matching for the perfect sound. After listening to the song after each addition his time was soon up.

"I gotta go Jimmy, I'll probably see you later." Jessica slapped her thighs and stood up. Without acknowledging Jessica he saved his work and copied the rest of the soundtracks on to his computer to edit later if they needed it. He unplugged the audio jack from his headphones and inserted the jack to his two speakers above the computer.

Jimmy played the song through once and it stunned Jessica. "What did you do?!" She gasped.

"What, something wrong?"

"No, it's even better than before. And you know that it was my producer, Mr. Richardson, who first added the sound?"

"Yeah, I know who he is. I'd like to be like him some day. I can't do much to change your music because ultimately I can't decide on what goes where."

"*Like him?* You're way better!"

"I'm not so sure, he knows a lot."

"Whatever. But what if I show him this? Do you think he will change his mind?"

"Well, you can't really, since you didn't make it. However, he would be stupid not to use this; his other sound which I started with was, well let's be honest, not that great."

"Yeah, well I'm definitely showing him this when we are meeting."

"Great, but are you guys really meeting for another album? I mean you just came out with one like two months ago. And you have many songs already."

"Yeah, but you know how it is, we only take like ten or twelve of them for the album. The rest is scrapped or we use it later. No, the meeting is about the tour and the final details like when I leave etc. Can you save that song onto my USB so I can go?"

"Yeah sure." Jimmy saved it then pulled it out of the port. He tried to hobble along with Jessica as she walked to her car. "When is the first day?"

"Still in about a month, but it's so cool to see all of the things coming together."

"So now you are finally happy then?" Jimmy asked as he opened the car door for her. Jessica slipped in and rolled down her window as the door closed.

"You know that plan I had told you about the other day at the mall?"

"Yeah, what? It backfired?"

"Well, it worked perfectly, too perfect that my mom has dad sleeping on the couch and he leaves like two hours earlier for work and comes home extra late. It's only been what? A day? But any chance they get they say something insulting.

"I also just told them about me leaving. Made it so much worse. And to think it was all my fault; I ruined their lives. Their relationship and now probably my brothers' lives as well, because when they get a divorce they will have to share the kids." Jimmy could sense the thick emotion in her voice. He heard Jessica whisper to herself, "Don't cry, you idiot."

Jimmy wanted to say, "You brought it on yourself." But decided it would be better to not make the situation worse. "If you need me for anything let me know," he tried.

"Thanks, see you later, Jimmy." Jessica carefully wiped her eyes and backed the car out of the driveway.

Jessica sat in the big conference room with two other people: her producer and agent. They were going over things that Jessica had no interest in. She couldn't wait to move into her new house. She had been waiting for this day for a couple of months. The little house was right next to the beach and fully furnished.

"What do you think, Jessica?" Mr. Richardson asked.

"I think it's a great idea!" Jessica didn't know what he was referring to, but she knew it had something to do with her tour.

"You don't want a show in LA?" Her agent asked, surprised.

"Did I say that? Sorry guys, I wasn't listening; what's happening?" Jessica asked.

Her agent filled her in, "The show on the 6th is really complicated because it is two days after your show in New York. Something was messed up in the planning stages. The tickets for the LA show are already sold out. We can cancel it and you will still get the money. In addition, there will be no one to open for you. Therefore, Mr. Richardson has asked if you wanted to cancel it. Do you?"

"Oh no! We are not canceling the LA show! You will make sure you can get all of the equipment to the place. I mean come on, you guys have a lot of money and Diamond Records is a huge company. If you cancel it, I will tell all of those reporters out there and you will have a whole lot of heat coming your way. Then I'll go and sign with someone else," Jessica threatened.

"You can't end the contract. When the contract time expires we will decide your fate if we want to keep you here or not. And you have nothing to worry about; your show will not be canceled," Mr. Richardson said and whispered to his assistant. The assistant shuffled out of the room. "The only thing is you won't have an opener for you."

"What if I find someone to open for me?" Jessica inquired. She looked at her agent and then at Mr. Richardson.

"By all means, if you find someone you can send them to me and I'll see what they are made of." Mr. Richardson replied.

"Cool, so now that the meeting is over can I show you something I changed in one of the songs? The meeting is over, right?"

"Unless someone has something more to add I would love to take a look at what you have come up with."

FIFTEEN

Jessica sat hunched over a drink, her head hanging. Across from her sat Brittany with a drink of her own, only it was not alcoholic. The loneliness of living by herself had gotten to Jessica. With no screaming or no one preparing something was creepy to Jessica. She

had lived for eighteen years with business and her brothers shouting at each other. Oh how she missed them. It had only been a month since she moved out, but it seemed like forever.

Thankfully her parents had not divorced yet, but Jessica was in no hurry to reconcile. The time she did not use with friends, being drunk, making music, or sleeping she was contemplating her life. What was the purpose? If there was a God like Jimmy had said then why did he make Jessica's life with a void that seemed to never be filled? She took a big swig from her glass.

"You have to pull yourself together, Jessica. You can't just get drunk all the time; what does that help with?" Brittany was concerned for her friend. And it wasn't only her who had noticed that Jessica was continuously getting worse.

"What else do I do? Sing? It gets hard after a while you know. I just don't know what to do. When I drink I can forget the things and just have a good time partying."

"Getting drunk every day is not partying. And it does a lot to your health if you aren't careful. How about the hangovers that you get the next day, is it really worth it?"

"Don't you go talking to me about *my* health."

"Well, something is wrong with you, Jessica! You aren't the same as you were a few months ago. I'm concerned," Brittany raised her voice, angry at Jessica.

"Well, don't be! I'm fine! Just leave me alone!" Jessica screamed back huffing.

"What are you missing, Jessica? Tell me! You have fame, money, glory, like a billion fans, and you can get like anything in the world. What more do you want? Friends who care about you?! Because you also have that! But do you care for them anymore? I'm not so sure you do." Brittany hollered back.

"I don't know, I don't know," Jessica sobbed.

Brittany was fed up. She stood up sending the chair backwards. The rubber tips screeched against the hardwood floors. It toppled over and banged against the floor, which startled Jessica. Brittany stomped out of the dining room and a few moments later Jessica heard the door slam closed. She buried her head in her arms and wept.

Jimmy's leg and arm did not need any more bandages to protect them; scabs had formed and some were already peeling off naturally. The use of his leg had almost returned to one hundred percent. He was able to bike again and he and Ryan were on one of their weekly 60-mile treks. Whenever Jimmy looked down at the road, he could see the scratches on the fork reminding him of his accident.

Halfway through they took a short break lasting only a few minutes.

"So when are you going to ask Jessica out?" Ryan asked slightly short of breath.

The verse that Fred and Seth shared ran through his mind. *'Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?'*

"I'm not sure. It seems like it has turned into a competition between Mark and me. She seems to like both of us to some extent. We just have to see who is smoother," Jimmy responded with a wink.

“That should be you then. Plus with that injury of yours you will totally win her over.”

“Even though there is no bandage?”

“Yeah, just pretend that it still hurts and bring attention to it every once in a while.

She’ll have such a heavy heart for your pain and suffering you could easily get her.”

“You know it’s wrong, yet you want me to lie?”

“Hey, it still hurts right?”

“Yeah, but only if you put pressure on it or if I put it in the wrong position.”

“There you go, it isn’t lying.”

“It’s deceit, almost the same thing. By the way, what do you think of the verse: ‘Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?’?”

“Oh, 2 Corinthians 6:14. That applies to marrying people in my opinion. Don’t worry if you think it will get in the way of you and Jessica going out. Talk to Fred, he’ll tell you about it.”

“Yeah, I did. He says that it applies to everything; or at least I should consider it for everything.” There was a pause, then Jimmy mounted his bike, “I’ll race you to Joe’s.”

“Our friend, or the restaurant?”

“The restaurant of course. We need to eat something after this ride. Loser buys the food.”

Ryan took off at high speed and Jimmy heard him holler, “Deal!”

Jimmy opted for a different approach; he would make sure he could bike at a constant speed for 27 miles and the last three miles he would power it to the finish. He also made sure to keep Ryan in sight at all times.

The last three miles came and Jimmy lowered his body and kicked the bike into high gear. Every few hundred yards he came closer to Ryan and Ryan became slower. The scenery was amazing, the sun radiated a bright orange splendor of light as it was just an hour from dipping below the blue Ocean. The hills absorbed the glow and the far clouds did the same.

Jimmy could smell the fresh ocean as a light breeze formed. The waves below him splashed against the cliff sending a spray in the air. Jimmy zipped past Ryan and looked back. Ryan was trying to gather up all the strength he could muster, but it was a futile attempt; Jimmy had already won.

He parked his bike and waited for Ryan. They walked in together and to their surprise, they saw a familiar face, Mark.

SIXTEEN

Mark and Jimmy bumped chests daring the other to swing first. They turned in a half circle still in the restaurant. The people in the closest seats turned their attention to the two nudging each other. Jimmy could sense Ryan standing awkwardly beside him not knowing what to do. A hush fell over the customers and everyone stared, including the owner, Joe, whom Ryan and Jimmy knew well.

“Come on chicken little, show me what you got,” Jimmy hissed.

“Two moves, Jim and you’re on the floor,” Mark spat.

“You two move along now, you’re disturbing my customers,” Joe hollered from the bar.

Jimmy and Mark simultaneously backed away. Then Mark said barely above a whisper, “Guess who’s got a date with Jessica tonight?”

Jimmy was disgusted, how in the world would anyone fall for Mark? Jimmy and Ryan got the usual, a protein and vitamin packed salad with chocolate milkshakes. A strange combo that they always caught second glances for. However, it was the best meal they felt helped after a long hard bike ride.

As they ate, both of them devised plans to get Jessica and Jimmy alone. Every time they mentioned Jessica and him together ‘*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*’ played over in his mind. He mentioned it to Ryan.

“Come on man, look it will all be fine. I know.”

“How do you know, Ryan? Do you have experience with this?”

“If I didn’t I wouldn’t advise you. Look at Brittany and me. We are doing great together. It’s like we were made for each other.”

“Brittany, Jessica’s friend?”

“The one and only.”

“How come I never knew?”

“Because I never told you. Oh, wait she’s calling now.”

Jessica was all dressed up for her date with Mark. She had on a blue dress which stopped just above her knees. It was nothing to get noticed for, but it looked good on her. She hoped Mark would like it. Her wardrobe had expanded from the many shopping trips she and Brittany had made together. So had her jewelry collection. Jessica wanted to impress Mark, but did not want to be noticed by everyone at the restaurant. She hoped that no one had leaked any information to the paparazzi.

“Hey, Mark, do you mind if I meet you at your house? Then we can go together?”

“Sure, anything works for me, babe,” Mark said in a soothing tone over the phone.

“Great, but do you have like a spare key so that I can get in and not stand outside waiting for you?”

“How did you know I was out?”

“I can hear cars.”

“Right, you have great ears. Under the goose by the front door. Kind of an easy spot, but you need the code to turn the alarm off. I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.” Mark paused and Jessica laughed. He continued, “I’m just joking, it’s 3979. I’ll see you in twenty minutes?”

“Yeah, can’t wait Mark, see you soon.” Jessica hung up and rushed to her car in her high heels. She wanted to check on something before she and Mark left his house.

She found the key right where Mark had said it was. The code also worked and she quickly entered. She found the pile of books, but no folder under it. She checked his desk

and nothing was there either. Finally on his neatly made bed she found the folder with the stamped red letters. She opened it and read the pages again. This time the pages were in a different order.

She read almost two pages which filled her in on Mark's assignment. Finally she got to the page with the names. She read them again, they were all too familiar. But none of them were under the "Target" category. She read the name which was and dropped the folder. She heard a noise and swiveled her head as her heart raced.

She ran to a window facing the driveway and only her pink Camaro was reflecting the sun which was almost below the horizon. She raced out to her car and took off towards the coast.

Jimmy attached powerful bike lights to his bike for he needed to see what was in front of him so he wouldn't go over a cliff. He saw someone a few yards in front of him on a phone with their back to him wearing a jacket. He moved to within earshot of the person and recognized the voice to be Mark's.

"Yes, sir. She is at my house right now and I will pick her up there and we will go together... Should I just kill her at my place? Make it easier? ... Of course, sorry for not thinking sir. I have the drugs and I will make it last long enough that she would need to go to the bathroom. Then I can slip it in her drink and everyone will think it was the restaurant who poisoned her... Yes, they have a history with Jessica."

That startled Jimmy. He tried to make out the voice on the other end but he was too far away. Any closer and he would probably be noticed if Mark turned around suddenly. If he learned anything from what he had just heard it would be that Mark was capable of anything.

He moved out of sight and called Jessica. No answer. He tried three more times to no avail. He had no car to get to Jessica and now she wasn't answering her phone. He left her a couple of text messages and strapped his helmet on. It would be a long way to Mark's. He had only been there once before and in the dark it would be really hard to find.

Jimmy set off as fast as he could down the coast. Every so often a car's headlights would appear and he would check it just in case it happened to be her. A futile attempt but still worth a try. He pumped the pedals with his legs as hard as he could. He had to get to Jessica before she met up with Mark because he didn't know where they were going for dinner. Only that Mark was going to kill her as soon as he got the chance to.

SEVENTEEN

Jessica was furious, people whom she thought were her friends turned out not to be. The last person who she thought cared about her turned out to be a fake lover, a killer. No one was left who cared about her. Not her parents, not her friends, nobody.

She knew none of her fans and never really cared for them either. She hated being phony when she would meet any of them. With her tour coming up there would be a lot more of it.

As Jessica's anger grew so did her speed as she flew onto the coastal highway. The powerful car's engine grew louder as Jessica floored the accelerator. The car bumped and scraped along some of the uneven parts of the road.

Jessica didn't know what the point of her life was as she debated going off the coast. All of the fame, money, and glory meant nothing to Jessica if she couldn't fill the void in her heart. Happiness was one of the many pieces missing to fill the void. Jessica thought nothing in life would ever be able to fill that hole in her heart. *What's the point of living with this for like 70 more years when I can end it now?* Jessica asked herself.

Jessica contemplated that question for a bit; it wasn't like the other times when she was alone in her house. She could actually do it now. Then no one would know because the car would sink burying her in the ocean. *Then I could finally be free of the pain,* Jessica thought.

Jessica rolled all of the windows down an inch. She pulled the handbrake and snapped the wheel left. The tires screeched and the car tumbled over the railing and plunged into the water activating the air bag which Jessica banged into and was knocked unconscious.

As Jimmy raced down the highway along the coast he saw a car in the distance. It appeared to be coming very fast at him. Suddenly the headlights appeared to be tumbling and the car went over the railing. Jimmy heard a splash as he neared the place where the car broke the barrier. He ran through his mind what he should do. Should he keep going and try to reach Jessica or attempt to rescue the people in the car? How many people would be in the car?

Jimmy stopped and took the powerful light off his bike. The car was face down in the water and appeared to be sinking fast. It was a forty foot drop, but it appeared much further down. Jimmy called 911 and informed them. He quickly sent Jessica one more text in a desperate last attempt to reach her.

He ran to the side of the road furthest away from the water. He ran as fast as he could towards the water and leaped into the black sky. Water overcame him as plunged into the deep blue. As he descended into the water he could not feel the bottom yet and was surprised. Panic overcame him and he grasped for the surface.

He gulped in the fresh air and remembered the task at hand. By now the car was almost fully submerged which made Jimmy's job even harder. As he swam to the front of the car the lights got dimmer. He was able to see the color pink on the fender and noticed the number plate. It was one of a kind. Only one person in the world had that number plate, it was Jessica's car.

He swam over to the drivers' side and went under the surface. The salt water stung his eyes and his vision was blurry. He could make out Jessica's figure and she was not moving. That meant one of two things to Jimmy, she was dead or unconscious. He hoped the latter. He found the window open about an inch. He surfaced for air and went back under. He gripped the open part of the window and placed his feet on the lower part of the

window near the door. He pulled with his hands and pushed with his feet. He came up for air and tried again. A third time was needed and finally the glass broke.

Jimmy reached in and unbuckled Jessica. He came up for air once more and this time heard sirens. At least someone was coming. He dove under one last time for Jessica. When he pulled her out his arm scraped the broken glass and he got a nasty cut. The salt water didn't help either.

Jimmy surfaced with Jessica trying to keep both of their heads up above the water and focused on getting to shore as fast as possible. The flashing lights from the highway bounced off the water which showed that help had arrived.

His legs and arms burned trying to swim with Jessica to the shore. His muscles ached as he kicked the water. It didn't help that he had forgotten to take his biking shoes off. Jimmy lay Jessica on the little beach there was. Panting he put his ear next to her mouth and nose. He heard and felt nothing.

Frantically Jimmy searched for a pulse in her wrists and her neck, her face was a shade of blue and purple. Jimmy performed CPR on Jessica while praying silently, "Father, help me revive Jessica. I know it's kind of a selfish request, but please give her one more chance. I know you can do it, help me to do it. However, you have a greater plan ahead, so your will be done Father. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."

Jimmy heard the thwacking of helicopter blades in the distance. He had wondered how they were going to get them out from this place. The moonlight and the blue and red lights from emergency vehicles illuminated the water, but not where Jimmy and Jessica were. He exhaled into Jessica's mouth and watched her chest rise, then fall. She still wasn't breathing and had no pulse. He moved back to her chest and pressed on her sternum repeatedly.

Jessica gave a weak cough. She was alive! Jimmy quickly put her in the recovery position, her head resting on her arm. The sound and smell of barf wafted into the air. The helicopter was now scanning the water and coastline. Jimmy stood up and waved his hands in the air desperately. The strong light moved in his direction and he closed his eyes from the blinding light.

The helicopter was really loud as it hovered above them; he still could not look up for the light was still trained on him. He was barely able to hear the winch being lowered over the loud noise. The man grabbed Jessica first and put her on a stretcher. Jessica was hoisted up into the helicopter and Jimmy was next. When he got in someone had already applied monitors to Jessica.

One of the personnel on the helicopter tended to his cut arm and his previous wound. As they entered the hospital all of the attention was diverted to Jessica and Jimmy found himself lost in the maze of white hallways. Eventually he found his way to the waiting room and sat in one of the many empty blue cushioned chairs.

EIGHTEEN

Jimmy awoke to the sound of people milling through the waiting room. The clock on the wall showed 11:30. He had slept late and no one bothered to wake him up. Jimmy thought it was strange. He walked up to a nurse.

"Jessica is awake and you can go see her in room 116," the nurse said.

Jimmy was bewildered. "Excuse me, but can you tell me how you know whom it is that I am looking for?"

"Yeah, when I asked you last night when you started sleeping."

Jimmy had recalled no conversations that past night. He thanked the nurse and made his way to the room Jessica was in. The TV was on and was quietly playing a movie.

Jessica was staring blankly at it, obviously bored. Jimmy found a chair and set it next to the hospital bed. He straddled and leaned on the chair. Jessica turned to see who it was. Relief spread over her face. Then a frown.

"What's wrong? And how do you feel?" Jimmy asked Jessica.

"I feel like I could go home. It's so boring here and I don't feel bad at all. I don't see why they don't let me out of here. The thing that's wrong is that I'm still alive."

Jimmy hung his head. It was what he had feared: it was her doing, not Mark's. Jessica turned back to the TV as Jimmy considered a new approach.

"Jessica," Jimmy said with a sigh. "If something was free would you take it?"

"Yeah, as long as it isn't something bad."

"What if I told you that you could have eternal life?"

"Oh no, Jimmy, not this again."

"Why are you avoiding it? You know the truth and you can't come up with any arguments that God is fake. You heard what happened when I pulled you out of the car, did you not? Your windows are bullet proof and like the only thing that can get through is, well, I don't know! Don't you think that it is a miracle that I was able to break the glass and somehow swim to shore both of us? You, fully clothed, and me weak from biking? I sure think so. The only reason why I would think that you survived was because He gave you another chance. Why not take it?"

"You mean it was you who took me out?"

"Yes it was me; had it been someone else you would most definitely have been dead. Not to mention that you had no pulse when I laid you on the shore. I also had to do CPR and stuff, to bring you back to life."

"Well why didn't you just leave me dead?!"

"Because I had no idea whether it was you or Mark who did it. And if I knew you did it I still would not let you die before I tried."

"You should have saved yourself the effort. And how did you know about Mark?"

"I'll tell you later. But please, answer my question?"

"I don't know Jimmy; I don't think I want to. You know..."

"No, I don't know." Jimmy started to raise his voice, "Is it because you are afraid that you will have to give up control of your life? I mean you already do that when you drink anyways. When you are drunk you have no control over yourself. I have seen some of the things that you do with yourself and they aren't pretty. Come on! What more is it going to take to convince you?"

Tears welled up in Jessica's eyes. Half of her wanted to go through with it and the other half held her back.

"Look what is says in Revelation 21:8: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all

liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

“I’m not saying you are all of those, but do you want to live the rest of eternity burning and feeling like you are always dying? Do you want to feel anguish and pain for the rest of your life? Maybe that is how you feel now, because you wanted to kill yourself. Maybe you thought that if you could get out of this life then you could escape the pain. No you cannot.

“What did you think would happen after you died? Do you think that it all just disappears? As I told you before about history. You must believe the Bible if you believe what happened in the history books.” Jimmy paused then said, “You know that last night when I saw your car—”

Now Jessica was really crying and she just shook her head. Jimmy couldn’t tell whether it was of surrender or because she didn’t want to do it. Jimmy laid a hand on her shoulder and said, “Jessica, I love you. Not just as a colleague/helper but more than a friend. I didn’t want to hurt you, but I think it is about time that you embrace what is going on in your life.”

“Why didn’t you ask me out then?” Jessica inquired through sobs.

“Well, I almost did. The Bible says that we should not yoke ourselves to unbelievers and I asked my pastor about it and he didn’t really take my stance on it. When I realized that this Mark fellow was going after you I got a bit jealous and I didn’t like him. I thought I would have been better for you. I thought that God wanted me to go out with you anyways and save you from this guy.

“It didn’t work out when I tried to, so I thought He had other plans for you. It turns out that I was right and now you are here in the hospital with a suicide attempt to your name and I am trying to convince you to take action.”

“Why doesn’t He just tell me to do it or do it for me?”

“Because He gave us a choice to worship Him or not.”

“But if He made us for that then why not just make all of us worship Him instead of us choosing?”

“The way I understand it is: would you rather have people who are paid to become your fans or people who willingly became your fans because they like your music or you?”

“Fans who actually like me and my music.”

“See, same thing with God; He gave us a free will and does not want anyone to go to hell. However, people have to want to follow Him, He isn’t going to make the choice for anyone.”

“Then why did He make me? Why not make me someone else or just not at all?”

“Because He has a special plan for you.”

“And what would that be?”

“I don’t know! I don’t have an answer to all your questions. He hasn’t revealed His plan for you to me yet.”

Jessica pondered it for a bit and then said, “So let me get this straight. If I do say yes to this eternal life, I would know what His plan is and I will go to heaven and He forgives all of my sins. You don’t have to do good things to get to heaven?”

“No you don’t have to, all you have to do is ask. It says in the Bible, ‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.’

“It clearly states that it isn’t ‘by works’, but the grace is ‘the gift of God’. Also, grace cannot be earned but it is given, that it why is is a gift from God.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“You need to remember though that it is a lifetime commitment and not something that you do on the day and then forget about it. And you will have to change the way you live, talk; you need to follow His rules, and changing some of your friends to ones who also walk with Christ will help,” Jimmy reminded her sternly.

“Well, that doesn’t matter, seeing I have no friends anyways.”

Jimmy was dumbfounded, she had many friends. “What about Brittany? And, well, I guess Mark isn’t one of them. But me?”

“No, and I forgot about you. Jimmy, I want to do it. Can you pray with me?”

Jimmy was stunned. “Like right now? Are you even ready?”

“You yourself said that we don’t know how much time we have left on this earth.”

“OK, but you really need to mean it when you tell Him.”

He looked into Jessica’s eyes and he could tell that she was serious.

“You’re right, He knows if you mean it or not.”

“So can you pray with me?”

“I would be most glad to. Would you like to repeat after me or do you want to do it yourself?”

“Heavenly father, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jimmy was amazed when she already started and she hadn’t even asked how to start or say anything. Jimmy leaned forward, forearms on his knees, head bowed and resting on the chair, and eyes closed he prayed with her.

Jessica already felt a little bit better just from those eight words. “I believe in You and that Your Word is true. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that He died on the cross so that I may now have forgiveness for my sins and eternal life.

“I am sorry for those drunken nights. I know that, with the help of my dear friend Jimmy, without you in my heart my life is meaningless. I believe in my heart that you, Lord God, raised Him from the dead. Please, Jesus, forgive me, for every sin I have ever committed or done in my heart, please Lord Jesus forgive me and come into my heart as my personal Lord and Savior today. I need You to be my Father and my Friend.

“I give You my life and ask You to take full control from this moment on; I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.” Jessica immediately felt the burden and depression that weighed her down for so long was now gone.

As Jessica was about to get up Jimmy put his hand on her shoulder and she sat back down. With one arm still on her shoulder he prayed, “Father, thank You for this new sister in Christ. I ask that You would use her for Your glory and Your glory alone. I ask that she would have a hunger for Your Word and that You would show her the will You have for her. Please give her the courage and desire to fulfill it. Bless her, in Jesus’ name I pray; amen.”

They got up and Jimmy embraced her. He pulled back and Jessica said, “So now does that mean we can go out?”

“Don’t tell me that is the reason why you said what you just said.”

“It isn’t, but I really need to get home, can you drive me there?”

“Unless you are discharged now by the hospital you can’t go. But I can get something if you forgot it.”

“Yeah, please get my parents. I’d like to have a few words with them.”

“Ah,” Jimmy understood what she was going to do. “Well, I can call them to come here?” Jimmy looked around and dug his phone out of his pocket. It had survived the ocean water and was functioning very nicely.

“You mean that still works?”

“Yeah, it does.” Jimmy spoke on the phone and Jessica could barely make out her mother’s voice. She choked up and turned away. When Jimmy finished Jessica said, “Now, tell me how you found me and got me out of the car?”

NINETEEN

Backstage Jessica Hall still felt the energy of the crowd as they started to disperse. Her pulse still racing after an enthusiastic and energetic performance in New York City. It was late and Jessica started to wind down. She took a quick shower and changed into sweatpants and a sweater.

Back in her hotel room Jessica bathed again as she reflected on the past few months. She was finally happy and content; the feelings were unlike the ones she had felt before her suicide attempt. She no longer felt a piece missing. Everything was in place. Her family was now a better place since she got right with her parents. It was tough for Jessica to fess up and admit that she had tried to get her parents to fight so that she could have an excuse to move. It was selfish of her; only thinking about her future and not her brothers’ or parents’.

She was grateful for a great friend in Jimmy King and what he had shown her. Jessica’s phone buzzed on the side of the bath tub. Jessica dried her hands off and caught the phone just before it vibrated over the edge into the white tub filled with relaxing warm water. Jessica turned the jets on in the tub and relaxed to read the text from Kelsey.

Kelsey and Jessica met when Jimmy had introduced them to each other at a youth meeting. Kelsey told Jessica that she was a big fan of Jessica’s, but she had kept her cool and had not gone crazy, which Jessica liked. They hit off really well and had become good friends after that night alone. They grew in their relationship and Jessica felt that Kelsey was as good a friend as Brittany and Jessica were; best friends. Now when they spoke it wasn’t weird or especially exciting for Kelsey.

The message read, “JESSICA!! I just got a text from Seth that Jimmy is in the hospital! I’m on my way there but Seth says that it’s really bad and the doctors can’t figure out what’s wrong with him. I think you should come now. At least be here as soon as you can!” The message went on to ask how the show went.

Jessica tapped the keyboard on the screen rigorously and sent a message back. She then called her manager to ask him to book the next flight out of NYC to LA. Jessica dried off, dressed, and packed her bags. Her plane ticket was brought to her and a helicopter,

waiting on the roof of the hotel, flew her to the airport. She was seated on the plane and was told via text message that a car would be waiting outside LAX airport to take her anywhere she needed to go. It was then that Jessica decided to hire a private jet for the next time she flew.

Jimmy was groggy and covered in a white sheet. His whole body felt as if it were on fire. He had an IV tube stuck in his left hand and other medical equipment strapped on him or nearby. He realized he was in a hospital; he didn't know how he got there, only that when he came home he felt sick and ran for the bathroom.

In the dim light he saw a blond nurse with blue eyes next to him, checking equipment. The blinds were shut and the curtains were partially drawn at the far end of the room. As far as he could tell, Jimmy was in a room by himself. He tried to speak, but it came out in a grunt. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead as his face reddened. The nurse faced Jimmy and saw his expression. Jimmy tried to signal he was going to vomit. The nurse, acting quickly, brought a bowl to Jimmy's mouth. He turned his head slightly and emptied his stomach.

"That ought to be the last of it," the nurse said and wiped Jimmy's mouth. Jimmy tried to smile back but couldn't do it the way he was feeling. The nurse walked out and stopped in the doorway. Along with a doctor, Jimmy's parents were there, talking to the nurse and doctor. Jimmy strained to hear the conversation.

"Do we know the problem yet?" his mother asked.

"Unfortunately, no. We have sent blood samples to determine his condition. But until then we cannot do much." The doctor responded.

"Is it serious? Uh, will he die?" Jimmy's dad asked, emotion in his voice.

"To be perfectly honest Mr.—?"

"King."

"To be perfectly honest Mr. King, we do not know. He seems to be in critical condition; he has minutes or hours. Until we get the test results back we cannot determine how to diagnose him and what medication we should give him. Some might work with the poison and kill him even faster. We have done everything we can up to this point."

"Poison?!" Jimmy's mother exclaimed. Jimmy's heart sank at the news. He felt terrible, but he didn't know he could die any minute.

"Yes, ma'am. We believe he was poisoned."

"Can we see him?"

The doctor turned to the nurse and asked if Jimmy was awake. She nodded a reply and came back through the door to Jimmy's side. She asked him and Jimmy nodded his reply, not daring to try to speak again.

His parents walked over to his right side and Seth and Kelsey on his left. His mom took his hand and Jimmy grimaced. The burning sensation heightened with her touch. She kissed his hand and smiled at Jimmy. The kiss soothed his hand slightly and Jimmy returned the smile with one of his own.

They stood in silence and his mom squeezed his hand. Pain shot up his arm and Jimmy tried to hide it. Jimmy turned towards Seth and Kelsey. Both of their eyes were wet, but no tears had shed yet. Jimmy assumed they he heard the news as well. He lifted up his free hand and Seth grabbed it. Now a tear rolled down his cheek. They let go and Jimmy's arm dropped, exhausted. Kelsey glanced at Jimmy, then tugged Seth's arm. It was obvious she did not want to be there when Jimmy could pass away any minute.

Jessica rushed into the hospital and saw Kelsey and Seth sitting side by side, holding hands. Jessica walked up to them and they filled her in on the situation. They told Jessica where the room was and she took off.

Jessica made it to the room and saw that Jimmy's parents were by the bed. She walked in and was noticed by everyone in the room. Jimmy looked awful. His face was red and he looked really tired. Soon it was just Jessica and Jimmy in the room. She grabbed a chair and placed it next to the bed.

"How was the concert?" Jimmy's voice was weak and he sounded weary.

"Great, I can't wait until the show in LA where *you will* open for me."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I won't be able to. But maybe you can have Seth open for you." Jimmy tried to force a smile but Jessica looked away. *Had he already considered himself dead?* Jessica questioned in her head.

"No, I'm sure you'll be fine by then. It's in two days so, I'm sure you'll be fine by then."

"Jessica, listen. I won't be there; as much as I would like to I doubt I will get to see the sunrise tomorrow."

"Don't talk like that Jimmy!" Emotion thick in her voice.

After moments of silence Jimmy requested a pen and paper. Jessica dug in her purse and produced what he had asked for.

"You have just about everything in there don't you?" Jimmy joked. Jessica could find no humor at a time like this. "Would you mind writing for me?"

Jessica nodded her head. She had no words to speak and was afraid of losing her composure. She wrote the date, and addressed it to "Family and Friends". She wrote as he dictated his will. It seemed a bit strange to Jessica that someone who had only just turned eighteen would need a will.

Jimmy gave most of his belongings to his little brother, Seth, and his parents. He let Jessica choose all of the hats that she wanted to take and willed the rest of them to his brother. His new car would go to his brother as well and his bike to Ryan. When he had finished dictating Jessica had already drowned in tears. It was still hard to comprehend that Jimmy might not be with them soon. Jimmy looked around and saw his San Diego Chargers beanie, he grabbed it and handed it to Jessica. "Keep it," he said. Jessica traded him the will so that he could sign it.

"By the way," Jimmy said and looked weakly at Jessica, "you look beautiful Jessica." Jessica thought that was an absurd thing to say at a time like this.

“Thanks,” Jessica was flattered that he even thought of that on the brink of death. “You don’t look too bad yourself, all things considered.”

Jimmy smiled back and signed the paper. A loud constant tone shattered the silence and shocked Jessica. A doctor and a couple of nurses rushed into the room and Jessica quickly got up and left for the lobby. Jessica clutched the powder blue beanie as tears streamed down her face.

Kelsey had her head buried in Seth’s chest and Seth’s mom’s in her husband’s chest. They all saw Jessica’s grim face. Seth’s mom burst into tears. Kelsey got up and hugged Jessica who was still holding the beanie tight. Seth had his face in his hands.

A few minutes later the doctor, who had just half an hour ago informed Jimmy’s parents the news appeared to confirm the details which Jessica had told Jimmy’s family: Robert, Linda, and Seth King; and Kelsey. Jimmy died at 11:16 pm.

TWENTY

Through further investigation Jessica was informed that Jimmy’s death was caused by a poison which there was no cure for at the moment. Jimmy’s assassin was traced back to Mark. Mark had paid off the girl, Taylor, at the donut shop Jessica had been to. After Taylor was arrested she spilled the beans about Mark and how much he paid her for it. However, she did not know of any other members who may be linked.

Jessica piled Jimmy’s hats one by one on top of each other after adjusting each and trying them on. Memories filled Jessica’s mind as she looked around the room. The lump in her throat began to build up again. She lifted a snapback off the shelf, the wear and tear showing from the many days Jimmy wore it. It was his favorite cap. She placed it in a separate spot away from the others. As Jessica placed the hats in the box Seth walked in.

“Are those all the hats you are going to take?”

“Yeah, there are many more and I thought I would leave a few for you.”

“Thanks, I guess. They are all technically yours since he left them for you.”

“Is it a problem to give the rest to you?”

“Not at all.” There was a pause. Then Seth sighed, “It’s hard to imagine that he isn’t here with us any longer.”

“Yeah, I try not to.”

“Hey, we all loved him. I loved him like a brother,” Seth hinted a smile.

“Bad joke, Seth,” Jessica was not in the mood for jokes. She had loved Jimmy more than others knew. She even surprised herself how much she cared for him. Jessica was mad at God, *Why did he take such a great person? If we had more like him the world would be a much nicer place. Why did You take him?!* Jessica almost spoke the last words.

“OK, enough with the jokes,” Seth said and motioned Jessica over to the desk. “I found this lying here with this verse circled. I don’t know if he had known that he was going to die or if it was a coincidence.”

Jessica picked up the Bible and read Thessalonians 4:13, the verse that was circled, aloud, ““Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.””

There was a long pause as the verse hit home in Jessica's heart. She had hope, she knew that Jimmy was a Christian and so was she, she would eventually get to see him again.

"Hey, don't you have that awards ceremony to go to?" Seth asked.

"Oh shoot, I do! How could I forget?" Jessica had been nominated for the Best Teen Pop music award. She raced home and changed into her outfit for the evening.

She rolled up to the red carpet in her brand new Audi R8, which she had bought since her other car lay in the deep blue. The photographers snapped away, the shutters clicking every step of the way. The constant bright flashes annoyed Jessica a little, but she hid it as she posed and smiled for pictures.

As Jessica sat she recited her acceptance speech silently if the time arose. Many of her favorite artists in the other categories who were nominated won the award. The ceremony seemed to be long with all of the awards given and the special music performed by a range of talented artists. Finally the announcers, Rachel and Louis, came on stage to announce the winner and present the award to the winning artist in Jessica's group of nominees.

The tension rose, as did the music, as the nominees' names were shown once again. Rachel opened the envelope and said, "And the winner of the first ever award for Best Teen Pop is: Cassandra Walters!"

Jessica was disappointed and happy at the same time for Cassandra. A recent good friend and she was Jessica's only real competition; plus Cassandra was also signed by Diamond Records, so it wasn't a big disappointment. Close to the stage Jessica caught the eye of a man staring at her. He didn't look away and kept his ice cold stare at Jessica.

She gasped when she recognized him. *It couldn't be! He shouldn't be here! What is he doing here?*

He started to advance towards Jessica and she panicked. He was coming for her and he was not going to stop. She swiftly made it out of her row and immediately headed for the exit. Looking back every few rows she saw he was gaining on her and no one else seemed to notice.

The lights went dim as Cassandra was finished with her speech. Jessica quickened her pace as she saw the light from the exit. An arm from behind yanked her back. She stiffened and gulped in air to calm herself.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my friend Tom Preston who shared his knowledge about music and music producing with me. To my editor Frieda for the many hours she spent working on editing and providing advice. Finally, to all who supported and helped with advice for the novella.